

**A Comparative Analysis of National Media Responses to the OECD Survey  
of Adult Skills: Policy Making from the Global to the Local?**

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# **A comparative analysis of national media responses to the OECD Survey of Adult Skills: policy making from the global to the local?**

OECD's Programme of International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is put forward as a landmark development in the lifelong monitoring and international comparison of education. PIAAC's first round of the Survey of Adult Skills compared performance in Literacy, Numeracy and Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments across 24 countries. However, the translation of any OECD agenda into national policies is mediated by many actors including the media. This paper examines and compares how national media of Japan, England and France reported on the PIAAC results of their countries, and the extent to which these reports mirror key messages from the OECD's *Country Notes*. It begins to trace how the OECD PIAAC agendas materialise into national policies. Although their role in this initial period was limited, we argue the roles of the media together with other policy actors must be monitored as they interact to shape possibilities for sustainable adult education policies.

Keywords: lifelong learning; education policy; adult literacy; adult numeracy; comparative media analysis; OECD; Survey of Adult Skills; PIAAC

## **1. Introduction**

In October 2013, the OECD released results from the international Survey of Adult Skills (SAS), one element of its Programme of International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) project, for 24 industrialised countries, focusing on adult literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technologically rich environments (PSTRE). Through international surveys like PIAAC (and others, notably PISA, its international assessment for 15-year-olds), the OECD claims to offer data which can guide national policy in education and adult skills development (OECD 2013a, 28). According to Andreas Schleicher (2008) of the OECD who has had a major role in the development of both PIAAC and PISA, PIAAC's underlying human capital model assumes that such skills development is essential to global competition in the knowledge economy.

The PIACC survey is designed to enable comparative analysis of skill-formation systems and their outcomes, and international benchmarking of adult skills. The survey will be repeated over time to allow policy makers to monitor the development of key aspects of human capital in their countries. According to Grek (2010, 403), PIAAC is a landmark development in international benchmarking in that it is designed to bring together performance measures from PISA and the SAS to allow the lifelong monitoring of education in order to promote Lifelong Learning (LLL).

Elaborate definitions of the test constructs are presented in the main OECD publications (e.g. 2013a, Ch.2), where Literacy (L), Numeracy (N) and PSTRE are characterised as 'the key information-processing skills that are invaluable in 21st-century economies' (OECD 2013a, 3). The specific psychometric methodology developed to measure these skills determines which aspects of adult activities are accountable and noteworthy, within a framework that postulates universal (i.e. transnational) skills (Sellar and Lingard 2014; Tsatsaroni and Evans 2013). Thus the predominant interpretations of proficiencies in the PIAAC survey within the media appear to reflect a decontextualized skills-based approach rather than one that sees them as part of situated social and cultural practices (cf. Barton 2007).

In this paper, we examine how findings from PIAAC – particularly the themes highlighted by the OECD in the relevant *Country Notes* – have entered into media discourse in participating countries. From the standpoint of sustainable policy and practice in adult and lifelong learning, the extent of national media's coverage of the PIAAC and their level of critical engagement with OECD's analysis of the findings is of interest, especially if, as suggested by Hamilton (2012) and Rubenson and Walker (2014), the media prove to be key players in influencing educational policies in the participating countries. We take a socio-material approach to the policy process that focuses on the travelling artefacts of the

international assessments – the test items themselves, the numbers and data displays, and scientific, media and policy reports produced in relation to them – and the social relations and processes through which the tests are materialised within national contexts (Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk 2011; Hamilton, Maddox and Addey 2015).

From a large corpus of media reports, selected findings are presented from print newspaper coverage in three countries chosen because they were placed differently in the PIAAC league tables for L and N: Japan (top in both proficiencies), England (around the middle), and France (close to the bottom). Further, in each case the researchers were proficient in the language of publication and could translate the relevant reports. Such critical comparative studies can provide insights into transnational influences on national perceptions of the results and possible influences on local policy processes. We pose the following questions in relation to media coverage in each country:

- (1) What issues, demographics and numbers are highlighted in the coverage?
- (2) How is credibility established for the findings?
- (3) What policy-related implications are drawn from them?

While the OECD asserts that the PIAAC survey has been designed to be valid across cultures and national languages (OECD 2013e), understandings of where and how literacy, numeracy and adult learning are located in the national policies of participating countries differ. Within the European Union, LLL and skills have been strongly coupled in policy for some time (see Tuschling and Engemann 2006) whereas in Japan, LLL has not been narrowed down in its policy formulation to the same extent (Okumoto 2008). However, countries in the EU have progressed unevenly towards the specific reforms needed to implement LLL due to a lack of national strategy and finance and in some cases resistance from traditional educational structures (Bengtsson 2013); moreover, three different models of national governance of LLL within European countries can be identified (Prokou 2008). Thus we might expect different

reception of the PIAAC findings in different national contexts. This paper highlights some key issues that can be used to trace how the global agenda set by the OECD materialises in national policies in participating countries.

## **2. The Survey of Adult Skills and its Relationship to Other OECD Surveys**

The SAS is a household sample survey of adults aged 16-65 years, administered by an interviewer in participants' own homes. The development of the L and N assessments for the survey drew on the experience of developing such performance items for the earlier International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL). For each of the L and N assessments, each respondent was assigned a score which is transformed into one of six levels from 'below level 1' to 'level 5' (OECD 2013e). L and N results are provided by the OECD both as country averages, and in terms of percentages at the different levels.

In contrast, the PSTRE problem solving items were used for the first time in an international adult skills survey. Completing the PSTRE items required the use of a laptop provided by the interviewer, but not all respondents could use the technology. Therefore the PSTRE performance of respondents in a given country has to be evaluated in relation to the percentages of adults who were not included in the PSTRE assessment for this or other reasons (see OECD 2013e, 49, Figure 3.1). For this round of the survey, national averages for the PSTRE results are not presented by the OECD. Instead, the PSTRE results are presented only as 'below Level 1', or as one of Levels 1 to 3 (see OECD 2013a, 87, Fig. 2.10a).

In addition to the three proficiency assessments, PIAAC also produced demographic and attitudinal information via a Background Questionnaire (BQ). This included indicators on the respondent's (self-reported) use of, and need for, job-related skills at work; the latter are based on respondents' perceptions of the extent to which 'literacy', 'numeracy', 'ICT' and

‘complex problem-solving’ are required by their employers. (We use upper case for PIAAC-measured proficiencies, and lower case for the less technical concepts used either in media reports, or by survey participants in reporting their responses to the Background Questionnaire.)

For countries such as the UK and France which participated in both the SAS and the earlier IALS, it is possible to try to link the results from the two studies. However, this is not straightforward: while some items were used in both surveys, there are differences in the definition and measurement of the proficiencies, as well as methodological improvements between the two surveys.

While it is also tempting to try to carry out a longitudinal analysis linking the PIAAC results with those of PISA, a great deal of care should be exercised here as well since the definitions of proficiencies differ between the two, as do the fieldwork conditions (household surveys and school-based testing, respectively).

### **3. Methodology of this study**

The corpus of data we draw on was collected between October-December 2013 by inviting members of our professional networks to alert us to relevant media reports; this was supplemented by searches of online international newspaper databases (such as Nexis and Factiva) and the websites of key newspapers in each country. There are substantial challenges for media analysis in an age of networked, multi-lingual and multi-modal digital media where data sources occur in a variety of interconnected forms accessed by different audiences. These setups produce trails of interconnected texts and artefacts including blogs, tweets, online reports and readers’ comments, photographs, videos and data charts. After our initial analysis, we needed to select a manageable and comparable sample of sources from these trails. Thus, in this paper, we focus on the coverage of the survey in a selection of key

national daily newspapers in each country, in the period immediately following publication of the results on 8 October 2013.

The selected articles in the French and Japanese presses were read and analysed in the original languages, with headlines and quotations translated as necessary. We encountered numerous difficulties with the basic terminology of key words and concepts. The difficulties with translating terms for ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’ in Japanese and French are covered in the relevant sections below. Most newspapers in all three countries, had difficulties in interpreting the results for PSTRE. There were also difficulties of searching with appropriate key words since, for example, ‘PIAAC’ was not commonly used in the press reports suggesting that the acronym is still unfamiliar.

#### **4. The OECD’s Country Notes**

As part of a well-coordinated media strategy also used with other surveys, such as PISA, the OECD published several types of reports of the PIAAC findings on the day the results were released. These included international overview reports (e.g. OECD 2013a, OECD 2013e), and for most participating countries, a *Country Note* (OECD, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, for France, Japan, and the UK, respectively). These *Country Notes* contain selected information about the PIAAC methodology, a summary of the proficiency results (L, N, and PSTRE) for the country, and a list of key policy issues identified by OECD.

This section focuses on, distils and explains key pieces of information from these OECD *Country Notes* for two reasons. First, the *Notes* appeared, fully formulated, on the day of publication of the results, and thus provided an available and ‘credible’ basis for local national media to draw on in time for next-day publication deadlines. Second, though the *Country Notes* are not ‘objective’ since they are summaries written in line with the OECD’s

main preoccupations, they are for this reason useful as a basis for comparison with the national media reports analysed in the next section.

Table 1 summarises the key issues identified in each of the OECD *Country Notes*.

Table 1: Aspects of the PIAAC findings identified in the OECD *Country Notes* as ‘key issues’

These issues are derived from the performances of survey participants in L, N and PSTRE (with the exception of France), and the BQ responses from participants. Although there are some variations, Table 1 illustrates the similarities in the OECD’s construction of the important issues for each country: ranking in the OECD league tables for L and N as the headline issue, and implications for economic growth and educational policy as the elaboration.

In the section that follows, we examine how the national media of Japan, England and France reported on the PIAAC results of their respective countries, and the extent to which these reports mirror the key messages from the *Country Notes*.

## **5. National Media reports**

The items identified for initial analysis in all three countries were a mixture of headline news items, comment and opinion pieces. However, the core news coverage occurred in all papers on October 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> 2013. Media attention to the PIAAC results declined rapidly thereafter. Any follow-up tended to be in opinion pieces / blogs or readers’ letters, often just as a passing reference in relation to other surveys or woven into comments about popular culture. Once the most recent (5<sup>th</sup> wave) PISA findings were released on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013, any relevant coverage tended to deal with both surveys, with PISA dominating. Comment on these related reports was used as an opportunity to refer again to the headline PIAAC findings, linking these simplified versions intertextually with the other reports and embedding them in more



general arguments to produce a cumulative effect.

In the following three sections, selected media reports from the three countries are analysed.

These sources are listed in Appendix 1.

### ***(a) Japanese Daily Newspapers***

The Japanese media reports were sourced from the three largest national newspapers in Japan: *Yomiuri Shimbun* (YS) (circulation about 9.2 million, right of centre), *Mainichi Shimbun* (MS) (circulation about 3.3 million, liberal/centre) and *Asahi Shimbun* (AS) (circulation about 7.2 million, left). (Figures as at Sept. 2014 are taken from <http://www.nippon.com/en/features/h00084/>).

All three newspapers provided some information about the PIAAC methodology: the number of participants overall and the number of participants in Japan. They also provided information about the levels used in the different assessed domains.

The *Asahi* (9.10.2013c) and *Mainichi* (9.10.2013a,b) published rankings of the top five countries in each of the three areas, showing the country's name and the mean score achieved for L and N. For PSTRE, the percentages of survey respondents in these countries scoring at the top two levels combined were shown, with indications that Japan came tenth.

Problems of translation and meaning in the Japanese newspaper articles are significant, though not acknowledged as such. Concepts of 'Literacy' and 'Numeracy' in PIAAC had been developed with considerable deliberations by international expert groups (OECD 2013a). However, even in English, the language in which the expert groups' reports were first written, L and N are often associated with 'basic skills', that is those skills that people might be expected to learn largely at school. In Japanese, Survey of Adult Skills has been translated as 成人力調査 (survey of adult ability), and literacy as 読解力 (reading comprehension ability) and numeracy as 数の思考力 (numerical thinking skills); and it is

unclear whether literacy and numeracy are intended to be understood as inherent abilities of individuals or as learned skills. Moreover, in some articles, literacy is used interchangeably with 学力 which can mean both ‘being learned or educated’ and ‘academic ability’. In some articles, examples of the types of questions in the PIAAC were described to illustrate what was being assessed in these domains.

For a country that came first in the international league tables, it is not surprising that the headlines in all three papers highlighted this, for example:

- ‘Unexpected, but proud, Japan world 1st in adult skills survey’ [AS\_9.10]

Interpretations are added to the statistical expressions of the survey performance by citing educational experts. The *Mainichi* [MS9.10a] cites Takashi Hamano, an educational sociologist from Ochanomizu Women’s University who explained how the overall favourable results pointed to the high standard of compulsory education: ‘Compared to the West, our [curriculum is] high in the degree of consistency and density.’ A researcher in comparative education from the National Institute of Education Policy Research, Yasuo Saito, is quoted as saying, ‘the power to maintain academic ability / literacy is another explanation for the favourable results because academic ability / literacy generally falls when they are not used ... in Japan, there are many adults who read the newspapers and magazines, and this makes it more difficult for ability / literacy learned in school to decline’ [MS\_9.10a].

In terms of international references, Japan’s performance is compared favourably with Germany, the USA and Spain, and negatively with Korea. Over a month after the initial media reports, one article [MS\_25.11] discusses a commentary on the Japanese results, citing the OECD’s critique of Japan’s under-utilisation of its human capital, and the contradictions between the insignificant gender differences in the proficiencies and the second worst gender disparity in income (Korea is named as the worst in this regard).

One report examines Japan's top position in the league table more critically [YS\_10.10]. It explains that while, in overall mean scores in L and N, Japan came top, in the proportions of respondents who scored at Level 5 in L, Japan was fifth, behind Finland, Australia, the Netherlands, and Sweden. For Level 5 in N, the order was shown with Finland first, and Japan seventh.

A focus is also placed on the 'less good' outcomes in L and N in the younger age groups, compared to the older groups (i.e. when comparing both internationally). The *Asahi* [AS\_9.10] reports that some attribute this to the policy change, known as *yutoriyoiku*, a move to de-intensify the curriculum. Manabu Sato, an education professor from Gakushuin University offers a counter view to that extolling the virtues and success of the traditional compulsory education system that enabled the older generations to perform well [AS\_9.10]. He points to the significantly lower percentage of immigrants in Japan compared to many of the other OECD countries, and how a greater linguistic diversity in the population could have markedly changed the results. In response to Japan's 2009 'less good' outcome in PISA (eighth in literacy, ninth in mathematical literacy, out of 62 countries), Sato attributes the difference between PIAAC and PISA to a problem in senior high school and university education and an over-reliance on industry for the education of adults.

Many of the articles repeated or sought to interpret the key issues identified in the OECD country report. Thus the poorer performance shown in PSTRE compared to L and N was also picked up in two headlines: 'International adult skills survey, success of basics focussed education, 'cell phone' generation not *au fait* with PC' [YS\_9.10a] and 'Detection of tardiness [in] information literacy education, ...' [YS\_9.10b].

Despite frequently citing the OECD country report as the basis of their articles, the under-utilisation of skills held by women identified by the OECD as a key was one topic not taken up with any emphasis by the papers. Another absence in the media reports that could be

observed is any interrogation of educational inequalities within Japan. For example, while reporting on the high performance in L and N of respondents who had not completed upper secondary schooling compared to corresponding groups in countries such as Germany and the USA [MS\_9.10b], there is no attempt to problematise the large number of such relatively less educated people within Japan, even from a purely human capital perspective.

### ***(b) UK Daily Newspapers***

The three newspapers used for the analysis presented here were those that paid most attention to the PIAAC results: the *Daily Mail* (DM) that frequently covers educational issues and is the second best-selling UK newspaper, with a circulation of around 1.7 million per day; *The Daily Telegraph* (T) with around half a million circulation, and *The Guardian* (G) with just under 200,000 ( Figures taken from <http://www.theguardian.com/media/table/2014/may/09/abcs-national-newspapers>). The *Mail* and the *Telegraph* take a right of centre approach to the news, whilst *The Guardian* is liberal left.

The mediocre performance of UK citizens in relation to other countries is treated as an alarming story of national decline by all three papers. In terms of *rhetorical strategy* in the texts themselves, there were many examples of negative and ‘crisis’ language used: for example ‘no-learning cycle of creeping hopelessness’; youngsters ‘force-fed a diet of dumbing-down and low expectations’ (repeated 3 times in [DM\_ 8.10]); ‘shocked and confused’ and ‘disgrace’[G3\_ 9.10, b & c]; ‘UK has effectively gone backwards’ and ‘lagging’ [T\_ 8.10]. Even the occasional sceptical article refers to this discourse of general calamity [G\_8.10b].

There was a general concern in all three papers with what the PIAAC survey can show about trends over time. The predominant repeated message, also identified in the

OECD *Country Note*, relates to the surprising finding that the youngest age group does no better than their ‘grandparents’ of retirement age. The conservative *Telegraph* and *Mail* interpret this finding as evidence of the declining quality of the education system, especially assessment practices, while the *Guardian* points to increasing social inequalities. The *Guardian*’s focus on this issue relates to the finding highlighted by the OECD that the UK shows a stronger relationship between reading (L) and social background than other countries. This finding was given less prominence in the newspaper coverage than the age trend.

The third point picked up by the media from the OECD’s summary was the generally worse performance in N compared with L. This is mentioned by all three papers, reflecting concerns from previous national surveys.

No mention was made in any of the articles of PSTRE. While this was not stated in the OECD *Country Note*, UK scores are just above average for the OECD countries (OECD 2013a, 97). The PSTRE scores also show a different age pattern from literacy and numeracy with younger adults being more proficient than older ones.

Perhaps the most striking finding, however, given that this is a survey of *adult* skills encompassing the whole population of employment age, is how the discussion focuses almost entirely on initial education and on the youngest age group, largely ignoring LLL as a policy issue. LLL is raised only by advocacy organisations such as trade unions and the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education, who talk about the development of literacy and numeracy through adult life and work. Consistent with the focus of the textual stories on initial education, the accompanying photographs were all of children or young students, in classroom or exam settings, using print-based materials and pens/pencils. Apart from calculators, there was no sign of digital technologies of any kind and no sign of adults beyond their mid-20s or in workplace, community or everyday settings.

In terms of reference countries, Korea, Japan and Finland are mentioned as positive comparators (though elsewhere, in the broadcast media, evaluation of Korea is qualified – see for example <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-24433320>). Italy and Spain on the other hand are mentioned for their poor performance on the survey, while Eastern European countries are mentioned as performing similarly. The focus on Eastern Europe resonates strongly with current debates and fears about competition from migrant labour from these countries.

Besides the obligatory references to the OECD (referred to by the *Telegraph* [T\_8.10] as ‘respected’, and personified through a quote from Andreas Schleicher), a variety of other sources are mentioned: the then government Minister for Skills and the opposition spokesperson for education; advocates for adult learning and training including both trade union and employer representatives, educational experts and academics. Just one article (not included in the sample discussed here) reports first-hand experiences from teachers and adults with limited literacy and numeracy (*Guardian Education*, 11.10.2013 ‘Adult Literacy – the view from the night school’).

Compared with the PISA results which followed in December 2013 the PIAAC survey of adult skills commanded limited attention from the press, and, as mentioned above, the policy focus tends to revert to school and school-leavers. A report that starts off talking about PIAAC often slips into discussion of PISA and the finding of low achievement among the youngest age group (16-24) feeds this concern with initial education (see [DM\_8.10]).

Much blame is placed on the English education and qualifications system with newspapers lining up to put the responsibility on current or previous government reforms, depending on their political line. This is almost entirely the thrust of statement from the Minister for Skills who uses the PIAAC findings to argue for the failure of the previous Labour administration’s education policy (though again referring to investment and strategy

in *initial education*, not post-16 which Labour also funded substantially) and to reiterate the virtues of current government reforms which emphasise autonomy for schools, parental choice and a more rigorous and traditional curriculum.

The government subsequently announced a 3 million pound initiative using a randomised control trial methodology to discover ‘what works’ in adult literacy and numeracy education (BIS 2014). Apart from this, there is little evidence that the PIAAC is sparking new policy initiatives in the area of post-16 and adult education. Rather, the survey findings are used to reinforce existing controversies around schools, standards and changes in qualifications which are also justified using PISA results.

### ***(c) French Daily Newspapers***

Analysis of media reports in the French press is based on four national papers. Three were major dailies: *Le Figaro* (circulation around 325,000, centre-right) *Le Monde* (around 300,000, left), and *Libération* (around 100,000 far-left). The fourth was the business-oriented paper, *Les Echos* (around 125,000) (Figures taken from [http://www.ojd.com/var/ojd/storage/files/books\\_pdf/C/OJD\\_BOOK\\_presse-grand-public-2014\\_169.pdf](http://www.ojd.com/var/ojd/storage/files/books_pdf/C/OJD_BOOK_presse-grand-public-2014_169.pdf)).

Composing the French headlines appears to have posed challenges. The words used officially by PIAAC for L and N, *littératie* and *numératie*, are not widely used in France. Thus papers’ headlines mentioned ‘the written (domain)’ [*l’écrit*] or ‘reading’ [*la lecture*] and ‘calculation’, ‘figures’ or ‘maths’. However, the three major dailies defined the terms Literacy, Numeracy, and PSTRE within their articles.

In terms of the issues and findings that are highlighted, the French newspapers had relatively bad news to convey. Most reported the proportion of low-scoring French respondents, as those performing at Level 1 or below in L and N. *Le Monde* reported those up

to Level 2 versus those at Level 3 and above, while *Le Figaro* and *Libération* reported the proportion of high scorers as Levels 4/5. The low percentages were compared with the OECD average, or sometimes with Spain and Italy, which scored below France in both L and N. In most reports Japan and Finland were mentioned as ‘good students’, reflecting a pervasive school-like metaphor (see Hamiltom 2012, 43-47). PSTRE was largely ignored, unsurprisingly as France (like Spain and Italy) did not participate in that part of the Survey. All four papers focused on broadly the same demographics and their relation to L and N scores: namely, age, respondent’s level of education, and parents’ level of education. *Le Monde* went somewhat further in its interpretation: ‘Social origin [i.e. social background, as measured by parents’ educational level] and [respondent’s own] level of education play a more discriminating (stratifying) role in France than in many countries. Just like being born in France or not.’ But the main findings highlighted were that ‘young (16-24 years) people achieve better results than older (55-64) people’ and ‘as in Korea and Finland, the gap between the two [age groups] is substantial in France.’ *Le Monde* suggests that several explanations are possible (see next paragraph).

*Le Monde*’s article finishes by quoting an OECD ‘expert’ to the effect that ‘what is most problematic is the inequalities in the system’, referring to age, place of birth, level of education, and parents’ level of education. This issue is taken up in Eric Charbonnier’s blog [‘Education Déchiffrée’] for *Le Monde* (15.10.2013). The inequalities mentioned in the *Libération* headline, in contrast, appear to relate to inequalities between countries in Europe. Only *Le Monde* indicates that some questions remain open: ‘OECD is unable to say if older people [the lower performers] left the system with a mediocre level, or if their competences deteriorated in their professional life.’

All the newspapers establish credibility by quoting at least one OECD official. Most quoted was Stefano Scarpetta, Director of Employment, Labour & Social Affairs at the



OECD; *Le Monde* also quoted a second official, Eric Charbonnier, (who writes a blog for the paper). *Libération*'s report quoted Angel Gurría, Secretary General of the OECD and Androulla Vassiliou, Commissioner for Education for the EU, speaking at a press conference in Brussels on the day of the release of results. In contrast, national government spokespersons were not in evidence in these reports.

The reports did not offer any critique of the survey methodology (such as the measurement of the proficiencies). They mentioned only the overall sample size (166,000) and/or France's sample size (7000).

All the main articles were published in the day or two after the findings were released, so any policy-related conclusions are 'first reactions'. *Le Monde* mentions 'inequalities' (see above), and *Le Figaro* mentions the 'spread' of scores; *Libération*, considers that 'in too many European countries, the future of children is pre-determined by the situation of the parents' (quoting Vassiliou). When seeking factors responsible for the problem, *Les Echos* considers it to be 'first tied to the large numbers of adults whose parents did not do higher education', i.e. 'the influence of the socioeconomic milieu.' It goes on to quote Scarpetta at the OECD: 'The school forms initial competencies. But these develop next at work ... which is a matter for [economic] ministries, but also business: France has a problem of skill, and of use of skills: many talents are not exploited... The OECD is concerned by the high number of fixed term and part-time contracts, which reduces the level of skill use.' He is also concerned that 'continuing education tends to prioritise the most skilled, and deepens the gap with the weakest.' Concerning policy, *Le Monde* implies that inequalities within France must be tackled. *Le Figaro* quotes Scarpetta, who emphasises 'three important dimensions: access to education and training; development of competences throughout professional life; use of skills adequate for the post held.' *Libération* considers 'immediate measures needed at European level' (quoting Vassiliou), presumably to tackle inequality between countries. More

generally, Gurría of the OECD considers the results ‘a wake-up call, to see what others do, and to draw lessons from that.’ For *Les Echos*, ‘France must act to better use its talents.’

## **6. Comparative analysis of national reception of findings**

The **pattern of media coverage** was similar in all three countries. The main articles appeared during the first two or three days after the results were released, and were then quickly eclipsed by other news. The key issues identified by the OECD’s *Country Note* for each of the three countries appear to have strongly guided the focus of the media reports in the respective countries. For example the media reports for all three countries followed the *Country Notes* in identifying the country’s position in the international league tables as the main headline news. The generational variations, whether deemed positive or negative, were another common area of attention. However, some of the OECD-identified key issues struggled to get taken up by the local press; one example of this was the OECD’s finding that ‘Japanese women represent an underutilised resource of skill’ (OECD 2013c,1), a reference to the comparatively low rate of labour force participation of Japanese women with high skills performance results.

The headline findings were repeated briefly in later articles where they were mentioned in relation to other surveys (particularly PISA) and used as evidence in debates about social and education issues. In the UK all the print newspapers were connected to online news sites that included further links to commentary and data, and extensive reader comments on these sites brought an interactive dimension to the coverage. The level of reader commentary in the Japanese and French media was harder to determine due to our more limited access to such sources through the news database and the newspapers’ online sites.

In each of the countries there were **issues of language and terminology** which were especially complicated where we needed to translate the original coverage from French or

Japanese into English. In addition, some key terms, including literacy and numeracy, used by the OECD were not easy for the journalists to translate into everyday French and Japanese. As mentioned above, French papers wrote about ‘the written (domaine)’ (*l’écrit*) or ‘reading’ (*la lecture*) and ‘calculation’, ‘figures’ or ‘maths’. In the Japanese press, literacy was translated both as ‘reading comprehension ability’ (読解力) and as ‘academic ability’ (学力), while numeracy was expressed as ‘numerical thinking/ cognitive ability’ (数的思考力). Furthermore, PSTRE was rarely translated in full, and the Japanese media used the terms IT skills or PC skills for what we assume to be references to PSTRE. These issues of language and terminology constrained our ability to evaluate our effectiveness in capturing (via searches) the full corpus of relevant media reports, and introduced uncertainties in evaluating the media’s interpretation of the findings.

While media reports in all countries reported on aspects of the methodology such as the targeted age group and sample size, none attempted to explain how literacy, numeracy and PSTRE were conceptualised in the PIAAC. In particular, it was notable that **the media in none of the three countries highlighted PSTRE as a new dimension that was worthy of problematisation**. Further, **the results on the three key dimensions of the survey were unevenly reported** in the media. In the UK and France almost no attention was paid to PSTRE findings (the latter country did not test PSTRE). In contrast, all three dimensions were reported in the Japanese press, particularly by the *Yomiuri* which included the poorer outcome in the PSTRE, in its 9th October headlines.

Both numeracy and literacy were mentioned in the UK, with numeracy continuing to enjoy equal status with literacy (rather than the earlier status as the ‘poor cousin’ of literacy) achieved under the *Skills for Life* policy (National research and Development Centre, 2008). ‘Literacy’ appears to be interpreted by the UK media in a traditional way as printed language, mainly books, while the **digital forms and skills are ignored**. This is despite the fact that the

UK sample achieved a slightly higher proportion of top scorers (Levels 2 and 3) in PSTRE than the international average, and younger age groups did better than their elders. So there is an interesting, but complex, story to be told about the PSTRE findings that is not reflected in the early media reports.

Japan's ranking as the top scorer in L and N was analysed more carefully in one report, for example, pointing to the difference between the overall average (where Japan came top in both) and the percentage of the participants who were performing at level 5 in Literacy and Numeracy (where Japan came fifth and seventh, respectively). But they did not discuss **what these results tell us about what people at these different levels should be able to do with their literacy and numeracy in different contexts**. While reference to the kinds of survey questions appeared in some of the reports, there was little to convey that what was being attempted by the OECD and its Expert Groups (e.g. OECD 2013a, Ch.2) was a measure of literacy and numeracy that is meant to have richer meanings in adults' lives, than the '3Rs'.

The findings were not simply reported as country averages in skills scores, but were **correlated with different variables in order to tell an interesting story**. Most importantly, media in all three countries were interested in how the younger participants performed in relation to older generations. They tried to extrapolate from age differences in the snapshot survey to historical trends in achievement and in both Japan and the UK, the findings are used as a way of conducting a popular evaluation of recent educational policy reforms. In Japan where the main demographic source of disparity was age-related, the higher performance of the older generations was discussed as evidence of people maintaining their skill levels through work and everyday practices, while the lower performance among the younger groups was interpreted by one of the papers as attributable to recent curricular reforms in schools. In France attention was also paid to what the results said about social and

educational inequalities in society, and prominent interpretations lamented the lack of opportunities for adults to develop and use their skills at work. The disparities in age differences found in the three countries suggest that monitoring and explaining such differences will continue to attract interest in many policy jurisdictions.

Despite their different placements in the PIAAC league table, **the media coverage focussed on negative findings** in all three countries and this was carried through metaphorical language in the headlines and main body of the articles. Even the Japanese media, despite the country's high ranking in L and N, reported on the 'problem' of digital skills. This genre of 'blame' works across the political spectrum, suggesting that PIAAC can be fitted into existing debates and policy agendas: it has 'something for everybody'.

Media in all three countries, though not all papers within each, paid some **attention to differences in performance according to other demographic factors**. At least two French papers noted that people born in and out of France performed differently while one of the Japanese papers cited opinion that the low degree of disparity between the lowest scores and the highest scores was due to the low levels of immigration in Japan. In the UK no attention was paid to migrant groups even though there were differences that could have been reported. However, the proportion of those scoring at the lowest levels in the UK is compared with the proportion of high achievers and linked with other background variables to make an argument about socio-economic inequalities *within* the country, as compared with other nations. In Japan, where the disparities according to educational qualifications and occupational factors were the smallest across the OECD countries, the media reported these as evidence of the success of the country's education system.

**Gender differences** were not mentioned in the UK or France presses, despite there being important gender differences in Numeracy scores. As discussed above, the gender issues in Japan were not initially taken up there as a major focus, despite the OECD's efforts

to highlight the under-utilisation of women's high level skills in the *Country Note* (OECD 2013b).

Despite an apparent interest in **trends over time**, media in none of the countries compared the PIAAC performance to the earlier IALS even though the UK and France were participants in it. Comparisons or references to other international surveys, where made, are to PISA which tends to be better known and understood by the media. In the UK, this omission is very significant since a story of *improvement* in literacy from these earlier assessments could have been told, rather than the prevalent narrative of panic and decline (Wheater et al. 2013).

The French press drew out most explicit **policy implications for adult learning, training and LLL policies**. In contrast, the UK and Japan press made few policy connections other than with schools. Perhaps this was because in the UK and Japan the younger generation performed no better than the older generation. This lack of generational difference - compared with the higher scores for the younger groups in most other countries - was taken to show a declining trend in young people's performance which was attributed to various causes within the education system, depending on the political leaning of the newspaper source (e.g. ineffective reforms of the curriculum, 'dumbing down' of qualifications, etc.), or to cultural or disciplinary issues among young people themselves. The poorer performance in PSTRE together with the low uptake of the computer based form of the survey raised questions for the Japanese about reasons behind this, and the government's identification of this performance as an issue, as well as the need for re-examination of their IT education and integration of ICT into schools, was reported.

In the UK the core **focus on children and schools** is carried through into both textual metaphors and the accompanying images, despite the focus of PIAAC on adult skills across the lifespan. These tendencies were also noted in France, where school-based metaphors were

used: ‘dunce’s cap for French adults’ (*Figaro*), and ‘the French are useless [nuls]’ (*Le Monde*). Recent research into the media coverage of the PIAAC in Denmark has found a similar pattern despite a long-standing Danish tradition of LLL (Cort, Larson, and Mariager-Anderson 2014).

The **voices of experts were everywhere dominant** in the media reports, sometimes through references to international and national agencies (‘the respected OECD’ [T\_ 8.10]); sometimes personalised by particular officials and advocates (especially Schleicher, and national politicians and representatives of the policy arm of government). The voices of academics were more visible in the Japanese press than in the others; in the French and English press, the voices of OECD and national government officials’ voices respectively appeared to be more prevalent. These voices are reinforced through inter-textual references to other statistical reports, from the OECD and elsewhere. Teachers and learners are rarely allowed any space. A range of trade union and other advocacy groups are called on for their opinions but these do not really interrupt the expert narrative, even where they raise alternative issues.

## **7. Conclusions**

Media analysis is complex in an age of interconnected interactive digital media. To make the analysis manageable, we strictly constrained the sources included and excluded online news sites and readers’ comments. Comparison proved difficult, due to the differences of media industries across countries and translation problems with key concepts. For these reasons, our study was more challenging than expected.

However, comparative studies such as this are important because they highlight the difficulties faced by international surveys themselves in working to influence policy across diverse contexts and languages. The analysis shows how, in each national case, particular

aspects of the PIAAC results were foregrounded, depending not only on the performance measures themselves, but also on how accounts of the results were assembled to extend national cultural narratives and debates around education and social policy. PIAAC acts as a policy intervention initially through framing public awareness of adult skills and persuasively enrolling key national actors. The OECD itself actively mobilises media responses and offers copious (yet selective) resources to guide public interpretation of the findings, via *Country Notes* and press releases simultaneous with the results, combined with an accessible interactive website and ongoing background briefings on economic and educational issues. This serves to frame and shape media coverage in national contexts, and provides a credible evidence base that is hardly contested in the ensuing media discourse, at least in the short term. Importantly, the OECD material summarises complex data that are otherwise not easy for journalists to quickly access and absorb. It inevitably directs attention to particular facts and issues in a format that is easy to translate into press reports and headline news.

The national media report the results with varying degrees of alarm, celebration or complacency (see Steiner-Khamsi 2003) but all countries treat them as significant headline-worthy news, and articulate them within existing national preoccupations. Consequently, the OECD's agenda is not uniformly reflected in the media coverage. Some key points are ignored or reinterpreted in the context of ongoing national assumptions, definitions and debates, and others are selectively appropriated to mount new arguments within existing local debates. In particular the national media diverged from the OECD's agendas in their treatment of LLL policies (in Japan and the UK at least), digital aspects of skills, and some demographic differences and inequalities, such as those relating to gender, migrant populations, and class. PIAAC is explicitly intended to inform national LLL policies but LLL and adult education appear to be less easy for journalists to grasp and discuss, compared to initial schooling which is never far away from public debate. Thus, the role of the newspaper



media was largely that of framing, filtering and simplifying the OECD's reports of the findings in line with existing cultural narratives. These simplified messages are then amplified and incorporated within popular public discourse through repetition in related stories over time.

Much important detail for informing a critical evaluation of the surveys is available in OECD technical documents (e.g. OECD 2013e); however there was little evidence of journalists accessing this information within the period studied. Thus key issues in the design of PIAAC seemed not to be taken up in any of this press coverage. First, despite the interest shown in all three countries about trends over time, the inability of snapshot surveys like PIAAC to provide a firm basis for drawing such conclusions was not acknowledged. Second, minimal attention was paid to the PIAAC definitions of the three proficiencies or the methodology which generates their measurement; even the representation of literacy by reading skills alone might have attracted more attention.

For a new OECD survey addressing PSTRE as a new skills domain, media attention in these three countries might seem surprisingly shallow and short-lived. From the perspective of literacy and numeracy studies, the new practices afforded and demanded by 'technology-rich' work, community and home environments are significant areas for discussion and policy action (Hoyles et al 2010; Yasukawa, Brown, and Black et al. 2013). Both our own analysis of the PIAAC framework for PSTRE and the sparse media coverage of the digital elements of the survey suggest that this and related constructs are currently unstable and fluid within both public and expert discourse, making them hard for media and policy makers to use (Lankshear and Knobel 2008; ; Gourlay, Hamilton, and Lea 2014).

The media are often accused of biased and superficial coverage of key policy issues. However, our close investigation revealed more about the dynamics of news production in relation to a specialist news object like an international adult skills survey. We conclude that

the media's role in translating PIAAC's global agenda into local policy action is understandably **limited** due to industry demands to rapidly produce newsworthy material from the available information; and **indeterminate** depending on national contextual factors which help constitute what will be recognised by their readership as an interesting story.

Our research picked up on the first wave of PIAAC results. The lifetime of the PIAAC news story was very short in all three countries and opportunities for journalists to focus on the findings in the longer term or in more depth are unpredictable. However, two further waves are now underway, involving more countries. As these results are released, there is likely to be renewed interest from the media and additional participating countries may afford different angles for media analysis. Moreover, we might expect that with each wave, awareness and understanding of PIAAC by the media will increase. Thus, follow-up research on future waves of the PIAAC survey is recommended to see how the media response will develop as it becomes more familiar with this novel approach to adult skills assessment (see for example Mons and Pons 2009 on changes in French media responses to PISA over a 10 year period). The rapidly developing specialism of "data journalism" (Knight, 2015) may also positively affect future news coverage.

Further, the online and interactive social media, on the one hand, and documentary programmes, specialist advocacy and professional websites and publications on the other, offer additional possibilities for delving more deeply into the survey and for making explicit links to a wide range of relevant resources. The latter cluster can be a particularly important complement to the general public and popular press in that they are aimed at influential professional audiences who are key to the formulation and implementation of national policy.

We have argued that media discourses enter debates about policy making through different and at times unpredictable avenues. Thus, tracing how media reports about PIAAC translate into national policies requires close monitoring of many aspects and channels of

local socio-political and economic debates. It is through these debates that issues related to ‘adult skills’ could be raised and linked to their assessment through surveys such as PIAAC.

## **Appendix 1**

### *Newspapers Japan*

*Asahi*, 9.10.13 [AS\_9.10] 意外、でも誇らしい 成人力調査、日本が世界一

[Unexpected but proud - Adult Skills Survey: Japan is first worldwide]

*Mainichi*, 9.10.13a [MS\_9.10a] 国際成人力調査 - 大人の学力、日本 1 位 義務教育で

差小さく 維持力も高く / 得意の選択式 [International Survey of Adult Skills – adults’

literacy, Japan 1st; small variations due to compulsory education, and high skills maintenance

/ preferred assessment format]

*Mainichi*, 9.10.13b [MS\_9.10b] 国際成人力調査- 大人の学力調査、日本トップ 義務教

育、研修が支え [International adult skills survey – a survey of adults’ academic ability

(literacy): Japan comes top, reflection of compulsory education and training]

*Mainichi*, 25.11.13 [MS\_25.11] イタリア、学力「最低」の背景 - OECD 国際成人力

調査 [Italy – backdrop of being “worst” in literacy – OECD Survey of Adult Skills]

*Yomiuri*, 8.10.13 [YS\_8.10] 日本の「成人力」、2分野で1位...弱点はIT [Japan's

'adult skills', number 1 in 2 areas ... weakness is IT]

*Yomiuri*, 9.10.13a [YS\_9.10a] 国際成人力調査 基礎重視の教育成果 携帯世代P Cは苦

手 [International adult skills survey: basics focussed education; PC a weakness for cell phone generation]

*Yomiuri*, 9.10.13b [YS\_9.10b] 情報教育の遅れ指摘 国際成人力調査 P C解答不能

3 6 % [Detection of tardy response to informatics education – international Survey of Adult Skills; 36% unable to respond to items on PC]

*Yomiuri*, 10.10.13 [YS\_10.10] [社説] 国際成人力調査「読解力」世界一は誇らしいが

[Editorial: International Survey of Adult Skills – proud results in literacy, but ...]

### ***Newspapers UK***

*Daily Mail* 8.10.13 [DM 8.10] Britain's education crisis: Up to 8.5 MILLION people are no better at numeracy than a 10-year-old and young people are now among least literate in the developed world

*Guardian* 8.10.13a [G\_8.10a] England's young people near bottom of global league table for basic skills

*Guardian* 8.10.13b [G\_8.10b] Let's pause before bashing Blighty over the OECD literacy report

*Guardian* 9.10.13a [G\_9.10a] Education: Expert view: Nothing short of a national disgrace

*Guardian* 9.10.13b [G\_9.10b] Education in England: Sliding down the class

*Telegraph* 8.10.13 [T\_8.10] Young worse at maths and English than grandparents and behind 'almost every other nation'

## *Newspapers France*

*Le Monde*, 8.10.13 [LM\_8.10]. Les-adultes-francais-sont-parmi-les-plus-mauvais-a-l-ecrit-et-en-calcul [French adults are among the worst in writing and in calculation].

*Le Figaro*, 8.10.13 [LF\_8.10]. Maths-lecture-bonnet-d'âne-pour-les-français-adultes [Maths, reading: dunce cap for French adults].

*Libération*, 8.10.13 [L\_8.10]. Fortes-inegalites-sur-la-lecture-et-le-calcul-au-sein-des-pays-de-l-ocde. [Large inequalities in reading and calculation in the heart of OECD countries].

*Les Echos*, 9.10.13 [LE\_9-10]. Lire-ecrire-ou-compter-la-france-parmi-les-cancre [Reading, writing or reckoning : France among the dunces].

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