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Staying alive: how international organisations struggle to remain relevant policy players

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Abstract

This article engages in the discussion on international organisations as global players. IOs appear as paradoxical arenas of regulatory co-operation. Although they have been perceived as influential, they operate with unequal resources and tend to be increasingly contested. While acknowledging their role in transnational policy framing, the article discusses the power of IOs critically. It stresses their dependence (on states and external funds) and analyses how these organisations attempt to remain relevant policy players. The case of the transnational governance of higher education as a secondary policy field sheds light on the relations between international and European organisations (Council of Europe, European Commission, OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank). In order to explain how IOs that face limited financial resources seek to maintain their position in transnational policymaking, the demonstration highlights the material, practical and ideational aspects of interorganisational coordination. The article is based on empirical research conducted in several countries: over 50 semi-structured qualitative interviews, archives of main IOs, and institutional documents.

Keywords: Council of Europe; European Commission; higher education; international organisations; OECD; UNESCO.

Introduction

The scholarship on international organisations (IOs) oscillates between demonstrations of their global impact and documentation of their limits, exemplified by growing transnational contestation (Stephen and Zürn 2019) and loss of legitimacy (Tallberg and Zürn 2019). This article addresses the power of IOs through the lens of their struggle to maintain a normative diffusion capacity and their authority as policy knowledge providers. The existing scholarship tends to depict IOs through their capacity to diffuse policy and persuade governments (Jakobi 2009). As creators of global performance indicators, IOs ‘gain authority based on their (assumed) competence and expertise, which in turn may be inferred from their tangible power and wealth’ (Kelley and Simmons 2019: 497).

This article addresses the question of IOs policy relevance critically. It focuses on the specific case of IOs that assert their authority in a policy area but have limited financial resources to act. It shows that they may rely on other better-endowed organisations to preserve their authority as relevant policy players. While acknowledging that ‘interconnectedness among IOs’ ‘increases the likelihood of diffusion’ (Sommerer and Tallberg 2019: 400), the empirical demonstration refines this argument by linking the relevance of policy issues to their relative (de)politicisation. I conceptualise the policy relevance of IOs relationally, as the capacity to shape policy issues, which depends both on symbolic (authority) and on material elements (resources). The question that has guided this research is: under what conditions international organisations – which generally work under budgetary strain and whose reformist ideas spark controversies – try to preserve their policy position? This article builds both on International Relations literature that deals with the power of IOs and their policy diffusion potential and on organisational approaches centred on bureaucratic rules (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). By focusing on the administrative governance of IOs, it contributes to the discussion on the way in which they deal with their shrinking resources (Goetz and Patz 2017). I underline the strategic importance of IOs funding, considering sources, types, and streams of funding. I connect the issue of resources to the issue of policy relevance, conceptualised as the ability to shape a transnational policy sector and to remain a meaningful player in it. Adopting an inductive perspective inspired by ‘micro-

dynamics' of policy transfers within global networks (Hadjiisky et al 2017), I follow the practice-oriented approach in its ambition to bring (the existing) 'scholarly debates "down" to the ground' and to 'empirically scrutinise the processes whereby certain competent performances produce effects' (Adler and Pouliot 2011). I refer to scholarship that combines 'approaches concentrating on interactions between public organizations and their environment [...] and analytical accounts that focus on administrations and their subunits as collective actors' (Nay 2011: 690). I also draw on research inspired by sociological constructivism that sheds light on actor configurations and power relations in the construction of public 'problems' (Rowell and Mangenot 2012).

The transnational governance of higher education (HE) provides a good case study to discuss the tension between the reputation of IOs active in the field and the practical constraints that affect their capacity of action. Higher education can be considered as a secondary policy field, as compared to other priority issues such as economic policies and governance (in the case of OECD or the World Bank), primary and secondary education (in the case of UNESCO), democracy and human rights (within the Council of Europe/CoE). This analytical perspective invites to consider IOs as multi-dependent policy actors whose main challenge in the field is to hold their rank and survive politically. I show how the three IOs analysed in this article, i.e. the CoE, the OECD and UNESCO, strive to remain part of the transnational policy game. The risk these large organisations face is therefore not necessarily 'death' as an organisation (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020; Gray 2020), but policy irrelevance. Facing this challenge, I show how IOs try to stay afloat and defend their prerogatives over policy fields that are the preserve of nation states and in which their resources are often scarce. Drawing on material, organisational and inter-organisational factors, the demonstration highlights the strategies they devise to prevent policy irrelevance. These strategies involve circumstantial alliances with other, better endowed organisations, and with some states or sub-state units. Their growing dependence – not only on member states but also on non-state actors as well as other IOs – requires considering IOs within their 'wider policy environment' (Harmsen and Braband 2021).

This article is based on research conducted in France, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Brussels, and Washington. It draws on archival research (CoE, UNESCO, OECD), institutional documents, expert reports, and legislative texts. Over 50 semi-structured qualitative interviews were also conducted. The interviewees include senior civil servants in the national ministries in charge of HE, and who represent their country in European policy coordination (such as the Bologna Follow-Up Group) or international policy forums, high-level IO respondents in charge of the sector (CoE, OECD, UNESCO, World Bank and European Commission representatives), as well as members of stakeholder organisations. While most of them were selected based on their institutional position (charts, minutes of meetings), additional – or former – key participants in these policy forums were identified through the snowball effect. The interview template was adapted to the organisations and contexts under study. It systematically included sections on the current policy priorities in the sector, everyday aspects of interorganisational cooperation, the position of the unit within the organisation and the professional trajectories of the interviewees themselves. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Open coding was performed to analyse the data.

The paper is divided as follows. The first part discusses international organisations as paradoxical arenas of knowledge diffusion in general and with a focus on the HE sector. The second part critically examines how these IOs face the risk of policy irrelevance, focusing on the unequal distribution of resources among them and their multiple dependences. The third part delves empirically into the interconnectedness between international and EU organisations in the post-Cold War context to defend their policy relevance; it builds on their cooperation in matters of quality assurance and diversification of funding as issues that are respectively depoliticised and politicised.

International organisations as paradoxical arenas of knowledge diffusion

International organisations have been conceptualised as sites of global governance, international cooperation, and norm diffusion (Checkel 1999; Cortell and Davis 1996). From a constructivist perspective, IOs appear as ‘teachers of norms’ (Finnemore 1993) and socialising institutions (Checkel

2005) but also as norm takers (Park 2006). In the educational field, quality assurance and competitive funding are some of the transnationally diffused norms that will be discussed in this article.

IOs diffuse reformist ideas and policy schemes (Jakobi and Martens 2009; Jakobi 2009) and expert knowledge (Littoz-Monnet 2017a). In particular, the global performance indicators they produce have been considered as influential instruments that frame issues and capture global attention (Kelley and Simmons 2019). Some authors have adopted a critical stance on international indicators developed by the World Bank and the OECD, labelled as ‘bad science’ (Broome et al. 2018). Another research strand reminds us that IOs are increasingly contested by NGOs and social movements (Stephen and Zürn 2019), as the liberal international order is called into question (Adler-Nissen 2021; Deitelhoff 2020). International institutions may reproduce global inequalities (Fehl and Freistein 2020) and hierarchies known as the ‘international pecking order’ (Pouliot 2016). This article does not take a normative stance on indicators as such; it recognises the importance of interorganisational cooperation and transnational governing by numbers as a way of maintaining policy relevance. This section starts by analysing IOs as international bureaucracies, then debates their contribution to the international governance of higher education. Having acknowledged the growing importance of governing by numbers and comparison, I stress that HE remains a secondary field, which forces the bureaucrats to defend and justify its position.

IOs as complex bureaucracies

Social science concepts have helped study IOs as organisations for decades (Ness and Brechin 1988; Schmitter 1971). Considering IOs as bureaucracies, Barnett and Finnemore (2004: 41, 163) have focused on organisational logics and the expanding tasks of the UN’s general secretariat or the IMF to explain their structural ‘pathologies’. Referring to the literature on organisations and public administration, some authors describe IOs as ‘compound bureaucracies’ (Trondal et al. 2010: 12). However, as the contributors to the latter volume consider IOs individually – through parallel case studies focused on the general secretariats of the Commission, the OECD, the WTO –, they do not

explain how IOs coordinate. Studies focusing on initiatives aimed at reducing fragmentation in the UN system have discussed ‘cross level coordinating practices’ such as ‘systemic thinking’ and ‘jointly mobilizing resources and consensus’ (Mele and Cappellaro 2018: 2). This fragmentation also relates to IOs’ resources: according to Michaelowa (2017), the growing share of non-core funding and the complex funding structures have shifted the power from the official decision-making bodies to some groups of funders or external actors. Non-core and voluntary contributions play an important role in the policy sector analysed in this article, i.e. higher education governance.

This article deals with inter-organisational cooperation and external funding as a way to preserve an IO’s policy relevance. It builds on research on IOs’ resources, coordination, and struggle for reputation. While reputational issues have given rise to significant research (Carpenter 2001, 2010; Maor and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2016), I show that securing an international positioning as a relevant policy player is a never-ending battle between (but also within) IOs. On the one hand, reputation – meaning, in this case, being recognised as a relevant and legitimate actor – is a stake in many IOs’ endeavours. Still, this idea could be taken slightly further, as what is at stake is not only their ‘organizational reputation’ (Busuioc 2016) but their international policy relevance and, therefore, their political survival in specific fields. Ensuring ‘organisational survival’ has been identified as one of OECD’s main historical missions (Ydesen and Grek 2020: 3).

The international framing of education policies has gradually and belatedly elicited interest from political scientists (Jakobi et al. 2009). The existing scholarship has raised questions on the dynamics of policy diffusion and convergence (Dobbins 2011), on interorganisational relationships (in terms of competition or collusion) and on the power of IOs themselves.

Debating IOs’ contribution to the transnational governance of HE

According to institutionalist approaches focused on policy diffusion, IOs are ‘new arenas of education governance’ whose activity has developed since the early 1990s (Martens et al. 2007). Adopting a historical lens, Mundy (2007) considers that ‘educational multilateralism’ goes back to the aftermath

of the Second World War with Keynesian policies and the promotion of a right to education by UNESCO during the Cold War, followed by a growing role of the OECD starting in the 1960s and finally, by neoliberal policies promoted by the World Bank, the OECD, the EU but also the WTO with the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).

Beyond the heuristic input of these studies, some of their conclusions deserve further discussion. The statements asserting that IOs ‘are involved in establishing and diffusing the construction of one global political space in which decisions are of common interest’ and that ‘they define global public policy’ (Jakobi 2009: 32–33) tend to generalise – and possibly overestimate – the scope and coherence of their action. Harmsen and Braband (2021) refine this perspective, focusing on interorganisational and intraorganisational logics, and show that the OECD has failed ‘to make a distinctive claim to establish convening authority’ in the HE sector.

Beyond the organisational aspects, the subsector of HE reflects the importance of governing by comparison. The transnational framing of knowledge policies has been characterised by international trends such as growing competition between HE institutions, spurred by global academic rankings (Kauppi and Erkkilä 2011; Erkkilä 2013). These rankings have reinforced the demand for indicators and international comparison. The production indicators that help compare the performances of domestic educative systems are a means through which HE has gained international prominence. According to Lawn and Grek (2012: 70) standards as a regulative policy tool, together with experts and practitioners who disseminate them, contribute to ‘governing without government’.

The use of statistics has been a battleground between IOs (Heyneman 1999). Efforts to harmonise OECD, UNESCO and the Statistical Office of the European Communities started in the 1970s and continued in 1980s. Since the statistical services of UNESCO, OECD and Eurostat merged in 1995, data production on educative systems has become increasingly standardised (Cussó, d’Amico 1995). Thanks to the World Education Indicator Program (WEI) developed by the OECD in cooperation with UNESCO and financed partly by the World Bank, data on a large range of non-OECD member states have been included, since 1997, in the report *Education at a Glance* (Henry et

al. 2001: 90).¹ Based on the case of statistics, Cussó (2006: 542) has explained the loss of UNESCO's unique prerogatives in the educational field: in the beginning of the 1990s, UNESCO's statistical services were severely criticised for not sufficiently focusing on 'data on education background of the work force (human capital) and for measuring and comparing educational system performance'. The OECD has been conducting this competitive comparison of students' but also, HE systems' performance has been carried out by the OECD since the 2000s.

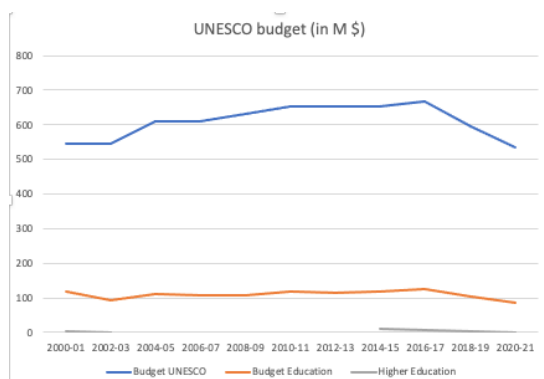
Far from being a neutral tool, 'governance by comparison' (Mertens 2007: 41) can highlight and reproduce the existing hierarchies and inequalities in the global academic field. While a growing number of governments have been launching competitive funding schemes in the hope of reinforcing the position of their higher education institutions (HEI) in the academic global competition, international rankings induce a double bind: while they are expected to increase the visibility of the domestic HEIs, they also unveil weaknesses of peripheric HE systems.² In these debates on the governance of HE by IOs, one aspect warrants emphasis: the dominated place of HE within international policy hierarchies.

Higher education as a secondary policy field

In the ongoing debate on the relevance of IOs, the specificity of the tertiary education sector must be acknowledged. On the one hand, HE is a secondary policy sector: first, it occupies a minor, subordinate, under-the-radar position within the internal hierarchy of IOs; secondly, it appears as a secondary concern on the national level. On the other hand, HE has gained a prominent place on the international agenda under the guise of catchwords such as the knowledge economy, skills, and lifelong learning. Over the past five decades, HE policies have been framed by a growing number of IOs, among which some were statutorily in charge of education and science (UNESCO) while others entered the field progressively, through their work on citizenship and democracy (CoE) or economic development and growth (OECD, World Bank).

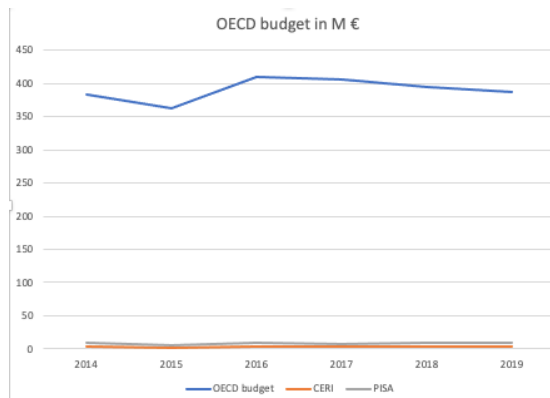
The position of higher education as a public policy sector within the hierarchy of these organisations may vary. At UNESCO, higher education ‘has long been overshadowed by the organisation’s focus on popular access to education’ (Mundy and Madden 2009: 46). After a period of expansion of UNESCO’s international reach in HE, the late 1970 and 1980s brought crisis, budget cuts and a fragmentation of the IOs’ educational programmes (ibid.). According to some analysts (Klüver 2016), UNESCO’s involvement in educational programmes has suffered from the difficulty of recovering the United States’ pending contributions and from inflation. It must be noted that UNESCO’s budget has been overhauled on several occasions. After its steep decrease as a result of the US withdrawal in 2017, some of the voluntary contributions were included in the regular budgeting.³

Figure 1



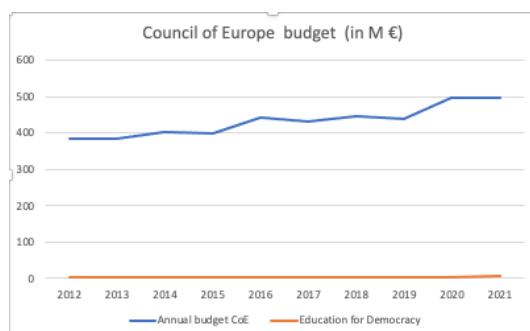
Source: Data compiled by the author from UNESCO financial reports

One of UNESCO’s main competitors, the OECD, has become a significant reference for comparing the educational system performances at the turn of the 21st century. Recent scholarship on the OECD has highlighted its ambitions to address governments beyond its member countries through programmes like the Global Competence Assessment (Sorensen et al. 2021). However, its visibility in skills assessment has not made the OECD safe from the risk of policy irrelevance in the HE field (Harmsen and Braband 2021).

Figure 2

Source: Data compiled by the author from OECD financial reports

While the end of the Cold War was an opportunity for the CoE to welcome new members and to contribute to the reform process in the region, its organisational structure reflects the dwindling importance of educational projects and the effective disappearance of HE as a policy field over the past decade.⁴

Figure 3

Source: Data compiled by the author from CoE financial reports

While the World Bank financed several UNESCO initiatives in the educational field during the 1960s and 1970s, its funding decreased in the late 1980s when it set up its own Department of Education (Hüfner 2016). Nowadays, the World Bank Group is considered as the most prominent global provider of multilateral assistance for education (Hüfner 2016). While it is by far the major donor in South Asia, in Europe the bank appears as a minor player and a follower of HE reforms promoted by the European Commission together with its stakeholders.⁵ However, as a major part of

WB's expenses takes the form of loans and reimbursable advisory services, it is difficult to compare it with other IO's budgets.

The European Commission's position is a distinct one: while the competence for education was formally granted to Community member states, the provision on vocational education in the Treaty of Rome paved the way for a subsequent positioning in the field (Corbett 2005). HE has gained prominence as a policy field since the end of the 1990s against the backdrop of the rise of a global narrative about knowledge societies and economies.

While these organisations and the expertise they produce have become key references in the global framing of the educational sector, this position is more fragile in the HE sector. In this policy field, some IOs face the constant risk of becoming marginalised or deprived of resources and sufficient political support. The question to be asked is under what conditions can IOs stay alive politically, in other words maintain policy relevance in a sector where their resources are scarce. Beyond influential flagship products such as the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), their relevance in a specific subsector like HE may be fragile. Thus, securing new partnerships and funding sources – through voluntary contributions – allows them to keep programmes afloat. The next section shows how these organisations nevertheless struggle to remain relevant policy players in the international field.

The powerlessness of the powerful: when IOs face policy irrelevance

While IOs have become important sites of expertise and global policy diffusion, the case of HE, where their formal competences are limited, illustrates that IOs' resources are unequally divided, limited, and depend on contributing states and external funders (Goetz and Patz 2017). The growing reliance on external resources leads to higher administrative costs, lower transparency (Michaelowa 2017) and an increasing proportion of non-permanent staff (Ege and Bauer 2017) as has been shown in UNESCO's case (Klüver 2016). The empirical part that follows strives to refine the general statement according to which IOs are 'active and independent policy-making institutions' (Trondal

et al 2010: 6). Following Biermann and Koops (2017: 4), we ‘open the black box’ of interorganisational relations and highlight IOs’ dependence on voluntary and external contributions. On the one hand, all IOs analysed here depend on their contributing states, illustrating the power relations within the committees where the ministerial representatives sit, analysed by scholars focused on ‘transnational administration’ (Moloney and Stone 2019). On the other hand, IOs establish ties with other international bureaucracies (who become their funders, allies, or co-producers of data). I show below that this external support may become the condition of their organisational survival in a policy field.

Dependence on states’ voluntary contributions: the case of the OECD

While IOs generally depend on their contributing members, this is particularly crucial in the context of budgetary constraints. The OECD relies heavily on the member state representatives that sit in its committees and vote on proposals. Within the OECD Education Policy Committee (EDPC), the officers working on HE issues act as ‘bureaucratic entrepreneurs’ (Littoz-Monnet 2017b). They mobilise external expertise and strive to present attractive projects that are liable to be backed by governmental representatives. The Directorate for Education and Skills is relatively young compared to others and heavily dependent on governments’ voluntary contributions. On the contrary, the Economics department is financed quasi exclusively (97%) by statutory funding (the so called ‘Part I’) that member states pay automatically, while such statutory funding amounts for only 8% of the Education directorate’s resources.⁶

OECD representatives must constantly seek to secure the support of participating countries and stakeholders. They try to make sure that the products (projects, data, and services) they sell will find buyers among their member or non-member countries.⁷ The now defunct International Management of Higher Education program (1976–2016) relied on funding from higher education institutions. Following the success of the PISA programme, tailored for assessing skills in secondary education, high ranking members of the OECD Education Department launched an international project to

measure the skills of HE students called *Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes* (AHELO). Throughout its pilot phase (2008–2013), top representatives of the Education department tried to convince government representatives to commit financially to the project.⁸ When it transpired that the AHELO would be discontinued due to the methodological and political scepticism of member states and experts (Dakowska 2017), the EDPC of April 2014 launched an Informal Working Group ‘to consider what policy-related work the EDPC could carry out on higher education and how it could be financed’ to ‘maintain a capacity to provide evidence-based policy advice on higher education issues’.⁹ Drawing on this reflection, three strands of potential work emerged: Benchmarking higher education systems; Monitoring of higher education trends, intelligence and foresight; In-depth analysis of higher education systems’ labour market relevance and outcomes / and of financing higher education systems. When a few countries expressed support for pursuing work on each of these strands; a budget was established, and the Secretariat proposed a ‘crowd-funding’ considering that ‘work on a strand would start when voluntary contributions reach the required threshold’.¹⁰ In this case, the IOs’ continued policy relevance depended on a fragile coalition of member states who agreed on further extra-budgetary contributions. Owing to this support, HE has resurfaced on the OECD’s agenda although its stable financing remains uncertain.

While governing by numbers and ‘through the pressure of comparison’ (Kelley and Simmons 2019: 491) has gained momentum globally, the launch of costly new indicators and benchmarks nevertheless causes reluctance even among country representatives that are familiar with such schemes. Before they become consensual, reformist schemes promoted internationally often elicit resistance and criticism, both internally and externally (Dakowska 2020). Among the few countries that provided feedback to the OECD Informal Working Group on HE, the US representative specified: ‘As the U.S. stated in this summer’s discussions, benchmarking is not beneficial to the U.S. given the many higher education “systems” we have [...] I need to state again that at the present time, the U.S. does not have the resources to commit to additional work.’¹¹

In a comparable way, representatives of France, which counts among the countries that were most favourable to the development of international indicators in the late 1980s (Henry et al. 2001: 87), expressed reluctance towards new OECD initiatives such as AHELO. The cost of this extra voluntary contribution adds to the costs of domestic expertise in a country which has heavily invested in its own services working on international comparison.¹² Among the few supporters of recent OECD HE initiatives, small states that are less familiar with benchmarking exercises may trust the OECD's reputation: 'For Estonia filling the matrix is difficult, because with limited resources we don't do much international comparison and don't very well know what is available and what is not. We believe that OECD position and the quality of work suits best for international comparison (benchmarking) and forward looking (trends, foresight)'.¹³ Thus, while limited resources at the domestic level usually work against the earmarking of voluntary contributions to IOs, lacking expertise may be an argument in favour of delegating tasks to them.

Dependence on other IOs: the European Commission's purse

IOs not only depend on governments but also on each other. This has been the case since the 1960s, with UNESCO's initiatives in the educational field, funded by the World Bank. On the European continent, the Commission's funding opportunities not only shape the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member countries' HE institutions (Batory and Lindstrom 2011); they also keep afloat some IOs in the field. While the CoE's Education Department manages a variety of projects, it is nevertheless heavily dependent on the European Commission's funding and has only a handful of employees able to contribute to the HE field. Within the 2020–2021 budget, educational projects as part of the Democratic participation line are funded for 80% (up to 100%) of their cost by the European Commission through Joint Programmes.¹⁴

This material dependence on EU-funded projects has several consequences. On the one hand, the resources provided by the European Commission can increase the OECD's and CoE's policy relevance, in some cases even enable their survival as a relevant player in the HE field. On the other

hand, this cooperation facilitates EU civil servants' access to comparative data and international surveys. Politically, EU-funded organisations tend to become policy partners and supporters in a transnational policy field. Therefore, it would not be adequate to frame the relationship between the Commission and its partner organisations in terms of competition; rather, policy symbiosis and coproduction are more accurate terms. The OECD and the Commission are mutually dependent. The Commission is a member of the OECD: it enjoys the same rights as the member states, except for voting. The OECD depends heavily on EU funding. The Commission uses its analysis and indicators.¹⁵ While contributions from EU member states make up 47% of the OECD budget, the Commission makes voluntary contributions that may reach a quarter of the organisation's overall budget. In 2018, the Commission's voluntary contributions amounted to 42 million euros.¹⁶ The Commission's DG Education and Culture (EAC) cooperates closely with the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills, which is known for producing and comparing international data on education. The Commission covers 80% of participation costs in the OECD's surveys on teachers (TALIS) and adult skills (PIAAC) for member states (and participating countries in the Erasmus+ programme).

These funding flows shape the positions of states that are represented in the OECD's decision-making bodies. In a time of austerity, most state representatives are reluctant to pay voluntary contributions to review their educational systems.¹⁷ Under the circumstances, EU members are strongly encouraged to participate in the surveys developed by the OECD, knowing that the costs of their participation will be covered by the Commission.¹⁸

Facing budgetary difficulties

In times of austerity, a secondary policy sector lends itself well to studying how IOs fight for their political relevance. All IOs active in HE and based in Europe have faced severe budgetary difficulties. UNESCO, which could formally be considered as the main organisation specialised in education and science, remains materially and politically weakened since the United States and Israel withdrew.¹⁹ Contending with a structural deficit, UNESCO has been struggling to retain a position within the

global policy field.²⁰ Since the USA's suspension of contributions, the organisation has faced budget cuts and frozen posts.²¹

While education accounts for a considerable part of UNESCO's budget (around a third), HE was marginalised by the Millennium Development Goals, where it was not mentioned explicitly. It has gained new exposure since the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, in which HE is mentioned in the 4th goal: 'By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university'.²² Still, to achieve this ambitious goal, a budget of only 2,732,000 dollars worldwide has been allocated for 2018–2019 (and the headquarters received only a small part of this sum).²³

The UNESCO's progressive marginalisation relative to the Commission was highlighted in the early 1990s when the UNESCO-CEPES centre specialised in HE and established in Budapest in 1972 faced competition from a growing number of EU-funded programmes. CEPES ended up closing altogether in 2012. The EU support to structural reform in pre-accession countries brought to light the Commission's political and material domination.

[The] European Commission became our competitor. And they had a lot of money for the new member states [...]. We were, well, finding support, capacity building, also working with the Commission but often the Commission funded the projects. Even for the reform of HE in Romania. The Ministry was like a block away from our office. They got five million euro from the Commission to reform their HE system. And we couldn't possibly compete.²⁴

Among IOs facing material difficulties, the Council of Europe is also subject to geopolitical vagaries. The toughening of authoritarian regimes in some of its member countries and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 triggered internal tensions and weakened the CoE's financial situation. Russia and Turkey periodically threaten and freeze their contributions²⁵. In this tense context, the Bologna Process and cooperation with the European Commission became a way for the CoE to preserve its policy relevance in the HE sector.²⁶

Renowned IOs like the OECD may be confronted with budgetary difficulties in sectors that are not considered priorities by their members. The launch of the Informal Working Group on HE was a

response to an alarm call on the OECD's fading visibility in this field. Due to its 'limited resources', the EDPC 'expressed concerns that the continued absence of work on higher education [...] could seriously compromise the capacity of the OECD to provide policy advice on higher education issues'.²⁷ Thus, the fact that IOs launch new and ambitious benchmarking projects does not necessarily reflect their influence. This may be a sign of desperate efforts to keep pace and remain a relevant player in this transnational policy field.

Trying to remain a player in the international game

Facing the risk of irrelevance in some policy subfields, IOs mobilise to remain visible and recognised players. This was demonstrated in the case of the OECD (Clifton and Díaz-Fuentes 2011), especially after the demise of the AHELO project, when 'higher education had literally dropped off the agenda' (Harmsen and Braband 2021). As an institution that has weathered several crises, UNESCO faced the threat of losing authority in HE after the closure of CEPES and during the MDG period.²⁸ As they face these structural and conjectural constraints, HE-relevant IOs' departments strive to tighten their relationship with international, national and subnational institutions.

When increased demand meets sinking resources, relying on extra-budgetary funds can be a way to stay afloat politically. This happened when the UN Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015 re-evaluated HE as a policy sector and thus provided increased visibility to UNESCO. Numerous African delegations have submitted requests for policy advice to its headquarters since.²⁹ Still, due to insufficient funding, the office in charge of HE was not equipped to address them. Lastly, UNESCO's involvement in HE reforms in Africa has been supported by the Chinese municipality of Shenzhen, which has financed the programme 'Strengthening quality assurance in higher education in Africa' launched in 2017, with the aim of setting up quality assurance agencies in ten African countries.³⁰ Due to UNESCO's limited operational capacity, this kind of voluntary contributions have become a means to assure its survival as a relevant policy player. Tellingly, the two million dollars

invested (over three years) by Shenzhen / the People's Republic of China for UNESCO's activity in Africa exceed the IOs headquarters' financial resources for the HE sector.

For the OECD, a way to defend its visibility has consisted in developing a strategy to enhance the online availability of its data in the 2000s: 'The dissemination plan endorsed by the Council strongly supports OECD's role as a global knowledge builder. The dissemination work increases the visibility and reputation of OECD as a source of high-quality, internationally comparative statistics and increases outreach'.³¹ Having explained the multiple material constraints weighing on the activity of IOs, the next section will ask under what ideational conditions the international diffusion of public policy schemes becomes possible.

How IOs construct HE policy recommendations

Having explained the material incentives that drive IOs to pursue increased interorganisational cooperation, this section delves into the ideational component and shows how interorganisational cooperation in HE reorganised after the end of the Cold War. Two different policy issues are examined with a focus on their capacity of depoliticisation and resulting impact on IOs policy convergence. Quality assurance provides an example of depoliticised policy issue, whereas funding remains loaded with a considerable potential for domestic politicisation.

The interconnectedness between European schemes and IOs

The end of the Cold War presented an opportunity for ramping up international cooperation in the field of HE. On the one hand, this pivotal period coincided with the European Commission's development of several programmes in HE and research. On the other hand, the political breakthrough on the European continent and the collapse of the communist regimes fuelled growing cooperation between the Commission, the organisations that represent academic interests and IOs.³²

The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, has become a key forum for elaborating common instruments and engagements on HE systems (including the degree structure, commitment to mobility, quality assurance, etc.) (Brøgger 2019). It was followed by the proclamation of a European Higher Education Area in 2010, which now encompasses 48 countries. Although the Bologna Process is formally intergovernmental, the Commission joined it in 2001 and became a full member in 2003. In this configuration, the EU Commission's resources, and persuasion capacity counterbalance its lack of legal competence in dealing with educational issues. The Bologna Process shows evidence of divergences and strategic rapprochements between the European Commission and IOs such as the Council of Europe and, to a lesser extent, UNESCO. The process has built through sedimentation on schemes that were previously promoted by international and EC organisations. It relies on the Erasmus programme launched by the Commission in 1987 and the ECTS credit transfer system to promote mobility.³³

The Bologna Process had provided an opportunity for the Council of Europe to position itself as a player that can aspire to a comparable rank to the European Commission's (without the latter's voting rights and financial resources) in intergovernmental arenas. After the ministerial conference of Bergen, in 2005, the CoE representative reported to his hierarchy on the political added value of the Bologna Process:

Throughout the conference, the Norwegian hosts made a point of treating the Council of Europe on a par with the European Commission and to underline the Council's contribution to the Bologna Process. There is no doubt that our work in the Bologna Process has significantly increased the Council's visibility among higher education policy makers and practitioners in Europe.³⁴

The growing international cooperation in this sector context challenged the idea that education remains a domestic prerogative. Quality assurance and funding emerged as priority issues for international discussion (ibid.: 19).

The rise of quality assurance

The rise of quality assurance (QA) as a key element of evaluation of HEI testifies to the use of comparison and standards as a new mode of government. Reaching beyond ‘formal powers and authorities’, quality assurance appears as a ‘a new form of governance’ while the ‘concept of quality’ has become ‘measurable, statistical and standard-based’ (Ozga et al. 2011: 1, 3). This article argues that the growing involvement of IOs in this area can be explained by the de-politicising potential of the policy issue of QA, which is not a politically sensitive subject and remains consensual. Therefore, it is easier for an IO to launch projects on quality assurance rather than on funding or access to higher education, which may be perceived as more sensitive in some regions.³⁵ This concurs with the findings of recent works on depoliticisation practices as a ‘resilient feature of IO action’ (Louis and Maertens 2021) but also of more classical works on depoliticisation in international development politics (Ferguson 1994).

At the EU level, QA has been promoted by the Commission since the early 1990s. It builds on the work coordinated by the CoE and UNESCO on diploma recognition. Arguments advanced by OECD experts in favour of QA include the massification of HE, the spread of New Public Management (NPM), a better protection of consumers (students) and the need to spur economic growth.³⁶ By the 1990s, quality had become one of the catchwords of OECD’s discourse on HE, which linked ‘institutional diversity to quality through competition, often in terms of responsiveness to labour market need and student demand’ (Hunter 2013: 712). The emphasis on HE as a provider of human capital, skills and on its ‘labour market relevance’ is shared by the Commission and the OECD and evidences the growing interrelationship between these organisations. For the OECD, QA is an answer to the ‘development of a market in higher education’, which has been turning students into consumers (OECD 2017:50).

Both the Commission and the Council of Europe agreed with Brussels-based academic stakeholders that Quality Assurance should be one of the key commitments of the European HE Area.³⁷ The Paris ministerial conference communiqué of 2018 set up a ‘structured peer support

approach' to move forward implementation in this area (Paris communiqué 2018: 2). Although criticised by some member state representatives, the procedural approach to QA was endorsed by most governments.³⁸ While quality assurance is perceived as a formally technical and consensual issue, the question of HE funding remains more controversial.

The issue of fees

The issue of fees is a less consensual and more politicised one. It has sparked domestic controversies and divergences among IOs. In Europe, while public HE remains formally free in many continental countries, the sector has undergone a partial privatisation in some post-communist Central-Eastern countries. More recently, some Western countries have introduced fees for incoming international students, as a result of which accusations of 'neo-nationalism' (van der Wende 2020) have been levelled against them.

The introduction of fees is sometimes referred to euphemistically as the 'diversification of HEI funds', which may be part of a broader agenda such as 'HE modernisation'. Although there is no explicit agreement between IOs on the added value of fees in tertiary education, the European Commission, the OECD, and the World Bank (Canning et al. 2007) have supported and legitimised this idea. In its HE modernisation agenda, the European Commission (2006) called for the diversification of funding: 'Competitive funding should be based on institutional evaluation systems and diversified performance indicators with clearly defined targets and indicators supported by international benchmarking for both inputs and economic and societal outputs'. In the years that followed, the DG EAC financed several projects on funding diversification.³⁹ In its updated agenda for modernising the EU's higher education, the Commission recommended 'diversifying funding sources, facilitating access to alternative resources including private funding' and 'linking funding to performance with an element of competition' (European Commission 2011). This concurs with the World Bank's strategies that have promoted student loans, performance-based grant policies and the participation of the private sector in HE funding (World Bank Group 2017).

Among the IOs active in the field, the CoE has positioned itself as the organisation that defends HE as a common good (which should remain accessible to students from different backgrounds) although a progressive alignment of the CoE with the Commission's position can be noted.⁴⁰ UNESCO also promotes a conception of education as a global public good. The OECD, however, has adopted a more market-driven, fee-friendly stance: 'Countries that charge international students the full cost of education also reap significant economic benefits' (OECD 2017). According to the OECD, not charging fees entails the risk of 'not fully exploring the benefits of internationalization' (OECD 2017: 38) and thus becoming less competitive. The funding diversification encouraging student fees appears as a dividing issue that cannot be 'sold' internationally as efficiently as quality assurance.

Conclusion

IOs evolve in a constrained environment characterised by competition and shrinking funds. Based on the field of HE (which differs from more classical areas of IR analysis such as security or trade), this article engages in the debate on IOs policy relevance. It shows that IOs' power is contingent, depending not only on member states' demand but also on external support that can be fragile and fluctuating. Analysing how IOs fight for their political survival as relevant policy players is particularly heuristic in the case of a secondary policy sector. When they face the risk of losing their visibility, IOs engage in coalition-building with other influential organisations and search for extrabudgetary contributions from countries that support this cooperation.

Based on the scholarship on the life and death of IOs and bureaucratic entrepreneurship, this article adds to the knowledge of contemporary IOs' survival strategies under budgetary constraints. It shows how IOs attempt to remain relevant policy players even with minimal resources. The empirical demonstration makes a case for reassessing material elements through the lens of interorganisational relationships. In a policy sector that is highly dependent on external funding, the refusal of member states to finance an ambitious but costly project can stop a policy stream. Securing

extra funds can help an IO stay afloat in a policy sector or gain a political foothold. The organisational approach provides a window to gain deeper insights into exchanging resources and mutual dependence between these organisations. Interconnectedness is an element of IOs positioning as legitimate policy actors. But it can also be a way to prevent their policy irrelevance, i.e. to survive politically.

The article explains how post-Cold war transformations, the Bologna Process and the growing dependence on indicators have reinforced the cooperation between the OECD, the CoE and the European Commission. It reconsiders the idea of competition between IOs given the significant proportion of funding that OECD and the Council of Europe get from the European Commission. On the European continent, the Commission's funds provide a powerful impetus for member countries' involvement in HE harmonisation and governing by comparison as they reduce reluctance to perform costly international assessments for domestic bureaucracies. This ability to prevent 'contest from arising on issues of importance' appears as a central feature of power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). The article addresses this capacity to neutralise specific policy issues through the relationship between IOs and depoliticisation. It shows how IOs converge on consensual policy schemes such as quality assurance, which can hardly be contested on the domestic level and pave the way for the discussion of more controversial reforms of HE governance and funding.

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Notes

- ¹ These statistics cover 70% of the world population. Since its launch in 1999, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) has received the financial support from the World Bank, among others, to develop the WEI programme.
- ² This ambiguity has been confirmed by expert interviews conducted in Poland (Ministry of HE and Research and Bologna working groups) especially in 2010 and 2011 and in Ukraine in 2015 and 2018 (Ministry of Education and Higher Education Reform Experts).
- ³ Interview with a UNESCO senior staff representative, 2 October, 2021.
- ⁴ The Higher Education Division became the Higher Education and History Teaching Division in 2002, and then the Education Department in 2011. The latter is part of the Directorate of Democratic Participation, a subdivision of the CoE's Directorate General of Democracy.
- ⁵ Interview with an analyst at the World Bank, 15 September, 2021.
- ⁶ Interview with senior analysts at the OECD, 20 February, 2019.
- ⁷ Interview at the OECD, Paris, 17 January, 2014.
- ⁸ Interview with a former OECD representative, Berlin, March 2015.
- ⁹ OECD Archives, Outcomes of the informal working group on HE, 28 and 29 October, 2014, Directorate for Education and Skills, Education policy Committee, EDU/EDPC(2014)23.
- ¹⁰ OECD Archives, Outcomes of the informal working group on HE, 28 and 29 October, 2014, p. 3.
- ¹¹ OECD Archives, Informal working group on HE: country responses, EDU/EDPC/RD(2014)8, 15 September, 2014.
- ¹² Interview at the French Ministry of HE and Research, Paris, January, 2015.
- ¹³ OECD Archives, *Informal working group on HE: country responses*. p. 7.
- ¹⁴ Council of Europe Programme et Budget 2020–2021, p. 181.
- ¹⁵ Interview at the European Commission, Brussels, 20 February, 2017.
- ¹⁶ Author's correspondence with the European Commission's DG EAC, March–April 2019. The data cited in this paragraph comes from the DG EAC.
- ¹⁷ Countries such as Canada, Korea, Mexico and Norway have supported OECD initiatives in the HE field over the last years, as well as Slovenia and Estonia on more specific projects.
- ¹⁸ Interview at the French Ministry of HE and Research, Paris, January, 2015.
- ¹⁹ After first withdrawing in 1984, the USA suspended their contribution until 2003. They suspended it again in 2011, after UNESCO recognised Palestine as a member state. The US's withdrawal, notified in 2017, was followed by Israel's.
- ²⁰ Interviews at UNESCO, Paris, 16 January, 2014, and 21 February, 2019.
- ²¹ There were 3,457 staff worldwide in 1975, 2,150 in 2003 (Cussó, 2006), and 2,293 in 2021 (but only 1,468 on a regular budget and 825 on extrabudgetary funds).
- ²² Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), available at <https://sdg4education2030.org/the-goal>.
- ²³ The sum may vary between 350,000 euros and 800,000 euros. Interview at UNESCO, 21 February, 2019. UNESCO, Programme and budget 2018–2019, 39 C/5Approuvé. (By way of comparison, the EU Commission provides 600,000 euros a year only to one of its student stakeholders in Brussels, the Erasmus Students Network, and 300,000 euros a year to the European Students Union).

- ²⁴ Interview at UNESCO, Paris, 21 February, 2019.
- ²⁵ In 2019, Russia settled most of the debt it had accumulated since 2017 (Drzemczewski 2020).
- ²⁶ Interviews at the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, November 2011 and July 2016.
- ²⁷ OECD Archives, *Outcomes of the informal working group on HE*, 3 October 2014.
- ²⁸ Interviews at UNESCO, 16 January, 2014, and 21 February, 2019.
- ²⁹ Interview at UNESCO, 21 February, 2019.
- ³⁰ UNESCO Strengthening quality assurance in higher education in Africa, available at <https://en.unesco.org/themes/higher-education/quality-assurance-africa> (last accessed on 20 January, 2021).
- ³¹ OECD Archives, OECD Council Committee on public affairs and communications. The dissemination of OECD statistics: results and future plans, 9 July, 2008, C/INF(2008)14.
- ³² Per Nyborg, *The roots of the European University Association*, April 2014, document elaborated for the EUA, p. 20, available at <https://eua.eu/about/who-we-are.html> (last accessed on 20 January, 2021).
- ³³ As far as diploma recognition is concerned, it refers to the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention, signed in 1997, which is the main legal instrument of the Bologna Process. A new Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications was adopted in 2019 under the auspices of UNESCO.
- ³⁴ CoE Archives, Memorandum, Strasbourg, 24 May, 2005, Note for the attention of G. Battaini-Dragoni, Mission report, Ministerial conference on the Bologna Process and BFUG, Bergen, 18–20 May, 2005.
- ³⁵ Interview at the World Bank, 19 February, 2020, Washington; Interview at the World Bank, 15 September, 2021.
- ³⁶ OECD Archives, Directorate for Education, Education and Training Policy Division, *Assuring and Improving Quality in Tertiary Education Pointers for Policy Development*, September 2008.
- ³⁷ Interview at the European Students Union, Brussels, February, 2018.
- ³⁸ Interviews with members of the Bologna Follow Up Group, 22 February, 2017, 1 February, 2018, and 9 July, 2018.
- ³⁹ EUA (T. Estermann & E. Bennetot Pruvot) *European universities diversifying income streams. Financially Sustainable Universities II*, 2011.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with a representative of academic stakeholders in the Bologna Follow Up Group, June, 2016.

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