The OECD and its Influence in Higher Education: A critical revision

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Without doubt, the OECD counts as a powerful agent in the convergence of national policies for higher education, both within the framework of neo-liberalism and of its more diffuse expression, globalization. It commands a range of sophisticated and subtle vehicles for advancing these perspectives. Amongst them are regular, up-to-date and exceedingly high quality data and information systems, functioning cross-nationally, and what we have termed an “indirect strategy” of development, based on peer review, high-level networking, and on the recourse to what is sometimes alluded to as “soft law.”

These axes of communication penetrate to the highest levels of permanent officials in the appropriate ministries of its member countries and to a lesser extent, into academia itself. To be sure, OECD does not possess the power of the purse. But this, as we have pointed out, is not necessarily a disadvantage.

This chapter has tracked the OECD’s development across the past 40 years and very particularly over the past 20, a period that saw it both defining and strengthening its role as “missionary for the values of liberalization” and with it a new determination in its recommendations that have become more audacious, prescriptive, and precise. We have examined the general setting and background against which this development arose, though it may also be attributed to the creation of the Center for Educational Research and Innovation, set up in 1968 and the program on Institutional Management in Higher Education created in 1972, both of which laid out solid ties between civil servants, educational administrators, and the world of (higher) education research.

From the standpoint of the historian, the OECD and its predecessor, the OEEC, are unique in that they have been instrumental in two “reconstructions” of Europe: the first involving the economic rebuilding of Western Europe in the immediate aftermath of World War II; the second being the modernization of the economic systems and the educational provision of East and Central Europe in the wake of the collapse of the command economies amongst the satellites of the now defunct Soviet Union. Both “reconstructions” served to build up the organization’s standing and, in the case of the latter, to enlarge its sphere of influence geographically, politically, and, as we have argued, the range and depth of its analyses and recommendations as well as its sphere of action. This process, sometimes presented as “mission creep,” “creeping competence” (Pollack), or alternatively as “furtive mission incrementalism” (Neave) whilst evident in the case of the OECD, is not exclusive to it. Similar tendencies have been detected in the dynamics of the IMF as well as in the European Commission.

In the OECD’s institutional saga, many changes, internal as well as external, have taken place. These we have set out against a broad backdrop the better to grasp their impact and strategic significance upon the organization’s development, its strategies, Weltanschauung, and economic vision. Prime amongst them, it was suggested, was the abandonment of neo-Keynesianism and the triumphant rise of postmodern economic liberalism. Whilst the OECD has remained steadfast in upholding a “market economy,” what is understood by this construct and thus the policy fallout has been central both to the organization’s strategy and in defining the ways in which it fulfills its mandate. Close attention has been paid to the report Tertiary education for the knowledge society. We have done so not only because it contains a forward-looking vision for action. It is also an essential summary of the views entertained by the OECD on such matters as governance, quality, equity, research and innovation, the development of careers in academia, relations with the market, and, last but not least, the place of internationalization in education policy.
Still, as one of higher education’s prime international interlocutors, and despite the very real, radical, and sometimes very painful consequences its doctrinal changes have had for higher education, the OECD maintains an unbreakable loyalty to the primacy of the economic vision of man in society. As Portuguese folk wisdom has it: “Same old donkey, new saddle.”