

Research Article

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OECD–EU Soft Governance and Educational Reform in Greece: PISA, Accountability, and Digital Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the mechanisms through which cooperation between the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) shaped the orientation of Greek education policy between 2015 and 2026. Its point of departure is the OECD's institutional role, the development of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the earlier Greek debate on educational evaluation. This historical foundation is extended through recent international research. Comparative measurement, peer review, policy recommendations, European funding, and digital competence frameworks are analysed as interconnected instruments of soft governance. The study follows a qualitative synthesis that combines institutional document analysis, secondary interpretation of PISA evidence, and comparisons involving Greece, Iceland, Sweden, Portugal, South Korea, and China. The findings indicate that international indicators do not transfer mechanically into national policy. They become influential when they are connected to domestic administrative capacity, political legitimacy, teachers' professional learning, and credible implementation monitoring. A four-stage framework is proposed, tracing the movement from an international signal to national mediation, school-level enactment, and educational outcomes. Equity, sample representativeness, privacy, and the prevention of teaching narrowly to the test are treated as essential safeguards. The framework reframes PISA as a source of diagnostic and professional learning rather than a league table and offers a practical basis for evaluating future Greek reforms.

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Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) acknowledges education as a crucial factor for economic development and social cohesion. It develops performance indicators and comparative evidence designed to inform policy development and improvement. As such, the original Greek study on which this article is based examined three interrelated issues: the institutional operation of the OECD, the role of the PISA, and the educational relationship between the OECD & EU, and Greece. The article retains such a historical line of inquiry but transforms it into a focused analysis of contemporary policy influence.

The main research question is: Through which soft-governance mechanisms did OECD–EU cooperation influence the orientation of Greek education policy towards skills, evaluation, accountability, and digital transformation during the period 2015–2026? The analysis connects the institutional background with post-pandemic policy, PISA 2022, and the PISA 2025 assessment framework.

The analysis draws on background sources on PISA, international institutions, and European education policy broader research on international organisations in education, institutional information on PISA, and European evidence on teaching practices [1–8]. Recent international studies inform the discussion of testing, local implementation, sample representativeness, well-being, and policy mediation [9–13].

Soft governance is defined as influence exerted in the absence of a legislative command. The OECD provides comparable data, classification, definition of competence, reviews, and recommendations. The EU incorporates some of this knowledge into common priorities, sets benchmarks, and provides funding incentives and coordination cycles, although member states remain formally in charge of education. As a result, reform emerges not in a linear order, but through the interaction of international signals, national selection and local enactment. New international testing research highlights that quantification can move governments but varies in effect depending on domestic political reception and credible attribution of comparison [9,14–16].

The examination employs a qualitative interpretive synthesis. It first reconstructs the institutional development of the OECD and its cooperation with the EU. Secondly, it treats PISA not just as an assessment, but as an infrastructure for producing policy knowledge. To begin with, Greece is interpreted through policy learning and national mediation and implementation capacity. Also, comparison avoids the incorrect assumption that general tensions of international assessment are uniquely Greek. The format does not project the causal impact of just a single reform. Rather, it proposes a clear mechanism and set of indicators which later empirical work can usefully invoke [17-20].

Institutional and Theoretical Framework

Historical Development, Purposes, and Rules of the OECD

The International organization which is headquartered in Paris is the OECD. It came from the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation, which was established in 1948 for administering the Marshall Plan and for European reconstruction after the Second World War. The organization was reconstituted as the OECD in 1961 as economies outside Europe joined. Greece participated in the predecessor organization and became a founding OECD member. The importance of this history is as follows: it anchors education within a larger institution primarily concerned with reconstruction, economic coordination, and development [2].

The aim of the OECD is to promote policies that improve economic and social well-being. Member nations use it to compare their performance across trade, taxation, technology, agriculture, environment, employment, and education. They identify common problems, share practices and produce policy guidelines. The OECD Convention connects growth in the economy, jobs, living standards, financial stability and world trade expansion. These objectives elucidate why education came onto the organisation's agenda as both a social institution and a source of human resource capability [2].

The structure of the institution combines political representation and expert production. The Council, made up of representatives of member States, establishes broad priorities. Ministerial meetings give high-level directions while permanent representatives execute regular work in Paris. National officials and experts of different policy fields meet in committees. The Secretary-General of the Secretariat assists in research, data production, policy analysis, and preparation of recommendations. The intergovernmental nature of the organization is reinforced by consensus-based decision-making, but the ongoing work of committees and experts also enables the organization to stabilize concepts and methods over time.

The account of the history should be read as a starting point, not as a static institutional portrait. The composition of the membership

and leadership has evolved, and the scope of education work has developed from statistics to competence frameworks, system reviews, scenarios of transformation, etc. The modern relevance lies less in numbers and more in the creation of a common language like: learning outcomes', 'resilience', 'equity', 'student agency', 'digital readiness', and 'lifelong learning'. That kind of vocabulary becomes the cognitive map governments use to describe problems and justify interventions. The act of borrowing is never a straightforward copying process. Domestic players adapt and fuse foreign models in reaction to political disputes and policy opportunities [16].

Knowledge Production and Soft Regulation

The OECD promotes collaboration within audits, statistical numbers, as well as comparative texts. The information is gathered from various policy domains and activities to regularly monitor national policy development and implementation. While the organization doesn't have the authority to legislate for schools, it can influence their agendas through the selection of outcomes to be measured, categories to be compared, and policy options to be made plausible. Thus, the education system is linked to a wider development model in which knowledge, skills, productivity, participation and social cohesion mutually reinforce each other.

In education, OECD reports, indicators, and recommendations exert influence through evidence, peer comparison, and reputation. Governments interpret these instruments within national political and institutional contexts. Research on Nordic education describes the OECD as an adviser, knowledge broker, and participant in policy networks [17].

The growing focus on well-being, agency, and resilience has made it harder for people to view the OECD as only about productivity potential. According to the organization's endorsement of happiness and well-being writes the script for desirable educational futures and embeds normative assumptions in seemingly technical frameworks [12]. Indicators need a democratic review. Policymakers need to clarify which problem an indicator captures, which experiences are left outside the frame, and which educational values are made weaker when measurement becomes a target.

According to Table 1, soft governance does not depend on one single lever. It has a cumulative effect. A signal is produced by measurement, interpretation is supplied by peer review, competence frameworks indicate direction, and European funding can reduce implementation costs. It is possible for the same sequence to produce genuine organisational learning or ceremonial compliance. Whether teachers and schools get involved in implementing the change is a key factor.

Table 1: OECD–EU Soft-Governance Mechanisms and their Expected Effects

Mechanism	Mode of Influence	Application and Risk in Greece
International indicators and PISA	Make performance and equity gaps visible and establish a shared problem language.	Support trend diagnosis; risk of ranking without contextual interpretation.
Peer review and system reviews	Connect experts, administrations, and comparative cases in feedback cycles.	Build administrative learning; risk of superficial transfer of “best practice.”
Recommendations and competence frameworks	Define concepts, targets, and reference standards for curricula, assessment, and digital learning.	Improve policy coherence; risk of narrowing education to measurable competences.
EU coordination and funding	Connect shared objectives to projects, milestones, technical support, and monitoring.	Accelerate infrastructure and professional development; risk of compliance without local ownership.
Public comparison and dissemination	Mobilise media, professional bodies, and political debate.	Increase accountability; risk of “PISA shock,” school stigma, and short-term reactions.

OECD–EU Cooperation and PISA

From Policy Coordination to a Shared Evidence Infrastructure

The OECD started to increasingly associate economic objectives with education. The institution’s comparative expertise and continuous publication of indicators through its broad presentation made it a major educational institution. As part of the Education and Training 2020 strategy, the European Commission and the OECD identified international surveys as a field of shared interest and devised a cooperation on education and skills. The relationship brought together OECD global assessments with EU coordination among education systems that remained nationally governed.

In 2013, the organizations together made available the results from PISA and the Survey of Adult Skills, or PIAAC. Evidence on students, adults, and the transition from education to employment was able to reach a wider audience because of them. In 2015, Eurydice published a report on teaching practices, perceptions, and policies in Europe [4]. The analysis of teachers in European primary and secondary schools is based on evidence from large-scale assessments collected by the Commission’s Centre for Research on Education and Lifelong Learning [8].

The relationship has become more organised around quality, equity and digital change since 2015. The OECD retained global comparative infrastructures. The EU combined regional coordination with considerable funding capacity. The dual levels in Greece created a rich environment for referencing outcomes. On the one hand, comparisons were made globally. On the other hand, thanks to European priorities, reforms received a timetable. Furthermore, national authorities were expected to interpret broad objectives in various things like curricula, teacher learning, school evaluation, and digital services.

The information in Table 2 suggests that this period did not mark a linear path of uninterrupted reform. The international agendas are changing due to the pandemic crisis and more. There does appear to be a degree of continuity in the policy lexicon of skills, evidence, evaluation, school capacity and digital transformation. This continuity reflects a cognitive effect but does not prove that every national measure is an effect of the OECD or the EU [21,22]. The 2026 OECD review of Greece addresses school governance, teacher professionalism, and digital education, while the PISA 2025 assessment framework includes Learning in the Digital World [21,22].

Table 2: Timeline of International Signals and Greek Policy Mediation, 2015–2026

Period	International or European Signal	Greek Relevance and Interpretation
2015–2017	Joint use of TALIS/PISA evidence, with attention to teaching quality and skills.	Evaluation became more closely associated with instructional quality but remained politically sensitive.
2018–2020	PISA 2018, EU digital priorities, and preparation of national reforms.	The need for applied knowledge, school self-evaluation, and digital infrastructure became more visible.
2021–2023	Pandemic-driven digitisation, PISA 2022, and funding milestones.	Access to devices expanded, while pedagogical use and inequality remained critical.
2024–2025	PISA 2022 Volume V and Education Policy Outlook 2025 emphasised learning strategies and resilient lifelong learners [19,20].	Attention moved from equipment alone towards agency, learning strategies, and professional capacity.
2026	A dedicated review of Greece and the PISA 2025 digital-world framework was published [21,22].	School governance, teacher professionalism, and evidence-informed digital pedagogy became central priorities.

PISA as Assessment and Policy Institution

The OECD initiated its international programme of PISA testing that constitutes a global enterprise. Samples of 15-year-old students near the end of compulsory schooling are assessed. Through international coordination, common procedures are implemented by the national centres, which pay for the programme. The evaluation emphasizes how applicants utilize knowledge rather than how well

they have mastered a single national syllabus [1,5]. Countries with different curricula are compared through literacy-oriented constructs through this distinction.

Over time, reading, math, and science remain the three learning domains; each cycle has had one domain receiving more emphasis. Context questionnaires gather data on students, families, school resources, learning climates, and education-system features. The data allow analysis of relationships but do not in and of themselves determine causal explanation. As a result of this programme, applied learning now includes additional domains such as collaborative problem solving and digital competencies.

PISA results can influence public debate because rankings translate complex assessment evidence into accessible messages. Research on South Korea shows how media coverage contributes to educational agenda-setting [14]. Evidence from a local Chinese context also suggests that PISA's perceived influence on learning is mediated by the interpretations and practices of school leaders and teachers [10].

Previous research on the Swedish PISA sample and register data [11] demonstrated the importance of representativeness for national inference. Research on PISA for Development has also questioned how international assessments represent out-of-school youth [15]. The National averages in Greece should accordingly be presented with evidence on participation, exclusions, gaps, regional variation, school type, and statistical uncertainty.

PISA 2012 involved 65 countries and economies, with mathematics as the major assessment domain. Greek sample consisted of around 5,000 students from 192 schools. The programme grew in authority through continental expansion and mechanism cycles, as illustrated by historical participation data.

Figure 1 illustrates the geographical coverage of PISA 2015 [7]. It provides historical context for the period examined in this article and should not be interpreted as a map of current participation.

International comparisons provide participating countries with insight into their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the association between their student outcomes and the characteristics of their education systems. They can serve as a basis for reflection on whether policies enhance quality and social justice. After all, one high-performance system does not guarantee the success of another, as they are different systems. Mechanisms must be identified rather than visible institutional forms reproduced.

Recent evidence provides support for this qualification. The gaps in public–private school performance vary greatly with sampling weights and the composition and educational pathways of the student population [18]. It cannot be assumed that the performance of another country is due to a school-sector structure or an isolated practice. Structural elements such as selection, resources, composition, and institutional history matter.

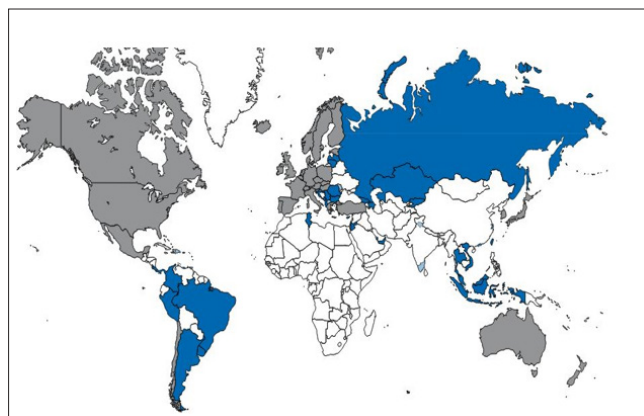


Figure 1: Countries and economies participating in PISA 2015. Participating OECD member countries are shown in grey, and partner countries and economies in blue. Source: Institute of Educational Policy. (n.d.). PISA [in Greek]. <https://www2.iep.edu.gr/el/?catid=25&id=322:pisa&view=article> [7]

Greece, 2015–2026

Participation, Performance, and Equity

Greece participated in PISA for the first time in 2000. The body in charge of national implementation is the Institute of Educational Policy, which was trained in depth by the OECD. It was previously involved with the Centre for Educational Research. Historically, samples have included public and private schools from various regions and about 5,000 students [1]. By the year 2015, testing was conducted on the computer and came with student and school questionnaires.

An initial examination of Greece's performance generated a poor outcome, which further argued that greater connection is needed in the education system between academic knowledge and real-life problem-solving.

Greek scores continued to lag behind OECD average levels and fell relative to earlier cycles. A good interpretation should go beyond rank and differentiate three aspects: the level of performance, the distribution of educational opportunity, and the system's ability to recover after disruption. The PISA 2022 volume has made the association of achievement with learning strategies, motivation, and attitudes, while the Education Policy Outlook 2025 focuses on an engaged and resilient lifelong learner in a digitally transforming world [19,20].

Low performance should be interpreted at the system level rather than attributed to a single group of students, teachers, or curriculum designers. The OECD review of Greece recommends strengthening school governance, teacher professionalism, and digital education [21]. These recommendations require accountability to be combined with practical support, including time for collaboration, professional development, appropriate technology, and constructive feedback.

From Evidence to Changed Practice

The material collected from PISA may be the object of a national analysis, with a view to modelling proposals to the education authorities. The effective ways and the areas that need improvement can be revealed in principle through comparisons. The issue with implementation occurs because of the distance of the national indicator from classroom action. A score does not identify the appropriate teaching response for a particular student, nor does it indicate whether the intervention is feasible under local conditions. A national-level analysis hence needs intermediate structures to link system evidence with curriculum, formative assessment, professional dialogue, and school planning.

Student portfolios can document learning products, problem-solving processes, and progress over time. They can support activities aligned with the PISA 2025 emphasis on computational problem solving and self-regulated learning in digital environments [22]. Such activities should develop transferable capabilities rather than reproduce assessment items.

Technological progress in the absence of fundamental innovative approaches to institutions will not guarantee transformation. According to a systematic review of teachers' digital competence, there is an important combination of technical, pedagogical design, assessment capacity and organisation [23]. As per Greece, the investment in devices and platforms should therefore be connected to communities of practice, school leadership and short improvement cycles. A teacher could create a genuine task, gather proof in the portfolio, discuss anonymized examples with colleagues, and adjust instruction. As a result, an international indicator turns into an internal instrument of professional learning.

Table 3 summarises comparative lessons about the mechanisms through which international evidence is interpreted and used in national contexts.

Table 3: Comparative Lessons on National Mediation of PISA Evidence

Case	Recent Research Finding	Lesson for Greece
Iceland	The OECD occupied multiple positions in the policy network around Education Policy 2030 [13].	Roles should be transparent, and national ownership of objectives should be explicit.
Nordic Countries	The OECD acts as adviser, knowledge broker, and policy participant [17].	Recommendations should be treated as negotiable knowledge rather than ready-made prescriptions.
Sweden	Sample representativeness affects the reliability of national conclusions [11].	Participation, exclusions, and uncertainty require technical scrutiny.
Portugal	Weights and student composition alter estimates of public–private differences [18].	Causal claims should not be drawn from unadjusted mean differences.
South Korea and China	Media and local actors reframe PISA messages [10,14].	Communication and teacher participation are integral to implementation.

Accountability, Professionalism, and Policy Legitimacy

Conflict may be heightened by soft governance when indicators are framed as unchallengeable technical truth. In addition, if it is designed as an infrastructure for learning, evaluation can be a common basis for dialogue. Evaluation therefore requires clear objectives, privacy safeguards, proportionate procedures, and opportunities for teachers to interpret and discuss the evidence concerning their practice.

In addition to being a communication strategy, legitimacy of a policy also serves as the means for implementing the policy. It is important for school leaders and teachers to have structured opportunities to explain which objectives are feasible, which resources are no longer available, and which unintended consequences are emerging. Students and families need information that is clear and not stigmatizing. Central authorities should publish not just targets but also the evidence and criteria which were used to appraise progress. These arrangements shift responsibility from top-down monitoring to mutual obligation to account for decisions and outcomes.

Professionalism and accountability complement each other rather than being in opposition. Professional judgement can be interpreted as evidence of professional autonomy; however, accountability for perceptions of distinct educational outputs could result in pressure for severe adjustment of data or performance. A balanced model establishes predefined expectations whilst schools are allowed discretion over their methods, documenting their reasoning, with freedom to shift plans. This phase of the assessment provides information on whether the program is implemented in line with the plans and proposals.

Integrative Framework and Discussion

Table 4 presents the proposed four-stage framework linking international evidence, national mediation, school enactment, and outcomes.

Table 4: Framework for Converting International Signals into Sustainable Educational Improvement

Stage	Core Functions and Indicators	Risk and Quality Safeguard
1. International signal	PISA result, country review, or competence framework; tests of validity, trend, and equity.	Ranking without interpretation; publish uncertainty and multiple indicators.
2. National mediation	Public justification of goals, stakeholder participation, curriculum fit, and resource analysis.	Policy copying; require documented adaptation and piloting.
3. School enactment	Professional learning, collaborative design, formative assessment, and digital support.	Administrative overload; provide time, technical assistance, and simplified procedures.
4. Outcomes and feedback	Learning, equity, well-being, and digital agency assessed through quantitative and qualitative evidence.	Teaching to the test; use a balanced outcome set and scheduled revision.

OECD–EU influence takes place through a four-step chain. At the first stage, international evidence alters the perceived problem. At the second level, national actors choose goals and institutional forms. At the third stage, reforms take place at the material and professional level of the school.

At the fourth stage, outcomes should inform feedback and revision rather than serve only as a final judgement.

The framework also shows the reasons why similar recommendations lead to different results. An effective global signal with no local legitimacy quickly fades. Compliance with the law is well documented nationally but means little. When the four stages become linked together, PISA can serve questions that go beyond ranking: Which learners drop off? What strategies strengthen agency? What organizational conditions enable schools to learn or get better?

The research identifies three significant mechanisms as productive of meaningful social structural change. To begin with, problem construction occurs when comparison makes a gap visible and supplies categories for naming it. In specialized terms, resource alignment is the phenomenon that occurs when European coordination connects a policy objective to the provision of technical assistance, infrastructure, or professional development. Third, there is recursive learning when the evidence of the implementation is used to revise the policy, rather than just demonstrate compliance. These mechanisms explain why influence is not coercive and not without effect. It alters the information, language, motivation, and timing surrounding national decisions.

We cannot stop being critical. Although comparison may enhance transparency, it reduces the diversity of education to a handful of numbers. It is necessary to analyse the structures and modes of life of society relevant to social improvement and planned change. Validation, participation, proportionality, and revision should therefore be embedded in assessment and policy processes. Digital tools, when used to assess, can provide rich process data but also create new requirements for privacy and interpretation. The proper response is not to reject comparison or accept it fully.

During the period under analysis, there is a change in the object of governance. Earlier cycles focused public attention on the mean scores and subject domains. Recent frameworks emphasise, alongside performance learning strategies, attitudes, self-regulation and digital problem solving [19,22]. This broadening has the potential to mitigate a rather restrictive conception of quality, but it also extends the reach of measurement to encompass material where cultural and local context has a strong dependence.

Accordingly, national authorities should not categorize every novel dis/enabling norm as, i.e., the immediate target. A construct should not enter into policy until its meaning in Greek-language

instruments has been examined, its relationship with curriculum established, and schools given a pedagogic reason for using it.

Different timings exist for international assessment cycles, EU programming periods, national legislation, school planning and teacher professional development. When a government has committed to fast action about an international indicator, it may require schools to take action before there are materials, training or staff available. A good school initiative can disappear before any system-wide change becomes visible during the next international cycle. Consequently, the four-stage model is to be accompanied by an implementation calendar that differentiates between short-term outputs, medium-term practice changes and longer-term learning outcomes.

Ultimately, proof must move in more than one direction. Usually, OECD and EU reports move from international analysis to national recommendations. However, situated knowledge of schools regarding feasibility, inclusion, and unintended effects is also produced. A reciprocal model would combine this knowledge without forcing it into compliance data. The Ministry of Education (MOE) could illustrate how international recommendations, through structured teacher panels, student consultation, and regional case studies, have been accepted, amended, or rejected in the last three decades through transparent responses. This feedback would strengthen national ownership and enhance the quality of future international review. One of the essential forms of evidence is professional experience, which is not an impediment to evidence-informed policy; we must collect it systematically and subject it to challenge.

A total of four practical implications emerge for Greece. Before publicising ranks, national reporting must interpret trends and equity gaps. Proposals that seek to engender reform should clearly identify the exact international evidence used and the domestic assumptions that were added during the subsequent translation. Plans for implementation should include specified professional time and support. In the end, what should be monitored is student learning, well-being, inclusion, and digital agency, to stop any one indicator becoming the purpose for education.

It is essential to create and maintain stable capability within the public administration sector. Frequent changes of terms, platforms, or reporting procedures waste the school's time and make longitudinal interpretation tough. A compact yet resilient analytical entity made up of assessment specialists, curriculum professionals, data privacy specialists, and educational practitioners could facilitate definitions, publish methodologies, and support continuity across political cycles.

Conclusion

According to the evaluation, OECD–EU cooperation entered Greek educational policy essentially through comparative visibility, the common language of skills, country and system reviews, peer

learning, and the connection of European priorities with resources for implementation. While PISA was the best-known mechanism, it was not the only one. Since 2015, the agenda shifted from measuring performance to focusing on issues of equity, resilience, teacher capacity, and learning in a digital world.

This effect was not followed by a predictable convergence. International ideas get a contextual meaning through national decisions and school practices. The main job of Greece is not just to enhance its league-table position in isolation, but to create a realistic cycle of diagnosis, support, enactment and feedback. Teacher evaluation is educationally legitimate when it makes inequalities visible, supports and fosters professional judgement, and makes the judgment open to revision.

Digital transformation has educational value when it strengthens learners' problem-solving, self-regulation, and effective use of digital tools.

The proposed framework can help clarify responsibilities at each level. To ensure feedback is actionable, international bodies must produce valid evidence, the national authority must substantiate the adaptation and resource it, the school must turn the objectives into teaching opportunities, and the system must manage the monitoring. When these conditions are in place, soft governance may be a source of evidence-informed national learning. Not having this presence means that the same tools risk being symbolically compliant, having narrow accountability, and having a reformist fatigue.

Future research can apply the four-stage framework in a mixed-method, longitudinal study of Greek schools. The first strand will trace how OECD–EU recommendations are translated into national regulations, professional-development programmes and school action plans. The second kind of evidence would be PISA trends, national evidence, student portfolios, and interviews with teachers, learners, leaders and officials. A third would analyze schools across countries and socio-economic settings to examine the extent to which evaluation and digital policy reduce or reproduce inequality. In practice, the framework can serve as a prospective policy-audit tool: before a reform is scaled, responsible authorities would document the international signal, national adaptation, implementation resources, privacy safeguards and multiple outcome criteria. If the initial method was used more often, it would create institutional memory of why it was introduced and what evidence dictated the change.

This study is an interpretive synthesis of selected research and institutional documents. The proposed framework has not been empirically validated, and the review does not establish causal effects of OECD–EU cooperation on Greek educational outcomes.

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