



The Quest for Revolution in Australian Schooling Policy

Glenn C. Savage



THE QUEST FOR REVOLUTION IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING POLICY

This book seeks to critically examine the impacts of ‘grand designs’ in public policy through a detailed historical analysis of Australian schooling reforms since the ‘education revolution’ agenda was introduced by the federal government in the late 2000s. Combining policy analyses and interviews with senior policy makers and ministerial advisors centrally involved in the reforms, it offers a detailed interpretive analysis of the complexities of policy evolution and assemblage. The book argues that the education revolution sought to impose a new order on Australian schooling by aligning state and territory systems to common policies and processes in areas including curriculum, assessment, funding, reporting and teaching. Using a theory and critique of ‘alignment thinking’ in public policy, Savage shows how the education revolution and subsequent reforms have been underpinned by uncritical faith in the power of nationally aligned data, evidence and standards to improve policies and unite systems around practices ‘proven to work’. The result is a new national policy assemblage that has deeply reshaped the making and doing of schooling policy in the nation, generating complex questions about who is steering the ship of education into the future.

The Quest for Revolution in Australian Schooling Policy is a must read for education policy researchers, policy makers, education ministers and school leaders, and will appeal to anyone with an interest in the complex power dynamics that underpin schooling reforms.

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Taylor & Francis

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First published 2021
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 9780367691318 (hbk)

ISBN: 9780367681876 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003141792 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vi</i>
1 Revolution	1
2 Arrangement	32
3 Order	70
4 Disorder	101
5 Future	132
<i>Index</i>	<i>163</i>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Countless people have enriched the intellectual work informing this book, but the following individuals stand out: Bob Lingard, Fazal Rizvi, Lyn Yates, Jack Keating, Helen Sullivan, Kate O'Connor, Steven Lewis, Elisa Di Gregorio, Emily Clark, Jessica Gerrard, Sigrid Hartong, Jennifer Wallner, Laura Engel, Jessica Holloway, Sam Sellar, Radhika Gorur, David De Carvalho, Dean Ashenden, Tom Bentley and Alison Savage.

1

REVOLUTION

To seek to impose order on social life means to attempt to arrange people and things in relation to some idealised scheme or in accordance with a pre-defined pattern or method¹. The antonym of order is disorder, which disrupts the functioning of ordered arrangements. The history of public policy reflects repeated attempts to impose order on social life, while social life proves both partially resistant and compliant to such attempts at ordering. While politicians, bureaucrats and policy elites seek to make the complexity of social life amenable to governance, social life perpetually shows itself to be disorderly in the face of persistence. When grand designs fail to achieve the desired outcomes, implementation is seen to have failed. In response, public policy designers go back to the drawing board, to improve design, refine implementation and ensure attempts to impose order *this time* around are more effective.

The pursuit of order gives coherency and momentum to policy research. Its allure provides the *raison d'être* for the majority of policy researchers, schooled in the belief that if policy designs are more refined, implementation practices are more sensitive and evaluation methods are more sophisticated, research will help make attempts to order life more effective. These ideals are indivisible from the Enlightenment narrative of a march of progress via rational scientific endeavour and advancement. When policy studies crystallised as a field of study in the post-war decades, this 'technical rationality'² gave it legitimacy and voice. The 'policy sciences' were to be scientific and based on technical, rational and usually quantitative research designs³. This logic continues to dominate how most people think about policy, despite decades of showing limited capacity to plan, predict and understand the complexity of interactions between social and policy processes. As a policy researcher recently told me when I visited the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris, 'our methods are so refined, it's clear we have the data, the challenge is how to use it to achieve

2 Revolution

the outcomes and scale-up practices globally'. Seeking to order and align policy to data that tells us 'what works' is now the clarion call for policy action on a global scale.

This book enters into and extends a rich vein of scholarship that has sought to critically examine the impacts of revolutionary 'grand designs' intended to reorder social relations through reforms that rest on deep faith in the capacities of technical rationality. It takes as its object a set of phenomena related to what Jal Mehta calls 'the allure of order', based on a belief that systems can and should be standardised through applying principles of scientific administration 'from above'⁴. It speaks broadly to a number of similar argumentative threads, including James C. Scott's critique of attempts by states to impose rational and technical order⁵, Donald Schön's critique of technical rationality⁶, Nicholas Tampio's critique of standards-based reform⁷ and arguments by Robert Geyer and Samir Rihani who suggest public policy research is hamstrung by a persistent failure to recognise complexity and move beyond a dominant 'paradigm of order' that rests on a Newtonian vision of an orderly world driven by immutable laws⁸.

The book contributes to these lines of analysis by developing a theory and critique of what I call *alignment thinking* in public policy. I define alignment thinking as a specific form of technical rationality that seeks to standardise, harmonise and impose order on systems through a diverse assemblage of political technologies that are *made to cohere*. These technologies include, but are not limited to, standards-based reforms, evidence-based reforms, collaborative federalism, centralisation, nationalisation, harmonisation of policy and governance processes, and the production of data and accountability infrastructures that privilege national and transnational commonality over subnational and local diversity. In layman's terms, alignment thinking refers to ways of understanding and doing policy that assume progress will come through re-arranging diverse people, ideas and practices in line with common and apparently more efficient approaches, based on evidence about 'what works'. The allure of order is always central to alignment thinking, despite the fact that order perpetually proves to be elusive.

While my articulation of alignment thinking draws upon existing critiques in sociology, policy studies and other fields, I go beyond this work to show there are unique ways alignment thinking operates in contemporary policy contexts that are increasingly informed by transnational flows of policy ideas and practices, and governance contexts that are de-centred and polycentric. Alignment thinking can be understood as a 'global form'⁹ of technical rationality that manifests in unique and context-dependent ways in an era marked by intensified policy mobility. Alignment thinking seeks to harness the capacities of governments, markets, networks and policy actors in novel ways. Alignment thinking is an important part of attempts by the state to govern but cannot be reduced solely to the work of the state. Alignment thinking is not simply an artefact of neoliberalism or new public management, even if it draws on ideas inherent to these modes of governance. Nor is alignment thinking just another way of talking about

forms of governance that continue to privilege traces of Fordist and ‘industrial models’ of social planning. Instead, alignment thinking *re-articulates* these older forms into technologies of governance unique to the contemporary and with novel implications.

To inform my critique of alignment thinking, I build on an emerging body of literature on *policy assemblage*, extending recent attempts I have made to articulate what an assemblage approach to policy analysis means and looks like in practice¹⁰. As a policy sociologist, I draw primarily on sociological approaches to the study of public policy, but also on insights from human geography, anthropology, complexity theory and political science. Policy assemblage, I argue, can be understood as a *social process of arrangement* resulting from complex interactions between people and things which are embedded within existing conditions of possibility. To arrange something is to seek to bring people, ideas and practices into particular strategic relations: to make policies cohere towards certain ends¹¹. But as I will show, not everything can be arranged or made to cohere. Indeed, a vast number of factors and dynamics make certain arrangements possible, with particular impacts, while obscuring possibilities for others. We must ask, therefore, how some arrangements come to be while others do not see the light of day or were never possible in the first place. To do so, consideration is needed to history, agency, power and the hard-fought politics that determine how policies are capable of being imagined, reasoned and translated into practice in specific places and times.

While the concepts of assemblage and alignment might at first seem to share similarities, insofar as each signal *purposeful attempts* to arrange the component parts of policy in particular ways, it is important to clarify from the outset that these are distinct concepts and serve different analytical purposes. Central here is that processes of policy assemblage are not necessarily oriented by a normative desire to bring things into a state of alignment. Indeed, policies can be assembled and made to cohere in a remarkable variety of ways, which may or may not have anything to do with the underpinning aims of policy alignment. This book, however, examines what happens when processes of assemblage are indeed harnessed towards the development of grand designs that seek to engender policy alignment, and the radical impacts that often flow from such attempts to reorder diverse systems in line with common approaches.

To pursue these aims, this book engages in a detailed analysis of the unprecedented set of national schooling policy reforms that have taken place in the Australian federation since the landmark suite of ‘education revolution’ reforms were introduced by the federal Australian Labor Party in 2007. In many ways, this book is a history of the education revolution agenda and its extended aftermath. While the federal Labor government was only in power until 2013, its education revolution reforms ushered in a monumental period of change that continues to deeply shape reform trajectories as we enter the 2020s. The education revolution is an exemplary case of a public policy ‘grand design’, insofar as it comprised a diverse and wide-reaching suite of reforms across nearly all

core areas of schooling, in the hope of reordering previously more diverse and fragmented subnational (state and territory) systems in line with a new national agenda that would ostensibly revolutionise how schooling policy and governance processes work across the federation, while at the same time promising to drive a vast number of improvements that would render the nation more globally competitive.

By combining policy analyses and in-depth interviews with senior policy actors who have been centrally involved in reforms from the education revolution period to the present, I offer a detailed examination of the complexities of policy evolution and assemblage. In doing so, it is not my aim to assess whether the education revolution has had the intended impacts on key performance indicators in schooling such as student achievement or equity, as it is already abundantly clear from existing evidence that in most cases it has not¹². Instead, my interest lies in understanding the extent to which the education revolution has changed how schooling policy and governance operates in the Australian federation. In other words, this book is driven by a desire to understand whether the education revolution has led to revolutionary change in the dynamics of policy production and enactment as a result of the new policy infrastructures, technologies and processes designed to set it and subsequent reforms in motion.

In pursuing this line of analysis, I argue that the education revolution and subsequent reforms sought to impose *a new order* on Australian schooling by aligning state and territory systems to a set of common policies and processes in areas including, but not limited to, curriculum, assessment, funding, reporting and teaching. These reforms were underpinned by significant and often uncritical faith in the power of nationally aligned data, evidence and standards to improve policies and unite systems around practices ‘proven to work’. By privileging standardisation over difference, commonality over diversity, collaboration over competition and connection over disjuncture, the education revolution established profoundly new conditions of possibility for schooling in the nation, generating reform trajectories that are now difficult to disrupt. The result is the emergence of a new national policy assemblage that has significant implications for the making and doing of schooling policy moving forward.

This chapter provides foundations for my analysis to follow. I begin by briefly considering how schooling policy and governance processes have historically been arranged in the Australian federation and how federal Labor’s education revolution reforms sought to disrupt existing norms and arrangements. Following this, I outline my theory of policy alignment and consider how the aims of alignment interact and often grate uncomfortably with the principles and constitutional division of labour underpinning the governance of schooling in the Australian federation. I then introduce the methodological and analytical approach that informed this book, with a focus on interpretive policy analysis and policy assemblage. I finish by providing a succinct overview of the argumentative structure of the chapters to follow.

Grand design par excellence: Australia's 'education revolution'

As a means of governing society, Australian federalism historically rests on a division of power between federal and state governments, with the latter designed to embody principles of self-rule and autonomy, while the former seeks to govern matters of national interest and steer the nation as a whole. When the constitution was established in 1901, schools were not deemed to be a matter for the federal government. Similar to other federations globally, Australia was established as a composite of relatively autonomous subnational governments¹³, each pursuing distinct social and economic goals, while forming together to ostensibly reap the benefits of union as a nation. Responsibility for schooling was to lie with the states, and national coherency was not seen to be required. Over time, these arrangements led to unique state and territory policy formations and cultures, and distinct approaches to the governance of schools¹⁴.

As the twentieth century advanced, however, the division of roles and responsibilities between governments increasingly blurred across a number of domains of public policy and schooling came to be seen as a policy area that required some level of coordination across jurisdictions. The structural conditions for advancing reform also shifted significantly when the federal government assumed control over income tax during the Second World War, which greatly increased the capacity of the federal government to raise revenue¹⁵. State governments, however, remained responsible for the delivery of expensive services such as education, but had lost significant capacity to fund such services. In the decades to follow, this 'vertical fiscal imbalance' meant states became increasingly dependent upon the federal government for support, which paved the way for greater federal intervention, especially through conditional funding arrangements¹⁶. Significant changes then took place following the Karmel Report of 1973¹⁷, when the federal Labor government introduced ongoing federal funding to both government and non-government schools for the first time¹⁸. The Karmel Report was a watershed moment, generating radically different conditions of possibility for federal involvement in schooling¹⁹, and paving the way for a new era of national reform in the decades to follow. As Bob Lingard has argued, the report 'fully systematised'²⁰ the federal presence in schooling, and established a funding system distinct in comparison to most OECD nations.

Federal funding to government and non-government schools increased significantly in the 1980s and 1990s²¹. In conjunction with these revised fiscal arrangements, the federal government emerged as an increasingly dominant player in schooling policy, working with state and territory governments to drive new national agendas. In 1988, federal Minister for Education, John Dawkins, released a policy statement titled *Strengthening Australia's Schools*²², which argued that significant national improvements were required to secure a stronger economic future and sparked debates about inconsistencies between Australian states and territories. Shortly after, all governments (federal, state and territory) signed

the 1989 *Hobart Declaration on Schooling*²³, which for the first time outlined ten national goals for schooling reform. The Hobart Declaration was an important historical marker, representing a growing desire by the federal government to shape national reforms, and a willingness amongst state and territory governments for increased intergovernmental collaboration both with the federal government and across subnational borders. The Declaration had important impacts, including major yet ultimately unsuccessful attempts to create National Statements and Profiles in curriculum in the early 1990s²⁴. It also set in motion attempts to reform reporting systems and address the quality of teaching, which had significant consequences in the decades to follow. Far from the imagination of schooling that existed at federation, the Declaration framed schooling as an area all governments should work together to improve for the sake of the nation.

As the millennium approached, arguments for national reform further strengthened and became increasingly connected to political and policy narratives about emerging global uncertainties and imperatives. New times, it was argued, required new solutions, and a need to think differently about what young people should know and be able to do²⁵. Schooling was not only seen as an area of public policy that required reimagining and reform to prepare young people for new global realities but was also increasingly framed as a mechanism for building human capital and making Australia more productive and economically competitive²⁶. Schooling was thus positioned as both a problem and solution to the emerging social and economic challenges of globalisation, and as firmly in the national interest. In this context, the 1999 Adelaide Declaration was signed by all education ministers, replacing the Hobart Declaration²⁷. A decade on, the new Declaration strongly emphasised the apparent need to pursue revised national reform goals for the sake of positioning schooling systems, young people and the nation to engage and compete in an increasingly complex world, set to undergo rapid 21st Century transformations as a result of globalisation and technological change²⁸.

The Adelaide Declaration paved the way for a flurry of national reform activity, led by the federal Liberal Coalition government under Prime Minister John Howard, who had been in power since 1996. Under Howard, national schooling reforms were not only promoted based on social and economic grounds but also reflected an ideologically conservative agenda for nation building that positioned schools as central sites for building 'Australian values'²⁹. Howard rejuvenated the push for a national curriculum and worked with states and territory education ministers to develop ongoing annual national literacy and numeracy testing³⁰, laying foundations for many of the national shifts that would take place under the Labor government in the years to follow. The Howard government also led the charge to develop national teaching standards, but in a way that strongly established the federal government as the authoritative force in shaping understandings about what quality teaching means and looks like. In 2004, for example, the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL) was established to drive the standards agenda, but even though it was ostensibly

‘national’ in focus, it was owned exclusively by the federal government with no formal ownership by states or territories³¹. Its establishment signalled an overt attempt by the federal government to exert order and control over an area of schooling that was constitutionally a state responsibility.

By the mid-2000s, a number of powerful narratives about the apparent need for national schooling reform began to converge and dominate the political imagination on both sides of the party divide. Not only was schooling regularly framed as a national policy problem in need of national intervention in a context of global and technological change, but these broader narratives began to merge with a growing sense of panic about stagnation and decline in the achievement of Australian students, which grew louder as student performance continued to drop on key international measures. Central here was that Australia’s performance fell into steady decline, in both real and relative terms, on the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The OECD’s influence in this context can barely be overstated, with PISA and other data produced by the organisation playing a powerful role in arguments by Australian politicians when arguing for urgent and broad scale national reform³². In the years to follow, such arguments would be increasingly connected to broader public policy narratives emphasising the importance of data-informed policy based on evidence that tells us ‘what works’³³. Together, these arguments would cohere into a strong and often unquestioned view amongst key players in Australian schooling that national policy alignment through data, evidence and standards would serve as a panacea for various apparent ills plaguing the nation’s schools.

The 2000s were also marked by a number of reports highlighting the apparent wastefulness of schooling policy arrangements across the federation, with repeated claims made that there were unjustifiable and inefficient duplications, overlaps, misalignments, inconsistencies and inequalities of educational provision across state and territory systems, along with major unresolved tensions concerning the federal funding of schools³⁴. While similar issues existed in other areas of public policy, education was often singled out as an area in serious need of re-assessment. In 2006, the Council for the Australian Federation established a steering committee, chaired by Professor Peter Dawkins, then Secretary of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, to review the Adelaide Declaration and consider future national reform options. The report of the committee, entitled *The Future of Schooling in Australia*, presented a twelve-point action plan which was endorsed by all education ministers in 2007³⁵, and strongly argued for ongoing national reform and intergovernmental cooperation, suggesting further harmonisation and alignment of policies would ensure, ‘the future prosperity of the economy’ and ‘maximise the opportunities for young people to reap the benefits of globalisation’³⁶. The report laid plans for a new national declaration, stating that all governments believe, ‘it is time to reassert the importance of national collaboration’³⁷.

These developments meant that by the time the 2007 federal election campaign began, a new architecture of national reform had begun to take shape, albeit in rudimentary form. While the specifics of many national reforms were yet to be clarified, the foundations and momentum established under the Howard government had rendered schooling policy a ripe site for further intervention at the national scale. It was in this context that federal Labor opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, went into the election campaign promising Australia ‘an education revolution’, central to which was an intention to pursue a comprehensive make-over of Australia’s schooling system through an array of national reform initiatives. Building on the surging political and public interest in reforming the nation’s schools, Rudd positioned education as a central cog in the wheel of positive change for a reformist federal Labor party intent on pursuing nation building reforms across multiple policy domains. In line with the shifts taking place to establish a new national declaration, Rudd positioned federally driven national reform as a logically necessary and unquestionable solution to an array of apparent problems. An education revolution, he argued, was not only urgently required, but was a core part of his political fibre and guiding purpose as a potential Prime Minister³⁸.

Surpassing Howard in rhetorical flourish, Rudd honed his language throughout the campaign, especially in terms of how he rationalised links between the economy, education and equity. Rudd believed, he said, ‘passionately in the power of education’, portraying it as simultaneously, ‘the engine room of equity, the ‘engine room of opportunity’ and the ‘engine room of the economy’³⁹. While many of the ideas slated by Rudd replicated or built directly on reform trajectories established under Howard, Rudd was able to harness these into a convincing new narrative, ‘joining up’ existing threads to forge a rearticulated vision of national reform that built strongly on the energy and ideas of ‘third way’ political movements, especially Tony Blair’s New Labour reforms in the UK. In doing so, Rudd put forward a rejuvenated centre-left agenda in which education, along with social goods such as equity and inclusion, would be harmonious bedfellows in the machine of economic growth and prosperity⁴⁰. Rudd’s arguments also played strategically into ongoing ‘global panics’ about Australia’s achievement relative to other nations on a range of measures⁴¹. This language of crisis served well to further destabilise the existing state of affairs and make schooling policy arrangements appear problematic and in need of immediate intervention. Indeed, unflattering global comparisons were directly used by Rudd to argue the nation requires, ‘nothing less than an education revolution *now*’⁴².

Fortunately for Rudd, Labor went to the election with Labor governments dominating state and territory leadership across the country, which helped ensure that his clarion call for change had political support from the outset. Talk of revolution had particular resonance in the state of Victoria, where significant work had already been undertaken, especially through the Department of Premier and Cabinet, to outline the benefits of national reform and argue for a rejuvenated

reform agenda through the Council of Australian Governments⁴³ (COAG) that aligned closely with federal Labor's ambitions. Importantly, Labor's message resonated with the Australian public, with the promise of an education revolution arguably playing a key role in what ended up being a landslide Labor victory at the November 2007 election.

Upon taking office, Rudd assumed the helm of what would be the most wide-reaching and comprehensive reform of Australian schooling policy in the nation's history. Indeed, the sheer depth, breadth and pace of national reform that followed the election was astounding to say the least. In the space of a few years, Australia would go from having no formalised national policies in most core areas of schooling to having a broad suite of interconnected national reforms, including the Australian Curriculum, the National Assessment Programme to assess young people's literacy and numeracy achievements (NAPLAN), the My School website to report in a nationally consistent way on the profile and achievements of every Australian school, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), the Australian Professional Standard for Principals, the Early Years Learning Framework, the National Schools Interoperability Program to harmonise data collation and sharing across systems, a national Measurement Framework for Schooling that outlined key performance measures all states and territories must report against, a revised federal model for school funding through the development of a Schooling Resource Standard, a new National Education Agreement, a range of National Partnerships relating to schooling reform and a revised national vision agreed to by all education ministers via the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians⁴⁴. To develop and support these reforms, significant funds were committed to establishing major new policy organisations, including the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which developed the Australian Curriculum and My School, and took responsibility for the ongoing development of NAPLAN; the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), which led the development of the APST and related policies, and Education Services Australia (ESA), which was established to provide technology-based development and support to all governments in relation to national reforms.

Together, this array of new national policies, organisations, targets, accountabilities, responsibilities, agreements, measurements, indicators, benchmarks and data infrastructures combined to translate the high hopes of Labor's education revolution into reality, vastly reshaping the conditions of possibility for schooling across the nation. Indeed, at the time of the 2007 election, it is unlikely that even Rudd could have imagined the scope, pace and depth of national reforms that would evolve during his reign as Prime Minister, or the extent to which the reforms rapidly developed under the Labor government would in time be embraced by those on the other side of the party divide. Telling the story of this policy revolution and its ensuing impacts is the primary aim of this book will begin in depth in the chapter to follow.

Anathema? Alignment thinking, federalism and schooling reform

Labor's education revolution and subsequent reforms exemplify the aims and practices of alignment thinking in public policy. From the beginning, the national reform agenda rested on an assumption that the greater alignment of policies and processes across schooling systems is a logical solution to an array of problems stemming from social and economic contexts that are increasingly complex and globalised. As governments face pressure to deal with shared policy problems that cut across traditional national and subnational political boundaries, alignment is regularly framed by policy thinkers, designers and researchers as an effective mechanism for tackling heightened complexity and interdependency⁴⁵. In theory, advocates of alignment suggest it will engender an array of positive impacts, such as eliminating duplication and overlap, tackling inconsistencies in provision or approach, breaking down silos between governments and agencies, opening new channels for collaboration and co-design, and promoting sharing and learning through the cross-pollination of effective ideas and practices to ensure policies are based on evidence about 'what works'⁴⁶. Arguments for alignment frame the *misalignment* of policy goals, processes, content, and more, as a problem leading to waste, inefficiencies and poor outcomes. Alignment, we are told, will produce better policies, new efficiencies and superior outcomes⁴⁷.

These arguments are especially prominent in federations, with alignment frequently offered as a solution to a variety of 'problems' that federal systems are seen to produce, such as fragmentation, high or problematic levels of diversity across systems, challenges relating to intergovernmental decision-making and cooperation, conflicts and inconsistencies between state and federal agendas, and difficulties associated with achieving 'coherence' when implementing national or standards-based reforms⁴⁸. Advocates of alignment frequently depict differences between subnational systems, or between subnational and national governments, as standing in the way of good policy and as needing to be 'fixed' by aligning policy content, processes and procedures, and instruments and mixes⁴⁹. In this way, policy alignment shares much in common the concept of 'harmonisation', which is similarly used to argue for greater coherency and consistency across political, policy and process dimensions⁵⁰.

In this book, I use the term *alignment thinking* to capture the modes of reason (political rationalities) that underpin arguments in favour of policy alignment. As I will show, these ways of thinking and reasoning manifest in an array of technical practices (political technologies) that seek to translate the aims of alignment thinking into reality. Borrowing from governmentality theory, I understand political rationalities and technologies as distinct but equally powerful dimensions engaged in what Michel Foucault called 'the art of government'⁵¹, which together serve to problematise and provide a basis for intervening in social life. The distinction between the two underlines what colleagues and I have previously termed, 'the recursive relationship between the manner of knowing and

representing a problematic social domain (rationalities), and the corresponding means of acting upon it to effect meaningful reform and improvement (technologies)⁵². In other words, ‘if political rationalities render reality into the domain of thought, “technologies of government” seek to translate thought into the domain of reality’⁵³. Rationality can thus be understood as ‘an epistemological realm’ concerned with the world of ideas (ways of conceiving and making sense of the world), whereas technology refers to the ‘technical realm’ and the specific ‘techniques, mechanisms, instruments and processes through which governance “gets done”’⁵⁴. Rationalities are central to practices of problematisation, which is a necessarily precursor to political and policy interventions through political technologies. As Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose argue, to intervene in social life, problems must first be ‘rendered thinkable in such a way to be practicable or operable’⁵⁵. Rationalities, as ‘styles of thinking’, render reality thinkable so that can be intervened in through the construction of political technologies that serve as the practical means (the instruments, so to speak) through which rationalities become operable⁵⁶.

In line with this, I argue that although the term ‘alignment’ is harnessed in multiple ways and towards diverse ends in public policy and research, its various global manifestations rest on common modes of reason. There is, therefore, a strong measure of coherency at the level of rationality, central to which is a view that commonality, commensurability and harmonisation of policies and processes are intrinsically positive features that will drive improvement. To this end, arguments for policy alignment tend to privilege similarity over difference, sharing over contestation, smoothness over disjuncture, and standardisation over diversity. Underpinning such arguments is a specific form of ‘techno-scientific’⁵⁷ reason that rests on a belief that it is indeed possible to locate ‘the best’ evidence that tells us ‘what works’ and that such evidence should provide foundations for broad-scale reform that seeks to align and impose a new order on previously more diverse systems. In turn, such modes of reason lead to arguments in favour of interventions such as standards-based reforms, evidence-based reforms, collaboration and co-design, enhanced data interoperability, the adoption of common goals and metrics, the development of common evidence repositories to inform practice, and intergovernmental processes to generate the sharing of ideas and resources⁵⁸. Alignment thinking thus endorses and produces political technologies that seek to re-arrange diverse policy practices in line with common and ostensibly more efficient approaches, and in ways that strongly privilege *episteme* (scientific and so-called ‘universal knowledge’) and *techné* (technical knowledge) at the expense of *phronesis* or *métis* (practical and local knowledge)⁵⁹. Alignment carries, therefore, an alluring promise of order, certainty and progress. A vision of a more harmonised future.

These aspirations are unsurprising, given the etymology of the word ‘alignment’, which traces back to the late 18th century, when it evolved from the French term *aligner*, which means ‘to line up’. In subsequent centuries, alignment took on a second meaning, relating to the process of adjusting or arranging