Governing Board

EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF MEETINGS OF PISA NATIONAL PROJECT MANAGERS

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EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF MEETINGS OF PISA NATIONAL PROJECT MANAGERS

Introduction

1. At the meeting of the Executive Group of the PISA Governing Board (PGB) in June 2007, the Secretariat outlined main concerns and issues with respect to the structure and conduct of PISA National Project Manager meetings following feedback from PISA National Project Managers. The Executive Group:

   - WELCOMED the changes that had recently been introduced by the Consortium but CONSIDERED that these fall well short of what is needed to accommodate the growing number and diversity of participants in meetings of National Project Managers.

   - NOTED that the current arrangements for the training of, and collaboration with, National Project Managers through meetings had had been established more than a decade ago when means of electronic communication had been much more limited and RECOMMENDED that the PGB thoroughly review the arrangements, including the arrangements for document management, the organisation of training activities, issues relating to research and analysis at international and national levels, and the consultation of National Project Managers on technical and substantive matters, with the aim to shift the focus of National Project Managers’ meetings from the dissemination of information to fostering interaction among National Project Managers at multi-lateral and international levels.

   - RECOMMENDED that the PGB conduct a task analysis of National Project Managers.

2. In the following, the purpose of National Project Manager meetings and the National Project Manager meeting targets throughout the project are outlined, as well as considerations for further reform of the meeting structure. The PGB is asked to:

   - REVIEW the steps that have been taken by the PISA Consortium to address the issues and PROVIDE DIRECTIONS for any further necessary steps.

Purpose of National Project Manager meetings

3. As laid down in Annex F of the contract with the PISA Consortium, the international meetings of National Project Managers serve three main purposes:

   - To provide a forum for participants’ representatives to review, comment on and ratify proposals put by the Contractors relating to frameworks, instruments, proposed indicators and draft reports of results.

   - To provide training for National Project Managers on operational procedures, and the coding and entry of data.
• To brief National Project Managers on planned data analyses and report preparation at the international level.

4. Apart from these core purposes, the National Project Manager meetings have evolved over time to also include:

• Apart from national centre consultations between the Consortia and the National Project Managers, an exchange of information among National Project Managers across countries.

• An overview of the sampling and scaling methodologies used in PISA, and an introduction into the principles of analysing PISA data.

• A forum to learn from each other and initiate cooperation: Increasingly, National Project Managers use the meetings to discuss issues of dissemination and reporting in their countries, to present national developments or add-ons to PISA and to initiate joint work on the PISA data.

5. A written consultation of National Project Managers undertaken by the Consortium in 2005 / 2006 shows that National Project Managers consider these components as a very important addition to their work for the project (Annex A).

Current issues with respect to the structure of National Project Manager meetings

6. As the project has grown in size, and as the diversity of levels of experience with PISA has increased, the operation of National Project Manager meetings has become a particular matter of concern, and a variety of issues have been identified.

• The sheer size of meetings, with the need to accommodate representatives from more than 60 countries for PISA 2009 (and with many countries typically sending more than one person). The style, physical arrangements, and conduct of meetings used when the project was smaller may not be suitable for such large numbers.

• The additional costs associated with venues that can accommodate the increased numbers. Venues large enough to accommodate the increased numbers tend to be more expensive. Related to this is the demand from many national centres that the Consortium offers cheaper accommodation options during National Project Manager meetings.

• The increasingly mixed levels of experience of meeting participants, including some National Project Managers who have been involved in each assessment cycle since 2000, some new centres and National Project Managers joining PISA 2009 for the first time, and everything in between. While many meeting topics remain relevant and important for everyone, the needs of participants are increasingly varied.

• Related to this, the Consortium reports variation in the extent to which National Project Managers have read and absorbed the contents of meeting papers in advance of the meeting, so that the meetings themselves can focus on discussion of the issues, and the implications flowing from the papers.

• The increasingly differing interests of National Project Managers, ranging from an exclusive focus on the core issues that will enable them to successfully implement PISA in their countries to a desire for more active participation. The Consortium reports that the latter group of National Project Managers is increasingly looking to National Project Manager meetings to gain (and to
provide) input on a variety of matters, for example relating to data interpretation, to dissemination, and to consideration of broader issues arising from PISA data now that several waves of data are available, and the impact of changes to policy settings can increasingly be considered. Following up on this, National Project Manager meetings now also provide a platform for interaction in these matters.

Revising the meeting structure

7. In light of the increased heterogeneity of needs and interests of the PISA National Project Managers, a thorough revision of the National Project Manager meeting structure is needed. The restructuring of National Project Manager meetings would need to address the issues identified above, i.e. the increasing number and increasingly different levels of experience of participants, as well as their different interests and motivations in attending the meetings. It would not necessarily be restricted to these issues, however.

8. This is also reflected in the contract for the Implementation of PISA 2009, in which changes are proposed in the organisation of the meetings of National Project Managers: “To cater for the variation in National Project Managers’ levels of skills and experience, the Contractor for Core A will restructure the National Project Managers meeting to provide greater opportunity for targeted training. This will be achieved by using a plenary session to deal with consultation on substantive matters requiring national input from all Participants, followed by a series of break out sessions targeted at different levels of National Project Managers experience. “ (Article 211, Contract for Core A)

9. Following these demands, the Contractor for Core A revisited the meeting structure in 2006, and asked National Project Managers for feedback on their interest in the agenda items and discussion topics, as well as on the overall objectives and approaches to the National Project Manager meeting organization. The following table lists the concerns and issues identified by the Consortium as well as the modifications which the Consortium is pursuing.

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<tr>
<th>Concern or issue identified</th>
<th>Modification sought by the Consortium</th>
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| The increasing number of participants, meaning use of the traditional U-shape room layout for the whole meeting no longer works. | 1. The Consortium has moved away from the U-shaped room layout for as many sessions as possible and is now using a classroom layout.  
2. The Consortium has introduced more discussion sessions where participants are in smaller groups. |
| The increasingly diverse needs of participants. In particular the need to cater differently for newer National Project Managers, particularly National Project Managers of newly participating countries, and National Project Managers who have performed this role in previous cycles. | 1. The Consortium seeks to more clearly identify the purpose of each session, so that National Project Managers can choose to attend only sessions geared to their needs.  
2. The Consortium seeks to structure the agenda so that the first day is devoted to the training and information needs of newer National Project Managers.  
3. The Consortium includes provision for consultation meetings with all National Project Managers to deal with particular issues and needs they may have. |
| The need to provide meeting papers covering most items well in advance so that participants can prepare for the meeting, and the meeting focus can be more on discussion of issues and information rather than on transmission of information. The need for more active participation. | 1. The Consortium is preparing papers in advance to cover ‘information’ items, and expects participants to have read the papers prior to the meeting.  
2. The Consortium seeks to provide time to clarify and discuss the papers if needed.  
3. The Consortium seeks to structure the meeting agenda to focus more on discussion and interaction among participants. |
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<td>The official purpose of each meeting must be recognised and addressed. There are specific matters of content that need to be covered at each meeting, depending on the stage of the project.</td>
<td>1. The meeting topics are outlined more clearly and each topic is allocated to an appropriate session within a proposed agenda. 2. Other purposes, such as the importance of informal interaction among participants, are also recognised and catered for through the structuring of the agenda and the planning of a social program.</td>
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<td>National centre presentations have been a very successful component of recent meetings. In addition, National Project Managers expressed an interest in also having Special Interest Group discussion sessions.</td>
<td>1. The Consortium is instituting Special Interest Group discussion forums that involve National Project Managers having an interest in particular areas contributing as panel members, and participating in discussion. 2. The Consortium continues to provide the opportunity for national centre presentations on issues of general interest to National Project Managers.</td>
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<td>The need to continually review procedures, and to use National Project Manager feedback.</td>
<td>1. The Consortium seeks to prepare a short discussion paper covering relevant issues, and carry out a consultation with all National Project Managers.</td>
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10. The Consortium invited the countries to give feedback regarding the proposed modifications, and 34 countries followed this invitation. Feedback was collected prior to the National Project Manager meeting in Istanbul in November 2006, the first meeting scheduled to follow the revised meeting structure. Of the thirty-four responses received, thirty made a specific positive comment about at least some aspect of the direction of the proposals regarding the proposed meeting organisation in the discussion paper. Particularly:

- The proposal of introducing **specific days of training or introduction days for “new” NPMs** (participating in PISA for the first time) was supported by most National Centres, apart from by two National Project Managers; one who felt that separate meetings should be provided for training purposes, and one who thought that NPM meetings should be divided into target groups but that the division should not be based on a “new” vs. “old” basis.

- Support was expressed for the suggestion to **move away from the traditional U-shape arrangement** wherever it is appropriate to do so. In fact, a number of respondents went further and suggested this format should be completely abandoned. Most respondents supported a move away from lecture-style presentations and strong support was given to the Consortium proposal for the provision of handouts and information well in advance of the meetings so that the meetings could involve more interaction and discussion between National Project Managers rather than listening to presentations by Consortium members. One National Centre proposed that if information were to be provided in documents, attendance at the meeting could be optional for “old” National Project Managers. A further comment related to the need for Consortium input to discussions to be not too active or dominant, rather to play an observer and facilitator role and to be available to provide information when needed.

- In particular, the efforts made towards increasing **input from National Centres** were supported. The idea of collaboration between National Project Managers was also raised, with the suggestion of putting in place a process for ongoing discussion between NPMs after the meeting. It was also proposed that National Project Managers should have the opportunity at the meeting to come to an “NPM point of view” in relation to some issues, which could be presented to the PGB and the OECD Secretariat.
In terms of **meeting location and length**, there was moderate support for shorter meetings although National Project Managers generally wanted to maintain the opportunity for social interaction, in recognition of the importance to the health of the project of informal exchanges of information among National Project Managers. It was noted that when choosing a meeting location, consideration of flight connections should be made with a preference towards larger cities with an international airport.

**Possible next steps**

11. While the feedback received on the *proposed* changes in meeting structure was very, no systematic evaluation of the National Project Managers’ *experiences* with the revisions has been undertaken so far. Initial, informal feedback collected at the most recent National Project Manager meeting in Dubrovnik, Croatia, in September 2007 showed general satisfaction with the revised meeting structure, specifically with the fact that the focus of meetings has come to rest more on review and discussion than on the dissemination of information per se. The cost of venues that can accommodate large meetings as these is considered to remain a challenge for some countries, however. It must be noted that this assessment is rather informal, and does not rest on information from all, or even the majority of 66 participating countries.

12. A more systematic evaluation of the revised meeting structure could ascertain to which degree the modifications introduced in the National Project Manager meeting in November 2006 can be considered successful. Furthermore, the PGB Executive Group has recommended a task analysis of National Project Managers’ work in order to assess their meeting needs in a more comprehensive fashion, identifying areas for which an international meeting of all National Project Managers will constitute the appropriate platform, topics for which meetings of sub-groups would be more efficient, and fields where other means of communication might be more effective, altogether.

13. Ideally, the evaluation of the already implemented modifications and the task analysis would be conducted by a professional consultant together with an acknowledged PISA expert who is intimately familiar with the project and its implementation demands. The PGB may want to consider appointing a special advisor to the Governing Board for this task, e.g. a senior, recent National Project Manager.