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PISA Strategic Development Group

**IMPROVING ACCESS TO PISA FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND OTHER SPECIAL
EDUCATION NEEDS**

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IMPROVING ACCESS TO PISA FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND OTHER SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

1. Since April 2009, the PISA Governing Board (PGB) has expressed interest in potentially expanding access to PISA for students with disabilities and other special education needs. This briefing note reviews current PISA policy and then outlines three issues for discussion in the Strategic Development Group (SDG) to help develop recommendations for the PGB for moving forward in this area.

Current PISA Policy

2. The current PISA policy (from 2009 and prior) allows exclusions at the school level (*e.g.*, a geographically remote school) or within school for certain students, including:

- Intellectually disabled students who have a mental or emotional disability and who, in the professional opinion of qualified staff, are cognitively delayed such that they cannot perform in the PISA testing situation;
- Functionally disabled students who are permanently physically disabled in such a way that they cannot perform in the PISA testing situation;
- Students with insufficient assessment language experience, meaning they (a) are not native speakers of the assessment language(s), (b) have limited proficiency in the assessment language(s), and (c) have received less than one year of instruction in the assessment language(s); and
- Students not assessable for some other reason as agreed upon.

3. PISA mandates that overall exclusions not exceed 5% of the PISA school-age population and that exclusions based specifically on disability or special education not exceed 2.5%. However, exceptions were allowed to the latter if the percentage was slightly higher but caused by a large proportion of students not proficient in the language of the test.

Issues to Consider

4. By allowing accommodations in the PISA testing situation, theoretically, some students who are currently excluded (mainly from the first two groups above) would be enabled to participate in PISA. Additionally, because of PISA's limits on exclusions, it is likely that some students with special education needs already participate in PISA without accommodations and thus, under a policy change, might become eligible for accommodations. Either situation changes the testing population and conditions and potentially countries' scores, both averages and distributions. The potential magnitude of a policy change is not known—the consortium was not able to provide information at the level of detail requested by the earlier paper on this topic—and may vary slightly by country, depending on how each country implements the current PISA policy and how students with disabilities/needs are educated and tested nationally.

5. At this time, the SDG needs to consider three key, interrelated issues, all of which should be set within an overall rationale, which is considered at the end of the paper.

6. First, *how should a change in PISA's accommodations policy be structured?* For example, the new policy could make increased accommodations *allowable*—countries would have the choice of whether or not to provide accommodations that expand access to some students otherwise excluded—or make them *mandatory*—all countries would be required to provide accommodations and expand access to some students otherwise excluded. Further, if additional accommodations were mandatory, countries could either be required to offer the same accommodations or they could be required only to offer some accommodations (*e.g.*, based on their greatest needs or largest special needs populations). The main pros and cons are identified below.

Strategy	Pros	Cons
Accommodations allowable but not mandatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases complexity and administrative burden (<i>e.g.</i>, in terms of collection, scoring, scaling) only for countries in which it is necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes testing conditions for some countries Leads to different population definitions across countries
Accommodations mandatory with uniform implementation across countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures similar population definitions and testing conditions across all countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases complexity and administrative burden for all countries
Accommodations mandatory with flexible implementation across countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows level of complexity and administrative burden to be decided upon by individual countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes testing conditions for some countries Leads to different population definitions across countries

7. The degree to which the “cons” for the first and third strategies impact comparability and trends is interrelated with decisions regarding analysis, which are discussed in the third question.

8. The SDG should consider the pros and cons of these different strategies and make recommendations regarding the structure for a new policy.

9. Second, *what kind of accommodations should be allowed?* An earlier survey (to which 25 OECD and 6 partner countries responded) identified a number of common accommodations or adaptations that are currently implemented nationally. For reporting purposes, these were initially organised into three categories (communications, text/print, and physical/timing adaptations). However, for the purposes here, it may be more useful to list the common adaptations individually and along a continuum of the degree to which they may be expected to affect the integrity of what is being assessed.

10. For example, having a Braille or large-type version of the assessment does not disrupt what the test is trying to assess—which is the students' ability to pull printed information from the page—whereas having a helper to read portions of the test to the student does. On the other hand, having a helper to read portions of the mathematics literacy assessment may not interfere with the assessment of mathematics skills but it does neutralise the effect of reading ability for some students while not for others. Thinking of possible adaptations in this light might assist the SDG in more fully analyzing the pros and cons of each individual adaptation. Below, common adaptations are listed *loosely* from low to high on this continuum. The ordering of the accommodations is not intended to be definitive, merely suggestive to aid discussion of the bigger picture. Another useful way to think of these adaptations might be to identify which ones

accommodate the special needs of students and which ones may provide assistance in addressing the content of the assessments. (The number in parentheses indicates the number of countries from the survey offering the accommodation.)

- Use of Braille versions of the assessments (24)
- Use of sign language to respond to the assessment (some subset of 16)
- Adaptations in which the content of the assessment is the same but a different font, text size, text color, or paper color is used in a nationally produced alternative version (17) or in alternative versions allowed to be produced at the school level (15 countries)
- Use of word processing for student responses (19)
- Amanuensis (*i.e.*, a helper to write down the students' answers) (some subset of 22)
- Allowance of rest periods (19)
- Provision of extra time to students with special needs (23)
- Allowance for students to take the test separate from other students (22 countries—sometimes for purposes of amanuensis)
- Use of sign language to deliver the assessment (some subset of 16)
- Amanuensis with a helper to read questions (some subset of 22)

11. Countries also identified 13 other accommodations. Only two of these accommodations involved changes to the tests (*e.g.*, through item exemption or special versions)—these would fall on the “high” end of the continuum. Others ranged from computerised solutions to certain needs (*e.g.*, use of synthetic text, voice recognition, recorded texts, etc.) to compensatory aids (*e.g.*, magnifiers, physical manipulatives) to additional staff (*e.g.*, for prompting)—which likely fall at different points along the continuum.

12. In considering accommodations for PISA, the SDG should also keep in mind whether or not it is important to target particular groups of students for inclusion. For example, in terms of policy groups, some adaptations may better address the needs of some students with physical disabilities, whereas other adaptations may better address the needs of students with cognitive disabilities. Additionally, while any accommodation increases administrative burden and complexity, the nature and level of complexity varies by accommodation (*e.g.*, some require resources at the local level during delivery, others at the international and national/local levels for negotiating adaptations, others on time required from schools). A view of the general pros and cons is presented below.

Strategy	Pros	Cons
More adaptations for more groups of students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More fully meets spirit of inclusiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively greater administrative burden and complexity • Depending on which adaptations, may compromise comparability of results within countries (<i>e.g.</i>, readers v. those with reading help)
Fewer adaptations or more targeted groups of students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively less administrative burden and complexity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less inclusiveness

13. The SDG should identify which accommodations should be considered for a new PISA accommodations policy (including those listed above and any additional ones identified during discussion).

14. Third, but not least, ***what should be done with results for accommodated students?*** The first two issues cannot be considered divorced from the third, which is how will the data from accommodated students be analysed. One option is to include fully include results for these students in the calculations of averages and distributions. The other option is to exclude results for these students and analyze them separately. In the absence of data on the magnitude of any population changes incurred by increased access, it is difficult to predict the effects on scores but it is possible that there would be at least some effect.

15. If the first option is chosen, this assumes no differences in reporting from current strategies, though appendices presenting disaggregated results for the two groups of students would be possible. If the second option is chosen, results for accommodated students may be reported at different levels of prominence—in separate tables or sections within the main body of the report, in appendices, in separate publications, etc. However, while reporting is another consideration, the main focus of the SDG's discussion should be on analysis, and the main pros and cons of the different strategies are identified below.

Strategy	Pros	Cons
Fully include results for accommodated students in analyses (<i>e.g.</i> , they factor in to averages and distributions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results will allow full expression of the distribution of student abilities in countries • If accommodations are implemented on a mandatory-uniform basis, results will be comparable across countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produces results on different population definitions than previous years and thus impacts trend lines • If accommodations are implemented on an allowable, or mandatory-but-flexible, basis, population definitions will vary across countries and be non-comparable • Presents results that may be non-comparable within countries, depending on the types of accommodations implemented (see earlier section)
Analyze results for accommodated students separately	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since there is no change to the population definition for the students included in analyses, ensures comparability over time is not compromised • Better enables allowable or mandatory-but-flexible implementation of accommodations by countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May offer a false sense of opportunity: although additional students are enabled to participate, they are still treated differently and attention is called to these students and their abilities as a group

16. The SDG should consider how results for students with accommodations should be analysed and develop some preliminary recommendations in this area. The SDG also might identify how the Technical Advisory Group could be employed to provide guidance in this area and/or if there is additional information that is necessary to inform these decisions (*e.g.*, that might be obtained from National Project Managers).

17. As stated before, these three key issues are closely intertwined. However, they all have to be considered in light of the overall goals of the PISA accommodations policy. While the PGB has stated a general interest in expanding access to PISA to students with special education needs, the specific policy rationale is unclear. For example, does access to PISA need be expanded because of legal requirements in some or many countries related to providing access? Do countries want to expand access because they would like to better represent the range of ability within countries? Because inclusiveness has become a primary goal for education/assessment to the possible overriding of other goals? Because there is political interest or requirement in doing so? Whatever the reasons, the SDG should discuss and help articulate the rationale for expanding access to PISA so that it can be used to assist in decision making in this complex area.