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Navigating nationalism, universalism and cosmopolitanism: a historical inquiry into international education organisations and the crisis of the liberal international order

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Abstract

This article addresses the underexplored role of education intergovernmental organisations in navigating crises of the liberal international order, focusing on how cosmopolitanism, nationalism and universalism shape OECD and UNESCO policies and strategies. Our critical analysis of these ideological influences traces continuities and transformations within evolving liberal international order in these organisations' activities. While the global education agenda of Sustainable Development Goal 4 aligns the OECD and UNESCO, their differing priorities and approaches offer a valuable

opportunity for comparative analysis. Drawing on archival research and historical publications, the article identifies two key dimensions of the liberal international order crisis: legitimacy and ideology. The legitimacy crisis is seen in shifting educational reforms promoted by intergovernmental organisations, which now emphasise soft skills and metrics to assess educational outcomes within the Sustainable Development Goal 4 framework. Tensions among globalisation, nationalism and cosmopolitanism mark the ideological crisis. An exemplary response is global citizenship education, which emerged as a key intergovernmental organisation strategy, legitimising more flexible national interpretations while maintaining globalist ideals traditionally upheld by intergovernmental organisations. The article deepens understanding of how education intergovernmental organisations have historically functioned and continue to operate within the context of liberal international order crises, elucidating the complexities of global education governance amid shifting ideological and legitimacy challenges.

Keywords liberal international order; global citizenship education; global governance; OECD; UNESCO

Introduction

In the context of global education governance, the relationship between education and the reconfiguring world order has been a critical theme (Jones, 2007; Mundy and Verger, 2016), with literature addressing concerns about a crisis within the liberal international order (LIO). International relations scholars note the rise of emerging powers that are economically, politically and culturally distinct from established Western nations (Stephen, 2017) and describe increasing conflicts and rivalries as multipolar governance (Mearsheimer, 2019). In the field of global education policy research, Bromley et al. (2024) observed a longitudinal movement away from rights-based reforms and towards datafication, which may reflect broader shifts in the global order and a decline in democracy.

However, literature also challenges the notion of LIO in crisis. Experts argue that LIO is a dynamic construct historically characterised by contradictions and inconsistencies (Lake et al., 2021; Peoples, 2024). Since emerging in the 1940s, it has endured crises and contestations without being fundamentally undermined (Finnemore et al., 2021; Niemann et al., 2023). LIO should be perceived as transforming internally, instead of being in crisis.

To some extent, this research discrepancy can be related to an unclear definition of LIO and its correlation with the world order per se. Since the end of the Second World War, not all international actors involved in forming the international order represented liberal regimes founded on democracy, civil and political rights and liberal economies. This necessitates differentiation between traditional liberal philosophy, which emphasises individual freedom and equality, and post-war liberal internationalism (Lake et al., 2021). Liberal principles upheld by LIO include rule of international law, sovereign equality of states, peaceful conflict resolution and support for an international capitalist market. Many illiberal states adhere to rules of the multilateral system but justify breaches of international law by invoking other globally recognised norms, like the principle of non-intervention. To deflect scrutiny, these states frequently highlight violations committed by political opponents. Meanwhile, cultivating a reputation for complying with key international regulations can benefit national elites in global trade relations.

Although much LIO research emphasises countries perceived as having the greatest economic and political influence, numerous decolonised states have historically played a foundational role in establishing the modern LIO and its core principles of national equality under international law and commitment to non-intervention (Tourinho, 2021). The UN's 'Pact for the Future' passage in September 2024 demonstrates their influence, despite Russian efforts to derail it. Angering representatives from the African Union and Mexico, Moscow's attempt was met with isolation and the pact was ultimately approved (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, 2024).

To clarify, the LIO crisis extends beyond other states merely contesting Western dominance in the global order. Examining ideological and political transformations within LIO, this article investigates the latent evolution of intergovernmental organisations' (IGOs) educational policies. As pillars of LIO, multilateral institutions offer valuable insight into how the organisations' principles are upheld, challenged or reinterpreted by diverse actors. Education serves as a key arena for legitimising ideological foundations of the world order. Thus, examining educational agendas, policies and programmes enables tracing ideological shifts within LIO and uncovering a cohesive ideological narrative.

As educational IGOs' once-promising visions for the future lose credibility and legitimacy, they must adapt to rapidly changing global conditions (Auld and Elfert, 2024; Montjourides, 2022). To maintain relevance, IGOs must revise portfolios, action plans and strategies while fostering partnerships and networks in an environment of multi-stakeholderism (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023a). Notable examples include the UN's Transforming Education Summit held in September 2022, where representatives from more than 130 countries convened to discuss the urgent need to reboot education systems and accelerate efforts to resolve the learning crisis. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has taken a humanitarian turn, adopting a more flexible approach to assessment that increasingly emphasises evaluating non-cognitive skills (Kim, 2024; Li and Auld, 2020).

Although literature addresses recent shifts and reconfigurations among education IGOs, historical roles, discussions and initiatives of education IGOs in navigating crises within LIO remain underexplored in global education research. Concurrently, LIO 'contains a collective commitment to global governance in the sense of an aspiration to work toward a common global good' (Lake et al., 2021, p. 232). Analysing the vision crisis around the global good is essential to understand how ideologies around education evolve. This article aims to fill that gap by:

1. examining how education IGOs have historically responded to perceived and recurrent LIO crises, focusing on the OECD and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)
2. analysing their reconfigurations through the lenses of nationalism, cosmopolitanism and universalism to unpack the complexities of global education policymaking in response to shifting ideological and legitimacy challenges
3. offering relevant insights into contemporary scholarly discussions on global education governance and the operation of education IGOs within evolving LIO and its ongoing crises.

Sharpening focus: refining the analytical lens and structure

This section refines our analytical lens and clarifies our understanding of LIO, its crisis and the integral role of IGOs. We offer methodological reflections on data and theory and present the article's structure underpinning our analysis.

International world order and IGOs: frames of analysis

To define key characteristics of LIO, signs of its current crisis and how IGOs address it, our analysis follows three premises of scholars of education and international relations, which will be discussed in detail in the next section:

1. political contestations have continuously shaped LIO (Lake et al., 2021; Tourinho, 2021)
2. this contestation's ideological frameworks are outlined by the concepts of universalism, cosmopolitanism and nationalism (Goodman and Pepinsky, 2021; Simmons and Goemans, 2021)
3. to sustain their legitimacy, IGOs developed their education policies in response to the changing international order (Robertson and Beech, 2024).

Since emerging after 1945, the 'assumption that liberal industrial democracies are the creators, protagonists, and sustaining pillars of the world order' shapes the perception of the current LIO crisis (Tourinho, 2021, p. 258). While the Anglo-American influence was significant, many other actors also shaped an international order characterised by ideological and political tensions. The emergence of the modern LIO can be traced back to the 1940s. North American and Western European states aimed to strengthen peaceful coexistence on Western terms by promoting a liberal economy, free movement of goods (and later capital), liberal values, democratic institutions and rule of law (Lake et al., 2021).

Founding international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund drove these intentions. On the other political pole, the Soviet Union occupied a sixth of the world's land area, expanding its influence by occupying several European states and socialist and communist movements strongly associated with decolonisation and resistance against Nazism and fascism. Like other major war victors, the USSR expected to divide influence, ruling its part of the world without considering the opinions of less powerful states (Porter, 2023a).

Nonetheless, African, Asian and Latin American countries contributed to the formation of LIO's 'liberal internationalism' (Lake et al., 2021, p. 231), which is associated with equality of all peoples in multilateral cooperation and the universal rule of international law. India's significant victory in 1947 made decolonisation, as well as the principles of equal treatment of all states under international law, integral to the new world order. Simultaneously, decolonised states' resistance to and rejection of Anglo-American hegemony created new political and legal forms. 'Rather than being liberal by design, that order is a syncretic result of political contestation over core international norms' (Tourinho, 2021, p. 260).

To outline ideological frameworks of this contestation in relation to educational policies, we refer to the concepts of nationalism, universalism and cosmopolitanism. Since the early development of international educational frameworks during the interwar years, IGOs operated within this complex, often contentious, triangle, adapting policies as well as underlying justifications to support their legitimacy. After the First World War, universalist and cosmopolitan ideals gained prominence, particularly in education, for shaping a new generation committed to building a better world (Boyd, 1930). This vision drew on concepts such as international understanding, global awareness and world citizenship (Brehony, 2004).

Notably, modern education policies often veil significant historical and conceptual differences between cosmopolitan and universalist ideologies. Universalist discourse assumes fundamental values apply independently of any geographic, cultural or social context, calling for global implementation. Exemplifying this movement, peace or human rights education (HRE) imply the fundamental value of human dignity and human life (Hofstetter and Schneuwly, 2024).

However, cosmopolitanism is a 'historically contingent' ideology with elitist connotations in LIO context (Ritter, 2025, p. 110). Academic interest in this concept resurfaced post-Cold War and during globalisation (Kleingeld and Brown, 2019) driven by visions of 'one world' (Singer, 2002), sustainable peace and a borderless community of world citizens with shared ethics, institutions and economic ties (Cabrera, 2004; Nielsen, 1988; Nussbaum, 1994). Many scholars still deem this morally desirable, culturally inclusive and institutionally possible (Cabrera, 2018). However, advocates also recognise its economically, politically, culturally and even linguistically privileged origins (Mendieta, 2014, p. 121), implying particular individual qualities in the community of world citizens shaping the international agenda. These qualities include multilingual proficiency, especially English fluency (Mendieta, 2014), transnational mobility and financial resources facilitating required education and travel (Sakhiyya, 2024; Wright et al., 2022).

In education, cosmopolitanism became an ideology for constructing a 'global middle class' (Beardsmore, 2022), mainly through international elite schools and universities (Howard and Maxwell, 2020; Sakhiyya, 2024). It is increasingly linked to nationalism through the global promotion of national education models and to imperialism through the imposition of powerful nations' own versions of cosmopolitanism (Mendieta, 2014; Yemini et al., 2024). While other historical interpretations exist, we focus on the contemporary perspective, which facilitates a clearer analysis of its role in LIO and global education governance.

Nationalistic forces resist cosmopolitanism and nationalism despite their differences – a persistent tension mirrored by the LIO economic domain. IGOs institutionalised world governance, facilitating citizens' engagement outside the control of nation states under universal international norms (Yemini et al., 2024). Advocates of global economy considered LIO an entrepreneurs' order rather than a world government (Pedersen, 2021). Belief in the sovereignty of the nation state and its exclusive authority over education fuels nationalist opposition (Tröhler, 2020a). Nationalism, as a political expression of a nation, has remained a powerful force since the formation of modern nation states in the nineteenth century (Tröhler, 2020b), emphasising national identity and resisting what it perceives as external impositions from international bodies.

After the Second World War, the international order continued evolving within these frameworks. LIO was built on national borders and the principle of non-intervention in sovereign matters while also promoting the rule of law and equality of all nations in the application of this law (Simmons and Goemans,

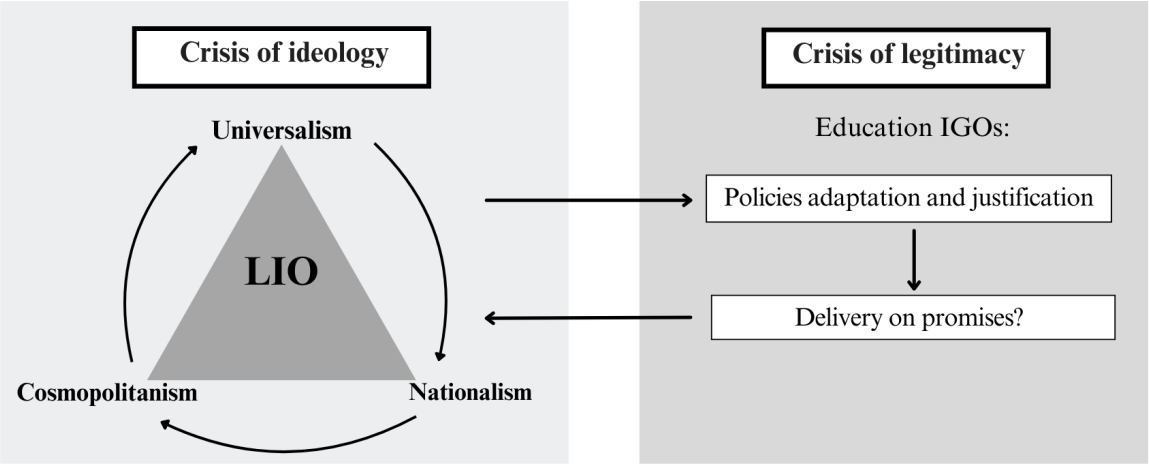
2021). LIO's economic frameworks promoted the idea of world citizenship to encourage economic exchange and migration, but nationalist actors limit political participation (Goodman and Pepinsky, 2021). The latent interplay among universalism, cosmopolitanism and nationalism underpins global education initiatives at the heart of LIO's shifting manifestations. Universalism advocates for shared values like peace, justice and human rights. Cosmopolitanism, rooted in elite intellectual traditions primarily accessible to those with the means to engage in global dialogue, echoes these aspirations, carrying an air of exclusivity, while nationalism asserts national priorities, highlighting the persistent tension between global and national interests.

The history of the International Bureau of Education (IBE), founded in 1925, demonstrates these dynamics' continuity. As the first IGO entirely focused on education, curriculum development and teacher training, it championed a highly universalist agenda to harmonise educational efforts through international conferences, research and teacher-training activities (Hofstetter and Schneuwly, 2024). However, this universalist ambition led to continuous internal reconfigurations and tensions with nationalist agendas, its dissolution as an autonomous entity and incorporation into UNESCO in 1969 (Brylinski, 2022; Hofstetter and Schneuwly, 2024).

The IBE's dissolution underscores observable results' significance as sources of legitimacy for IGOs seeking authority in the global governance architecture (Robertson and Beech, 2024). As national interests frequently conflict with universalist norms and cosmopolitan ideas, IGOs must navigate legitimacy challenges as a continuous feature of LIO development when implementing international frameworks. Ongoing negotiations complicate linear progression in either direction, forcing these organisations' adaption to a global landscape shaped by competing visions of the future (Elfert and Ydesen, 2024).

Considering the continuous ideological contestations within LIO and related legitimacy challenges for IGOs, it could be argued that crises are regular stages in the development of both LIO and IGOs after the Second World War. Each ideological crisis within LIO leads to a legitimacy crisis for IGOs and their policies. When a new LIO ideology emerges, education IGOs legitimise it by describing a better future achievable through education. Perception of these organisations as obsolete and IGOs' failure to deliver on promises coincide with ideological contestation of the world order. Thus, this article identifies two key dimensions of LIO and the IGO crisis: a crisis of legitimacy and a crisis of ideology (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Two key dimensions of the liberal international order and the intergovernmental organisations' crisis: legitimacy and ideology



Evolving educational reforms championed by IGOs, which use the crisis narrative normalised in LIO as a governance mechanism to validate their legitimacy, reflect these dimensions' interrelationship (Elfert and Ydesen, 2024), exemplified by the US push for international comparative indicators within the OECD following the highly critical 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* (Bottani and Tuijnman, 1994). This national agenda's global dissemination is described as extrapolated nationalism, embedded in, reproduced through and promoted by global and international education agendas (Ydesen, 2022).

However, a universalist narrative of holistic human development and a cosmopolitan idea of global civic competencies contest this extrapolated national OECD agenda (UNESCO, 2015). A compromise becomes evident in the OECD's growing emphasis on soft skills, extending the organisation's role beyond the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) framework's traditional scope while reaffirming long-standing promises about labour market skills as the currency of the twenty-first century (Zembylas, 2023).

The continuous critique of UNESCO's statistics and accountability further exemplifies this interrelationship. In contrast to the OECD's historic economistic approach to education, UNESCO's education policies were dominated by a humanistic-emancipatory agenda (Elfert, 2023). However, once 'quantifiable, comparable, and standardizable' knowledge became a key legitimisation instrument of the global governance of education (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024, p. 538), UNESCO faced criticism for its lack of attention to knowledge accumulation and presentation. This critique resulted in increasing reliance on data and metrics to assess educational outcomes, particularly regarding Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The establishment of the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning aimed at the development of assessment tools and learning indicators reflects this shift (Grek, 2024; Ydesen and Elfert, 2023). Thus, UNESCO's (perceived) failure to deliver on universalist promises introduced a metrics industry feeding back into the organisation's policies. These reforms underscore IGOs' ongoing efforts to maintain legitimacy and relevance by reinventing themselves within evolving ideological frameworks.

Methodological reflections

Subsequent sections of our article explore LIO's ambiguous transformations historically, focusing on crises of legitimacy and ideology shaping key policies and IGOs' strategies. To define key components of LIO's architecture and trace manifestations of its evolution, we analysed the policies and operational strategies of two educational IGOs, UNESCO and the OECD, as they navigate nationalist, cosmopolitan and universalist frameworks within the international order.

These two educational IGOs were selected for analysis because of their current engagement in implementing and monitoring SDG 4. With the ultimate goal of increasing human capital, the OECD's governance of education through metrics and comparisons among member states differs significantly from UNESCO's focus on human capability and human rights (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023a). However, the OECD assumed a significant role in measuring SDG 4 progress (Li and Morris, 2024). Together, they define the international education development agenda's modern image.

Current scholarship often contrasts the OECD's economistic and UNESCO's humanistic approaches to education (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023a), a distinction supporting their selection due to their significantly different positions within LIO. Notably, their collective examination emphasises how each responded to shifts in the global order.

Drawing on archival sources from UNESCO and the OECD along with historical publications and research papers, we analyse data on their historical development and adaptation of educational policies in response to ideological and legitimacy contestations within the evolving world order. The concluding discussion synthesises and relates main findings to contemporary manifestations of the LIO crisis, including reflections on our contributions.

UNESCO education policies: evolving with the world order

Amid the emerging Cold War's political tensions and the wave of decolonisation, the United Nations (UN) was established as a platform for peaceful international cooperation among member states, founded on principles resonating with LIO ideals while accommodating national priorities – such as sovereign equality of states, right to self-determination, non-intervention and conflict resolution through negotiation (Lake et al., 2021). Initially, the UN was designed to serve as a platform for the cooperation of states who perceived themselves as primary victors of the Second World War: the UK, the Soviet Union and the United States (Mazower, 2009). Although they held significant privileges in the UN Security Council, competition among them and pressure from other participants resulted in formal equality of all member states in many UN institutions, including UNESCO (Porter, 2023b). Universalist ideas like the IBE, prominent among intellectuals involved in the first IGOs during the interwar years, were significant in this design (Hofstetter and Schneuwly, 2013).

UNESCO aspired to be a platform for equal cooperation among member states, reinforcing international understanding and peace through education, science and culture (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023b). However, from its inception, the organisation became an ideological battleground – not only between powers divided by the Iron Curtain but also within the same political alliances. The organisation's universalist mandate, nationalist ambitions of member states and cosmopolitan influences contested by nationalist actors defined this battlefield. Concurrently, the ideological foundations of UNESCO's concepts and approaches are particularly important for the agency since its legitimacy is largely normative, dependent on the perceived ideological fit of its policies (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023a).

The Soviet Union strongly objected to UNESCO's founding, arguing it would interfere with national educational systems, give too much power to smaller UN member states and be a dangerous advancement towards 'world governance' (Porter, 2023a). Simultaneously, the US government claimed that the cosmopolitan views of UNESCO leadership aligned with Marxist ideas of world revolution, alleging connections between Soviet ideology and UNESCO's educational activities, which it portrayed as efforts to shift public opinion towards world government. It suspected UNESCO staff of communist allegiances, conducting detailed checks on employees with US citizenship (Porter, 2023a).

Cosmopolitan and universalist ideas were popular among the intellectual elites of the time, significantly shaping UNESCO's philosophy and mandate (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023a). Cosmopolitanism, a politically controversial term, gained an elitist connotation in the early twentieth century. The first UNESCO director-general, Julian Huxley, was labelled a cosmopolitan for his fluency in European languages and his 'ease at diplomatic dinner parties' (Sluga, 2010, p. 397). In the 1950s, 'education for world citizenship' was introduced into UNESCO policies, conceptualised as education for international understanding. Following strong opposition from the US (Ydesen, 2016), the organisation omitted this term due to its 'acquired unsuitable political connotations' (UNESCO, 1965, p. 56). Instead, it used 'education for living in a world community', intending to compromise between cosmopolitan views, UNESCO's universalist aspirations and national interests. 'It has never been the purpose of Unesco to turn citizens from their national loyalties. We are trying to do something quite different: to train citizens … faithful in their duty to their own country … and to the international obligations which their country has assumed,' stated the second UNESCO director-general, Jaime Torres Bodet (UNESCO, 1953, p. 5). The notion was eventually abandoned because of its vagueness (UNESCO, 1965).

To maintain its status as a platform for negotiations among all member states during the Cold War, UNESCO emphasised its universalist agenda, launching the international textbook campaigns with particular focus on teaching history to promote international understanding (Pingel, 2016). Smaller UN member states supported this agenda. Opposing the victors' emphasis on re-education of post-Axis powers, they emphasised the need for international educational reforms to sustain peace (Dussel and Ydesen, 2016). For instance, Mexico submitted a proposal on the revision of textbooks on world history in 1946 'to eliminate all statements tending to create a false feeling of racial superiority or national imperialism which may be contrary to the development of a spirit of human brotherhood and universal solidarity' (reproduced in Wells, 1987, p. 116).

UNESCO also played an important part in conceptualising human rights for the UN, including both political and civil liberties as well as social and economic rights promoted by the socialist bloc (Ishay, 2008). From UNESCO's perspective, the universality of HRE was twofold – legal and ethical (Jones and Coleman, 2005). Human rights were described as fundamental ethical principles formalised into law, making them obligatory for worldwide implementation (Saba, 1968).

The *Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace, and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (UNESCO, 1974) articulated the UN's compromise *modus operandi*, balancing nationalist interests and universalist claims. Linking nations' right to self-determination with the human rights framework situated the *Recommendation* within UNESCO's anti-colonial discourse, allowing UNESCO to legitimise universalist policies in the context of emerging anti-colonial nationalist movements. The *Recommendation* identifies 'equality of rights of peoples, and the right of peoples to self-determination' as the first 'major problems of mankind' that education must address (art. 18).

The universalist narrative remained central to UNESCO's education policies throughout the 1980s, promoted through peace and HRE, which were justified by the urgency of disarmament and international security (UNESCO, 1987). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Cold War's end marked a turning point in the history of international organisations. The UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali called it a 'historical opportunity' and 'a new chapter in the history of the United Nations' (Boutros-Ghali,

1992, p. 89). While political and intellectual elites anticipated the end of history and the undisputed victory of liberal democracies (Fukuyama, 1992), the consensus on UNESCO's universalist approach remained elusive. China and Saudi Arabia criticised the UN human rights agenda for its inflexibility and neglect of national specificities (UN Secretariat, 1993), while liberal democracies, including new post-socialist democratic states, raised concerns over its lack of attention to democracy and civics (UNESCO, 1993). As most countries officially became democratic (Davies, 1999), democracy and citizenship education, along with HRE, became integral to UNESCO's policies (Rauner, 1999).

Concurrently, the eruption of nationalist conflicts in the post-socialist states signalled that the victory of 'the heralded *New World Order*' and 'Western universalism' was being challenged (Mouffe, 1993, p. 1). Moreover, in response to growing support for global cooperation in education, calls for patriotic education became more pronounced in the US (Nussbaum, 1994). The need to reformulate arguments in response to nationalist claims in post-Cold War realities led to the re-emergence of cosmopolitanism or, in its modern version, global citizenship (Ganim and Legassie, 2013). Intellectual elites of the Global North reconceptualised cosmopolitan education, arguing it was ethically grounded in human rights (Habermas, 1996; Nussbaum, 1994). This ideological shift is especially evident in the formation of the modern version of education for cosmopolitanism, global citizenship education (GCE), at the end of the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s, gradually replacing HRE as a dominant UNESCO education framework.

While HRE remained central to UNESCO's education policies for decades, its legal and ethical universalism was evidently too rigid for most member states to commit to its full implementation. Monitoring issues reflected this lack of commitment. Since the introduction of a monitoring mechanism on HRE implementation in 1985, only a minority of member states submitted reports during each monitoring cycle, which evoked significant concerns among the organisation's leadership (UNESCO, 1985, 1999, 2013). Moreover, in the context of the rising dominance of quantifiable outcome-oriented learning, UNESCO's non-quantifiable approaches like human rights or peace education were losing visibility (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023a; UNESCO, 2011).

The perception of UNESCO's legitimacy was also shaped by the general lack of visibility for education on the UN level. The 2000–15 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) included only one educational goal – universal access to primary education – limiting UNESCO's influence in comparison to more resourceful economic 'global governors', like the World Bank, which played a prominent role in this agenda (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023a, p. 98). To address the MDGs' educational policy gap, the Education for All framework – encompassing a wider array of educational goals, from early childhood care to adult literacy – was initiated by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), highlighting the fragility of UNESCO's position as the key UN educational institution (Jones and Coleman, 2005).

When the UN Secretary-General announced the Global Education First Initiative (GEFI), UNESCO seized the opportunity to confirm its leadership on the UN education agenda (UN Secretariat, 2012). UNESCO's director-general became the formal leader of GEFI (Bokova, 2016), and GCE, as a central concept of GEFI, was integrated into UNESCO's education policies. Notably, two papers published by UNESCO raised questions about the contested nature of GCE regarding its potential elusiveness and exclusiveness (Koyama, 2015; Tawil, 2013). Nevertheless, considering the priority given to GCE by the Secretary-General, its institutionalisation within UNESCO's agenda moved forward.

In addition to reinforcing UNESCO's legitimacy as the leading UN education agency, GCE was meant to address key HRE issues. GCE offers greater flexibility in national interpretations and places less emphasis on criticising states that violate human rights. UNESCO promotes GCE as a relevant approach for tackling global challenges such as climate change, violent conflict and forced migration (UNESCO, 2017b). Simultaneously, it downplays HRE's critical perspective by omitting discussions on global economic and power inequalities contributing to these issues (Monaghan and Spreen, 2017). Under SDG 4.7, GCE encompasses a wide range of educational approaches from traditional human rights and non-violence education to newer themes like sustainable lifestyles and cultural diversity appreciation. This flexibility bolstered UNESCO's legitimacy, since twice as many member states reported on SDG 4.7 implementation in 2016 compared to 2012, when HRE was the primary focus (UNESCO, 2017a).

To counter criticism regarding a lack of quantifiable evidence, UNESCO put forward the idea that measuring learning outcomes leads to their improvement (Raikes, 2015), introducing competency frameworks as a structured approach to assessment (Keevy and Chakroun, 2015). This policy model was already prevalent in global education governance through institutions like the OECD and UNICEF as well

as philanthropic donors (Dill, 2013). Consequently, GCE became oriented towards learning outcomes and was conceptualised within a competency-based framework (UNESCO, 2015).

In 2023, a superseding revision of the 1974 *Recommendation* focusing on human rights and peace education called for cultivating 'an ethic of global citizenship' (UNESCO, 2024, art. IV) while keeping the traditional universalist terms, such as HRE and peace education, to legitimise GCE's promotion by UNESCO.

This brief overview of UNESCO's education policies illustrates how this educational IGO navigated the shifting ideological balance within LIO – among nationalism, cosmopolitanism and universalism – to maintain its primarily normative legitimacy. When the agency struggled to fulfil its promise of a universally bright future, its legitimacy and ideological foundations were challenged. This led to a transition from a universalist agenda to a compromise incorporating universalist, cosmopolitan and nationalist ideals. GCE demonstrates a particularly vivid example of this shift, which is explored in greater detail in the concluding section.

The OECD and its development with global education

From its very inception, the OECD was established as an organisation for liberal capitalist countries in the West. As Leimgruber and Schmelzer (2017, p. 6) explain, the transformation of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), founded in 1948, into the OECD in 1961 can be seen as the organisation assuming the role of an economic NATO. This shift was part of a broader reinvention that began in the late 1950s, during which the European Productivity Agency, under the OEEC, served as a forum promoting the reshaping of Western Europe in the image of the United States (Bürgi, 2019; Judt, 2005). In that sense, the new organisation became an important component in upholding, developing and even recruiting for LIO, canonising liberal political and economic values (Carroll and Kellow, 2011). In the coming decades, the OECD would demonstrate its value as a central pillar of LIO, gaining authority and setting standards across a wide range of policy fields. It also served as a vital forum for the development and dissemination of ideas and policies, extending its influence well beyond its relatively small group of member countries. In this context, the OECD provides a compelling case study for examining how tensions among nationalism, universalism and cosmopolitanism are navigated, particularly in overcoming crises of legitimacy.

After the OEEC transferred to the OECD in 1961, and the US and Canada became members, the organisation remained and solidified its position as a 'Club of the Rich' (Schmelzer, 2016, p. 25) and as a vital coordinating and negotiating forum for liberal capitalist countries in the West. This function of the organisation explicitly appears in a 1964 British dispatch, which described the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) as an

> essential organ in which, untrammeled by hysterical speeches from the Afro-Asian bloc or subversive maneuvers from behind the Iron and Bamboo curtains, the Western Powers can study the real substance of aid problems in all objectivity and think out a coordinated line to take at New York and Geneva. (Cited in Leimgruber and Schmelzer, 2017, p. 44)

This quotation reflects a classic cosmopolitan vision, reminiscent of early-twentieth-century ideals, emphasising the creation of qualified world citizens expected to contribute to a better global future. It also indirectly serves as a strong example of how decolonised states crucially shape discussions within key LIO institutions, such as the UN. These states significantly contributed to reinforcing LIO's foundational principle of state equality, underscoring their influence in global post-colonial dialogue.

From a functionalist perspective, the OECD fostered a Eurocentric worldview, with the DAC emerging as a community of Western, developed nations united by a common mission to coordinate and promote a paradigm that expanded Western political influence and economic thinking. A 1964 statement from Thorkil Kristensen, then Secretary-General of the OECD, who described non-Western countries as 'suffering from economic, and as a result cultural, stagnation' (cited in Schmelzer, 2016, p. 234), supports this interpretation.

Since its establishment, the OECD adopted an economistic approach to education. Integrating education into its agenda was central to the organisation's reinvention from the OEEC to the OECD. Two key factors largely drove this move: (1) development challenges in less developed economies, as highlighted by Walter W. Heller from the Council of Economic Advisers in the Kennedy administration.

He explained that 'our increased interest stems from our concern with the less developed economies. Indeed, much of the postwar reawakening of American interest in education as investment arose out of the analysis of development problems and experience of these economies, which threw into bold relief the high rates of return realised on investments in training and education' (OECD, 1962, p. 33); and (2) the urgent need to produce more engineers and technical personnel in response to the 1957 Sputnik shock (Tröhler, 2010), which is a reflection of national priorities and an example of the OECD adopting agendas to secure its role and legitimacy. These educational priorities must be understood within the context of two defining phenomena of the time: decolonisation and the Cold War's bipolar world order. Decolonisation, with the resulting autonomy of former colonies, created a new battleground for the hearts and minds between the competing Cold War systems and the OECD quickly sought to play a role in this ideological struggle.

As an economic IGO without a formal mandate in education, the OECD approached the field primarily from an economic perspective. Education was a critical factor in producing an educated and skilled workforce for the labour market (Elfert, 2019; Elvin, 1961). The 1961 Policy Conference on Economic Growth and Investment in Education in Washington marked a significant shift from viewing education as an expenditure to its framing as an investment. This conference was ripe with ideas about cultivating human capital and talent (OECD, 1962) while also underscoring 'the problems of the economically less developed countries, with which the member countries had technical assistance relationships' (Elvin, 1961, p. 485). A key point raised was that 'education is also more and more widely recognised as a means to economic growth, which, since the end of the war, has everywhere become a paramount aim of national policy. In the under-developed countries, economic growth is necessary to alleviate widespread poverty' (OECD, 1962, p. 16). The conference was hailed as a distinctive event with the potential to shape the future, with one speaker noting: 'What we do in the coming decade about education and the development of human resources, in all our lands and in helping the less developed countries, is sure to have profound influence on the future course of history' (OECD, 1962, p. 26).

Preceding this was the Economic Aspects of Educational Development in Europe Conference, held in 1960 at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy. This event led the OEEC's Committee for Scientific and Technical Personnel (CSTP) to launch the Mediterranean Regional Project (MRP), which the OECD later took over (Ydesen and Grek, 2020). The MRP aimed at 'drawing up a planning framework for the allocation of resources to education in Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, and Yugoslavia in relation to the requirements arising out of economic, demographic, and social development up to 1975' (Lyons, 1964, p. 12). The MRP reflected the highly technocratic social engineering approach of the time, entailing the calculation of each country's manpower needs and the development of plans to meet those needs based on available statistics and economic and demographic data (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023a). This methodology later gained the attention of educational economists and was transferred to several Latin American countries with financial support from the Ford Foundation: in 1963, the OECD received a US$400,000 grant to launch the Programme on Scientific and Human Resources for Development, which aimed to extend the MRP experience to developing countries, especially in Latin America. The OECD–DAC conducted pilot studies in Argentina and Peru and organised seminars in countries such as Syria and Egypt (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023a).

Despite concerns about the application of universalist tools and agendas, such as the caution expressed by conference Chairman Philip H. Coombs, who highlighted that 'educational assistance to less developed countries, as the expert conference papers emphasise, is no mere matter of exporting a carbon copy of one's own curriculum, methods, and organisation to nations with different needs and culture' (OECD, 1962, p. 28), the OECD continued to promote its liberal values beyond its member states, reflecting its universalist approach where human capital theory was promoted as a *sine qua non* for a sound and productive relation between education and the economy. This was evident in the establishment of the Centre for Co-operation with European Economies in Transition created in March 1990, which aimed to incorporate post-socialist (non-member) states into OECD activities after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. By 2007, four post-socialist states – the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia – had joined the OECD (Ougaard, 2010), demonstrating its capacity to capitalise on geopolitical shifts. The organisation's universalist claim is also clearly reflected in the OECD's 2011 slogan 'Better policies for better lives' and the launch of the OECD Better Life Index (OECD, 2018a).

The OECD's universalist dimension has been a consistent feature of its work, evident in its recommendations and programmes aimed at promoting good governance, economic growth, social balance and skill development. This trajectory culminated in the Definition and Selection of

Competencies programme and the PISA, which, along with its sub-programmes, has sought to bring every participating education system onto the same playing field (OECD et al., 1999). PISA rests on the assumption that the same skills are needed across countries, whether in Malaysia, Finland or Canada, and that high PISA scores will translate into a high GDP in the future. In this sense, PISA creates a common framework where all education systems are evaluated and the OECD assumes the role of globally defining what constitutes good education.

The OECD's ability to establish legitimacy and authority as a beacon of good governance is reflected in its expanding membership. Mexico joined the OECD in 1994, followed by Chile in 2010, Colombia in 2020 and Costa Rica in 2021. Several other countries, including Brazil, Peru and Argentina, are in the process of joining. This expansion demonstrates the OECD's ongoing influence and attractiveness as a global forum for countries seeking to enhance their standing in the international arena and LIO.

But there are also notable instances where the OECD faced opposition on nationalist grounds. One such example is the formation of the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) in 1968, which was met with resistance. Concerned about potential interference in national education policies, member countries were reluctant to fund CERI when it was first proposed (Centeno, 2017). Despite these concerns, CERI was initially financed by external sources, including the Ford Foundation and Royal Dutch Shell, from 1968 to 1971. During this period, CERI operated as an autonomous academic body dedicated to promoting educational innovation. However, member states agreed by 1971 to take over the funding after the initial external support ended. Even so, education policy remained a sensitive issue, with many member states considering it a domestic matter and resisting any centralised OECD authority in this domain.

CERI's governance structure reflected this tension. Unlike the CSTP, whose governing board consisted of official country representatives, CERI's board was composed of distinguished educational figures, not necessarily policymakers or national delegates. This structure lent CERI a more cosmopolitan character, distancing it from direct national control. The formation of CERI showcased the OECD's agility in navigating the tension between nationalist concerns and the creation of a cosmopolitan body of education experts.

Another manifestation of nationalism within the OECD arena is how national agendas, and their extrapolated forms of nationalism, become embedded in, reproduced through and promoted by global and international education agendas. A key example of this is the push for developing international comparative indicators. In the early 1980s, the US performed poorly in the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS), conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) between 1980 and 1982. These disappointing results angered the US government, which found that the sampling conducted by the IEA had not been approved by any government agency. In response to this oversight, the US demanded more precise definitions, systematic methodologies and standardised procedures for international comparative education performance indicators.

In 1983, the publication of the report *A Nation at Risk* heightened these concerns, portraying the US education system as a critical liability in the global competition with Japan and the Soviet bloc. This pushed the US to advocate strongly for the development of international comparative education indicators. At a 1984 meeting of the CERI board of directors, the US delegate exerted significant pressure on the OECD to undertake a project focused on collecting and analysing statistical data on education inputs and outcomes. According to Heyneman (1993), this initiative was met with shock and deep suspicion from CERI staff. Ultimately, the pressure led to the OECD launching the International Educational Indicators project in 1988, which produced the annual *Education at a Glance* reports from 1992 onwards and eventually contributed to the development of PISA a decade later. This example highlights how a national agenda was adopted, globalised and universalised within an international context.

Nevertheless, recent years have provided growing evidence of what has been termed 'PISA fatigue' (Jerrim, 2024; Sorensen et al., 2021). As criticism regarding the relevance and validity of the OECD's flagship education programme PISA increased, several countries showed signs of weariness towards the initiative (Engel and Rutkowski, 2020). Nonetheless, the OECD continues to expand its portfolio of PISA-related products, including PISA4U, PISA for Development, PISA for Schools and even PISA for five-year-olds (Lewis, 2019). The organisation is actively reinventing its education framework through initiatives like the Education and Skills 2030 agenda, which features the Learning Compass 2030 – soon to be followed by the Teaching Compass 2030. These programmes promise a more holistic approach to

education, which the OECD refers to as an ecosystem approach, with a strong emphasis on student agency and a broad understanding of societal well-being. Similarly, the OECD has introduced its Education GPS initiative, offering education metrics 'at your fingertips' (Ydesen, in press).

When considering the universalism embedded in the OECD's mission, it is essential to recognise that the D in OECD stands for development, a concept that is both powerful and, at times, disarming. While few would dispute the value of development, the very notion implies that some nations are more 'advanced' or better than others. This judgement is inherently normative and value laden. As a result, the OECD's work in education can be interpreted as promoting ideology that reinforces a Western-centric, hierarchical view of development, classifying nations into categories such as developed, developing and even 'wrongly developed' (Ydesen and Verschaeve, 2019). The aspirations of many Global South countries to join the OECD – and thereby take their place within LIO – as a marker of their level of development mirrors this perspective.

Moreover, there is a distinctly Eurocentric – or Western-centric – dimension to the historical conception of development advanced by the OECD, closely resembling the classical modernisation theory of thinkers like W. W. Rostow in 1960 (as cited in Ydesen and Verschaeve, 2019). From a critical standpoint, this ideological framing, rooted in specific values and assumptions, is expected. The OEEC/OECD was and remains primarily an economic IGO and, thus, its focus on education is naturally aligned with economic priorities and perspectives.

Conclusions: contemporary manifestations of LIO crisis and responses of education IGOs

The theoretical and empirical evidence provided in this article allows for drawing some conclusions on the nature of LIO and its crisis through the lens of education IGOs. We have used the cases of UNESCO and OECD, key actors in contemporary international education development agendas, to trace the evolution of international education policies in the context of LIO transformation.

LIO is a world order, established at the end of the Second World War, that has continuously evolved through political and ideological contestations. To a large degree, these contestations have been related to tensions among the war victors, but also to the influence of smaller and decolonised nations. They have co-constructed the LIO liberal internationalism founded on pillars of multilateral organisations, principles of equality of sovereign states, the rule of law and non-intervention. These actors' essential roles in forming the modern world order are evident in UNESCO anti-colonial and HRE policies. With the significant influence of smaller states, OECD member states used the organisation as a platform to create an exclusively Western coordinated line of development policies.

We analysed ideological frames underlying LIO's contestations through the concepts of cosmopolitanism, universalism and nationalism. The evolution of international education policies reflects ideological shifts that may be seen as crises, which, in turn, prompt challenges to the legitimacy of IGOs. In response, IGOs adapt to these shifting narratives to maintain their relevance, occasionally even leveraging the crisis narrative to reinforce their position within LIO. For instance, facing opposition from powerful actors, UNESCO distanced itself from the cosmopolitan approach, aligning with a universalist agenda endorsed by decolonised and decolonising states instead. The OECD successfully consolidated its role as a leading provider of effective governance policies, leveraging the end of the Cold War to extend its influence into Eastern Europe and the Global South. However, the organisation also adapted significantly over time, such as by adding education to its portfolio in the late 1950s and early 1960s and, more recently, developing education programmes tailored to support the Global South, including initiatives like PISA for Development and other specialised PISA sub-programmes.

Current expressions of the LIO crisis are evident in renewed ideological manoeuvring among nationalism, cosmopolitanism and universalism. The notion that a unified West universally supports cosmopolitan and universalist LIO narratives, while emerging powers advance nationalist demands, does not align with observable trends in global governance. Across the globe, nationalist political blocs are 'pushing back against all those cosmopolitan elites who, under the flag of globalisation, had in the eyes of millions of people been selling the nation short' (Cox, 2019, p. 261). In the West, globalisation – often associated with liberal internationalism by nationalist groups – has triggered deep societal divides between those seen as beneficiaries and those perceived as having lost in global competition (Cox, 2019; Ikenberry, 2018).

Meanwhile, national elites and private edu-businesses benefitting from globalisation and privatisation appear to leverage cosmopolitan education policies – such as national expansions of International Baccalaureate curricula and globally marketing their education systems – to legitimise national education agendas, enhance the global competitiveness of education systems or simply for profit (Rönnberg and Candido, 2023; Yemini et al., 2024). Scholars define this approach as cosmopolitan nationalism whose elements can be discovered in different regions. For instance, in Chinese private international schools, it supports the construction of students' identities comprising both national and global expectations (Wright et al., 2022).

Among these developments, GCE serves as a particularly striking illustration situated at the crossroads of the current LIO ideology crisis. Both UNESCO and the OECD played a significant role in the conceptualisation and promotion of GCE. The OECD pioneered global competencies discourse which largely defined the shift of interest to GCE in international education policies (Dill, 2013). Furthermore, both organisations are major stakeholders in the SDGs monitoring, including the GCE target 4.7. The recent revision of the 1974 *Recommendation* reflects the integration of a cosmopolitan GCE into a traditional universalist UNESCO agenda (education for peace, human rights and international understanding) (UNESCO, 2024). On the one hand, GCE offers a flexible framework for implementation, more open to national interpretations. On the other hand, GCE ethic builds on the universalist moral background of human dignity and human rights according to the 2023 revision. Its cosmopolitan connotations narrate the story of globalisation winners whose success relates to their real global citizenship. Beyond UNESCO, but in the context of ongoing LIO developments, the world's richest man, Elon Musk, presented an American think-tank's Global Citizen Award to radical right-wing Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni for 'seeking to improve the state of the world' (Walla, 2024).

Thus, GCE calls for addressing inequalities through education (universalism), but at the same time silences key issues behind these inequalities and, to some extent, justifies them, putting responsibility on individuals to become competent global citizens (cosmopolitans) and adapt to the changes brought forward by globalisation. Such an individualistic approach resembles the OECD 'The Future of Education and Skills 2030' framework that emphasises students' individual responsibility for their learning and, consequently, their global success (OECD, 2018b; Robertson and Beech, 2024). With IGOs' lack of control over new global developments, both UNESCO and OECD acknowledge unpredictability and base their legitimacy on addressing uncertain futures without examining responsibility for these insecurities. Broad interpretations of GCE allow member states flexibility to select components best aligning with their national education agendas. GCE encourages exchange among local, national and international levels in shaping global education – a level of openness that has posed challenges for HRE, which prioritises the universality of international human rights law.

These ideological contestations relate to debates on the very purpose of education (Biesta, 2009). The LIO crisis concerns the vision of 'a common global good' (Lake et al., 2021, p. 232) and education IGOs seek a common purpose to strengthen their shaken legitimacy. The UN 'Transforming Education' campaign demands preparing learners for an evolving and unpredictable world. While UNESCO increasingly adopts traditional OECD approaches, such as measurement and national comparisons, the OECD seeks ethical legitimisation for its policies by using UNESCO-like language emphasising soft skills, student-centred and holistic development. Although these organisations' approaches are fundamentally incompatible, their current trajectories are deeply interconnected, shaped by an evolving world order that accommodates and reconstructs itself around these ideological tensions.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonimyse the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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