

How international organizations frame the work of evaluation agencies?

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Contexts of empirical research

- Brazil
- European Union
- Finland
- Germany
- Japan
- Malta
- Nordic countries
- Portugal
- Post-socialistic countries
- Russia
- Sweden
- United Kingdom
- Vietnam
- GINTL-project contexts

Foci

- Comparative education
- Education policy & politics
- Quality in education, evaluation
- Knowledge production and use
- General school education and higher education, vocational education policy

Presentation today

Trends in evaluation

Presentation of two relevant projects (extra: data & methods)

Reflecting the role of international organisations with multiple streams framework

Concluding thoughts and discussion

Starting points

Evaluation is ritualistic and unavoidable (Peter Dahler-Larsen 2012; 2019)

Societies and education are conditioned by PISA (Waldow & Steiner-Khamsi 2019) and evidence-based policy (Barber & Ozga 2014)

International organisations (and somewhat the QA agencies (Segerholm et al. 2019)) have been able to take the new space for expertise (Kauko et al. 2018)

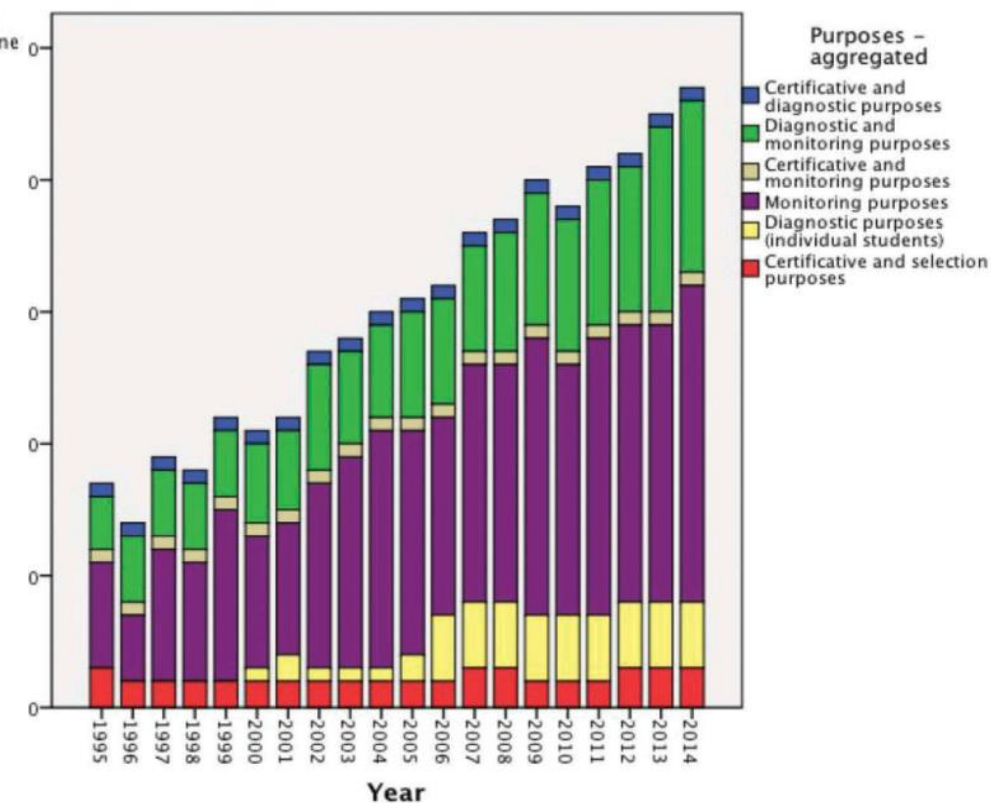
Trends in evaluation

Steering with evaluation (Verger et al. 2019)

- Data: Systematic review
- Increased steering functions with evaluation
- Focus on schools and education systems
- Census gained ground instead of sample-based tests
- Numeracy and literacy emphasiss



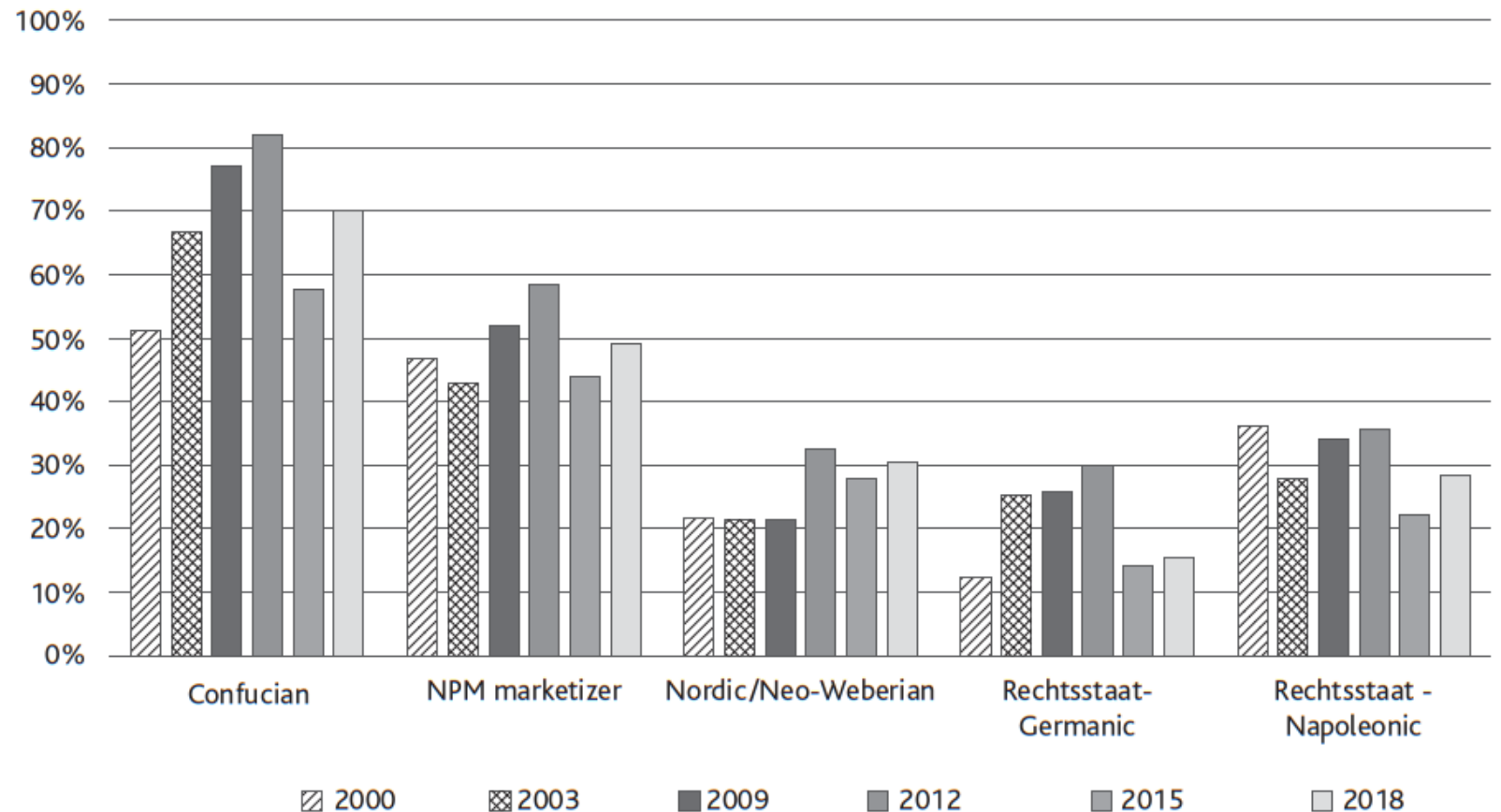
(ISCED 1)






































Differences in administrative regimes (Verger et al. 2024)

- Data: PISA questionnaires for principals
- Nordic: Norway, Denmark & Sweden
- Regime-specific trends rather than global convergence

Figure 2.2a: Percentage of schools reporting "standardized tests are used to make judgments about teachers' effectiveness"



Evaluation regimes in the Nordic countries (Dovemark et al. 2018)

					
Decentralisation					
School inspections					
Standardised tests for whole age groups					
Primarily public education provision					
Active school choice policy					
Active school choice policy in large cities					

A global counter-current? (Sahlberg 2016; Simola et al. 2013)

Presentation of two projects

EU and European processes have increased EU influence especially in higher education in a piecemeal fashion

- Bologna process / EHEA (e.g. Vukasovic 2017),
- Open Method of Coordination (e.g. Lawn & Grek 2012),
- European Semester (Eeva 2021),
- European University Initiative (e.g. Kanninen & Pekkola 2023).

The OECD has become inevitable in making education policy

- "Global education governing complex" with post-WW2 human-resources-driven capitalism and instrumentalist view on education (Ydesen 2019)

Projects discussed today



Research Council of Finland

Transnational Knowledge Networks
in Higher Education Policymaking
(KNETS), 2021–2025



The Research
Council of Norway

Policy Knowledge and Lesson
Drawing in Nordic School Reform in
an Era of International Comparison
(POLNET), 2018–2023

Transnational Knowledge Networks in Higher Education Policymaking (KNETS), 2021–2025



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Policy Knowledge and Lesson Drawing in Nordic School Reform in an Era of International Comparison (POLNET), 2018–2023, Norwegian Research Council

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Data and methods

Analysed POLNET reforms

Table 3.1 List of reforms by country

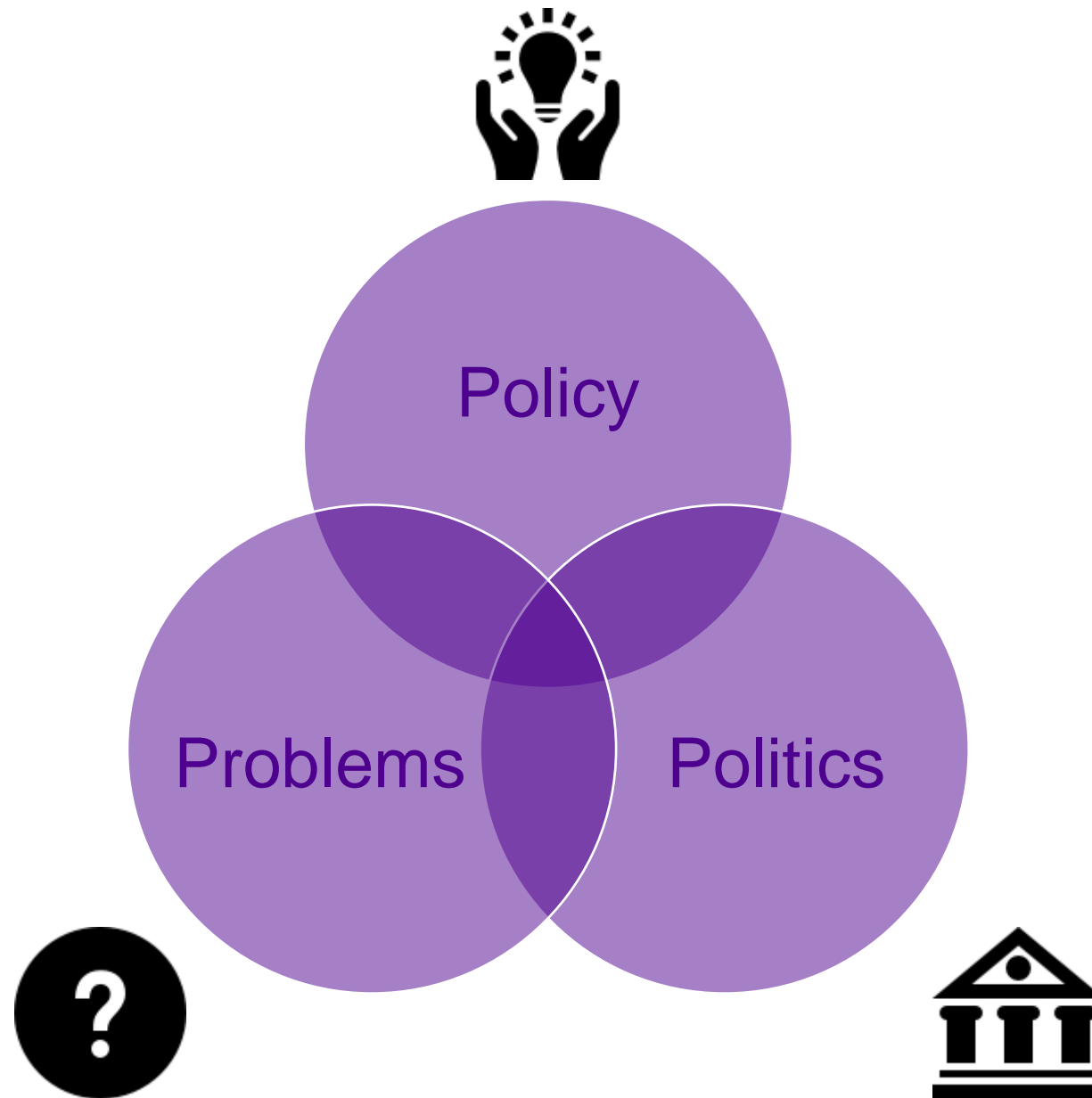
Country	Years	Title
Denmark	2013	The Public School Reform
Finland	2014	National Core Curriculum for Basic Education
Iceland	2014/2018	Renewal of the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools with Subjects Areas
Norway	2016/2020	Renewal of the Knowledge Promotion Reform
Sweden	2015/2018	A Gathering for School—National Strategy for Knowledge and Equivalence

Bibliometric analysis, social network analysis, interviews, document analysis

KNETS project data

Database / dataset	Size	Analysis
Ministry of Education and Culture database (2010–2021)	179 higher education working groups with group and membership information	Social network analysis (SNA)
Finland–EU organisation database 2022	149 organisations or groups with 702 organisational members	Network ethnography, SNA
Policymaker interviews in Finland and Brussels	15 politicians, 15 stakeholders, 15 officials	Content analysis, discourse analysis, descriptive coding
Observation dataset 2021–2022	Committee on Culture and Education (30 h); EU30 subcommittee (11.5 h); EU29 subcommittee (4,5 h)	Content analysis, discourse analysis

Problems, policies, and politics (Multiple streams)



Policy documents draw mainly on self-referential material (Baek et al. 2022)

Table 9.3 Distribution of references by location

Country	Domestic	Regional	International
Denmark	60.17%	3.46%	36.36%
Finland	76.04%	1.63%	22.34%
Iceland	75.00%	2.08%	22.92%
Norway	66.83%	7.09%	26.08%
Sweden	79.80%	1.27%	18.93%
Total	71.94%	4.24%	23.82%

Note: $\chi^2 = 149.36$, $p < 0.001$

- Data: references in the preparatory major reforms of each country
- However, "Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden ... highlighted global education policies promoted by the OECD, such as competency-based education, twenty-first century skills, and accountability reforms" (Baek et al. 2022, p. 270)

EU and OECD have more weight than other sources (Forsell & Kauko forthcoming 2026)

- OECD and EU institutions rarely questioned as sources of information, respected especially by officials
- Different stakeholders seen more easily as interest-driven

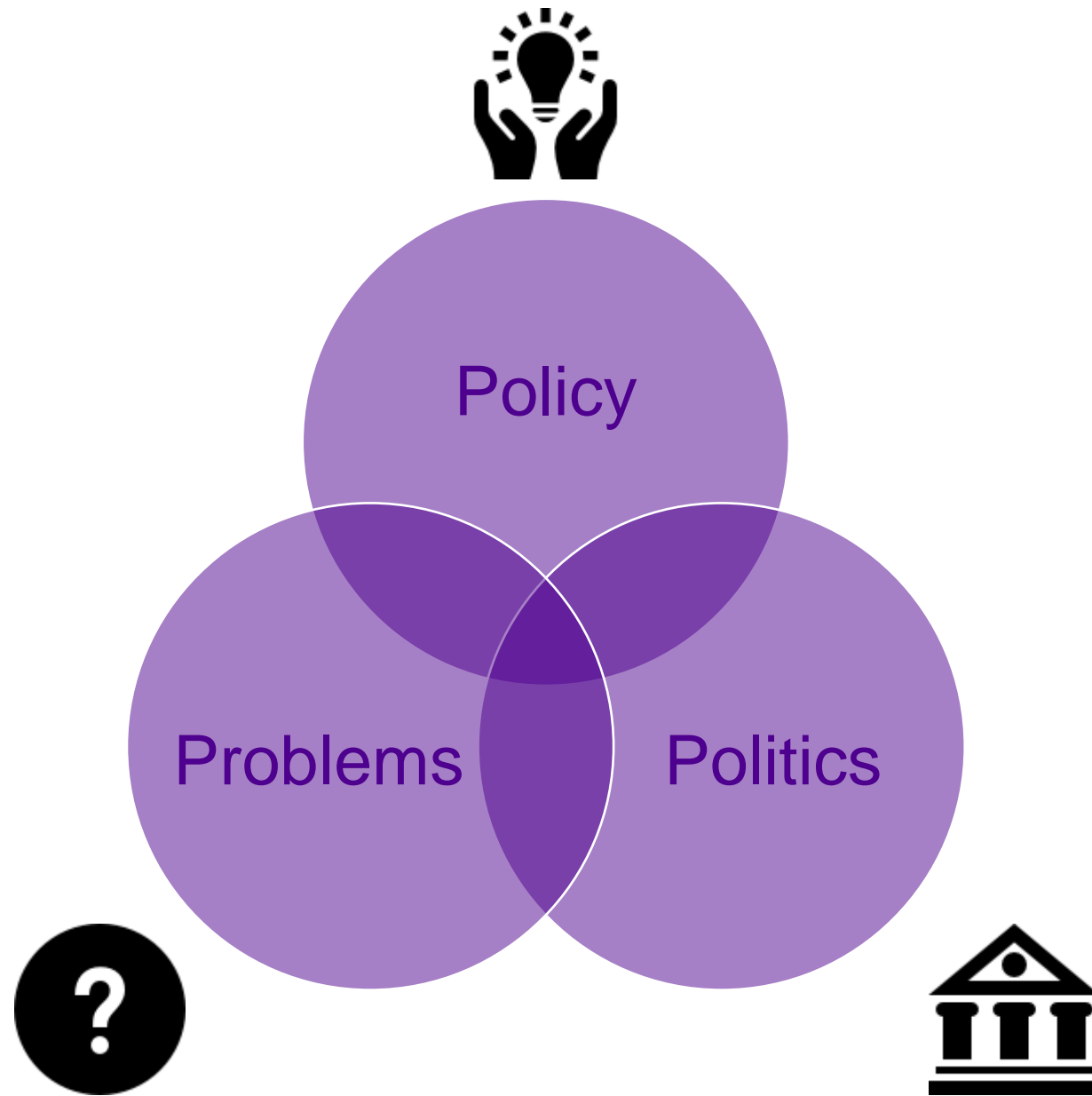
International sources of information ... they're terribly useful, they're absolutely essential for our own system's development. That's what we get from both the EU and perhaps above all from the OECD. ... They're terribly important for our system's development, and they really are one of the things that can show where we're going. A good example is the discussion at the education level – in my opinion that should be talked about even more because our relative ranking has been sinking for a long time.

(Official)

National and Nordic emphasis (Volmari et al. 2022b)

As you look to these countries, then one sees a certain underlying OECD influence. Some may think that this is a hard line coming from above, but that is not correct. These are influences formed in unison by the participating countries, and I think this has normally been so. I think there are both indirect and direct influences from there. You attend twice a year with representatives from all the countries. There is a special Nordic meeting, always a preparatory meeting before the OECD meeting, where you discuss with your Nordic colleagues. (Civil servant, Iceland)

Well, that transnational governance, there is of course this point of view related to it, that the OECD produces different kinds of data. That there is real data that can be analyzed nationally and base the decisions on, to use it as basis for decision. But then there are also these country reports that the OECD countries can order, so this kind of commissioned research. And it is of course so, and we have examples of this as well in our state governance, that if not directly that, that they stem from the own interests of the country in question. That one decides on a political measure, and then one orders the country report from the OECD, where then international evaluators become involved. And before these reports are published, the countries and the OECD do discuss them. So I think this idea of transnational governance is just one angle, namely this when one uses these country reports. But here one comes to what I said before, the blanks in evaluating research, that one legitimizes one's own views with some material produced by an international actor. (Working group member, Finland)



OECD building legitimacy for national agenda and politicising

PISA offers a projection surface (Waldow 2009) and is an "obligatory point of passage" (Carvalho & Costa 2014)

- PISA press releases were aligned with government programme, not the results (Seppänen et al. 2019)

Country reviews have preceded major education reforms (Rinne, Kallio & Hokka 2004; Kallio 2009; Kauko & Diogo 2009)

Discursive changes and framing (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi & Taylor 2001; Rinne & Simola 2015)

Quiet work: education questions 'depoliticised' in the EU organs

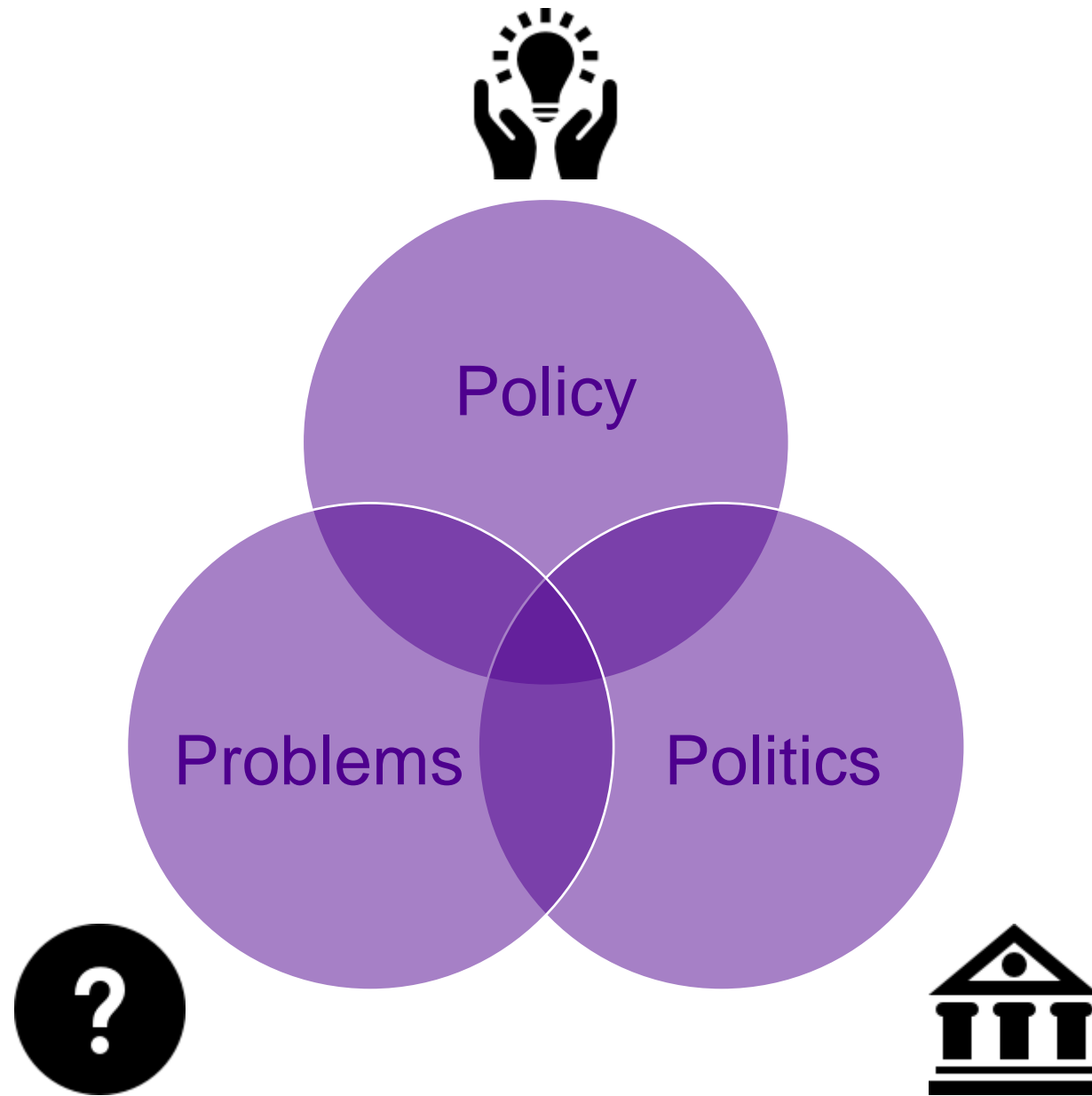
Fluid, credibility-based network (Kauko & Eeva forthcoming 2026)

- Builds trust through informal networks
- Crosses sectoral and state borderlines and they also extend

E.g. CULT committee boosting a depoliticizing narrative of "greater good" (Eeva et al. forthcoming 2026)

Eeva & Kauko (forthcoming 2026)

In my experience the content of [European] education policy in domestic decision making seldom creates any debates or political passion inside the government. I think you can see the lack of [legal] competence directly here. ... [T]here's seldom any content that causes internal discussions in the government. (Politician)



Politics: episteme of the world

OECD as an epistemic community (Kallo 2009)

OECD was the most significant knowledge producer in studied Nordic reforms (Karseth & Sivesind 2022)

It was also at the top of knowledge hierarchies in the Finland-EU higher education network (Forsell & Kauko forthcoming 2026)

Bibliometric analysis of reforms (Ydesen, Kauko & Magnúsdóttir 2022)

Rank	Denmark: School reform	Finland: Curriculum reform	Iceland: School vision
1	Ministry of Education	Finnish National Agency for Education	Ministry of Education, Science and Culture
2	Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA)	Ministry of Education and Culture	Statistics Iceland
3	Danish National Centre for Social Research (SFI)	University of Jyväskylä	OECD
4	OECD	University of Helsinki	Icelandic association of local authorities
5	SAGE publications	Taylor & Francis	Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs
6	Aarhus University	PS publishing	University of Iceland
7	Government	OECD	..

Danish PISA

Finnish PISA

Icelandic PISA

Concluding thoughts

Conclusion

Policy

- In education policy-formulation takes place close to national and Nordic context, but in international networks
- How to match policies with problems?

Problems

- Classical arena for evaluation, creeping influence from international actors
- With the risk of oversimplification: OECD attempts to dominate the agenda, EU the processes

Politics

- Networks support a limited view on what is knowledge-production
- A great time to be in the evaluation business, huh?

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