

PISA in the British media: leaning tower or robust testing tool?

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International surveys such as the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have become significant indicators of education performance at a national and international level: policy – makers increasingly have to take account of where their country stands in the international ‘league table’. What is the role of media in this process? This Briefing considers how the results of PISA 2006 occupied the British media headlines and examines the media’s role in marketing the PISA ‘spectacle’ and helping to shape education policy and action.

- ▶ The British media accepted the OECD as the major intergovernmental organisation for conducting reliable and robust statistical analysis of education systems’ performance.
- ▶ They stressed the need for such analysis if countries are to improve their short- and long-term standing in competitive global markets.
- ▶ Most of the media focused on where the UK education systems ranked internationally and tended to concentrate on the negative results using populist and catchy sporting equivalences - being ‘beaten’, ‘slump in the world league’ and ‘failed’.
- ▶ However, some the British media were more critical and raised questions about international ranking exercises as a means of judging education systems and suggested the need for a more measured response to the results.
- ▶ A feature of many articles was the contrast made between the amount of spending on education and the apparently disappointing results.
- ▶ The media response to PISA shows that is an event that cannot be ignored by countries. It has become *the* major international tool focusing interest and debate on the issue of education and economic performance.

Introduction

The role that education plays in a country's economic growth and prosperity has seldom been perceived as more important than today. In the context of global markets and increased competition, a high quality education system is seen as crucial to a nation's ability to compete internationally; moreover, countries increasingly recognise the need to *demonstrate* that their education system is 'world class'. Hence, international organisations, like the EU and the OECD, appear as crucial in rating and ranking educational achievement internationally and offering policy recommendations. In this climate, surveys of student performance such as OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) can be seen as shaping national education policy and practice (see *CES Briefing 44*). The role of the media in this process is an important one: how the public and politicians in a country respond to their nation's performance in PISA will be influenced by how the national media cover the PISA 'spectacle'. This *Briefing* focuses on how the UK media response to 2006 PISA and considers the credence and importance they accorded to the survey, and how they reported and interpreted the results.

PISA 2006 in the UK

PISA is conducted in three-yearly cycles and examines the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in compulsory education. It examines students' reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, as well as attitudes towards learning; in 2006, the focus was on science and 57 countries around the world participated. In the UK, Scotland participated separately from England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) was responsible for administering PISA in Scotland while the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) carried out the study in the other parts of the UK.

In terms of the results for England, according to the NFER, 'only seven of the 56 other participating countries significantly outperformed England in science. This indicates that England ... compares well with other EU and OECD countries in terms of science achievement' (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2007; 19). The report, however, also noted that while 'England is among the countries with the largest numbers of high-achieving students, the long tail of under-achievement is a cause for concern (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2007; 26).

The report states that 'England's performance in mathematics was not significantly different from the OECD average', while admitting that 'compared with the top performing countries in the world England was lacking in high achievers in mathematics' (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2007; 31). England was close to the OECD average in reading, too, while the results for Northern Ireland and Wales were similar to those of England in all three subjects.

In Scotland, the report on the PISA results published by the Scottish Government stated that 'in science our performance apparently has not changed while others have improved', while for maths and reading the report suggests that 'our results have declined' (Scottish Government 2007; 11-12). The Scottish Government did not appear to devote too much attention to the PISA results. However, during the same period, the OECD was also undertaking a review of Scottish education which drew substantially on PISA data (OECD, 2007). Both the government and the media were awaiting OECD's study on the education system in Scotland. Published a few days after the announcement of the PISA results, this report was to receive greater attention by both the government and the media.

The media reception and interpretation

The PISA results for all four parts of the UK were broadly similar: not spectacular achievements in science and an evident drop in performance in reading and maths. The English-based press covered the announcement of the PISA findings extensively. Interestingly, the topic was covered by the tabloid press as well as broadsheet newspapers, including extensive coverage of the results by financial newspapers like the *Financial Times* and the *Economist*. Newspapers of all political allegiances presented OECD PISA as the most objective, trustworthy and indicative source of information for the position of the country's education system in international comparisons.

Britain slumps in world league table for maths and reading

Fig.1: *The Guardian*, 5.12.2007

The decline of the performance in the three areas tested was to give the press its main headlines: in the day after the announcement of the results the *Guardian* reported that 'Britain slumps in world league table for maths and reading' (Fig.1). The *Evening Standard* commented that 'Billions spent on education, but British schools slump in the world league' and the *Independent* reported that 'Reading and maths standards falling in Britain, says OECD' (Fig.2).

Reading and maths standards falling in Britain, says OECD

Fig.2: *The Independent*, 5.12.2007

In more detail, starting from newspapers which might be considered centre and centre right, the *Evening Standard* was one of the first newspapers to report results which had leaked out: 'Britain tumbles 10 places in the world's most important school league table' (29.11.2007). Terms such as 'plummeted down', 'beaten' and 'falling behind' were used to describe the UK's position and the article concluded by stressing the 'concern that Britain is falling behind other developed nations in producing scientifically literate school leavers vital for the future economy'. According to a *Telegraph* article of the 30 November, 'UK schools beaten by Estonia in science skills':

A study has revealed that standards in British schools for science are plummeting and are worse than those of pupils in Slovenia and Estonia. The news has been touted as wake up call for the Government, whose education policies saw the UK slump from its previous third place ranking to 19th for reading.

A note in the online version of the *Telegraph* posted with the title, 'What happened to "education, education, education"?' (as Blair had expressed New Labour's priorities in 1997) received 128 lengthy comments from readers within two days. *The Times* summed up UK's performance as 'The Three Rs – Really Rotten Results?'. The article contrasted the positive results reported by the Government for its spending on education with the mainly negative findings of the international surveys (*The Times*, 9.12.2007).

British pupils fall in world rankings

Fig.3: *The Times*, 5.12.2007

Newspapers of a centre and centre-left political allegiance covered the announcement of the PISA results extensively and most of them followed lines broadly similar to the more conservative press. On November 30th, *The Independent* reported on the leaked results with the headline 'UK children plummet down science league table'. The article stated:

The Government faces further embarrassment over standards of education, after Britain plummeted down yet another international league table – this time for science. ...The ranking puts the quality of science taught in Britain's schools behind Slovenia, Estonia and Liechtenstein but still in the top third of world nations.

However, although they accepted the OECD expertise and neutrality in conducting the study, they also raised questions about international ranking exercises as a means of judging education systems.

*It would be wrong to attach too much weight to these surveys. International learning comparisons can never be an exact science. Tests can play to the strengths of a certain country's system. But they are still the best tool we have (*Independent*, 5.12.2007).*

On December 6th the *Independent*, while accepting the PISA findings, suggested the need for a more measured response to international comparisons:

The fact is that the experts believe there are reasons why we don't do brilliantly. For a start, teachers in the UK do not teach to these tests, as they do with GCSEs and A-levels. If they did, there is little doubt we would begin to improve. But we would then find that the results were becoming detached from the education we wanted to put in place. It is easy to read too much into these scores. Such international comparisons are a valuable research tool, but if we start to celebrate when we do well and despair when we do badly, we are missing the point of them.

The Guardian appears somewhat ambivalent in its response to PISA. An article on December 5th by its chief political correspondent described PISA as the 'most authoritative international study' and reported that 'Britain is sliding down the world league table'. However, on December 6th ('The truth about the tables'), it tried to put the results and the process into perspective:

The collection of data about the things that schools and universities do... is useful in principle. But in practice the material is presented in the form of who's-up-who's-down league tables it frames the argument in a misleading way. Statistics about children's achievements can shed light on many things, but cannot definitively settle the quality of a school... the only definitive league tables are in sports, not in science.

The *Financial Times* was one of the newspapers with the widest coverage of the PISA results from as early as November 30th, when the first leaked results came out ('UK teenagers plummet in world science league' *FT* online, 30.12.2007), and then on the day of the official announcement: according to the newspaper, the 'OECD gives UK teenagers only "average" marks' in a survey that is 'statistically robust'. Most other articles of both the *FT* and the *Economist*, in contrast to the rest of the British press, did not centre on the UK but focused on global rankings and their significance for the future of global markets: 'Asia Pacific teenagers top OECD tests' (*FT* online 4.12.2007); and 'The race is not always to the richest' (*The Economist* online, 6.12.2007). According to this last article, 'money and effort aren't enough to impart the skills and knowledge needed in a cut-throat world... Letting schools run themselves seems to boost a country's position in this high-stakes international tournament ...' (*The Economist* online, 6.12.2007).

The BBC covered the OECD PISA study extensively with several online articles on the day of the publication of the results (December 4th). Some of the headlines included: 'UK slips down global table'; 'Schools face up to global leagues'; 'Finland stays top of global class'; and 'Scotland slips in schools league'. Using subheadings such as 'Downwards' and 'Overtaken', BBC reported that the UK was 'the only country ... to have slipped down into the lower group' (BBC online, 4.12.2007). In relation to the Scottish performance in PISA, the BBC reported on the response from the Minister for Skills and Schools, Maureen Watt,

who stressed that 'we have inherited a situation' and that 'this, taken with the information from the recent international literacy study and the forthcoming OECD review of school education in Scotland, provides us with valuable insights into our strengths and weaknesses' (BBC online, 4.12.2007).

Conclusions

The UK press coverage of the PISA study was substantial. The British media unequivocally accepted OECD as the major intergovernmental organisation for conducting reliable and robust statistical analysis of education systems' performance. Further, many newspapers stressed the need for such analysis if countries are to predict and hence attempt to improve their short- and long-term standing in the competitive global markets. Although the OECD is 'shy' (FT, 2007) to make comparisons with previous PISA studies, league tables, rankings and graphs of performance decline between 2000 and 2006 were dominant in the UK press. The ranking presentation of the results attracted journalists who were keen on making populist and catchy sporting equivalences of being 'beaten', 'overtaken' and 'failed'.

Another key feature of most, and especially of the right wing leaning newspaper articles, was their focus on the large education spending and the apparently disappointing results. Political opponents appeared to grasp the opportunity PISA offers to criticise the government and demand radical action, whereas media more favourable to government policies were more likely to be reserved in their analysis of the results. Financial newspapers commented on the state of the national education system but seemed far more interested in pointing out to their business readers which economies are expected to perform better in the future; with global markets being borderless, capital investment targets the best wherever they are located.

Finally, part of the UK press also seemed to portray some degree of critical distance from the spectacle of PISA: although fully trusting the OECD capacity to deliver objective results and despite their small number, there were some press articles which questioned the need for immediate action on the basis of the negative results. Perhaps the publication of league tables in the English education system for over a decade might have offered experience on reading and analysing comparisons across

institutions – in this case, countries – with some detachment and open-mindedness.

Nevertheless, above all, there is a single dominant reality evident in journalists' writings as well as in the reactions of policy makers, educators and politicians to the study; PISA is an event that no-one can afford to miss – it requires answers and demands action. It has become *the* major international tool mobilising interest and debate on the relation of education with the knowledge economy agenda. No matter one's opinion of PISA, critical or approving, there is certainly one position no media, policy maker, politician or researcher can take – that is, ignore it.

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For more information and working papers see www.ces.ed.ac.uk/research/FabQ/index.htm

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