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### National policy brokering and the construction of the European Education Space in England, Sweden, Finland and Scotland

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## National policy brokering and the construction of the European Education Space in England, Sweden, Finland and Scotland

Sotiria Grek<sup>a</sup>, Martin Lawn<sup>a</sup>, Bob Lingard<sup>b</sup>, Jenny Ozga<sup>a\*</sup>, Risto Rinne<sup>c</sup>, Christina Segerholm<sup>d</sup> and Hannu Simola<sup>e</sup>

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This paper draws on a comparative study of the growth of data and the changing governance of education in Europe. It looks at data and the ‘making’ of a European Education Policy Space, with a focus on ‘policy brokers’ in translating and mediating demands for data from the European Commission. It considers the ways in which such brokers use data production pressures from the Commission to justify policy directions in their national systems. The systems under consideration are Finland, Sweden, and England and Scotland. The paper focuses on the rise of Quality Assurance and Evaluation mechanisms and processes as providing the overarching rationale for data demands, both for accountability and performance improvement purposes. The theoretical resources that are drawn on to enable interpretation of the data are those that suggest a move from governing to governance and the use of comparison as a form of governance.

### Introduction

The focus of this paper is the relationship between national policy-makers in the field of education and ‘Europe’. The paper builds on a number of theoretical and empirical resources to discuss whether and to what extent the fabrication of a European Education Policy Space existing within and across national boundaries can be discerned in flows of data – and discussions about data – that stimulate and support constant comparison and that generate indicators which steer and shape education. The theoretical resources include ways of understanding changing governance – for example, the apparent move towards ‘soft’ governance in networked forms (Lawn 2006) and their possible links to the growth of comparison and measurement through education data. In pursuing these ideas we are looking at the rise of Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE) mechanisms as providing the overarching rationale for data production in terms both of accountability and increased performance. QAE is creating a perspective on the world that illuminates and defines certain objects and obscures and hides others for governance purposes (Simola and Rinne 2008). We suggest that the massive growth in data production and use, and its new capacity to flow across Europe (and beyond) may illustrate a shift from its role as providing a ‘state optic for governing’ (Scott 1998) into the fabrication of European education as a legible, governable policy space. In

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exploring and developing these ideas we are also drawing on a range of data from interviews with policy actors who may be classified as ‘policy brokers’, that is people who are located in some sense at the interface between the national and the European and who ‘translate’ the meaning of national data into policy terms in the European arena and who also interpret European developments in the national space. We also draw on interviews with those who work within European organisations (the Commission, Eurostat, Eurydice) and who may be understood as contributing to the formation of a European Education Policy Space through the collection and use of data. For the purposes of this paper, we are preoccupied with the idea of ‘Europeanisation’, which we understand to have the potential to be simultaneously a response to, as well as a conduit of, globalisation (Rosamund 2003). By this we mean that Europeanisation can provide a vehicle for the transmission of global agendas into the national arena and it can also provide a focus for support of a European social model in response to neoliberal pressures from transnational organisations like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This makes the positioning of the ‘policy brokers’ particularly interesting and significant. We cannot discuss our approach to globalisation in any detail here: we simply state that for this discussion we are particularly interested in its nature as a political process that involves real economic and political actors with real interests, rather than in its economic or technological development (Niukko 2006a, 9). In exploring Europeanisation and the position of policy brokers, our focus here is on the interaction of assumptions about the future of society and national interests in relation to social and education policies.

### **The complexity of ‘Europe’ and ‘the national’**

That brief presentation of the key intentions of this paper underrepresents the degree of complexity with which we are attempting to work in the wider project within which this enquiry is based. We are not painting a picture of national–transnational exchanges, in which policy brokers operate as frontier guards, and members of European organisations act as carriers of a European policy agenda. We need to stress that we understand Europe to be fluid and changing, and itself swept by international pressures, and that we further understand Europe to be simultaneously located in and produced by the global, the idea of the European and the national. In order to capture this constantly moving, liquid and undefined European education space, we start the analysis from a slightly more stable ground: its past. Education policy activity in the European Union (EU) could historically be classified in several ways; for example the Treaty of Rome (1957), the Single Act (1987) and the Maastricht (1992) and Amsterdam (1997) Treaties could be seen as four stages (1957–1987; 1987–1992, 1992–1997 and 1997–) (Ollikainen 1999; Shaw 1999; Blomqvist 2007). The European Education Policy Space was not determined merely by the fairly stable geographical boundaries of a common market: as early as the 1960s, it became a shared project and a space of meaning, constructed around common cultural and educational values. Indeed, from the 1960s–1970s, the discourse of a common culture and shared histories was slowly being produced as a cluster of facts and myths about the European ‘imagined community’ rising from the ashes of a destructive Second World War. Education policy-making for the ‘people’s Europe’ took the forms of cultural cooperation, student mobility, harmonisation of qualification systems and vocational training (European Commission 2006). It did not constitute a purely discursive construct, adding to the list of European myths. It was concretised and pursued

through Community programmes, such as COMETT and ERASMUS, involving large numbers of people and travelling ideas (European Commission 2006). Its impact was arguably limited in relation to the ways European education systems constructed their curricula and tools of governance; subsidiarity was the rule. However, regardless of its relatively limited effects, the project of a 'people's Europe' had a clear ambition: to create a distinct European identity and culture – and to use these resources to enable the governing of a shared cultural and political space.

This brief reminder of the foundational characteristics of Europeanisation is important in our work for two reasons: first, it helps to throw into relief the defining events that turned the European education space from a rather idealistic project of cultural cohesion to a much sharper competitive reality; and second, it enables us to understand how, when and why the discourses of Quality Assurance and Evaluation entered this space, and with what impact. For example, our data reveal the many points of origin identified by national policy actors in relation to policy requirements that demand data collection – these may originate in Europe or from the wider world of OECD, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or the World Bank. Indeed, for the most part, the source of pressures and requirements does not seem to be of great concern. Instead, policy actors focus on ensuring successful outcomes, on producing a 'world-best' education through the production and use of data: successful competition is the new language of high quality and standards. There are difficulties in identifying a distinctive European Education Policy Space, as policy actors interpret their brokering as a fusion of European and global influences that places pressure on systems to demonstrate success in terms of measurable outcomes. Such developments suggest that the 'Europe' of a collective project of shared trajectories, values and aspirations is less visible than in the past, and focuses attention on the kind of space of governance that the growth of data flows in Europe give rise to. Looked at in this way, we can see that the governing project of a 'people's Europe' is slowly being turned to a project of individualisation – the production of a Europe of individuals, striving to accomplish the 2010 goals, indicators and benchmarks. This project is made possible by the existence of networks through which data may flow, and through the capacity of technologies (software, data sharing systems, statistical techniques, statistical and analytical bureaux) to connect individual student performance to the national and transnational indicators of performance. Furthermore, we suggest that the use of these particular technologies of governing (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007) – irrespective of whether they take the form of performance data in England, evaluation in Finland or self-evaluation in Scotland – signals a shift from the attempted *fabrication* of Europe through shared narratives and projects to its *projection*. By this we mean a shift from the production of Europe through the recording and transmission of its existing characteristics and capacities to the moulding of the future through Quality Assurance and Evaluation processes that shape and project the individual and the nation forward into lifelong engagement with Europe as the most competitive knowledge economy in the world.

The role of transnational organisations in constructing educational indicators (for example, the World Education Indicators Project developed by OECD in conjunction with UNESCO and partly funded by the World Bank) adds another layer of complexity to the picture. OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a non-curriculum-based measure of comparative educational performance of students at the end of compulsory schooling in literacy, mathematics, science and problem solving, is dominant globally (at least in the global north) as the key international

comparative measure of the effectiveness of schooling systems. These data sets are heavily utilised by the EU and by its member nations, particularly as they relate to education in the nations which are both EU and OECD members, but there has also been alignment in approaches to measurement and category construction. Statistical categories have been aligned across the OECD, Eurostat and UNESCO and together work as a 'magistrature of influence' in helping to constitute Europe as a space of governance (Lawn and Lingard 2002). While the OECD is still predominantly a think-tank focusing on matters of economic policy, it appears to have become more of a policy actor in its own right in the context of globalisation (Henry et al. 2001; Rizvi and Lingard 2006). In its role as policy actor, the OECD has apparently created a niche as a highly technically competent agency for the development of educational indicators and comparative educational performance measures. EU data collection then is intersected by OECD work, which in turn may contribute to possible emergence of a global education policy field (Lingard and Grek 2005). In the framing and use of data we can see at play here social-spatial networks of the national, international (between nations), transnational (passing through nations) and global (Mann 2001). While these international and transnational network flows are significant, it is also important that they enter national spaces in different ways, and that different national systems receive and respond to these flows differently. The UK (and particularly England) might be characterised as a highly responsive 'bridge' or transmitter that links the European with the global (or more precisely Anglo-American) discourse, especially in times of growing Euro-scepticism about the future of an enlarged, 'multi-speed' Europe. Scotland – as we shall show – uses Europe as a way of projecting its new, politically devolved, identity. Finland – a small and peripheral but successful nation that is growing in influence has shown itself to be a 'model pupil' of the OECD and EU. Sweden – as a late entrant to the EU – has perhaps remained more internally-focused and less susceptible to European and global discourse. The idea of a Europe produced through QAE and performance data is not absent from the policy narratives of actors in all of these systems – in England, Finland, Sweden and Scotland; however, it is almost impossible to separate this from their global reference points. In later sections we look at these policy narratives and highlight the differences and similarities that emerge in them, but before doing that we need to spend a few moments on the concepts that are key to understanding data as governance. Networks provide the conduits through which data flow, and also signal shifts from government to governance (Kooiman 1993; Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999) on which we draw. However for data to constitute governing we need to work with the key concepts of commensurability and cross-borders spaces of equivalence. The next section discusses the analytical purchase of these ideas and contextualises them within the European frame of reference.

### **The complexity of comparison and commensurability**

Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) outline a new mode of transnational governance of education, based on processes of 'international spectacle' and 'mutual accountability'. They refer to the renewed interest in comparative education that, as a consequence of a process of political reorganisation of the world space, calls into question education systems that for centuries have been imagined on a national basis:

In a world defined through a flux of communication and interdependent networks, the growing influence of comparative studies is linked to a global climate of intense

economic competition and a growing belief in the key role of education in the endowment of marginal advantage. The major focus of much of this comparative research is inspired by a need to create international tools and comparative indicators to measure the 'efficiency' and the 'quality' of education (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003, 424–425).

In this new world, policy-makers seek international education indicators in order to build education plans that are legitimised by a kind of 'comparative global enterprise'. Since the mid-1980s, but particularly in recent years, the programmes and guidelines that have been implemented at the European level reflect the adoption of a common language of education. New ways of thinking about education carry governing principles that tend to impose a single perspective and consequently rule out alternatives.

Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal point to the immense influence of OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the EU's indicators for assessing the Quality of School Education and Concrete Future Objectives of Education and Training Systems. The conclusions and recommendations derived from these programmes tends to shape policy debates and to set discursive agendas, influencing educational policies around the world. Such researches produce definitions of 'good' or 'bad' education systems, define policy 'problems' and offer directions towards solutions. In addition, the new style of policy formation derived from the Lisbon Council produces trends towards greater policy convergence. The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) incorporates quality assurance processes, indicators and benchmarking as a new 'soft' form of governance (Lawn 2006; Alexiadiou 2007).

According to Robertson and Dale (2006, 221–222) and Rinne (2007), the OMC aims to establish guidelines for the EU combined with specific timetables for achieving the Lisbon goals; through quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks that assess the EU member states against the best in the world; and through coordination and comparison to translate these European guidelines into national and regional educational policies. Furthermore, the OMC supports constant comparison through periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review as mutual learning processes. In all of these processes a key element is the visibility of performance (Walters and Haahr 2005, 125–128). Visibility brings the possibility of peer pressure. Visibility requires indicators and data sets that are legible and public.

The emergence of Europe as a commensurable policy space has therefore been constructed around particular data sets, including indicators and a range of performance measures in respect of education. In making our argument, we draw upon histories of statistics which demonstrate the political, technical and cognitive work necessary to the emergence of both the nation and national statistics and their imbrication in each other (Porter 1995; Desrosieres 1998). We are making an analogy about the significance of indicators and data to the construction of Europe as a legible, governable policy space in the context of globalisation. A number of histories of statistics demonstrate the intimate and interwoven relationships between the development of state administrative structures – or what Latour (1987) calls a 'centre of calculation' – and the development of standardisation, methodologies, technologies and related cognitive schemes of statistics and scientific thinking (Hacking 1975, 1990; Porter 1995; Desrosieres 1998). The nation constituted as a 'space of equivalence' is necessary to the construction of statistics (Desrosieres 1998), but also statistics and numbers which elide the local are equally important to the construction of the nation. In parallel with the *internal* construction of the nation state in Europe through statistics and standards, nations also compared themselves *internationally*. The systems of schooling, for example, including buildings, texts and teachers, were created after study visits, special reports and communications

with other countries. Comparison was made against the best. This was a question of judging progress by adopting recognised models from leading system elements elsewhere. Today, comparison is a key element of the operation of multinational companies (sites of production, costs of resources, etc.); it is managed by numerical data, which has increased in velocity, scale and scope. Comparison for constant improvement against competition has come to be the standard by which public systems are judged, as the ideas of the private sector dominate the ‘new’ public. While states originally managed this process of comparison in a limited way, the flow of national data internationally has increased. Comparison is now cross-border; it is both an abstract form of competition and an element of it; it is a proxy for other forms of rivalry. Comparison is highly visible as a tool of governing at all levels – at the level of the organisation (to manage); of the state (to govern); indeed comparison events or ‘political spectacles’ (such as PISA) may be used because of their visibility. The data have to cross borders ‘well’ – that is, in a form that is unchallenged and clear, but not all data travel well (for example, IEA data that are contextualised). If they do not travel they cannot be used to govern. Thus in our framing of the issue of governing through data we see the co-dependence of commensurability and comparison as key in making data work as governing technologies.

In working through our interview data, then, we have focused on key questions or organising themes that include commensurability and comparison as key technologies, along with networks as essential conduits and spaces of interaction/interrelationship. These technologies are operating in national spaces that are shaped by ‘collective narratives’ or traditions (including national systems and practices of data collection, national understandings of commensurability and appropriate comparison), but that are also energised by global data requirements and flows. We have therefore grouped our data in relation to these key ideas: traditions, networks, comparison and globalisation. Before looking at each of these, it may be useful to say a little more about the research methodology that we employed in identifying respondents and in constructing our interview schedule. As indicated above, we were interested in policy ‘brokers’ who occupied a dual role between and within national systems and the European or transnational agencies and organisations involved in producing or collecting quality indicators in education. In each national system, therefore, we identified key personnel (policy and data analysts, people with responsibility for the national implementation of PISA testing, members of the Inspectorate with a European remit and so on, as well as members of Brussels-based organisations with a relevant role in national systems) and conducted semi-structured interviews with them about their positioning, their membership of networks, and their views about data flows and comparability. The data were then analysed using the key organising themes discussed above. We move now to setting out some illustrative material from the interviews, which has also been selected to illuminate – albeit very briefly and schematically – the key themes of traditions, networks, comparison, and globalisation.

## **Constructing the European Education Policy Space**

### ***Collective narrative and tradition***

Within the UK, the English and Scottish approaches appeared to be quite different in the project of the construction of the European Education Policy Space. In fact, if the UK has been characterised as the EU’s ‘reluctant partner’, Scotland is arguably build-

ing on an identity *between* two unions, one in the UK and one in Europe (Dardanelli 2005):

the subject was very much self-evaluation and I gave a presentation and talked about the Scottish context and the fact that we don't collect [...] data at national level in the way that we would have done against 5–14 in our main approaches. And our English counterpart gave a presentation and talked about the PANDA<sup>1</sup> system. And this incredible sort of complex ..... machine and they were able to tell by the age of 11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> how youngsters will perform when they are X, Y and Z. (CP6S: Scottish policy actor)

English policy actors, when asked about their specific relations with the European Commission and other European organisations, refuted policy influence coming from that direction. In their project of benchmarking and measuring skills and competences, they found that OECD has more advanced tools and greater expertise:

They are just not nearly so far ahead as the OECD in terms of the competencies that they also have for carrying our big studies. That is, the expertise that they have in the Commission is not there at all. I am finding very much relying on people from individual countries like myself who have seen how it is done and sort of come back to their table and advise them on, tell them what we need to be looking over... We are probably ahead of other countries in terms of data used... Influence is almost going the other way. (CP2E: English system actor)

Policy actors in England shared a sense of the advanced nature of data collection in that context:

Because we have all this Key Stage Data and because it is longitudinal, we are practically, without boasting, we are probably the leading administration in the world as far as value-added measures and schooling are concerned. (CP5E: English policy actor)

...we would see ourselves as something of an international trendsetter in this whole area of data generation and analysis. (CP2E: English policy actor)

However the Scottish actors framed their discussion of data use with European colleagues with wider references:

I'm not convinced actually, in terms of the sort of performance data, I'm not ... at the moment I don't think that the group that we're actually talking about really is driven by performance data. It's looking at education in the round and aspects of education. (CP5S: Scottish policy actor)

English and Scottish policy actors presented very different attitudes towards the European policy-making space; those located in England maintained that ambiguity and fluidity in Europe are due to the lack of expertise and coordination, whereas the Scottish policy actors presented it in a positive light as an 'organic' space of policy learning and exchange:

There are some indicators at a very early stage of development and we need to keep an eye on that one as well. There's not a lot of detail in these new indicators so we need the Commission to tell us a bit more. We do take part in working parties that address some of these but there's not much detail and communication at the moment, so we sort of preserve our position on a few things particularly, so that we don't increase burdens to a point that we don't achieve response rates on any of these things. (CP2E: English policy actor)



A lot is done in a sort of an organic way in response to particular thing. (CP5S: Scottish policy actor)

English policy actors appeared to maintain a safe distance from European education policy-making. Although they did ‘keep an eye’ on it, it didn’t ‘drive our thinking’, according to one informant. They positioned themselves more in the global, rather than the European, field.

In the Finnish case, Finland’s position between east and west framed most of the international cooperation of the country until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Europe in the 1990s. Openness of influence to the OECD and the west came late, and openness to neoliberal system redesign even later:

Now we can say that during 1981, 1982, 1983 there was a phase during which we went on as if ignoring it, and ignoring even the fact that there was of course a tendency in the OECD towards binding education all the more strongly as an instrument for enhancing international competitiveness, but Finland didn’t retreat about this. (...) we were by that time in quite an interesting situation as the Nordic countries, not to mention the Central European Countries, even Sweden, were giving up already. We pushed with all our force towards a comprehensive school which would provide general competence (...) so it was about this that we must get something to assess and measure and through this to make the most of the system as well as of the teachers. As here we emphasised and did it perhaps exceptionally strongly that quality assurance cannot be based on competition between the schools, pupils and teachers. That’s where we had to give in as late as the 1990s. (Finnish policy actor)

In the 1990s the political context in Finland was rapidly changing. The great recession at the beginning of the 1990s had severe consequences for Finland and weakened the defence of comprehensive provision. The conservative governments allied with the employers in promoting the market-liberal values of effectiveness, marketisation, parental choice and management by results. More weight was also given to the international comparisons and cooperation as well as to the recommendations of the supranational organisations. The collective narrative of education as a national enterprise was weakened during the 1990s. The hard years of the recession strengthened the Nordic egalitarian ethos again, and Finland became a ‘model pupil’ in applying neoliberal innovations in education, but through technical and incremental policy rather than through making strong neoliberal declarations. Curiously enough, no political actors were willing to question the aesthetics of the equality in education discourse (Rinne et al. 2002; Kallio and Rinne 2006; Patomäki 2007; Simola et al. 2007).

In Sweden, while there is evidence of the increased significance of quality assurance processes nationally, in the EU and globally, and growing attention to the OECD, the EU and the Official cooperation in the Nordic region (Nordiska Ministerrådet), there is also some impatience about the lack of recognition of Sweden’s capacity and traditions in relation to assuring quality in education. As a late member of the EU, Sweden was not particularly sensitive to its education policy efforts in the early stages of its membership. Interviews suggest that this has changed, and the EU is becoming a more and more prominent part of the Swedish education policy sphere. Sweden has taken part in the Lisbon process and has recently been more actively engaged in processes to develop a ‘coherent framework of indicators’ (Swedish policy actor). However these quality indicators are described by Swedish policy actors as very well anchored in the Swedish government and parliament. It was said that the indicators

match the goals of Swedish education fairly well, and that Sweden has already achieved what was agreed on in the earlier process of setting common education goals for Europe. Most of the Swedish interviewees saw the general aim of the EU's QAE activities as to promote high quality education in Europe in order to produce and sustain a highly knowledgeable, competent and flexible workforce, so that Europe (and Sweden itself) becomes the most competitive region on the world market. However Sweden, according to these interviewees, does not import, borrow or copy ideas or models from anywhere. Indeed it is the expressed opinion in the Ministry and at the Swedish National Agency of Education (SNAE) that Sweden is already very good at assuring the quality of its education. Thus the collective narrative of excellence and experience remains strong, although interaction with the EU is growing.

### *Networks and communities*

The governance of the European Education Policy Space appears from the data as being increasingly 'done' through building relations between people – groups/nations in networks/communities. The project of Europeanisation seems increasingly dependent upon the cooperation and joint resource mobilisation of national policy actors who sometimes lie outside governmental hierarchical control. Further, policy networks accommodate the blurring of state/civil society boundaries that is such a feature of current policy-making – perhaps especially in England – with the growth of cooperation or dispersed responsibilities among state and non-state agencies, and engagement of actors from the private and voluntary sectors in the delivery of services. The term 'policy community' (Rhodes 1997) denotes a network with high levels of stability and continuity, longer-term agendas and interests beyond the sectoral- or issue-based. The term has stronger membership meanings than 'network', and in some contexts – for example in Scotland – has acted to mark off a governing group with shared cultural norms (around meritocracy – see McPherson and Raab 1988). It connects to ideas of the 'collective narrative' in national systems (Popkewitz et al. 1999; Ozga 2005) that features as a backdrop in the previous section. From our interviews Europe appears as a network with a (reciprocal) agenda of improvement (Scotland):

Well, I think, to a certain extent, I mean that undoubtedly so because if you think about the Barcelona agreement and so on that that's not about an opt in or opt out, not [as its] signed by every EU country. And this commitment to, you know, the particular areas that were identified as areas for improvement. So we ... I mean I don't think it was any ... ever been a discussion as will we participate or not. I think the question would really be, how can we best participate? What can we contribute? Or what do we give back? (CP6S: Scottish policy actor)

Networks feature strongly in the self-presentation of the (Scottish) Inspectorate (HMIE) in Europe and beyond – is this a 'policy community' finding a role for Europe in the promotion of a small, peripheral country's agenda for improvement?

It's probably a good example of the sort of working title of the group which is a Network.... As a result of that, you know, people coming together at a formal meeting but very often it's the spin-offs that arise from that ... I must say that we've been quite intrigued the way ideas seem to spread between different parts of it ... (CP5S Scottish policy actor)

Networks in Scotland use Europe as a vehicle for self-promotion, (and build connections to other networks) and use 'network' language of collective learning:

It's constant ... and likely to become more. And it seems to me having discussed it with colleagues at various meetings over in Europe, as more and more accession countries come in that a lot of the countries that are coming are actually seeking assistance and advice and support. And they see particularly the European network policy-maker group as a vehicle for that. (CP5S: Scottish policy actor)

On the other hand, an English Department for Education and Science (DfES) – now Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) – informant stresses the importance of the national data and its reliability. In England, the learning appears to be rather internally-focused:

The PISA 2006 schools will be getting the data this month and NFER has been working on it, so we will obviously ask them how useful that has been. So I think that is the main way that this will be useful in quality assurance. I don't...at a national level, I can't say, well it can't be an independent benchmark of national performance. I mean you have to be very careful, we can use it alongside our national data but I wouldn't use it as a proxy for our national data. And I would say our national data is a far surer measure than any international study can ever be. (CP2E English policy actor)

Finland has actively participated in the PISA project since its beginning in 1995, and has been a model pupil of OECD while also being active in the work of PUMA, the Public Management Committee of the OECD. Finland adopted the ideas of the New Public Management Committee, especially at the municipal level. There were a number of influential conduits of OECD influence in the first Conservative Party-led coalition government in the 1990s. Other important networks involved permanent officials specialising in education, who spent three to five years in Finland's Permanent Delegation to the OECD and UNESCO in Paris and who became important brokers of OECD ideas. Finland was represented on the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) Governing Board and also on the Education Committee of the OECD. The exceptionally receptive stance of the Finnish education policy elite towards the OECD has been noted by various commentators. Interviewees in Niukko's (2006b) study and in our own research refer to mutual respect especially following the recent attention given to Finland after its national success in PISA.

Sweden's networks are shaped by clear ideas of limits to what Sweden will agree to participate in. For example, Sweden does not look with enthusiasm on the European Commission's efforts to get support for a common and coordinated education policy throughout the member states. Sweden defends the principle of national sovereignty in the case of education. Interviewees state that education is a national responsibility and the EU should not interfere with that. There seems to be some divergence of opinion among civil servants, both at the ministry and at SNAE, regarding what should be measured and how it is measured. There is no straightforward 'translation' of indicators into the Swedish system. Many informants point to more generic and non-curriculum-based competences like literacy and mathematical and problem-solving ability as the most important ones to foster (and measure). Others bring forward issues of equality, critical thinking and independence as individual characteristics that should be recognised in education. At the same time they acknowledge that quality in these attributes is not easy to test or measure.

### *Commensurability and comparison*

As comparison related to governance has grown in visibility, it has moved from being the responsibility of an 'internal' infrastructural agency, providing data for government,

to being an ‘internal/external’ agency, collecting and disseminating data, related to national/transnational governing. Internationalisation – in this case, Europeanisation – knits agencies together in working practices and standardising procedures cross-border. Posts are invented – e.g., the ‘International Comparisons Programmes Manager’. Governing means turning data into action.

Cross-border positioning becomes normed. Comparison as competition becomes normed as well; it can be ‘shocking’ (CP2E) and a public event, an international event, when it fails as a process – for example, when Germany had unpredicted poor PISA rankings. Cross-border comparison, in this heightened sense, has moved from being an act of public government, about which little was publicly known, to public governing that is highly visible. The data and its management, cross-border, are domesticated in an event – a moral panic, a crisis, a new policy. At the same time, in England, data has to be bought and supplied with the use of advocates to make sure cross-border comparison can continue with its same intensity. Data production is described as needing to be ‘incentivise[d]’ (CP5E).

Comparison has become more intense since open coordination and Commission groups use the service more directly; it has a life of its own now:

....since Lisbon we’ve found also that some of the working groups at Commission level have come to the Eurydice European Unit in Brussels and suggested that we have publications in the Network work programme that will feed into those working groups. (European Commission official 1)

So, the Eurydice Unit in England, for example, appears to have shifted from being a loosely-coupled general information agency into a focused data-sharing enterprise, tightly connected into EU governing processes. They connect government departments at regional and national level across Europe.

Since 2000 there has been a stream of OECD reviews of education in Finland. International cooperation and communication by the Finnish education government has become a part of everyday life (Niukko 2006b, 103). This includes cooperation in the new initiatives of the EU. There are clear signs of a new enthusiasm about international indicators in relation to QAE. In a Ministry of Education (MoE) seminar one could sense a strong collective enthusiasm, even a shared dream of finally having available instruments and indicators that will make new planning and steering possible and eliminate politics from governance.

PISA taught Finnish education politicians and officials the ‘market value’ of international comparisons. Interview data make it apparent that OECD is seen as a transcendent carrier of reason (see also Niukko 2006b, 112). It may be seen creating a consensual community (Weber 1981), a discourse of truth (Foucault 1989), a style of reasoning (Hacking 1990). Interviewees described the importance and meaning of OECD meetings and texts as follows: ‘OECD-doctrine’ (Niukko 2006b, 122 and 126), ‘up-dated themes’ (ibid., 111), ‘magic of numbers’ (ibid., 117), ‘the only table where Finland can sit with the G8-countries’ (ibid., 130); ‘a council of the sages’ (ibid., 131); ‘guiding member states in the same direction’, ‘peer and moral pressure’ (ibid., 143); ‘moral commitment’, ‘indirect effect’ (ibid., 144), ‘the economic as the primary nature of education’ (ibid., 161–164); ‘tuning sentiment and sympathy’ (interview 10, April 2007), ‘modernisation’ (Finnish policy actor 3).

Some interviewees refer to the OECD as ‘the instrument, catalyst and certain framework for comparison’ for Finnish education policy (Niukko 2006a; 2006b, 130) and admit that *Education at a Glance* and rankings in PISA ‘do have clear effects to

policy, especially if you are ranked below average' (ibid., 141). In Niukko's (2006a, 2006b) study, the decision-makers and civil servants saw the most important function of the OECD in its role 'as a neutral tool of the national education policy'. Some of them criticised OECD as 'the judge', and others characterised it as 'the doctor' or 'the psychiatrist'. Sweden has taken part in OECD projects for several decades. Projects and groups that are mentioned in interviews are: the International School Improvement Project (ISIP), the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), the Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE), PISA both in relation to test groups and the steering group, the OECD governing board, the International Comparisons in Education (INES) steering group, a spin-off network from ISIP; and the International Council for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI). These are the organisations and groups that the Swedish brokers hold in highest esteem for their professional and analytical capacity. PISA is also mentioned by all, for its high impact on national policy, not only in Sweden but in other countries as well, because of the attention media give it. In the eyes of the interviewees, Sweden is regarded as a driving force in the EU and the OECD work with QAE in education. The long history of official statistics in Sweden (since the 1700s for the reading ability of the population), and its long tradition of national systems of controlling public education, are examples given to explain Sweden's strong international position and self-confidence about the policy and practice of QAE.

### ***Globalisation and Europeanisation***

Finally, the influence of OECD and PISA in particular has been central in policy talk at both the national and the European level. There is no doubt that international tests of pupil ability in core subjects, and the international rankings that these tests produce generate a very strong discourse that links high test performance to competitive economies:

It is at the education level that all begins, that will be the determinant of a country's prosperity. If you get it right on that level, you'll get it right within the macroeconomic level. (CP2E: English policy actor)

But certainly the concern about world-class competitiveness, having students that are fit for the world of work, making them able to do all the things that they have to do – that's a pressing need for this government and just about every other government in the developed world. (CP5E: English policy actor)

However these English actors, while stressing the significance of international competitive performance in PISA and Third International Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS) as a benchmark for an internationally competitive economy, also emphasised the ways in which test results informed consumers about how well their system was doing – judgements of quality made within the nation were based on rankings and tests that were international. PISA data also had diagnostic use – it helped identify problems with the system, but again in the English context its limitations by comparison with more detailed data that allowed comparison between institutions were stressed. In addition, there is a very strong awareness of the politics of international testing and the hierarchies it produces, but with a focus on the national:

... the government will clearly be held to account by the media if these results are up or down or whatever compared to the last time, and therefore that media pressure is quite

significant in international terms. But I think that plays more to a domestic audience than it plays to any kind of international audience. (CP2E: English policy actor)

In these ways, global data flows and uses are impacting on the national, but not in uniform ways, even within the UK. The policy actors from Scotland maintained a distance from PISA hierarchies, although they found PISA results ‘reassuring’ as indicating that ‘our students are, on average, reasonably pretty high performing anyway’, but they singled out the usefulness of the contextual data that PISA produces:

...they were interesting, not for the league table aspect, which I think many of us would query, as whether it was very helpful at all. But because of some of the more qualitative stuff that was coming on the back of that. The interviews, the stuff about the management and governance of schools, the whole side of the ethos of schools. Issues about behaviour ....So it was not so much that the data in itself was particularly significant but [...] the data in connection with all these other things. (CP6S: Scottish policy actor)

However while difference in response to global pressures of performance measurement is important, there is also evidence of the pervasive impact of such testing regimes, particularly in the non-OECD member states – where participating in PISA sets a modernisation agenda and enables countries to place themselves in a relationship with the ‘best’. Here it was suggested (by an informant from England) that these countries:

might choose to see PISA as more relevant for them or certainly in terms of the comparisons you can make. They don’t necessarily want to be making comparisons with countries like them, they often want to be making comparisons with the member countries and the economic part, how far they have got to go in order to catch up.... They come to PISA because they want to be compared with these leading countries. (CP2E: English policy actor)

Finland, as indicated above, is the OECD’s ‘model pupil’ (Rinne et al. 2004; Rinne 2007). This characterisation is contained in the OECD’s own account of Finland:

Finland has a record of heeding the advice of past OECD education reviews. The review seems likely to continue that pattern, helping to shape the future of a dynamic education sector. (OECD 2003, cited in Rinne et al. 2004)

The former longstanding head and a kind of founding father of the education office of OECD, George Papadopoulos (2004, cited in Niukko 2006b, 146) refers to the same phenomenon:

I have the impression that Finland has an exaggerated perception of the role of what experts say. (...) Some countries are very hostile to foreign criticism. I think Finland, from what I guess, is not hostile but would like to get assistance.

The titles of some publications (published only in Finnish) of the National Board of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reveal the positive and highly respectful attitude to OECD: *Learning from the Analysis of the OECD* (Laukkanen and Kyrö 2000); *OECD – Firm Base for Decision-Making* (1999); *OECD – Directions for Policymaking in the 21st Century* (2001); *OECD Resources for Decision Making in the Era of Globalisation* (2005).

Sweden, on the other hand, while mindful of OECD reports and statistics, is secure in a long history of statistical data collection, and the national QAE system has been

developed for several decades and is composed of a web of evaluative activities, described by one informant as a palette of interrelated activities like national inspection (reintroduced in 2003, and extremely comprehensive and far-reaching), national tests (ongoing in slightly different forms since the 1960s), national evaluations (a programme was launched in the middle of the 1980s), strengthened municipal audit (now including quality assessment, not only monetary and legal audit), etc. The new government has announced an increase in national testing and focus on assessment of pupils and a continued high level of inspection directed more at assessing the pupils' subject knowledge. Swedish brokers put a lot of emphasis on PISA and how it connects global non-subject-based educational values to national policy-making. PISA is widely referenced by national politicians, national civil servants, local politicians, teachers' unions, and so on. What is measured in PISA becomes important in Sweden in that it triggers competition through comparisons. It also activates quick policy action, getting certain issues on the policy agenda fast. Traditional Swedish educational values promoted for several decades – at least in the national rhetoric – like equality, equity, democracy, tolerance, independent and critical thinking, are noted as being at risk of neglect in favour of easily tested competences/subject knowledge.

## Conclusions

This paper seeks to present an argument for approaching Europeanisation in education through the lens of data production and flows that create constant comparison. Our interviews with national and European policy-brokers, illustrated with very brief extracts here, reaffirm Jones's (2007) proposition that 'the global architecture of education is...a complex web of ideas, networks of influence, policy frameworks and practices, financial arrangements and organizational structures' (326). The global agenda of competitiveness is influential, and PISA is heavily referenced across the systems discussed here – though in different ways, depending on their positioning and their histories. Our research indicates strongly that, at least in Europe, and once again echoing Jones' conclusions 'the nexus between the state and education, indeed, remains a cardinal expression of statehood' (2007, 327). Nevertheless, Europeanisation, either in pursuit of the older idealist line of thinking for collaboration for justice, peace and social cohesion, or the more recent and realist worldview which sees nation-states as competitors in the world market, seems to fit what Mundy (2007) describes as 'standard-setting multilateralism' with the OECD as a key actor in teaching, as she suggests, 'member governments to "think" about the relationship between education and economy in new ways' (2007, 339–357). Finland, partly because of its PISA success, seems most tightly bound to OECD, while England and Sweden – in different ways – have quite strong internal referencing that derives from distinctive practices of QAE. In the case of England, this relates to a complex and highly sophisticated data production system, in the Swedish case to an established culture of QAE that relates to overarching system goals. Europe is less visible than the OECD via PISA, but exists as a resource or frame of reference for some, and is less significant for others. Scotland projects a particular approach to QAE into Europe, Sweden is reluctantly more engaged with Europe than before, England is confident in its own data production and seems rather indifferent to European developments, and Finland is more directly connected to OECD than to the Commission.

These findings suggest that networks and data flows are operating to shape and influence education policy in the European systems explored here, and raise interesting

issues about the relative openness or receptiveness of these systems to the combined effects of data production and transnational networking in promoting new forms of governance of education in Europe – the ‘limits of the possible’, as Mundy suggests (2007). We will continue to explore these questions in the project.

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### Note

1. PANDA is the Performance and Assessment Report for each secondary school (now replaced by an even more complex system) that contains information on school characteristics, including ethnicity, inspection judgements and an attainment summary comparing performance with all schools nationally and with similar schools. The grades shown in the summary are based on the average National Curriculum points achieved by the school’s pupils in their national assessments (i.e., Key Stage [KS] 3 and GCSE [KS4]) and equivalent results. The major part of the PANDA is taken up with detailed analysis of data on KS3 and GCSE results, including comparisons with national averages, with national benchmarks and with national benchmarks for schools in similar contexts. These comparisons include prior attainment and free school meals. There is also a KS2–KS4 value-added measure that allows schools to chart pupil progress.

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