Centre for Educational Research and Innovation

Strategic Education Governance

Project Plan and Organisational Framework

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1. Rationale

The Strategic Education Governance (SEG) project involves developing policy tools to support countries in identifying the best ways to achieve national objectives for education systems in a context of multi-level governance structures and complex environments. It identifies and promotes effective governance processes in the realms of accountability, capacity, knowledge governance, stakeholder involvement, strategic thinking, and a whole-of-system perspective.

This work extends and complements the initial exploratory work on developing policy tools to support and promote Strategic Education Governance undertaken in 2017-18. It continues mobilising the knowledge base of effective governance processes to support countries/systems with specific governance challenges or reforms.

Strategic Education Governance addresses the need to develop open, flexible and adaptive governance processes that improve the effectiveness and sustainability of reform in multi-level and complex education systems. It aims to help countries develop smarter governance arrangements, sensitive to context and capable of delivering improvement by building upon robust knowledge systems, stakeholder co-operation and constructive accountability.

The Strategic Education Governance project provides a forum for collective learning on how to govern education systems more strategically. It helps to focus policy makers' attention on the importance of ensuring effective governance processes, as part of both policy design and implementation, strengthening attention on the “how” in policy reform, as a critical ingredient to its success. The project generates insights into effective governance processes and mobilises this knowledge for use within and among countries.

Concrete information on the state of governance mechanisms to compare against an international, normative framework of strategic education governance allows policy makers to bring effective governance processes onto the political agenda. It allows the identification of “governance gaps” and areas for reform. It also generates information and positive examples of effective governance mechanisms in different countries to feed into the collective knowledge base on strategic education governance. The Strategic Education Governance analytical approach and insights can be applied to ongoing governance challenges and/or reforms in specific countries/systems.

2. Analytical approach

The SEG Organisational Framework (Annex A) encapsulates the project’s overarching analytical approach and structures its work. The Organisational Framework builds on conceptual and empirical work carried out between 2011 and 2016 in the OECD Governing Complex Education Systems project (GCES) and is progressively refined based on ongoing SEG work.

The GCES project highlighted the increasingly complex nature of the systems in which governance processes are embedded, analysed the implications of such complexity on the effectiveness of existing governance arrangements, and explored inroads to new modes of governance effective in complex systems (OECD, 2016[1]; Burns and Köster, 2016[2]).

The SEG Organisational Framework brings together the analytical lens of the complexity paradigm established in previous work – systems are interconnected, exhibiting properties unpredictable for constituent parts – with practical considerations to maximise the ability
to guide improvement efforts. It comprises six interrelated domains each identifying aspirational goals for effective governance:

- **Accountability.** The domain pertains to organising who renders an account to whom and for what an account is rendered, shaping incentives and disincentives for behaviour. Key areas for governance in complex systems pertain to enabling local discretion while limiting fragmentation, and promoting a culture of learning and improvement.

- **Capacity.** The domain pertains to ensuring decision-makers, organisations and systems have the adequate resources and competencies to fulfil their roles and tasks. Key areas pertain to ensuring capacity for policy making and implementation, and stimulating horizontal capacity building.

- **Knowledge governance.** Knowledge governance pertains to stimulating the production of relevant knowledge and promoting its use in decision-making. In complex systems, key areas pertain to promoting production of adequate and comprehensive evidence, mobilising produced evidence for convenient use, stimulating an evidence-use culture, and nurturing evidence-related capabilities.

- **Stakeholder involvement.** The domain pertains to helping involve stakeholders throughout the policy process in policymaking and practice of governance, in turn building support and increasing relevance and suitability of policy for stakeholders.

- **Strategic thinking.** The domain pertains to balancing short-term priorities with long-term perspectives in a context in which effective policy strategies emerge and evolve based on new information and system dynamics. Key areas of the domain pertain to creating, sharing and consolidating a system vision, adapting to changing contexts and new knowledge, and balancing urgencies/short-term priorities with the long-term system visions.

- **Whole-of-system perspective.** The domain pertains to adopting perspectives reaching beyond individual realms of responsibility to coordinate across decision-makers, governance levels and policies. Key areas in this domain pertain to overcoming system inertia, and developing synergies and moderating tensions within the system.

3. **Work strands**

The Strategic Education Governance work identifies concrete examples of effective governance processes and mobilises the collective knowledge on processes that support strategic education governance. To do so, the project carries out work along three main work strands.

3.1. **Research on innovative governance approaches**

The first strand provides periodic overviews of cutting-edge research informing the collective knowledge base on effective governance processes. This desk-based research aims to provide new evidence on priority areas, as identified by countries. The research is published with the OECD Education working papers series.
3.2. Policy toolkit

The second strand develops a policy toolkit that countries/systems can use to promote effective governance processes by focusing policy makers’ attention on the processes that underpin strategic education governance. The SEG project established an overarching methodology, initially applied to develop a survey instrument in the domain of “knowledge governance”. This methodology underpins developing instruments in the domains of “accountability” and in all other SEG domains, subject to continuity of this work in the 2021-22 CERI programme of work).

The survey instrument (questionnaire) in a given thematic domain (such as “Knowledge Governance”, “Accountability”) will underpin the offer of case studies, providing a common framework to analyse the state of play within a thematic domain. A case study includes discussing the context of a given education system for in-country dialogue as well as to provide other systems to reflect on which stakeholders to involve and how to collect, consolidate and report insights gained from a thematic questionnaire.

Continuing to develop the SEG policy toolkit as an (in-country) survey instrument, the SEG project offers countries the opportunity to benefit immediately from the thematic questionnaires as they become available by participating in the SEG questionnaire-led case studies.

Questionnaire-led case studies are carried out by the SEG team. Scope of the case study is set in close cooperation with a system’s education ministry. The main method of data collection are interviews with organisations conducted by the SEG team.

The information collected will be compiled and analysed. This will help further refine the instruments and will reveal new insights to governance processes in the light of an international, normative framework.

3.3. Learning Seminars

Outlined above, the six domains accountability, capacity, knowledge governance, stakeholder involvement, strategic thinking, and whole-of-system perspective provide the conceptual basis for strategic education governance – translating them into national, regional and local contexts, and for particular policies is not always obvious and calls for differentiation and contextualisation. The SEG Learning Seminars support countries to learn from each other on how to realise those elements in the everyday governance of specific policies. The SEG Learning Seminars create a space where country representatives can learn from exchanging and studying real life cases.

Learning Seminars bring together three to four countries/systems where participants learn about effective and/or innovative governance policy practice in other countries and context-specific obstacles and enablers, and identify governance options and possible trajectories (next practice) for future action. These seminars generate new knowledge of the actual “how to” of policy implementation or make tacit knowledge explicit, by deepening insight to the design and implications of implementation strategies.

They are designed to create an engaging learning environment inspired by both case methodology and policy design. The seminars are deliberately interactive, with participants actively engaging in discussion and explicit reflection. They comprise a small group of actors, involving key stakeholders from the host system.
4. Calendar of activities

In 2019-2020, the Strategic Education Governance work includes:

- Research on emerging challenges for strategic education governance as identified in work with countries.
- Building on exploratory work undertaken in 2018 to develop a survey instrument in the domain of “accountability”.
- Conducting in-depth case studies on the basis of the survey instrument developed in the “knowledge governance” domain (see Annex A, Section on Knowledge governance for more information on the theory of change underpinning this instrument).
- Engaging countries/systems with the piloting of (in-country) survey instrument (in “knowledge governance” developed in 2018 and – upon completion of ongoing survey instrument development – in “accountability”).
- Delivering Learning Seminars with individual countries on current governance challenges.
- Publishing an international report bringing together the key insights on processes that support strategic education governance.
References


Annex A. SEG Organisational Framework

Education systems are complex. While some OECD countries have a long tradition of providing local authorities and school leaders with sizeable autonomy in how they run their schools, others have only relatively recently made moves to decentralise control to respond more directly to citizens’ needs. This means that policy making takes place at different levels of the system.

At the same time, parents and other stakeholders in decision-making join those in charge of the system and relationships between stakeholders and decision-makers are increasingly dynamic and open to negotiation. The various actors, such as policy makers, parents, and teachers, can have varying perspectives on the system’s problems and how to solve them. Interpretations of the reality differ, and so do expectations and preferred solutions. Information is now more widely gathered than ever before, and while the growing availability of information allows new insights and approaches to shape education, it also prompts new demands.

Despite this complexity of today’s education systems, it is still ministries that remain responsible for ensuring high-quality and equitable education. The Strategic Education Governance (SEG) project seeks to support countries in this complex environment, helping authorities juggling the dynamism and complexity of today’s education systems at the same time as steering a clear course towards established goals.

This annex presents the organisational framework, which is normative in nature. The organisational framework benefitted from critical feedback from an advisory group comprising educational researchers, policy makers and professionals with expertise in governance indicator development.
The OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) project Governing Complex Education Systems (GCES) uncovered elements of effective governance to help countries meet modern education governance challenges. Two volumes synthesized the conceptual and empirical work undertaken (Burns and Köster, 2016[3]; Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016[4]). This body of work identified that effective governance systems 1) focus on effective processes, not on structures; 2) are flexible as well as adaptive to change and uncertainty; 3) build capacity, engage in open dialogue and involve stakeholders, 4) pursue a whole-of-system approach; and 5) integrate evidence, knowledge, and the use of data to improve policy making and implementation.

At the start of the GCES project countries had highlighted three traditional areas of governance that proved most challenging in complex education systems: accountability, capacity building and strategic vision and planning (OECD, 2016[1]). Applying the five elements of effective governance, Burns, Köster and Fuster (2016[4]) find that: well-designed accountability arrangements can both work towards system-wide alignment and provide room for local adaptiveness; capacity building is the prerequisite both for ensuring that stakeholders are productively involved in governance processes and that evidence and research is integrated by different stakeholders; and a strategic vision can help to strike a balance between following longer term priorities for the education system and responding to local demands and political urgencies.

Figure A A.1. SEG Organisational Framework

Based on these findings, the organisational framework for SEG includes domains of accountability, capacity and strategic thinking. Three additional domains are included:
knowledge governance, whole-of-system perspective and stakeholder involvement. The decision to include these reflects both theoretical considerations drawing from the five elements of effective governance and practical reasons, namely, to promote and support the measurement of progress in moving towards effective governance (UNICEF, 2012[5]; Mintzberg, 1994[6]; Colgan, Rochford and Burke, 2016[7]; Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016[4]).

Figure A A.1 presents the six domains and presents working key areas in each of the domains. The key areas were distilled from conceptual and empirical work of the GCES project and discussions with experts. They are outlined in the following sections (ordered alphabetically).

Accountability

Today’s education systems are characterised by decentralised responsibilities, reduced hierarchical control, a degree of fluidity in governance relationships, and a greater number of (non-state) governance actors; at the same time, much of the knowledge crucial for policy realisation is spread across actors and governance levels (Blanchenay and Burns, 2016[8]; Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016[4]). By organising who renders an account to whom and for what an account is rendered, accountability arrangements shape incentives and disincentives for actions, ranging from binding laws and regulations to softer incentive structures.

In the context of complex systems, accountability plays an important role as enabler of effective governance. Two key areas play an important role in this: Firstly, enabling local discretion while curbing fragmentation to combine contextual responsiveness with comparability and mutual learning, and secondly, promoting a sustained culture of learning and improvement to move beyond monitoring as tool for ensuring compliance but as genuine instrument to improve education. Stakeholder involvement in creating legitimate accountability arrangements, agency of stakeholders in rendering an account of their work and sustainability of accountability arrangements play an important role in this.

In a context of reduced hierarchical control and diverse local challenges and contexts, local discretion is a key mechanism to meet the challenges of complexity in education systems while limiting fragmentation is useful to improve learning from each other and pursuing common goals. Related to approaching policy from a whole-of-system perspective, accountability arrangements are an important instrument to support the organisation of pressures and demands across policies and levels of governance into a coherent whole. This includes aligning accountability demands with decision making-powers. Pursuing a coherent system of accountability demands across different actors, levels and policies contributes to policy effectiveness and resource efficiency.

Several elements are fundamental in enabling local discretion while limiting fragmentation. First, a legal framework allowing for accountability demands to be adapted to contexts; second, deliberation across stakeholders at the various levels of governance over which accountability demands should be common across the system and which should be adapted to context; and third, the involvement of local stakeholders in shaping accountability demands responsive to local context. That is, the engagement of different stakeholders at various points of policy development and implementation -- and at various levels of governance -- is instrumental in realising a balance between responding to local diversity on the one hand and ensuring the attainment of common goals and supporting knowledge exchange and comparability across the system on the other.
By providing incentives (of varying strength and formality, for example outside formal regulations) and by promoting identified elements of educational success, accountability arrangements can encourage and enable a culture of improvement and learning at sub-central levels. In the context of reduced hierarchical control and complexity, a culture of learning and improvement depends on promoting accountability arrangements that are considered legitimate and fair by a wide range of stakeholders (Pierre and Peters, 2005[9]). When stakeholders perceive accountability measures as legitimate and fair, trust and ownership increases and this promotes self-directed improvement of policy at sub-central governance levels.

A constructive accountability setup equally shapes agency in accountability processes (Elmore, 2004[10]) and provides means for managing and balancing risk to encourage practical risk-taking for improvement.

**Capacity**

A broad and critical domain, capacity comprises ensuring actors, organisations and systems have the adequate resources and competencies to fulfil specific roles and tasks. Resources pertain to financial and human resources, as well as time and material resources, such as technical equipment. In complex systems, responsibilities are decentralised and knowledge is distributed, both where it is produced and where it is required, across levels of governance and across stakeholders inside and outside the government administration, which creates specific challenges to ensuring capacity (Blanchenay and Burns, 2016[8]).

First, the spread of responsibilities and knowledge creates specific needs for capacities across the systems as adequate capacities are needed for policy implementation and evaluation, as well as for policy-making at sub-central levels. This particularly pertains to setting priorities, knowledge governance, integrating evidence and research in policy, policy design and adaptation, and strategic thinking.

Second, in complex systems, identifying capacity needs centrally is not feasible and, it follows, an exclusively vertical approach to capacity building is inefficient. Horizontal and collaborative approaches to building adequate capacity are more suitable to link to varying contexts and capacity legacies (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016[4]).

**Knowledge governance**

In today’s education systems, the number and diversity of stakeholders involved and the dynamic relationships among them requires particular attention to knowledge processes across the system as knowledge is spread both where it is produced and where it is used; producers and users of knowledge overlap, with some actors producing some knowledge and using other knowledge. This pertains to both a variety of sources as well as different types of knowledge.

In complex environments, decisions in professional and policy-making contexts draw on a wide range of knowledge and considerations. Following Hess and Ostrom (2007, p. 8[11]), “knowledge is assimilated information and the understanding of how to use it”. The broad definition includes all forms of knowledge explicit (recorded) and tacit, as well as knowledge outside the policy-making and professional contexts. This is pertinent as knowledge governance realistically neither could nor should govern all aspects of knowledge supply and demand.
A key motivation of effective knowledge governance is to strengthen the systematic use of evidence by decision makers, thus reducing the relative influence of inclinations, shortcuts and inaccuracies in decisions made. Evidence is defined as the product of any “systematic investigative process employed to increase or revise current knowledge” (Langer, Tripney and Gough, 2016, p. 11[12]), regardless by whom evidence was generated. Evidence includes formal research, as carried out for example by research institutions, government agencies or think-tanks; evidence gathered in education practice and in the practice of policy-making, implementation, and evaluation; and administrative and achievement data.

However, effective knowledge governance does not endorse evidence for certain decision-making situations or recommend the adoption of specific research-informed practices or approaches. Rather, it seeks to promote the systematic consideration of evidence during the decision-making process (Langer, Tripney and Gough, 2016, p. 39[12]), across the entire spectrum of evidence. This respects that decision makers need to decide on the appropriate evidence necessary to inform a given decision. Policy decisions are embedded in value-driven political context and may have no or multiple technically ‘best’ solutions (Newman and Head, 2017[13]). Relatedly, teachers’ day-to-day decisions in classrooms are governed by a vast amount of tacit knowledge in addition to systematically gathered evidence.

Research has identified three factors that can change decision makers’ behaviour and increase their systematic consideration of evidence in decision-making processes: the individual’s motivation, capability and opportunity to use evidence (Michie, van Stralen and West, 2011[14]). Based on empirically observed mechanisms (Langer, Tripney and Gough, 2016[12]), SEG identifies the following efforts that can promote evidence use in decision-making:

- **Skills**: Fostering the individual capability to access and make sense of evidence. This includes the skills required for locating, appraising, and synthesising evidence, as well as integrating it with other information and political needs (capability).

- **Availability**: Communicating evidence and providing decision-makers with convenient access to evidence. This is carried out within organisations as well across organisations, for example through setting up a data warehouse (opportunity and motivation).

- **Support processes**: Fostering the organisational processes and structures that provide the means for and reduce the barriers to evidence-use (opportunity and motivation).

- **Interaction**: Fostering the interaction between decision-makers and evidence-producers is intended to help build trusted relationships, encourage collaboration, and promote exposure to different social influence (motivation and capability).

- **Norms and standards**: Promoting evidence-use as a principle of good decision-making and building a shared understanding on what constitutes fit-for-purpose evidence (motivation).

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1 Evidence producer refers to anyone gathering data in a systematic way and as such is not confined to official research positions. Thus it may include, for example, practitioners carrying out systematic investigation into classroom practice.
These efforts to change behaviour take place at different levels – the individual decision maker, but also at his or her work place, interactions with external stakeholders/other organisations and the system level (Figure A A.2).

Knowledge governance relates to processes governing the production of knowledge, mobilising knowledge for different users and uses, shaping the flows of knowledge between actors, and promoting the use of knowledge (Fazekas and Burns, 2012[15]).

**Figure A A.2. Organisational levels at which efforts take effect**

Efforts take effect at different levels of organisation to strengthen individual decision-makers’ opportunity, motivation and capabilities to use evidence.

- **Level of the individual decision-maker**
  - Efforts affect decision-makers independent of the organisational context and decision-making arena they are in
  - For example: the skills to access and make sense of evidence

- **Immediate organisational environment**
  - Efforts affect the immediate organisational context of decision-makers
  - For example: efforts in the decision-maker’s work-place

- **Broader organisational environment**
  - Efforts shape how an organisation relates to its external stakeholders and other organisations
  - For example: an organisation communicating research-summaries to teachers

- **System level**
  - Efforts affect decision-makers’ behaviour beyond the boundaries of an individual organisation
  - For example: professional norms and standards.


Ensuring the supply of evidence, knowledge governance strives to guide the research enterprise itself to strengthen supply of varied, adequate and relevant evidence. This includes producing knowledge directly, for example through policy experimentation and piloting, and facilitating knowledge production, for example by shaping funding channels or otherwise incentivising researcher’s behaviour.

The objectives of knowledge governance – including both the demand and the supply side – can be summarised into four main points.

- Promoting production of adequate and comprehensive evidence;
- Mobilising produced evidence for convenient use;
- Stimulating an evidence-use culture;
- Nurturing evidence-related capabilities.

**Stakeholder involvement**

With less direct hierarchical control, decentralized decision-making, and dispersed knowledge, a focus on stakeholders across the policy process is vital for successful policy making in complex education systems.

First, integrating stakeholders’ knowledge and perspectives is central in adapting policies to local contexts, legacies and demands. This includes consultations and consequential integration of stakeholders in the policy process, from defining priorities and policy co-creation to governance processes concerning implementation and evaluation. This way, governance can capitalise on increased feedback flows from different kinds of information and knowledge, thus building capacity and strengthening accountability.

Second, engaging stakeholders can foster sustainable change by promoting ownership, trust, and mobilising legitimacy for policy reform. Mobilising support and shared responsibility for policy design and realisation relies on open and consequential dialogue about concerns, purpose and approaches related to a given policy. In turn, mobilising trust, legitimacy and promoting ownership is a vital precursor for strategic thinking.

**Strategic thinking**

Complexity theory posits that complex systems are characterised by emergent properties which cannot be anticipated by analysing a system’s constituent parts (Mason, 2016[16]; Snyder, 2013[17]). Due to system complexity with changing internal and external dynamics, effective policy strategies cannot always be defined in advance but emerge and evolve as new knowledge develops. Strategic thinking pertains to balancing short-term priorities with long-term perspectives, and organisations balancing their respective current core activities with changing external pressures and requests.

This balancing takes place at all levels of governance. The ongoing process of strategic thinking aims to adapt strategies as new developments are anticipated and emerge, together with stakeholders, continuously assessing and if necessary adjusting long-term goals, while at the same time staying true to a long-term vision over time. Since strategic thinking is not reserved only for the central level, strategic thinking at the system level also entails strengthening the capacity for developing long-term strategies and vision at all levels of the system.

First, linking to a whole-of-system approach, stakeholder focus and knowledge governance, strategic thinking works to build, deliberate and consolidate long-term strategy and vision for the education system. Such vision does not only contain long-term goals, but also includes the principles regarding how to reach those goals, based on a coherent theory of change. Both goals and key principles are underpinned by knowledge from a broad range of sources. Strategic thinking processes actively seek to incorporate various perspectives of stakeholders across the system; adapting strategy and vision as new information and knowledge emerges.

Second, strategic thinking pertains to integrating new knowledge and adapting policy and practice to emerging developments and events at any level of the system. The synthesis of
information and knowledge in strategic thinking helps to make informed decisions, find better strategies, and challenging existing mind-sets (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016[4]).

Third, strategic thinking contributes to balancing a need to respond to urgent priorities and short-term goals with the long term strategy of organisations at all levels of the system. Relying on a long-term vision, strategic thinking is able to counterbalance to public and political pressures.

Whole-of-system perspective

In complex systems the relationships between constituent parts shape the functioning of the system as a whole so that isolated interventions may prompt adverse effects elsewhere in the system; synergies between various parts of the system may not be realised; and fragmentation of policy approaches can produce inefficiencies (Colgan, Rochford and Burke, 2016[7]). Coordination and alignment across actors, governance levels and policies hence requires a perspective reaching beyond individual realms of decision-making and accountability. A whole-of-system perspective can pertain to the education system as a whole, as well as to reasonably self-contained systems such as schools, school districts, municipalities and regions (Blanchenay and Burns, 2016[8]).

First, the manifold links between elements are a source of inertia to change in complex systems, making coordinated efforts necessary to achieve sufficient mass (interventions at multiple points) to overcome system inertia (Mason, 2016[16]).

Second, maintaining a whole-of-system perspective can help align policies, stakeholders' roles and responsibilities across the system. This can increase the effectiveness and efficiency of policy approaches and help moderating tensions between priorities – e.g. risk-avoidance and innovation, consensus building and making difficult choices – and identifying and developing synergies between elements (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016[4]). Additionally, communicating the successes of a whole-of-system perspective can help establish legitimacy and mobilise stakeholder support for collaborative approaches (Colgan, Rochford and Burke, 2016[7]).