Recent Activities

This year has been a busy period for everyone involved in PISA. For countries involved in PISA 2003, the main focus has been the implementation of the main study, which began in March 2003. Most of the countries have now submitted their data to the Consortium. Countries which participated in PISA Plus\(^1\) worked hard on the international report and their national reports. The joint OECD/UNESCO publication with their first results entitled *Literacy Skills for the World of Tomorrow* was jointly released by the OECD and UNESCO on 1 July 2003.

From the OECD Secretariat’s point of view, activities have ranged from PISA 2000 to PISA 2006. National dissemination activities have been an important aspect of our work. Several publications were released in 2002 including: i) *Sample Tasks from the PISA 2000 Assessment – Reading, Mathematical and Scientific Literacy*; ii) *Manual for the PISA 2000 Database*; iii) *Reading for Change: Performance and Engagement across Countries*; and iv) *PISA 2000 Technical Report*.

Another main objective of the Secretariat in 2003 has been the continuous analysis of the PISA 2000 data and subsequent release of thematic reports. The report *Learners for Life – Student Approaches to Learning* was successfully released on 30 September 2003 and the thematic report *Student Engagement at School* will be released on 15 October 2003.

As far as PISA 2003 is concerned, the *PISA 2003 Assessment Framework* was released this summer and a dissemination strategy has been established with the identification of the thematic areas to be analysed.

All our released publications are currently available on our website: [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)

For the PISA 2006 cycle a call for tender was released and a contract with a consortium led by ACER is currently under discussion. Developmental work has also been carried out for the expansion of the science framework for assessing science as a major domain and the assessment of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

During the PISA 2000 cycle, some countries had problems obtaining cooperation from schools and for the PISA 2003 cycle other countries have been trying to identify methods to increase school participation. For this reason, the main aim of this issue of the *PISA Newsletter* is to present the school co-operation strategies being adopted by four countries in PISA 2003: Australia, Austria, The Netherlands and Switzerland.

In addition, this issue will present the two international options for PISA 2003: the Information Communication Technology questionnaire and the Educational Career questionnaire.

\(^1\) *PISA Plus* is the repeat of PISA 2000 in Albania, Argentina, Bulgaria, Chile, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, Israel, Macedonia, Peru and Thailand.
Strategies for School Co-operation

School participation is an essential aspect of PISA, and one viewed as a challenge by some countries. PISA Standards require that 85 per cent of the schools from the original sample accept to participate in PISA. If that level of participation is not met, countries can still meet the target by using the replacement schools. This section of the PISA Newsletter will present some of the strategies used by countries to cope with this issue and increase school participation.

Australia
By John Cresswell

To obtain a sufficient sample for each cycle of PISA is a challenge for many countries, especially where testing in the schools is optional and depends on the decision of the principal and where students and their parents can elect not to participate. Australia is one of those countries and has introduced a number of strategies to encourage participation:

- Included with the letter of invitation for the school to participate is a package which contains a coloured brochure outlining Australia’s results in the previous cycle PISA, a letter of support from the Chief Executive Officer of the relevant education authority and a copy of a brochure that can be forwarded to parents and students.
- In the letter inviting the principal to participate it is made clear that the school was randomly chosen, hopefully alleviating any suspicion that there might be some ‘hidden agenda’ in testing the students at the school. We also try to emphasise strategies employed to minimise the impact on the school, such as sending in a fully trained Test Administrator so the teachers won’t have to be involved and allocating money to the school to employ a replacement teacher if needed. For the next round of PISA a portion of this payment is going to be made as soon as the school agrees to participate. The principals are also informed that all schools in the survey remain anonymous. Participating schools are sent a letter of thanks and a large coloured PISA poster for display.
- The letter to the principal also contains details of tokens of appreciation for the principal, the School Coordinator (each of whom is given a PISA pen) and for the students – during the testing they are given snack bars and at the conclusion they are given an ACER/PISA digital clock. Some schools have also used the money they are allocated to buy extra snacks (for example, hamburgers or pizzas) for the students at the end of the assessment. A detailed letter is also sent home to the parents of the chosen students describing PISA and guaranteeing the confidentiality of the information which is collected.
- All students participating in PISA receive a certificate of participation and the schools receive the results of their students and a certificate of appreciation. All participating schools receive a free copy of the national report.
- In addition to these inducements, we employ a person to make regular, persistent, persevering contact with the schools to try to get them to participate, and to try to convince them to agreeing if they are not committed.

It is a difficult task to reach the desired sample in some countries and it is hoped that these measures will maximise the level of participation.

Austria
By Claudia Reiter

After a very low response rate in TIMSS 1995 a strategy was developed for PISA in order to increase school participation rates. This strategy consists of three major parts:

Firstly, the Austrian Ministry of Education and the minister personally support the study and asked for the support of the school authorities and for the schools to participate.

After drawing the sample the information process starts at the ministry. The National Centre then informs the school authorities of the states and the local school authorities about selected schools they are responsible for. So, when a school is invited to participate, all responsible school authorities have already been informed and are willing to help in case of problems.

The support the National Centre gets from the school authorities seems mostly genuine (and not just an effect of obeying the orders by the ministry) mainly because of the second part of its strategy: Information policy. Since the decision to take part in PISA was made some time back in 1998, the Austrian National Project manager, Guenter Haider, has been touring Austria to publicise PISA with presentations and discussions. At the beginning, he focussed on the study itself and its goals, the implementation of the field trial and the main study. Later several members of staff joined him and the presentations were focused on the results of PISA 2000 and their implications. By this he managed to make
PISA is well-known to all parts of the school authorities and amongst school principals and teachers.

Contacting schools has become much easier because of the high familiarity of PISA reached by part two of the strategy. Nevertheless, it proved to be important to spend a lot of time and effort in making phone calls to schools – in order to convince principals to participate or simply to remind School Co-ordinators of outstanding student list and the like. The decision to participate has been made easy for schools, because when implementing the study all efforts were made to minimise the work of the school co-ordinators. In addition to the international way of splitting responsibilities between Test Administrators and School Co-ordinators – which in itself helps a lot – we tried to keep as much work as possible from the schools. In the end, the School Co-ordinators only need to do what nobody from outside the school can do and are supported by not having to handle a long manual but are given necessary information by letters at special points of time. Additionally, they are paid for that extra work by the national PISA centre.

The Netherlands – Obtaining school co-operation in the Netherlands: the creation of the PISA Ambassador

By Erna Gille

Persuading schools to participate in PISA is no mean feat in The Netherlands. Since other countries are not so interested in why this is so, but rather in practical solutions, I will explain how the Dutch PISA team approached this problem.

For PISA 2000, teachers who had just taken early retirement were recruited to the team of Test Administrators. That seemed like a good idea, as retired teachers are familiar with the school environment and how to deal with the students. Indeed, this was a great success. We therefore carried out the same procedure for the field trial in 2002.

Then thinking about the daunting task of getting 180 schools (we have 30 students per school) to participate in PISA 2003, we decided to ask those retired teachers if they would like to become Ambassadors for PISA. They would have to approach the schools for us to secure their co-operation, to establish good contacts with the school co-ordinator and also to administer the tests in the schools.

Most of the field trial Test Administrators volunteered straight away. We recruited a lot more all over the country, so that every Ambassador would work in his or her own region. In all we recruited about 30, so that every Ambassador would need to approach six schools. We trained them and gave them materials to present to the schools. To pave their way, we checked every address, telephone number, and name of each school manager before they started their work. In addition, every school manager was informed in writing that he or she would be approached by a PISA Ambassador.

The usual response rate of schools in The Netherlands is about 25 to 30 per cent. Now 85 per cent of the schools of the original sample have promised to participate in March/April 2003. So the personal approach has worked well. Hopefully the good relations established through the PISA Ambassadors will ensure that all of the schools will administer the test to their students.

Switzerland

By Huguette McCluskey

Participation of Swiss schools in surveys is not compulsory. Therefore we need the official agreement of the schools chosen for PISA. This decision is taken by the school director (if there is one) and the teachers.

In 2000, the acceptance of the survey was satisfactory as we obtained 92 % school participation. Nevertheless in some cantons we came up against resistance and even fear. Schools are often highly solicited to take part in studies which use up lesson time. What’s more, the results could have negative consequences on teaching conditions. On the basis of research results, it has happened that politicians have decided to reduce the budget for education or to increase the size of classes. The teachers were also suspicious that the results of PISA could be used to determine their salary.

These facts together with the quantity of missing data in the test booklets and in the questionnaires showed us that the motivation of both teachers and students needed to be increased.

PISA is directed by a national centre working in close collaboration with four regional centres responsible for the realisation of the survey. The National Project Manager produces model letters for different circumstances which can be adapted to local conditions and needs. This approach is necessary so that the communication strategy corresponds to local culture and language. It is also easier for these intermediaries to have direct contact by telephone. This is important as we experienced that personal contact is a very efficient strategy in motivating the participation of schools.

Because of the above considerations, we have adopted the following procedures for PISA 2003. For the first contact with the schools, we will send:

- a letter from the regional centre informing the school that it has been chosen and inviting it to participate;
- a letter from the cantonal authority encouraging participation;
- an informative leaflet about PISA 2003; and
the synthesis of the PISA 2000 results.

Some days later, the regional centre will phone the school (or the school director if there is one) to clarify details about the running of the test, to answer questions and to nominate a School Co-ordinator.

Some days before the test date, the students receive a letter (addressed to them and to their parents) informing them about the goal of PISA and the material they need for the test. This letter is prepared by the National Project Manager but can be modified by the regional centre, by the canton or by the school, depending on local organisation. The main purpose is that the students, as those directly concerned, receive the necessary information before the test date.

We have not organised a gift of any kind for the students, although locally a snack is offered at the break. This decision was taken for financial reasons. In Switzerland, the sample, including national options, is about 25,000 students!

**International Options for PISA 2003**

The international options for PISA are components (assessments or questionnaires) that relate to topics that are important to a large number of countries but that are still experimental in nature. Countries may, but are not required to administer these. The international options relate to policy relevant areas and will therefore have a prominent place in the international reports.

**Information Communication Technology (ICT) Questionnaire**

This option assesses the familiarity and awareness of 15-year-old students with computers and information technology. This theme is a continuous priority of PISA, with a similar version used in PISA 2000, and sets the ground for a future assessment of ICT in 2006.

The proposed instrument requires approximately 5 minutes of the student response time with questions concerning three aspects of computer familiarity:

i) **Availability and use of ICT**, including the location where ICT is mostly used as well as the type of use.

ii) **ICT confidence and attitudes**, including self-efficacy and attitudes towards computers.

iii) **Learning background of ICT**, focusing on where students learned to use computers and the Internet.

**Educational Career (EC) Questionnaire**

This option assesses aspects of the students’ educational career through a 5 minute questionnaire. The main areas assessed by this instrument are:

i) **Students’ past education** including grade repetition, interruptions of schooling, changes of schools and change of study programme.

ii) **Students’ current education** on aspects involving mathematics, focusing on the type of mathematics classes and the teachers’ marks.

iii) **Future education and occupation**, focusing on expected education level and expected occupation at the age of 30.

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**Contributions:**

We are seeking input for future issues of this newsletter. If you have something you would like to share with other participants in the project, please contact Claudia.Tamassia@OECD.org