

# GOVERNING COMPLEX EDUCATION SYSTEMS

---

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

2011-2016

---



**Contact:**

Tracey Burns ([Tracey.Burns@oecd.org](mailto:Tracey.Burns@oecd.org))



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| RATIONALE .....                      | 3 |
| PROJECT GOALS.....                   | 3 |
| KEY THEMES.....                      | 4 |
| KEY OUTPUTS OF THE GCES PROJECT..... | 5 |
| REFERENCES .....                     | 8 |

---

## RATIONALE

---

One of the crucial issues for OECD countries is how to deliver high quality, efficient, equitable and innovative education in increasingly complex education systems. This is a delicate equilibrium, one that is difficult to achieve given the complexity of the education system in many OECD countries. As a result, governance issues have moved up political and policy agendas, and countries are increasingly looking for models that they can adapt to their own needs.

A number of intersecting trends contribute to increasing complexity in education systems. Decentralisation has allowed local authorities, school boards and schools a greater degree of freedom to respond to local demands. Parents, students and communities have become more diverse and highly educated and as a result have higher expectations that schools cater to students' individual needs. More information about school and student achievement is readily available, empowering a broader set of actors. This has changed the nature of the relationship between governance levels, moving away from a hierarchical relationship to a division of labour, interdependence and self-regulation.

Education systems are now characterised by multi-level governance where the links between multiple actors operating at different levels are to a certain extent fluid and open to negotiation. Modern education governance must be able to juggle this dynamism and complexity at the same time as it steers a clear course towards established goals. And it must do this as efficiently as possible, with limited financial resources.

The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI)'s [Governing Complex Education Systems \(GCES\)](#) project focused on which models of governance are effective in complex education systems and which knowledge systems are needed to support them. The project ran from 2011-2016. The work on governance was then taken up by the [Strategic Education Governance \(SEG\)](#) project.

---

## PROJECT GOALS

---

The GCES project aimed to:

- Identify the state of research and evidence in these areas and contribute to the analytical and conceptual knowledge base in the field.
- Explore current practices in OECD member countries through a series of thematic workshops, working papers, and case studies.
- Build an international network of policy makers and researchers with expertise in this area.

---

## KEY THEMES

---

The GCES project focused on three key themes identified by participating countries as their biggest priorities:

- 1) **Accountability systems:** This theme encompassed issues of evaluation and assessment, stakeholder involvement and implementation, and the possible tension between accountability, innovation and levels of trust in the system. Access and management of knowledge systems and research evidence was also a central component to this strand.
- 2) **Capacity building:** This strand focused on identifying gaps, needs, and dynamics of capacity building on individual, institutional, and system levels. Key elements are the production, diffusion, and mobilisation of knowledge (including funding and priority setting), and integrating different forms of knowledge: practitioner/expert, research and indicators.
- 3) **Strategic vision and planning:** Many countries struggle with developing strategic approaches to reform and policy-making while at the same time it is needed to ensure alignment between autonomous actors and levels of the system.

In 2015-16, the GCES project expanded these main themes conceptually by introducing three transversal strands:

- **Trust:** Trust is important for school effectiveness, student achievement and teacher job satisfaction. Building trust is an explicit goal for many educational actors, yet this must be aligned with other goals (e.g. the push to increase accountability). This strand looked particularly at definitions, measurements and the role of trust in education governance.
- **Use of data:** Increased availability of data enables central authorities to better monitor and steer the system. It also opens new possibilities for teachers, school management and parents to receive immediate feedback on student performance. However, available data can only contribute to decision-making if there is sufficient capacity to gather and interpret it.
- **Risk-taking:** Important elements to consider range from the governance of risk (e.g. who is responsible, and who decides on the levels of risk appropriate in decentralised systems?), the identification of risk (e.g. who or what is at risk and how might this affect different stakeholders?) and the level of acceptable risk. This strand is still being developed.

Each of these themes and subthemes was explored analytically in working papers and also through thematic conferences. The conferences also served to reinforce one of the goals of the project: building an international network of policy makers and researchers with expertise in this area.

---

## KEY OUTPUTS OF THE GCES PROJECT

---

The project worked through three main activities: a series of thematic conferences that brought together relevant stakeholders from policy, research, and practice; a range of working papers exploring the conceptual issues around modern governance challenges; and case studies that examined real reform efforts in their local or national context. The project's work culminated in two final synthesis volumes, both published in 2016.

---

### CONFERENCES

---

- [\*Governing Education in a Complex World\*](#) (17-18 October 2016 in Brussels, Belgium) served as the project's closing conference. It brought together current research with country experiences of effective modern education governance. Plenary and workshop discussions explored shared responsibility and stakeholder involvement, participatory governance, and accountability and professionalism.
- [\*Trust in Education\*](#) (7 December 2015 in The Hague, the Netherlands) focused on building and sustaining trust in education. It brought together state of the art research with country examples of the role of trust in education, with a focus on accountability, professionalism and responsibility.
- [\*The Use of Data in Educational Governance\*](#) (12-13 February 2015 in Tallinn, Estonia) focused on the use of data for education governance. The main themes included the challenges of the use of data in education, some strategies that have been applied to address these challenges and the kinds of support needed at different governance levels.
- [\*Understanding Complexity: The Future of Education Governance\*](#) (10 February 2014 in Oslo, Norway) revolved around the impact of complexity on education governance. Conference participants discussed the challenges of complexity for education, some of the approaches to cope with these challenges, as well as the identification of gaps in our knowledge base.
- [\*Effective Multilevel Governance in Education\*](#) (17-18 June 2013 in Paris, France) focused on two main themes in effective multilevel governance: transparency and trust. The conference was a joint collaboration between the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) and UNESCO.
- [\*Effective Governance on the Local Level\*](#) (15-17 April 2012 in Warsaw, Poland) looked at the role of local stakeholders in the governance of complex education systems. The conference asked about the place of local authorities and schools in the governance process, how local authorities and schools can be ensured to have the capacity to govern their local systems and how local stakeholders can hold local authorities accountable.
- [\*Effective Governance from the Centre\*](#) (21-22 November 2011 in The Hague, the Netherlands) focused on the role of central government in complex, multilevel systems of governance. Even as regional, local and school levels receive more autonomy, the role of the centre is still crucial as it is held accountable for education outcomes and is in the best position to set priorities and ensure a common direction.

- [The GCES Launch Conference](#) (28-29 March 2011 in Oslo, Norway) contributed to defining the scope and direction of the project. The conference explored the governance mechanisms and knowledge options that facilitate effective steering of complex education systems by bringing together an international group of senior policy makers and researchers.

---

#### WORKING PAPER SERIES

---

- [The Educational Roots of Trust](#) (Borgonovi and Burns, 2015) examines the association between education and interpersonal trust. The analysis demonstrated that education strengthens the cognitive and analytical capacities needed to develop, maintain, and (perhaps) restore trust in both close relationships as well as in anonymous others.
- [Steering from the Centre: New modes of Governance in Multi-level Education Systems](#) (Wilkoszewski and Sundby, 2014) explores innovative governance strategies for the central level in education systems. It identifies core features of multilevel governance and introduces a basic analytical categorisation of modes of governance.
- [Trust: What it is and Why it Matters for Education and Governance](#) (Cerna, 2014) analyses the centrality of trust for policy making and current governance issues. Trust enables stakeholders to take risks, facilitates interactions and co-operation, and reduces the need for control and monitoring.
- [The Simple, the Complicated, and the Complex: Educational Reform through the Lens of Complexity Theory](#) (Snyder, 2013) explores complexity theory and its applications for educational reform. After discussing the key concepts of complex adaptive systems, the paper defines the differences between simple, complicated and complex approaches to educational reform.
- [Exploring the Complex Interaction Between Governance and Knowledge in Education](#) (Fazekas and Burns, 2012) asks the question of how governance and knowledge mutually constitute and impact each other in complex education systems.
- [Looking Beyond the Numbers: Stakeholders and Multiple School Accountability](#) (Hooge, Burns and Wilkoszewski, 2012) analyses trends in accountability mechanisms and processes and argues that regulatory and school performance accountability can be usefully augmented by involving multiple stakeholders.

## GCES CASE STUDY SERIES

---

The GCES case studies were conducted by teams of researchers following a specific [framework](#).

- [United in diversity – A complexity perspective on the role of attainment targets in quality assurance in Flanders](#) (Rouw et al., 2016) through an examination how well curriculum reforms have been implemented, this case study explores the overall context of multi-level governance of education in Flanders.
- [Reforming Education Governance through Local Capacity-Building: A Case Study of the 'Learning Locally' Programme in Germany](#) (Bussemeyer and Vossiek, 2015) looks at the use of educational monitoring on the municipal level in Germany. The analysis focuses on the use of data and its influence on education governance across system levels.
- [Implementation of a New School Supervision System in Poland](#) (Mazurkiewicz, Walczak and Jewdokimow, 2014) explores the strategies, processes and outcomes of a school inspection system in Poland. Implementation challenges included structural issues as well as a lack of trust.
- [Shifting Responsibilities: 20 years of Education Devolution in Sweden](#) (Blanchenay et al., 2014) examines the consequences of important education decentralisation reforms in Sweden. A lack of local capacity building and weak systemic vision have had lasting impacts on the system.
- [Coping With Very Weak Primary Schools: Towards Smart Interventions in Dutch Education Policy](#) (van Twist et al., 2013) looks at the effectiveness of policy instruments aimed at reducing the number of underperforming primary schools in a system with a long tradition of school autonomy.
- [Balancing Trust and Accountability? The Assessment for Learning Programme in Norway](#) (Hopfenbeck et al., 2013) explores the dynamics of change and capacity building for teachers during large-scale implementation of a formative assessment programme in Norway.

## FINAL SYNTHESIS PUBLICATIONS

---

- [Governing Education in a Complex World](#) (Burns and Köster (Eds.), 2016) addresses key challenges involved in governing modern education systems. The publication brings together research from the OECD Secretariat and international scholars to provide state of the art analyses and a fresh perspective of some of the most difficult issues facing educational systems today.
- [Education Governance in Action: Lessons from Case Studies](#) (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016) bridges theory and practice by connecting major themes in education governance to real-life reforms. The publication builds upon case studies of education reform in Flanders (Belgium), Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Sweden. These are complemented by country examples to build and sustain trust in education systems.



---

## REFERENCES

---

- Blanchenay, P., T. Burns and F. Köster (2014), "Shifting responsibilities - 20 Years of education devolution in Sweden: A Governing Complex Education Systems case study", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 104, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jz2jg1rqrd7-en>.
- Burns, T. and F. Köster (eds.) (2016), *Governing Education in a Complex World*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264255364-en>.
- Burns, T., F. Köster and M. Fuster (2016), *Education Governance in Action: Lessons from Case Studies*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264262829-en>.
- Busemeyer, M. and J. Vossiek (2015), "Reforming education governance through local capacity-building: A Case Study of the 'Learning Locally' Programme in Germany", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 113, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5js6bhl2mxjg-en>.
- Cerna, L. (2014), "Trust: what it is and why it matters for governance and education", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 108, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jxswcg0t6wl-en>.
- Fazekas, M. and T. Burns (2012), "Exploring the complex Interaction between governance and knowledge in education", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 67, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k9flcx2l340-en>.
- Hooge, E., T. Burns and H. Wilkoszewski (2012), "Looking beyond the numbers: Stakeholders and multiple school accountability", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 85, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k91dl7ct6q6-en>.
- Hopfenbeck, T. et al. (2013), "Balancing trust and accountability? The assessment for learning programme in Norway: A Governing Complex Education Systems case study", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 97, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k3txnpqlsnn-en>.
- Mazurkiewicz, G., B. Walczak and M. Jewdokimow (2014), "Implementation of a New School Supervision System in Poland", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 111, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jxrlrxgcb6b-en>.
- Rouw, R., et al. (2016), "United in Diversity: A Complexity Perspective on the Role of Attainment Targets in Quality Assurance in Flanders", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 139, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jlr8ftvqs1-en>.
- Snyder, S. (2013), "The Simple, the Complicated, and the Complex: Educational Reform Through the Lens of Complexity Theory", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 96, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k3txnpt1lnr-en>.
- Van Twist, M. et al. (2013), "Coping with very weak primary schools: Towards smart interventions in Dutch education policy", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 98, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k3txnphld7-en>.
- Wilkoszewski, H. and E. Sundby (2014), "Steering from the centre: New modes of governance in multi-level education systems", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 109, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jxswcfs4s5g-en>.