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Governing Adult Learning Through Influencing Public Debate

How the Media Use PIAAC Data in Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom

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Governing Adult Learning Through Influencing Public Debate: How the Media Use PIAAC Data in Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom

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Introduction

This chapter examines the visibility of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC), and the use of PIAAC data, in widely read newspapers in Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom. Data generated through PIAAC, and its ‘implicit’ benchmarking of Level 3 in adults’ performances, support European standard setting in adult learning, and when national governments ask international

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organisations to do ‘objective’ evaluations, the latter enhance their power. The media contribute to knowledge production, and this is one way they might exert influence. How PIAAC data is used by different newspapers varies between countries but also according to the role each newspaper plays within national debates.

The role, meanings and place of adult learning are strongly connected to a number of global trends, such as the evolution of global political agendas, discourses and governance mechanisms that expand beyond or operate across national boundaries (e.g. the Sustainable Development Goals) and the development of regional political agendas (e.g. Europe 2020), and governance architectures (e.g. the European Semester). Research on the role of European governance in adult learning, carried out by the Enliven team, therefore examined how governance mechanisms employed by the institutions of the European Union (EU) influence policies to regulate lifelong learning and approaches to intervening in lifelong learning markets at both European and national levels (Milana & Klatt, 2019; Milana et al., 2020). These analyses have shown how (hard and soft) mechanisms, combined with wealth redistribution within the EU, can influence policies at both regional and national levels. In doing so, they pointed to standard setting as a core (soft) governance mechanism and to benchmarks and data generation as two key instruments that contribute to its working.

Against this backdrop, this chapter centres attention on the ‘implicit’ benchmarking in adults’ skills, endorsed through the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC), and the data it produces. It does so by examining the use of PIAAC data in the highest circulating national newspapers in three European countries: Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom, and to what extent this contributes to the public debate informing national policy in these countries.

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Like all media, national newspapers actively contribute to the production of knowledge. They receive and collect information from many sources, synthesise and structure it, and communicate it to audiences. In this process, the media prioritise certain topics and approaches, drawing on ideological and commercial stances. Thus, the media produce and circulate knowledge in different policy fields and can be assumed to influence both the public and decision-makers.

In the Enliven project, we assumed that people's agency is not determined, but is nevertheless influenced by social structures and environments. (See Chap. 2 above for a discussion of *bounded agency*.) We further assumed that knowledge produced and circulated by media supports the formation of social structures and environments that may, at a national level, influence adults' attitudes towards, and possibilities for, learning.

For example, in examining what contributed to a growing political concern about adult literacy in Canada (1980s–2010s), Walker and Rubenson (2014) pointed at national newspapers as central in shaping both governmental and public perceptions. This led to the creation of the International Assessment of Literacy Skills, thereby reinforcing the links between the development of governmental policies and the measurement of adult skills. More recently, PIAAC and how its results are popularised through different media have attracted scholarly attention (Cort & Larson, 2015; Hamilton, 2017, 2018; Yasukawa et al., 2017). Albeit focusing on newspapers, this chapter contributes to this strand of research, encompassing a longer time span than previous studies on the influence of PIAAC.¹

In the next section, we present the framework of this study, explaining our approach to governance, and our understanding of standard setting in European adult learning. This section also touches upon the use of social indicators and benchmarks for monitoring EU progress and clarifies our focus on PIAAC data. We argue that the data generated through PIAAC, and PIAAC's 'implicit' benchmarking of Level 3 in

¹This chapter draws on a larger study which also covered Estonia and Slovakia; see Milana and Varella (2019).

adults' performances, contribute to standard setting in adult learning within the EU.² In subsequent sections, we illustrate the design of our empirical study, and present and discuss the results.

Governance, Standard Setting and Benchmarking in Adult Learning

Drawing on literature on governance (e.g. Ozga et al., 2011; Lawn, 2011; Martens & Jakobi, 2010; Dale, 1999; Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007; Woodward, 2009), we conceptualise a governance mechanism as a policy process aimed at reaching specific policy objective(s), which are then naturalised, and their effects achieved, by means of specific instruments. Standard setting is one such mechanism, engaging the EU institutions, together with member states, around common policy goals and targets to be pursued at a community level.

We understand standard setting as the process involved in the very establishment of common rules, which entails two corresponding phenomena: (1) a value-laden process that sanctions some actions as good, desirable, or permissible, the results of which are codified in the texts; and (2) a reconciling process that allows for reaching an agreement on common policy goals—which are then translated into benchmarks.

Benchmarks, and the process of benchmarking, are instrumental to standard setting, as they translate policy goals into accepted standards

² Level 3 of proficiency in the three competence domains assessed through the PIAAC Survey is defined as follows:

- Literacy: 'Texts at this level are often dense or lengthy. Understanding text and rhetorical structures is often required, as is navigating complex digital texts.'
- Numeracy: 'Tasks at this level require the application of number sense and spatial sense; recognising and working with mathematical relationships, patterns, and proportions expressed in verbal or numerical form; and interpreting data and statistics in texts, tables and graphs.'
- Problem solving in technology-rich environments: 'At this level, tasks typically require the use of both generic and more specific technology applications. Some navigation across pages and applications is required to solve the problem. The task may involve multiple steps and operators. The goal of the problem may have to be defined by the respondent, and the criteria to be met may or may not be explicit. Integration and inferential reasoning may be needed to a large extent.' (OECD, n.d., pp. 3–4).

used to evaluate the approximation of a country's performance towards these goals. Likewise, data generation (and the generation of computable data particularly) is also instrumental in standard setting, as it helps in the design of indicators and their linking to policy and related benchmarks.

In the EU, indicators and benchmarks represent a cornerstone in education and training policy and are essential for national implementation of community policies (European Commission, 2004). Yet, by comparing the European benchmarks developed to monitor progress under the 2010 and 2020 Education and Training work programmes, we note that while several areas in which progress is monitored through dedicated benchmarks have changed over time, others have remained substantially unchanged, with only minor adjustments. That is the case for the only explicit benchmark on adult learning monitored under the Education and Training work programmes: namely, the percentage of adults engaged in lifelong learning. However, in 2018, the European Commission introduced a new framework for consolidating benchmarks and monitoring adult skills and learning policies across the EU under the European Semester.

All processes leading to the benchmarks mentioned have been *explicit* (i.e. deliberate and systematic). However, parallel to these processes, in relation to adult learning an *implicit* benchmarking has also occurred (i.e. as a by-product of data generation) (Jackson, 2001). We claim that an implicit benchmarking on adult skills has occurred since the late 1990s and the first launch of International Assessment of Literacy Skills, and has been reinforced through PIAAC and the increased interest of the OECD in data on adult learning.

Run under the auspices of the OECD and based on agreements with national governments, the PIAAC Survey has been carried out at the time of writing in three rounds (2011–2012; 2014–2015; 2017–2018) in a total of 38 countries around the world, including most EU countries, as well as countries from the Americas, Asia, Australasia, and the Russian Federation. The Survey builds on the experience the OECD gained in the late 1990s and early 2000s in cooperation with Statistics Canada, while carrying out International Assessment of Literacy Skills, and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL), and later the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) every three years.

International Assessment of Literacy Skills, an international taxonomy of adult literacy, identified five levels of proficiency. Its middle level (Level 3) has since come to be considered internationally the minimum desirable standard in adult literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments. Level 3 has thus become an *implicit* benchmark for assessing, in terms of policy outputs, performances in adults' skills (Hamilton et al., 2015). Similarly, it has become—through various forms of collaboration among the EU institutions, its member states and the OECD—an implicit benchmark for evaluating EU policy and member states' performance.

As Milana (2017) noted, when the European Commission recommended an explicit benchmark on adult learning under Education and Training 2010, there were several European surveys producing data on adults' *participation* in formal, non-formal and informal education, but none on adults' *performances*. After considering whether to develop a new EU survey or to use the one under preparation by the OECD (European Commission, 2007), the EU and OECD finally agreed 'to work closer together in three areas: skills strategies, country analyses and international surveys' (European Commission, 2013). Consequently, Eurostat entered into cooperation with the OECD, and member states and their national statistics agencies were given permission to use resources from the Structural Funds to join the PIAAC Survey and gather the required data at national level.

In this way, both the data generated through PIAAC and its 'implicit' benchmarking of Level 3 in adults' performances supported EU standard-setting in adult learning. Further, when national governments hand over the task of undertaking 'objective' evaluations, as with the PIAAC, to international organisations, these strengthen their power position (Grek, 2009; Martens & Niemann, 2010). Such calculative practices may affect the capacities and connections between different actors, and generate new ways for different actors to influence governmental action (Miller, 2001). Active contribution to knowledge production by the media is one way in which such influence may occur. It is for this reason that we examine the use of PIAAC data in the highest circulating national newspapers in three selected countries.

Study Design and Methodology

Our study draws on the literature on qualitative approaches to media content analysis (e.g. Macnamara, 2005; Martins et al., 2013; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Krippendorff, 2018), and particularly those employed to analyse newspaper content in multi-year studies (Lacy et al., 2001).

We selected Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom as they represent Northern and Southern European countries, which score differently in the PIAAC Survey. The OECD average scores are 268 for literacy, 263 for numeracy and 31 for problem-solving by use of information and technology. Denmark is well above the OECD average in literacy (271), numeracy (278) and problem-solving skills (39). By contrast, Italy is below the OECD mean scores in both literacy (250) and numeracy (247). Finally, the United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland) has a mean score similar to the OECD average in numeracy (262), but higher scores in literacy (273) and problem-solving skills (35).

Dataset

In each country, our data consists of articles, editorials and opinion pieces, identified and collected by means of a shared protocol. First, in each country, we considered the highest circulating newspapers, as well as newspapers with different political, ideological and/or cultural orientations. Then, online archives were searched (Infomedia in Denmark; newspapers' internal databases in Italy; Infotrac newsstand, Gale group, ProQuest, Pressreader in the United Kingdom), for articles published from 2012 to 2019 (July). We used a number of search words that were common across countries (but translated into local languages): PIAAC, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies; Survey of adult skills; and additional key words considered of country-relevance.

Overall, our searches yielded a total of 88 texts (articles, editorials and opinion pieces) of which 83 were considered for the analysis presented in this chapter (Table 8.1).

Table 8.1 Number of texts analysed, by country, newspaper and political orientation

Country	Newspaper	Political orientation	No. of texts
<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Berlingske</i>	Liberal-conservative	5
	<i>Jyllands-Posten</i>	Liberal-conservative	10
	<i>Politiken</i>	Centre-left	7
	<i>Total</i>		22
<i>Italy</i>	<i>La Repubblica</i>	Centre-left	9
	<i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i>	Liberal	8
	<i>Il Giornale</i>	Right-wing	6
	<i>Total</i>		33
<i>United Kingdom</i>	<i>The Daily Mail</i>	Conservative	9
	<i>The Financial Times</i>	Liberal	6
	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	Conservative	6
	<i>The Guardian</i>	Centre-left	7
	<i>Total</i>		28
<i>Total number of articles</i>			83

Source: Our adaptation from ADS; Federal Agency for Civic Education (www.eurotopics.net); Financial Times (2018); Smith (2019); and Statista (2019)

Data Analysis

In each country, the articles were synthesised in a grid composed of two sections: (1) descriptive information (e.g. the newspaper title and orientation, type of article, date of publication) and whether PIAAC was the main topic or scope of the article; and (2) analytical notes on graphical displays, reliability and credibility, as well as explicit or implicit references to politicians, policy priorities, reforms and the language used and meaning conveyed. In order to ensure accuracy, parsimony and flexibility (Miles & Huberman, 1985), for each country, both descriptive and analytical information were then synthesised through a matrix consisting of ‘cases’ (e.g. the articles), presented in the rows and ‘variables’ (i.e. information about each article) in columns. This enabled a clearer picture of the function each article assigned to PIAAC; the possible presence of implied information and causal relationships; how adult learning was represented, and through which rhetorical figures and/or line of argument this was done. On this basis, we looked for hints of the potential

function played within national debates by each newspaper in promoting specific views of education and learning through the use of PIAAC data.

Though there are different kinds of texts in the newspapers, all content is filtered in some way by the editors, so the content as a whole more or less conforms to the policy or 'platform' of the newspaper. In our analysis, we see texts mainly as representing the different newspapers' platforms, but, in some instances, we also take account of different sources or authors.

In the following section, we present the results of our analysis.

The Use of PIAAC Data in the Highest Circulating National Newspapers

Denmark

Our study of the Danish press included six national newspapers. Of the 27 articles found, 22 were published in three of these, and we restricted our attention to these: *Berlingske* (liberal-conservative, 5), *Jyllands-Posten* (liberal-conservative, 10) and *Politiken* (centre-left, 7).

The first Danish PIAAC results were published in October 2013, and all three newspapers published news on this. Most of the news coverage drew on the press release on the PIAAC results brought out by the government. The press release summarised that Danish adults had fairly good competencies in maths and medium-level competencies in information and technology, but scored below average in reading. This last fact, along with the statement in the brief report summarising the Danish results that 'one out of six Danes aged 16–65 years have bad reading skills' (SFI, 2013, p. 4), inspired most of the news coverage. Examples of headlines are:

- *One in six Danes is a bad reader* (*Berlingske*, 9 October, 2013)
- *Danish youngsters have become worse at reading* (*Jyllands-Posten*, 10 October, 2013)
- *Tuesday Analysis: Adults' reading skills get worse* (*Politiken*, 5 November, 2013)

The texts in *Berlingske* predominantly concentrated on policy related to school-level education and teaching standards in primary and lower secondary school. It emphasised the reading difficulties of many Danes, including older adults, unemployed people and immigrants, and quoted the Director of the Danish Association of Employers, who accused the government of having failed to establish an education system at top international level. The newspaper also suggested building a taskforce to improve participation in education and provided advice on changes to the quality control of teachers to ensure raising teaching standards. Further, *Berlingske* published an opinion piece by two researchers, with a careful discussion of the OECD dataset and its methodology, recognising the importance of the Danish social context and pointing to the existing national statistical data that might be more reliable (*Berlingske*, 22 December 2013).

In the early coverage following the publication of the Danish PIAAC results, *Jyllands-Posten* restricted attention to the literacy competences among young Danes and linked this question to the (then) on-going reform of primary and lower secondary schooling, which among other measures increased the number of teaching hours in Danish and maths. All in all, the article supported the idea that *Danish youngsters have become worse at reading*. However, the PIAAC results were reported in a relatively sophisticated way, using a variety of experts to analyse and comment and providing alternative explanations to the apparent decline in adult competences—as this quotation suggests:

It was much easier to be a good reader then, 15 years ago. Today you need not only to read a newspaper, but also to keep up to date with other kinds of texts, such as electronic media, and that means a much higher degree of complexity. (*Jyllands-Posten*, 10 Oct 2013, own translation)

In the early news coverage and discussion, both *Berlingske* and *Jyllands-Posten* may be seen as supporting the policy perspective signalled by PIAAC and its framing by the Danish Ministry of Education. Both papers confirmed that the skills (especially in reading) of Danish adults represented a problem, emphasised the business and competitiveness

aspects of the problem, and discussed the PIAAC results in relatively sophisticated ways, drawing on different stakeholders, experts and data.

After the initial coverage and discussion following the publication of PIAAC results in 2013, newspaper texts on the topic generally became sparse. However, in *Jyllands-Posten* PIAAC resurfaced some years later largely in connection with debates on the information and technology skill levels of Danes. During 2017, the newspaper published five texts drawing in one way or another on PIAAC results. The first was a feature article by a journalist, the rest were opinion pieces written by experts and stakeholders. Some of the headlines provide examples of how the discussion framed the problems of the Danish skill levels in a critical way, mainly from a business and competitiveness perspective:

- *The basic information and technology skills of the Danes are overrated* (20 June 2017)
- *We need an alliance for better information and technology, numeracy and literacy skills* (27 May 2017)
- *600,000 adults with weak reading skills is a burning issue* (27 August 2017)

Jyllands-Posten stands out for the way it used existing and new research and presented contributions from experts, such as the Director of the Danish Evaluation Institute, an authoritative public research and consultancy agency, who authored two of the texts whose headlines are quoted above.

Unlike *Berlingske*, or the early coverage in *Jyllands-Posten*, *Politiken* paid greater attention to adult education and workers' skills than to school-level policies. It took a kind of progressive role that, at the start of the reporting period under consideration, discussed education issues as a matter of social equality. Paying attention to the competencies of low-educated employees and migrant workers, it consolidated its progressive message. To support its approach, *Politiken* used references to the studies from the Danish metalworker's union, on employees' competences, social security schemes and wage levels, to defend workers and workplaces, and the need for an adult education support system.

In *Politiken's* later coverage, the focus on workers' skills continued, but it was related to technological change in the workplace through artificial intelligence and high-technology robots. An article published on 20 May 2017 (*The public school must act as a bulwark in the struggle against the robots*), based on an interview with a representative of the Danish unskilled workers' trade union, argued that in order to 'make sure that employees in the Danish labour market will not drown in the wave of artificial intelligence and high technology robots', both the public school system and the system of adult and continuing education needed to cope with the situation. The following spring, *Politiken* published another article written by the Director of the Danish Evaluation Institute, entitled: 'Formulate objectives for digital competences' (11 May 2018). This coincided with the focus on digital skills in *Jyllands-Posten*.

In general, what needs to be emphasised is the role that experts and researchers played in the newspaper coverage of PIAAC in Denmark. Almost half of the articles under consideration (13) were written by stakeholders and experts from outside the media. The most prominent of these was the Danish Evaluation Institute. Moreover, apart from a single article written by two researchers, the Danish newspapers accepted the PIAAC results as authoritative, while not always mentioning OECD as the source.

Italy

PIAAC acquired relevance in the Italian press in 2013 following the release of its first results (8 out of 18 articles found were published in 2013), and it became a national matter to which all newspapers under consideration paid some attention until 2019 (July).

However, the newspapers studied show considerable differences in the knowledge that they disseminated and produced over time. The year 2013 represents both the time when PIAAC data were published and the period when *La Repubblica* (centre-left), which dominated the communication scene at that time (with 5 articles out of 7 collected), started politicising PIAAC from a neoliberal perspective. This was a position

this newspaper consolidated over the following years through the idea that there is a need to reform the labour market system and its entry-rules on the basis of the productivity of human capital. This view was based on the assumption that a direct and linear causal relationship exists between individual learning outcomes and national economic advancement. It also had an impact on the political discourse and related policy solutions.

The relationship between education outcomes and economic factors was emphasised with specific rhetorical strategies, such as the use of metaphors. For example, *La Repubblica* (9 Oct 2013) compared the country to a laggard in order to emphasise the low scores in literacy and numeracy in Italy, which implied it was last in the ‘race’ and at risk of an irretrievable loss of human capital resources. While *La Repubblica* was the most active during 2013, it stopped reporting on PIAAC for the next two years, when *Il Sole 24 Ore* (liberal) became more active.

Although in 2014 *Il Sole 24 Ore* ‘took over’ the reporting on the PIAAC subject, its linking of educational attainment and market labour demand was not dissimilar from *La Repubblica*. Although the ideological assumptions did not change, *Il Sole 24 Ore* pushed them further towards a neo-managerialist framing. This was primarily by focusing on the deterioration of results in education and training that (it was reported) led to a lack of skills in the labour market, an increasing mismatch between skills/education and jobs, and a negative impact on Italian productivity.

What emerged was a subtle argumentative strategy, with this newspaper resorting to the key words of ‘early school leaving’ and ‘poor basic skills’ and linking them to systemic deficiencies in the Italian educational system, seen as stemming from lack of effective school-to-work transitions and private investment in education.

Literacy and numeracy levels in Italy improve (data from both PISA and PIAAC results). However, Italy remains on the back foot in relation to high school diploma and degrees [...] According to the OECD report, both public and private expenditure on education increased by 8% between 1995 and 2008 and then decreased by 12% between 2008 and 2011. (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 9 Sept 2014 own translation)

The newspaper thereby represented a complex reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) as simple, claiming there were easy ways to improve the national reform agenda in education. In other words, the neoliberal framing, used by *La Repubblica* in 2013, was deployed in 2014 by *Il Sole 24 Ore* in an epistemic way to promote a specific approach regarding the way in which the problem was understood, addressed and solved.

Another trend visible in the reporting on PIAAC in Italy can be seen in 2015, when *Il Giornale* (right-wing) started to use PIAAC data in articles focused on promoting specific conservative ideological discourses on patriotism, nationalism and patriotic nationalism. PIAAC data, for example, was mentioned in relation to an article discussing the relationship between the use of English language by Italians and their sense of national identity. It was suggested that: *We use English words since we do not love nor know Italian*. This article, published on February 2 2015, dealt with PIAAC data only to show the syllogism according to which *The more Illiterate you are, the more you use English and the lower is your sense of national identity*. In other words, *Il Giornale* seemed mainly interested in demonstrating the idea according to which resorting to an Anglicism (especially when it is not strictly necessary) became a clear indicator of a low sense of Italian national identity, rather than being concerned about the PIAAC results themselves.

Between 2016 and 2019, PIAAC data was again discussed in *La Repubblica* and *Il Sole 24 Ore*. In this period, both newspapers tended to diversify the issues that they addressed, how they were presented, the political priorities they pursued and the rhetorical strategies to which they resorted. From 2016, *La Repubblica* no longer dealt with the PIAAC results as a central issue but rather shifted to implicitly supporting the Reform of the national education and training system (Law no. 107/2015), hence sticking to its narrative about the link between educational attainment and labour market demands (and the school-work transition).

Regardless of the differences, since 2013, all three newspapers have used PIAAC data to strengthen their respective positions and, in doing so, they have reinforced the link between education and the economy.

The United Kingdom

In the UK, most newspaper coverage of PIAAC was around 2013 (June–December), when the OECD released the first PIAAC results. Over a six-year period, half of the newspaper articles, editorials and opinion pieces (15) appeared within this short time frame (2013). At that time, *The Guardian* (centre-left) was the most active in reporting issues linked to PIAAC, publishing six articles between October and November 2013.

In general, almost half of the articles (13 out of 28) under consideration covered PIAAC as their main subject. Of those specifically addressing PIAAC over the six-year period, seven appeared in the *Daily Mail* (conservative), three in *The Guardian*, two in *The Financial Times* (liberal) and one in *The Daily Telegraph* (conservative). However, attention to PIAAC in public debate mostly responded to the first OECD press release in 2013.

The Guardian dominated around this time, publishing a total of six articles dealing with PIAAC that year. This positioned *The Guardian* strongly as a public ‘amplifier’ of the political debate. It seems that the newspaper amplified the political arguments between Conservative and Labour parties, entering debate over the economic consequences of ‘bad’ educational policy decisions. It positioned itself as non-partisan by providing a different perspective on the issue, including quotes from both Conservative and Labour Party representatives, OECD experts and business representatives. A number of letters to the *The Guardian*’s editor (11 Oct 2013) provided a further platform for the public to vent about political parties’ lack of progress in education. By providing a variety of perspectives that enabled political and public debate, *The Guardian* legitimised its reporting as independent and non-partisan. But while representing itself as an independent voice, *The Guardian* amplified messages from the government (repeated in most other newspapers)—for instance, by quoting Matthew Hancock, the Minister for Skills and Enterprise:

These are Labour’s children, educated under a Labour government and force-fed a diet of dumbing down and low expectations (*The Guardian*, 9 Oct 2013).

After 2013, *The Guardian* did not cover PIAAC for at least another four years. By contrast, the *Daily Mail* reported on the PIAAC findings only twice in 2013 but consistently returned to the subject over the following years. The *Daily Mail*, unlike *The Guardian*, positioned itself as a ‘moral judge’ on political and social issues. The PIAAC results became a sort of rhetorical strategy used as a means to emphasise the falling standards of English youth, presenting the results in a political light that predominantly made the previous Labour government responsible. Specific social issues, such as social mobility or inequality, were used as starting points, or *topoi*, to criticise past policies of the Labour Party and to support market-orientated solutions to educational and social issues. An article from 2013, ‘*Social mobility is among the worst in the developed world*’, reported on the relationship between literacy and numeracy levels and socio-economic background in England, but only one solution was presented: ‘the best way to overcome social disadvantages and improve education was to allow businesses to have a say in what is taught in schools’. From 2016, university degrees and students became the target. Interestingly, the OECD, which was described as a ‘think tank’, was used as a partner in the shaming:

- *The OECD, which published its report yesterday, also blamed the huge surge in numbers going to university* (29 Jan 2016)
- *The OECD said institutions must (...) stop admitting students who are substandard* (29 Jan 2016)

The economic value and the ‘value-for-money’ arguments were the only justification used in ‘judging’ university degrees by *The Daily Mail*. This newspaper also promoted industry placements as an alternative to university education. The moral blaming and judging were clearly visible in the language used in several articles:

- *Shame of 500,000 ‘NEETs’ who don’t even want to work* (27 May 2015)
- *Too many universities were getting bums on seats* (12 Sept 2018)
- *‘Worthless’ degrees* (12 Sept 2018)
- *Some ‘Mickey Mouse’ degree courses* (12 Sept 2018)

Unsurprisingly, *The Financial Times*' reporting was dominated by an economic framing. The PIAAC results undermined 'the UK's "self-image" of progressive and productive knowledge economy' (11 Oct 2013). The paper alerted readers that low literacy and numeracy skills threatened Britain's future prosperity and so 'skill development' was seen as the primary concern of school education. Education was portrayed as a commodity needed to support industry and economic development. *The Financial Times* emphasised the educational role of business and called for UK companies to start investing in developing their own talent (6 Nov 2013), almost delegitimising the role of schools and teachers.

Finally, *The Daily Telegraph*, which mentioned PIAAC in several articles between 2013 and 2015, used PIAAC instrumentally to support the specific political agenda of the day: to criticise Labour policies (9 Oct 2013), welfare policy (6 Dec 2013), economic policy (29 Jan 2014) and immigration policy (26 Feb 2015).

It is worth mentioning that all newspapers considered consistently referred to the expertise of the OECD representative, Andreas Schleicher, who was extensively quoted in ten articles. He was introduced as 'OECD's own education chief' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2 Dec 2013) and 'OECD's special advisor on education' (*The Guardian*, 9 Oct 2013). *The Financial Times* (4 June 2013) published an article by Schleicher, which focused on the importance of skills for competitive economies, and provided advice on what skills should be taught at schools and how to motivate disengaged youth. *The Guardian* (26 Nov 2013) published a profile of Schleicher, presenting him as a 'human face' of the OECD, the 'world's schoolmaster' and a man who 'invented and still runs the [PISA] Programme'. While a variety of experts was consulted and quoted by education editors, Schleicher was positioned as an international guru on skills and schooling in all newspapers under consideration.

Finally, in reporting on England's PIAAC performance, the British press accepted the OECD results as authoritative, using both the data and the expertise of the OECD representative as unquestionable truths. At the peak of reporting, the main information was provided in the news sections by education and society editors.

Concluding Remarks

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the media actively contribute to the production of knowledge, driven by different ideological and commercial stances. In contributing to public debates and the production of knowledge, during the years 2013–2019 the highest circulating newspapers in Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom made use of PIAAC data in different ways, adjusted to each country's socio-economic and political context.

Specifically, in Denmark, PIAAC data were used to focus attention on a decline in adult competences and the importance of information and technology skills, mainly from a business and competitiveness perspective, as well as on a need for reforms to primary and secondary education. In Italy, PIAAC data were used to focus attention on school-to-work transitions and the needs of the labour market. By comparison, in the United Kingdom PIAAC data were often used to point at the failures of the formal education system and its impact on the future labour force, including critiques of the Labour Party and its policy choices.

National differences are also evident in who contributes to knowledge production in the newspapers under consideration: in Denmark, researchers and experts were prominent; in Italy, it was mostly journalists; and in the United Kingdom, journalists and specialists, though they relied for the most part on the expertise and authority of the OECD.

Moreover, in each country, there are hints of different functions that each newspaper played within the public, national debate in relation to PIAAC. These functions are less distinctive in Denmark but rather differentiated in Italy and the United Kingdom (Table 8.2).

Specifically, in Denmark both *Berlingske* and *Jyllands-Posten* emphasised the business and competitiveness implications of the PIAAC results, supporting the economy's need for skills. By contrast, *Politiken* took a more progressive position and appeared to focus more on the workers' needs for skills. However, it also paid attention to low-educated employees and migrant workers and discussed education issues as a matter of social equality.

Table 8.2 The function of newspapers regarding the view of education they promote by country and newspaper

Country	Newspaper	Function
Denmark	<i>Berlingske</i>	Supporting the economy's need for skills
	<i>Jyllands-Posten</i>	Supporting the economy's need for skills; mediating policy debate
Italy	<i>Politiken</i>	Supporting workers' need for skills
	<i>La Repubblica</i>	Supporting the economy's effectiveness of education and labour market reforms
	<i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i>	Supporting the economy's need for skills through the privatisation of education
United Kingdom	<i>Il Giornale</i>	Pursuing nationalist agenda
	<i>The Guardian</i>	Amplifier of political debate
	<i>The Daily Mail</i>	Blaming policy reforms of education and supporting market-oriented solutions
	<i>The Financial Times</i>	Supporting the educational role of business
	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	Supporting political agendas of the day

In Italy, *La Repubblica* made use of PIAAC data to highlight the economy's dependency on education and labour market reforms, based on a neoliberal view of education. *Il Sole 24 Ore* used PIAAC data to suggest the need for increasing private investment in education. In doing so, it promoted a specific view of education as an instrument for economic productivity. *Il Giornale* took an 'ideological' role, promoting specific conservative discourses on patriotism, nationalism and patriotic nationalism.

Finally, in the United Kingdom, *The Guardian* acted as a non-partisan 'amplifier' of the political struggle between Conservative and Labour parties on the economic consequences of policy decisions in education. By contrast, *The Daily Mail* undertook a judgemental attitude with regard to political and, especially, social issues like social mobility and inequality, while offering support for market-orientated solutions to both educational and social issues. *The Financial Times* stressed the needs of business, promoting a view of education as a commodity needed to support industry and economic development. *The Daily Telegraph* used PIAAC data selectively for different instrumental purposes, depending on the political agenda.

The Enliven project examined the intersectionality between micro-, meso- and macro-level factors that shape young adults' situations of vulnerability (see Chap. 1). Among macro-level factors is public opinion around topics of concern at country level, for both politicians and stakeholders. Our study shows that newspapers have mediated information about PIAAC and its results in different ways in three of the participating countries. Even in today's complex public sphere, with many types of electronic media, newspapers remain a key element of the public sphere, and are often taken as indicators of public opinion by politicians and stakeholders. Hence, representations in national newspapers contribute to shaping the policy implications of PIAAC.

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