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Europeanizing the National Education Space? Adjusting to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the UK

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This article examines the reception of the education Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the UK as an aspect of Europeanization of national administrations. It addresses relationships between political and administrative actors in the process of responding to the education OMC. We argue that despite progress with institutionalization of the education OMC at the EU level, there is limited institutionalization of the education OMC at the national level. Against the backdrop of UK skepticism about engaging with the EU integration project, the interesting finding is the administrative strategies employed for deflecting EU influence on the national education space.

Keywords: Europeanization, education policy, OMC, administrative strategies

STUDYING EUROPEANIZATION THROUGH THE LENS OF SOFT REGULATORY TOOLS

An important strand of Europeanization literature examines the impact of European integration on domestic policymaking (Bache & Jordan, 2006; Börzel & Risse, 2003). More recently, the focus has shifted to the use of soft instruments seeking to achieve convergence in European public policy-making, such as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). This is part of a wider “governance turn” in European Union (EU) studies (Kohler-Koch & Rittberger, 2006, p. 27). There is a significant body of literature on the use of the OMC for economic governance (Maher, 2007), social policy (Daly, 2008), and employment policy (de la Porte, 2011) as well as some reference to the OMC in the field of environmental protection (Knep & Fink-Hafner, 2010). Few studies, however, have examined the operation of the OMC in the context of education policy, though reform of education systems has also involved the reordering of relations between the nation state, supranational institutions, and citizens, a key triad in the multi-level governance regime of the EU. More recently, there has been interest in how the OMC is becoming institutionalized as a policy instrument for the Commission at the EU level, but also within national education policy-making processes (Alexiadou & Lange, 2013; Gornitzka & Ravinet, 2011; Štremfel & Lajh, 2010).

Institutionalization captures here both the establishment of new organizational structures, such as transnational working groups, and associated attempts to entrench normative ideals of

“European” education. Our interest in probing the counterintuitive institutionalization of soft tools for policy convergence is also driven by the fact that the organizational structures for institutionalizing European education policy have become more complex and have expanded to the development of education policy ideas. This marks a departure from the earlier phases of institutionalization, which were mainly concerned with information gathering and the funding of EU mobility programs.

Our case study on administrative strategies in the UK in response to the education OMC is located within a wider literature on the Europeanization of education which has explored networked governance as a way of thinking about how relationships between the EU and national levels of governance become constructed (Kupfer, 2008; Pons, 2012). Tackling the limitations of “methodological nationalism” (Beck, 2003), recent studies have explored the idea of “co-construction” as a way of conceptualizing relations of mutual influence between national and European levels of governance (Corbett, 2011; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010). An important aspect of such co-construction can be norm diffusion through policy expertise and the sharing of information among different EU Member States (Kleibrink, 2011).

This article seeks to make a distinct contribution to the literature on Europeanization through soft regulatory tools. Our research addresses the wider unresolved issue of whether a lack of fit between European and domestic arrangements is a precondition for Europeanization or simply one facet of the European integration project. While we focus on domestic variables, in order to describe and explain the reception of the education OMC in the UK, we think of these variables not as entirely domestic, but as reflecting interrelated EU and domestic political activity. We seek to capture and query the extent of this “transnationalisation” (Goetz & Meyer-Sahling, 2008, p. 21) of public policy-making through a combined institutionalist and discourse lens. By focusing on organizational and ideational dimensions of domestic institutional configurations, we provide an account of the policy-making structures that are part of the UK’s reception of the education OMC. These include projections of domestic discourses back to the EU. By combining an analysis of institutionalist and discursive resources in the process of national adaptation to the education OMC, we wanted to avoid a familiar dichotomy that informs some of the Europeanization literature. This dichotomy consists of linking an analysis of formal institutional arrangements with limited Europeanization, while an analysis of executive cultures, norms, and role identities has been associated with a greater openness toward Europeanization (Goetz & Meyer-Sahling, 2008). More specifically, we focus on administrative strategies as a key element of national adaptation to the OMC. We examine how tasks (e.g., reporting and policy learning), competences (e.g., more limited competences in relation to tertiary education in comparison to compulsory schooling in the UK), resources (e.g., staffing levels), and discourses (e.g., national sovereignty) are deployed through small-scale administrative arrangements that accommodate the education OMC.

In contrast to this, the Europeanization literature has tended to examine how government, through formal structures and processes, receives and adapts to EU regulation. Less attention has been paid to informal bottom-up processes of adapting to soft integration tools that are often made to work “behind closed doors.” In this article, we seek to capture the processes of responding to the education OMC in the UK by focusing on the relationship between national civil servants and the European Commission. By examining the reception of the education OMC through administrative strategies, this article provides a detailed analysis of how EU governance in education is managed in the UK. Administrative arrangements, in turn, reflect “patterns of institutional, behavioral and ideational legacies, born out of a country’s history

and experiences” (Fink-Hafner, 2007, p. 809). Our focus is on the contemporary approach of the UK administration to the education OMC, but our case study also includes a time dimension (Goetz, 2006), because we see in our data a historical continuity of key themes through which the UK administration has positioned itself in relation to the EU, in particular an emphasis on national sovereignty.

How Do Member States Adjust to EU Governance?

Europeanization literature tells us that the participation of Member States in the governance of the EU entails a continuous process of adjustment that includes not only the setting up of particular administrative structures for implementing EU policies, but also formal and informal negotiations that governments engage in to position their state in relationship to the EU (Bulmer & Burch, 2005). At the national level, these adjustments do not necessarily lead to the same responses from Member States, rather there is evidence of both convergence and continuing divergence when engaging with Europeanization (Fink-Hafner, 2007). In her research on core executive adaptation to the EU in Finland, Greece, and Ireland, Laffan (2006) has argued that in “managing Europe from home,” Member States select models and systems that suit their national circumstances (p. 687). These selections tend to be guided by two variables that also help to explain differences in Member States’ approaches to EU adaptation; the degree of institutionalization of EU agendas within national public policy agendas, and the relationship between formal and informal policy-making processes put in place, and through which “EU business is channeled” (Laffan, 2006, p. 701). In the case of education, the OMC can be a potential tool for enlarging the sphere of influence of EU supranational actors, through “competency creep,” in particular since the formal Treaty base for integration is weak (Prechal, 2010, p. 5). Variation among Member States in adjusting to EU governance has also been discussed with reference to variables, such as “political commitment” and “implementation capacity,” the various manifestations and combinations of which produce different outcomes in relation to the reception of the OMC (Halász & Michel, 2011, p. 299).

EUROPEANIZATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF NATIONAL AND EU GOVERNANCE—THE CASE OF EDUCATION

We examine Europeanization through the specific case of the “reception” of EU education policies at the national level, but also through the “projection” of national preferences and norms back to the EU. We seek to understand how the domestic administrative structures accommodate to the education OMC (the “reception” element). We also seek to understand how at the same time the administration attempts to shape education policy at the EU level. Member States seek to promote their own substantive political agendas, or, to minimize the cost of having to implement undesirable changes to their domestic policies. This highlights the political nature of education policy problem solving and points to an interactive process of public policy-making whereby Member States co-construct with the EU supranational institutions the policies that become crystallized as “European.”

These European policies become institutionalized to varying degrees within the logic and practice of domestic administrations, a process of mutual adaptation and co-evolution between the domestic and the European levels (Radaelli, 2008). From this perspective, national political systems have a significant capacity to achieve the outcomes they prefer in the course of adapting to EU governance, within the context of existing relationships of power between the different Member States and the EU. This capacity is framed by a range of

factors. First, as historical institutionalism suggests, past interactions in the specific policy field shape the evolving links between the national and the European levels of governance. Second, national political systems' governance is constrained by the formal institutional expectations of the EU. Third, national political systems' capacity is shaped by the ideational frameworks in which policy actors operate, who have to interpret policies and decide on the direction of change. In the case of education, the significance of the first two factors is fairly limited. It is only after the Lisbon European Council of 2000 that the education policy became formulated at the level of the Commission and within the framework of Education and Training 2010/2020 (Council Conclusions, 2009). Due to the principles of subsidiarity and the absence of a specific primary Treaty power for the EU to legislate directly in the field of education policy, EU formal expectations are limited in scope. Member States produce reports for the Commission on their progress in relation to the education objectives and reference targets of the Lisbon agenda. These reports feed into the development of further Commission initiatives in education, while Joint Commission and Council Work Programmes facilitate cooperative relationships between the Commission and Member States, and thus are key to pushing forward with the development of what are formally "soft" governance mechanisms (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, p. 444). With no formal legal power for implementing sanctions or rewards, the potential power of the OMC as a governance instrument lies to a large extent in its capacity to focus the attention of the EU education agenda onto particular problems, as identified by the Commission. So, the OMC gives direction to policy through benchmarking and the structure of progress reports and shapes the normative frameworks that identify policy problems. In the process, Member States are invited to become active co-constructors of these EU policy agendas and to contribute to the shaping of the Commission agenda (Alexiadou, Fink-Hafner, & Lange, 2010). The OMC "confronts actors with structures of opportunity, influences how they behave and privileges certain actors and interests over others" (Kassim & Le Galès, 2010, p. 4). In doing this, the OMC draws on the ideational framework of new public management, a major reform program for public administration which has enrolled private actors in the delivery of public services and which focuses on outcome-based results, often measured through audit. The OMC also steers toward a particular policy "content" that emphasizes certain directions for the reform of education systems, such as a reduction in the share of "low-achieving" 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science to less than 15% (European benchmark from Education and Training 2020) and a closer link between skill-based education and labor market needs. Third, and linked to the first two dimensions, we consider the OMC as framing and thereby regulating the policy space of education. This policy space is mapped out through normative and ideological ambitions that drive education systems reform into particular directions for the future. By referring to a European policy *space* in order to conceptualize convergence of national education policies, we seek to depart from the foregrounding national territory in order to understand how Member States respond to EU governance (Goetz & Meyer-Sahling, 2008).

We draw on two sources of data that we analyzed through thematic coding and analysis of discourses employed by key policy actors. First, we analyzed interviews and e-mail communications with civil servants working in UK government units that deal with EU initiatives. One of these, the Joint International Unit (JIU), handled EU initiatives across a range of policies. Another one, located within the Department for Business and Skills (BIS), dealt specifically with EU initiatives in relation to Higher Education. Since 2011, after we conducted our research, this structure has changed, but the new administrative arrangements have similar functions. Thus, we examine the reception of the education OMC in the UK through the lens of the administrative formation that controls at the level of the central government the reception of EU policy frames. We also interviewed staff in the Directorate

General (DG) for Education and Culture in the European Commission and civil servants in the UK in the period 2010–2012¹. Our second data sources are official documents produced by the UK civil service² and the Commission³.

Our approach is exploratory and qualitative. We therefore do not formulate hypotheses at the outset. Instead, our aim was to generate through inductive analysis a set of constructs for capturing policy adjustments and the discursive resources they draw upon. We are interested in what interviewees understand as appropriate policy transfer from the EU to the national education space, how they describe the administrative strategies adopted in the process of responding to the education OMC in the UK, what rationales they supply for the selective reception of the OMC measures, and what, if any, changes in education policy-making the interviewees attribute to policy learning. We use a similar approach to analyzing Commission and UK civil service documents that summarize activities in relation to the education OMC. We examined these documents for what they tell us about structures and resources supporting administrative actions, policy learning, and other mechanisms of policy change as they emanate from the OMC. The following sections report our findings.

UK ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS AND THE EU

In principle, the UK could be an ideal candidate for full institutionalization of the education OMC. At the level of “ideational repertoires” as well as “political discourses” (Borrás & Peters, 2011), the national policy paradigms in relation to the purposes of education policy, including their connections to economic growth and competitiveness, are a good “fit” with the EU discourses that emanate from the Commission. For instance, the European Scrutiny Committee of the UK House of Commons has suggested that the UK government considers the challenges identified by the Commission Communications for education and training as neither “surprising nor contentious” (Eighth Report of Session 2008-9). Both EU and UK agendas emphasize as a priority the connection of education to the needs of the economy, a

¹ In 2010–2011, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews (50–90 min each) with European Commission officials in the DG Education and Culture (DG EAC), Directorate A (Lifelong Learning: Horizontal policy issues and 2020 strategy), and Directorate B (Lifelong Learning: Policies and programs). In the period 2010–2012, we conducted two semi-structured interviews (90 min) and had four extensive follow-up e-mail communications with two UK civil servants actively involved in the reception of the education OMC. In 2010, these were located in the Joint International Unit (JIU) and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) in the UK. In 2012, these were in the Department for Education, UK.

² The UK civil service documents consist of the JIU Strategic Narrative 2010/2011 paper, the JIU Organisational Chart (May 2010), and a discussion paper produced by the JIU entitled “Open Method of Coordination— An opportunity for the UK in the field of education” (referred to as “OMC discussion paper 2010”). These were not public documents and we had permission to use them appropriately for research purposes.

³ We examined the following Progress Reports:

- (a) European Commission (2005) *Implementing the “Education and Training 2010” Work Programme—Report on the UK’s progress towards the Lisbon Objectives*.
- (b) European Commission (2007) *Education and Training 2010—Report on the UK’s progress towards the Lisbon Objectives*.
- (c) European Commission (2009) *Education and Training 2010—Report on the UK’s progress towards the Lisbon Objectives*.
- (d) European Commission (2011) *Education and Training 2020—Report from the UK*.
- (e) European Commission (2013) *Education and Training Monitor 2013: United Kingdom*.

theme that was apparent in the Lisbon Agenda's emphasis on "economic Europe," and that is continued also through the inclusion of two educational targets in the Europe 2020 strategy. The OMC was originally developed in the context of economic policy coordination, and the education OMC in particular was linked to the European Employment Strategy (EES), with the EES being considered as one of the stronger and more institutionally developed OMCs.

Since the mid-1990s, consecutive UK governments have shaped the education policy space by prioritizing economic functions of education over social ones, such as education for citizenship (Ball, 2008). This new substantive direction for education policy was supported through also a reformed public policy-making process that chimes with the procedural dimension of the OMC. From the late 1970s until the late 1990s, the management of public services in the UK was dominated by targets that measured performance against set standards, with institutions ranked against each other on the basis of their performance (Hood, 2006). The development of performance indicators for all areas of public service was at its peak in the post-1998 period when the Blair government developed comprehensive Public Service Agreement (PSA) performance targets. Any additional public expenditure in England and Northern Ireland was tied to the achievement of "higher outputs." Targets were also ingrained in the evaluation and investment strategies for education. Those targets were largely expressed in terms of learning achievements and they covered all ages and stages of education. For instance, in mid-2000, the Department for Education (DfE) was operating six top-level targets that were translated to "90 'conditions' for each of the 24,000 state schools in England" (Hood, 2006, p. 515). Even though in the late 1990s the New Public Management model became modified by new discourses on governance, networks, and joined-up services, its legacy is still visible and strong in the governance of education, particularly in England (Pollitt&Bouchaert, 2011). The current Conservative–Liberal UK coalition government has replaced the PSAs through a *Transparency Agenda*, launched in 2010, and managed by the Public Sector Transparency Board. This agenda seeks to steer the provision of public services by making data openly available. In education, this includes the publication of school performance tables (UK Civil Servant 2, Email communication, 2012). We can see a continued emphasis on targets also at the EU level. The EU Education and Training 2020 program is fleshed out through the Integrated Guidelines of Europe 2020, the Member State National Reform Programmes, and country-specific recommendations that are issued in order to guide "targeted" national education reforms. Member States are asked to connect more closely their education policies to their National Reform Programmes, and in effect to their economic strategies for growth and competitiveness.

This is again compatible with the UK emphasis on connecting education and economic governance at the national level of policy-making. The goal of modernizing and reforming education systems across the EU Member States and the need to "reinforce efficiency and quality" are emphasized in the 2012 Joint Report of the Council and Commission (2012/C 70/05), and the latest Council Conclusions (Council of the European Union 2014). Throughout the 2011–2013 documents within the Education and Training 2020 program, the language of New Public Management is clearly present. There is also reference to "improving coordination" of reform programs and policies in education, "sharing responsibility and partnership amongst public and private sector actors," "improving the collection, monitoring and analysis of information," and "cross-sector cooperation" in "modernizing" the system as a whole (European Commission, 2011, 2013; European Council and European Commission, 2012). But, despite these similarities in key policy ideas, in particular the strengthening of a link between education and economic competitiveness, as well as the shared commitment to new public management styles of policy-making at the national and the EU levels, our data do

not point to a significant institutionalization of the education OMC in the UK. Instead, we observe the UK “deflecting” EU initiatives (Alexiadou & Lange, 2013; Etzioni, 2013).

We argue that a political commitment to national sovereignty at the higher levels of government that frame the reception of the education OMC helps to explain this limited institutionalization (UK Civil Servant 2, Interview, 2010). A recent House of Commons European Scrutiny document, discussing the Commission’s Communication “European Higher Education in the global world” provides a good example of such commitment. The UK Minister for Universities and Science urges the Commission to respect intergovernmental processes and institutional autonomy and complement rather than duplicate UK efforts in the internationalization of the European Higher Education Space. The scrutiny report draws to the Select Committee’s attention that the UK is not participating in the EU’s multi-rank system for evaluating Universities and seeks to enlist the Commission’s support for enabling the recognition of UK one-year masters’ degrees currently not recognized in some EU Member States (European Scrutiny Committee, 2013). This political position that projects national interests at the EU level is also referred to in interviews with civil servants both in the Commission and in the UK administration. Where the UK cannot defend its own views and policy and has to accept the EU proposal, the central civil service may not undertake great efforts to “translate” the EU measure into national policy. For instance, while the UK signed up to the Bologna target of 20% of student mobility by 2020, this was not turned into a national target but into a suggestion that UK universities *may wish to consider* this. In addition, the UK sometimes conforms to EU initiatives by “subsuming” European targets within broader UK ones. For instance, while the Commission has a target of 40% of 34-year-olds having participated in university education by 2020, the UK had a “broader target of all working age people to be educated to at least level four”⁴. A fourth facet of the national sovereignty discourse involves “counting things in a slightly different way” in order to maintain UK policy while also lessening the discrepancy between European and UK policy objectives (UK Civil Servants 1 & 2, Interviews, 2010). To summarize, our qualitative data suggest that the UK maintains a commitment to a national sovereignty discourse, with this discourse having become even more central to government policy under the current Conservative–Liberal UK coalition government. In the following sections, we provide further detail of the administrative strategies adopted in the UK for responding to EU education policy initiatives.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING EU EDUCATION POLICY INITIATIVES

The Ebb and Flow of Government Support for EU Policies

Since the election of a Labour government in 1997, the overall policy of the UK in relation to the EU changed distinctly to a more positive one in comparison to earlier Conservative governments (Bulmer & Burch, 2005). The aim was now to have a more constructive approach toward the EU that was also more proactive by contributing to the shaping of EU policy goals. This was accompanied by an increase in the power of the UK Permanent Representatives in Brussels. According to James (2009, p. 610), this made it “increasingly

⁴ In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, Level 4 qualifications correspond to Bachelor’s degree, Foundation degree, and the Higher National Certificate. This is part of the Qualifications and Credit Framework, which is the national credit transfer system. It came into existence in 2010, having replaced the earlier National Qualifications Framework. Scotland has a separate Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

difficult for policy leads to oppose their Brussels-based colleagues.” In education, this meant a higher participation by the UK in various EU action programs. At a formal level, education policy was managed and coordinated by the JIU, an administrative structure that was created in order to serve three government departments: “Children, Schools and Families,” “Work and Pensions,” and “Business Innovation and Skills (BIS).” In relation to education, the main function of the JIU was to “promote and represent the interests of the DfE and BIS in the EU” (Organisational Chart, May 2010). This more general description has been refined in internal documents, which specified the role of the JIU as one of “influencing EU policy and identifying the impact of European regulation on legislation, policy and practice to minimise the risk of challenge by the European Court of Justice and other adverse effects on domestic policies and legislation.” In addition, the organization was seen to have a more positive role through the available civil service “expertise and influence with the Commission,” but always coupled with the more vigilant duty to “provide vital checks on inappropriate regulation that undermines the positive economic and social benefits of free movement and reduces opportunity for UK citizens and business” (JIU Strategic Narrative, 2010/11).

Since the abolition of the JIU in 2010, each government department has taken control of their own international work, so the DfE is now responsible for coordinating the work related to the EU Education Council and for its responses to EU education policy more generally, including responses to the EU Education and Training 2020 Strategy. But, despite these changes in the institutional structures for coordinating EU and national policy, there is a similar trajectory in terms of a lack of domestic political commitment in relation to the EU 2020 Education and Training Strategy.

The Strategic Expansion and Limitation of Staff Resources

The Blair government’s proactive European stance resulted in a redistribution of resources within the Cabinet Office in order to have a more strategic direction (James, 2009). By the mid-2000s, the government increased the number of senior staff and mid-ranking civil servants to a total of 34 fulltime staff dealing with Europe (James, 2009). In 2010, the education unit within the JIU had the equivalent of 3.25 full-time employee posts working on “European Union policy implementation” (UK Civil Servant 2, Interview, 2010). But since summer 2010, the new coalition government has significantly reduced the number of staff to “3 civil servants who work 70% of their time on EU education policy issues,” with the occasional support from the Head of the International Division of the DfE (UK Civil Servant 1, Email communication, 2012).

The reduced resources during the years 2011–2012 are associated with less participation of UK civil servants in meetings with staff from the Commission DG-Education and Culture (EAC). Moreover, our interviewees estimated that London officials only attend about 50% of Education Committee meetings, with an increased reliance on the UK Permanent Representative to perform the tasks required. The decreasing resources are also justified by the UK coalition government’s austerity measures in response to the current financial crisis:

Also, at a time of decreasing resources for international and European work, we are keen to see fewer EU policy initiatives. In addition, due to the pressure on resources we would urge the Commission not to time future national reporting under ET2020 so that it coincides with Member States production of Europe 2020 National Reform Programs. (UK Progress Report 2011, section 9.5)

Since the abolition of the JIU in 2010, the coordination of UK participation in the ET 2020 has transferred to the DfE. It sends representatives to the Education Committee and meetings with DG-EAC. But the extent of such participation is limited by the shrinking human resources available in the Department. A civil servant from London “only attends when negotiations require on-the-spot decisions to be made” (UK Civil Servant1, Email communication, 2012). In case of High Level Group meetings, composed of senior education civil servants from the Member States, the UK sends the Head of the International Division of the DfE. This is the same official who used to be the Director of the former JIU. In case of ad-hoc EU Presidency events that cover specific EU education policies, relevant officials from the DfE, or BIS, or the education administrations of Scotland and Wales attend.

There is still a regular communication at the domestic level between the DfE and the Department for Industry and Skills in relation to EU education policies in the context of the OMC. Before 2010, this coordination between national education and business/industrial policy fields was achieved through one organizational structure, the JIU. But even though each department has taken since 2010 “ownership of its international work,” there are still systematic contacts between the two departments. The new International Division of DfE discusses “at least once per EU Presidency” with colleagues from BIS the handling of briefings for the EU Education Councils (UK Civil Servant 2, Email communication, 2012).

In order to further understand, however, the administrative arrangements for the management of the education OMC in the UK—now in the context of even more limited resources for responding to EU policy initiatives—it is important to examine further discursive resources, in particular existing structures of communication and coordination that are part of the education OMC and that also enable the UK to influence the EU education policy agenda.

Policy Information Pathways and Institutional Blocks

The International Division of the DfE performs now a role similar to the one carried out by the JIU until 2010. This includes the reception of all Commission documents that require an official response from the Member States and developing a UK position. Documents are ranked in terms of their significance, and the International Division then liaises with the relevant domestic teams, also in order to assess the impact of the EU proposals on national policy, and in order to construct a UK policy response (UK Civil Servants 1, 2, Interviews, 2010).

This filtering and monitoring process is complemented by the European Scrutiny Committee, a Select Committee in the Commons, and the lower house of the Westminster Parliament. All education policy initiatives that come from the EU arrive at the European Scrutiny Committee, after they have been channeled through the International Division. The International Division also provides an “explanatory memorandum” that outlines its perception of the main issues in relation to a particular Commission Communication. This includes an assessment of the potential implications of the EU initiative for the devolved education administrations in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Hence, a significant element of the discursive work of the International Division is to distinguish between “appropriate” and “inappropriate” EU policy initiatives.

The reactive position of the domestic policy actors . . . means that the UK civil servants who first deal with the education OMC have a significant scope for action in relation to the OMC, and an important capacity for shaping the UK’s response. Civil servants both

in the JIU and BIS (until 2010), and in their Departmental International Divisions (in 2012) consider themselves to be a “buffer” between the EU and the domestic policy teams. They receive, filter and present what the EU communicates to the domestic actors, with their main preoccupation being to safeguard against initiatives or proposals that may significantly change the UK policy agenda. Their ability to do so is also strengthened by the fact that they assume that their colleagues in the domestic policy arena will have little or no knowledge of the specifics of EU public policy making. This, however, may have changed somewhat, since the dissolution of the JIU in 2010 and the repatriation of international work into ministries, through the International Divisions in Ministries. Ministers are “more aware of EU initiatives . . . as all work related to the EU is now within the DfE itself.” (UK Civil Servant 1, Email communication, 2012)

This mediation of policy on the journey from the EU to the domestic level suggests that UK civil servants effectively become policy brokers. Even though the broad steer for policy is provided by Ministers, civil servants play a significant role in screening policies and making decisions about the relevance and potential risk particular OMC policy contents may represent. This is consistent with the literature on the engagement of national civil servants in EU policy implementation that suggests that national administrators “become multi-level players” who become fairly autonomous from the national political leadership in their direct dealings with the Commission (Goetz & Meyer-Sahling, 2008, p. 13). But it is important to note that civil servants involved in international policy work are not engaged in day-to-day domestic policy making that pertains to the implementation of the OMC. Therefore, the limited vertical integration of the OMC into the daily business of the domestic policy units facilitates civil servants blocking EU policies and providing a buffer zone between the EU and the UK. This is consistent with the views of Commission policy officers who expect this functional separation of roles in many Member States, and the UK in particular (EAC Interviews 5, 6, 2011). In order to further understand administrative strategies involved in the reception of the education OMC in the UK, it is also important to examine how UK civil servants communicate formally and informally with the Commission in relation to OMC education measures.

COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES AS ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES

Communication between UK civil servants and the Commission has both formal and less formal properties in relation to OMC education measures. There are meetings at the EU level of the High Level Group of senior officials every six months. These meetings are organized by the Presidency of the Council to discuss future policy directions. They are not about the details of specific texts (as in the case of the Council Working Group meetings), rather they are an informal opportunity for the officials responsible for EU work within each Member State “to get together with colleagues from other countries, as well as the Commission and table suggestions for the way forward” (UK Civil Servant 1, Interview, 2010). The Council Education Committee receives and negotiates the draft of the Conclusions of the High Level Group meetings which are prepared by the Presidency together with the Commission. The emphasis in this process is on achieving consensus and, in education, as opposed to other areas of policy making, this process is often informal and flexible (EAC Interviews 1, 6, 2011).

The various OMC-specific working groups set up by the Commission are another route for civil servants to shape OMC education measures. For instance, the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks enables Member States to shape the very definition of indicators

and benchmarks. This is important, since these benchmarks “measure” Member States’ education performance on the basis of national and Eurostat statistics. The UK sends a mid-ranking civil servant to this group, the same person in the period 2010–2012, who works for the statistics section of the (now) DfE. His work covers the interests of both DfE and BIS (UK Civil Servant 1, Email communication, 2012). Moreover, once the Standing Group has developed a number of indicators, the officials from the International Division are further involved in the process of agreeing these, for instance through a conference and a High Level Group meeting, with the view of “checking” the political feasibility of the indicator for the UK.

In the case of contentious issues, UK civil servants seek more direct and less formal access to the Commission in order to discuss the proposals before they reach the stage of negotiation within the Council Education Committee. According to EAC and UK interviewees, the Commission is inviting and welcoming this type of informal discussion. On these occasions, more senior civil servants will liaise with senior staff in the Commission. This applies to all levels of education, including higher education. The final dimension of administrative strategies for handling the education OMC we discuss is how the UK seeks to demonstrate its compliance with key EU education policy ideas.

REPORTING AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGY

Our analysis of interviews and national Progress Reports suggests that the UK shows a basic level of compliance with the education OMC. The UK is concerned with the content of the OMC only when this goes beyond what the country already does. Civil servants from the JIU used to write the biannual Progress Reports for the UK. Since the abolition of the JIU in 2012, the DfE coordinates the drafting of the progress report “on behalf of the UK” (UK Civil Servant 2, Email communication, 2012). These Progress Reports are perceived to have one main function: to report what the UK is already doing. There is a tendency to construct a narrative around questions of “fit” with the EU requirements. This is recognized by Commission officials (EAC Interviews 5, 8, 2010). Until the 2009 Progress Report, JIU officials used the PSA targets for education, training, and lifelong learning in order to construct a narrative that suggested that compliance with these domestic targets also entailed compliance with key EU education policy objectives. The UK reports on each of the themes that the Commission stipulates, by linking these EU themes to domestic education policies. Sometimes the UK employs a practice of “copy and paste.” Statements from national websites, such as that of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, are copied into the EU Progress Reports. This practice of “copy and paste” can be found in the 2005, 2007, and 2009 Progress Reports:

The UK has chosen to address the EU benchmarks through its existing system of performance measures. In England, these are based on Public Service Agreements (PSAs). PSA targets use measured outcomes, and results are published for each institution and Local Authority. They are used in funding, and provide a rigorous tool to monitor progress and ensure accountability. (UK Progress Report 2007, p. 3)

This statement was accompanied by a “matching” of the five (in 2007) education OMC benchmarks to the PSA targets that related to education and training. Domestic PSA targets were portrayed as putting into practice the five EU education OMC benchmarks. Our research thus does not provide evidence of any of the UK education policies *being a result of*

responding to a new EU OMC education policy initiative. “Copy and paste” is also noteworthy because it means that the UK does not necessarily see the OMC as an opportunity for uploading its own policy preferences onto the EU agenda, nor does it see OMC measures as an opportunity to argue more fundamentally against an expansion of OMC-related activities at the EU level. The interviews and e-mail communications with civil servants from DfE and BIS describe the education OMC as of limited relevance to the mainstream education policy work: “sometimes it feels like the OMC is ‘something we do’ because you have to fill the UK chair . . . it is often about the presentation of UK policy in OMC terms” (UK Civil Servant 2, Interview, 2010). This is a theme very explicitly addressed also in the documents:

The Government will not set national targets in education in response to the headline targets agreed by the European Council in June 2010. Instead, the National Report Programme refers to relevant impact indicators set out in the Department’s business plan—attainment at age 16 and attainment at age 19. This approach is in line with the overall approach we are taking across Government to the Europe 2020 strategy and targets.

The UK Government is in favour of pursuing European cooperation through exchange of good practice, and the OMC. Considering Member State subsidiarity for Education, we need to be cautious about the scope of future Council instruments to ensure that they fully respect this principle. We will consider future texts on a case by case basis in this light. (UK Progress Report, 2011)

This is the boldest statement yet in all the four UK Progress Reports of “non-compliance” with Council requests and an explicit strategic statement of political support only to the softest areas of “cooperation” that do not move beyond the exchange of good practice. But it remains to analyze how and to what extent the exchange of good practice—the softest dimension of the education OMC—has contributed to the institutionalization of the education OMC in the UK. The next section analyses domestic administrative strategies in relation to policy learning, a key mechanism for the “exchange of good practices” in the context of the education OMC.

SURFACE POLICY LEARNING AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGY

Policy learning is a fundamental element of the governance strategies of the OMC in education and of the whole reform program that was started with the post-Lisbon policy cycles. It refers both to “mutual learning” where Member States are encouraged to learn from each other and to the wider issue of policy transfer and exchange. In the 2013 Council Conclusions on investing in education and training, the OMC is significantly more present as a policy instrument compared to earlier Conclusions, with a call to strengthen those parts that spread knowledge about appropriate education policies, but also to monitor reforms (European Council, 2013, pp. 6–8). The Council invites Member States and the Commission to engage more actively in the process of identifying policy problems, and to engage in a “voluntary peer review process focusing on the implementation” of country-specific recommendations. This is an interesting development since peer review had not in the past been introduced into education policy, even though it was included in the toolkit of the OMC from the outset, and it was operationalized in OMCs in other areas of social policy. This shift in the nature of instruments used in monitoring reflects the recognition that the first phase of implementing the various OMCs (2000–2004) has been perceived as too “soft,” with not enough penalties in place. But, this changed after the mid-2000s with a more precise

assessment of national reform plans, the more central positioning of targets of performance, and the publication of country-specific recommendations. Such recommendations and reform plans follow the Employment OMC and have distinct implications for education, with the Council embarking on explicit guidance for the nature and type of reforms needed in individual Member States.

But our research suggests that both mutual learning and policy exchange are of little interest to UK civil servants and the political leadership (UK Civil Servants 1 & 2, Interviews and Email communications, 2010, 2012; EAC Interviews 2, 4, 5, 8, 2010). In the case of the UK, many of the domestic policy objectives correspond very closely to the benchmarks set in the education OMC. This fit between EU and domestic level policy framing is a necessary but not sufficient condition for institutionalizing the education OMC (Helgøy & Homme, 2013). This applies in particular to those national contexts where participation in learning, for instance through peer-learning activities, is construed as “a discrete, isolated task” (UK Civil Servant 2, Email communication, 2012). In the UK, this of course is a deliberate outcome of the administrative organization that has designed the functional separation of domestic and OMC education policy activities, taking great care not to allow space for interaction between the two. As such, the opportunity to use the OMC as a way of identifying policy problems is missed. Given the change of government in the UK in May 2010 to a Conservative– Liberal coalition government, civil servants from the JIU anticipated that the UK was going to be:

. . . less proactive in its approach than under the previous government. For instance, we pushed for the skills agenda to be a priority in Europe. It is unlikely that we will try and lead policy in such a way in future. The new government is not enthusiastic about cross European policy, although it is very interested in international comparisons in education. (UK Civil Servant 1, Email communication, 2011)

This expectation has certainly been met and would seem to point toward a further period of “surface” policy learning in education in the UK (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010, p. 455). It also seems to be an indicator of a continuing process of limited responses to the education OMC that is part of a wider picture of maintaining national education policy preferences.

CONCLUSION

This article has started to tackle the question how the UK adapts to the education OMC. We have focused on administrative structures, and in particular strategies, in order to understand how EU education policies and norms become mediated in the national arena. We have depicted these administrative structures as active translators of the EU agenda into the domestic policy field, and, as modifiers and “co-constructors” of this agenda in the process of its implementation.

Our research has generated a range of interesting findings that shed light on the use of soft tools for public policy coordination in the EU. There is strong support in some of the Europeanization literature for the argument that more intergovernmental policy coordination processes are likely to empower political leadership in EU Member States, while supranational coordination processes focused on the Commission may empower public administrations (Goetz & Meyer-Sahling, 2008). Our case study of the education OMC suggests that an intergovernmental process, in which the Commission is playing an important role in promoting EU education initiatives, leads in the UK to a significant role for civil

servants as policy brokers. Moreover, our case study suggests that the “software” of the executive, such as discursive resources—in the case of the UK a continuing commitment to a national sovereignty discourse—can also contribute to resilience to Europeanization. This is in contrast to some contributions to the Europeanization literature that associate the culture, norms, and role identities of national executives as potentially more open to Europeanization (Goetz & Meyer-Sahling, 2008). Finally our research draws attention to the administrative strategies of national engagement with EU policy convergence initiatives that have received so far limited attention, such as the strategic use of networks of communication. While this article has focused on the reception of the education OMC in the UK as a critical case study, given the path dependency of the UK’s skepticism in relation to the EU integration project, the research discussed here may also open up further comparative research into administrative strategies deployed for managing EU governance in various Member States. A focus on administrative strategies as the unit of analysis can thus also contribute to overcoming the problem of “methodological nationalism” in research on Europeanization.

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