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# Who produces 'Global' education policy knowledge? Epistemic communities, networks, and power in global education governance

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## ABSTRACT


International organisations are considered central actors in global education governance, producing policy-relevant knowledge that can shape national reforms. While extensive studies have examined their influence on education policy, less attention has been paid to who actually produces this knowledge. This article examines the producers of global education policy knowledge by analysing the authorship of education-related publications of UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank. Drawing on the theoretical concepts of policy networks and epistemic communities, the study dissects patterns of disciplinary backgrounds, institutional affiliations, and geographic locations of authors. Based on an analysis of 1,447 publications and 3,175 authors, the findings reveal limited overlap across organisations, distinct disciplinary profiles, a strong reliance on internal contributors, and a predominance of authors affiliated with institutions in the Global North. These patterns reflect organisational mandates and knowledge infrastructures, and point to epistemic segmentation that shapes how policy knowledge on global education problems and solutions is legitimised.

## KEYWORDS

Global education governance; international organisations; knowledge production; epistemic communities; policy networks; UNESCO; OECD; World Bank

## Introduction

Over the last few years, knowledge has come to be an integral part of today's global education governance. Large international organisations have claimed authority not only through financial resources and by consolidating power but also through their capacity to produce, curate, and disseminate education policy-relevant knowledge and expertise (Baek and Steiner-Khamsi 2024). This expertise circulates in the form of global monitoring reports, international large-scale assessments, toolkits, and evidence syntheses that purport to assist governments in diagnosing policy problems and identifying viable solutions (Elfert and Ydesen 2023). However, precisely at the moment when knowledge has moved to the centre of global education reform, the optimism that characterised early global education reform agendas has been tempered by persistent inequalities, uneven progress, and growing scepticism about the universality and

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transferability of 'global' solutions (Verger, Novelli, and Altinyelken 2018). This article is situated at the intersection of these developments and asks a simple but politically consequential question: Who produces global education policy knowledge, and what are the implications for policy development?

The United Nations' Education for All initiative and Millennium Development Goals, which were later consolidated in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), articulated an ambitious vision of expanded data collection, monitoring, and cross-national learning. Instruments such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rendered student performance in different countries visible and formally 'comparable' (Grek 2009), although it remains contested whether such results can be meaningfully compared given their contextual differences across education systems (see Teodoro 2022). In addition, multilateral reports and databases have promised evidence-based pathways to reform. This architecture of measurement and guidance generated what scholars have described as *promissory legitimacy* (Auld and Elfert 2024; Robertson and Beech 2024), referring to the expectation that global indicators, benchmarking, and 'what works' packages would catalyse effective education policy.

Over the past 25 years, the global education agendas, designed to be promoted and facilitated by various policy instruments such as international large-scale assessments, reports, and databases, have not unfolded as discrete initiatives, but as a cumulative and evolving project governance. Priorities may have changed over time, but the emphasis on data, indicators, and comparative evidence has been intensified (Fenwick, Mangez, and Ozga 2014). The large international organisations have continued to produce, promote, and disseminate knowledge that is able to convert broad agenda commitments into benchmarks, recommendations and thus to solutions to policy problems (Steiner-Khamsi, Martens, and Ydesen 2024). These knowledge practices have had the effect of stabilising global education agendas and helped make them actionable over time.

Despite these global education agendas of the past 25 years, enrolment gains and improved access now coexist with persistent learning poverty and widening inequalities both within and across countries (Azevedo et al. 2022; UNESCO 2020). With the COVID-19 pandemic further exposing the structural vulnerabilities of education systems, narrow performance metrics were shown to be limited in guiding crisis response and recovery (Soudien 2020). Political polarisation and other governmental changes as well as social divisions have reshaped domestic debates, complicating the uptake of 'evidence' in the policy process. Against this backdrop, some critical questions have re-emerged: Whose knowledge and what processes are mobilised? Which disciplines and methods define the terms of problem identification? And how do the social and political structures of expertise shape the policy ideas that circulate transnationally?

This study examines the production of global education policy knowledge by drawing on two theoretical concepts: policy networks and epistemic communities. The concept of policy networks considers the relationships between actors such as international organisations, governments, universities, think tanks, consulting firms, foundations and civil societies that exchange resources and ideas in the policy process. Meanwhile, epistemic communities refer to the expert groups within those networks who share common beliefs and approaches in terms of causality and method, as well as notions of validity. Both concepts help us understand how particular actors and relationships shape policy decisions by producing and disseminating authoritative and legitimate knowledge. They also

indicate that the authority and legitimacy of knowledge are socially and politically constructed by who (can) produce knowledge, where it is placed, and how it is used in the policy process.

In education, the presence and influence of policy networks and epistemic communities are particularly noticeable. The education sector is inherently multidisciplinary, with plausible claims to expertise emanating from a variety of disciplines including economics, sociology, psychology, political science, and education. Nevertheless, institutional settings governing large-scale knowledge production tend to privilege methodologies that yield comparable indicators and that suit the editorial sources of international organisations (see Grimaldi 2019). Especially in an era of evidence-based policymaking, certain epistemologies gain disproportionate visibility (e.g. those rooted in economics, quantitative assessment, and managerial accountability), whereas context-sensitive, practice-near, or community-embedded forms of knowledge struggle to achieve comparable significance (Biesta 2007). Moreover, geography or locale is equally important in knowledge production. If authorship is disproportionately concentrated in institutions and experts in the Global North, the resulting evidence base risks reflecting specific policy agendas, solutions, and feasibility constraints that may not be readily applicable across education systems elsewhere.

Although recent critical scholarship has increased, a systematic empirical account of who actually produces the knowledge outputs of international organisations remains underdeveloped. This gap is particularly notable in the research on expertise-seeking arrangements in education policymaking, which examines how governments' and international organisations' knowledge outputs actively organise, select and institutionalise expertise in order to generate authoritative policy knowledge (Baek 2022). The recent research on intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and epistemic governance also shows that expertise, knowledge and evidence are sought and selected through organisational routines, professional norms and institutional channels (Cross 2013; Marcussen and Trondal 2011). This study contributes to the existing body of scholarship by mapping authorship across three intergovernmental organisations (UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank) over a five-year period (2018–2022). It pays specific attention to the authors' relationships, disciplinary backgrounds, and affiliations. With these characteristics of the knowledge producers in hand, this study dissects the organisational mechanisms through which knowledge production is structured and discusses the implications for global education policy. The paper proceeds by first identifying empirical patterns in authorship and subsequently situating the findings within organisational contexts, epistemic communities, and even broader aspects of global education governance.

## **The role of IGOs in global education governance**

In the past decades IGOs have expanded their roles, shifting from providing coordination, setting regulations, and offering technical assistance to facilitate the connection between policy-relevant knowledge and expertise in global education governance (Baek and Steiner-Khamsi 2024). Collectively, IGOs like the OECD, the World Bank, and UNESCO shape what is recognised as evidence, which problems gain visibility, and which solutions appear feasible, contributing to epistemic governance, in which authority in global education manifests through the production, validation, and circulation

of policy-relevant knowledge, rather than through formal regulation alone (Normand 2016).

IGOs also produce and maintain different strategies of knowledge governance. For example, the OECD has consolidated authority through indicator regimes and large-scale assessments like PISA. Many scholars in comparative and international education studies have examined the ‘PISA effect’, which demonstrates how cross-national comparisons reconfigure national debates, normalising ‘governing by numbers’ utilising standardised metrics (e.g. league tables, benchmarking narratives, and thematic indicators) (Elfert and Ydesen 2023; Grek 2009). Sellar and Lingard (2017) characterise this authority as soft power via hard facts, noting how rankings, cross-national reviews, and ‘what works’ syntheses persuade rather than compel. From an epistemic perspective, this reflects the consolidation of a distinctive organisational culture in which particular methods, indicators, and evaluative logics come to define legitimate knowledge claims (Kallo 2021). The OECD has progressively extended its reach through PISA for Schools, which links school-level diagnostics to global metrics, as well as PISA for Development, which adapts assessments for low – and middle-income countries (Lewis 2017; Lewis, Sellar, and Lingard 2016). These initiatives extend comparison downward into classrooms and outward to new country groups, which reinforces the OECD’s brokerage or facilitator role while still privileging what can be measured (Niemann and Martens 2018).

The World Bank, in turn, institutionalised knowledge production with its ‘Knowledge Bank’ turn. Going beyond finance, it positions itself as a producer, manager, and broker of educational knowledge by maintaining and supporting open repositories, data portals, and programmatic toolkits (Zapp 2017). Bibliometric analyses by Menashy and Read (2016) demonstrate the World Bank’s reliance on economics and Global North sources in its policy publications, particularly in areas such as public – private partnerships. This epistemic pattern helps explain how particular reform models have diffused across borrower countries. Over time, the World Bank’s ability to synthesise financial leverage, conditionality and epistemic authority has created a powerful platform for policy entrepreneurship in education (Edwards et al. 2024; Mundy and Verger 2016). The result is a distinctive economic style of reasoning that elevates cost-effectiveness, accountability instruments and standardisation. Such an orientation can accelerate the uptake of portable reforms, although since contextual and social dimensions are less easily quantifiable, it narrows the potential of the policy imagination.

UNESCO anchors its authority in norm-setting and in monitoring progress toward SDG 4. Through the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, it curates consensus narratives around equity, inclusion and rights. Meanwhile, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics provides the technical structure for global indicator frameworks. The SDG 4 Scorecard translates global targets into dashboards, and benchmarks that highlight progress on the one hand, and persistent data gaps on the other. In contrast to the OECD’s reliance on psychometrics and the Bank’s economic orientation, UNESCO is often characterised as idealistic, as it promotes education as a human right and a public good (Elfert 2017; Robertson 2022).

Despite the differences outlined above, these three organisations employ similar governance mechanisms. Knowledge brokerage typically follows a process of measurement, synthesis and prescription. Indicators and rankings provide cognitive shortcuts; flagship

and thematic reports narrate problems and assemble toolkits; and technical notes and guidance documents translate lessons into operational steps. Steiner-Khamsi, Martens, and Ydesen (2024) call this dynamic ‘governance by numbers 2.0’, whereby reliable intermediaries pre-select problems and compress complexity in order to facilitate rapid policy uptake under conditions of information overload.

Three key observations can be made in this context of epistemic governance. First, indicators are performative. For example, PISA rankings actively construct (inter)national priorities and reform timelines, not merely describe performance (Grek 2009; Sellar and Lingard 2017). Second, instruments diffuse across contexts as they spread. Standards, accountability regimes and public – private partnerships disperse globally, often creating new markets for such categories as curriculum, assessment, and quality assurance (Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa 2019; Verger, Parcerisa, and Fontdevila 2019). Third, organisations increasingly rely on promissory legitimacy. In the face of uneven results, they can maintain their authority through anticipatory instruments such as scenarios, benchmarks, and roadmaps. Initiatives like UNESCO’s SDG 4 Scorecard and the OECD’s Education 2030 project are examples of how commitments can be mobilised toward trajectories as much as outcomes (Auld and Elfert 2024).

Furthermore, IGOs possess durable and stabilising knowledge infrastructures, like assessment systems, repositories, dashboards and review mechanisms (Martens and Jakobi 2010; Zapp 2017). Each IGO sustains a recognisable epistemic style, and indicator-driven brokerage has become a dominant mode, particularly for the OECD and the World Bank (Seitzer, Baek, and Steiner-Khamsi 2024; Sellar and Lingard 2017; Steiner-Khamsi, Martens, and Ydesen 2024).

However, while existing research has examined instruments, indicators, and organisational strategies, the composition and overlap of the epistemic communities that generate these knowledge outputs remain under-specified. Few studies directly map which authors write across the different IGOs and to which disciplines, institutions, and regions they belong. This study addresses the gap by reconstructing authors’ networks and attributions across the three aforementioned organisations over a five-year period. By analysing disciplinary backgrounds, geographic affiliations, and organisational locations, the study examines how epistemic imprints are socially structured and institutionally reproduced, with the aim of providing insights on the knowledge ecosystems through which global education agendas are produced and legitimised.

## **Understanding global policy knowledge production in education**

To analyse the production of global education policy knowledge, this study draws on the concepts of policy networks and epistemic communities. Both emphasise the patterned relations through which knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated. Policy networks describe relatively stable patterns of interaction among state and non-state actors involved in policymaking, including ministries, international organisations, academic institutions, think tanks, foundations, consultancies, and civil society organisations (Börzel 1998; Rhodes and Marsh 1992). Through repeated exchanges of information, resources, and recognition, these networks enable coordination across institutional boundaries. At the same time, they shape access to policymaking by privileging particular actors and forms of participation, with significant implications for

which ideas and types of expertise come to be treated as authoritative (Börzel 1998; Rhodes and Marsh 1992; Stone 2008, 2013).

Within these broader networks, epistemic communities function as important sites where authority over knowledge is consolidated. As Haas's seminal work (1992) states, epistemic communities consist of professionals who share causal assumptions, normative orientations and standards for evaluating knowledge, allowing them to offer authoritative guidance in contexts marked by uncertainty. Later work has shown that such communities are neither uniform nor fixed. Instead, their influence is sustained through institutional routines, professional norms, and organisational settings that help stabilise epistemic authority over time (Cross 2013). Thus, the role of epistemic communities needs to be understood in relation to their administrative and organisational embedding (Christensen 2021). In education, epistemic communities often stabilise around techniques that enable comparison and control (for example, cross-national assessments, cost-effectiveness analyses, or impact evaluations), and around editorial practices favouring evidence that is portable across settings.

Organisational structures and processes channel participation and stabilise policy networks and epistemic communities over time. Staffing models, procurement rules, editorial routines, and preferred collaborator lists determine who is invited to author and review reports. Participation patterns, in turn, consolidate epistemic communities with shared standards of evidence, defining which outcomes become salient and what level of generality is needed for policy guidance. The outputs – indicators and scorecards, flagship and thematic reports, toolkits, and technical notes – then enter domestic policy cycles, where they shape agenda-setting by making certain problems urgent while relegating others to the periphery. In this sense, policy networks and epistemic communities serve as conduits through which organisational priorities are translated into authoritative policy knowledge. This dynamic is consistent with prior accounts of OECD governing by numbers (Grek 2009; Sellar and Lingard 2017), the World Bank's knowledge-management approach (Mundy and Verger 2016; Zapp 2017), and UNESCO's SDG 4 monitoring architecture.

Two structural features are particularly important in shaping how policy networks and epistemic communities govern knowledge: closure and brokerage. Closure accelerates coordination but risks epistemic insularity by reinforcing shared assumptions and excluding alternative perspectives. Existing research shows that relatively closed epistemic communities can privilege particular problem framings, indicators, and methods while rendering alternative perspectives less visible, as illustrated by studies of international large-scale assessments such as PISA, global learning metrics including learning poverty, and the circulation of 'best practices' (Grek 2009; Sellar and Lingard 2017; Steiner-Khamsi 2016; Unterhalter 2019). These studies have called for the importance of local and contextualised knowledge and evidence.

Brokerage, by contrast, connects otherwise separate clusters and enables production and translation of knowledge within and across contexts (Baek and Steiner-Khamsi 2024; Martens and Jakobi 2010; Niemann and Martens 2018). The balance between closure and brokerage underpins the epistemic styles that characterise each organisation, shaping whose and which types of knowledge are perceived important and valid. Specifically, the OECD privileges psychometrics and indicator-based comparison; the World Bank privileges development economics and results-based management; and UNESCO

privileges rights-based and inclusion-oriented monitoring. These styles generate selective environments for authors and reviewers, repeatedly engaging some disciplines while marginalising others.

Moreover, closure and brokerage are not limited to the internal organisation of individual IGOs. Instead, research on global governance has highlighted how policy networks operate transnationally, channelling particular models and framing devices across contexts (Menashy and Read 2016; Stone 2013). Rather than diffusing through an open marketplace of ideas, much policy knowledge circulates within relatively narrow, hierarchical networks in which a few well-connected organisations serve as central nodes. From an epistemic community lens, such network-based diffusion reinforces existing hierarchies of knowledge, as ideas that have been validated within these networks travel widely while alternative or locally grounded approaches struggle to gain traction.

The studies cited above call for investigating who is invited to speak, where those voices originate, and how legitimacy is formed. These investigations can enable us to connect concerns about the fading optimism in global education not only to external shocks or domestic contestation but also to the internal politics of knowledge production.

## Research design

To examine the politics of knowledge production in global education governance, this study conducts a systematic analysis of the authorships of publications from UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank published between 2018 and 2022. These institutions' outputs (e.g. flagship reports, assessments, and policy recommendations) circulate widely and frame not only what is known about education but also what should be done in terms of policy and practice (see Steiner-Khamsi et al. 2024). Tracing who authors these texts, and to which disciplines and geographic locations those authors belong, can help us understand the epistemic and institutional structures that shape global policy knowledge. Constructing author-level data for the publications required extensive tracing of disciplinary backgrounds, institutional affiliations, and geographic locations, which necessitated limiting the timeframe. The data collection began in 2023, and a five-year window was selected to capture a sufficiently large and stable body of publications as well as tracing authorship information while still supporting comparability across organisations and minimising historical drift in organisational mandates and knowledge practices.

The publications were accessed via the official repositories of each organisation: the UNESCO Digital Library, the OECD iLibrary, and the World Bank Open Knowledge Repository. Publications were selected if they (1) focused primarily on the theme of education, (2) were published by the respective organisation, (3) were published between 2018 and 2022, (4) listed individual authors, and (5) contained empirical knowledge (excluding meeting notes, promotional materials, newsletters, etc.). Applying these criteria yielded 749 publications from UNESCO, 474 from the World Bank, and 224 from the OECD, for a total of 1,447 publications. A list of publications with authorships was collected with the following information: (a) publishing organisation, (b) title of publication, (c) year of publication, (d) type of document (e.g. journals, reports, books, articles), and (e) author names in order. From these publications, an author – document matrix was constructed,

comprising 4,765 author – document pairs and identifying 3,175 unique authors across the three organisations.<sup>1</sup>

Among these unique authors, the analysis focused on 679 authors who contributed to more than one publication. While single authorships often reflect ad hoc or peripheral involvement, recurrent contributors like these are more likely to play a sustained role in shaping organisational outputs. Thus, concentrating on repeated contributions offers a clearer view of the disciplinary, geographic, and institutional structures embedded within each IGO and, by extension, in global knowledge production.

Building on Menashy and Read's (2016) earlier study on World Bank publications, each author was coded by institutional affiliation, geographic location, disciplinary background, and professional role. Affiliation data were coded by internal staff and external contributors from universities, research institutes, consulting firms, and NGOs. Moreover, the geographic location of the affiliation was identified and was then coded as 'Global North' or 'Global South'. Despite the multifaceted nature of these two terms, this study classifies them based on the geographical locations of the authors' affiliations to reflect the institutional settings that shaped the authors' access to resources and participation in global knowledge production. The possibility of collecting additional data (e.g. information on individual identities) for a more layered classification was limited by the availability of records. Each author's disciplinary background was entered as stated in the publication, on the author's profile, or as reported by the degree-granting institution. For analysis, related specialisations (e.g. labour economics and development economics) were grouped under a broader disciplinary category (e.g. economics). When author attributes could not be identified from the publications, other sources (e.g. institutional directories and LinkedIn profiles) were used to identify the missing information. A sample of the Author Attribute Database is demonstrated in [Table 1](#).

In addition to descriptive analyses of authorship characteristics, this study uses network analysis to examine patterns of authorship across publications produced by UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank. Network analysis is employed to represent and visualise relationships among authors and to identify structural features of authorship that are not apparent from publication-level descriptions alone (Borgatti et al. 2009; Scott 2000; Wasserman and Faust 1994). The authorship network is constructed as a two-mode network, linking authors to the publications to which they contributed. When authors appear across multiple publications, they are represented by larger nodes in the visualisation and exhibit higher degree centrality. No assumptions are made regarding the direction of influence, agreement, or authority among authors. In this study, epistemic communities are inferred based on authorship patterns and institutional contexts. Although it does not examine the content of documents, the study builds on sociological understandings of epistemic communities as structured through collaborations and organisational environments that tend to shape shared assumptions, normative orientations, and standards for evaluating knowledge.

Network data were initially recorded in Microsoft Excel to construct matrices linking authors and publications. UCINET 6.755 was used to analyse the matrices, and NetDraw 2.179 was used to visualise the relationships between the documents and the authors as well as epistemic communities and policy networks.

**Table 1.** Database sample (author attribute).

Name	Occupation	Affiliation	Location of work	Global south	Highest degree	Highest degree discipline	Highest degree institution	Highest degree location
Borgonovi, F.	Head of Skills Analysis	OECD	France	N	Ph.D.	Social and Public Policy	London School of Economics and Political Science	United Kingdom
Chatterjee Singh, N.	Senior Programme Officer	UNESCO-MGIEP	India	Y	Ph.D.	Physics	University of Pune	India
Filmer, D.	Director, Development Research Group	World Bank	United States	N	Ph.D.	Economics	Brown University	United States
Mercier, J.	Professor	University of Quebec in Montreal	Canada	N	Ph.D.	Educational Psychology (Applied Cognitive Sciences)	McGill University	Canada

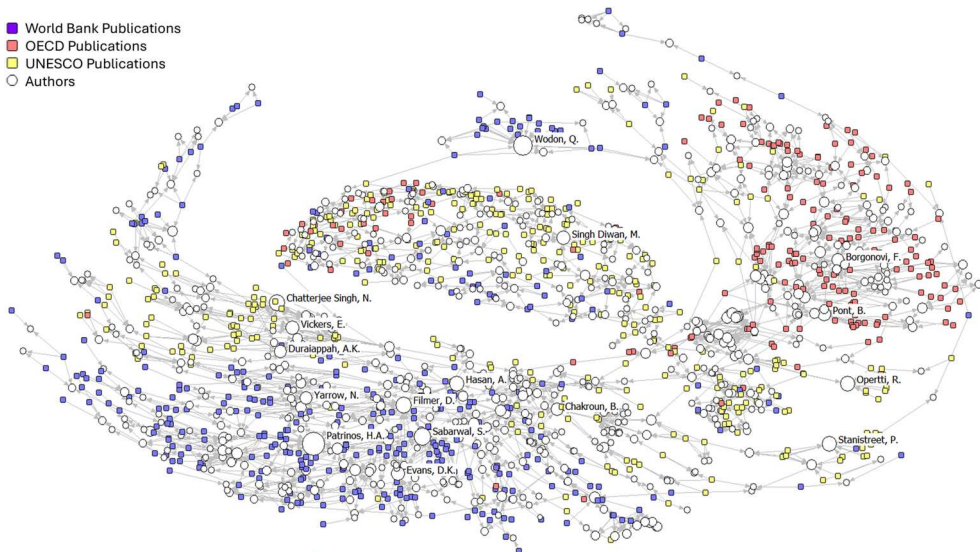
## Findings

The analysis of UNESCO, OECD, and World Bank publications reveals differences and similarities across the IGOs in terms of the authorship network, disciplinary orientations, geographical representations, and epistemic structures. The findings show that the author base of each of these IGO publications exists in relative isolation from the others. Furthermore, each organisation has a distinct disciplinary base, which is reflected in its publications. Across the three organisations, a majority of the influential authors are based in the Global North, and there is relatively heavy reliance on internal expertise.

### *Authorship network structures and epistemic silos*

The examination of author networks showed that UNESCO, OECD, and World Bank authors rarely worked together on publications. The analysis revealed that 3,175 distinct authors wrote for the three organisations, yet only 70 authors (2%) published work for more than one organisation. The minimal overlap among the authorship of the three IGOs indicates a pronounced epistemic isolation, which implies different and possibly conflicting approaches to understanding education and addressing educational issues. In [Figure 1](#), authors (indicated by circles) are connected to publications (indicated by squares), with the colour of the latter indicating the publishing organisation (blue: World Bank; red: OECD; yellow: UNESCO). The three network clusters in [Figure 1](#) show tight clustering with minimal bridging ties, indicating that authors who work with one IGO do not frequently collaborate with authors who work with the other two. In line with the visualisation, network density is high within organisations and markedly lower across them, indicating a structure consistent with closure and limited brokerage.

There are a few key actors who enable and stabilise these epistemic differences. In [Figure 1](#), the size of the circle nodes indicates the centrality of the authors in the



**Figure 1.** Authorship network of the three IGOs.

network, which is calculated based on the number of authored publications. Within the World Bank network, prolific contributors include Patrinos, H., Wodon, Q., Sabarwal, S., Filmer, D., and Hasan, A. UNESCO's cluster is anchored by authors such as Chatterjee Singh, N., Opertti, R., Stanistreet, P., Singh Diwan, M., and Vickers, E. The OECD network's leading authors are Pont, B., Borgonovi, F., Cerna, L., and Fordham, E. These central actors do not have a strong presence in the other organisations' publications, which may contribute to the institutional separation.

The way actors relate to each other establishes which issues will receive focus during decision-making activities. The high level of internal cohesion in editorial work enables faster coordination and streamlines editorial processes; however, it also creates a dependence on established methods, reduces exposure to different approaches and cases, and restricts the exchange of ideas between different groups. These network properties explain how the following results emerged: organisations have and perpetuate unique disciplinary patterns, authors from the Global North dominate the authorship, and organisations heavily depend on internal contributors. These findings will be presented in detail in the upcoming sections.

While the overall authorship networks are largely segmented by organisation, a small number of authors appear across publications produced by more than one international organisation. An examination of these cases suggests that cross-organisational authorship does not primarily reflect sustained brokerage between otherwise disconnected epistemic communities in the sense commonly associated with the 'strength of weak ties' (Granovetter 1973). Instead, such cases are closely tied to specific career trajectories and institutional roles. For example, Borhene Chakroun, currently Director of the Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems at UNESCO, authored publications for both UNESCO and the World Bank at different points in his career. Polycarp O. Otieno similarly contributed to publications produced by UNESCO-affiliated institutes and World Bank education projects following changes in institutional affiliation.

### ***Disciplinary composition***

The disciplinary composition of authorship (see [Figure 2](#)) also suggests that each of the three organisations (UNESCO, OECD, and World Bank) may maintain its own separate author community. The three organisations appear to draw on different epistemological bases that situate their publications in particular methodological and normative frameworks.

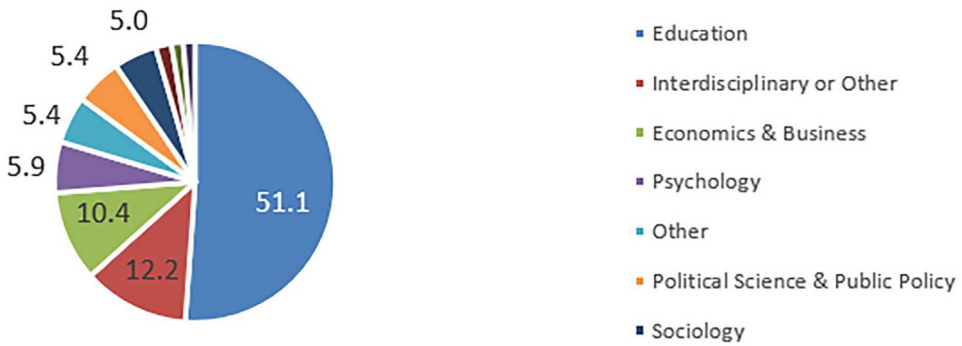
OECD publications demonstrated a strong preference for authors trained in economics or political science. Approximately 29% of authors received their highest degree in economics or business, and about 22% of authors received their highest degree in political science or public policy. Next, the field of education is represented by 18% of the authors. This distribution appears to reflect and reconfirm OECD's historical and methodological alignment with economic and policy frameworks emphasising efficiency, performance measurement and evidence-based policymaking through standardised benchmarks (e.g. PISA).

UNESCO publications, by contrast, were predominantly authored by experts with academic qualifications and training in education, pedagogy, curriculum studies, and related fields. Approximately 51% of UNESCO authors held their highest degrees specifically in

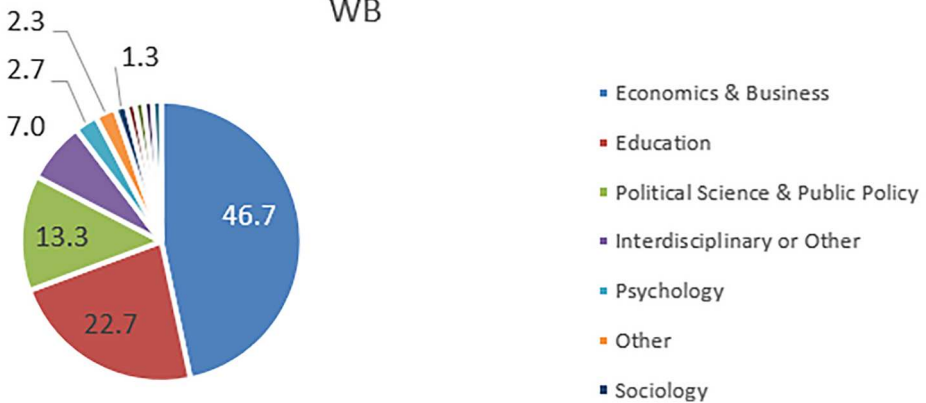
### OECD



### UNESCO



### WB



**Figure 2.** Disciplinary composition of the authorship.

educational fields, underscoring the organisation’s explicit focus on educational quality, equity, cultural diversity and human-rights-based educational frameworks. Interestingly, 12% of UNESCO authors came from interdisciplinary backgrounds.

World Bank publications exhibited a dominant representation of economists, accounting for approximately 47% of authors. The second largest group, 23%, came from education, followed by 13% from political science and public policy. This distribution reflects the World Bank's policy-driven analytical frameworks, combining economic rationale with education and governance perspectives. It also highlights the organisation's focus on institutional capacity-building and education as a vehicle for economic development.

These disciplinary differences among the three IGOs reflect their distinct epistemological frameworks, which contribute to the varied conceptualisation and promotion of educational problems and solutions, as well as policy recommendations, in their respective publications.

### ***Geographic representation and bias***

In addition to the disciplinary composition of the authorship, the geographic distribution of authors deserves further discussion. The findings reveal significant geographic biases; specifically, authors from institutions based in the Global North are overwhelmingly dominant. For example, among those who authored more than one publication, almost all authors from the OECD publications are affiliated with institutions based in the Global North, predominantly from Western Europe and North America. While this pattern aligns with the OECD's membership composition as a predominantly Euro-American and economically advanced organisation, it nevertheless highlights the regional and economic situatedness of the OECD's knowledge production processes. This observation is analytically important given the organisation's substantial influence on education policy debates beyond its formal membership, including in contexts where educational priorities, constraints, and challenges differ from those of OECD member countries.

While UNESCO publications demonstrated slightly broader geographic representation, 80% of authors were affiliated with institutions in the Global North. The countries with the most authors are the United States (52), France (33), the United Kingdom (28), and Germany (26). Though UNESCO actively promotes global cultural diversity and inclusivity, the dominance of authors based in the Global North reflects the prevailing epistemological hierarchies and unequal power dynamics within global educational governance.

World Bank publications similarly displayed considerable geographic bias, with approximately 77% of authors based in the Global North. However, the World Bank authorship showed a slightly larger representation of authors from institutions in middle-income countries (notably in Asia and Latin America), indicating somewhat greater geographic diversity compared to OECD and UNESCO. For example, Indonesia had the largest number of authors after the United States and France. Furthermore, Argentina, India, the Philippines, South Africa, and Uganda are also included in the list. Still, authors from low-income countries remained starkly underrepresented, despite being frequent subjects of World Bank policy interventions.

The geographic biases identified in the authorship of the three examined IGOs significantly impact the framing, assumptions, and relevance of global education knowledge, and this imbalance has the potential to perpetuate epistemic dominance and inequalities. Of particular concern is the limited presence of scholars and practitioners from those regions that are most affected by global educational policies, as this lack of representation

undermines efforts towards genuinely inclusive and contextually responsive global education governance.

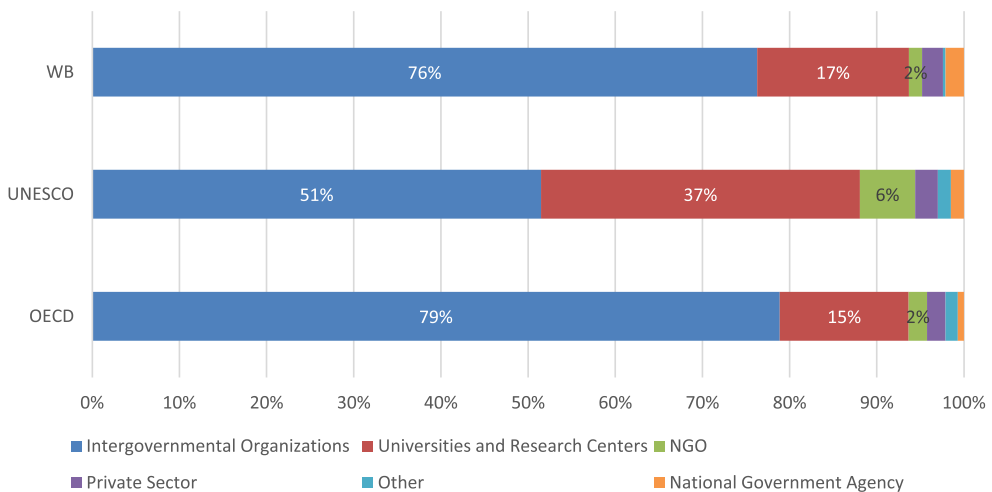
### **Reliance on internal organisational expertise**

Across all three IGOs, the analysis revealed a significant reliance on internal, organisationally affiliated authors (see Figure 3). OECD publications relied most heavily on such internal expertise, with approximately 88% of authors being OECD employees or consultants frequently contracted by the organisation. Similarly, internal staff or consultants accounted for about 80% of the World Bank's authorship. This significant reliance on internal expertise perpetuates epistemic insularity, as internal experts may consciously or unconsciously adhere closely to organisational policy priorities. Consequently, alternative or critical external perspectives are likely to be overlooked.

By contrast, UNESCO publications were comparatively more open, with internal staff comprising only around 65% of authors. UNESCO authors include experts from its institutes and centres, such as International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), and Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP). The relatively higher proportion of external authors may reflect UNESCO's broader organisational mandate. Nevertheless, even UNESCO's knowledge production is significantly influenced by internal priorities and institutional frameworks, as UNESCO-affiliated institutes and centres continue to account for a substantial share of authorship.

Overall, the pronounced reliance on internal expertise across IGOs indicates limited external scrutiny or input, which may restrict epistemic pluralism and reinforce internal institutional paradigms. This imbalance raises critical questions about the openness, representativeness, and accountability of global education policy discourse.

In addition to authors from intergovernmental organisations, academics from universities and research centres constitute a significant share of the authors, particularly in the



**Figure 3.** Types of author affiliations.

case of UNESCO publications. Nearly 100 authors of UNESCO publications were affiliated with universities or research institutes, considerably more than the number affiliated with the OECD or the World Bank. Some examples of the central academic institutions in the network are George Washington University, Georgetown University, University of Melbourne, and Harvard University.

## Discussion

This study discusses the sociology and politics of knowledge production and its implications for global education governance. By reconstructing authorship networks across three intergovernmental organisations (UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank), the analysis examines disciplinary orientations, geographic affiliations, and institutional positions of those who produce education policy knowledge. The findings of this study suggest that authorship arrangements constitute a key organisational mechanism through which epistemic authority is structured, stabilised, and reproduced.

A first and central finding is the epistemic isolation of international organisations. With fewer than three percent of authors contributing across more than one IGO, the three organisations sustain epistemic communities that are largely separate, and they have distinctive disciplinary orientations. This pattern can be understood in light of the distinct historical trajectories, mandates, and sources of authority through which these organisations have constructed their roles in global governance. The OECD, for example, has relied on expert authority rather than legal competence or financial leverage, reflecting both its origins in economic coordination and the interests of its member states. As documented in organisational analyses of the OECD, the organisation's influence has historically rested on expert authority, peer review, and the cultivation of epistemic communities (Carroll and Kellow 2011). Over time, this reliance on expertise has fostered a strong internal orientation toward economic analysis, statistics, and comparative policy review, an orientation that has been shown to extend across multiple OECD policy domains, including education (Carroll and Kellow 2011; McGaw 2008; Sellar and Lingard 2017). In this context, the prevalence of economists and quantitatively trained policy analysts among OECD authors may reflect not an arbitrary selection but a long-standing institutional strategy for maintaining epistemic authority.

The World Bank's authorship patterns similarly reflect its dual role as a lender and a producer of policy-relevant knowledge. Since the 1990s, the Bank has increasingly positioned itself as a 'Knowledge Bank', embedding development economics, cost-effectiveness analysis, and results-based management at the core of its policy advice (Zapp 2017). This orientation has shaped both the types of analytical tools the Bank promotes and the forms of expertise it favours in its publications. UNESCO, by contrast, has historically anchored its authority in norm-setting, rights-based frameworks, and global monitoring. Its mandate to promote education as a human right and a public good is reflected in a comparatively strong presence of educational and interdisciplinary expertise beyond economics among its authors. The disciplinary concentrations observed across the three organisations may be the institutional outcomes shaped by organisational mandates, recruitment practices, and internal socialisation processes rather than as deviations from an otherwise unified global knowledge field.

When interpreted through the concepts of policy networks and epistemic communities, the findings indicate that authorship functions as a closure mechanism. Rather than loose clusters of contributors, each organisation sustains relatively bounded communities of experts. These experts often share disciplinary backgrounds, methodological commitments, and assumptions about what constitutes valid policy knowledge. What is important to clarify, however, is that such closure does not automatically imply organisational failure or epistemic stagnation. On the contrary, bounded epistemic communities may enable IGOs to maintain coherence, credibility, and continuity in their policy advice and knowledge production and brokerage. Interestingly, epistemic closure could operate as a governing strategy that prioritises internal alignment, comparability, and consistency over epistemic pluralism.

The study also demonstrates that reliance on internal authorship intensifies the different aspects of closure. Indeed, the predominant use of internal staff as authors supports continuity, institutional memory, and alignment with organisational priorities and may not be a surprising finding. Research on international bureaucracies shows that IGOs actively socialise their staff into organisational norms, role expectations, and shared understandings of relevant knowledge production, which fosters strong identification with institutional goals and policy styles (Marcussen and Trondal 2011). It means that internal authorship not only reflects technical expertise, but also the internalisation of organisational values and epistemic commitments. Similar to the epistemic closure mechanism discussed above, this contributes to maintaining coherence and credibility in policy advice. Furthermore, broader societal shifts, such as the expansion of evidence-based policymaking and the consolidation of the knowledge society, more closely associated policy authority with scientific credentials and professionally sanctioned expertise (Rautalin, Syväterä, and Vento 2021). The predominance of highly educated internal and affiliated authors thus may reflect not only internalisation of organisational values and epistemic communities but also how IGOs have adapted to growing expectations of methodological rigour and technical credibility.

Geographic asymmetries further deepen the epistemic closure mechanism. The dominance of authors from the Global North in the field generates significant challenges that affect both the representation of diverse voices and the authenticity of the work. The geographically disproportionate participation indicates that knowledge production remains concentrated within relatively closed epistemic communities, reducing opportunities for brokerage that could connect policy knowledge more closely to the contexts in which it is enacted. The systematic inequality between North and South reinforces epistemic closure by stabilising existing hierarchies of authority within transnational policy networks. Northern expertise continues to occupy central positions in global policy discussions, while alternative perspectives remain peripheral.

The policy system resulting from isolated networks, as well as from disciplinary and geographical inequalities in knowledge production, tends to focus on maintaining the existing order rather than adapting to change. This focus, in turn, may lead to the reproduction of social inequalities through the knowledge production structures, and this, consequently, leads to the reduced legitimacy of IGOs as well as the knowledge they produce and disseminate.

Closure, however, is not inevitable. Network theory shows that brokerage can be cultivated, while research on externalisation and policy transfer demonstrates that new flows

of expertise can be organised and institutionalised. Interventions such as cross-organisational secondments, shared editorial responsibility, and co-commissioned studies led by Southern institutions could contribute to the meaningful changes of the authorship patterns. Additionally, moving from consultation to co-authorship with Southern scholars could open global governance to greater pluralism and equity.

The findings of this study reveal a configuration of epistemic communities characterised by closure. They suggest that global education agendas in past decades may be the result not only of institutional or political factors but also of epistemic ones, structured through the unbalanced composition and closure of the communities that produce global policy knowledge. By situating the analysis within debates on knowledge-based governance and knowledge equity, the study extends prior work on how education policy knowledge is mobilised, institutionalised, and legitimised. The broader challenge in discussing education agendas may not be in choosing among competing bodies of knowledge but in recognising and sustaining the institutional conditions that allow exchange across different epistemic communities over time. Strengthening brokerage within and across epistemic communities may enable international organisations to convert internal coherence into external relevance, and international and national policy actors to translate globally circulating policy knowledge into forms that are more responsive to diverse educational contexts.

## Note

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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