INTRODUCTION

Special Issue of *Comparative Education*: Global governance and the promissory visions of education: challenges and agendas*

Maren Elfert\(^a\) and Christian Ydesen\(^b\)

\(^a\)School of Education, Communication & Society, King’s College London, London, UK; \(^b\)Institute of Education, University of Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

This article – and the special issue it introduces – contributes to the expanding scholarly literature on the global governance of education, with a particular focus on its future-oriented and ‘promissory’ dimension. Inspired by Beckert’s (2020) concept of ‘promissory’ legitimacy, a key contribution of this special issue is to critically analyse past and contemporary promissory narratives of the major international organisations and other global actors concerning the future of education. We focus on three overarching themes that emerge from the contributions to this special issue: Problems of legitimacy in the global governance of education; a shift towards multistakeholderism, which we explore through the lens of ‘the neuro-affective turn’; the use of crisis narratives as an instrument of global governance, and geopolitical shifts and the decline of the liberal world order.

KEYWORDS

Global governance of education; international organisations; promissory visions; legitimacy; multistakeholderism; crisis

Introduction

This special issue contributes to the expanding scholarly literature on the global governance of education, with a particular focus on its future-oriented and ‘promissory’ dimension (Elfert and Ydesen 2023; Milana et al. 2023; Sobe 2023). There is a long history of international organizations (IOs) partially deriving their legitimacy from ‘governing education futures’ (Robertson 2022). Notably, René Maheu, a former Director-General of UNESCO, stated in 1962, ‘I believe that it is in this task of planning the future – perhaps more than in operational activities, however necessary they may be – that lies the principal and immediate vocation of (international) organizations and, certainly, of Unesco’ (cited in Elfert and Ydesen 2023, 9). Due to its fundamental role for the reproduction of society, education has always been a focal point for envisioning the future, making it a battleground for various stakeholders and political actors. Since the very early stages of the construction of a global architecture for educational governance after World War I,
IOs have framed education as a crucial tool for achieving better, more effective, more competitive, wealthier, and/or more sustainable societies (Fuchs 2007). Drawing on political science literature, Robertson (2022) has drawn on the concept of ‘anticipatory governance’ to examine how IOs deploy anticipation and future-making as governing strategies. Berten and Kranke (2022, 156) defined ‘anticipatory governance’ as ‘a diverse set of transnational practices of producing, contesting, and implementing global present futures’.

Jens Beckert’s work (2016; 2020) has significantly inspired the ‘futuring’ literature on global education governance. Addressing the unfulfilled promises of neoliberalism, Beckert (2020) introduced the concept of ‘promise-oriented’ or ‘promissory’ legitimacy, which refers to the promises regarding future outcomes that political or economic leaders make to justify their decisions. He argued that the social imaginaries that supported the neoliberal political project have been exhausted, leaving a void where ‘no new promissory future fills the emerging gap’ (327). Applying Beckert’s analytical lens to education, promise-making has been a key feature of the global governance of education. Many of these future-oriented initiatives, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI)’s ‘Schooling for Tomorrow’ project (1997–early 2010s), that represented an inquiry into the future of schooling (Kim 2024), the OECD’s ‘The Future of Education and Skills 2030’ programme (Auld and Elfert 2024; Kim 2024; Robertson and Beech 2023), and UNESCO’s reports on the future of education (Yliniva, Bryan, and Brunila 2024) are being discussed in this special issue. Also, universal agendas and targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that heavily frame the work of IOs, make promises about the future development of societies for the better (Fontdevila 2021; Hulme 2010). However, most of these promises have been made before, and it is hard to argue that they have become reality. The grandiose promises of progress in terms of greater equality, productivity and ‘eradication of poverty’ have largely remained unfulfilled. Against this background, a key contribution of this special issue is to explore how IOs and other global actors have attempted to fill the gap between the promises they made and the all too often disappointing reality, how struggles around promissory futures have played out among global actors and the resulting implications for the structure and the instruments of the global governance of education.

Crucially, the central theme cutting across the futuring literature in global education governance is its emphasis on the political nature of how the future is constructed, which has significant implications for governance. This aligns with Strassheim’s (2016) assertion that theories of time are inherently political, as temporal frames profoundly impact ‘how power, rationality, and collectivity are related’ (151). Present-day global education governance also displays distinct temporal dimensions, as seen in initiatives like UNESCO’s Education 2030 Framework for Action and the OECD’s Future of Education and Skills 2030, alongside the tri-annual cycle of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). These initiatives collectively promote a governing complex characterized by ‘swiftness, regularity, and synchronization’ (Landahl 2020, 631). Therefore, understanding future-oriented governance requires examining the uneven and asymmetric distributions of power, the rationalities – including the canonised forms of knowledge – and the constructions of collectivities, or ‘we’s’, that contribute to and
sustain a governing complex. In essence, it involves exploring who holds the legitimacy to define the future, what types of knowledge actors draw upon, and for which groups such a future is envisioned.

Against this background, this special issue identifies, compares and critically analyses past and contemporary promissory narratives of the major global agencies concerning the future of education. While a great deal of scholarly work exists around the topic of ‘futures’, it is predominantly based in the domain of science and technology, and there is a lack of historical and comparative perspectives. Examining the ‘promissory visions’ of global actors seems particularly important at this historical juncture characterised by a proliferation of non-traditional actors, such as philanthropic foundations, edtech companies, think tanks, and other interest groups, penetrating the education sector. Along with these shifts in the dynamics of the global governance of education, we are seeing an acceleration of crisis narratives. Since the financial crisis in 2008 and accelerated by Covid, a range of reports and visions of the future of education put forward by IOs portray the world in a perpetual crisis mode (Auld and Elfert 2024).

Contributions in this special issue examine ‘promissory visions’ in education spanning from the shaping of modernist educational planning strategies in developing countries in the Cold War context of the 1960s to the contemporary agendas of the pursuit of ‘best practices’ and benchmarking, of which the SDGs are the most recent example, and techno-solutionist promises regarding a brighter future shaped by Artificial Intelligence (AI). We have discerned several overarching themes across the seven articles included in this special issue: the global governance of education and problems of legitimacy; a shift in the global governance of education towards multistakeholderism, which we explore below through the lens of what Yliniva, Bryan, and Brunila (2024) call ‘the neuro-affective turn’; the use of crisis narratives as an instrument of global governance, and geopolitical shifts and the decline of the liberal world order. In the following section, we elucidate the significance and importance of these themes, and subsequently provide an overview of the articles featured in this special issue.

**Global governance of education and problems of legitimacy**

Possessing, or being perceived as possessing, legitimacy is crucial for any governing role. While political science often bases legitimacy on the notion of a social contract between the governed and the governing (Economides 2018), legitimacy in global governance relies on a different foundation. This distinction arises because IOs do not wield legislative power, are not elected by voters (with the European Parliament being a notable exception) and are typically not democratically governed. Instead, IOs usually operate with a specific mandate – either given or acquired. For instance, UNESCO has been endowed by its member states with a mandate for education, while the World Bank and the OECD have independently expanded into the education sector. Unlike UNESCO, the OECD lacks a formal mandate in education but has an indirect one due to education’s relevance to member states’ economic situation. This indirect mandate is evident in the OECD’s slogan adopted in 2011, ‘Better policies for better lives,’ and the launch of the OECD Better Life Index (Ydesen 2021a). These initiatives reflect a shift in the OECD’s outlook from a purely economic perspective to a more comprehensive one, allowing
engagement with a broader range of agendas (Li and Auld 2020). But the OECD’s involve-
ment in education is also legitimised by the requests and permissions of its member
states. The formal recognition of the OECD’s role in education by the member states
became evident in 1971, when they agreed to assume responsibility for the funding of
the Centre for Education Research and Innovation (CERI), previously provided by the
Ford Foundation and Royal Dutch Shell in a three-year start-up phase.

Therefore, IOs base a significant portion of their legitimacy on their member states
and partners, with credibility and relevance being crucial factors (Tallberg and Zürn
2019). This is where literature on the extrapolation of imperial nationalisms and
national agendas onto the IO arena finds its grounding (Tröhler, Piattoeva, and Pinar
2022; Ydesen 2021b). Simultaneously, IOs actively cultivate and enhance their own
legitimacy by emphasising their credibility through positive impacts, the meanings
that IOs derive their legitimacy from their role as ‘teachers of norms’ (703). Similarly,
Auld and Elfert (2024), in this special issue, describe IOs as ‘world-making’ agents
that perceive their role as imbuing the world order with spiritual significance. Addition-
ally, Robertson (2021, 168) points to an ‘epistemic community’ that connects the OECD
to prominent elite higher education institutions and their experts, organisations like
the Asia Society and American Field Services, the US Department of State, and corpor-
ate philanthropists.

Beyond issues of legitimacy, these configurations also encompass distinct dimensions
of futuring, where for instance UNESCO’s norm-setting and policy recommendations are
driven by an idealistic belief in education as a human right and a vision of a socially just
society, while the OECD and the World Bank base their legitimacy on human capital
theory, promising increased productivity, poverty eradication, and opportunities for all
through education investment. Robertson (2022) raises the question of whether objective,
science-based approaches to future-making, as favoured by the OECD, generate higher
legitimacy compared to UNESCO’s ‘philosophical “possibilities”’ approach (190). Elfert
(2018, 228) has argued that the economically-oriented IOs, referring to the OECD and
the World Bank, were ‘endowed with greater legitimacy by more powerful institutions’,
such as the United States government that prioritised working with the OECD and the
World Bank over UNESCO, and that ‘the ideological imaginary UNESCO stands for, human-
ism, lost out in the struggle of ideas’.

The ‘technical turn’ and the ability to offer unique expert knowledge to members and
partners, particularly in the form of data and statistics, represented another important
source of legitimacy for IOs, which is also essential for their futuring dimension of legiti-
macy. Since the launch of the first PISA study in 2000, the OECD has positioned itself as a
hegemonic actor in the global governance of education. However, a growing body of lit-
erature has highlighted the flaws and limitations of PISA and International Large Scale
Assessments (ILSAs) as drivers of educational policies and reforms (Zhao 2020). The legi-
mity derived from traditional governing by numbers is waning, as also discussed by
Robertson and Beech (2023, 13) in this special issue, who refer to ‘data evangelism’, involv-
ing national league tables and competition failing to ‘detect emotions, like the resent-
ment of those left behind following decades of neoliberal policies, and which have
fuelled authoritarian populist politics’. The failure to realise past future promises has
led to ‘legitimation problems that must be managed’ (Robertson 2022, 189). As Kim
(2024) points out in this special issue, ‘the production and dissemination of numbers are no longer a sustainable source of legitimacy.’

The OECD’s PISA has arguably been one of the principal tools of ‘governing by numbers’ over the past three decades (Grek 2009). PISA has conferred substantial ‘world-making’ power and legitimacy upon the OECD (Gorur 2015, 582). However, in light of extensive critical research, this legitimacy appears to be diminishing (Sorensen, Ydesen, and Robertson 2021). César Guadalupe in this special issue, subjects ILSAs and PISA to a critical analysis, and notes that PISA is being used as an instrument for monitoring SDG4 even if its design does not align with the intentions of SDG4. Li and Morris (2022, 14) have argued that the OECD ‘shifted its position from the margins to the centre of the network involved with delivering SDG 4’. This has also been pointed out by Auld, Rappleye, and Morris (2019) in their study tracing the inclusion of Cambodia in PISA for Development (PISA-D). Guadalupe, focusing on the use of ILSAs in Latin America, points to ‘the mismatch between promises and expectations’, the ‘ritual usage of ILSAs data’ and the ‘participation in ILSAs [as] a symbolic gesture, a way of signalling commitment to educational improvement’, even if the results of the ILSAs only ‘play a limited, if any, role in the actual policymaking process’ (Guadalupe 2024, this issue).

As the legitimacy of certain agendas diminishes, IOs are compelled to continuously reinvent themselves, with varying degrees of success. For instance, while some argue that ‘governing by numbers’ has lost its legitimacy, the OECD persists in seeking new metrics, integrating ‘humanitarian’ policy indicators such as happiness, well-being, and social and emotional skills into its frameworks to broaden its measurement schemes (Kim 2024; Li and Auld 2020; Robertson and Beech 2023). Auld and Elfert (2024) illustrate how the ‘promissory visions’ and ‘world-making’ narratives of IOs have evolved from World War II to the present, reflecting changes in the political economy. They contend that IOs derive their legitimacy not only from future-oriented promises but also from threats and coercive technologies, and they discuss the failed experiments of the global governance of education. It could be argued that a particular noteworthy example of such a failed experiment is PISA as after 24 years of conducting this international test, scores are actually declining (OECD 2023; see also Larsen 2024). Faced with numerous failed experiments, IOs resort to crisis narratives and an ‘ever further escalation, a perpetual cycle of acceleration and revolution’ (Auld and Elfert 2024, tbc)

Moreover, the advent of ‘data evangelism’ and the rise of a perpetual global metrol- ogy of education have resulted in IOs operating within a regime of surplus numbers and evidence, coinciding with an increase in the number of stakeholders, actors, and knowledge brokers (Grek 2024; Steiner-Khamsi, Martens, and Ydesen 2024). This proliferation creates a crowded and contested educational landscape with an overabundance of information and knowledge. Consequently, the process of granting or acquiring legitimacy for IOs becomes highly complex, highlighting the regime of multi-stakeholderism, which is the next theme in this section where it will be elucidated through the rise of the neuro-affective turn.

**Multistakeholderism and the neuro-affective turn**

Auld and Elfert (2024) address the proliferation of representatives of the system of global governance between the post-World War II decades to the present day. They
point to a shift away from multilateralism towards ‘multistakeholder governance’, ‘where non-elected, mostly corporate or philanthropic “partners” are invited into the intergovernmental sphere.’ A growing body of literature discusses this shift towards multistakeholderism in education governance (da Silva, Croso, and Modé Magalhães 2023; Elfert and Ydelsen 2023; Gleckman 2018). Within the context of the multistakeholderism regime and the educationalization of social problems, twenty-first century education is increasingly driven by externally defined purposes and legitimations, rates of return, testing, and performance indicators. This trend has detached education from its foundational principles and its intrinsic value, potentially redefining its essence and perceived purpose.

Corporate actors, philanthropic foundations and think tanks are engaging in ‘promissory’ visions for education, predominantly promoting the digitalisation of education since the onset of Covid-19. The increasing influence of corporate actors, in particular education technology companies, is intricately linked to what Yliniva, Bryan, and Brunila (2024) in this special issue call the ‘neuro-affective turn’. As such the entry and rise of neuroscience into education is a lens for exploring and understanding the workings of multistakeholderism.

Yliniva and colleagues critically examine the increasing ‘promissory visions’ of brain science, social and emotional and personalised learning. The ‘neuro-affective turn’ encompasses gene learning, precision learning, neurobiology, neuroscience, and neuropedagogy, which involves translating research findings on neural mechanisms of learning into educational practice and policy, and understanding the effects of education on the brain (Thomas, Ansari, and Knowland 2019). Rooted in the life sciences, this agenda is supported by substantial funding and economic interests. Consequently, the neuro-affective turn has the potential to fundamentally alter education and has already been promoted by key reports in the global governance arena, such as the 2022 report Reimagining Education: The International Science and Evidence-Based Education Assessment, published by UNESCO’s Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) (Bryan 2022; Vickers 2022).

The premise of the neuro-affective turn is that educational practices and theories can be precisely derived from scientific knowledge about the human body and brain. Yliniva and colleagues are very critical of the promise of ‘precision governance’ as the new panacea for education. They consider this shift ‘a post-political agenda which detracts attention from the wider structural forces responsible for socio-ecological injustices’ (13).

From a historical perspective it can be argued that the neuro-affective turn has roots extending back to nineteenth-century phrenology, the eugenics movement, and IQ testing practices in the early twentieth century (Gillborn 2016). For example, Robert Plomin, a leading contemporary behaviour geneticist, has argued that ‘life is an intelligence test. During the school years, differences in intelligence largely explain why some children master the curriculum more readily than others’ (Plomin and von Stumm 2018, 148). Although the relevance of neurobiology to education was acknowledged throughout the twentieth century, it was not until the 1990s, designated the ‘decade of the brain’ (Jones and Mendell 1999), that technological advances in in vivo brain imaging led to the theoretical developments making educational neuroscience a viable field (Thomas, Ansari, and Knowland 2019). The ‘neuro-affective turn’ is underpinned by behaviourism and psychological techniques to manipulate people’s behaviour.
through ‘nudging’ (Bradbury, McGimpsey, and Santori 2013). These techniques, which are based on ‘big data’, are not only being used by corporations to influence consumer behaviour, but also by governments to design public policies. It is to be expected that this agenda will further advance the penetration of education by corporate actors such as Silicon Valley companies that stand to make dizzying profits. In this context, the emergence of the neuro-affective turn aligns with multistakeholderism and the proliferation of information and knowledge, leading to conflicts over which knowledge should be canonised and which futures are to be envisioned.

The crisis as an instrument of global governance

Winston Churchill is widely credited with the statement, ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste,’ in the context of his efforts to establish the United Nations after World War II (Baird et al. 2023). This assertion implies that the declaration of a crisis creates an opportunity for action, enabling measures that address the crisis and foster the creation of a better future. As Robertson (2022, 190) states, ‘Struggles over which future is to be imagined, represented and potentially materialised tend to be episodic, and emerge at moments of crisis and deep rupture’. Auld and Elfert (2024) argue that the current period since the 2008 financial crisis is characterised by the ubiquity of crisis narratives; they call it the age of ‘emergency governance’. The notion of a ‘crisis’ in education is not a new phenomenon (Niemann and Martens 2021). In the history of education, two notable moments that were constructed as a ‘crisis’ were (a) the successful launch of the Soviet Sputnik satellite in 1957 and (b) the publication of the influential A Nation at Risk report during the Reagan administration (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). The former catalysed the enactment of the US National Defense Education Act of 1958, profoundly impacting curriculum and assessment practices (Porter 2018; Strain 2005) and paving the way for the rise of technologies in education (Watters 2021). Conversely, A Nation at Risk painted the United States federal education system as an impediment to national economic and technological advancement, particularly when compared with the education systems of Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union (Steiner-Khamsi, Martens, and Ydesen 2024). Following publication of this report, policymakers in the United States implemented new accountability measures and assessment frameworks, and advocated for the development of international comparative indicators that eventually yielded PISA.

Since 2020, the world has been in a state of crisis, serving as the backdrop for numerous reports and visions regarding the future of education put forth by IOs, as outlined above. Robertson and Beech (2023) argue that the OECD builds its legitimacy as ‘guardian of the challenges ahead’ (7) by constructing a future of uncertainty, ‘using phrases like “we are facing”, “unprecedented challenges”, “accelerating globalisation”, “faster technological development”, “rapidly changing world” “widening inequalities” “adversity” – the future … is represented as more unpredictable, more uncertain, and more hazardous … ’ (7). Kim (2024) makes the point that the OECD’s turn towards a ‘happiness’ and ‘well-being’ agenda is also built on ‘the narration of an “imagined” crisis’ as the Covid pandemic ‘has underscored that traditional cognitive skills are not enough to thrive in a complex world’ (Knudsen 2021, cited by Kim). Kim points out that ‘the discursive power behind these crises and uncertainty narratives is further strengthened by presenting the audience with various examples that construct a “problematic present”’ (this
issue). Corporate actors, philanthropic foundations, and think tanks also capitalise on this ‘problematic present’ and develop ‘promissory’ visions and solutions for education, largely advocating for the digitalisation of education since the onset of Covid-19.

Yliniva, Bryan, and Brunila (2024) argue that the neuro-affective turn in education is underpinned by crisis narratives. Yliniva and colleagues ‘interrogate how the positioning of education and the world itself as being “in crisis” has a range of discursive, subjectifying, as well as material effects, which limit possibilities for re-imagining and re-constructing the world otherwise’ (6). They are concerned that, ‘against the backdrop of a logic which presupposes that all learners can acquire the requisite social-emotional skills needed to “thrive in difficult circumstances”, certain people are implicitly positioned as deserving of care, rights, or justice, while others are framed as undeserving of the same treatment’ (15). Yliniva and colleagues argue that crisis narratives serve to ‘conditioning populations to accept that states cannot protect them from these threats, and that the onus falls on individuals to develop the requisite resilience to cope with these challenges’ (9). This is in line with Robertson and Beech’s (2024) claim that the emphasis on agency in the OECD’s Future of Education and Skills project is designed to blame the individual for the outcome of their ‘agentic efforts’ (14).

Mochizuki and Vickers (2024) point to moments of crisis being used by actors to position themselves strategically. They refer to the Chinese government taking advantage of crisis moments in UNESCO to assert its influence. One such moment was when the United States withdrew from UNESCO after the organisation had adopted Palestine as a member state in 2014. China also seized the opportunity to obtain a UNESCO institute when the International Bureau of Education in Geneva was in a crisis after the government of Switzerland decided to stop funding the institute.

Notably, this new body of research diverges from the traditional Churchillian perspective by suggesting that the declaration of a crisis should not only be understood chronologically – as a crisis followed by a promising future – but also as serving a governing function through its very endurance and reproduction, which is fuelled by the continuous identification of uncertainties. Similarly, Krejsler (2019) discusses a ‘fear of falling behind,’ which can be described as a contagious syndrome among decision-makers who seek indicators of their standing relative to competitors. Crucially, this fear contributes to a state of crisis and uncertainty, which, in turn, fuels strategic positioning and geopolitical shifts, the focus of the subsequent theme in this section.

**Geopolitical shifts and the decline of the liberal world order**

Currently, educational IOs are navigating a landscape where the geopolitical foundations established post-World War II are undergoing significant challenges and reconstruction. Krejsler (2021) highlights that anthropological research has frequently shown that what was previously considered ‘universal’ is, in fact, a predominantly Western-centric interpretation of globalisation. The Western-centric era is being questioned as the significance and influence of the West, particularly Europe, diminishes globally (Daskalovski 2023). This shift was evident in the May 2024 summit between Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, where challenging the Western-centric global governance architecture was explicitly stated as a goal of Russia and China. Another significant indicator of this shift is the expansion of the BRICS network – which includes Brazil, Russia, India,
China, and South Africa – to incorporate Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates as of January 2024, transforming the network into what is now called BRICS +. According to estimates, BRICS + now account for 37.3% of the world GDP, more than half of the European Union’s share (14.5%) (Think Tank European Parliament 2024; see also Chisholm and Chissale 2024).

As we have argued, IOs have always reinvented themselves to maintain legitimacy and provide solutions to decision-makers. One strategy to strengthen an organisation and potentially alter the relative positions of IOs is global expansion or the recruitment of new partners and members. For example, in 1990, the OECD established the Centre for Co-operation with European Economies in Transition to engage with post-socialist (non-member) states. Additionally, through its PISA programme, including the PISA-D sub-programme, and its alignment with the United Nations’ SDGs, the OECD has significantly expanded its influence to low- and middle-income countries across all continents (Li 2021).

However, the current situation appears more fundamental than previous ones because the asymmetric power relations that positioned the West as the benchmark are now under intense scrutiny and challenge. There is an ongoing struggle over geopolitical influence and who gets to set global norms and policies. For IOs, this means they are in a race to maintain their relevance, authority, and legitimacy. The critical question is whether alternative IOs or networks in education will emerge or if existing IOs will adapt to their new constituencies in terms of programmes, priorities, funding, and staff composition. Simultaneously, the expansion of BRICS to BRICS + suggests potential for increased collaboration between IOs and these countries. This could result in new educational initiatives and partnerships that leverage the strengths and resources of BRICS + nations.

So far, we have seen China assume a key role within UNESCO, reflecting this shift. China’s growing influence in UNESCO, which has accelerated since the United States withdrew from the organisation following the acceptance of Palestine as a member state, is the topic of the article by Yoko Mochizuki and Edward Vickers in this special issue (Mochizuki and Vickers 2024). They demonstrate how China is using UNESCO as a platform to further its strategic interests in AI and education for science and technology. The US, wary of China ‘moving to assume global leadership, especially with regard to standard setting for AI’, cited Chinese influence as the major motivation to rejoin the organisation in 2023. This move has to be situated ‘in the context of intensifying US–China geostrategic rivalry that is transforming international cooperation more broadly’ (this issue).

Mochizuki and Vickers emphasise the “technopolitical” priorities of governments in the context of ‘the intensifying US–China technological rivalry’ and the ‘geo-politics of AI’, which plays out in UNESCO. The impact of the merging of technology, ‘big data’ and behavioural psychology can be seen in the ramping up of technologies for monitoring and surveillance, which are particularly advanced in China, but have also greatly intensified worldwide as a consequence of the Covid lockdowns (Williamson and Hogan 2020; cited in Mochizuki and Vickers 2024).

With countries like China assuming more prominent roles, UNESCO’s educational programmes may increasingly reflect a broader range of cultural and political perspectives while there is a risk that UNESCO may increasingly serve agendas as a result of tied money. This diversification could lead to a greater emphasis on education models and
policies that align with non-Western values and priorities. As traditional ‘governing by numbers’ approaches face criticism, the IOs may have to innovate new metrics and frameworks that better reflect the priorities and wishes of rising states on the geopolitical chessboard such as the embrace of the OECD’s happiness education agenda by South Korea (Kim 2023). On the other hand, there are also signs of converging agendas between Western and non-Western countries. As Auld and Elfert (2024) argue, ‘while there is clear evidence of increasing (geo)political multipolarity, our analysis has shown that transnational actors and networks hold converging interests and pursue strikingly similar societal and educational visions’. The ‘neuro-affective’ turn addressed by Yliniva, Bryan and Brunila and the turn towards ‘social and emotional skills, creativity, global and digital competencies’ (Kim 2024) are cases pointing to ‘a deepening ideological alignment’ between actors that were previously distinct in their traditions and ontologies. Yliniva et al. argue that UNESCO is moving more towards the OECD in its embrace of ‘neuro-affective’ education: ‘Whereas UNESCO may package its ideal learner somewhat differently to give it a more humanistic complexion, the underlying discourse bears a striking resemblance to the OECD’ (16).

Another area of convergence is the coordination between IOs in the promotion of ‘research evidence’ and ever more data. Ydesen and Elfert (2023) point to the creation of the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism (GCM) in 2021, with the aim of ‘boost[ing] the implementation of SDG4 by promoting the coordinated use of research evidence for policy among the large IGOs in education’. Ydesen and Elfert interpret this as ‘the creation of a global datafication project with an unquenchable thirst for more data’ (2) that legitimates informal multistakeholder arrangements characterised by ‘a whole series of informal and ad hoc arrangements, all accepted and all approved in the name of an education crisis’ (Elfert and Ydesen 2023, 214; citing Grek 2020).

Related to these geopolitical shifts, some papers in this special issue also address the shift away from a liberal world order. Bromley, Nachtigal and Kijima (2024)’s analysis of hundreds of education reform projects worldwide between 1970 to 2018, reveals an increasing number of reforms related to data and information and a decrease of reforms framed explicitly in the discourse of ‘rights’. These tendencies may point to a decline of the liberal world order. In a similar vein, Auld and Elfert (2024) argue that in the current ‘age of “emergency governance”’, IOs have given up on liberal scripts in terms of making ‘promises of a better world, progress and development’. Instead, they have resorted to crisis narratives.

Robertson and Beech (2023) address what they observe to be a shift in the capitalist system. In the context of debates about the OECD’s move towards a more ‘humanitarian’ and softer agenda (Li and Auld 2020), Robertson and Beech argue that the OECD’s turn ‘to individual agency, well-being, anticipation, and reflexivity’ does not represent a real change in the OECD’s approach. They argue that ‘it is important not to be distracted by appearances’ and that ‘there is little reason to see that anything has changed’. Rather, in their view, the discursive shifts represent a reaction to the transformation of capitalism, as the new capitalism requires a new form of worker, the ‘immaterial worker’ that has ‘a unique combination of psychic, cognitive and affective powers’ (citing Berardi 2009), ‘called upon to invest their creative sensibilities and communicative capacities’ (citing Dorahy 2022). As a result of these new requirements, ‘the ideational
work of the OECD must follow along with the instruments of imagination that it uses to govern’ (this issue).

**Overview of the articles included in the special issue**

The article by Euan Auld and Maren Elfert, *The waning legitimacy of international organizations and their promissory visions*, undertakes a critical inquiry into the legitimacy of the international organisations created after World War II and their promissory visions. They analyse the promissory visions promoted by IOs in three historical periods, the post-World War II period, the neoliberal globalisation period, and the contemporary period, which they refer to as ‘emergency governance’. Conceptually framed by critical theory, they present the history of global educational visions as a story of failed experiments. They also argue that a pattern emerges towards ever greater convergence and globalism.

The article by Patricia Bromley, Tom Nachtigal and Rie Kijima, *Data as the new panacea: Trends in global education reforms*, draws on the World Education Reform Database, which is the outcome of a research project conducted by the Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education, to investigate changes in the promissory visions articulated in education reforms around the world. Using topic modelling to analyse the content of 9,268 reforms from 215 countries during the period 1970 to 2018, they find a decline in traditional management-focused reforms and a rise in reforms related to data and information. While there is a notable increase in references to educational access and inclusion, reforms framed explicitly in ‘rights’ discourse diminish. They speculate that these shifts in the framing of education reforms may reflect a broader erosion of the liberal world order.

The article by Susan Robertson and Jason Beech, *”Promises promises!”: International organisations, promissory legitimacy and the re-negotiation of futures*, focuses on the promissory visions presented in the OECD’s Future of Education and Skills strategy as an example of how an IO engages with anticipatory governance. They are particularly interested in how the OECD compensates for its failed promises that were tied to neoliberal policies and how the organisation deals with the legitimacy problems that arise from them. They identify five strategies the OECD uses in its new Future of Education and Skills 2030 initiative ‘to narrate a now failed past and problematic present, and to advance a new education future in ways that move the legitimation burden away from the OECD’. They also notice ‘rather schizophrenic tensions’ and ‘ongoing ambivalence’ between the new OECD’s 2030 Futures programme and its ‘old’ policy work ‘tied to skills, large-scale assessments and standardisation’.

The article by Min Ji (Evelyn) Kim, *Scripting solutions for the future: The OECD’s advocacy of happiness and well-being*, connects with the previous article by Robertson and Beech as it also engages with the OECD’s Future of Education and Skills 2030 project and addresses the question of how the OECD deals with a legitimacy problem. Kim argues that the OECD resorts to making ‘futuristic claims’ – she uses the concept of the ‘fictive script’ – in order to compensate for the waning legitimacy of ‘the production and dissemination of numbers’. She shows that the OECD is returning to the future studies methodologies it engaged with in the late twentieth century, re-defining itself as ‘a pathfinder and a problem solver’. Ultimately, Kim – similarly to Robertson and Beech – sees the OECD’s turn to ‘humanitarian policy signifiers such as happiness, well-being, and social and emotional skills’ as a ‘way for the organisation to expand its measurement schemes’.
The article by César Guadalupe, ‘The promises and expectations of ILSAs regarding policymaking: Lessons from Latin America’, engages with one of the major tools of the global governance of education that has been the object of a myriad of publications in recent years, International Large Scale Assessments (ILSAs). Focusing on Latin America, Guadalupe asks what the impact of ILSA results has been in Latin American countries, and how ILSAs have been used for policymaking. Guadalupe points to a ‘mismatch between promises and expectations’ and sheds light on the use of ILSAs as a political instrument and what he calls the ‘ritual usage’ of ILSAs data. Participation in ILSAs as a ‘symbolic gesture’ has become more important than the results of ILSAs, which ‘play a limited, if any, role in the actual policymaking process’.

The article by Yoko Mochizuki and Edward Vickers, ‘UNESCO, the geopolitics of AI, and China’s engagement with the futures of education’, examines China’s increasing engagement with UNESCO ‘as an arena for competitive national branding’ and as a way to legitimize China’s strategic interests in STEM and AI. The authors discuss China’s relations with UNESCO in the context of increasing ‘securitisation’ and ramping up of digital technology of education in China as well as China’s geopolitical context of President Xi Jinping’s ‘major country diplomacy’ and the ‘intensifying strategic competition with the USA’. This is timely against the background of the United States’s recent return to the organisation, citing the intention to counter China’s influence. Mochizuki and Vickers are sceptical that the intensifying relationship with China will be conducive for UNESCO’s commitment to a humanistic vision of education as the ‘technologically-enhanced autocracy that China embodies … represents the antithesis of the sort of humanistic and emancipatory vision of learning that UNESCO has long advocated’.

Drawing on previous work on the current ‘neoliberal’ turn (Bryan 2022) and ‘precision education governance’ (Mertanen, Vainio, and Brunila 2021), Kirsi Yliniva, Audrey Bryan and Kristiina Brunila, in their article, ‘The future we want? – The ideal 21st century learner and education’s neuro-affective turn’ critically analyse ‘education’s neuro-affective turn in an era of precision education governance’, with a focus on the construction of the learner by IOs, specifically on the OECD’s ‘resilient learner’ and UNESCO’s ‘empathetic learner’. They argue that future-making visions point to ‘a deepening ideological convergence regarding the fundamental purposes of education’ between IOs that in the past were characterised by distinct ideological differences. They are concerned about the effects of the positioning of education and the world as ‘in crisis’ on justice and equality, as these new discourses may lead to greater inequalities and a depoliticisation of broader political and structural problems.

**Conclusion**

The contributions in this special issue enhance the growing body of scholarly literature on global governance in education, emphasising its future-oriented and ‘promissory’ role. In this introductory article we have teased out a number of overarching themes across the contributions, in particular the problems of legitimacy faced by actors of the global governance of education, multistakeholderism and the neuro-affective turn, the crisis as an instrument of global governance, geopolitical shifts, and indications for the decline of the liberal world order.

Although many perspectives are missing, this introduction and the papers included in the special issue reflect that we are in a time of significant and, some would argue,
distressing change. The post-World War II multilateral system of international cooperation is undergoing shifts, indicating a historical juncture and a transition between an ‘old normal’ and a ‘new normal’, as Robertson and Beech put it in this special issue. IOs, as ‘guardians of the future,’ must adapt to new geopolitical dynamics, heightened conflict, and crisis. In this context, IOs may compromise their traditional values to align with new governance dynamics involving powerful countries and corporate stakeholders distancing themselves from the liberal world order as a part of which these IOs have been created.

Despite these shifts, there is a converging trend across IOs towards the ‘neuro-affective turn,’ with AI and digitalisation dominating educational agendas worldwide. The agendas and actors of the global governance of education will remain a focus of critical research. The ‘promissory visions’ of AI will likely be a dominant theme within this research agenda. It remains to be seen whether these visions will be realised, who will benefit, who will be left behind, and what they mean for education. The articles in this special issue suggest there is reason to be sceptical.

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Notes on contributors

Maren Elfert is Senior Lecturer in International Education at King’s College London. Her areas of research involve the global governance of education and the influence of international organisations on educational ideas and policies, and she has published on the history of international organisations in relation to education for development, literacy, and adult education and lifelong learning policy. She is member of the editorial board of Comparative Education and submissions editor of the International Review of Education.

Christian Ydesen holds the chair in History of Education and Policy Analysis at the Institute of Education, University of Zürich, Switzerland, and an Honorary Research Fellowship at the Department of Education, Oxford University, UK. He has published numerous chapters and articles on subjects such as educational testing, international organisations, accountability, educational psychology, and diversity in education from historical and international perspectives. Currently, he serves as an executive editor of the European Educational Research Journal and the editor-in-chief of the Springer book series Global Histories of Education.

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