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Panel 20: Comparing Policy Advisory Systems

Advisory bodies as boundary organizations –Evidence from a European comparative study of education councils

Abstract

In this paper we discuss national and regional advisory bodies in the field of education policy. We draw our empirical data from recent comparative research on education councils in Europe (Brans, Van Damme, & Gaskell, 2010; Van Damme, Brans, & Fobé, 2011). In all, 15 education councils were analysed, of which six in depth. In this paper we discuss the institutional set-up of these six councils (membership, legal status, social status, level of autonomy, etc.). Next we discuss council performance and look at the impact of specific aspects of the institutional arrangement on performance. The research findings suggest that institutional features such as membership and legal and social status are important for achieving good outcomes.

Introduction

Internationally, there appears to be a development towards more and more diverse mechanisms of public consultation and participation in the policy making process (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007; Hendriks, 2010). In parallel, there has been a development towards a broadening of sources of policy advice, with an expanding involvement of actors from both within and beyond the governmental system. Not only academic experts and big interests are being consulted, but also individual citizens, specific target groups, etc. Next to more institutionalised (semi-)permanent advisory bodies also ad hoc structures are being set up, delivering policy advice, requested or not. Advice has accordingly become more competitive and contested (Halligan, 1995; Van Damme et al., 2011). In such an environment we can see that institutionalized advisory bodies develop specific strategies to maintain or intensify their role in the policy making process (Van Damme et al., 2011).

In this paper we look at education councils in Europe as an example of institutionalized advisory bodies. Such councils operate at the crossroads of the different challenges to the policy making process, pressured by the need to contribute to evidence based policy development, by the need to assist in building societal support, and by the need to deliver advice that does not infringe too much upon the discretion of political actors to make the ultimate policy decision. Therefore, advisory bodies typically operate between the worlds of science, society and state. The specific make-up of an advisory body is, however, strongly dependent on a country's dominant political traditions.

We draw our empirical data from recent comparative research on advisory bodies on education policy (education councils) in Europe (Brans et al., 2010; Van Damme et al., 2011). In all, 15 education councils were analysed, of which six in depth. In this paper we will first illustrate the research design and offer a brief introduction of the six education councils studied in depth. This will allow us to contextualize the councils as they are typically a product of a specific political culture and system. Then we illustrate in more detail the institutional set-up of the education councils (membership, legal status, social status, level of autonomy, etc.). Next we discuss council performance, looking specifically at policy impact. Subsequently we discuss the impact of specific aspects of the institutional arrangement on council performance. The research findings suggest that institutional features such as membership and legal and social status are important for achieving good outcomes. We finish the paper with some avenues for further research as we have only begun to explore the organisation and performance of policy advisory bodies.

Research design

In a recent European comparative research project, national and regional advisory bodies in the field of education policy were analysed (Brans et al., 2010). This project was initiated by EUNEC, the European Network of Education Councils and funded via the Jean Monnet funding by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). The main part of the research was descriptive. Organisational aspects such as council membership, legal and social status, level of autonomy and funding were analysed. In addition, the contribution of education councils to the policy making process and the way in which these councils deal with current societal developments, such as policy advice competition, was studied. We also looked into the step by step process of advice production, looking at such elements as agenda setting, advice formulation, advice distribution and dissemination. The explanatory component of our research began to explore the possible influence of institutional aspects on the outcome of the advisory process. In order to do this, different components of this outcome were identified, such as the innovativeness of the advice, policy impact, participant learning and conflict resolution.

In the study, a mix of data collection and research methods was used. The study consisted of three stages. The first stage, the literature review, was oriented towards developing theoretical insights and a conceptual framework starting from concepts and research protocols in the policy advice literature. Some research has been done e.g. on the use of scientific policy advice (Webber, 1992; Peters & Barker, 1993; Jasanoff, 1994; Oh & Rich, 1996; Mac Rae & Whittington, 1997; Brans et al., 2004; Florence et al., 2005). Other relevant streams of literature contributed to the conceptual framework, including network theory and democratic theory (Barber 1984; Fischer 1993; Kickert et al. 1997; Chambers 2003). Different concepts were translated into an analytical research framework. Additionally, dimensions along which to compare different education councils were developed. In the second stage we analysed a broad range of European education councils, based on specialist databases such as the European Commission's Eurydice network¹ and UNESCO's International Bureau of Education². This information was supported by online information from the relevant councils and by questionnaires. As a result of this analysis 15 council fact sheets were developed containing basic descriptive information. The third stage of the research focused on six in-depth council case studies. The Greek, Spanish, Flemish, Dutch, Portuguese, and Estonian council were analysed via further document analysis and thirty-four in-depth interviews (with council members, staff members and government officials).

¹ The database can be consulted at http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index_en.php

² The database can be consulted at <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en.html>

Institutional arrangements: introducing and contextualising the education councils

In this section we introduce and illustrate the institutional set-up of the six councils that were studied in depth. We discuss administrative support, legal and social status, principals, membership, scope and discretion (autonomy). However, before discussing these aspects in detail, we briefly introduce and contextualize the six councils.

The **Portuguese council** (Conselho Nacional de Educação) has a long history, and currently consists of 68 members. The council was founded in 1982 as a product of Portugal's post-dictatorship period, which sought to incorporate increasing levels of public participation within Portuguese decision making. After the dictatorship ended, it was accepted that major education reform was required although there was disagreement on the form such reforms would need to take. An educational advisory council would be able to provide both the expertise and legitimacy to the reforms. Most council members represent specific groups and interests. The Portuguese council has stakeholders such as trade unions, employers' organisations, parents' and students' associations forming the core of its membership. However, there are also some academic experts present. Another interesting feature is that government representatives are included within the council, from both the national and regional level.

The **Dutch council** (Nederlandse Onderwijsraad) was established in 1919. The council used to be based upon both the socio-economic neo-corporatism prevalent in the country at the time, as well as on the denominational pillarisation which was a feature of Dutch politics. The original membership stood at over 80 with a division into chambers depending upon the educational sector being discussed. This changed in the 1990s when corporatist structures fell from favour with the government of the day. In 1997 the Dutch education council, which had been through many minor reforms over its relatively long life, went through a major change. The council went from a large body of members from social interest groups, to a small body of academic and technical experts. With the actual council only being made up of 12 members, there are no civil society or interest group representatives present. All members are nominated by the government and appointed by the Crown, including the council President. Six are selected for their academic expertise and six for their technical expertise.

The **Flemish council** (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad) was established in 1990 as an attempt to amalgamate the varied advisory bodies in the field of education that existed at the time. It was also set up at a time when education was regionalised and became a competence of the Flemish

Community. The council was also meant to take up roles of pacification and mediation between the different educational partners in a society where education was a highly divisive issue. The Flemish council is divided into multiple chambers. Next to the General council, there are four councils dealing with the different levels of education. The General council is made up of 39 members coming from the umbrella-organizations of educational organizers, heads of institutions of higher education, teachers' unions, educational users (parents and students), etc. Government representatives do not play an active role in the discussions and mainly act as observers, sometimes providing information from the government's perspective.

The establishment of the **Estonian council** (Eesti Haridusfoorum) was a direct product of the instability within Estonia in the post-communist period. Rapid social change was combined with governmental instability leading to policy stagnation in many areas as government failed to keep pace with social development. The teachers' movement stepped into the stagnating policy field to assist the government with education reform. As time passed, the teachers' movement called for the greater involvement of different stakeholders in education, and in 1995 the Estonian Education Forum was formed. During this early period the council's weight was considerable. However, for a young democracy, the existence of an independent participatory structure, operating in parallel with the official government structures, was seen as a threat to the Parliament's representative sovereignty. Thus, in 1999, after criticism from the Estonian Parliament, the Estonian Education Forum chose to reform itself. The council expanded the participatory structure and chose to refocus its advice to long-term strategic advice. Theoretically, the membership of the main body of the council is unlimited, open to individuals as well as representatives. The council has very flexible membership regulations and a rather organic structure.

The **Greek council** (Ethniko Symvoulio Paideias) has been around for about 30 years, with the earliest precursor of the current council dating back to 1982. It has had a chequered past, though, never able to isolate itself from the turbulence of Greek politics. The dictatorship led directly to the undermining of the capacity of the Greek state, which consequently lead to a relatively weak policy-making infrastructure. The Greek education council developed as a support structure to the policy-making capacity of the state. The membership of the council is wide, including representatives from ministries, various professional groups, university rectors, political parties, the Orthodox Church, students' and parents' organisations, etc.

The **Spanish council** (Consejo Escolar del Estado) is a large council with a strong representation-based membership structure and an active presence of government actors. The council was founded

in 1985, during the period of post-Franco democratization, and has a current membership of 105. The largest group in the plenary consist of educational stakeholders, such as teachers', parents' and pupils' representatives. Regional and local government representatives are present as well, with membership extending to all 17 presidents of the school councils of the autonomous communities and 4 representatives of local authorities. Also the traditional mandates of socio-economic interests are present and equally divided between trade union and employers' organisations. There is also quite a large but diverse group in the council that consists of 12 individuals of recognised prestige in the fields of education and pedagogical reform, as well as of religious and secular institutions that have traditionally been engaged in the education field. Additionally, there is the direct membership of 8 representatives from the administration of the Education ministry, directly appointed by the minister. As political advisers they function within the council as advocates of the minister. The council has gradually become more inclusive, as it is now also incorporating representatives of women's organisations and organisations representing people with disabilities.

Analysis of the institutional set-up of education councils

In the study we have looked into the institutional set-up of the different education councils. More specifically, we have analysed the administrative support, legal and social status, membership, principals, role and discretion (or autonomy) of the councils. From the literature, we expect such elements to have an impact on council performance. An institutional characteristic such as membership, for example, can be expected to play a role in achieving good outcomes. Possibly, a highly diverse council is able to bring together different perspectives and generate more innovative policy ideas (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Li & Hambrick, 2005). On the other hand, a more homogenous group might be faster in delivering its advice. When the council consists of mandated representatives of organisations, a different kind of advisory process might develop than when members are simply speaking for themselves and out of their own expertise (Li et al., 2005; Schruijer & Vansina, 2007). We can also expect advice production to take a longer time, as representatives have to consult their own organisations, at least to some extent. Possibly, the advice carries more weight when it is coming from a group that can be labelled as representative. However, this might also depend on the national or regional context, i.e. the weight that is ascribed to representativeness.

In this section we first introduce the framework used to study and score the different institutional characteristics. Subsequently we present the research findings regarding the institutional set-up of

the councils studied. Scores are based on document analysis and interviews (council members, staff members and government representatives).

We have scored the legal and social status, as well as the general administrative support structure of the council. Legal status can be understood as the level in which a council is legally entrenched or embedded into the policy making system. The indicators we have identified are: official government recognition of the council as an advisory body, independence of budget, legal requirements for consultation of the council and legal requirement for government feedback on the advice the council delivers. Social status, is an attempt to capture the social standing of the council. We place a value upon the social status of the members themselves, and the council president in particular as this person often has a pivotal function both inside and outside the council. The two main sections of the administrative support structure are the budgetary support the council receives and the number of permanent staff. The first is however evaluative, and its value dependent upon the interviewees' opinion on the topic. The second provides the number of staff (FTE) working for the council.

Next, we have considered the number of principals or ‘masters’ a council acts as an agent of. We have specifically looked into the number of principals the council reports to. We expect advisory bodies to operate as ‘boundary organisations’. Typical for boundary organizations is that they are accountable to multiple worlds and thus serve multiple masters (from a principal-agent perspective) (Guston, 2000). Principal-agent theory holds that organizational relations may be understood as a series of delegations of authority from principals to agents within or between organisations. The success of a boundary organisation is determined by having principals on either side of the boundary, both of whom rely on the boundary organisation to provide them with the necessary resources. As Guston (2000) puts it, for such an organisation its “dependence is as important as its independence,” because its stability is not derived from isolating itself but by being accountable and responsive to opposing, external authorities.

Further, we consider the membership of the council as being an important comparative element for identifying differences between councils. We have focused upon the openness of the membership- which can also be called the boundary rule (Ostrom, Gardner, & Walker, 1994)- as well as on council diversity. Are there specific rules on who can become a member? In some cases, membership can be completely open and anyone can join. In other cases, there are very specific membership rules with criteria specifying who can participate. We have also looked at the diversity of the council: to what extent do members come from different communities and organisations? We

differentiate between three communities (scientists and experts/society/government). Thirdly, we consider whether the councils are representative or not (understood here as whether the members of the council are representatives of an organisation).

The final institutional characteristics deal with the role of the council and its level of autonomy. The role of the council we divide into the scope of advice and the right of initiative. Is the advice produced short or long term advice? And, does the council have the right to initiate a policy advice (without being requested by the government)? We also consider the discretionary power (autonomy) of the council. We analyse the level of discretion that a council has to organize its structure and work. As indicators we use the level of strictness of externally imposed rules and the flexibility that the council has in organising its structure and work. Both are related, as strict rules often imply limited flexibility. For example, when there are no or only very broad rules, the council itself can decide to add members, change membership criteria, change working methods, set its own agenda, etcetera.

Having illustrated the different institutional characteristics, we now turn to the research findings regarding the institutional set-up of the councils studied. In the section below we discuss the different elements.

Legal status

The legal status of the education councils has proven generally high, with all being founded upon legislation. The Flemish council enjoys possibly the highest legal status, with the government being required to consult the council on specific topics, as well as the requirement to give -to some extent- feedback on whether or not the advice was followed. However, the strength of these legal consultation requirements should not be overestimated, as the case studies have also shown that in some cases the government uses coping mechanisms to bypass a clear cut consultation requirement. Also, whereas the Spanish council does not enjoy a legal feedback requirement on the advice produced, the membership and organisation of this council does provide ample opportunity of interaction with government representatives, leading to on the spot government feedback on advice. Interestingly, the Spanish council combines a governmental consultation requirement with a lack of feedback requirement, whereas the Dutch council combines a lack of consultation requirement with a feedback requirement. In the Netherlands, the government can choose whether or not to ask advice, but when it does so, it needs to provide sound argumentation to the council if and to what extent advice is followed or not. In the Spanish system, the consultation is seen as a crucial element in the decision-making process, but first and foremost as a procedural step that needs to be

followed. We can coin these different perspectives as a procedural and an argumentative approach. As for legal status in general we find the Estonian council to be in a vulnerable position as it enjoys only a loose coupling with government policy making processes.

| | Spanish | Dutch | Portuguese | Estonian | Greek | Flemish |
|---------------------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|
| <i>Government recognition</i> | Y | Y | Y | Y/N | Y | Y |
| <i>Independence of Budget</i> | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y |
| <i>Consultation requirement</i> | Y | N | Y/N | N | N | Y/N |
| <i>Feedback Requirement</i> | N | Y | N | N | N | Y |

Social status

In general, we have identified that almost all councils have a significant social profile and are well known at least in the educational sector. The social status of members and president is generally high. In some councils, such as the Flemish one, there is an interesting mix of both medium and high status members. This is related to the councils' ambition to be (more) inclusive of the education sector or even society as a whole. As some councils increasingly pay attention to be inclusive, they become quite large. However, when a council becomes too large, this may to a certain extent hamper social status. The Portuguese council seems to enjoy the highest social status with members being high profile figures in their patron organisations or in the education field and with high profile presidents such as an ex-education minister.

Furthermore we have to indicate that the basis upon which social status is awarded appears to differ somewhat depending upon the country's political system and culture. For example, it appears that in the Dutch system more status is awarded to experts than in some other cases, such as the Flemish system.

| | Spanish | Dutch | Portuguese | Estonian | Greek | Flemish |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|
| <i>Social Status of Members</i> | + | + | ++ | +/- | + | + |
| <i>Social Status of President</i> | + | + | ++ | +/- | ++ | + |

Administrative support

The level of administrative support we identified varies considerably. We see that those councils with larger budgets in Western Europe tend to have larger number of permanent staff. The number of staff ranges from 1 (Estonian council) to 26 FTE (Flemish council). Unsurprisingly we have also found that in expert bodies such as the Dutch council there exists a higher ratio of staff to members (8 staff members/ 12 council members) than in large representative bodies.

| | Spanish | Dutch | Portuguese | Estonian | Greek | Flemish |
|------------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|
| <i>Funds</i> | + | + | + | - | - | + |
| <i>Permanent Staff</i> | 18 | 8 | 12 | 1 | 2 | 26 |

Principals

We can clearly identify a pattern that it is more common for education councils to have multiple ‘masters’ or ‘principals’ that they report to. As we have indicated earlier, the number of principals is typically high for boundary organizations. In the study we found a range of principals between one in the Estonian case and three, in the Flemish, Spanish and Portuguese case. In the latter cases, not only the members (or the members’ organisations to be more precise) but also the government and parliament function as principals. In the Dutch case, as the members are not (group) representatives, there is one principal less. In the Greek case the council reports to the minister and to a limited extent to members’ organisations. The Estonian council is only accountable to its members.

| | Spanish | Dutch | Portuguese | Estonian | Greek | Flemish |
|-----------------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|
| <i>Number of Principals</i> | 3 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1-2 | 3 |

Membership

As for membership, all councils apart from the Estonian one, have specific rules and a closed access. In the Estonian case all can participate in the council. For the other councils, the rules specifying the kind of persons that can become a member differs though. Broadly speaking we can differentiate between the logic of expertise and the logic of representation. The Dutch council’s membership rules are typically based on the logic of expertise. However, most councils are to some extent hybrids, mixing both logics.

| | Spanish | Dutch | Portuguese | Estonian | Greek | Flemish |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Openness</i> | Closed (-). Specific membership rules | Closed (-). Specific membership rules | Closed (-) membership rules | Open (++) No membership rules | Medium (+/-). Membership rules vary depending upon council section | Closed (-). Specific membership rules |

We have also looked at the diversity and representativeness of the council. We find a dominance of councils with high membership diversity based upon a representative structure.

It also appears from our study that councils that have operated in a historically corporatist environment where only a limited amount of top organisations are included are under pressure to become more inclusive and more diverse. As a strategy to counter criticism they often add members so as to increase their membership legitimacy (Van Damme et al., 2011).

Whilst expert councils appear to be in the minority, information from various interviews suggests that governments frequently choose to turn to expert bodies although these are usually ad-hoc in nature and established over particular issues. More permanent expert bodies are less common, although not non-existent as the Dutch council demonstrates.

During the course of the study it arose that the division between group or interest representation and expertise is far more blurred than it initially appeared. In representative bodies there usually exist mechanisms for including experts within the advisory process, although the specifics of this mechanism vary considerably dependent upon the country. In Portugal academic experts are being co-opted in the council on a more permanent basis, whereas in the Flemish council such experts are consulted on an ad hoc basis. Expert bodies similarly demonstrate such compensation mechanisms which allow for greater inclusion of interests or at least diversity of backgrounds within the expert council. We can clearly see this in the Netherlands where the composition of the expert council needs to be broadly representative. Not of specific educational interests of target groups, but of society in general (including gender and minorities). The Dutch council also sometimes consults representatives of educational interest groups. We can observe a comparable strategy in the composition of Greek ad hoc expert committees which seek the inclusion of a range of political

leanings. Thus, all councils reveal a mix between representation and expertise, with there being no true example of a pure expert or pure representative body.

| | Spanish | Dutch | Portuguese | Estonian | Greek | Flemish |
|------------------------|--|---|--|--|--|--|
| <i>Diversity</i> | Very high (++) More than 2 groups within 3 communities | Limited (-). More than 2 groups within 1 community | Very high (++) More than 2 groups within 3 communities | Very high (++) More than 2 groups within 3 communities | Very high (++) More than 2 groups within 3 communities | High (+). More than 2 groups within 2 communities |
| <i>Representatives</i> | Y (also some experts) | N (representatives ad hoc) | Y (also some experts) | N (also some representatives) | Y (experts ad-hoc) | Y (experts ad hoc) |

Role

We can see a range of roles of advisory bodies such as developing advice, offering a forum of interaction between educational stakeholders, stimulating social learning and conflict reduction, etc.. If we focus on the advisory role, we can observe that all these councils to a certain extent provide different types of advice: more short term instrumental advice, or more long term conceptual advice agenda setting advice, etc. (Bekkers, Fenger, Homburg, & Putters, 2004). The Dutch council typically stresses a more long term conceptual and agenda setting role, although instrumental advice on operational matters is not alien to them either (e.g. advice on legislation). The Greek council in turn, focuses on instrumental advice, often even on very operational dimensions of current government policy. Most councils seem to take on different roles. In line with this we can often find a mixture of long term and short term advisory focus.

When we turn to the right of initiative, which can be seen as an indicator of the level of discretion a council enjoys, but can also be linked to the agenda setting and conceptual roles, we have found that five out of six councils studied have the right of initiative, which they employ regularly. The

Spanish council uses this right more sparingly. The Greek council does not have the right of initiative.

| | Spanish | Dutch | Portuguese | Estonian | Greek | Flemish |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Scope</i> | Mixture ST and LT | Mostly LT | Mixture ST and LT | Very LT | Mostly ST | Mixture ST and LT |
| <i>Right of Initiative</i> | Y. Sometimes used | Y. Regularly used | Y. Regularly used | Y. Regularly used | N | Y. Regularly used |

Discretion

Discretion (or autonomy) is a topic where we have identified the Estonian council as an example of the most organic structure in Europe which allows for complete adaptability and flexibility with next to no set rules guiding its structure or work. Other councils operate within a comparatively strict legal framework leaving sometimes little room in terms of flexibility to self-organize council structure and work. We have observed that there are often quite a lot of rules fixing council membership, the nature of the issues that the council is to be consulted about, and the time and manner in which advice has to be delivered. Nevertheless, it appears that usually some freedom seems to exist to tailor the advice to fit the contextual environment to a certain extent e.g. to consult additional people, to develop advice at one's own initiative, to time one's advice, etc.

All of the councils studied in-depth except for the Greek one also have the right of initiative which they use (rather) regularly. It appears that the right of initiative is an important discretionary element as it allows a council to set its own agenda. Although councils are usually quite attentive to the governmental agenda, they also appreciate the possibility to develop their own initiatives so as to make the best use of the expertise and experience of their members and bring new issues to the attention of the government.

| | Spanish | Dutch | Portuguese | Estonian | Greek | Flemish |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Rules, flexibility</i> | Medium (+/-). Some discretion. | Medium (+/-). Some discretion. | Medium (+/-). Some discretion. | Large (++). Full discretion | Medium (+/-). Some discretion. | Medium (+/-). Some discretion. |

Types of education councils

We have developed a double typology of education councils, based on council membership characteristics and the council's relationship with the government (Van Damme et al., 2011). We found that the dominant type of membership style combines delegation (representation) and lay knowledge. The Flemish, Spanish and Portuguese council have mostly members which are group representatives with a lay background. The Greek council has mostly academic members that to a large extent function as representatives. The Dutch council has mostly academic members that only represent themselves. Finally, most of the members of the Estonian council have a lay background and only represent themselves.

The second typology looks into the relationship of the council with government. The Dutch and Flemish council are both external to the government and have a low intensive interaction with the government. The councils are situated at a (certain) distance to the government, having a (rather) high level of independence, and there is little interaction with government officials during advice production. The Estonian council has more or less the same characteristics, although the interaction with government officials can at times be higher. The three other councils are characterised by more intensive interaction with government officials. The positioning towards government differs though, with the Greek council as government internal and the Portuguese as external. The Spanish council takes up an in-between position. Whereas it is formally integrated in the government apparatus, it is able to take budgetary decisions or set its agenda independently.

The challenge of defining and measuring council performance

The aim of the study was not only to describe the institutional set-up of the councils and to develop a typology but also to explore the impact of different aspects of the institutional arrangement on council performance. In the study we illustrated different possible benefits of policy advice such as innovativeness of advice and policy impact. However, when a broader perspective is taken on

council performance other benefits can also be included, such as the level in which the council supports social learning, conflict reduction, trust, and policy support. These outcomes can indirectly support successful policy making. For example, during the course of advice production the different council members can learn about the perspectives and opinions of other members and or governmental actors. They can also to a certain extent adapt their own perspective. A more long term result of working together in the council can be the development of mutual trust, as insight is gained in the perspectives, values and interests of the different parties involved.

Whereas we were not blind for these more indirect functionalities of education councils, for the study we focused on the use by policy makers of the advice produced (policy impact). How can we measure the impact of policy advice? Reminiscent of Weiss' work on research utilization (Weiss, 1980), four kinds of impact have been differentiated by Bekkers et al (2004). First, instrumental impact, where the advice leads to an immediate change in the behaviour in line with the recommendations of the advice. Secondly, conceptual impact, where the advice leads to a change in the knowledge, opinion, or argumentation of individuals or organisations. Advice can thus serve an 'enlightenment' function. Thirdly, the advice can have an agenda setting impact, when a new subject is put on the societal or political agenda. And fourthly, there can be political-strategic impact, in that the advice is being used to increase the position of one or more players (Bekkers et al., 2004; Bekkers et al., 2004). For the six councils we have analysed the policy impact at an instrumental, conceptual, agenda setting, and strategic-political level. This data is however highly qualitative, as it is based on interviews with council and staff members and government officials. Therefore it is based on the perception of knowledgeable actors, not on the actual impact of the advice on policy decisions.

| | Spanish | Dutch | Portuguese | Estonian | Greek | Flemish |
|-----------------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|
| <i>Instrumental</i> | + | +/- | +/- | - | + | +/- |
| <i>Conceptual</i> | +/- | + | +/- | +/- | - | +/- |
| <i>Agenda setting</i> | +/- | + | +/- | +/- | - | +/- |
| <i>Strategic/ Political</i> | +/- | +/- | +/- | - | + | +/- |

Generally speaking, interviewees speak of impact of the council's advice on policy as neither high or low. Impact typically depends on the specific advice. They can often also illustrate this with examples of advice that has had a clear impact and of advice that did not have any impact. In most

cases, interviewees state that the council's advice has higher impact on specific levels. For example, the instrumental impact of the Spanish council is said to be high, whereas at the other levels it is intermediate. The Greek council's advice typically has impact at the instrumental or strategic-political level. The instrumental impact of the Estonian council is said to be low, whereas at the conceptual or agenda setting level it is intermediate. As the data measures perception of impact, we need to be cautious however with the findings. Future research should look into the actual impact of council advice.

The impact of institutional arrangements on council performance

In the next section, we look into the impact of institutional elements on council performance. Whereas our findings on council performance are preliminary, the case studies suggest some elements that seem to stimulate council performance.

First of all, the level of "embeddedness" of the council within the policy making process plays an important role. Both legal and social status as ways of embedding seem to be crucial. They provide points of access to policy making. Being officially recognized as an advisory body as well as the government's requirement to consult the council provides a minimal guarantee of interaction on policy issues. But also social status is important as this functions as an informal guarantee that the council has a say over policy proposals. It has been suggested that mechanisms of information, coordination, feedback and involvement between the regular policy stream and the advisory stream can increase policy advice take-up (Van Damme & Brans, 2008a). Being embedded as a council in the policy process, in a formal or informal way, through its legal or social status, seems to help in providing these links with the policy stream. Whereas education councils are not designed to fit a specific policy issue, they often do enjoy privileged access to the regular decision-making process.

The actual position of the council vis-à-vis the government seems to be of lesser importance. Contrary to what might be expected, councils that are external and that do not enjoy close interaction on policy advice with government officials can perform well. However, because of this positioning such councils need to seek ways, though their membership, the quality of advice, or otherwise, to make sure that their advice is sufficiently taken into account by government officials. Councils that are more internal and enjoy close interaction with government officials, will develop advice that takes into account government expectations, possibly increasing its instrumental relevance. However, it appears that councils such as the Greek one that are very close to government, are to some extent vulnerable as they are highly dependent on government goodwill.

Secondly, when it comes to the impact of the membership of the council, we see a pattern that for a council a wide and diverse membership can contribute to council performance. First of all, wide membership can support both representativeness and inclusiveness. This supports the input (or membership) legitimacy of the council. It can also stimulate developing innovative advice that has an impact on policy. Councils seem to be aware of this. Those councils that have a more narrow membership, lacking in diversity, expertise or representativeness, develop strategies to include groups that are formally excluded. This can be achieved by consulting groups in a more ad hoc manner. Another strategy is illustrated by councils such as the Spanish and Portuguese. These councils have, over time, expanded their membership.

Thirdly, it appears that a council must diversify its roles and scope if it is to remain useful for governmental parties as well as for its members. Therefore advisory bodies typically combine a wide array of activities such as reviewing scientific findings, delivering long term strategic as well as short term instrumental advice, and stimulating reflection and learning (Halffman & Hoppe, 2004). Accordingly, principal diversification plays a substantial role in council performance. It seems that the more principals the council has, the more independence is guaranteed from any single principal. Or, as the boundary work literature would have it, the more masters to be dependent upon, the more independence the council actually enjoys. Another element we can link with the boundary work mentioned, is the dissemination and tailoring of the advice. In some of the councils studied a lot of attention is paid to tailoring the policy advice to the needs of the specific principal. This can have a positive effect on policy impact. We can observe boundary workers within education councils, members but most often staff, that are able to provide links between the various communities, tailoring the council's work to the different audiences.

Fourthly, the level of discretion or autonomy of the council is of importance. Whereas different councils have specific legislation detailing the membership, issues to be consulted upon, etc. they still often have quite a lot of discretionary power. This discretion allows for councils to take the initiative as well as to be sufficiently flexible in developing policy advice.

Finally, although institutional characteristics such as social and legal status, membership, role and scope, as well as autonomy, can increase council performance, it is clear that education councils are bound to their national environment in terms of their structure and operation. Their success can thus be considered contingent upon the environment in which they operate.

Conclusion: successful advisory bodies

In this paper we have discussed the institutional set-up of six European education councils at some length. We have also looked at council performance and the impact of specific aspects of the institutional arrangement on performance. The research findings suggest that institutional features such as membership and legal and social status are important for achieving good outcomes. However, education councils are bound to their national environment in terms of their origin, structure and operation. In one country scientific expertise might, for example, be valued more than in another. Or, in one country too close a cooperation during advice production between advisory bodies and government officials is seen as a democratic liability, whereas in another country it is promoted as increasing policy relevance. This indicates that there is no perfect ‘catch all structure’ for advisory bodies such as the education councils studied.

Whilst advisory bodies are now a common feature of the policy making process in many countries, recent knowledge of their origin, organisation and functioning, performance, and of their development over time is lacking. With this study we have offered some insights in the way in which education councils as advisory bodies operate. We have elaborated that for advisory bodies operating in a competitive policy environment, they need to be able to gain and sustain access to the policy making process. Not only the advice needs to be of high quality and of high relevance, the advisory bodies themselves also need to establish and maintain a high status. In order to be successful, it seems that the advisory body needs to function as a ‘boundary organisation’. Boundary organizations are able to bridge the worlds of science, state and society, tailoring to the needs of different actors or principals. For such an organisation, its “dependence is as important as its independence” and its stability is not derived from isolating itself “but by being accountable and responsive to opposing, external authorities” (Guston 2001:402).

Whereas we have gained some insights in the organisation and performance of policy advisory bodies, further research should elaborate on this. One item that draws particular attention is council performance. Council performance should in our opinion be broadly defined, including not only the impact of advice on policy, but also such elements as the innovativeness of advice, social learning, conflict reduction, trust, and policy support.

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