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The epistemic culture of the OECD and its agenda for higher education

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The rise of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as a global actor has been attributed to its capacity to create and redefine the boundaries of knowledge through powerful discursive concepts, such as the idea of a knowledge economy. The organisation's reviews, forecasts and statistics have been perceived as producing multifarious effects within and beyond its member countries while shaping the perceptions of policy alternatives or lack thereof. The shared views and arrangements of knowledge creation within the organisation, from which the organisation produces its artefacts, have nevertheless received minor attention. This article approaches the OECD and its agenda for higher education from the perspective of organisational cultures and knowledge creation within organisations. The article investigates the changes that have taken place in the OECD and its higher education agenda. Moreover, it examines whether any dominant narratives on higher education emerge from the interview data and the OECD reports, and if so, what their differing or opposing narratives are. Lastly, the article aims to understand the dynamics of the changes by analysing whether an epistemic culture exists within the OECD, and if so, what kind of culture it is.

Key words: OECD, higher education, organisational culture, epistemic culture, epistemic community

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Introduction

The OECD has gained prominence as a global actor due to its capacity to create and redefine the boundaries of knowledge through powerful discursive concepts, such as the idea of a knowledge economy (Godin 2006; Robertson 2009; Rizvi and Lingard 2009; Wende 2011). With its global reach and function as a rating agency of countries' economic (and educational) 'worth', the OECD has assumed the role of a sort of 'macro-epistemic actor' (Knorr Cetina 2007; Knorr Cetina and Reichmann 2015) by validating knowledge that circulates about its member countries. The organisation's reviews, forecasts, and statistics have been perceived as producing multifarious effects within and beyond its member countries while simultaneously shaping the perceptions of policy alternatives or lack thereof (Henry et al. 2001; Woodward 2009; Rizvi and Lingard 2009; Niemann and Martens 2018). The shared views and arrangements of knowledge creation within the OECD, from which the organisation produces its artefacts, have nevertheless received minor attention.

This article examines the OECD and its agenda for higher education from the perspectives of organisational culture (e.g., Czarniawska 1992, 1998, 2011; Harisalo 2009; Gabriel 2015) and knowledge creation (Knorr Cetina 2007; Lindkvist 2008). The article suggests that investigating the OECD's organisational culture, that is, shared beliefs and internal arrangement of knowledge creation, will provide insight into what kind of organisation the OECD is inside and how it has secured its position in the field of global education policy. From this point of view, the article first investigates the changes that have taken place in the OECD and its higher education agenda. Second, it examines whether any dominant narratives on higher education emerge from the OECD reports and interviews with the OECD secretariat and academics, and if so, what their differing or opposing narratives are. Third, the article aims to understand the dynamics of the changes by analysing whether

an epistemic culture (Knorr Cetina 2007; Knorr Cetina and Reichmann 2015) exists within the OECD, and if so, what kind of culture it is. Narrative inquiry is used as a method of analysis (e.g. Gabriel 2015).

Higher education has been regarded as an important field of activity within the OECD although its Convention (1960) includes no reference to (higher) education. This importance has, to a significant degree, been attributed to the expansion of higher education (Schuller and Vincent-Lancrin 2009), as well as its redefined role in the knowledge economy (Henry et al. 2001; Wende 2011). Although economic orthodoxies and higher education programmes have changed over the past decades, the central focus of the organisation has remained, as Amaral and Neave (2009, 83) note, 'steadfastly and unwaveringly within the imperium of economics'. As the article 1 of the OECD Convention (1960) states, the organisation shall promote policies designed to contribute to the development of the world economy and the expansion of world trade on a multilateral, non-discriminatory basis.

The changing higher education agenda of the OECD has been analysed from a number of perspectives. For example, studies have been done from a historical perspective, drawing from the authors' careers in the OECD (e.g., Papadopoulos 1994), while others have discussed aspects of influence from a discursive perspective (Saarinen 2008). A large body of research has focused on policy reviews and other activities in the field of higher education (Henry et al. 2001; Rinne, Kallo and Hokka 2004; Schuller and Vincent-Lancrin 2009; Hunter 2010; Amaral & Neave 2009; Kallo & Semchenko 2016). Other researchers have elaborated on the new governance of the organisation (Rizvi and Lingard 2009; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Shahjahan 2013, 2016; Robertson 2017), its role in the field of higher education research (Kallo 2017) and analysed its higher education agenda from a global perspective (Wende 2011). However, studies that examine the culture, dominant narratives (e.g., Czarniawska

1998; Gabriel 2015), and the arrangement of knowledge creation within the organisation (Knorr Cetina 2007) remain absent.

Research on organisational cultures (e.g., Czarniawska 1992, 1998, 2011; Harisalo 2009; Gabriel 2015) has traditionally focussed on how shared views are constituted within organisations. These shared views are perceived as evolving and strengthening over time, with actors inside the organisation relying on them when forming their understanding of alternatives. It would be obvious to presume that the OECD has a strong organisational account, or an 'organisational saga' (Clark 1972; Amaral & Neave 2009; Stensaker et al. 2012), given the organization's relatively long historical continuity and the prominence of the organisation as an economic advisor to its member countries. The scarcity of reviews that look at the organisation 'from within' and the resulting gap in information, combined with the anonymous character of the OECD's publications, have reinforced the nature of the OECD as an impartial and impersonal expert organisation providing infallible advice. The involvement of member countries in OECD assessments and indicator studies, the media's habit of treating the OECD as an augur, and the policy research providing critical but aerial pictures from outside perspectives have together and independently contributed to the formation of what could be called a historically constructed account of the OECD. In light of the findings of this study, the OECD's 'saga' does not seem as cohesive as might be commonly supposed. The impression gained through this research is that the OECD's education programmes have undergone a significant transformation and that the organisational climate has been influenced by both uncertainties and ideological chasms.

The role of the OECD in higher education: an epistemic perspective

This study approaches the OECD's work on education from the perspectives of epistemic community (Haas 1992; Davis Cross 2013) and epistemic culture (Knorr Cetina 2007; Knorr Cetina & Reichmann 2015). Many previous studies have referred to the OECD as an epistemic community (Kallo 2009; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Shahjahan 2016), whose influence pervades academia and society and diffuses beyond political governance through its vast networks of civil servants and consultants. However, little research has been undertaken into the OECD's epistemic culture, that is, the interiorised processes of knowledge creation within the organisation, which shape the knowledge artefacts the organisation produces for its members (cf. Knorr Cetina 2007; Schein 2016).

Before moving on to a closer look at the concepts of epistemic community and epistemic culture, it is worth reflecting on the issue of mandate, which underlies the OECD's work on education. As education is not covered by the OECD Convention (1960), it is up to the member countries to decide on the temporary mandates for education. This implies that temporary mandates and voluntary contributions from the member countries have had a major impact on the nature and content of the knowledge produced by the organization and thereby on its epistemic culture. A remark by OECD official is illustrative of this situation; 'the authority depends on what we do, not on what our legal stages are' (OECD 8).

Temporary mandates have enabled the extension of the OECD's activity to the education sector. These type of actions beyond the conventions—*ultra vires*—have been scrutinised in studies on international law (e.g., Cannizzaro and Palchetti 2011; Sinclair 2015). These studies have sought explanations for why international organisations (IOs), in this case the OECD, exceed their mandates by extending their activities to areas other than those mentioned in their foundation treaties.   It is common for IOs, which enjoy a degree of discretion, to enlarge the scope of their activities. Since the goals of the conventions are broadly defined, the frontier between *ultra vires* and *intra vires* (acts or actions within the

mandate) can also be interpretative (Cannizzaro and Palchetti 2011). In the case of the OECD, the temporary mandates for education have been justified by the role of education in economic growth. As Wende (2011) states, the introduction of education into the OECD agenda was particularly influenced by prevailing neoclassical economic theories that regarded education as a key factor in increasing human capital. This notion defended the belief that investments in higher education were worthwhile.

Research on IOs has also provided a variety of views on the reasons for the OECD's extension of activities. Realist interpretations identify nation states as the most important actors in the international system and view IOs as arenas for states to channel their own interests (Archer 2001; Jönsson 2017). Though realist interpretations have had to make room for more complex interpretations of the development of international relations, some scholars (e.g., Martens and Jakobi 2010) have pointed out that it is necessary to understand the internal dynamics of the OECD by taking into account its dependency on the priorities of its largest financiers.

Research into governance in international relations has provided insightful accounts of the grounds for the expanding political leverage of the IOs (Rizvi & Lingard 2009; Jönsson 2017). From this viewpoint, the role of the OECD has been strengthened alongside the emergence of a new global governance that fosters the marketisation of education, the privatisation of education and the dismantling of the public sector. While contributing to the shift from government to governance, the OECD has influenced the construction of educational subjects who have taken on the values and features of new governance through the process of what Foucault describes as governmentality. (Rizvi and Lingard 2009.) Both realist research and research on governance in international relations are especially interested in the disposition of the IOs in the broader global context; their focus is thus directed towards global discursive analyses rather than to what takes place within organisations.

Constructive approaches to the study of IOs suggest looking at their expansion by focusing on internal dynamics, formation of expertise, norms, meanings, and legitimacy (Barnett and Finnemore 1999). These approaches are interested in how organisations such as the OECD initially serve their member states but become more autonomous actors over time. From this perspective, Wende (2011) sees that the OECD framework for intergovernmental negotiations on the preparation of strategies and the consensus that global competitiveness can be strengthened through intergovernmental cooperation have in fact strengthened the role of the OECD in higher education policy.

The epistemic perspective

The examination of studies on *ultra vires* in international law and theories of IOs shows that it is not meaningful to construe the disposition and expansion of IOs solely through their internal aspirations, practices or norms, nor through their external roles in the world system. As Reinalda and Verbeek (2004) have noted, international relations and decision-making involve actors other than states, and separation of the international and domestic spheres in research of this kind is rather unhelpful.

Analysing the OECD as an epistemic community with a distinct epistemic culture provides an opportunity to move beyond the frontiers of the research outlined above. A limited legislative capacity, supplemented by a wide range of tools for knowledge management and dissemination, make the OECD largely dependent on its recruited experts. Thus, its expansion appears to largely depend on its ability to extend the margin of discretion, to utilise opportunities and to table motivating themes and normative concerns that may have varied constitutive effects over time (cf. Reinalda and Verbeek 2004; Park 2018). In turn, the resultant new themes and concerns may lead to the redefinition of the preferences of actors and in this way lead to further reinforcement of the organisation's legitimacy.

The epistemic approach is useful in understanding how the OECD's extended margin of discretion in determining its mandate in education is achieved. The position of education outside of the convention compels the secretariat working on education to apply for renewal of mandates and thereby resort to discretionary powers. When the authority of the formal organization is limited, the organization can compensate for this by expanding its discretion through informal action (Harisalo 2009). This study of the OECD as an epistemic community with a distinct epistemic culture helps to identify the underpinnings of its knowledge production and resultant position in the global education policy field. It increases the understanding of shifts and current powers in higher education policy.

Haas (1992, 3) defines an epistemic community as 'a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area'. The members of this network share certain normative and causal beliefs and notions of validity (Haas 1992; Davis Cross 2013). Taking on the epistemic community approach means that an analysis is not confined to that of the internal secretariat but can also consider the OECD as a network that extends from the secretariat to the member countries' research institutes and policymakers.

The concept of epistemic culture, which is of specific interest in this article, is cognate with the idea of epistemic communities (Haas 2001; Lindkvist 2008). The concept of epistemic culture aims to capture the interiorised processes of knowledge creation bound together by affinity and historical coincidence of views. Epistemic cultures are 'cultures of creating and warranting knowledge' (Knorr Cetina 2007; Knorr Cetina and Reichmann 2015). To articulate the epistemic culture of the OECD, this article devotes attention also to interiorised processes of knowledge creation within the organisation and the arrangements known as 'epistementality' (Gibbons 1994 in Knorr Cetina 2007). The notion of epistementality refers to the arrangements that shape the way expert knowledge becomes

embedded in education policy schemes and legal frameworks, thus making up 'how we know what we know' (Knorr Cetina 2007, 363).

Research questions, interview data, and methods

Given the viewpoints considered in the previous sections, this article addresses three research questions: (i) what are the changes that have taken place in the OECD and its higher education agenda; (ii) what are the dominant narratives on higher education that emerge from the interview data and the OECD reports, and (iii) does an epistemic culture (Knorr Cetina 2007; Knorr Cetina and Reichmann 2015) exist within the OECD, and if so, what kind of culture it is.

Interviews (n = 29) and the OECD reports constitute the primary source material for this article. The interviewees were officials of the OECD Directorate for Education (n = 10), commissioned experts who consult or have consulted for the OECD (n = 4), and experts who have not provided consultancies for the OECD but who have knowledge of the organisation's work through their own research (n = 15). The reason for including commissioned experts who have consulted for the organisation as well as experts who have not is to gather viewpoints on the OECD's historically constructed account and epistemic culture that cannot be gained simply by interviews with the OECD secretariat. In this article, references and quotations from the interviews are marked with the terms 'OECD' and 'Academia' depending on the interviewees' background. The former refers to an interview with someone within the organisation's secretariat and the latter to an interview with a commissioned expert to the OECD or an expert who has not provided consultancy to the organisation. The interviews were conducted between 2003 and 2004 and were preceded by a two-month collection of research data at the OECD Directorate for Education. At that time,

the author had the chance to visit a small educational library of the Directorate for Education to learn more about the working methods of the organisation from within. This experience largely corresponded to what Czarniawska (1992) calls ‘mini-immigration,’ referring to temporary socialisation occurring in accordance with the principles of an organisation and the tolerance of discomfort and estrangement as a price of learning.

The interview data includes diverse personal histories and perspectives on changes in the OECD agenda and the issues behind such changes. With regard to the OECD secretariat, interviewees’ educational backgrounds varied, ranging from economics and international relations to history and education. For many OECD officials, it was often the case that they joined the OECD first as part of a shorter project, later extending their work with the organisation for years or even decades. The lengths of service and the positions within the directorate also seemed to influence the way the interviewees made sense of changes in the OECD agenda. The academics who were interviewed for this study represented different universities and research institutes in Europe. Their personal histories, varied scientific philosophical approaches, and experiences with OECD reviews and other projects were reflected in their responses.

Some of the interview findings were published as a doctoral dissertation (Kallo 2009). In this article, the interviews are reopened and researched from other methodological and temporal perspectives than those covered in the dissertation. The interviews took place in their own contemporary historical contexts and are treated as oral histories. Oral histories encompass diverse layers of time, which raises the question of reliability of interpretations (Teräs & Koivunen 2017). Interviewees’ and researcher’s interpretations of past events are not constant but instead change over time, along with the vicissitudes of life and the changes in the social, political, and economic environments. Competing views of the past within the organisation may also influence interviewee’s interpretations. (Teräs & Koivunen 2017.) In

recognition of the limitations of this study, the temporal distances described above are not understood as an example of tragic estrangement (verfremdung) but instead as a historical space that makes it possible to look at events and experiences differently (Gadamer 2004). The meanings the interviewees attach to the events therefore represent valuable information (Teräs & Koivunen 2017).

Analysing the OECD from within by focusing on aspects of organisational culture necessarily sets certain requirements for the selection of research methods. In this study, 'knowing' is seen as a subjective attribute or phenomenon rather than as a universal, generic one (Webster and Mertova 2007 in Puusa et al. 2014). Given this view, the analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne 1988; Heikkinen 2000) seems a pertinent approach to study the question of what has taken place inside the organisation.

Narratives may have certain characteristic features and follow a certain structure, expressing conventions of their own time (Delamont and Atkinson 2014) and even historical myths (Gabriel 2015; Kostera 2012). Narrative research on organisations may focus on genres that can be expressed, for example, by different metaphors (Czarniawska 1998, 2011). Metaphors help to articulate the nature of organisational narratives with which there is no prior familiarity. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) refer to 'root metaphors' as organising metaphors; these are metaphors that hold a deeper cognitive meaning and assist in the organisation of thinking. One such example is the metaphor of the 'organisational saga' (Clark 1972; see also Rhoades and Brown 2005; Välimaa & Ylijoki 2008; Puusa et al. 2014; Stensaker et al. 2012). The term draws from research on organisational cultures and refers to a collective understanding of a unique accomplishment in a formally established group. Organisational sagas may vary in their strength and durability, which are dependent on the organisation's historically acclaimed achievements (Clark 1972). The question of whether a

common culture underpinned by an ‘organisational saga’ exists or not inside organisations has been a subject of debate in the research literature on organisations (Stensaker et al. 2012).

Research questions guide the narrative analysis in the section of findings below. The findings section is divided into two subsections. The first subsection seeks answers to research questions about the changes that have taken place in the OECD and its higher education agenda and the dominant narratives on higher education. It highlights the meanings individuals attach to changes (Rhoades and Brown 2005; Puusa et al. 2014) inside the OECD and its higher education agenda. Furthermore, it shows how some narratives become dominant over a period of time (Czarniawska 1998, 2011; Gabriel 2015), change slowly, and safeguard the continuity of the OECD and its work on education. Humphreys and Brown (2002) use the term ‘hegemonic narrative’, which denotes a dominant narrative based on ‘natural’ justifications (Humphreys and Brown 2002). From this point of view, narratives appear as powerful means by which organisations are reproduced discursively and rebuilt as regimes of truth. The second subsection examines the epistemic culture by analysing the narratives of shared meanings and ideas of interiorised processes of knowledge creation (Knorr Cetina 2007). Traditionally, research on organisational cultures has perceived culture as shared meanings—as deep structures that are invisible and empirically difficult to approach. They refer, above all, to the prevailing ways of thinking that have been shaped and encouraged in the course of the organisation's history (e.g., Czarniawska 1992, 1998, 2011; Harisalo 2009; Gabriel 2015). The research on epistemic culture extends the analysis also to knowledge practices that are not devoid of meaning. As Knorr Cetina and Reichmann (2015, 874) put it, ‘[t]he focus on practice moves the level of cultural analysis “down” to the realm of material regularities, but without losing sight of symbolic regularities and the ways these are associated with the material’.

Findings

The OECD's changing higher education agenda: an analysis of dominant narratives

Since its early years, the OECD has encouraged its member countries to invest in higher education, assuming that the expansion of higher education would lead to economic growth. The organization urged European countries to invest in the education of a qualified labour force, with the aim of matching educational attainment levels in the United States and surpassing those of the Soviet Union (OECD 1962; Resnik 2006). This early role of the OECD in promoting the expansion of higher education in Europe has been perceived as considerable. As Kogan (1979, 53) notes, 'the informal OECD network […] made the expansion of higher education, and the resulting changes, thinkable'.

Safeguarding the position of education with social dimension

The OECD reports and interviews revealed asymmetric narratives between different directorates and within the Directorate for Education and the historical change in the balance of power between them. The early emerging narrative can be identified as 'safeguarding the position of education with social dimension'. Issues of expansion and widening access underpinned the OECD agenda for higher education until the mid-1970s. The organisation's reports focused on educational growth, expansion (e.g. OECD 1962; OECD 1971) and equality (e.g. OECD 1975). The OECD carried out a large number of educational activities, many of which were associated with social goals having no distinctive linkage to economic growth and the notion of human capital. This implies a lax interpretation of the Convention (OECD 1960) and resistance towards the (neoclassical) economic goals. The impact of

Nordic countries, especially that of Sweden and Norway, was significant (OECD 3). This was to the extent that some member countries reproached the OECD for being 'too social democratic' (Academia 1) and for giving too much space for equity concerns (OECD 3).

The second oil crisis of the 1970s and the following economic recession intensified the critique against the social dimension of education and resulted in the realignment of priorities in the OECD's higher education agenda. One official described strained relationships between the directorates and highlighted the capacity of people working on education to respond to external pressures within the organisation. These pressures were caused by the scenarios produced by the OECD's economic committee, which considered the way of education was organized 'a rather wasteful public activity' (OECD 5). Subsequently, the closure of the educational activities including the ones of the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation was discussed but not implemented (Academia 10).

Establishing a hegemonic claim for economisation of education

The operational vacuum left by the collapse of Eastern bloc economies at the turn of the 1990s had several consequences, such as the OECD's repositioning in the global policy field and the reshaping of its strategy with regard to higher education. The members of the OECD secretariat felt that the increased attention given by the European Union to higher education had a detrimental effect on the organisation's work on education (OECD 2, OECD 4, OECD 9). One interviewee used the word 'turbulence' to describe the internal situation of the OECD at that time, which resulted from financial difficulties and related demands to disband some of its committees (Academia 9). The OECD assumed a role as an advisor for many Eastern European economies, but, as one official noted, 'the euphoria about the fall of communism turned quickly into disappointment with the low speed of reforms' (OECD 1).

The organisation's publications of the early 2000s exhibit renewed self-confidence, as manifested, for example, in the publication *Getting to Grips with Globalisation: OECD in a Changing World* (OECD 2004). In his opening statement of that same publication, Donald Johnston, Director of the OECD from 1996 to 2006, emphasised the role of the OECD as a creator of global 'rules of the game'. The document summarised the objectives of the OECD, which were to build efficient market economies in its member states, privatisation, and regulatory reform, combined with strong policies to enforce competition. Retrospectively, this document contributes clearly to the trend that Alvesson and Karreman (2000) call a proliferation of neoliberal mega-discourse.

The OECD's reports on higher education revealed a strengthening narrative of 'a hegemonic claim for economisation of education'. This narrative seemed to gain momentum from the criticism that the expanded higher education sector has brought about a problem of oversupply of graduates and mismatch between students' skills and qualifications and the needs of the labour market (OECD 1979). The OECD (1983, 1987) pointed out severe challenges within higher education organisations, such as financing gaps and obsolete forms of governance. In the subsequent years, the organisation proposed structural reforms for higher education institutions, such as involving external actors in their decision making, reforming management practices, and ensuring accountability of universities (OECD 1987; OECD 1997). The impact of the OECD's proposals for structural reforms has been considered significant by recent research, which indicates that the ideas for higher education reforms were disseminated through the global consciousness by the OECD and other IOs (Shahjahan 2013, 2016). The academia witnessed a shift towards a new kind of autonomy and entrepreneurship (Shattock 2005; Marginson 2016), wherein the success of a university is measured by new managerial criteria based on how effectively institutions and their

employees turn knowledge into products and services (Slaughter and Rhoades 2009; Naidoo 2016).

The narrative of a hegemonic claim for economisation of education was clearly visible in the interviews with the OECD secretariat and especially in their perceptions of the activities of trade in higher education. These activities aimed at proposing guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education (OECD 2005; Kallo & Semchenko 2016). The following quote reflects the new weight given to the advice from economists:

> Usually we have done everything without the trade side. But now we were thinking about soft law [guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education]. [We] invited the Directorate for Financial and Enterprise affairs, which has done the guidelines for multinational enterprises, the Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry, which has done guidelines for consumer protection, and our legal office, which has been part of all of this, to come to [a] meeting and say to us, is it a good idea that you try to do something [i]n this area, […] And their uniform advice was that this is a good thing to do, so we decided to go ahead. (OECD 2)

The hegemonic claim for economisation of education (e.g., Rizvi & Lingard 2009; Spring 2015) draws from 'natural' justifications (cf., Humphreys and Brown 2002). Characteristic of this narrative is the determination that it was not meaningful to decelerate the expansion of trade in higher education across borders, but as one official stated, the OECD's 'job [was] to make it happen in a reasonable fashion' (OECD 8). The OECD's concern was 'that it is going to happen fairly and of good quality' (OECD 8).

> So, you know, we don't take a sort of, [trade in higher education] shouldn't happen, this is a terrible thing, which some anti-globalisation [movements] [do]. I am sure that for them, the OECD is seen as a promoter, but actually our view is that it is going to happen, no matter what we do […]. This is a neutral view of cross-border flows. (OECD 8)

Many experts who had not worked for the OECD criticised the initiative on trade and quality assurance in higher education. They stated that the arguments put forward by the OECD were difficult to override because the organisation is 'very effective at capturing powerful words—who can argue […] with quality […]?' (Academia 3). The OECD was 'trying to soften [trade in higher education], what really is a highly political area' (Academia 3).

Overall, the hegemonic claim for economisation of education, emphasising the skills needed for working life, seemed to function as a centripetal force within the organisation. The interviewees who clung to this viewpoint opined that education should be made more 'accountable to avoid arbitrary policies' (OECD 6, OECD 7). Education was depicted as 'a dark field,' 'whose outputs should be evaluated instead of [the] continuous evaluation of processes'(OECD 7). Notwithstanding this, the narrative of hegemonic claim for economisation of education was not shared by all the OECD officials. Although the US funding for developing learning assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) had helped to secure the extensions of the mandate for education, some officials were less convinced about their scientific input. They saw the learning assessments merely as activities bringing the organisation 'back to basics' (OECD 3), disregarding curricula (OECD 10) and relying on 'simple interpretation of human capital theory' (OECD 3). One interviewee stated that the studies for assessing learning achievements and the various

types of ‘what-works’ programmes started to overshadow the content of other, more profound work (OECD 4).

Rise and fall of the activities of higher education

The development of OECD work on education in the past two decades highlights a rapid increase and consequent decline in higher education activities. Since the turn of the millennium, the OECD has sought to assert the idea of a knowledge economy and establish itself as a global player in a new multilateral world order (Godin 2006; Robertson 2009). It embraced a view of the importance of innovation in economic growth and networks of higher education as clusters that would provide a favourable context for innovation (OECD 2006). It took up measures, which promoted, as Amaral and Neave (2009, 91) note, the organisation’s civilising mission through international technocracy. The organisation focused on higher education activities dealing with ‘system efficiency’, that is, modes of financing and indicators of institutional performance. These themes were generic to all systems regardless of their underlying political ideologies, thus posing no threat to national sovereignty (Amaral & Neave 2009).

The OECD has also engaged in new types of thematic reviews of tertiary education (OECD 1998, 2008), which have affected conceptual boundaries of higher education by including institutions below the level of the university (Amaral & Neave 2009). The first thematic review, entitled *Redefining Tertiary Education*, aimed at analysing the first years of tertiary education in relation to students’ needs and those of society and the economy. While recommending enhanced participation in post-secondary educational provision globally, the OECD review supported a new type of entrepreneurial and marketized university (OECD 1998; Henry et al., 2001, 140). The second thematic review, entitled *Tertiary Education for*

the Knowledge Society (OECD 2008), adhered to an operational logic that addressed policy problems on the basis of liberal economic theory. According to Amaral and Neave (2009), this thematic review not only laid out the operational boundaries for the future development of tertiary education but also extended these boundaries for neoliberalism itself, by demonstrating the range of its applicability to the fabric of tertiary education. It proposed financial reforms of higher education, including prescriptions for the improvement of overall cost-effectiveness and the use of cost-sharing between the state and students (OECD 2008; Istance 2011). It highlighted the problems of quality assurance of higher education and provided a rationale for the Feasibility Study on the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) (Tremblay 2013).

AHELO, which adopted an approach similar to PISA, was one of the OECD's latest large-scale higher education activities assessing student and university performance globally (Morgan & Shahjahan 2014). The Institutional Management of Higher Education Programme (IMHE) coordinated this assessment study (Shahjahan 2013; OECD 2015). IMHE represented a network of players, extending from the OECD secretariat to individual universities, with the aim of improving the management functions within expanding higher education systems in Europe. The nature of IMHE was considered distinctive because its members were academic institutions, not countries (Istance 2011; Henry et al. 2001).

AHELO faced scientific and political controversy. Problems were related to (among other things) the validity of the survey and the generalizability of the results (Ursin 2015). Following the feasibility study, the programme was suspended in 2015 due to conflict of interest and a lack of support, especially from the United States and Canada (OECD 2015; Corbett Broad and Davidson 2015). From the OECD's point of view, AHELO was considered as an assessment with the potential to provide valuable comparative information on students' qualifications and skills. Furthermore, the OECD believed it could supersede institutionally

focused higher education assessments based on research and citation scores, which it considered untrustworthy (Gurria 2015). Following the suspension of AHELO, the renewal of the mandate of the IMHE programme was rejected and expired in late 2016 (OECD 2019). These examples of recent changes in the OECD's agenda reflect the persistence of power relations in the global policy field resulting from the financial leverage of the players with the strongest capacities (cf. Marginson & Ordorika 2011).

The epistemic culture of the OECD

This second subsection of findings examines whether the interviews and the reports suggested the presence of an epistemic culture within the OECD, referring to interiorised processes of knowledge creation, including practices and arrangements underpinned by affinity, necessity, and historical coincidence (Knorr Cetina 2007, 363). The notion of epistemic culture has been of interest among higher education researchers (Stensaker et al. 2012) inasmuch as it considers not only the intangible aspects of organisational culture such as values and other social structures but also the organisations as a whole, including the tangible and materialised processes that Knorr Cetina (2007) refers to as 'machineries of knowing' (Knorr Cetina 2007, 363; see also Czarniawska 2011).

Therefore, the following findings highlight formal machineries of knowing as well as intangible epistemic culture within the OECD. The thread of the analysis is that the intangible procedures can compensate for limitations of a formal mandate (cf. Harisalo 2009). After that, the analysis is extended to the epistementality of the OECD displaying the interiorised arrangements that shape the way the OECD's produced knowledge becomes embedded in the policy schemes and legal frameworks of its member countries. Identifying recurring themes and structures in the interviews that are both individual and socially shared (Delamont & Atkinson 2014) is the leitmotif of the analysis.

Formal machineries of knowing: a narrative of dearth

While the mandate of the OECD does not possess a means of legal enforcement, creation of knowledge and 'inducement via networking has perforce to act as a substitute *faute de mieux*' (Amaral & Neave 2009, 86). The OECD has generated a considerable amount of information on education to achieve its agreed goals and to secure its existence. For example, from the 1960s until the early 2000s, the OECD had published more than 2,000 volumes in almost 100 different areas of education, including working papers, monographs, and review reports (Kallo 2009). The OECD ILibrary Database contains a total of 6,764 volumes on education between 1997 and 2019, of which 781 were publications related to higher education. The OECD secretariat interviewed for the study found the creation of knowledge to be a prerequisite for its continued existence; as one official outlined, 'the OECD rises and falls by quality of its advice' (OECD 2).

The interviewees stressed the poor funding of the work on education, which they attributed to its temporary mandates. A shared narrative of dearth emerged from the interviews indicating how the petitions for funding have affected the agenda on education throughout the organisation's history. Basic allocations from the Directorate-General for Education through the Council accounted for just over a tenth of the funding for projects, which, according to an OECD official, meant that most of their funding comes from voluntary contributions (OECD 6). Some secretariat members felt that the funding and status of education, including higher education, had been uncertain at all times; notwithstanding that education had reached an established position within the organisation, its status was never self-evident, but rather dependent on the five-year mandates (OECD 3, OECD 6, OECD 7). The future of educational activities was constantly re-negotiated and, as one official noted, 'a

sunset clause' prevailed (OECD 3). This way of explaining the changes resembled a biological metaphor (Czarniawska 1992), which refers to the perceptions of individuals within organisations that serve certain purposes and whose survival proves their usefulness.

The way the interviewees made sense of the changes in the OECD's higher education agenda indicated the rather troubled position of higher education within the organisation, which, as a finding, deviates from those in previous publications (e.g., Schuller and Vincent-Lancrin 2009). The fact that issues of higher education were dealt with not only within the Directorate for Education, but also under the auspices of the Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation, had a devolving effect on the management of higher education activities (OECD 4). The ambiguous status of higher education was considered 'a challenge that the OECD must in one way or another solve' (OECD 4).

The temporary mandates resulted in operational uncertainty and production of knowledge, such as outcome indicators, that would satisfy the financiers. The constant risk of budget deficit impelled education officials within the OECD to persuade and generate funding for its activities (OECD 7). As indicated in the previous section, the agenda for education was affected by the extensive funding provided for the expanding PISA and other assessment studies, which resulted in restructuring and internal reviews of the organisation's programmes. This was implicitly signalled in an interview with an OECD official, who explained that the high number of OECD educational programmes and their wide range of activities constituted a problem (OECD 3). Indeed, in the years following the interviews, many activities, also in higher education, withered away and the work of the OECD on education began to focus on international assessments.

Intangible epistemic culture: a fulfilment of the OECD saga?

The interviews indicated that the intangible organisational culture of the OECD has made up for limitations caused by the temporary mandates and dearth of funding. Interviewees ascribed the strength of the organisation to the historical quality and augury, which together contributed to the creation of an account of the organisation's historically acclaimed achievements – *the OECD saga*. The quality of work was mentioned frequently in the interviews with the OECD officials. One official referred to the organisation's achievements by stating that 'historical quality' is the basis for its authority (OECD 2). Another interviewee (OECD 8) articulated this concept more specifically as 'the accuracy of statistics, the quality of the framework within which the data is gathered […] the quality of writing, [and] the way in which it is made available'.

The interviews also revealed views showing how the OECD has been elevated to a position typical of an augur. In these views, the OECD was described as an organisation capable of identifying future trends that then come to pass within three or four years (OECD 3, OECD 4, OECD 5). This was perceived as being achieved by 'using privileged access to databases' and 'recruiting people with ideas' (OECD 5). The ability of individual officials to persuade member countries to finance activities were considered instrumental in this regard (OECD 3, OECD 4, Academia 1).

The interviews highlighted the importance of external consultants (especially from the Anglosphere) in the creation of knowledge. The coloniality of English language and scholarship was recognizable. The rapporteurs of the OECD reviews are usually native English-speaking experts (Academia 1, OECD 8). One interviewee felt that the United Kingdom 'has an enormous school of very good expertise in [the] education field' and 'the OECD has been tapping [into] it all the time' (OECD 3). Thus, there has been 'quite strong influence there' (OECD 3). Notwithstanding the impact of the US, the largest financier of the

organisation, and the UK, an OECD official sought to confirm that ‘the OECD has not signed up as [in a] *full* neoliberal position as far as education is considered’ (OECD 8; italics added).

The interviews with the experts who did not consult for the organisation generally provide more critical accounts while still emphasising the clout of the OECD. Overall, they believed the quality and ideological focus of the OECD's work had gone in an adverse direction since the early 1980s. One interviewee described the OECD’s past studies as more academically ambitious and exhibiting academic freedom, which had made the interviewee interested in the activities of the organisation. The political transformation since the 1980s marked, however, a detrimental shift from equality of educational opportunity to effectiveness and efficiency. Concomitantly, the OECD moved to the right-centred ideological position, endorsing the redefinition of the nation state as a market state and promoting the ‘disvaluation of local circumstances’ through its statistical assessments. The interviewee doubted whether countries celebrating social democracy were strong enough to ‘slow down the market principles which the OECD is advocating powerfully’ (Academia 2). Another interviewee thought that the OECD’s agenda had strengthened since the 1980s with neoliberalism as an organising ideology. The interviewee saw the G7 countries as regulating the OECD but the USA as gaining ascendancy over the others due to its financial supremacy in many global organisations. The interviewee felt that the OECD had grown into a discursively powerful and influential actor whose message seemed coherent (Academia 3).

Overall, the interviews with the OECD Secretariat indicated that the fulfilment of the OECD’s saga appeared to depend on devotion, acumen, as well as the ability of employees to anticipate the future, set up an agenda, and persuade member countries to fund activities and reach consensus (OECD 1, OECD 3, OECD 5, OECD 7). The continuity of leadership until the end of the 1990s, supported by good personal chemistry among officials and related balance between forward-thinking and conservative staff, was highlighted (OECD 3, OECD

4). Similarly, the insight of some members of the secretariat, their ability to perceive emerging trends for the future, and their ability to establish relationships with member countries' administrations to secure funding was also mentioned (OECD 3, OECD 4, OECD 5).

The interviews also revealed forces that seemed to destabilise the fulfilment of the saga of the organisation, which Rhoades & Brown (2005) call a 'masquerade of consensus'. This refers to opposite forces within the organization, which result in the organization becoming a kind of plurivocal community (Rhoades & Brown 2005). As indicated in the previous section, the interest and prestige of the Nordic countries had shifted to the expanding EU arena since the 1990s, and the contribution to educational ideation and added value by these countries were considered to have been significantly weakened, creating more room for the increasing influence of the United States and Australia (OECD 8). The OECD education programmes, after the retirement of the long-standing and visionary heads of different educational units, experienced an epoch of several short-term managers in the 1990s and 2000s. This interim management phase, accompanied by changing leadership styles, entailed a feeling of organisational miasma for some members of the OECD secretariat and its consultants (e.g., OECD 5, Academia 1). An account of the organisation as a polysemic universe (Boje 2001) seems apt in capturing the internal state of affairs at the OECD in the early 2000s. One official used the trope of the OECD as an orchestra, where directors were composing music 'that was not always in harmony' (OECD 3).

The ways in which consultants described their own commitment to the OECD consultancy work varied. High responsibility for the content and the delivery of the reports in good time were highlighted (Academia 1). Some consultants found their tasks difficult due to, for example, problems of reliability of data provided by the member countries (Academia 5) and tight terms of reference; visits to the target countries and related stakeholder meetings

were carried out on a tight schedule (Academia 1), which has raised questions about the validity of such far-reaching conclusions drawn in such a short period (Academia 2). There was also the issue of the integrity of one's own research career; one consultant wanted to keep distance from the organisation in order to avoid excessive influence on their academic work. As the interviewee phrased it: 'Sups with the devil should have a long spoon' (Academia 5).

Thus, the OECD's organisational saga seemed 'fulfilled' in terms of shared beliefs on the historical quality of its work, the devotion of key players, and the imagery of the organisation as a discursively powerful player. However, the inconsistent history of educational programmes, its dependence on external financing, the temporary mandates, the ambiguous position of higher education within the organisation, and the continuous changes in staff seemed to destabilise the historically constructed account of the organisation.

Discretionary power as an arrangement of epistementality

This last section of findings aims to provide further insights into 'epistementality' as part of the epistemic culture (Knorr Cetina 2007) showing how interiorised arrangements that shape the way the OECD's produced knowledge become embedded in the policy schemes and legal frameworks of its member countries.

Previous studies have highlighted how the knowledge produced by the OECD impacts on the reforms of higher education policy (e.g. Henry et al. 2001; Kallo 2009; Hunter 2013). It has been noted that a government's ability to promote growth has increased the authority of economic professionals and organisations (such as the OECD) not only in the political economy but also in non-economic sectors such as those of the social, education, and scientific sectors (Schmelzer 2015.) The member countries seek the organisation's benediction for the policy measures and use its reviews to justify their upcoming reforms (e.g.

Henry et al. 2001; Amaral & Neave 2009; Rizvi & Lingard 2009; Kallo 2009). The organisation works through networks characterized by permeative and incremental ways of shaping opinions. It engages its members with its values, such as market friendliness and efficiency, and draws from solidarity among its members (Amaral & Neave 2009).

The interviewees for this study implied that with missing legislative power, the education officials of the OECD have managed to extend their discretion through changing epistemic networks. These networks spread out from the secretariat to national administrations and research institutes. The governing of individuals and the building of widespread consent were at the centre of this discretionary power:

> We leaned heavily on what we identified as the progressive elements within countries and got them to act. All this is very subtle and, […] unspecified ways to get them to act as our lobbyists within national administrations. So once national administrations were persuaded through [this] lobby exercise […] then it was transformed into political support through the country's passing it on their ambassadors when they come for the discussion in the Council for the overall programme of the organisation. This is how the process operated. Discreetly, subtly but always as, kind of, […], collusion between progressive members of the secretariat and forward-looking educationists in the countries, not only within national administrations but also within the research institutes, within the various pressure groups and so on. (OECD 4)

Until the 1990s, discreet and subtle methods of persuasion, occurring at different times and in various ways and contexts, was considered an interiorised arrangement aimed at

generating continued interest in the activities of the OECD. However, the assessments of learning achievements and competencies, which have received considerable attention in the media, reflect a significant change in the OECD's epistemic culture. Steering policy making in the OECD member countries by subtle persuasion has been augmented by peer pressure (e.g. OECD 2018) in the form of comparisons and rankings and publicity in the 2000s.

The academics who had not consulted for the OECD indicated strong criticism of the OECD's power to instigate ill-suited reforms through its studies. The organisation was perceived as a 'rating agency', suggesting the reduction of expenditures on public-sector activity, and generating nervousness in member countries with its benchmarking activities (Academia 3). These interviewees criticised the OECD reviews for spreading the message that education was in a state of severe crisis (Academia 3, Academia 4) while also pointing out pathologies, which increase the possibilities of reforms (Academia 2). Such messages in the OECD reviews were 'pushed down to the local level', promoting structural changes in the public sector (Academia 3). The subsequent measures and interventions were fast-paced, and as a result, formerly acclaimed personnel, ways of learning, and the work of trade unions were suddenly subject to strong criticism (Academia 3). In the member countries, the OECD was seen as a kind of neutral expert arbiter (Academia 4) when it came to justifying difficult reforms. As one interviewee described, the OECD 'represents […] a form of normative legitimation that […] doesn't exist anywhere else (Academia 4).

The authority through anonymity was pointed out frequently in the interviews. The OECD's reports, though prepared by individuals or collaboratively by the secretariat and consultants, are usually published anonymously to augment the organisation's leverage. This anonymity contributed to the organisation's authority and made it coherent outside, but at the same time, nurtured doubt about the reliability of the reports. One interviewee felt, that 'there

is a very large element of ventriloquism involved', because it is unclear 'where does the OECD gets it's information' and 'who writes the things? (Academia 4)

The anonymity associated with the production of the reports was also found to be problematic within the OECD, which has led to authors' names being added to the introductions of reports. However, the secretariat was not ready to give up anonymity; as one secretariat member noted, the OECD 'should not identify [who] the author is when it is a high profile report in which the institutional authority is needed' (OECD 2).

Overall, the organisation was seen to have a profound impact on the boundaries of knowledge, because 'it dominates thinking' that 'education is […] continuous self-improvement for the economy'. The OECD 'has become more powerful because of its longstanding ideological or […] ontological way of looking at the world, the sort of global ontology. (Academia 3) Some experts not only saw the organisation as influencing political decision-making, legislation, and reforms but also as having an even deeper effect on the issue of national identity, which was particularly pronounced in small countries. As one interviewee observed, understanding of education in these countries is 'filtered through and framed by OECD conceptualisations' (Academia 3).

Conclusion

In this study, the OECD and its higher education agenda were approached from the perspective of research on organisational cultures while considering the OECD as an epistemic community with a distinct epistemic culture. The selection of this approach was influenced by the gap in research regarding the shared meanings and interiorised processes of knowledge creation within the OECD.

The findings suggest the importance of reflexivity and deconstruction when studying aspects of sense-making and epistemic culture within global organisations such as the OECD

and how they affect boundaries and conditions of knowledge in education policies (Knorr Cetina and Reichmann 2015). Through stressing the discursive power and clout of global organisations, policy research may also unintentionally reassert the authority of the organisations' knowledge work on education.

Narrative inquiry was employed to analyse the OECD's changing higher education agenda and epistemic culture. Regarding power relations within the OECD, this study highlights a weakening narrative that emphasised the persistence of work on education with social dimension, as well as a strengthening hegemonic claim for economisation of the education, wherein the goals of efficiency and accountability have increasingly shaped the boundaries of the future of education. The study attributed the strength of the narrative of economisation of education to the hegemonic nature of this narrative—that is, to the justification of procedures by their 'naturalness' or 'neutrality'.

The findings show that the dependence on temporary mandates for education has shaped the epistemic culture within the Directorate for Education. The temporary mandates have led to the creation of knowledge that would secure future financial support. The intangible epistemic culture has been developed to make up for the limitations of the organisation's formal mandates for education. The study highlighted the role of external consultants from the countries where English is the native language. Anonymity was seen to reinforce the organisation's institutional authority and coherence outside, especially on weighty issues. The interviewees ascribed achievements of the organisation to the historical quality and augury, which together contributed to the creation of a historically constructed account of the organisation−the OECD saga.

In the absence of legislative capacities, the OECD relies on its discretionary power. Although the organisation's educational activity has been regulated through its five-year mandates, governing of the education activities within the OECD has enjoyed a degree of

discretion that has resulted in the enlargement of its scope of activity. The findings show that the OECD secretariat has managed to extend their discretionary power by building influential networks extending from the secretariat to national administrations and research institutes. The governance of individuals and the building of widespread consent are at the centre of this practice.

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