

IS PISA READY TO ASSESS GLOBAL COMPETENCE?

OBESSU reaction on PISA 2018 Global Competence Assessment results



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INTRODUCTION

On the 22nd of October 2020, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) released its Volume VI: "Are Students Ready to Thrive in an Interconnected World?" presenting the results of the PISA 2018 survey on global competence. As the platform representing school students in Europe, OBESSU has been advocating for an increased focus on qualitative assessment methods. Once again, we call for cautious as PISA global competence assessment results rely on a narrow quantitative evaluation of few indicators which can by no means provide a comprehensive approach of global competence and school student's performance in this field.

WHAT DOES PISA CLAIM TO MEASURE?

Global competence is defined in PISA 2018 Results Volume VI as "a multidimensional capacity that encompasses the ability to:

- **examine issues of local, global and cultural significance;**
- **understand and appreciate the perspectives and worldviews of others;**
- **engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions across cultures;**
- **take action for collective well-being and sustainable development."**

PISA assumes that these four dimensions are recognised as valuable by all societies, it therefore implies that this is the universal conception of global competence. However, **global competence is a complex, multidimensional concept and a unanimous definition has not yet been identified.** Moreover, existing conceptualisations of global competence have mostly been developed in Western countries. (Sälzer & Roczen, 2018) Additionally, the focus on global competence relies on the OECD's vision of the global labour market and not on the willingness of promoting intercultural dialogue or awareness on global issues.

The study is composed of two different parts, a cognitive test containing several test units and context questionnaires for students, parents, teachers and school principals. PISA claims to measure student's performance in each of the four dimensions identified above, however the validity of the data collected from the cognitive test is questionable. Students are asked to select the answer better describing their attitude in a fictional scenario. Correct answers are easy to identify and therefore school students could be tempted to select what they believe is the right answer rather than the answer that better defines what they think of a subject or what they will actually do in a particular situation. **The results of the cognitive test would then assess students' ability to point out socially desired responses rather than students' performance in global competence.** Additionally, **the students questionnaire assesses students' perception of their abilities in these four dimensions and not their performances.** What would be more valuable for policy makers and the education sector is to assess whether these abilities are acquired within the school environment or outside of it and how, meaning which methodologies should be used to enhance the teaching and learning process of global competence.

Many countries participating in PISA 2018 refused to take part in the assessment of global competence due to the lack of reliability of the assessment framework and lack of intercultural comparability.

HOW DOES PISA MEASURE GLOBAL COMPETENCE?

With unrepresentative samples

In PISA 2018, the main domain of assessment was reading. Mathematics, sciences and global competence were minor areas of the assessment. The PISA 2018 survey consisted of a two-hour computer-based test combining multiple-choice items and questions requiring students to elaborate their own answers. All participants responded to 60 minutes of reading items, additionally, 41% responded to mathematics items, 41% responded to science items and **only 30% responded to global competence items**. (OECD, 2020) This means that **out of the 600 000 students that participated in the study, only 180 000 students from 27 countries completed the whole global competence test, while further 39 countries completed only the students' questionnaire**. We can legitimately question the representativity of this sample of students.

PISA uses an age-based definition of its target population, it assessed competences of students who were aged between 15 years and 3 complete months and 16 years and 3 complete months at the beginning of the assessment period. As stated in PISA 2018 Results Volume VI: ***“all students who met these criteria were eligible to sit the PISA assessment, regardless of the type of educational institution in which they were enrolled and whether they were enrolled in full-time or part-time education”*** (OECD 2020: 241). **OBESSU as a platform representing school students all over Europe is really concerned about the credibility given to PISA studies by policy-makers while we believe it actually doesn't provide any valuable comparative data. How could we compare the skills of students of the same age, who have undergone different education experiences both in the classroom and outside, if we don't take into consideration these learning experiences and how they have impacted them?** It is crucial that policy makers, the media and the wider public take these differences into account when comparing PISA results. Furthermore, we question the legitimacy and the added value of such a study especially when PISA 2018 Results Volume VI states that ***“differences in performance observed when students are 15 may disappear later on if students' experiences in education converge over time”***(OECD 2020: 241). The purpose of a study in the field of education is to understand phenomena or provide data for improving one or more aspects of a particular education system. If there is evidence that the differences in performance observed in the PISA assessment results can disappear over time without making any change within the educational system, then: why is the OECD conducting these surveys in the first place? **What are countries investing time and resources into a study that does not bring any concrete conclusions to help them improve the quality of education?**

With a contradictory format

The global competence assessment presented 69 test items, most of them were **self-assessment questions on skills, opinions and attitudes and among these questions some described hypothetical situations. The format and the content of the questions are extremely problematic:** PISA claims to assess global competence of 15-years school students but with the questionnaires used, **PISA actually only evaluates school students' perception of their global competence based on fictional scenarios. The use of this methodology is even more concerning when it's applied to assess the 4th dimension** identified by PISA, namely *"Taking action for collective well-being and sustainable development"*. **Not only are the questions based on unreal situations but also they take the form of reductionist yes-or-no statements based on a really narrow vision of what school students are capable of achieving.** The eight statements used were: *"I reduce the energy I use at home to protect the environment"; "I choose certain products for ethical or environmental reasons, even if they are a bit more expensive"; "I sign environmental or social petitions online"; "I keep myself informed about world events via Twitter or Facebook"; "I boycott products or companies for political, ethical or environmental reasons"; "I participate in activities promoting equality between men and women"; "I participate in activities in favour of environmental protection"; and "I regularly read websites on international social issues (e.g. poverty, human rights)" (OECD 2020: 145). Furthermore, the assessment focuses only on certain issues, namely, climate change and global warming, global health, migration, international conflicts, hunger or malnutrition in different parts of the world, causes of poverty, and equality between men and women in different parts of the world, leaving behind essential global issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, gender violence, colonialism or racism, to name only a few.*

Students also completed a 35 minute student background questionnaire that gathers information about the student's socioeconomic backgrounds and learning habits and attitudes. A background questionnaire was also filled out by school principals to provide information about the teaching and learning environment. The study relies on their answers without verifying the veracity. In 19 countries, an additional questionnaire was distributed to teachers to gather information about their teaching practices and their own learning experiences; and in 17 countries, parents received a questionnaire to assess their involvement in their child's learning path. **The questionnaire for teachers focused on collecting quantitative data rather than qualitative data.** It asked teachers five yes-or-no questions about their professional development activities. The questions were: *"Have you received training on intercultural communication?"; "Have you received training on conflict resolution strategies?"; "Have you received training on the role education can play in confronting discrimination in all its forms?"; "Have you studied culturally responsive teaching approaches and techniques?"; and "Have you received training on issues related to teaching in multicultural classrooms?" (OECD 2020: 239). The questions therefore aimed at identifying whether teachers received trainings on skills needed to teach global competence rather than evaluating the quality of these trainings and assessing to what extent teachers have applied in the classroom the skills and methodologies learnt during these trainings. The approach chosen by PISA experts provides findings that are purposeless as they do not contribute to improve the quality of global assessment teaching.*

Generally speaking, the study relies too much on self-assessment of students, school principals, teachers and parents while self-assessment can lead to biased results as people can underestimate or overestimate their abilities.

The role of non-formal education in teaching global competence to students is not even considered

The fact that PISA decided to include global competence in its assessment means that the OECD considers these skills as valuable for the global labour market. By doing so, **it implicitly recognises the value of non-formal and informal education since school students tend to develop these skills through extra curricular activities.** However, PISA experts did not include in their assessment any question that could help determine whether schools students' global competence were developed in school or thanks to extra-curricular activities. Students were asked ten questions about different learning activities to which they are exposed and none of them was related to activities outside of school. The activities were: *learning about different cultures at school; learning how to solve conflicts with other people in the classroom; learning how people from different cultures can have different perspectives on some issues; learning how to communicate with people from different backgrounds; participating in classroom discussions about world events; learning about the interconnectedness of countries' economies; analysing global issues together with classmates in small groups during class; giving and discussing personal opinions about international news; reading newspapers, looking for news on the Internet or watching the news together during classes; and participating in events celebrating cultural diversity throughout the school year.* (OECD 2020: 235) We regret that non-formal education activities were not included in the questionnaire since **we believe there is a correlation between participation in non-formal education activities and the development of global competence.**

PISA 2018 Results Volume VI states that **"the accuracy of the results from any survey depends on the quality of the information drawn from those surveyed as well as on the sampling procedures"**(OECD 2020: 241). We couldn't agree more with this statement and we can only say that the OECD is failing in providing accurate and valuable information with the PISA tests.

HOW PISA PRESENTS ITS FINDINGS

Unrepresentative and biased results presented as universal

Nor only PISA methodology is questionable but also the method used to communicate findings. PISA results are presented as universal, as if they were valid for all OECD member countries and even the rest of the world. Throughout the document it is common to find the results introduced by expressions such as *"On average across all OECD countries"* (OECD 2020), while in truth only 27 OECD countries completed both the global competence test and the global competence questionnaire, and further 39 countries completed only the questionnaire.

Those numbers cannot reflect the global competence of students worldwide, nor at the national level. Moreover, the fact that the research is conducted in a limited amount of schools that use a sample-based method to assess students, does not provide a clear picture on the national scale either. The way the outcomes of PISA assessments are presented is problematic as they can be perceived as universal, and can lead to confusion and misinterpretation of data.

Inaccessible results

The study contains valuable information for learners, teachers and in few cases for parents on the importance of developing global competence and the many factors influencing students attitudes - however, the format of the report (426 pages, in which the same information is often presented more than one time), the way findings are presented (complex charts, elaborated vocabulary) makes it very difficult for the average 15 years old student, to first be aware of the existence of this study and then to extrapolate valuable learning outcomes. Not only students, but also teachers and parents might feel discouraged by the length and the complexity of the report, making it harder for them to embrace the results and contribute to a change. The accessibility of the results is compromised also when considering the format of the Conference that, due to the high participation fee and the lack of space for students, teachers and stakeholders to exchange their views, failed to provide a useful debate that involves all the actors. **We believe the OECD could improve its communication in order to make the findings more accessible for both students and teachers, who therefore could be able to self-reflect and bring their perspectives on the table.**

Quantitative findings that don't say anything about the quality of education

The study indicates the percentage of students attending schools addressing the global issues identified by OECD, but these numbers do not provide to which extent those issues are being deepened . Rather than the quantity of schools that addresses the issues, **the study should further assess what is being taught to school students and with which methodologies**, namely the qualitative aspect of the education system on global issues.

OBESSU RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE GLOBAL COMPETENCE IN SCHOOLS

Non-formal education actors as valuable contributors

Formal education has a great role to play to help students acquire essential global skills however, this potential is currently not sufficiently developed. Nowadays, we observe that **young people acquire more often these skills through their engagement in youth movements or other forms of activism and extra curricular activities, therefore through non-formal and informal education** (EU-CoE youth partnership). This is one of the reasons why **OBESSU advocates for the recognition of skills acquired through non-formal and informal education but also for the use of non-formal techniques in formal education**. We also stress the importance of creating synergy between teachers and non-formal educators in the area of global competence. We agree on the fact that **education institutions could do more to provide spaces for exchange** of tools and methodologies.

Apply a cross curricular approach

We also agree that global competence **should be developed in schools through a cross curricular approach**. Integrating global competence into existing curricula could be a way of limiting the pressure on students' time while adding a global perspective to existing courses. Only with a cross curricular approach we will be able to achieve better results. This should also be the case for teacher training, which from the PISA report we could see that teachers feel confident enough to teach about global issues, but are lacking professional development.

Decolonise national curricula

The study indicates the percentage of students attending schools addressing global issues such as climate change or migration but we regret to see that colonialism, despite its relevance, is not an issue that has been taken into consideration in the study. If we really want to equip school students with the knowledge and skills to understand local, global and cultural issues, acknowledge and appreciate the perspectives and views of others, to interact with different communities and take action for collective well-being and sustainable development, **education systems should address colonialism in national curricula**, its implications and its continuity and effects in today societies (eg. racism). **Education systems should also decolonise national curricula to stop vehiculating stereotypes and misconceptions of other cultures and ethnicities**. A way of doing so would be to **teach students about the many valuable contributions to our world from civilisations that have been oppressed through history and often portrayed as primitive to provide students with knowledge on privileges, oppressions, intercultural dialogue and cooperation with other regions of the world**.

Invest in intercultural activities

The study reports that 53% of students have contact with people from other countries in their school, 54% of the students are interested in finding out about traditions of other cultures and only 40% of students are interested in learning about the religions of the world (OECD 2020). In OECD countries in 2018, **only 35% of students attended a school whose principal reported that the school celebrates the festivities of other cultures**. This figure shows that **schools should put more efforts in building inclusive learning environments that embrace and respect all cultural backgrounds**.

Invest in quality teachers training

The research reports that respect for people from other cultures and attitudes towards immigrants, are weakly associated with learning activities at school and that this could indicate that those two attitudes are more influenced by the wider environment than by what happens at school. It is a matter of fact that students are influenced by their home environment and by the internet. Nevertheless, **we believe that schools can play an essential role in supporting students to develop critical thinking to be able to elaborate their own opinion and be critical towards the influences they are exposed to**.

Schools and in particular teachers can also teach respect and non discriminatory behaviours towards other cultures by setting the right example. If teachers normalise discrimination and if discrimination becomes an institutional problem, then students may develop discriminatory attitudes towards those who are different from them. By contrast, when teachers do not exhibit discriminatory attitudes and set clear rules about intercultural relations, then students may become aware of what constitutes discriminatory behaviour. **Teachers should be ready and trained to act in a multicultural setting and to set clear principles of respect towards other individuals.**

Invest in multilingualism

We strongly believe that multilingualism is an important asset for students as young citizens and we advocate for multilingualism to be one of the priorities for the education systems. We are glad to see a **positive correlation between language learning and school students' awareness on global issues.** According to the study, students who reported that they speak two or more languages, 50% of students, exhibited greater respect for people from other cultures. Attitudes towards immigrants were more positive among students who speak two or more languages and students who speak two or more languages exhibited greater awareness of intercultural communication. Sadly, the study shows also that 45% of students attended a school whose teachers reported a moderate or high need for training in teaching second languages and 54% of students attended a school whose teachers reported a moderate or high need for professional development in teaching in multicultural and multilingual settings (OECD 2020). **This indicates again the urgent need to invest in teachers training.**

Increase the accessibility of exchange programmes for school students

The study also shows that mobility of students, if they are appropriately prepared, is important to boost global competence, intercultural understanding and fluency in other languages, otherwise it can result in a traumatic and stressful experience. It is essential to provide students with the right tools required to face the challenges of an experience abroad, whether a full-year exchange programme or a short cultural exchange. **Exchange programmes should be made economically and practically accessible for all students.**

MORE GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Studies on school students' performance should not affect school students' mental health

We also want to remind the **importance of mental health support in schools.** Across OECD countries, just about two in three students reported that they are satisfied with their lives, and that percentage shrank by five percentage points between 2015 and 2018. Some 6% of students reported always feeling sad. The number of mental health related problems among students, such anxiety and stress has increased and are expected to increase more, as a result of the pandemic and of the new learning methods. Almost a quarter of students reported being bullied at least a few times a month.

Cyberbullying phenomena are escalating and harming the digital space of learning. **Students who face these challenges are unlikely to make the investments in themselves that are necessary to succeed in school. It is essential to focus on long term students' wellbeing and on creating a safe and inclusive learning environment.** We believe that PISA should focus more on assessing school students' mental health and wellbeing and develop policy recommendations in support of these aspects rather than assessing students' performance in certain curriculum through highly competitive tests that put extra pressure on their shoulders and increase the level of stress.

Invest in studies that provide valuable data for the education sector

The major effect of PISA results is identifying policy areas that require improvements, often quantifying and simplifying them. Improvements in quality education have become synonymous with improvements in PISA scores, but no real changes can be achieved if we do not specifically address the quality and relevance of the global issues taught and on the quality of teachers training instead of the quantity of issues tackled. **We strongly encourage the further development of studies that provide valuable data for policy makers on how to improve the quality of education rather than the quantity of policy problems.**

Reference

OECD (2020), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume VI): Are Students Ready to Thrive in an Interconnected World?*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, France.

Sälzer, C. and Roczen, N. (2018) 'Assessing global competence in PISA 2018: Challenges and approaches to capturing a complex construct'. *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, 10 (1): 5–20.

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