



# Policy transfer, neo-liberalism or coercive institutional isomorphism? Explaining the emergence of a regulatory regime for quality assurance in the Hong Kong higher education sector<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

The spread of quality assurance (QA) regimes in higher education has been an explosive phenomenon over the last 25 years. By one estimate, for example, half of all the countries in the world have adopted QA systems or QA regulatory agencies to oversee their higher education sector. Typically, this phenomenon is explained as a process of policy diffusion, the advent of marketization, the spread of neoliberalism, massification and, concomitantly, the emergence of a ‘global market’ for higher education, prompting governments to respond by validating standards, quality, and introducing certification and compliance regimes. In this paper I question the utility of these explanatory frameworks, specifically looking at the case of Hong Kong in order to explore the role coercive institutional isomorphism plays in policy adoption and the implications of this for regulatory performativity.

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## 1. Introduction

The changing nature of public administration over the last three decades has been variously depicted as a shift from government to *governance*. Theorists as diverse as Jessop (2002), Harvey (1990, 2005), Beck (1999), Hood (2004), Hood and Scott (1996), Majone (1997), Levi-Faur (2005, 2011, 2013), Sandel (2012), and Lodge (2008) – among others, have all reflected on the underlying forces prompting this transition as well as the institutional forms it has assumed. Harvey and Jessop, for example, see this transition as a functional outcome of late capitalism and the movement to post-fordist regimes of accumulation, requiring fundamental transitions in the organization of the state and its fiscal and managerial practices in order to accommodate capital. Hood, Majone, Lodge and Levi-Faur chronicle the demise of the Keynesian state prompted by concerns about governmental efficiency, changing ideational attitudes about the expanse of the state relative to markets, and new approaches to public management where the incorporation

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of market practices has reinvented government through regulation. For Sandel and Beck the dominant institutional forms of the post-Keynesian state emerge in the instrumental application of market forces to an ever widening set of economic, political, and social domains and the transition to market societies (see also Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010a, 2010b; Polanyi, 1957).

While epistemologically diverse all these approaches situate governance in the increasingly ubiquitous ‘regulatory state’ (Levi-Faur, 2013) – a moniker that captures three elements. First, a political or ideological moment that defines the distribution of power, the allocation of authority, and proscribes the discourse of management within the domain. Second, the specification of an institutional architecture and processes of technocratic administration situated in ‘evidenced based’ decision making and stakeholder engagement. Third, the specification of the meta-environment for regulatory performativity, including rules and systems of jurisprudence for the allocation of costs, risks and rewards, and the meta-normative principles that define accountability, performance, measurement, legitimacy and transparency (Black, 2000, 2007, 2008).

Collectively, these two grammars (the epistemological and technical) comprise the now dominant and expansive literatures that address governance by regulation. In this paper I utilise these two grammars as *quasi* hypotheses in an attempt to explain and understand the emergence of a regulatory regime for quality assurance (QA) in the higher education sector in Hong Kong, and the technical performativity of the regime in terms of its efficiency and impact on quality assurance outcomes. The basic tenet of the paper is that Hong Kong is an outlier in terms of epistemological grammars explaining the emergence of a regulatory regime for QA in higher education and is better understood in the context of institutional isomorphism – specifically ‘coercive’ institutional isomorphism following DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Further, the regulatory regime for QA in higher education in Hong Kong is *atypical* compared to its international counterparts. While it reflects international regulatory norms associated with institutional agentification these compete with parallel authority structures embodied in powerful and highly hierarchical ‘command and control’ administrative traditions but which are situated amid a grammar of ‘regulation inside of government’ following Hood’s (Hood, James, Jones, Scott, & Travers, 1999), Lodge and Wegrich’s (2012, pp. 120–136) typology. The result, I argue, is a bifurcated regulatory regime that limits regulatory effectiveness and sector outcomes.

The article is organized into three parts. The first addresses three epistemological grammars of regulatory capitalism. I contrast these now dominant epistemological grammars with institutionalist perspectives, specifically coercive institutional isomorphism, as a potentially superior means for understanding the adoption of a QA regulatory regime in the Hong Kong context. In Section 2 I trace the evolution and configuration of the regulatory regime for QA in higher education in Hong Kong, the nature of its adoption and implementation, and outline its institutional features and the articulation of regulatory practices. In Section 3 I turn to the issue of regulatory performativity and offer some concluding observations on sector outcomes, regulatory performance and the role of coercive institutional isomorphism in the regulatory landscape of the higher education sector in Hong Kong.

## 2. The global diffusion of regulatory capitalism: explaining the ‘great convergence’

The ‘global diffusion of regulatory capitalism’ is commonly depicted across three now dominant explanatory frameworks. I characterise these as (1) *policy transfer*, (2) *neo-liberalism and marketization*, and (3) *globalization*. Each represents broad typologies that are by no means exclusive but are used as heuristic typologies to order an otherwise vast literature on the rise of regulatory systems of governance and attempts to explain institutional transplantation and convergence.

### 2.1. Policy transfer

One of the most dominant trends in recent policy literatures has been a focus on policy convergence (Bennett, 1991; Drezner, 2005), policy diffusion (Dobbin, Simmons, & Garrett, 2007; Elkins & Simmons, 2005; Gilardi, 2010), and policy networks (Blanco, Lowndes, & Pratchett, 2011; Cao, 2012; Grossmann, 2013; King, 2010), all broadly referring to *policy transfer* – ‘a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, p. 344). This literature invokes two common explanations for policy transfer. First, a neo-functional sociological argument that sees the convergence of modern societies around similar systems of socio-economic organization as a fiat of the stages of economic growth and culminating in

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