

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT PISA

Released Thursday 2 December 2004

What is PISA?

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an initiative of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It arose out of a need for regular and reliable information on educational outcomes across countries, particularly a measure of students' skills.

What is the history of PISA?

The OECD launched PISA in 1997. The first assessment of PISA took place in 2000 involving 28 OECD member countries (including Australia) and four non-OECD partner countries. A further 11 countries undertook the PISA 2000 assessment in 2002. The second assessment, the results for which are to be released on 7 December, took place in 2003. Reading literacy was the major domain in 2000 and mathematical literacy in 2003. Scientific literacy will be the major focus of the PISA survey in 2006.

What are the goals of PISA?

The goal of PISA is to measure competencies that will equip students to participate productively and adaptively in their life beyond school education. The PISA assessment focuses on young people's ability to apply their knowledge and skills to real-life problems and situations.

PISA focuses on the following issues:

- How well are young adults prepared to meet the challenges of the future?
- What skills do they possess that will facilitate their capacity to adapt to rapid societal change?
- Are some ways of organising schools and school learning more effective than others?
- What influence does the quality of school resources have on student outcomes?
- What educational structures and practices maximise the opportunities of students from disadvantaged backgrounds? How equitable is education provision for students from all backgrounds?

What does PISA assess?

PISA assesses competencies in each of three core domains – reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy. During each PISA cycle, taking place on a three yearly basis, one domain is tested in detail. The remaining time is allocated to assessing the minor domains or to special one-off domains.

The PISA assessment materials focus on young people's ability to apply their knowledge and skills to real-life problems and situations, rather than on how much curriculum based knowledge they possess.

PISA also examines differences in performance between males and females and between different socio-economic groups. It explores some of the factors associated with student's levels of knowledge and skills and the implications of these for policy and practice. PISA also examines issues such as students' motivation to learn, their beliefs about themselves and their learning strategies.

-MORE-

What is meant by *literacy* in PISA?

The term 'literacy' is attached to each assessment domain to reflect the focus on these broader skills. The way in which it is used is a great deal broader than in the traditional sense of being able to read and write. The OECD considers that mathematics, science and technology are so pervasive in modern life that it is important for students to be 'literate' in these areas as well.

PISA defines *mathematical literacy* as - an individual's capacity to identify and understand the role that mathematics plays in the world, to make well-founded judgements and to use and engage with mathematics in ways that meet the needs of that individual's life as a constructive, concerned and reflective citizen.

PISA defines *reading literacy* as - understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society.

PISA defines *scientific literacy* as - the capacity to use scientific knowledge, to identify questions and to draw evidence-based conclusions in order to understand and help make decisions about the natural world and the changes made to it through human activity.

PISA defines *problem solving literacy* as - an individual's ability to use cognitive processes to confront and resolve real, cross-disciplinary situations where the solution path is not immediately obvious and where the literacy domains or curricular areas that might be applicable are not within a single domain of mathematics, science or reading.

What countries participate in PISA?

In 2003, 41 countries participated in PISA including all OECD countries (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States). The partner countries participating in PISA 2003 were Brazil, Hong Kong-China, Indonesia, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Macao-China, Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand, Tunisia and Uruguay. It should be noted, though, that results for the United Kingdom are not included in the reports of PISA 2003 because England failed to achieve the required sampling standard.

Who is assessed?

The student population chosen for PISA is students aged 15 years. National random samples of at least 4500 15-year-old students are chosen from 150 or more schools in each country to participate in the assessment.

In Australia just over 12,500 students participated in PISA 2003. They were from 321 schools from all states and territories and sectors of schooling. Nationally, a little more than 70 per cent of the 2003 PISA sample was in Year 10, 19 per cent in Year 11 and 8 per cent in Year 9. Seventy per cent of Australian schools were in metropolitan areas, 27 per cent provincial and three per cent were in remote areas.

What did the participants do?

Students who participated in PISA completed an assessment booklet which contained questions from the major domains and one or more of the minor domains being tested – in PISA 2003 they were assessed on mathematical literacy (the major domain), scientific literacy, reading literacy and problem solving skills.

Students also answered a short questionnaire, which included questions to measure their attitudes as well as questions to collect information on their backgrounds. School principals also completed a short questionnaire, which collected information about their schools.

-MORE-

What is ACER's role in PISA?

ACER leads a consortium that manages the design and implementation of PISA internationally. Other members of the consortium are the National Institute for Educational Measurement (CITO) in the Netherlands, WESTAT and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the United States, and the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER) in Japan. ACER is also employed by the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to manage the implementation of PISA in Australia. In this role, it is known as Australia's National Project Manager.

When will the findings of PISA 2003 be available?

PISA is being released at 00:01 Paris time on Tuesday 7 December. This equates to 10.01am Australian Eastern Daylight Saving Time. A series of media releases, a summary of key findings and the full report will be available for download from the ACER website at www.acer.edu.au at 10.00am. It will not be possible to release findings from PISA prior to the embargo time.

How and when will the results be reported?

Results from PISA 2003 are reported for each of mathematical, scientific and reading literacy and problem solving separately, and also on four subscales of mathematics: *quantity, space and shape, change and relationships* and *uncertainty*.

Results from countries are reported as average scores, as distributions of scores, and, in mathematics, reading and problem solving, as percentages of students who attain each of a set of defined levels of proficiency.

Australian results will also be reported by state, geographical location, gender, socio-economic status and Indigenous status.

Can graphs or sample questions from PISA be reproduced in the media?

The Australian PISA report includes a number of sample questions that have been released publicly by the OECD. Journalists will be able to reproduce these questions, along with tables and graphs, with the appropriate reference to the report.

Can ACER put me in touch with a school or individual students that took part in the assessment?

This is not possible due to issues of confidentiality. Students' results were sent back to their own schools. Apart from that, all information in PISA at student and school levels is strictly confidential at all times.

Where can I find additional information about PISA prior to the release of the results?

ACER staff will be happy to answer any inquiries relating to PISA prior to the release of the results but will not be able to discuss the results themselves. You can also find additional background information on PISA on the OECD website at <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/>

Reports on results from the PISA 2000 cycle can be found on ACER's website at http://www.acer.edu.au/research/PISA/PISA_reports.htm

*****ENDS*****

Media enquiries:

Louise Reynolds -Corporate Publicity & Communications manager (03) 9277 5582 or 0419 340 058
Email: reynolds@acer.edu.au