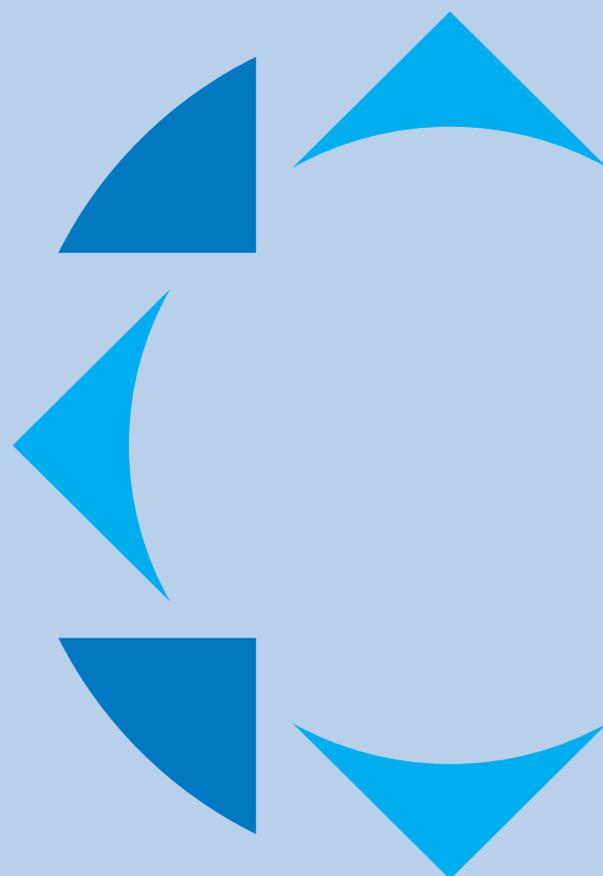


Peer Review and Policy Learning

Summary report from the 25 May 2018

Experts Meeting on Peer Review and Policy Learning





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Introduction

This report provides a short overview of the discussions that took place among a group of experts on peer review and policy learning at a meeting organised by GENE in Paris in May 2018. The group comprised representatives from GENE, the OECD, UNESCO, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France and the University of Copenhagen, along with an external facilitator. The key areas for discussion were policy, peer review and policy change and in the context of Global Education and development co-operation.

Policy change and policy learning

Among the participants at the meeting were Dr. Lucie Cerna (OECD, DG Education) and Professor Peter Nedergaard (University of Copenhagen), both of whom have written extensively on policy change and policy learning. Their respective work has inspired GENE since the network's inception. At the outset of the meeting, they shared some perspectives and insights from their research and professional experience of policy learning in international committees.

Lucie Cerna

Some of the key points from Dr Cerna's presentation were:

- There are not many theoretical perspectives on policy change; therefore, the OECD decided to look at this in more detail, starting by looking at ten theories of policy change and how they could be applied to educational work.
- One size does not fit all – policies that work in one country do not necessarily work in another country and the context within the country is an important factor. The key question is "What works under what circumstances?"
- Factors which support policy change are: coherence, stability in the system, training, stakeholder engagement and trust.
- There are different types of transformation (intended, unintended, gradual or radical) that can result from policy change.

- Reform, as gradual transformation, can take between 10-15 years to produce change, and for policymakers, this is a long time. The time it takes for policy change to manifest may be mistaken for a lack of policy change, and that may in turn result in policy makers deciding to implement a new policy, without waiting for the results of previous ones.
- The Centre of Education Research of Innovation within OECD is looking at innovation and positive change, where innovation is considered as a step beyond change and reform.
- Policy learning is about policy change through learning from others and learning together, which can be difficult both to operationalise and to measure.
- Policy diffusion is when innovation or policies spread from one government to another. There are two prominent versions of this. First: the adopter, when a government implements a policy change, which works, and another government analyses this reform and decides to implement it as well. The second type is the imitator, which is when a government copies what another government has done, but it often does not work because the different context (systems and actors).
- Policy implementation is usually top/down, but in some cases bottom/up approaches are used. There could be a combined multi-level approach, where different actors are involved at different levels.

Peter Nedergaard

The key points from Professor Nedergaard's presentation were:

- Contextualisation is important, but it is important not to contextualise too much, because the more we contextualise, the more difficult it becomes to compare.
- Change is a philosophical, yet practical thing. How do we measure it?
- Policy learning is learning to enable change to take place.
- Occasionally individuals hear an idea that they like, and sometimes they appropriate it and feel that it is their idea. However, ideas that lead to change usually reside in the collective; the learning is about what is going on in the exchange between people.
- Language change can be a key part of policy learning. Not all policy learning leads to change, but in order for there to be policy change, there needs to be a change of language.
- Sometimes, member countries only discuss the positive and do not focus on the negative aspects, or failures, which means that important learning gets lost.
- Much learning happens in smaller committees, where informality, openness and trust prevail.

Discussion on peer reviews and policy learning

Learning spaces

Peer learning and peer reviews can create safe learning environments and the right conditions for policy learning, where people can reflect openly about their practice. An atmosphere of trust also enables policy makers and civil servants to both try things that work as well as piloting innovations that may not be possible to do in a more formal setting.

Language matters

The power and significance of language was discussed in the context of policy change. Through the crafting of language, a deeper understanding can emerge. Within a small policy group, it is easier to achieve this and to share the same signifiers. With the semantics clear, the understanding through language can be built together. It is possible to observe policy change through the lens of language change.

Informal spaces

Several participants noted that the informal interaction that happens during coffee breaks, lunches and receptions at international and national events offer an important sharing opportunity, often on par with the formal programme. However, that inspiration and peer learning then need to go beyond the initial chat and exchange and back into the respective national context in order to achieve policy learning and ultimately, change. This may also require personal transformation and change, before the national and institutional contexts come into play – the processes are not necessarily linear.

Interactive methods

Participants discussed the conditions that they experience as conducive to learning during work in international networks and at committee meetings and conferences. There was one suggestion that entailed combining structured workshops for policymakers and punctuating that activity with moments of physical engagement. The increase in energy that results from this change can create more enthusiasm, and a climate of trust and support dealing with difficult issues.

Learning among international peers

Both the OECD and GENE had observed that the international peers that take part in reviews of development co-operation programmes and Global Education respectively often learn as much as the actors in the country being reviewed. There is a strong aspect of professional development and new horizons and insights on the part of international peers.

Benefiting from the momentum of a peer review

While peer reviews and peer learning processes often create a strong political momentum around a set of policies, there is a risk that much of the learning and improvements that could be achieved in the aftermath of a review will be lost, unless the country actively pursues them. Sometimes, the actors at national level are able to do this independently, and sometimes there is a need for further involvement from the reviewing organisation (e.g. the OECD offers interim reviews in-between its full reviews). This may be particularly relevant in countries where high-level political interest in the peer review policy area is low, or where staff turnover or other such factors may mean that the energy from the process may fizzle out.

Challenges and opportunities

Political context and time

- The long-term perspective of some policy learning and change does not fit with many of the urgent issues that governments are dealing with.
- In peer learning and review, we deal with many actors and contexts (national, local, sectoral etc.), each one with a specific cycle, decision-making mechanism as well as short and long term objectives. A key question revolves around how we work these actors and contexts to build involvement and move in a common direction.
- Political pressures and a more hostile context in terms of attitudes toward development co-operation, solidarity and social justice mean that much of the work that has previously been possible, may no longer be prioritised or funded by governments.

Reporting fatigue

- The OECD and UNESCO rely on countries to self-report on the key issues that they are monitoring or reviewing. With so many international regimes that require the submission of national reports, there is a sense of 'reporting fatigue' among quite a few countries, particularly where there are less resources or personnel.
- GENE employs a national researcher to create the initial country briefing before the peer review team visit, which means that the country being reviewed does not need to do any self-reporting.

The review element

How do we balance assessment and review with affirming what works and how others might learn from it? And how can self-reporting be made more reliable in terms of accuracy and completeness? Different peer reviews take very different stances on this, often related to whether the review is mandatory or voluntary and how strong the review element is.

Communicating results

Communicating results and generally making key messages interesting and relevant to broader audiences is of interest to many organisations. Could organisations learn from each other and from use of interesting technology or software? In the age of innovation and prevalence of mobile apps, peer review secretariats may need to consider new options for communicating more effectively, including an analysis of what audiences to communicate with and adapting messages and methods accordingly.

Learning together

How do we avoid imitation and policy copying, and move towards successful policy learning that improves outcomes? Some clues for how this could be done have already been revealed through practice and research – could we go deeper? Could we look at how the ministries and agencies participating in GENE learn together?

Secretariat learning

Could we imagine a scenario where representatives from peer review secretariats could more actively learn from each other? Mutual coaching? Participation in each other's reviews? Exchange of ideas on areas of overlap and how these may be approached?

A continuum of policy learning?

During the Paris meeting conversations, a continuum of policy learning began to emerge. Can we elaborate and build this further?

Participants

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This is a GENE report from a meeting on peer learning and policy change that took place in Paris on May 25, 2018. The meeting was organised to bring together representatives from international peer review secretariats, as well as experts from the academic community in order to reflect, discuss and learn together.

GENE – Global Education Network Europe is the network of Ministries, Agencies and other bodies with national responsibility for Global Education in Europe. GENE supports networking, peer learning, policy research, national strategy development and quality enhancement in the field of Global Education in European countries. GENE works towards the day when all people in Europe – in solidarity with people globally – will have access to quality Global Education.

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