

Summary

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OECD education policy. A comparative and historical study focusing on the thematic reviews of tertiary education.

The dissertation explores the OECD's history, methods of influence and relations with other international organisations. The emphasis of research lies on a case study analysing the utilisation of the 2006 OECD Thematic review of tertiary education in the Finnish higher education policy reforms. The case study on Finland is compared to a case study on the United Kingdom.

29 experts from the OECD and different European universities have been interviewed for the study. The written source material of the research consists of OECD publications and publications by other international organisations, agreements, minutes of the meetings, working papers, and memoranda. The source material for the case studies consist of the thematic review reports, the Finnish Government Programme 2007, government bills, legislation, development plans for education and research, ministerial background reports, speeches, working group reports as well as administrative documents produced by the UK government.

The dissertation explores the OECD as an epistemic community, whose power pervades academia and society and diffuses beyond democratic decision making through various networks of political decision makers, civil servants and experts. This research cements the view that the OECD's legislative power is limited. Parallel to its narrow legislative influence, the Organisation has, however, created other effective forms of soft laws. OECD peer reviews, recommendations, and indicator studies combined with EU's methods represent soft law, which are rules of conduct aiming to steer the national level decision making, higher education agendas and future legislative reforms. Based on the interviews conducted for the study, the OECD peer reviews provide consensual information and are subjective by nature. OECD thematic reviews increase peer pressure and competition, which fosters convergence between national education policies.

The dissertation introduces a new division of the history of the OECD education programmes and constructs an extensive table which identifies eighty major themes of the OECD education publications from 1960 to 2008. The investigation finds out that several themes, such as human capital, recur in the history of the Organisation's programmes and in the programmes of other international organisations. The investigation also shows how the education programmes of the OECD, the EU, and the World Bank have converged in the past decade. These trends are due to common projects and agreements between these organisations, and the demands from member countries to reduce overlaps between their programmes.

The case study on Finland shows that OECD country and thematic reviews have regularly preceded legislative reforms of the national higher education system from the 1980s until the present day. The 2006 thematic review of tertiary education has been used as a justification in several higher education reform initiatives, such as the Structural Development Programme and the Government Bill on the Universities Act and Related Acts in 2009. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the 1997 OECD Thematic review of tertiary education has been used to legitimise higher education reforms. The Dearing Inquiry refers to OECD recommendations when suggesting the introduction of new degrees, even though the OECD review team has in fact not recommended such. The investigation into both cases shows that different national interest groups search for information from OECD reviews, strive to legitimise nationally planned reforms by OECD recommendations, select OECD recommendations that are in line with their own interests, and adjust the OECD's broadly phrased recommendations to fit in different policy contexts.

Keywords: OECD, international organisations, education policy, higher education, tertiary education, thematic review, human capital