**‘Just describing is not enough’: Policy learning, transfer, and the limits of best practices**

**Introduction**

This article discusses the effectiveness of policy learning and exchange via best practices in cultural policy, using a case study of cross-national policy coordination in the European Union (EU). Though used frequently in the cultural field, particularly in a cross-national context, the understanding of the effectiveness and suitability of best practices as a method of sharing and exchange remains limited. The objective of this article is to critically examine the idea of best practices, looking at the processes of “producing” them as well as their subsequent use. It also offers six concrete lessons on how to best maximize the viability of best practices as a way of drawing lessons and transferring policies. The article fills a gap in the cultural policy literature by using well-developed theoretical frameworks from the discipline of public policy to examine the use best practices in the cultural field.

The general aim of best practices is to showcase a set of superior, workable ideas – “proven” solutions in one context – so that individuals, organizations, and/or countries can learn from what has worked elsewhere. In a cross-national setting, the collection of best practices ‘distils the many experiences of several countries into a manageable synthesis’ (Radaelli 2004, 726). Despite the challenges of comparing and transferring policy (see Feldman 1978, Peters 1998, Evans and Davies 1999, James and Lodge 2003 generally and Gray 1996, Belfiore 2004, Madden 2005, Pratt 2009 on cultural policy specifically), this is a popular mode of sharing and working in the field, particularly in international organizations such as the European Union, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the Council of Europe, although they are used in many other geographical contexts as well.

This article looks at one example of best practice exchange, the European Union’s Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The OMC is a process of intergovernmental policy coordination involving representatives from Member States working together on a common policy issue. The article specifically focuses on Priority A of the 2011-2014 Work Plan for Culture, *Cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and accessible and inclusive culture*, which contained three OMC working groups (see Table 1 below).[[1]](#footnote-1) The OMC makes for a good case study as its primary goal is to ‘foster exchange of best practice between Member States with a view to improve policymaking’ (McDonald et al. 2013b, 7). The EU in general has been described as ‘a platform for learning and policy transfer’ (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004, 372) because of the potential for diffusion and exchange in a transnational context (Egan 2009).

The ethos of best practice also runs through the EU’s entire cultural policy framework.[[2]](#footnote-2) According to the European Commission,

[the cultural policy] work done by the EU complements […] and adds a different dimension. Information gathered from the EU as a whole can be used to support national policy decisions or *provide examples of best practice* that others can share (European Commission 2013, 3; emphasis added).

The OMC also provides a “testable” case; its basic premise – even though it is not always made explicit – is that Member States coordinate on relevant policy themes, share ideas, and then go home and implement some of the resulting recommendations, based on the potential of policy transfer and lesson drawing via sharing and exchange. While there are methodological challenges to overcome in the evaluation of its effectiveness, studying the OMC allows researchers to identify and examine the links between best practices and domestic policies.

In the remainder of the article, I first discuss theoretical and methodological approaches, rooted in the literature on public policy and administration. I then move on to outline the case study of the Open Method of Coordination, and discuss four themes that emerged from my findings concerning the practical and conceptual challenges of best practices. Before concluding, the penultimate section discusses six key practical questions on the viability, suitability, and operation of best practices in order to promote learning and exchange.

**Theory and methodology**

The study of policy transfer, lesson drawing, diffusion, convergence, and policy learning are core components of the literatures on comparative politics and public policy. Space does not allow for a full exploration of these concepts, but a short discussion is necessary in order to establish baseline terminology. The increasing popularity of studying these phenomena has been attributed to changes in political and institutional structures that have occurred as a result of globalization (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, Evans 2009a).

Policy transfer is a general term used to refer to the transposition of ideas from one context to another, when ‘knowledge about policies, administrative instruments, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting’ (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 344). It,

…can involve a wide range of international actors, or merely a small professional network exchanging ideas. It can relate to the wholesale transfer of policy programmes, broad ideas, minor administrative change or even the decision to learn negative lesson and not follow another country (Cairney 2012, 245).

Meanwhile, policy diffusion occurs when choices made in one setting influence policy choices in another jurisdiction – the “spreading” of policy – and convergence is the gradual similarities of policies between countries over time.

Lesson-drawing refers to policymakers seeking to learn from other countries. It is only possible ‘if policymakers in different governments face a common problem’ (Rose 2005, 18). Rose refers to the transfer of *programs* – concrete measures for getting things done – rather than policies, as he finds the latter too vague. A lesson is an outcome of learning and contains concrete details concerning, for example, laws, staff, and organization needed in order to put a program in place.

Learning is defined as a ‘process whereby actors, through interaction with broader institutional contexts (norms of discursive structures) acquire new interests and preferences’ (Checkel 1999, 548). Learning through best practices is attractive because it seems to offer “ready-made” workable solutions that others can emulate. Best practice analysis is also aspirational in that it ‘show[s] what governments ought to do’ (Rose 2005, 38).

Information for this article comes from four different sources. First of all, 30 semi-structured interviews were carried out with key policy actors: EU officials in the European Commission and Council of Ministers, Member State representatives who attended the OMC meetings as nationally-appointed experts, and invited external experts who presented findings and shared results with the groups.[[3]](#footnote-3) Anonymized quotations from interview participants, with assigned pseudonyms, are included in the discussion below. Secondly, findings also draw on a session of non-participant observation of one OMC meeting, and, thirdly, the publically-available best practice reports themselves. Finally, where possible and appropriate, findings regarding the OMC’s effectiveness have been corroborated with a 2013 evaluation report on the OMC carried out by the consultancy firm Ecorys (McDonald et al. 2013a, 2013b). As there is very little literature, academic or otherwise, on the culture OMC, Ecorys’ report is useful because it used a mixed-method approach and looked at a broader set of research questions concerning the OMC and Structured Dialogue (a formal exchange between the cultural sector and the EU via a series of transnational platforms and a biennial Culture Forum). My research used non-participant observation to achieve a deeper and more contextualized picture of the OMC’s operation, and also focused more on the micro-level details of how exactly the OMC works.

**Case study: the EU’s Open Method of Coordination**

The Open Method of Coordination is a more flexible process than law-making via legislative processes. It operates on the basis of consensus, used as a ‘means of spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals’ (European Council 2000, para.37). It was created in order to enable a coordinated effort at some of the challenges associated with the EU’s Lisbon Strategy (2000-2010). The OMC is attractive to Member States ‘because of its … limited potential for unintended consequences’ (Schäfer 2004, 13) and its respect for subsidiarity.[[4]](#footnote-4) In theory, it seeks to ‘put the EU Member States on a path towards achieving common objectives, while respecting different underlying values and arrangements’ (de la Porte 2002, 39). The OMC began in the cultural field in 2008, following the publication of the 2007 Agenda for Culture. Each triennial Work Plan contains details of what OMC groups are operating at the time and what themes they work on.

***Insert Table 1 here***

In most other fields where the OMC is used, guidelines, target-setting, peer review, benchmarking, reporting, and “naming and shaming” based on targets and progress are key components. However, these elements are absent in the cultural field. According to the Agenda for Culture,

It is essential … for the special features of the cultural sector to be fully taken into account in the design of an OMC in this area. In a spirit of partnership with Member States, this implies adopting a *flexible approach*, entailing the setting of *general objectives* with a *light regular reporting system* (European Commission 2007, 12; emphasis added).

The emphasis in the culture OMC is thus on learning and exchange. Its specific aims are to:

* Foster exchange of best practice between Member States with a view to improve policymaking;
* Structure cooperation around the strategic objectives of the European Agenda for Culture; and
* Generate policy recommendations to feed EU and national policy-making.

Each OMC group, composed of nationally-appointed experts from Member States, meets approximately six times over the course of a 12-18 month period. Each group produces a report, usually in the form of best practices. The reports are 100-plus-page documents composed of examples and analysis, with questions and talking points for consideration sprinkled throughout. There is also a section at the end of the reports devoted to recommendations. Because the OMC is voluntary, it is most accurately described as a potential case of ‘voluntary transfer’, associated with Rose’s (2005) concept of lesson-drawing (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996). The OMC therefore represents a ‘powerful learning instrument, insofar as they are expected to destabilise prior understandings of issues and thus lead to incremental changes via an ideational shift in framing policy problems’ (de la Porte and Pochet 2012, 340).

However, the concept of best practices also raise a number of questions: who decides what a best practice is? What criteria is it judged on? How is consensus achieved in identifying them? Should best practices be somehow representative (geographically or otherwise)? If these issues are not addressed, questions of relevance, usefulness, and legitimacy begin to be raised. Other cultural policy scholars have highlighted these concerns and more. For example, in a study of UNESCO’s 2013 Creative Economy report, Christiaan De Beukelaer (2014) takes a critical approach to the 32 online best practices included in the report, arguing that while the examples ‘may prove effective tools for advocacy,’ they ‘remain superficial and leave no space for critical engagement’ (92). In another example, talking of cross-national policy transfer in the cultural and creative industries (CCI), Andy C. Pratt warns us that ‘we need to be clear not only of what the “*object”* of policy is […] as well as the *objectives*, and the *context* of their operation’ (2009, 15; emphasis added). Unless the examples are robust and detailed, it is difficult to achieve all three – object, objectives, and context – with best practices.

International organizations rarely explicitly say why they use best practices. Radaelli (2004, 727) argues that because they operate on consensus, best practices are attractive because they ‘can be used to allocate some “credits” to each and every participant.’ In the case of the EU’s culture OMC, the best practice reports represent a useable, tangible record of what has been achieved during the course of the discussions: *‘*[t]here is a specific mandate, concrete outputs – there is a result in the end – and this is very useful’ (Fatima, Commission policy officer, interview, May 2014). The reports are meant to communicate what the group has agreed on over the course of their discussions and also to recommend particular courses of action based on the identified practices. As the reports are public documents and experts are encouraged to disseminate within their Member State and personal networks, in theory they are useable to a much wider audience than those who took part in the OMC. Fatima, a policy officer at the European Commission, describes the overall potential of best practices:

…if a Member State wants to go in the same direction [as another Member State], they don’t have to go through all of the steps, there is less trial and error, because […] they can see the entire procedure: how it works, what are the things that didn’t work, the benefits, assessment, evaluation. […] This whole mechanism is to speed up procedures or developments (interview, May 2014).

From the interviews carried out with participants in the OMC groups, several themes were raised about the effectiveness of best practices, reflecting that their use varies widely. Some experts gave examples of how they were using them in their own professional practice. One expert, a director of a cultural institution, said that her organization was in the process of writing a handbook on their own practices and that she was using and referring to the OMC report as it was being written (Salma, interview, July 2014). Others said that although the reports might not have much impact in the immediate aftermath of the groups, one could see a trend that more and more of the OMC reports are being referred to in other domestic policy documents. Overall the consensus was that while they were useful in some cases, best practices also raise conceptual and practical challenges. Below, I discuss four main themes that emerged throughout my fieldwork, relating to target audiences, decontextualization, representativeness, and lack of critical analysis. These are discussed in reference to the case study groups I researched.

***Target audiences***

A fundamental question concerning best practices is who the practices are aimed at. In this case, since a central theme of the OMC is to inform national policy-making, and the Work Plan states that experts should have clear communication channels to national authorities (Council of the European Union 2010, 22), it is logical to assume that they are targeted at policy-makers. However, the practices are wide-ranging, and are also targeted at cultural practitioners: some are from arts and cultural institutions, some are Member State-wide policies, and some are a combination. There are numerous challenges for this “one size fits all” approach, as ‘it’s a very hard task to address both [policy makers and cultural practitioners] equally’ (Luise, expert, interview, June 2014). The two groups have different, although often overlapping, challenges. For best practices to be of use to policy-makers (whether national or sub-national), they need to go beyond examples of good practice from cultural institutions and look at, as one expert put it, ‘which policies were the base [of the good practices]’ (Wasil, interview, October 2014). For cultural institutions, examples need to include as much practical information as possible in order to increase the likelihood of implementation elsewhere.

***Decontextualization***

Although the information from the Commission indicates that the groups should identify policies *and* good practices, it is not clear how this division is meant to work in practice. One expert described how this was a conflict from the beginning: ‘[w]e were discussing so many different things. [Some were] insisting to focus on policy, but there was a rejection … to focus on best practices. You could immediately see there was a conflict’ (Timo, expert, interview, September 2014). Nils, another expert, summarized the concerns about decontextualization when he asked,

… how can we make good practices useful for other people? How should we describe them in a way that’s not about a “situation” but about [policy] mechanisms? We aren’t aware enough to analyse what is going on, and then take a situation [in another country] and adapt it as our own. […] Just describing is not enough(interview, June 2014).

What Timo is referring to is the need to more deeply contextualise what Richard Rose (2005) calls models (see more on this below): it is not only about *what* public administrations or cultural institutions do, but *how*. In his view, simply describing an event or programme is not enough.

Best practices examples are often short descriptions which run the risk of being vague and decontextualized. To take one example, in Group 1’s report, a best practice example on policy evaluation contains three sentences on the Louvre Museum’s Studies and Research department, saying that the department ‘conducts surveys and research covering sociology, statistics, the economy and marketing’ (European Union 2012, 103). This is not enough information for any similar institution wanting to implement or change their own research practices. Similarly, one recommendation for EU policy-makers in Group 3’s report is to ‘[s]timulate cultural participation of all citizens, with specific attention to children, starting from an early age, and to citizens from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds’ (European Union 2015, 68). This recommendation, though well-meaning, is too vague to be of much practical use when it comes to the implementation of specific policies or actions.

In general, the reports do not provide a great deal of information on how to implement or evaluate policies or programs and ultimately contain ‘very few examples of coherent policy frameworks at the national level’ (Camilla, invited guest expert, interview, October 2014). To maximize potential for policy transfer across jurisdictions, more information on institutional arrangements and implementation is required (Radaelli 2003). This is especially true in a cross-national context (Pratt 2009), given the heterogeneity of cultural policy across the EU Member States.

***Representativeness***

In the case of cross-national sharing and comparison, there is also the question of how representative to make the examples. In the culture OMC’s first generation (2008-2010), the groups tried to make the examples geographically representative. This presented challenges of equitability and comparability and so was done away with for the second generation. However, representativeness also goes beyond geography to issues of, for example, size and type of cultural organization. Should there be a balance of practices between world-known, national institutions like the Tate and the Louvre and small, local museums? Should there be a balance of types of organizations (museum, gallery, local community centre) and art forms?

Group 1 was clear on the challenges associated with representativeness and said that ‘the selection of examples aims only to provide a sample of diverse experiences, and it does not have the ambition to provide a systematic and fully representative overview of best practices across Europe’ (European Union 2012, 6). Group 2 acknowledged the boundaries of their examples and focused on the best practices of museums, live performance institutions, libraries and community cultural centres, ‘[d]ue to the selection of good practices,[*sic*] proposed by members of the group’ (European Union 2014, 16).

***Lack of critical analysis***

Another issue with best practices is that they are criticized for being reactive, ‘seldom alter[ing] the information pool’ (Hartlapp 2009, 11), and lacking critical analysis:

I was left with the sense that it was more about logistics – making paths for certain kinds of knowledge to circulate, but not criticising that knowledge. Like constructing a pipeline of knowledge that goes from one place to another, but not about critiquing it(Timo, expert, interview, September 2014).

The reports include both examples and analysis, but more of the former than the latter, leading one invited expert to claim that gathering, listening, and discussing are not enough – that there are ‘too many databases of best practices’ (Camilla, interview, November 2014). In addition, the reports represent a collation of ideas, but are *ex post*, rather than innovative and forward-thinking: ‘[h]istory does not provide lessons, but a stock of ambiguous evidence in search of interpretation’ (Radaelli 2004, 743). They are also not based on solving a clearly defined problem (see more on this below) and run the risk of ‘silencing debate,’ since certain ways of “doing things” are prioritized (Radaelli 2004, 726). As Radaelli (2004) argues, best practices *should* stimulate and encourage discussion, rather than act as a one-way communiqué.

**Discussion and lessons**

The themes raised above show that while best practice reports represent, in theory, a tangible and valuable guide that has the potential to be widely disseminated, they also raise several fundamental conceptual questions for the cultural field. While many experts do use the reports in their own practices, interviews with practitioners have illuminated several issues that warrant further consideration. Bartek, a guest expert, captured many of these tensions in his thoughts on the under-conceptualization of best practices:

…sharing best practices and discussing: it’s important. But you do not demonstrate the importance of your activity with best practices. […] Good practices, I often say, that in their best dimension, it is testimony; in their worst dimension, it’s just publicity. […] We have too many best practices reports. I think the cultural field in Europe, post-crisis, will die with their best practices!” (interview, November 2014).

How do we explain these findings and create lessons for future sharing and exchange? Below, I offer six key questions to ask about best practices. They are both conceptual and practical in nature; conceptually, care needs to be taken to design a system of debating and selecting practices that are meaningful and contextualized, especially in a cross-national context. There are also practical considerations that need to be taken into account in order to maximize opportunity for exchange. These questions are not designed to discourage the use of best practices, nor to provide a “fool-proof” approach to creating or using them. Instead, they are intended to be food for thought for organizations or individuals seeking to maximize the possibilities of policy transfer and learning.

The first question to ask *is whether a best practice approach is indeed the optimum “way” to collaborate and exchange ideas*. Critical questions first need to be asked about the aims of collaborating and sharing.[[5]](#footnote-5) As Armstrong (2010, 41) argues, ‘coordination […] demands justification.’ It is not always obvious why states, groups, or individuals collaborate and share policy ideas. In general, the “push” for common action may be driven by various forces, including external shocks, policy-related objectives, institutional and constitutional factors, or normative impulses to improve decision-making due to, for example, concerns about legitimacy (Diedrichs, Reiners, and Wessels 2011). In the case of the EU, there is a spectrum of rationales for coordination, ranging from “damage control” in the case of a shock, to looser coordination such as capacity-building and learning facilitation (Begg 2008).

The aim of exchange and dialogue needs to be clear. Is the aim to be innovative and creative, to solve a problem, or to exchange ideas? Will best practice exchange really be the best way of achieving this aim? The answer may very well be “yes,” but these questions need to be asked. In addition, best practices are most relevant when they are aimed at fixing a specific problem (rather than sharing the results of a loose discussion). In the case of the OMC, there is no real problem-solving involved. For example, rather than a solution-finding discussion on how to get under-represented groups to visit more art galleries and museums, Group 1’s report is about collecting what has already been done, in vastly differing circumstances and scenarios: the policy problem is de-emphasized. Discussions can become vague and unfocused as a result.

Secondly, *what is a “practice”*? This needs to be carefully defined. Is it a program, a policy, an idea? Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 349-50) identify seven possible ‘items’ of transfer: policy goals, structure and content; policy instruments or administrative techniques; institutions; ideology; ideas; attitudes or concepts; and negative lessons. What we see in the case of the OMC is a mixture, although there are no negative lessons. As De Beukelaer comments in the case of the UNESCO report, by excluding any “bad” practices, learning is impinged: ‘[w]e can learn from best practices, but we can also learn from (our own) mistakes by confronting them more explicitly and perhaps more publicly’ (De Beukelaer 2014, 95).

In addition to defining a practice, there is also a need to establish early on a set of agreed definitions and terminology. This presents numerous challenges, particularly in a cross-national context with 25 or more countries participating. The challenges can be both pragmatic, such as language barriers, but also more conceptual in terms of the translation of ideas and discourses. As such, the clarification of definitions takes considerable time and was a source of frustration for some participants (McDonald et al. 2013a, 22). This quote from expert Timo, recounting his group’s discussion of the meaning of *cultural diversity*, highlights some of the difficulties:

…racism, immigration, this discourse is very Nordic. Others … were explaining their definitions of diversity, which has more to do with internal inclusion, marginal groups in a local context. Their history of diversity is different. This was really obvious and important. I thought “ok, I don’t know how this will go,” because it’s such a multitude. It was too wide a subject (interview, October 2014).

Timo’s comment corresponds with one of the challenges identified by the European Commission, that ‘…the process of agreeing more specific fields proved challenging for the groups and, in some cases, delayed the effective start of their activities’ (European Commission 2010, as cited in McDonald et al. 2013a).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Indeed, the role of language cannot be underestimated:

… rules and situations are related by criteria of similarity or difference through reasoning by analogy and metaphor. The process is mediated by language, by the ways in which participants come to be able to talk about one situation as similar to or different from another; and assign situations to rules. The process maintains consistency in action primarily through the creation of typologies of similarity (March and Olsen 2009, 9).

These ‘typologies of similarity’ are exactly what is lacking in the case of the OMC. Policy development on Priority A’s themes is at various stages in the EU-28, and participants come from very different approaches, creating challenges for achieving quick consensus on such broad and sensitive topics:

…it is a sensitive area and you don’t have a long tradition. […] There’s still a lot of work to do. I think it should be more focused though, on specific issues, because otherwise one ends up collecting too much general information(Quentin, expert, interview, July 2014).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Thirdly, *who are the best practices aimed at*? The clearer the target audience, the more useful the practices will be. As discussed above, the intended audience of the culture OMC is not always clear: policy-makers, cultural practitioners and organizations, or both? (In other contexts, practices may of course be aimed at other groups, such as artists, NGOs, or charities). Even when they are made explicit, they can still represent a large, heterogeneous group, as was the case of Group 3, which, recognizing the vast potential for cultural awareness practices, chose to focus on ‘two policy levels: the European and multilateral on the one hand and the national and regional on the other’ (European Union 2015, 61).

A fourth issue is *what makes a practice best (or good!)?* How is success of policies and programs measured? How diverse should they be? Who decides what is best? Choosing best practices is a political decision (Kerber and Eckardt 2007), and raises important questions about who sets the parameters, frameworks, and terms of reference: ‘[t]o choose a set of indicators, to designate an innovation as “good practice”, to undertake a benchmarking exercise, and to write guidelines are all political processes. They establish hierarchies of domestic solutions’ (Radaelli 2003, 40). A rigorous, explicit set of criteria should be set. The more transparent this process is, the more legitimate the practices are.

Identifying and choosing practices is often a difficult task. In the OMC, the practices are identified and self-selected by the group. In order to compile an initial compendium for Group 3, each expert was asked to bring two examples. While many experts consult other relevant actors in their individual Member State, the examples are limited to what that expert, as a bounded actor, is aware of. There may be a case of “internal” debate *within* a Member State over which practices to share at the EU level, but this varies considerably. From there, the group decided which examples were to be included in the final report. The selection of these practices did not adhere to any strict criteria. Some, for example, were discounted because they were too complex and could not easily be understood in a couple of paragraphs.

Practices are therefore not tested, debated extensively, or measured against each other for style or type. In this case, they are self-selected, with “curational” input by the chair, sub-group, Commission policy officer, and/or an external guiding expert. There is also no distinction *between* practices, since best practices ‘tend to homogenize distinctions between programmes ranging from the second-best to worst’ (Rose 2005, 39). Indeed, we often see that no “top” i.e. best is determined, implying that they are all of equal quality (after all, “[i]f ‘best’ means that it is truly better than many or most other practices this implies that it is a relatively rare thing” [Bardach 1994, 266]).

A fifth issue is *how do best practices work*? Best practice analysis usually points to “one size fits all” suggestions, obfuscating the necessary combination of actors, institutions, and ideas necessary to actually carry out a policy or program. However, to be most effective, they need to include what Rose terms *models*, which contain information on pertinent laws and regulation, organization/structure, personnel, financial details, program outputs and recipients, and goal(s). This is particularly important when working cross-nationally (Rose 2005, 71), and also given the particular challenges of governance in the cultural sector (see Pratt 2012).

Klofsten, Heydebreck, and Jones-Evans (2010) discuss how an actor wanting to use a best practice only has access to the information provided by the “good-practice actor” (in this case, the Member State expert who supplied the practice). This seems an obvious point, but is worth repeating: best practices are static and exist in a certain time and space; to be useful to broader audiences, enough information has to be included to enable implementation. The same authors go so far as to suggest that ‘any learning from third-party experience can only be effective if the “champions” who initiated and managed the good-practice case in one region are substantially involved in the implementation of lessons learned by a partner in another region’ (Klofsten, Heydebreck, and Jones-Evans 2010, 792-3). While all groups have provided a list of further sources and reference documents at the end of the reports, these are general and usually not specific to the individual practices.

A sixth and final question is *is there any accompanying analysis*? All of the reports included some analysis. Group 1 set out a loose framework at the start of the report, contextualizing the subject of access to culture. This is followed by six chapters, each tackling a different theme relating to access. Each chapter provides some thematic analysis, and the report finishes with a page and a half of recommendations. Group 2’s report had a more analytical focus. The examples were separated into policy measures, which tended to be broad frameworks, and practices, further splitting the latter into programming, staffing, reaching out to new audiences, creating spaces for encounters, and intercultural competences. In addition to two sets of recommendations, the report also included a section on “success factors.” Meanwhile, Group 3’s report was structured around key lessons, which ‘reflect the way in which Member States include [the key competence] in their current policies on lifelong learning’ and also includes ‘analysis of what we consider good practice’ (European Union 2015, 39).

**Conclusions**

Best practices raise several questions concerning target audiences, critical analysis, representativeness, and contextualization. Identifying practices among several participating states with vastly differing political systems, cultural policy models, policy priorities, and funding structures is a challenging task. Rather than act as a default option, instead, critical questions need to be asked about whether or not best practices are the best approach to learning and exchange.

Where best practices may have most appeal and success in learning is ideationally. Of the four possible “outcomes” of learning – copying, emulation, hybridization, and inspiration (Evans 2009b) – exchange via best practice is most likely to lead to *inspiration*, whereby ‘an idea inspires fresh thinking about a policy problem and helps to facilitate policy change’ (Evans 2009b, 246). In the Ecorys survey, of 70 respondents, 61.4% said that the working groups increased their knowledge of best practices to a large extent, and 38.6% to some extent (McDonald et al. 2013a, 39). However, when translated into outcomes, and asked whether exchange has translated into changes in individuals’ own working practices, 27.1% said to a great extent, 41.4% to some extent, and 31.4% not at all (McDonald et al. 2013a, 39). As Group 3 outlines in their report, ‘… we do not offer readers a ‘how to’ handbook for developing the key competence of cultural awareness and expression. […] [W]e hope to *inspire* readers with our practices and recommendations (European Union 2015, 11; emphasis added).

Therefore, ultimately, best practices can provide the beginnings of inspiration for policy learning and transfer. However, without the inclusion of *models*, contextualized information on implementation and evaluation, as well as contact information so that interested agents can obtain further details from the source of the practice itself, their effectiveness as an approach for policy learning and exchange of remains limited. A fruitful option for future research in this area is to combine insights on policy learning and transfer from public policy and administration with the literature on arts management in order to further the discussion on how to best achieve these in the arts and cultural sectors.

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1. This priority area was chosen as a case study because of its interconnectedness with European cultural identity and diversity, which has come to be a symbolic, politically-charged, and strategic narrative for the EU. The objective was to gain more insight into the politics of European cultural identity and diversity and how these issues are conceptualized in a supranational context. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note that the terminology of best/good practices is used interchangeably by the European Commission and the participating experts. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interviewees at the EU were initially contacted via heads of unit and then progressively via the snowball method. Member State experts and invited experts were contacted via email using a publically-available participant list published in each OMC report. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Subsidiarity is a principle of EU law. It says that the EU will only become involved in a policy area if it is deemed the best ‘level’ of government to do so, i.e. that Member States acting on their own is insufficient. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The OMC has been criticized in the literature for its lack of clear aims and justifications for cooperation. As one invited expert claimed, ‘[t]here is a gravitation without a serious push or pull. Not even by the Commission. […] It was a diligent task – the teacher gives a task to a group…’ (Frederick, interview, December 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Interestingly, this is not particular to the cultural sector; de la Porte (2010) describes the difficulties an OMC group on social policy had in defining homelessness. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There is also a careful balance to be struck between allowing enough time for dialogue and “getting on” with the task at hand, the creation of the manual. Many experts thought that there was not enough time for real debate within the way that the OMC is organized. The ultimate functioning of the OMC is based on *task completion*, creating the manual (see Mattocks 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)