

EWIS 2021 Workshop Proposal

‘The Political Economy of Benchmarking in Europe’

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The role of benchmarking in governing modern statehood has received increasing attention within International Political Economy and Public Policy studies. In the literature, global benchmarks are thought to shape the content of discourses about what constitutes sound public policy (Broome et al., 2018; Snyder & Cooley, 2015; Verloo & Van der Vleuten 2009; Hass, 1992). In addition, most accounts argue that global benchmarking alters the behaviour of state actors in ways that reflect the interests of the benchmarking organisations and sustain the power relations built into the benchmarks (Stone 2013; Sklair 2011; Fougner, 2008; Van Apeldoorn 2000). As public policy within the state is (re)configured in response to the global expert knowledge reflected in the benchmarks and their associated rankings, then benchmarking effectively serves as a tool for ‘governing the state at a distance’ (Broome & Quirk, 2015; Kelley & Simmons, 2015). Yet, much of this scholarship offers little evidence of how global benchmarks operate to shape domestic public policy. Few contributions have been made to explore in more depth how benchmarks are used and how the transnational discourses they produce translate into domestic policymaking (Porter, 2015; Clegg, 2015). Given the prominence and continuing proliferation of global benchmarks (Global Benchmarking Database, 2020), there is a need to understand how, when, why and where they matter.

This workshop therefore aims to bring together scholars studying how global benchmarks interact with and shape policymaking processes in Europe. Through a comparative study of the use of benchmarks in the formulation of public policy at a national and regional level, it emphasizes the motivations behind the global production of benchmarks by public and private actors, and also the factors and actors influencing how, when, why and where benchmarks are utilised by policymakers to make political-economic decisions or justify political-economic change. In doing so, it establishes a more elaborate account of the link between global benchmarking practices and discursive regimes, and domestic policymaking.

The contributions brought together by this workshop offer empirically grounded accounts of how, when, why and where benchmarks matter, and to whom. Benchmarks are key instruments in the EU’s Open Method of Coordination and shape policy in a large range of sectors (Room 2005). In this workshop, we focus on the use of social and economic benchmarks by European governments and by European institutions, as these benchmarks are often used by policymakers to justify political economic changes in a context of neoliberal austerity. For instance, viewed as a gateway to solving the structural weaknesses of European economies and building a socially and environmentally sustainable Europe (Dobrovic et al., 2020; European Round Table of Industrialists, 2019, European Investment Bank, 2016), competitiveness has occupied a central position on the agenda of key political institutions in Europe such as the European Commission’s Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Council’s New Strategic Agenda 2019-

2024. European institutions and member states' governments have incorporated competitiveness benchmarks in their political economic strategies at a regional and national level (Bruno 2009; Bruno, Jacquot and Mandin 2006). Benchmarks have also been extensively used to shape EU educational policies (Holford 2008; Klatt 2020; Lawn 2006; Grek 2008)

Therefore, by exploring how domestic politics and actors condition the use, and utility, of global benchmarks, this workshop sheds light on the role, and motives, of state officials in managing national economies and the state's relationship with global benchmarks. It offers novel avenues for conceptualizing the production and use of benchmarks in a comparative European perspective. Moreover, through evidence-based analysis, it produces original accounts of the extent of, and limits to, the influence of benchmarking organizations in shaping contemporary policymaking.

To this end, this workshop invites contributions that speak, but are not limited, to the following questions:

- How do global and regional benchmarks feed into domestic public policy?
- Do benchmarks shape policy and are they used purely for instrumental or ideological reasons pertaining to specific governance contexts?
- Do states respond similarly to negative or positive benchmarking?
- Do different political regimes receive and use benchmarking differently?
- What do benchmarkers do (if anything) to get states to use their benchmarks?