

# A Comparative Study on the Roles of the World Bank, the OECD and UNESCO in Global Education Policy Making

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## ABSTRACT

International organisations provide financial, human, and technical support and greatly influence the development of global education policy. However, due to the different nature and purpose of each international organisation, their impact varies. As a comparative study, this paper adopts a combination of literature and comparative research methods to analyse the differences in the roles of the World Bank, the OECD and UNESCO. It considers that they focus on four aspects: the target recipient they desire to help with, the perception of education, the focus of work and the binding force. In addition, given these differences, this paper provides some references and advice on how a country can develop its education policy making in the light of globalisation and the influence of international organisations.

**Keywords:** *A comparative study; International organisations; Global education policy making; The World Bank; The OECD; UNESCO*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Under the influence of globalisation, the shaping of politics is increasingly determined not within insulated units but rather derives from a complex number of multi-layered institutional playing fields [1]. Supranational organisations have a profound impact on all aspects of a country's policies, including education. The World Bank, the OECD and UNESCO are three of the most influential international organisations in education policy making, each playing a role in global education policy making.

In this paper, it will be argued that the difference in their roles lies in four areas. On this basis, four recommended suggestions are then proposed to address how individual countries can better develop their education under the influence of supranational organisations and contribute to international education policy activities.

The significance of this research is to gain a proper understanding of the influence of international organisations on education policy and provide insights for a country to better cooperate with international organisations in the field of education and better participate in globalised education governance.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Methods

This paper uses a combination of literature and comparative research methods. The literature allows the research to be based on a scientific basis and facilitates in-depth analysis of the object. The cross-sectional comparative research method is suitable for analysing the differences between the three major international education organisations nowadays and facilitates the exploration of patterns from them.

### 2.2 Research Questions

(1) What are the differences in the role of the World Bank, the OECD and UNESCO in global education policy making?

(2) What can the study of these issues reveal about the development of education in a country?

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE DIFFERENCES IN THE ROLES OF THE WORLD BANK, OECD AND UNESCO IN GLOBAL EDUCATION POLICY MAKING

#### 3.1 Different Support Targets and Policy Positions

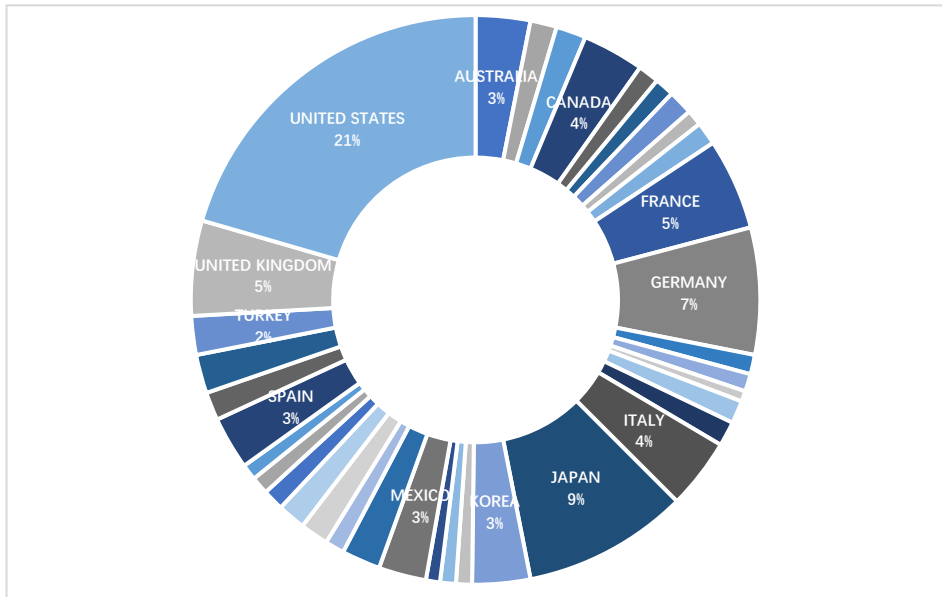


Figure 1 OECD Member Countries' percentage shares of Part I budget contributions for 2019

In terms of composition, the OECD is an intergovernmental international economic organisation made up of 38 market economy countries. National contributions to the budget are based on a formula that takes account of the size of each member's economy [2]. For example, as can be seen in Figure 1, according to the formula, the US accounted for 20.5% of all the member countries in Part I of the 2019 budget (the main part of the budget funded by all members). It is noticeable that most of the policies of the OECD are made in a game of power between countries [3]. As the size of the economic contribution determines the proportion of decision-making power, most of the power is vested in economically advanced countries like the US. Although the OECD has now also established cooperation with developing countries such as China, developed countries still remain at the centre.

Unlike the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank are more inclined to assist developing countries.

The majority of the budget for UNESCO also comes from the apportionment of member states based on their economic development, such as population size and per capita property. Yet, the contribution will not be linked to the distribution of power. Thus, under this mechanism, UNESCO's policy stance is more distinct and neutral, with an overall commitment to the interests of developing countries and disadvantaged regions.

Similarly, the World Bank's mission is to help developing countries eradicate poverty and promote sustainable development. For example, in the face of the

current epidemic, the World Bank has proposed a new commitment of US\$5.2 billion for education projects in the 2020 financial year to help low- and middle-income countries to overcome the crisis.

In conclusion, due to differences in membership, purpose and funding, the OECD is more concerned with the interests of the more economically developed market economies and policy positions are also dominated by these countries, whereas the policies issued by the World Bank and UNESCO are more oriented towards supporting developing countries.

#### 3.2 Different Perceptions of the Function of Education

Since the OECD started out with a primarily economic function, it was not until the 1950s, when the importance of education and science was recognised, that the OECD's education function began to take shape. Its Education Division, established in 2000, is working to help member countries achieve quality education that contributes to personal development, sustainable economic growth and social cohesion. This reflects the OECD's greater concern for the economic and social functions of education and its emphasis on the market service character of education.

Likewise, the World Bank was not involved in the field of education in its early years. As the world's largest source of finance and knowledge for developing countries, the World Bank is committed to reducing

poverty, promoting shared prosperity and fostering sustainable development. The credit operations issued by them are in pursuit of economic interests, while the provision of loans or even grants is accompanied by political clauses [4], which is actually a demonstration of the imposition of supranational organisations in the mechanisms of influence on national policy making. In a word, the World Bank's understanding of the role of education focuses on both economic and political aspects.

By contrast, UNESCO defines education as a public service. Education changes lives, which is at the heart of its mission to build peace, eradicate poverty and promote sustainable development. UNESCO believes that education is a lifelong human right for all and is a humanistic mission. Since it was founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, its establishment was a reflection of the desire for world peace. Its understanding of the role of education focuses on its cultural and social functions [4].

In a word, because of the different historical development of these three organisations, they have different understandings of the function of education. The OECD concentrates on the economic and social attributes of education. The World Bank issues loans with political clauses, and education is a form of economic and political fulfilment. UNESCO, however, focuses on cultural and social attributes.

### ***3.3 Different Work Priorities***

The OECD has developed a relatively sophisticated education navigation system with a strong team of experts [5], with work focused on measuring outcomes such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is conducted every three years. The OECD publishes a number of publications each year, including *Education at a Glance*, an analysis of key education indicators. In addition to this, the OECD also sets international standards and carries out occasional policy analysis or thematic studies on the education systems of its member countries. They work in areas such as teaching, skills development, policy implementation and educational innovation.

The World Bank issued periodical policy analysis as well, but its work in the field of education is mainly characterised by the provision of financial support, such as loans and bonds to member states and sponsorship of the conferences. In 2021, the Bank had 25 projects with financial support in the form of grants, including public administration - education (19), primary education (16) and secondary education (12) [6]. Its main themes of projects are education for all and education for the knowledge economy.

UNESCO's activities in the field of education are mainly concerned with data collection, standard setting, and the holding of international conferences [7]. For

example, in 2015, UNESCO's 38th General Conference adopted Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) to lead the 2030 Agenda for Education. UNESCO mapped out the overall goals of sustainable development for humanity for the next 15 years and published a roadmap to achieve this goal--the 2030 Framework for Action on Education (FFA). UNESCO's work covers education development issues from pre-primary to higher education and beyond. The topics included global citizenship and sustainable development, human rights and gender equality, and technical and vocational skills development.

To sum up, all three organisations are involved in the development of standards and the distribution of publications. In addition, the OECD is more responsible for the international measurement of a number of education indicators and provides analysis for member countries. UNESCO organises regular meetings of national and international organisations and sets goals for future joint efforts.

### ***3.4 Different Strengths of Binding Forces and Policy Implementation Approaches***

When creating global standards, the OECD is based on a robust process of intensive peer learning and mutual policy monitoring voluntarily [8]. There may be some seemingly binding principles of activity within the organisation, but in general, it remains based on the voluntary nature of the member states.

For example, the activity principle that seems most binding on the country is peer review. This term can be described as a systematic analysis by other countries to assess a country's performance with the aim of helping the country improve its decision-making and accept better practices [8]. On the one hand, this approach relies heavily on mutual trust between countries and confidence in the process. On the other hand, the process can also generate some pressure on the country being assessed, especially when the media is involved and the results are made public.

However, even in such cases, the country still has the right to choose, if it wishes, whether or not to accept some of the options proposed by the other members. What is more, not all recommendations from the OECD are accepted, and some of them are subject to criticism and may not be approved by governments. Recommendations and agreements are not binding on member or non-member countries. The OECD has to continuously make suggestions and exert some pressure on governments whose policies it considers irresponsible, and this may be an effective way of ultimately achieving the organisation's objectives.

As UNESCO calls for partnership and solidarity [4], its binding approach is not mandatory as well. It binds its member states mainly through conventions and resolutions, ensuring the dissemination of ideas and

actions. For example, in 2018, UNESCO adopted resolutions to protect the ancient city of Jerusalem and promote Palestinian education.

On the contrary, the World Bank has a top-down approach to policy implementation, which is highly binding [4]. The credit facilities are made available in the form of legislation. The main component of the World Bank loan is the project loan, and the evaluation and supervision of this type of loan are mainly done by the Bank staff. The whole process that one state can get the loans is complex, including selection, preparation, assessment, negotiation, implementation and evaluation.

In summary, although the OECD contains some seemingly binding principles for the activities of its members, overall it constrains them with very little intensity. Similarly, UNESCO binds its members on a voluntary basis and conventions generally have no legal effect. In contrast, the World Bank binds its members to a very high degree, and the aid loans it issues usually have legal force.

#### **4. ANALYSIS OF THE STATE'S RESPONSE TO SUPRANATIONAL ORGANISATIONAL INFLUENCE**

The above results can shed some light on how a country should approach its relationship with international organisations in educational policy development in the context of globalisation.

Firstly, countries should have a comprehensive understanding of international organisations. International organisations are a double-edged sword for the internal development of a country. Although they can bring human and financial resources to support the development and implementation of a country's education policy, there are also internal problems with them. For instance, it is difficult to guarantee equal rights and roles for member countries and there may be a lack of effective supervision. This requires countries to use the rules to protect and develop themselves in their activities within international organisations.

Secondly, the country should actively participate in discussions on international education policies and learn from the best achievements of other countries. With globalisation and closer economic and trade relations between countries, the internationalisation of education has also become a trend that can pose a huge challenge to traditional nation states [9]. However, with the development of technologies such as Big Data and Artificial Intelligence, it is again almost impossible to move away from the globalisation of education. Thus, the state needs to cooperate more with other countries to address education policy issues.

Thirdly, the country should study in-depth the rules and operating mechanisms of international education

organisations and accurately grasp the education policy positions of different international organisations. For example, developing countries receive relatively more assistance from UNESCO and the World Bank. The country should make full use of the various development opportunities offered by international organisations.

Finally, countries should take more responsibility for international education organisations and better reflect their values in international affairs. At the same time, countries can also establish regional international organisations that are led by themselves to take the initiative and better pursue their own development.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

This paper examines how the three major international education organisations differ in their influences on global education policy making and serves as a reference for countries facing the globalisation of education. The results can be summarised as follows: a) UNESCO, and the World Bank emphasize assistance to developing and underdeveloped countries; b) The OECD and the World Bank are more concerned with the economic role of education, while UNESCO is more concerned with its social and cultural role; c) Each organisation has a different content of work, the most obvious difference being that the World Bank provides financial assistance; d) The World Bank is the most binding, usually in the form of a law.

International organisations are not perfect, and they all have some problems. For instance, it is difficult to guarantee equal rights and roles for member countries. Therefore, it is important for a country to look critically at the impact of international organisations on education policy and try to strike a balance between forces promoting globalisation and those reinforcing the "container society".

A limitation of this study is the amount and scope of relevant literature needed for the analysis. For future research, this topic can be further investigated from the perspective of international organisations, such as analysing their remaining shortcomings at present and predicting their development trend. These are all promising areas to which this study might be extended.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

My gratitude goes to Professor Nasar Meer for informative lectures, to Teaching Assistant Gu Zongwen for inspiring comments on my paper, and to Ms Han Min for useful suggestions during this whole research journey.

I also owe great thanks to my parents and friends who always give me generous help. Without their support, this research would not have been possible.

At last, I am profoundly indebted to my school-College of Foreign Languages, Nankai University, Tianjin, China.

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