

Fabrication, Circulation and Use of a Supra-National
Instrument of Regulation Based on Knowledge

EDUCATION SECTOR

Production of OECD's
"Programme for International Student
Assessment (PI SA)"

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Introduction

This report is intended to provide the information required from the national team (Scotland Education) on a range of questions about when, where, how, who, why and for what purpose national actors enrolled in the PISA programme, and about their supra-national engagement in the production of PISA. We are also asked to provide descriptive material about national actors' views on their participation at the supra-national level, and some evaluation of the types of participation of the actors. We are required to address both policy and knowledge issues: that is the actors who are involved and the knowledge that is mobilised. The material is organised according to the headings set out by the Portuguese Team in January 2008, and there is an appendix providing some relevant interview quotations which are identified in the text through footnotes. It will be apparent that we have found it necessary to interview actors from both systems and to review documents from the UK and Scottish governments in order to complete this task and the reasons for this are set out below.

1. Descriptive Elements from the stories they tell about the 'National' entry in PISA

The story told about 'national' entry is one about the shifting nature of the 'nation' in question. We have explained this point in the interim report on WP 3 but will briefly review it here, as it is central to our understanding of the PISA issue and illustrates the complexity of identifying the locus of policy-making for education within the United Kingdom.

Before political devolution, because of its long history and distinctive characteristics (Humes and Bryce 2003), education policy in Scotland was permitted a high level of administrative separateness from education policy developments in the rest of the UK-for which the UK parliament and government at Westminster were and are responsible. There were and are different structures of provision, and, importantly, differences in testing regimes and cultures of accountability (Menter, Mahoney and Hextall 2004). Constitutional change has brought added complexity to the policy process across all policy areas (Jeffrey, 2007). Scotland now has, since 1999, a parliament with primary legislative powers and tax varying powers, but the devolution 'settlement' is provisional and devolution is best understood as a process rather than an event (Arnott 2005, Arnott and Menter 2008, Arnott and Ozga 2008). For the current Scottish (Nationalist) Government, devolution is a stage on the road to independence for Scotland. For the UK government, devolution is a set of working relations which preserves the 'union' of the United Kingdom and enables small nations (Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) to

survive within a stronger UK framework. It follows, therefore, that the PISA 'story' is unfolding against a shifting and increasingly contested political backdrop.

The party political background is also important. Research suggests both convergence and divergence in education policy across the UK in the 1990s (Arnott et al, 2003; Arnott 2005; Humes and Bryce, 2003; Menter et al, 2004, 2006; Raffe 2005). The pressure for convergence is linked to structural factors such as a shared UK labour market, but also follows from the fact that from 1999 until May 2007 the Labour Party was in power both in Scotland and at the UK level. From the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 until the second Scottish Parliament elections in May 2007 the Labour Party was the lead partner in a Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition. As a consequence there were common themes in education policy in both Scotland and England—themes such as choice, privatisation and standards (Arnott, 2005; Croxford and Raffe, 2007). These tended to be actively promoted by the Westminster UK government and reflected in policy in Scotland. Since May 2007 the situation has changed because of the election of a Nationalist Government in Scotland (though this is a minority government). This government is anxious to highlight clear differences in policy between themselves and the UK (Labour) government, and is doing this (in part at least) through shifting its points of reference from England and highlighting Scotland's similarities to small, continental European countries like Denmark and Finland. This supports the SNP Government's aim of ultimately achieving Scottish independence.

Scotland and PISA, then, presents a story that shifts from 'natural' inclusion within the UK, to recognition of difference, and now Scotland uses PISA data to make connections to other countries that have been identified by the Scottish government as appropriate comparators, and that move the focus away from the 'other' of England and towards different points of reference.

The PISA story starts in 1997 with 'national entry', as defined by OECD, covering all of the UK. As the PISA cycle unfolds the position changes: in 2000 the UK took part as one country (the Scottish and English/Welsh results were analysed separately later); in 2003 England failed to reach the response levels required for its participation in the test, whereas Scotland achieved them and took part; and finally, in terms of the PISA 2006 results, both England and Scotland administered and participated in the study separately, but were still officially presented as 'the UK'.

The story therefore is of increased recognition of separate status for Scotland, but it is also a story of lack of clarity about what the UK is in terms of education policy and knowledge about educational performance. This comes through our informants' difficulty in recalling a specific decision about participation, which reflects Scotland's difficulty in operating 'supra-nationally' because of its uncertain status. However footnote 15 (below) provides a quotation from an English informant that suggests both her slightly impatient

response to 'difference' and pressure from Scotland for recognition that eventually achieved separate representation on the PISA governing board.

1.1 When was the decision taken, by whom and in what context?

Scotland's first participation in the PISA Programme was decided collaboratively with England and Northern Ireland in 1997, as one national entity, the UK (Wales did not agree to participate fully in PISA until the 2006 study)¹. In the first round of PISA testing in 2000 the UK took part with one national manager and one representative at the governing board, both of whom were based in England. The Scottish results were subsequently analysed separately, as was the case in the following rounds of 2003 and 2006. However, in both 2003 and 2006 Scotland had gained the right to have its own national project manager and governing board member.

Entry in PISA was the result of close liaison between England and Scotland and the decision was taken at ministerial level² by all UK participating countries, 'based on advice from officials in the various education departments in each respective country'. None of our informants were closely involved with the processes of decision making for entry into PISA – however, they stressed that both England and Scotland have been working closely in relation to PISA throughout the 12 years of its existence and that this was certainly the case at its birth as well.

The context of entry by the UK into PISA is one in which the New Labour government had just taken power, with a strong modernising agenda, and this is highly significant in understanding the reasons for participation. Modernisation of UK education policy tied education very firmly to the economy (DfEE 1997) and involved a shift towards 'implied consent' by the public to government's problem-solving initiatives. These also required the widespread collection and use of data in order to enable the public to be informed, and the displacement of expert or professional judgement. Managerialism reinforced a technical and pragmatic approach to policy-making, driven by a calculus of economy and efficiency (Clarke, Gewirtz and McLaughlin 2000). In education policy-making these developments promoted integration ('joined up policy making') and sought to involve new partners, particularly private partners (Jones 2000, DfEE 1998).

In England in the period from 1997, the policy focus is on raising attainment. The 1997 White paper 'Excellence in Schools' outlined an agenda for 'effective change [that] requires millions of people to change their behaviour'. In this narrative underachievement is the key problem; international competitive success requires that performance rises, and underperformance jeopardises that project. There is 'zero tolerance', to use a phrase from the text, of arguments connecting underachievement and material and social conditions, nor is there acknowledgement of the exclusionary effects of curricular and pedagogic practices of schooling. The focus on 'standards, not structures' provides a

basis for the development of initiatives since 1997 that promote diversity and differentiation in provision. The preoccupation with changing attitudes and competition provides the space in which private enterprise is encouraged to play a significant role in the creation and delivery of education. Business is a model for promoting change and encouraging enterprise, including the enterprising self. All of these policy developments are made possible by the production of performance data, and the construction of a system of performance management in which the relative positioning of schools, teachers and pupils can be tracked year on year. Data are therefore absolutely central as a knowledge form, and comparative data shape policy interventions. Thus PISA entry is part of this development, but is rapidly overtaken by the sophistication of the data production system for statutory testing throughout schooling in England (Ozga 2009 forthcoming).

2. Justifications they give about the 'national' entry in PISA: why and for what purpose?

a. UK participation in 1997

OECD's stamp of the club of competitive nations in addition to the government's direct association of improved educational performance with economic growth, were the two prime reasons for the participation of the UK in the study. English actors in particular emphasise comparison with other major economies as one of the main motives for entering into PISA, since other international studies (IEA's TIMSS and PIRLS, for example), according to them, did not offer the same basis for comparison.³

Interviews with both English and Scottish policy actors also stress OECD's technical competence and expertise as best placed to deliver an internationally comparative study of the state of education systems in the industrialised nations and beyond. OECD is considered technically as the gold standard for conducting comparative studies like PISA: neither European agencies, nor other international organisations like the IEA, appear to our informants as having the expert capacity to deliver major comparative studies⁴. Above all, as stated earlier, comparison was key in the justifications for participation that actors gave: comparative knowledge is seen to be essential for the understanding of system performance (Jones et al 2008). OECD was able to offer a much greater spread of comparison, both for the more and the less successful education systems and hence economies. According to both Scottish and English actors, the indicators produced by the European Commission do not provide the same degree of commensurability across nations, and IEA's comparisons seem less relevant to the nations that England and Scotland consider as their comparator ones⁵.

On the other hand, both groups of actors are aware of the extent to which PISA has been branded through marketing techniques by the OECD to such an extent that countries are willing to take part on the basis of the media attention it receives. This rather undercuts their emphasis on the superiority of the OECD in comparison to other international organisations in terms of technical expertise, and may reflect a shift in attitude over time-as the costs of PISA have become more apparent, so our informants may adopt a more critical approach to OECD's 'spectacle'. In this account, PISA's acceptance is a result of OECD's masterful techniques of persuasion, or, as one interviewee suggested, even 'proselytization'⁶. Another Scottish interviewee described PISA as 'currency': although its data are barely used, PISA recurs in discussions by many policy makers and in a sense has become the symbol of international commensurability⁷. Actors who use it appear as able to place the nation and their own ideas onto a global stage of competition and 'cutting-edge' policy making. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that back in 1997 PISA was still a very new idea, a highly ambitious study which had little, if any, of the fame it later acquired. Therefore, this latter argument might be more applicable to countries which entered the programme later (2003-2006) rather than in the very beginning, like the UK. However, it might explain the reasons for many countries continuing to take part, although they find that they gain very little out of it.

b. Scottish participation

Scottish narratives about the participation of Scotland in PISA did not refer explicitly to the reasons for the original entry into the programme, as most actors were not involved in it at that early stage, and it was a UK decision. However, perhaps more significantly for the Scottish case, interviewees gave interesting insights on the country's continuous involvement in PISA since 2000.

First, although comparison with the best was still considered a very significant factor⁸, Scottish participation was mainly justified on the basis that, through PISA, Scotland acquires a role in the international education policy stage⁹ as a separate entity (from the UK/England). Thus PISA enables Scotland as a system to be visible. Moreover, given that there is and was a relatively high degree of confidence in the performance of the education system, the participation was not seen as risky -Scotland could gain visibility and kudos on the international stage. The actors based in England did not make such comments about participation in the international policy arena, a point that may be related to the development in England of a massive complex performance testing machine, which provided reliable system performance knowledge. Furthermore, the UK/England system actors were confident of their visibility and 'place' on the international stage.

The use of PISA for external recognition for Scotland is supported by the fact that PISA data are not analysed there. Although some interviewees suggested that they do see a

need for some further analysis, given the useful material on school culture and management, this has not yet happened. So there was a general consensus that the primary purpose of PISA is to offer Scotland a place in the international stage of competitive economies¹⁰. According to one interviewee, if Scottish results had been low, this might have triggered a more serious consideration of the results, comparisons with other countries or even reforms like those that took place in other European countries¹¹. However, as long as the results remain fairly positive, PISA's influence in Scotland is like that of a meteor: despite causing some ripple effects and few discussions, and possibly a couple of media headlines as well, PISA is a spectacle that as quickly as it illuminates the nation, with an equal speed it is forgotten and passed by¹².

Moreover, since Scotland does not have such a testing-driven culture based on individual data for every pupil as is the case in England¹³, PISA was described in several instances as 'a pat on the back', or as a 'reassurance'¹⁴. In other words, interviewees suggested that PISA reinforces Scotland's distinctiveness (from England) by providing knowledge about the performance of the system that can be used internally (in the UK) to resist pressures (from the UK government) for more testing and for the publication of individual test results on a national comparative basis. PISA represents a complex new strategy based on international comparisons that enables and renews the Scottish tradition of balancing data and numbers with the distinctive Scottish approach of self-evaluation and independent judgement by experts (especially the Inspectorate) of thought, but on a global stage; this is congruent with the parallel development of Scotland securing recognition at the European level through the 'branding' of self-evaluation (in the HGIOS-how good is our school model HMIE 2002, 2007) which has been taken up as a 'travelling policy' (Alexiadiou and Jones 2001) for over a decade. In this case PISA results are interpreted locally as reaffirming local and traditional (or embedded) policy and educational knowledge production. This may be interpreted as exemplifying Jones and Alexiadiou's (2001) discussion of 'travelling' and 'embedded' policy; in which travelling policy refers to supra and transnational agency activity, as well as to common agendas (for example for the reshaping of educational purposes to develop human capital for the information age). Embedded policy is to be found in 'local' spaces, (which may be national, regional or local) where global policy agendas come up against existing priorities and practices. This perspective allows for recognition that, while policy choices may be narrowing, national and local assumptions and practices remain significant and mediate or translate global policy in distinctive ways.

Finally, in the case of Scotland, the need to appear on the international stage helps to explain why the country is willing to spend substantial amounts of money, to secure through very stressful and uncertain conditions the required response rates and -often just- manage to participate, although it does very little, if not absolutely nothing, with the findings.

The UK framework within which Scotland is located is significant in the narrative here. The justification and purpose of UK entry in 1997 is connected to the incoming New Labour UK government's determination to reform public sector provision and improve the performance of the education system as a way on ensuring competitive advantage. As the UK government becomes more and more determined to manage performance, and more and more sophisticated in developing monitoring systems in England, so the significance of PISA for the UK/England system may decline. At the same time, as Scotland diverges increasingly from UK/English education policy, so too does the significance of PISA for Scotland increase. In the first place it is important as reassurance that without a massive expansion of testing its system is performing well: it is an external validator of internal quality assurance processes. In the second place it becomes an arena for the promotion of Scotland as a separate and distinctive education system (and, by extension, a separate national presence in the international arena). This latter function becomes more important as internal UK politics become more divisive.

2.1 Description of the national participation in the program: descriptive elements from actors' narratives about the 'last' PISA cycle (2003-2006)

Who, when and where, to do what, and about what

The actors that we have interviewed represent both the UK (England) and Scotland members of the PISA governing board, as well as members of the analytical services and research/evidence managers of the government departments responsible for school education in each system. The narratives of the respective national project managers and governing board members at the OECD PISA meetings clearly illustrate the divergence in motivation and experience of the two systems present in this 'national' case. Although there was general agreement on their shared working processes, their perception of the activities and agendas that took place in the meetings was quite different.

First, Scotland occupies the unique position of having a seat at the PISA Governing Board¹⁵ although it is not an independent country and has no established separate reporting of its results. Although this was not the case in 2000, the Scottish Governing Board member is able as PISA evolves to move from a back seat (having previously sat behind the English Governing Board member) to the front. This has considerable symbolic significance, as the Scottish actor points out at footnote 15-this gives Scotland a status that is not accorded to other 'devolved' administrations, like Catalunya. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the movement is symbolic and does not produce any surprises: both Board members have discussed the major issues and agreed in advance of the meeting how they will proceed.

Our interviewees had different levels of expertise: they ranged from having expertise in social sciences to more widely defined analytical skills. Two were based at a Government

department that processes and analyses data, and thus have a degree of technical capacity, but their account of meeting conveyed an impression that detailed technical discussions did not take place at the Board, and technical staff did not accompany these Board members. The English policy actor had attended most of the governing board meetings, whereas there have been at least two changes in the Scottish Board members; the current Scottish Board member is also new.

The Board meetings were described as constantly enlarging with the increasing number of the participating countries. One of our interviewees described the National Project Managers' meeting as even more chaotic, given that the national representatives bring their statisticians with them. These meetings were described as quite technical, in contrast to the Board meetings which were described as more political. The Board meeting has a choice of using either the English or the French language – however, most of the discussions are in English, a fact which was thought to disadvantage the non-Anglophone members¹⁶.

The Board meetings were described as political, in the sense that the members from each country members often appear to represent their national 'stereotypes' and argue for 'national' recognition. Nevertheless, the description of stereotypical attitudes here does not suggest banal and conventional caricatures of national 'types' – rather, education tradition and values are the stereotypes which are experienced repeatedly in the OECD PISA meetings. For example, our interviewees described the US representatives as having a very functionalist and instrumental view of education, whereas Continental Europe always appears to demonstrate a far more academic view of education's worth. As for Scotland, 'we tend to be somewhere in between'¹⁷. In a sense, the Board meetings were described as the place where national differences and traditions are 'ironed' out, in order to reach a consensus. Nonetheless, it was also very interestingly noted that the ideas put forward are those that are more likely to lead to a compromise amongst the members¹⁸. The meetings therefore were described as heavily managed and controlled by the OECD Secretariat and Andreas Schleicher himself¹⁹.

In terms of technical issues arising in meetings, although one interviewee described the people participating as a 'complete mix' where ideas and suggestions are always under scrutiny regarding their viability by the technical experts²⁰, another interviewee commented that technical issues are almost never discussed –instead, ACER experts often offer technical presentations which Board members never challenge but 'trust'²¹. The process appears to translate political participation (ie through representation of system values and practices) into technical processes through the ritual of enactment of stereotype and the 'trust' in technical expertise to reduce divergence and difference to manageable and comparable systems.

In summary then, the national participants in the transnational policy space of the PISA governing body are (i) representing two nations (ii) in Scotland's case, both part of the UK delegation and with separate status (iii) in Scotland's case, working in partnership with England but also achieving recognition (iv) enacting national values/traditions (v) but seeking consensus (vi) being guided by technical experts (vi) who translate their national pre-occupations into shared practices of assessment.

2.2 Modes of the national participation in PISA and its evolution: how do they evaluate their participation-types of participation, perceived influence, changes and tensions.

As indicated above the participation that we have recorded seems to be largely political rather than technical, and possibly quite convergent, although the positioning of the Scottish Board members is described by one of them as 'in between' what she describes as the 'functionalist' American/Anglo-Saxon view and the 'academic' continental European. The two sets of respondents offer rather different perspectives on their participation that perhaps reflects their different status and the differing significance of PISA to them. The UK/England Board member in her accounts of modes of participation often spoke in the first person in terms of organising the meeting (for example, 'from that point of view we have been thinking about how we might approach this in the future...'), thus giving the impression of a strong steering role in the discussion. The Scottish actors never spoke in a similar manner. Instead, they described the meetings as heavily controlled with very little opportunity for debate. Although the participation was described as largely convergent due to the range of issues put forward for discussion, it was also seen as quite passive with very few opportunities for active debate due to the highly intimidating structure and management of the meetings –an interviewee described dialogue as 'impossible'. For example, describing her experience in the 15th meeting in Mexico in March 2003, she spoke about the last day of the meeting during which they would summarise the matters discussed and agreed: 'He [Schleicher] would be sitting there with his powerpoint tapping in as we went along. And I suspect a lot was already there'²².

Therefore, although the Scottish seat and vote in the Board since 2003 suggests more active participation for the country, in fact participation is reduced to passive presence because of the nature of the meetings, which were seen by Scottish actors (if not by their England counterparts) as intimidating and closely managed. From this we conclude that the influence of Scotland on the debate is quite limited and passive.

3. Conclusions

There are issues and challenges in this task in relation to locating the 'national' case, given the changing nature of Scotland's representation in PISA. In order to understand this fully we have had to move to the wider UK frame of reference to provide more contextualisation of the production of PISA in this case. We believe that this lens has allowed us to see the way in which the changing politics of devolution in the UK has been linked to a changing representation of Scotland in the international and transnational policy space (Arnott and Ozga 2008).

In addition, we believe there is evidence from our analysis to date on PISA and the knowledge contained in PISA (but not used or discussed) to support Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal's powerful reading of such developments as part of creating the 'society of 'international' spectacle.' They go on:

'Politics is influenced, and in a certain sense constructed, through a systematic exposure to surveys, questionnaires and other means of data collection that would, or are perceived to have the ability to, estimate 'public opinion'. This ongoing collection, production and publication of surveys leads to an 'instant democracy', a regime of urgency that provokes a permanent need for self justification. Hagenbüchle (2001) rightly points out that 'the mediatisation of political life reduces politics to a public spectacle', impeding any critical discussion (p. 3). We argue that by using comparable measures and benchmarks as policy we are, in fact, creating an international spectacle, one that is deeply influencing the formation of new policies and conceptions of education. (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003: 427)

PISA appears to occupy an important symbolic space and to establish significance without being backed up by extensive analyses in-depth discussions of its content. Its production seems to centre on a ritual of participation that does not offer many opportunities for real debate and input from the national level. But this is not experienced by Scotland's actors as a significant issue. Provided they are there, and provided that PISA is successful - a 'pat on the back' as one interviewee put it, it serves its purpose. The fact that Scotland is relatively successful in PISA has to be taken into account here. There is a symbiotic relationship between PISA and the education system: Scotland needs PISA and PISA needs cases like Scotland. OECD is considered as highly competent and provides a 'spectacle' of recognition that comes with high levels of visibility and reputation.

The production of PISA provides little evidence of attention to its content and to the problems of construction of comparative assessment. The process is ritualistic and symbolic. By this means the local policy actor signals, to an international audience, through PISA, the adherence of their nation to reform agendas (Steiner-Khamsi 2004, p.

76), and thus joins the club of competitive nations. This is especially important for a small, peripheral nation, attempting to model small, successful nations, and escape the shadow of the 'other'.

In this perspective, as Appadurai (1996) argues, we can recognise 'vernacular globalisation' in which there is change and reconfiguration in global, national and local interrelationships but mediated by local and national history and politics.

Notes

Code: the interview quotations below come from actors (politicians and officials, including members of analytical services) at Central Policy levels in both England and Scotland. We have given them a number and a country code (England or Scotland) so they appear as CP 1E or CP 3 S etc.

Interview quotations

¹ 'It's all rather a long time ago and I wasn't around at the birth of PISA, but my understanding is that OECD countries, including the UK, agreed on the framework for the first PISA and decided on their participation in 1997.' (CP2E)

'We are treated by the OECD as one national entity, the UK. I would assume therefore that Scotland and England liaised very closely on the decision to participate (as we continue to do on all PISA-related work).' (CP2E)

'In the OECD they treat us as a national entity, they treat us as the UK and they look at other parts of the country as sub-national.' (CP2E)

² In 1997, David Blunkett was Secretary of State (minister) for Education and Employment in England and Brian Wilson was the Scottish Education Minister.

'The decision would have been made at ministerial level by all countries, based on advice from officials in the various education departments.' (CP2E)

³ 'PISA was certainly the first large-scale international comparison study that would allow us to benchmark our performance against all of the world's major economies. England and Scotland had both participated in IEA TIMSS in 1995 but the range of industrialised countries involved was not as complete as for PISA.' (CP2E)

'This government's main focus is economic growth and economic prosperity. With issues of solidarity and cohesion [...] too. So from that perspective obviously when you're looking at your comparatives you start to think – well, what are you most interested in? you're interested in countries that have successful economic strategies, that have economic growth.' (CP7S)

'The thing that springs to mind is Peter Peacock's interest in PISA and the dimension of it and wanting to have a benchmarking group of countries we compare with.' (CP8S)

'I've been making the argument that with PISA we would be comparing ourselves to OECD countries and we've not been comparing ourselves with ones out of the OECD. I think we should start really to look at some of the Baltic countries – say Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia – there are some other countries coming along.... how those countries are developing, their economies and developing how they operate. These are the countries that are huge competitors for Scotland. You know, so we need to be looking at them, you know. That's eh, I think the next round ... this round of PISA we presented the results very much looking just at the OECD countries. I think it would be safe to say the next round will be a broader look.' (CP7S)

⁴ 'I think it would be fair to say that PISA is top priority, in a sense, because it's an OECD study. That, in itself, has given it a credibility that perhaps some other studies would have less of. The fact of it is it's driven by the OECD.' (CP7S)

'I think [OECD] was just the obvious one and I'm not quite sure what other kind of standards they would have to judge Scotland compared to a comparative bunch of countries. It seems the obvious one to go for.' (CP1S)

⁵ 'Over the last four years I would say so. Up to 4 years ago I was asked to do a lot of comparisons with England and was constantly explaining the problems about doing that and advocating the use of PISA or something similar. And I think over, say, the last four years, there's absolutely been a move towards PISA and the OECD equivalences with England being one of those countries that we are comparing ourselves to but no different from any other countries.' (CP1S)

'Certainly since 2003 results of the last 3 or 4 years there's been an increasing interest in placing Scotland in international context primarily through PISA but also through other indicators such as the NEET indicators and things like that.' (CP1S)

'So I think there will be a great deal of interest in the PISA results and other international benchmarks. I think it's very much how Scotland fits in with the existing indicators that are there, for example, using PISA and just existing things rather than necessarily seeing Scotland's approach shifting towards a UK approach'. (CP1S)

⁶ 'I think PISA probably gets the most attention and that's not because it is any more valid or reliable, it is simply because OECD has done such a brilliant marketing job with PISA. So it is a real brand name, ministers are familiar with it, politicians generally are

familiar with it, the press, the education press and beyond are all familiar with PISA, whereas TIMMS etc they do not get the same amount of attention. Now when the press takes up something obviously, ministers will be more inclined to pay attention in case there is any, if there are any traps, so I would say this is why PISA is until now has more of a share of the attention for these studies. It is not at all reflection of the quality of the other studies, it is just that OECD has made a very good job of this. Andreas Schleicher travels the world prosyletizing PISA and has been very successful.’ (CP2E)

⁷ But it is amazing how often PISA comes up in general conversations about policy. Having watched in my area, in all sorts of unexpected ways people talk about PISA, it is like a currency (CP8S)

⁸ ‘... it’s gone through a number of iterations so I think it has improved over time. That’s one point. The other point is quite literally there’s so many countries have got involved. And so many of the countries that we’re interested in have got involved in it.... So, for example, with TIMMS and with PiRLS there are a lot of countries involved. There are a lot of countries involved that are countries in the developing world or that are countries along that axis we’re not interested particularly’. (CP7S)

‘I mean, obviously the other thing it doesn’t show you what other countries are doing. You know, so you get ... you know, you get the scores from the other countries and you get that kind of breakdown from other countries as well. Sometimes the top performers, bottom performers and so on. And you can start looking at that. So that starts giving you some ideas and thoughts about other countries performances. What do they look like? Is it ... and again that’s when you start thinking about – is this something we should be investigating and looking at in terms of these other countries as well’. (CP7S)

⁹ ‘The value lay on the ability of Scotland, Scottish ministers to play in an international stage, rather than the relevance to policy and practice... And sort of make contacts’. (CP8S)

‘I think that as long as we think it’s international comparisons [...]. And the political importance of being able to say how well is Scotland doing in the world compared to other countries. And I think as long as there’s an appetite for that kind of comparison then something like PISA will be used because it has got this kind of gold standard tinge to it because of the OECD attachment. But, I mean, you might say that ... is that the main thing we get from it. Is this kind of statement almost of – this is where you are? Possibly’ (CP7S)

'But I think it's partly about you know this is putting Scotland on the map. We do quite well in PISA so what more can we extract from that by way of evidence on our position in the world.' (CP1S)

¹⁰ 'And it was always quoted as being a major area of concern. What we probably didn't do is explore and dig into the PISA data as much as we could have done at that point and we ... to understand better the detail of those results. We focussed very much on our national source of information on the lowest 20% and more or less left the PISA analysis, as the headline figure, without really digging into it. Not sure the reasons for that. Partly, I think because of resource issues and getting to understand the datasets. But also the lack of analysis we had at that time on the Scotland results. It was because Scotland was just an adjudicated region we didn't have the amount of detail that we had obviously at the UK level'. (CP2S)

'We just tend not to use them. Other countries would pay a lot more attention, I think, to some of those elements and [...] for us we might look at them for kind of, just general interest, if you like, but it's not ... it's not of huge interest. We don't see it as – there is a particular set of instructions and strategies that always seem to work and therefore we must adopt those. That's not where we want to go. So that hasn't been of great interest to us. That kind of side of things.... We have a lot of attitudinal data collected. I think it would be fair to say we've done nothing with it. It really hasn't been looked at very much. I've looked at it a little since I've started. And it's one of the things that I want, in the future, to actually be looked at much more appropriately' (CP7S)

'It's diagnostic' (CP7S)

¹¹ 'The only one I know in much detail before Scotland was Denmark, which had a bad set of PISA results a few years ago. And the Danish one was overtly a diagnosis with a view to remedial action being taken. Whereas the justification for the invitation for Scotland was of a high performing system in an evolving world, and to orient the country better to go ahead, as I have heard it explained. ...The PISA data I don't think could be seen as a huge driver in the inspection model, because it is favourable for Scotland. There wouldn't be any particular basis for saying, oh because of PISA we must do this or that...Yes, I think were there to be a very negative set of PISA results in a future round, then I think your second point is that comparison would then start feed into the process as it did in Denmark, as it did in other countries' (CP4S).

¹² 'It's mainly been used so far to measure ... to basically say – where does Scotland exist in the world compared to other countries.... We have come fifth, twelfth, whatever.

That's been the main use, is that kind of idea of measurement. And then the idea of measurement just as an overall – there's where we are, and the other thing, I suppose, is using it to analyse different levels of achievement. So, in other words, how are our bottom performers doing, how are our top performers doing. But in terms of how are they doing, are they better or worse than others and do we have a higher percentage of children in these groups compared to other countries. It's very much those issues that it's being used for' (CP7S)

¹³ 'You would still want to have data available at the level of the individual institution, never mind what you say nationally about comparisons between institutions. And of course as you well know the way in which the PISA data is generated is quite different to the way we generate the other kinds and forms of assessment here'. (CP7E)

¹⁴ 'Here I think the argument is that changes take a longer time to come through, and in any event, we have the reassurance of PISA for example, suggesting that overall our students are, on average reasonably pretty high performing anyway' (CP3S).

'They're also slightly political in a pat on the back where – look, haven't we done well. You know. Scotland is up here in the top ten or whatever. And government has certainly used it very much in that perspective as well. (CP7S)

¹⁵ 'I sit on the PISA Governing Board and my colleagues in Wales and Northern Ireland are happy for me to represent them. The Scots because education in Scotland has always been devolved, yes, I don't think you record that...eh? (laughs) Independent, unique, in that it has always been completely separate from what's going on in England, Scotland decided that they ought to have a place on the Board as well and this is negotiated with the OECD' (CP2E)

'The governing board meetings are very interesting. I mean, basically the OECD countries are sitting around the table. It is interesting in itself that we have a vote and a seat although we are not really an OECD country. When we go we actually sit with the UK representative, so there's two people the Scots representative and the UK representative, the UK representative represents Wales and Northern Ireland as well'. (CP7S)

'We got our seat on the board...well, certainly for the 2006 round we were separate in our context of actually having, attending the meeting separately'. (CP7S)

'In 2000 it was all one. In 2003 there was a separate publication of our results. I am not sure how active a part we played. I think we probably started to play more active part in the governing board of PISA, that would be fair. So that in itself has been quite interesting. The fact that we have a place nobody else does so for example the Spanish representative, there will be one representative sitting at the table representing Spain and three or four people sitting behind as observers representing Catalan etc. We're the only country that managed that and that caused some confusion'. (CP7S)

¹⁶ 'As of the expansion and what that means, when we first did PISA in 2000 with 32 countries, I think we were way up at 16. Now certainly from the point of view of (...), these partner countries as we call them are able to sit in the governing board meetings. So they've become huge now, you need binoculars to see across the room. It is even a bigger problem I think at the National Programme Manager level. The National Programme Managers are the ones who are actually going into the schools, or are in charge of those people who are going into schools and administering PISA and often they will bring two or three people to those meetings. They are huge apparently and you are dealing with much more technical matters and...you obviously want to run...and I think the level of English is an important factor because all these NPM meetings are conducted in English. The PISA Governing Board has a choice of English and French. But if your standard of English isn't great then obviously you don't want someone talk at you. From that point of view we have been thinking about how we might approach this in the future but there are a lot of sensitivities there because you don't want to create some kind of an apartheid, you don't want to create two categories of PISA and you want to be as inclusive as possible. But you really have to be aware of other countries sensitivities as well. They come to PISA because they want to be compared with these leading countries'. (CP2E)

¹⁷ They are political in a small, country way. Every country lives up to its stereotype. If you want to imagine how each country's representative will behave, they generally do. So we have a particular view of education that tends to come forward from France, Germany, it is almost like the continental Europe perspective on education. And testing is about and so on. You get a set of views there. You get a set of views about what you might think about the Anglo-Saxon countries, Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Britain. We travel, we tend to be somewhere in between in the views that we express. So we are not quite as academic in our views as you might expect from continental Europe educationists But we are not quite as instrumental either, as the views that come across from Australia and some of the Anglosaxon countries. I think we are somewhere in between. So the nature of the discussions tends to be around those kind of differences which are very much differences about the purpose of education, so what to measure in

education systems. The most extreme point of view tends to come from the USA unsurprisingly which is a every functionalist and instrumentalist view of a case system and therefore in terms of measures, just measures of attainment. You know do kids have good levels in literacy , are they good in science and have little interest in other elements that might be part of the international survey, So every time there would be a proposal to extend PISA you can almost be sure that they will say no. At least to begin with anyway. You can almost be sure that in the more continental kind of things people will say yes because they are more interested in more in depth analysis of different aspects of the system. But it is quite stereotypical, what you would expect actually. (CP7S)

¹⁸ There's a lot of talking, an awful lot of talking. The meetings consist of an awful lot of talking around the table. They put forward different views and a compromise will be reached. And a compromise will always be reached because there is no appetite to put something forward that the majority will disagree, because it won't work. People will just refuse to do whatever needs to be done. So we always have to reach some kind of compromise. The Nordics are very good at compromises, they are very good at that kind of consensus building. And they will be really good at the discussions. You see the stereotypes again, they really are...! (CP7S)

¹⁹ 'I seldom remember any debates on that level. It was more about Andreas Schleicher driving the whole agenda along as a process- very controlled, time controlled and then just people contributing to particular issues of decision making. It was a decision making forum' (CP8S)

²⁰ 'A complete mixture, all are very different people. So some countries send people whose background is in educational research, they are experts in educational research and pedagogy. Other countries will send people that are more statistically based. Or statistically minded, other countries will send policy people. It depends. A complete mixture of people which actually I think is good. Because it means you do get quite a range of views. So if people get carried away with wouldn't it be wonderful if we could do this and this and this, the statistics people will say actually in survey terms that it is really difficult to do, we shouldn't even try this. Actually having different views is useful But everyone who is there is a representative of their government, so there is a political steer as well because before you go these meetings you would have discussions with a range of people here because you have to be able to say what your country view is going to be in certain issues. So there is going to be discussion for example if we need to extend PISA on x,y,z,, you need to be able to say that yes, we are in favour of that or

no. So no matter what your personal background is you will come with an agenda if you like that you create with your government and take with you'. (CP7S)

'So you will speak with a range of colleagues, analysts, a range of people who would have the interest and who would have the knowledge on different aspects and you would try to come to a position. We would normally discuss our Scottish position with the rest of the UK. So we wouldn't necessarily always agree but we do discuss the position so that we know in advance how each other will react'. (CP7S)

²¹ 'My recollection of the Governing Board – I think I went only to three - is that it doesn't get down to technical stuff'. (CP8S)

'The guys in ACER in Australia, they have a strong role. They would sometimes turn up in these meetings. So you are right, you remind me, but they would come and talk technical language, and nobody, although national representatives are not able, with some exceptions, they would just be sitting, just checking on trust that this was the way to go. There was very limited in my experience challenge or anything on the technical side' (CP8S)

²² 'The final piece of these meetings is always on the last day, the last session when we would have the summary of everything being agreed and he would be sitting there with his powerpoint tapping in as we went along. And I suspect a lot was already there. So , yes.' (CP8S)

'It was all heavily heavily managed. Reams and reams of paper. And the actual physical thing was quite intimidating, there was quite a large group of people so you would be sitting round with your flag and your microphone and to speak and particularly if you were new to the thing you had to press that button to say anything. And occasionally there would be someone wanting to say something if they disagreed but to actually contribute to an active debate was impossible.' (CP8S)

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