Houston Area Model United Nations
Standard Committee

UNESCO



Chair | Aashna Gurajala
Topic B: Reevaluating International Assessment & Standardized Testing Systems
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Atilgan Ozdil/Anadolu Ag

Chair Letter

Dear Delegates,

My name is Aashna Gurajala and I am a sophomore Biochemistry major at UT Austin!

My journey in Model UN began in my sophomore year of high school when I joined the club because my favorite teacher was the sponsor (and let's be honest, also because we could skip school for conferences). I had always been interested in geopolitics and public speaking separately, but it wasn't until joining MUN that I discovered how awesome it could be to combine both.

Having chaired CSW last year, I am so excited to be chairing UNESCO this year. As an organization dedicated to building peace through education, science, culture, and communication, I found that UNESCO offers a unique lens through which to address issues I care deeply about as someone in a STEM field. I hope our discussions will give you the chance to dive into some of the most pressing challenges faced worldwide, from addressing education systems to ethically representing scientific technology, and I can't wait to see the creative solutions you bring forward!

If I can give you any advice before conference, it would be to really develop an interest in the topics at hand. Be creative. Explore solutions that test the nature of global infrastructure and immerse yourself in the process of research and problem-solving. On a more practical note: bring band-aids in case your feet hurt, and please don't feel like you need to kill a forest trying to print every article you find. A few key statistics, the background guide, your position paper, and any absolutely essential research are all you need to debate effectively. And above all, don't forget to have fun! HAMUN is an incredible opportunity to step outside your comfort zone, meet new people, and make memories that last forever!



Best of luck!

Aashna Gurajala
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Topic Relevance

International assessment sits at the center of UNESCO's education mandate due to UNESCO being responsible for monitoring global progress towards inclusive, equitable, and quality education as a part of SDG 4. UNESCO's indicator for tracking this progress depends on countries having some way to measure whether children are actually learning to read and do mathematics at expected levels, which means this issue is at the center of the committee's education mission.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) are the most influential instruments used to answer how learning should be measured and by whom. PISA alone now involves around 80 countries, testing hundreds of thousands of 15-year olds in three year intervals, of which the results routinely dominated education news cycles and electoral debates globally.

This level of influence is the reason the topic is so contentious. PISA and TIMSS were built to answer a specific question, "How does my country's performance compare to others?". This question has proven to be an incredibly effective policy lever. However, consider whether a tool optimized for comparability is the same tool that should drive curriculum design, teacher evaluations, and education budgets. Take for example a thermometer. A thermometer can precisely measure a patient's temperature, but can't really provide data that should decide how the hospital is run. The core of this issue is whether international assessment has been asked to do far more than it was designed to do.

Additionally, UNESCO has a direct equity interest that OECD-run assessments do not share by design. PISA was created by and for The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member economies, a group of the wealthiest countries in the world, and only later extended to non-member participants. In contrast, UNESCO also has a mandate that centers low and middle income countries explicitly. When a lower income country's students are tested against a global benchmark built around the curricula, language, and resources of wealthy economies, the resulting comparison says less about the quality of

Topic Relevance

the country's teaching than the mismatch between the test and context it was given in.

Two values to hold in tension during debate are the practical benefits of international comparability and the risk that comparability itself narrows what counts as a good education as much as a three hour test can measure.

Background Information

What Does PISA Measure?

PISA, as launched by OECD, tests a sample of at least five thousand 15 year olds per country every three years in reading, mathematics, and science. PISA is not a curriculum-based test. It was designed to measure whether students can apply knowledge and skills to real-world problems rather than mastery of a national syllabus. This choice meant to make scores more comparable across countries with different curricula, yet also means that a country can perform well on its own national exams while performing poorly on PISA, or vice versa.

What Does TIMSS Measure?

TIMSS, administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), is explicitly curriculum-based. It tests what students have been taught in mathematics and science, sampled by grade level rather than age. Because PISA and TIMSS measure different things like applied literacy versus curriculum mastery, a country can rank very differently on the two assessments. For example, New Zealand and South Korea score closely on PISA mathematics, but have almost a one standard deviation gap on TIMSS.

Rankings and Political Weight

The clearest illustration of PISA's political influence is Germany's "PISA shock". In 2001, when Germany's first PISA results were published, this country, which had long assumed it had one of Europe's strongest school systems, ranked 21st out of 32 OECD countries, marking it quite average. The reaction included a televised quiz show "PISA Show", education became a central election issue, and the creation of national performance standards that had been politically impossible in Germany's decentralized education system. Soon after, in subsequent cycles, Germany managed to climb substantially which helped coin the general term applied to whenever a country's lower-than-expected ranking triggers a domestic reform push as "PISA shock".

Teaching to the Test

A practice that is common not just in individual study routines and school life, but in national curricula, is the practice of "teaching to the test". This entails narrowing classroom instruction towards the specific content, format, and skills that an assessment measures. The impact can be beneficial short term, but at the expense of content the assessment does not cover. An argument can be made that this is close to an inevitable consequence of attaching political and institutional consequences to test scores. When a government's electoral prospects, funding for schools, and employment rests on ranking, systems will inevitably seek optimization for achieving the number being measured.

International Assessment Landscape

OECD's Public-Private Partnership Model

PISA is sponsored and directed by OECD member governments but is honestly designed, administered, and scored by contracted private and academic organizations. Some of these organizations being the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) as well as other for and non profit testing organizations. This is currently one of the most contentious governance features of the system as it stands. While some point out that outsourcing globally influential measurement instruments to private contractors creates financial incentives that aren't fully aligned with the public's educational goals, others defend the system in the argument that specialized testing organizations bring nuanced technical expertise and that OECD still retain ultimate authority over what gets tested and the reporting of results.

OECD Public Open Letter

In 2014, an education researcher Heinz-Dieter Meyer and an educator Katie Zahedi organized an open letter to the OECD director of education and skills, Andreas Schleicher. The letter argued that PISA's three year testing cycle incentivizes short term fixes to improve scores rather than educational change, that the mandate created bias towards treating education as a tool for workforce preparation, and that PISA's reliance on private contractors creates conflicts of interest, since the contractors only stand to benefit from low PISA results.

The letter called for a pause in the testing cycle to allow public debate. In response, the OECD published a rebuttal, noting that PISA assesses a wider range of domains than what it's critics believe and that countries like Germany that experienced "PISA shock" used it to drive substantial reforms.

Regional Alternatives

Several regional assessment consortia were built to reflect the curricula and context of their member countries rather than an OECD standard. For example, The Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems (PASEC), Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA), and Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) all serve their regions and needs. These assessments can report against UNESCO's SDG Indicator 4.1.1 without any participation in PISA or TIMSS, and equity advocates frequently cite them as proof that logically designed and regionally governed alternatives are possible at a meaningful scale.

PISA for Development (PISA-D)

Rather than cede this space to regional alternatives, the OECD launched PISA for Development (PISA-D) in 2013 as a modified version of PISA with simpler test items and no competitive league tables to better suit low and middle income countries. The OECD declared the pilot as success in 2019 but critics argue that despite technical adjustment, it failed to address the issue of diversity versus globally standardized instruments.

Case Studies

Shanghai Controversy

When Shanghai first participated in PISA in 2009, its students ranked first in the world across all domains, even in 2012, cited as evidence of the strength of Chinese education. It also sparked a controversy over how administrative choices can distort international comparison. Shanghai's household registration system (hukou) bars many children of migrant workers from academic high schools, instead most are pushed to vocational tracks or excluded from the tested population. This restriction positively selects students from stronger family backgrounds, thus inflating the result. Critics argued that PISA officials were aware of these dynamics and continued to present Shanghai as a global model of equity and excellence without highlighting the limitations. China discontinued standalone Shanghai participation in further cycles, instead reporting provincial groupings, but the controversy still brings light to the fact that PISA's sampling safeguards may not be adequate enough to avoid bias.

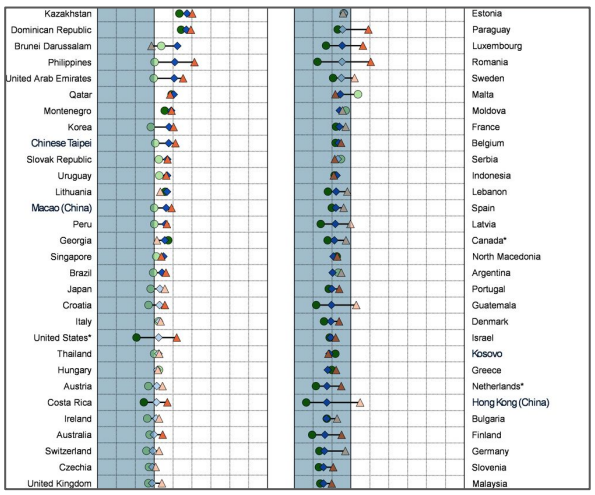


Fig. 1: 2025 PISA Test Score Distribution

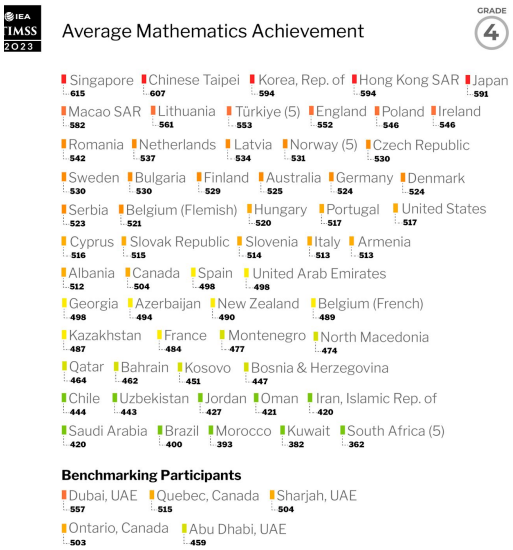


Fig. 2: TIMMS International Mathematical Achievement

Finland Counter-Model

Finland, a country consistently ranked near the top of PISA results since the assessment cycles began, managed to deliberately avoid the high stakes standardized testing culture in other high performing systems. Finnish students take no mandatory standardized tests through most of their schooling. The single significant exception is a matriculation examination at the end of upper-secondary school used for university admission. Finnish education officials and researchers attribute the country's results to investment in rigorously trained teachers, strong social welfare support that reduces poverty impact on learning, and a national culture that treats individualized, teacher-led assessment as more meaningful that standardized ranking. Finland is frequently invoked on both sides of this committee's core debate as skeptics note that Finland's small, relatively homogeneous population and substantial social investment make its specific model difficult to transplant directly into larger or less resourced education systems.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Should UNESCO prioritize strengthening regional assessment systems as genuine alternatives to global, OECD-led assessments, and if so, what kind of international support would drive that reform?
- What obligations would international assessment bodies have to disclose sampling limitations and structural exclusions before publishing rankings that might carry political weight?
- Are there any mechanisms of international review that can be applied to high-income countries that may compel them to aid in dismantling systemic racial and geographic barriers that drive maternal mortality within marginalized populations?
- What innovative, self-sustaining funding models, whether health levies, regional funds etc., could the UN propose to ensure consistent and uninterrupted supply of high-impact, low-cost essential medicines (oxytocin and magnesium sulfate) in low-resource areas?

CONCLUSION

The governance of international assessments sits in a strange limbo relative to other committee concerns. In this issue, the instruments already exist and shape national policy at a large scale and will not go away regardless of this committees decision. The question is not whether to measure learning across countries, but whether the current method of doing so has earned its current influence, and if not, what should take its place or work alongside it.

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