

A large white magnifying glass graphic is centered on the page, with its handle extending from the bottom left towards the center. The lens of the magnifying glass is positioned over the text. The background is a solid light green color.

**WHAT ARE  
EDUCATION  
POLICY  
BACKGROUNDS?**

# Policy Education

Although “top down” laws, regulations or new funding lines significantly influence educational governance and practice, it is generally difficult to gain insights in the background of such education policy decisions. Particularly practitioners in the field of education therefore often experience education policy as remote and elusive. However, a critical and constructive examination of topics related to digitisation requires engagement with the education policy backgrounds of digital education. Only then can:

- The foundation of political decisions be understood,
- A profound opinion be formed,
- And – from the side of education practitioners themselves – political commentaries, feedback and concrete actions be considered.

## Politics and policy beyond traditional forums

Policy making regarding the digitisation of education can be described as an arena, in which a variety of actors from different sectors (governmental, commercial, civil society, etc.) and levels (international, national, local, etc.) aim to assert their different interests and ideas. For this purpose, they form strategic alliances and employ different instruments to exert influence. This also includes “softer” forms of influencing, such as:

- Strategical lobbying,
- Creating technological and financial dependences,
- Shaping public debates,
- And – related to these first points – providing expertise and consulting (including the promotion of certain kinds of research).

Education policy therefore not only affects what is happening inside traditional political bodies. Rather, also everything around these bodies increasingly plays a crucial role and affects which laws, programmes and funding lines eventually come into effect. In particular, this also includes overarching processes of internationalisation, such as activities by international organisations (OECD, EU, etc.) or the growing influence of the Global Education Industry (GEI) and of the EdTech industry.

## Example: Germany’s “Digital Agenda”

In 2016, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) published the strategy paper “Education offensive for the digital information society” (original: “Bildungsoffensive für die digitale Wissensgesellschaft”) as a “systematic framework of action for the distribution of digital education in Germany”. In the same year, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) published the strategy paper “Education in the digital world” (original: “Bildung in der digitalen Welt”). These papers – and what followed in the next years (e.g. the “Digitalpakt”) – did not originate in a vacuum. Particularly from the political side, it has often been emphasised that a great number and variety of different experts had been involved in the political decision-making process. Critical scholars, however, do not share this assessment. According to a position paper from the Federation of German Scientists, primarily experts from media pedagogy, IT development and quantitative empirical education studies are involved in processes around the ‘digital agenda’ (whereas experts from media addiction research or media impact studies with a focus on developmental psychology are hardly ever involved).

## Increasing influence of the EdTech industry

Research about Germany’s ‘digital agenda’ points to an increased influence of the EdTech industry in Germany. This influence not only takes place directly (e.g. through lobbying), but also indirectly via so-called “intermediary actor networks”, that mediate between private and public stakeholders (such as “Bündnis für Bildung”, “Forum Bildung Digitalisierung”, “Bitkom”, “mmb Institut GmbH”, etc.) in an allegedly objective manner. This growing influence of the EdTech industry is directly reflected in the political programmes of the BMBF and the KMK, which specifically connect the digitisation of education with the promotion of private-public partnerships. “We remain objective” in this context often merely means that no individual EdTech supplier is favoured. What is not being discussed, however, is the education policy behind the ‘digital agenda’ and its limited technological view on the digitisation of education. This has led to a public perception according to which the German educational system should be digitised as quickly as possible, and which regards the system of federalism or reflection about the pedagogical usefulness of such digitisation as anti-progressive.

## Questions

- How are decisions made? In the context of current power shifts in education policy, it is more important than ever before that educational institutions become aware of the informal processes of political decision-making – and that they position their own digitisation strategies accordingly (e.g. develop own ideas about digital education in comparison to the ‘digital agenda’).
- Whose voices are being heard? In their own strategy development, educational institutions should take care to involve a wide range of actors. Particular attention should be paid to voices that are often not heard on the political level (e.g. media addiction counsellors when considering tablet classrooms; datafication experts when setting up data management systems, etc.).
- How can I take action? In order to direct education policy more towards a sustainable, pedagogically sensible and reflective digitisation, a stronger political visibility of such positions is required. Many approaches are possible, including contacting political representatives, online activities, or visiting and organising relevant events.

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UNBLACK THE BOX is a network initiative founded in 2019 by researchers from education science, sociology, information technology, media and health education, as well as teachers in schools, universities and pedagogical training. Our goal is to enable educational institutions and teachers to respond to the growing datafication and digitization of education with enlightened, critical and conscious decision-making, even without extensive IT knowledge.

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