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Generating and managing legitimacy: how the OECD established its role in monitoring Sustainable Development Goal 4

Li Xiaomin[a] and Paul Morris[b]

[a] *Institute of International and Comparative Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China*

[b] *Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK*

Correspondence details:

Li Xiaomin

Address: No.19 Xin Jiekou Wai Street, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China 100875

Email : lixiaomin@bnu.edu.cn

This paper identifies and analyses the legitimation strategies used by the OECD as it expanded its role in global educational governance. Whilst the literature recognises the mainly discursive sources of legitimacy which the OECD derives from its testing regime, especially PISA, what remains unexplored is how exactly it has created the legitimacy to monitor SDG 4 – an arena where it has not been previously involved. Drawing on Suchman's framework for analysing organisational legitimacy, we identify six strategies. We show how these: were used to promote the OECD's pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy; progressed over time from low-key passive conformity to active manipulation; and, operated on both an episodic and a continual basis.

Keywords: global educational governance; assessment Empire; PISA for development; organisational legitimacy; legitimation strategies

Introduction: from PISA to PISA-D to a global learning metric

The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has been essential in bringing about the 'globalisation of education policy spaces' (Hogberg and Lindgren 2021) and placed the organisation at the heart of what Ydesen (2019) terms the 'global governing complex' . PISA's purpose is to measure and compare the quality of education systems and identify transferrable 'best practices' (Schleicher 2009). An extensive literature has described the varied influence of PISA on educational policy (e.g., Maroy and Pons 2021) and in promoting outcomes-based accountability systems. These have been portaryed as central to the rise of 'New public management' (NPM) reforms associated with neoliberalism which has promoted the practices of the private sector into the education sector (Hogan et al. 2021).

PISA has been conducted every three years since 2000, in reading, mathematics, and science. It is a standardised test designed to measure the skills required by 15-year-olds entering the workforce. The OECD has since extended its testing empire to include more populations and concepts. These now include tests for pre-school children (IELS, 2018), university students (AHELO, 2012), teachers (TALIS, 2008), adults (PIAAC, 2013), and, tests of 'innovative domains' such as global citizenship and creativity (Grey and Morris 2022). In 2013 the OECD signalled (Schleicher 2013) their intention to make PISA a universal metric by including more low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and that the PISA for Development (PISA-D) project was the means to achieve this.

PISA-D was a one-off pilot project completed in 2018 designed to modify PISA to make it more relevant to the needs of LMICs; nine countries participated including Buhtan (2017), Cambodia (2016), Ecuador (2014), Guatemala (2015), Honduras (2016), Panama (2016), Paraguay (2015), Senegal (2015), and Zambia (2014). In parallel,

UNESCO was formulating a new global education agenda which emerged in 2015 as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 that identified minimum standards of quality to be delivered by 2030. If PISA-D was successful, the OECD would extend its role in global educational governance beyond its traditional focus on more affluent nations by positioning itself to monitor SDG 4 (Addey 2017; Li and Auld 2020).

Whilst existing research recognises the OECD's influence and strategic alignment of its activities with the SDGs, what remains unexplored is how exactly this was done. The question we address is, how has the OECD legitimated its role in monitoring SDG 4 and to what extent has it done so? As Addey (2017, 11) observes, 'this enigma is one of the many unknown stories that occur in policymaking and global education agenda setting – a dimension that would greatly benefit from further empirical research'. This paper sheds light on that enigma drawing on scholarship which analyses the sources of authority of international organisations (IOs) and the legitimation strategies used by organisations. We identify the shifting repertoire of legitimation strategies the OECD has deployed to establish a new role for itself.

In what follows, we situate our paper within the significant body of critical scholarship which is concerned with understanding how the OECD has managed to gain acceptance of its role, primarily in more affluent nations, despite it possessing neither a legislative mandate nor financial power in the field of education.

The OECD's sources of legitimacy: a holistic approach

Sorensen et al. (2021) broadly frame the OECD's legitimacy as deriving from its contribution to progress, economic growth and modernisation which involves a combination of the two classic sources (Scharpf 1997) of political legitimacy; namely input (procedures) and output (results). Beckert (2020) identifies a third source which he terms 'promissory legitimacy'; deriving from the credibility of promises with regard

to future outcomes that leaders make when justifying decisions. That is pertinent as the OECD relies heavily on promissory narratives that portray the organisation as delivering processes and products that resolve crises, promote economic growth eventually leading us to an idealised vision of the future.

We take our entry point from studies of organisational legitimacy where legitimacy describes multiple and interacting sources not just within the organisation but also fed by the organisation's external environment. Suchman's (1995) seminal work on organisational legitimacy provides the framework for understanding this. According to Suchman, early analyses of organisations portrayed them as closed, rational systems and their legitimacy as deriving from what they accomplish; this changed from the 1960s towards seeing organisations as more open agencies which operate both internally and externally through moral and symbolic forms (such as cultural norms, symbols, beliefs, and rituals). This shift has resulted in a broader focus on legitimacy which positions it as central to the normative and cognitive forces that constrain, construct, and empower organisational actors.

Despite its centrality, Suchman (1995) observed that many studies of organisational legitimacy were divided into two distinct groups, the strategic, which highlights the agency of organisational actors (e.g., Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Ashforth and Gibbs 1990); and the institutional, which stresses the broader contextual and environmental constraints (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1991). Suchman (1995, 574) integrated these two traditions and defined legitimacy as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions'. This definition positions legitimacy as dependent on a history of events and

a collective audience who construct it (inter-)subjectively. The latter aspect recognises that organisational actors manoeuvrer strategically within their cultural environments.

Building on this definition, Suchman identifies three main types of legitimacy – pragmatic, moral, and cognitive – and suggests that they co-exist in most real-world settings to create organisational legitimacy. *Pragmatic legitimacy* rests on a self-interested evaluation of an organisation's audience. It involves judgements about whether the organisation provides favourable exchanges or responds to their larger interests. In the context of this paper, pragmatic legitimacy arises when countries perceive participation in PISA as beneficial or when the OECD is seen as responsive to their substantive needs. *Moral legitimacy* reflects a positive normative evaluation of an organisation and its activities. It rests on judgements about whether the organisation is morally doing right (e.g., promoting societal welfare) or whether it is 'right for the job'; aligning PISA with the SDGs and advertising its technical competence help to promote the OECD's moral legitimacy. This form of legitimacy also includes official or mandated power which derives from the longstanding designation of certain actors as worthy of exercising certain types of power. *Cognitive legitimacy* shifts the focus from evaluation to cognition. It derives from the availability of cultural models that provide plausible explanations for the organisation and its endeavours. Globalisation, 'best practices', and evidence-based policymaking are examples of such models supporting the OECD's work on PISA.

Following Suchman, we argue that the existing literature on the OECD's legitimacy is informed by multiple threads of theory (see Sorensen et al. 2021 for a review), but these identify singular sources and are not synthesised in a way that creates a coherent foundation. For example, its legitimacy has been described as deriving from: 'the power of numbers' (Martens 2007; Grek 2009); its 'bureaucratic character'

(Sharman 2012); its role as policy ‘knowledge brokers’ (Bloem 2015; Niemann and Martens 2018); the use of ‘media’ (Hamilton 2017; Grey and Morris 2018); ‘the promise of future’ (Berten and Kranke 2019; Robertson 2020); ‘the authority of science’ (Zapp 2020); and, the use of ‘strategic narratives’ (Auld and Morris 2021).While plausible, these portrayals have tended to focus on a limited aspect of legitimacy and are based on the OECD’s long established legitimacy amongst more affluent nations. Consequently, the complexity of creating legitimacy within a new arena and the diverse arsenal of strategies employed has been obscured, as Suchman (1995, 586) noted: ‘skillful legitimacy management requires a diverse arsenal of techniques and a discriminating awareness of which situations merit which responses’.

In applying Suchman’s framework to understand how the OECD managed to gain acceptance of its role as the monitor of SDG 4, we therefore sought to move away from singular explanations (e.g., promissory legitimacy) to an analysis of the complex and interactive sources (i.e., pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy) which derive both from the actions, features and processes of the OECD as they relate to PISA and from the environmental conditions. For the latter dimension, Edwards et al.’s (2018) specification of legitimacy as having three key components – socio-political acceptability, reputation, and status – is also helpful for understanding the legitimacy dynamics between the OECD and the more established actors in the field.

Creating legitimacy in a new arena

Three aspects of the OECD’s history meant it had to overcome major barriers to become a legitimate monitor of SDG 4. *Firstly*, it had no history of involvement in monitoring the previous education agenda – the Education for All (EFA) – from the early 2000s when PISA was in its infancy. Barnett and Finnemore (2004) posit that IOs enjoy rational-legal authority, but the delegation of function is central to conferring

authority and legitimacy on an IO to act in certain domains. As UNESCO and UNICEF are the officially recognised custodian agencies for framing and monitoring SDG 4, the OECD is not in the same position and as a new entrant it had to promote its social-political acceptability in order to gain moral legitimacy.

Secondly, the OECD's ideology has, along with that of the World Bank, been portrayed (e.g., Henry et al. 2001) as strongly associated with neo-liberalism, in contrast to the more humanitarian orientations of UNESCO and UNICEF which had framed the global agenda with regard to developing nations (Jones and Coleman 2005). This poses a challenge to the OECD's task of 'convincing preexisting legitimate entities to lend support' (Suchman 1995, 587). The clash of ideologies between the OECD and UNESCO over PISA-D was evident in Cambodia (Auld et al. 2019) where UNESCO staff viewed its benefits as minimal and believed participation would divert resources from more important priorities.

Thirdly, few LMICs joined PISA from its inception indicating the OECD's very limited pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy. There is an extensive literature which highlights the significant challenges that LMICs face in engaging with cross-national testing (Lockheed et al. 2015; Kaess 2018; Rutkowski and Rutkowski 2021). India withdrew in 2009 after performing poorly and claimed that PISA had not been sufficiently 'contextualised' (Edwards 2019). Kyrgyzstan was the only low-income country in PISA in 2006 and 2009, was ranked last and withdrew in 2012.

These barriers indicate that the OECD faced significant challenges to gain acceptance of its role as the monitor of SDG 4. It would need to employ multiple strategies to address them at the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive levels. In line with Suchman (1995), legitimacy-building strategies fell broadly into three clusters: (a) efforts to conform to existing environments, (b) efforts to select among multiple

environments, and (c) efforts to manipulate the environmental structure. All of these involved a complex mixture of internal organisational change and persuasive external communication. In addition, Suchman introduces the 'temporal texture' of legitimation, separating dynamics that operate on an episodic or transitory basis from those that are continual and long lasting. This distinction is essential in that it helps us to see which of the OECD strategies are interjected in the short term whereas of those are sustained.

Our analysis was primarily based on document analysis, supplemented by interviews with key officials. We selected 11 documents which (a) focus on the OECD's intention to align PISA with the SDGs and (b) seek to promote PISA into LMICs (i.e., PISA-D). These included 2 presentations given by senior officials, 2 strategy papers, 4 project documents, 2 blogs (one published by the OECD and the other by UNESCO), and a speech by Michael Ward, the Project Manager. We also analysed the activities (e.g., meetings and workshops) carried out in the period 2013–2019 and documented on the OECD/PISA-D webpage. Moreover, we interviewed two key officials to understand to what extent they had been involved in setting the education agenda and encouraging LMICs to participate in PISA-D.

The specific strategies we identified were: (1) *building affiliations*; (2) *shaping and (re)framing SDG 4*; (3) *establishing credibility*; (4) *creating demand*; (5) *membership and belonging*; and (6) *persuasion in motion*. Table 1 summarises their key features and, whilst overlapping, they were broadly employed in the order shown. The order also shows how they progressed over time from compliance with the prevailing conditions to active manipulation of the environment. Further, the audience for the initial strategies were primarily the mandated organisations as the OECD sought to join them whilst the audience for the later strategies were primarily the LMICs as they were encouraged to join PISA-D. Relatedly, strategies such as building affiliations tended to

operate on an episodic basis whilst strategies such as establishing credibility and collective identity were continual and aimed at the more lasting form of cognitive support.

1. Building affiliations

According to Suchman (1995, 588), organisations may adopt conformist stances in pursuit of moral legitimacy; this often involves efforts to 'embed new structures and practices in networks of other already legitimate institutions'. Edwards et al. (2018, 34) describe a similar approach where an IO dedicates itself to achieving sociopolitical acceptability by 'invoking or affiliating itself with symbols (or other organizations) that possess legitimacy' and this strategy is evident from the outset. Specifically, the OECD started by affiliating itself with the specialised UN agencies (i.e., UNESCO and UNICEF) that possessed the legitimacy to frame the post-2015 education agenda. This is illustrated in the OECD strategy paper:

> The OECD is committed to supporting a post-2015 agenda, and to this end is closely *following*, and *where invited*, contributing to discussions at the UN on how to frame the agenda. For example, the Education Directorate is a member of the Advisory Group on the post-2015 education agenda, co-charied by UNESCO and UNICEF. (OECD 2013a, 24–25, our emphasis)

In the initial phase of formulating the agenda, the OECD acknowledged that it was on the periphery of discussions. The OECD's lack of a mandate necessitated forming affiliations with the legitimate agencies and it explained how it sought acceptability:

> UNESCO has established a Learning Metric Task Force […] to bring together experts to develop recommendations for the global education and development communities about internationally comparable learning standards, metrics and implementation practices. The OECD *will contribute experience*, *evidence*, *analysis* and *relevant policy knowledge to* the Learning Metric Task Force, the UN's thematic consultation and other relevant fora that are

> responsible for developing and agreeing post-2015 education goals. (OECD 2013b, 6–7, our emphasis)

Thus the OECD sought collaboration based on its expertise gained through years of using PISA for policy analysis, which was portrayed as necessary and valuable contributions to the formation of the new agenda.

Once affiliations were established, the OECD adopted a more affirmative portrayal of its contributions by positioning itself as (a) an *integral* part of the decision-making process; and (b) *well placed* to support the monitoring of the targets, based on its experience in PISA (see Davidson et al., OECD 2014).

It then shifted to highlight the *collaborative* relationships that it had established with these key agencies to raise the profile of PISA, and thereby PISA-D. An example was the speech given by Michael Ward in Cambodia in 2017:

> PISA-D is a *very important project* for the OECD and for the countries, but also *in the context of the SDGs* […]. And ***we*** were talking about how in the *United Nations, UNESCO,* how PISA *has been chosen* as the metric, the global metric for measuring progress towards achievement of the Education SDG. (our emphasis)

When this meeting was held, PISA had *not yet* been officially endorsed by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) as the metric for SDG 4 (specifically for Indicator 4.1). It was only recognised in 2019 as *a* source of data for this indicator (see the 2nd strategy identified below for conflicting claims). Nevertheless, the OECD succeeded in claiming a pivotal role in defining SDG 4 through an initial strategy of building affiliations. Having joined the 'high table', it proceeded with other more proactive strategies. We now demonstrate how the post-2015 discussions were steered towards forging perceptions PISA as the appropriate learning metric.

2. Shaping and (re)framing SDG 4

The SDG 4 vision is broad and comprises targets for expanding access to all stages of education and promoting a wide range of educational outcomes, including global citizenship and gender equality. As Suchman explains (1995, 591), 'innovators who depart substantially from prior practice must often intervene pre-emptively in the cultural environment in order to develop bases of support specifically tailored to their distinctive needs'. To promote PISA as the legitimate learning metric, the OECD needed to shape and (re)frame the SDG agenda so that it would focus on what PISA measures: the skills of 15-year-olds in Reading, Maths and Science. OECD officials explained how this was achieved:

> Previously, the focus was much more on quantity of education. The quality focus was to various aspects that PISA brought into the discussions. There have been measures in the past, but I think to have a comparative collective approach to assessments is quite new development. (OECD interview by authors #2, 2018)

> We positioned ourselves very early on as a voice arguing that the post-2015 world has to be focused on learning outcomes and quality. […] And of course, that immediately begged the question 'How are we going to measure quality, how are we going to measure learning outcomes?'. So, we offered PISA as a global metric, and said 'Look, the work on PISA-D is going to help us make this available to a wider range of countries'. (OECD2015#30, as cited in Addey 2017, 11)

To specifically introduce PISA, the OECD moved to *narrow down* the many stages of schooling to focus only on secondary education and *limit* the scope of educational outcomes *to* what is most relevant to PISA (i.e., literacy and numeracy); although a range of terms were used to describe what needed to be measured (e.g., 21st century skills, higher order skills, competencies etc.). The following extract explains the logic:

> Experience since 2000 has underlined that schooling doesn't necessarily produce learning. We have also learnt that in order for education to support social, economic and development outcomes in the 21st century, higher levels of learning will be needed – the

kind of competencies and higher order thinking skills that are achieved *only through quality secondary education*. The OECD is *well placed* to contribute to thinking about future global education goals. In particulalr, the experience of PISA […] *is particularly relevant* to a focus on learning in the post-2015 framework. (OECD 2013b, 1–2, our emphasis)

The focus on lower secondary schooling was the result of discursive practices that delineated what could be seen, said, known and thought. The pragmatic effect was to narrow the options as to what could be done and not done (Foucault 1972, 1979). In this case, the vision of SDG 4 was framed around the *need for measuring*. The agenda was reframed to articulate SDG 4 with PISA and prepare for the authority of the OECD's expertise to translate the complex issues around its definitions (King 2017) into technical problems that they could resolve. As the OECD persisted in suggesting:

> […] a post-2015 education goal is likely to include a stronger focus on learning and incorporate the secondary education level. *This kind of goal* will present the international community with a major challenge to develop or identify and agree on a universal learning metric. How do we define a learning goal that can be measured and tracked over time? How do we identify and collect the evidence needed to measure progress? What targets can be set to guide progress towards this goal? Major *OECD policy instruments*, such as *PISA*, have *pioneered new and highly collaborative ways* in which to measure progress in societies *on a global scale.* (OECD 2013b, 5, our emphasis)

These extracts illustrate the strategy; first, define the problem that required SDG 4 to shift its focus to learning; second, highlight the lack of a *secondary level*, *internationally comparable*, *learning* metric; and third, offer PISA as an optimal solution. The 'new and highly collaborative ways' referred to are the adjusted PISA instruments for measuring learning in LMICs developed in PISA-D. The strategy embodies what Biesta (2008) calls the 'normative validity' of measurements – that is privileging what can be measured rather than what we value, which obscures the complex relations that underpin the education system (Unterhalter 2017).

SDG 4 comprises seven major targets and ensuring relevant learning outcomes at the end of lower secondary is only one of the three indicators for Target 4.1. The targets are: '*proportion of children and young people: (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex*'. In 2016, the UIS issued a clarification, noting that 'the indicators [the OECD] used to rank [countries at *Education at Glance*] are not the global indicators but the OECD's interpretation' (2016, para., 5). They insisted that 'many of the [SDG 4] indicators are not yet sufficiently precise' and hence have been classified by the United Nations Statistical Division as a tier III indicator, which means that it has 'no established methodology' (para., 8). The UIS elaborated suggesting the OECD had misrepresented its role:

> In other words, a common standard agreed between countries on what counts as 'minimum proficiency level' is still missing. Indeed, the UIS, as custodian agency, has set up a mechanism for countries to reach consensus on standards for this as well as the other global indicators. Yet, *Education at a Glance* has presented results from PISA, its learning assessment of 15-year-olds, *as if it is the accepted standard* for its member states *and beyond to monitor* Target 4.1 – and the same is true of most of the other indicators. It would have been clearer if these had been presented as *potential* options. Or if the proposed approach had been presented explicitly as *a regional*, rather than global, approach to monitoring SDG 4. (ibid., para., 9, our emphasis)

This rebuttal of one of the OECD's legitimation strategies by the custodian agency illustrates that the tensions and competition between these intergovernmental agencies are intensifying. While cognitive legitimation appears to be especially problematic when different organisations compete for the same resources; consensus declines, undercutting gatekeeping, and reducing the authority of central actors such as UNESCO. The resulting contestation over the global metrics offers leeway for the OECD to promote its unconventional alternative.

3. Establishing credibility

According to Suchman (1995, 588), organisations seeking legitimacy 'rarely can rely on purely dispositional appeals, because assumptions of good character generally require an established record of consistent performance'. The OECD capitalised on PISA to this end and its strategy employed three elements. First, descriptions of PISA emphasised its established record of good performance in measuring learning outcomes. Second, PISA was described as *already for development*—successful in improving education systems, so that PISA-D is introduced 'to make the benefits of PISA available to a broader group of countries' (Schleicher 2013). Third, PISA-D was described from the outset as a pilot project.

The language deployed to describe PISA stressed its *collaborative* nature as well as the *validity* and *reliability* of its instruments and data. It also emphasised the *scale* of PISA coverage to reinforce its prominence as illustrated below:

> The OECD is well placed to contribute to this effort, based on its experience with the *highly collaborative* […] PISA. PISA provides *comprehensive* and *rigorous* [*validity*; *reliability*] *international* [*scale*] assessments of learning outcomes […]. Every three years, about *half a million* 15-year-olds from *around 70 countries* [*scale*] are tested under the PISA programme. PISA also collects student, school and system-level *contextual information*, which allows it to identify factors associated with quality and equity in learning outcomes [*validity*]. (Davidson et al., OECD 2014, para. 4, our emphasis)

This portrayal of PISA is repetitive and self-reinforcing. It exemplifies what Suchman (1995) refers to as 'popularisation' and 'persisting' by continually articulating stories which illustrate its reality. By stressing the reputation and status accorded to PISA, the OECD helped to establish the credibility of PISA-D.

The second element of the strategy is critical because the OECD was aware of the scepticism about PISA for LMICs; the initial project document acknowledges that: 'more needs to be done to encourage greater participation from developing countries

[which] regard PISA as s survey for rich countries, one that only OECD countries and emerging economies are able to benefit from' (OECD 2013c, 17).

To address this scepticism, the OECD referenced Brazil, Peru and Vietnam as exemplary cases which they claimed had successfully improved schooling because their PISA scores had improved. Their experiences were reported in OECD documents and rehearsed at PISA-D technical and advisory meetings and workshops. Brazil was cited most frequently; for example, after listing the benefits of participation in PISA, Schleicher (2013, Slide 11) stated: 'many country examples can be cited but Brazil presents an excellent example of how a country has leveraged its participation in PISA to improve learning outcomes and we will be hearing more about this country's experience later today'.

By referencing those countries, the OECD attempted to demonstrate the beneficial value of its role. Scrutiny of those countries' experiences suggests a more complex reality. According to Silva (2019, 127), Brazil's participation in PISA has been strongly influenced by the local agent INEP (the National Institute of Educational Research), and she argues that PISA resulted in major changes 'in the production of information about education more than in the education system itself', consequently stakeholders did not recognise changes at the school and student level. The reasons for this are explained by Rivas and Scasso (2021) who show that the improvement of PISA scores in Latin American countries was wholly a consequence of methodological changes in the scoring of the test and, although the OECD was aware of this, they presented Peru and Brazil as examples of improvement. Regarding Vietnam, an interviewee explained why it had performed 'really well':

> Vietnam as an example of how a poor country did really, really well. They have a huge out-of-school population, a huge population! So, we are really just testing their elites. So that means, that one out of two kids don't get to school. And you choose the best student in

> your family to go to school and the rest work to make it happen. (OECD interview by authors #1, 2018)

The third strategic element, depicting PISA-D as a pilot project, strengthened its credibility by associating it with a scientific method that involved an exploratory and reversible step in a process of evaluation, feedback and improvement. As Auld et al. (2020) demonstrate, the use of the term pilot was more strategic and cognitive than evaluative: the same strategy was employed when PISA was first proposed to the OECD countries and faced resistance; agreement to proceed was only given after its status was changed to a pilot project.

4. Creating demand

The 4th strategy involved articulating a *demand-led* story; this is evident in the following extract which illustrates how the OECD claimed two sources of demand: from LMICs who wanted to engage with PISA for their benefit; and from the international community which sought a universal metric to monitor SDG 4.

> PISA has been one of the most successful education programme at the OECD. We want to *make the benefits* of this programme *available to* developing countries…PISA-D is an initiative that we began really *in response to* the post-2015 agenda, which is prioritising education at the centre of development and within education a focus on learning. And of course, *measuring a learning goal is a challenge for the world*. And we consider that *the experience with PISA is very valuable.* (OECD interview by authors #2 2018, our emphasis)

However, the OECD statements ignore two issues related to demand. Firstly, PISA had been considered as one of the *potential* options for monitoring SDG 4 and was not until 2019 officially recognised by UIS as *a* source of data for measuring progress on Target 4.1(c). Secondly, although one interviewee explained that countries

tend to 'vote with their feet', another described the OECD's approach as *proactive*. Their contrasting statements are shown below:

> [1] Because I think the countries themselves, in a way the countries vote with their feet. We *never had intended PISA to become a global instrument*, but once PISA existed, *more and more countries want to be part of that.* For example, we *never invited* countries to take part in PISA, so writing to countries "Would you like to do this?". Countries *always asked* the OECD and sort of the *demand-driven* instrument. (OECD interview by authors #2, 2018, our emphasis)

> [2] I am pretty sure that *there must have been formal conversations* telling them about the [PISA-D] project. And once we had a basic mind, we *must have approached all the countries* that we thought could be interested in it and sort of "Would you like to join or not?". (OECD interview by authors #1, 2018, our emphasis)

Following Suchman (1995, 587), 'legitimacy building is generally a proactive enterprise, because managers have advance knowledge of their plans and of the need for legitimation'. This resonates with the OECD strategy of claiming that the demand for PISA drove its expansion and, therefore, the initiation of PISA-D. While there have been contradictory responses from the staff, the narratives presented in the OECD publications are generally consistent and illustrate the efforts to manipulate the environmental structure by creating demand. d'Agnese (2015, 58) similarly observes that PISA is 'more of a life brand than an assessment tool, and one which makes expansive claims'. Following this logic, the next strategy is 'brand' building and membership of the 'global PISA community'.

5. Membership and belonging

This strategy echoes Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal's (2003, 427) notion of 'the politics of mutual accountability', by which they mean a sense of sharing and participation, inviting countries into a perpetual cycle of comparison and improvement. In this case, the OECD emphasises membership of the *global PISA community* which provides

LMICs the benefits (and prestige) of comparing and exchanging with other members of the community (as 'global peers'). Apart from international benchmarking and peer-learning, the countries also gain access to high-level technical expertise, and they join a community of countries whose leadership are committed to improving education quality.

These narratives are repeated in the PISA-D pamphlets, for example:

> Through PISA results, policy makers can gauge the knowledge and skills of students in their own countries *in comparison with* those in *other* countries, set policy targets against measurable goals achieved in *other* education systems, and learn from policies and practices of countries which have *demonstrated improvement*. This kind of *international benchmarking* is more relevant now than ever, given that every country in the world has signed up to the Education SDG. PISA-D helps to *build the capacity* of participating countries to conduct large-scale learning assessments and analyse and use the results to support national policies and evidence-based decision making. (*PISA-D Brief 2*, OECD 2016, 1, our emphasis)

PISA-D is portrayed as providing benefits for LMICs beyond those provided by PISA. One relates to *capacity building* to undertake large-scale assessments, and the other introduces *peer-learning* as learning from existing members of the community.

The OECD's approach to *capacity building* operates primarily through international contractors who are responsible for survey management and operations. The contractors ensured that PISA-D countries completed the 'complex tasks' required in order to 'advance' from one phase of the project to the next while 'adhering to PISA's technical standards' (OECD 2017, 2). The OECD asserts that this 'learning-by-doing works: simply by participating in PISA-D with its well-established and high-quality procedures and technical standards, the countries have acquired valuable knowledge and understanding of how to manage a large-scale assessment' (ibid., 2).

PISA-D was designed to adapt PISA to *suit the needs of* LMICs and those involved in PISA-D were described as 'partners'. However, the OECD documents

suggest that PISA had already succeeded due to its 'well-established' and 'high-quality' procedures and standards. This establishes its procedural legitimacy and implies that additional inputs from the PISA-D countries are unnecessary. Indeed, as Auld et al. (2020) show, PISA-D was from the outset dominated by the OECD and its contractors; apart from overseeing the survey design and operations they also controlled the interpretation of the PISA-D data and production of national reports. Kaess (2018) argues that the resulting introduction of a universally applicable learning metric that failed to incorporate local and indigenous knowledge has contributed to the cross-Atlantic knowledge divide.

With regard to *peer-learning*, the OECD operates in a manner akin to what Hardt and Negri (2001, 199) term as 'circuits of movement and mixture'. Rather than PISA being a club for affluent nations, the OECD constructs the 'global PISA community' to co-opt countries at different stages of development. This was manifested in representatives from affluent nations seated with and mentoring PISA-D country representatives – all mixing together. The important point here is that the OECD gained acceptance of its role through processes of supplying *exchange*, *dialogue*, *membership* and *belonging.* Essentially, through the greater inclusiveness of this new global PISA community, the OECD invites all to enter *peacefully* into its sphere of operation as it represents the magnanimous and humanitarian face of the community, which sets aside differences but maintains a rhetorical acknowledgement of countries' preferences.

6. Persuasion in motion

Scholars highlight the significance of travelling experts in constructing a space of equivalence, where policy objectives are shared, and the improvement of performance achieved through constant comparisons (e.g., Grek 2013). The OECD is a key player in mobilising education specialists, test experts, and policy makers around the world. To

disseminate PISA-D, the OECD arranged meetings, workshops, and an international seminar which were onsite events and ‘co-present encounters’ (Urry 2003, 155) whereby the OECD discourse circulated and gained momentum.

Through these face-to-face interactions, the OECD not only provided access for PISA-D country representatives to connect with the existing members and test experts, but it also enhanced the reputation of PISA and PISA-D among, and encouraged their adoption by, a wider community of policy actors. These events thus operated as the *sites of persuasion* and *persuasion in motion* – moving from Paris to Washington D.C. to Montreal…to Phnom Penh to Asuncion…to London. As the OECD’s ‘outreach activities’ (2019, 107) to create new audiences, these events constituted a specific form of legitimation strategy comprising ‘collective evangelism’ which Suchman (1995, 592) describes as a group of organisations and actors ‘join together to actively *proselytise* for a morality in which their outputs, procedures, structures and personnel occupy positions of honor and respect’ (original emphasis).

For each site of persuasion, a specific theme (such as technical, annual, advisory or managerial) is set out, with some key attendants (including e.g., National Project Managers, country representatives from peer countries, and international contractors) remaining as a permanent core whereas the others are a fleeting presence (depending on the location and the availability of development partners and local agents). *Before* or *after*, PISA-D pamphlets, technical reports, and working papers are published, blogs are updated, and mission trips are made, along with a warm feeling of helping the poor (or supporting their ‘capacity building’); and *at* the site, documents are circulated, presentations are given, models explained, experiences recounted, and applause given.

Ball (2012, 68) describes these ‘microspaces’ as ‘pre-eminently social settings where “trust” is built, commitments are made, and deals done’, and presumably heretics

are not invited. They are the key relational sites where the sense of membership and belonging to the global PISA community *materialises*. As Urry (2004, 28) puts it, 'all social life [involves] various kinds of connections sustained at a distance but with intermittent meetings'. In this case, in addition to maintaining connections, these meetings and workshops *ensure* that substantial progress is made towards the completion and 'success' of PISA-D. As noted earlier, through these activities the OECD and its contractors 'closely monitor' PISA-D countries' progress in predefined tasks so as to ensure the consistency and comparability of results. These allow the OECD to manage differences between members (especially the experienced and the new) and create a hierarchy by placing PISA-D countries remote in place and time, albeit through the means of technical procedures and standards (Silova and Auld 2019).

Conclusion

This paper identified the major strategies that the OECD employed to legitimate its role as the monitor of SDG 4.1. PISA-D played the central role in this process by establishing and extending the perceived desirability and propriety of PISA into LMICs. In combination the strategies operated to promote the OECD's legitimacy at the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive levels, and over time they progressed from low-key passive conformity to active manipulation. The process of change that emerged was incremental, with the objective of 'PISA *for* development' which initially seemed novel 'becom[ing] more and more possible, then normal and then necessary' (Ball 2012, 113). This was achieved neither by the undertakings of a single actor nor a decision by the mandated authorities but was the result of the complex mixture of concrete organisational change and persuasive communication the OECD harnessed that 'overlap, repeat, or imitate one another according to their domain of application, […] converge and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method' (Foucault 1979,

138). The outcome is that learning, at age 15, now *has* to be measured and compared for improvement, PISA now *has* to be there for development, and LMICs are smoothly pulled like a vortex into the OECD's Empire (Hardt and Negri 2001).

In 2019 the OECD stated: 'PISA-D was successful in making the assessment instruments more relevant to LMICs while still being able to report results on the main PISA scale, thus facilitating international comparisons on all of the variables covered by PISA' (2019, 39). Success can be addressed at many levels. Pragmatically the OECD overcame major financial difficulties in implementing PISA-D with the help of donors and enrolled sufficient nations to proceed with the project. In terms of socio-political acceptability, the OECD seems to have successfully shifted its position from the margins to the centre of the network involved with delivering SDG 4; this is further evident in recent collaborations amongst them to adapt large-scale assessment tools to household surveys (World Bank 2020). Whether or not PISA-D will result in many LMICs joining in PISA is unclear (Ward 2020) but if PISA becomes the primary metric for distributing aid and development funds (i.e., accepted as a cognitive 'given') then success is likely.

However, the intrinsic rationale for PISA-D was to 'contextualise' PISA and make it more suitable for LMICs, and on this criterion the evidence of success is limited. Analysis of the final PISA-D report (Auld et al. 2020) identifies a range of problems and issues, including: high levels of repetition which made for low levels of eligibility for the test; the low scores in many nations were associated with the language of the test not being the pupils' mother tongue; major problems in assessing out-of-school children which resulted in a redefinition of this population; the results were interpreted through an a priori model derived from a study of literacy in the west; the main policies promoted to improve learning outcomes were designed to improve pupils' eligibility for PISA; and, the evidence cited to support policy recommendations draws on previously published

materials and references to high performers on PISA, not LMICs. In brief we suggest that PISA-D did not successfully address the problems of LMICs engaging in PISA, but it provided a performance which successfully legitimated the OECD's role in delivering SDG 4.

If LMICs join PISA, the evidence from analysing the PISA-D report (Auld et al. 2020) indicates they will: feature on the bottom of future league tables of pupil performance; be advised to invest more in assessment systems and reduce pupil repetition; and, encouraged to follow the best practices of high performing nations. Whilst improving the overall position and image of those countries they replace at the bottom of the league table it is unclear how exactly LMICs will benefit. Rather, it will help to confirm that they are backward and needing to learn from experienced PISA participants, with the support of private sector consultants and test experts. Their future development trajectory and priorities will be preordained, and defined by the OECD which, through its role as the global assessor, is able to impose its own universal logic.

Our analysis advances the literature in three significant ways. First, it extends beyond descriptions of the OECD's long-established legitimacy amongst more affluent nations. We demonstrate how the OECD used PISA and PISA-D to create legitimacy in an arena where it had not been previously involved. Drawing on Suchman's (1995) comprehensive framework, we suggest that to understand this process, one has to go beyond singular descriptors to recognise the multiple and interacting sources of legitimacy and the variety of means combined to promote it.

Second, the focus on organisations actively pursuing a repertoire of strategies to establish legitimacy provides an alternative to recent analyses which conceive of the legitimacy of IOs as being primarily defined by the expectations of others (Edwards et al. 2018). Our analysis suggests that the OECD has employed six legitimation strategies

both episodically and in the long term to exert direct control over its reputation and status. Key strategies harnessed to that goal were the establishment of credibility, the articulation of a demand-led story, and identification with the global PISA community. The initial strategy, which involved building affiliations, was also novel in that the OECD successfully manoeuvred into a space where it had no official mandate.

Third, by highlighting the barriers to the expansion of PISA into LMICs and the transformative effect of these legitimation strategies, we provide a critical perspective on the 'appeal' of PISA in developing countries (Addey and Sellar 2018). While recognising that countries participate in large-scale learning assessments for multiple reasons, and in the case of PISA-D, there is the resource of 'a global ritual of belonging' (Addey 2020) that national policy actors extract and employ in pursuit of their goals, our genealogy indicates that the benefits and prestige associated with PISA are primarily constructed by the OECD and are later narrated by the countries. However, by endorsing uncritically, and as in Cambodia and Zambia, adhering tightly to the OECD narratives the countries risk accepting the OECD's values as to the nature and purposes of schooling.

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Table 1 Summary of the OECD legitimation strategies.

1. Building affiliations	(a) Affiliating with UN specialised agencies in education (i.e., UNESCO and UNICEF) based on its experience and expertise in PISA and related policy analysis (portrayed as valuable contributions to SDG 4). (b) Positioning itself as an integral part of the decision-making process in framing SDG 4 and using this to improve its sociopolitical acceptability. (c) Highlighting 'established' partnerships with these agencies to help raise the profile of PISA and PISA-D.
2. Shaping and (re)framing SDG 4	(a) Narrowing the focus of SDG 4 to only lower secondary level and limiting the scope of educational outcomes to what PISA measures (i.e., literacy and numeracy). (b) Highlighting the critical role of Indicator 4.1(c) in achieving SDG 4 and leveraging the use of PISA as the optimal solution to track progress globally.
3. Establishing credibility	(a) Establishing PISA's record of good performance by stressing the collaborative nature of its work, the validity and reliability of the testing instruments and data, and the global scale of its coverage. (b) Referencing exemplary cases (e.g., Brazil, Peru and Vietnam) to demonstrate the benefits of PISA for LMICs and encourage their participation in PISA-D. (c) Depicting PISA-D as a pilot study to associate it with a scientific method that involved an exploratory step in a process of evaluation, feedback and improvement.
4. Creating demand	(a) Articulating that the demand for PISA drove its expansion and therefore, the initiation of PISA-D. **(b)** Claiming two sources of demand: from LMICs who wanted to participate in PISA, and from the international community which sought a universal metric to monitor SDG 4.
5. Membership and belonging	(a) Constructing a strong sense of membership and belonging to the global PISA community. (b) Members of the community are told they enjoy these benefits: international benchmarking and comparison; access to technical expertise; good practices and peer-learning; and demonstration of commitment/leadership.
6. Persuasion in motion	(a) Arranging meetings, workshops, and a seminar at a global scale, ensuring PISA-D completion and 'success'. (b) Creating the microspaces (i.e., social settings, blogs and various events) whereby PISA-D discourse circulates and gains momentum.