

Editorial

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit our health, economic, and social sectors hard. It has also exposed and highlighted some systemic weaknesses hampering genuine social mobility. Equality of opportunity is a key ingredient for a strong and cohesive democratic society. Unlike policies that address the consequences, education can tackle the sources of inequality of opportunity, by creating a more level playing field for people of all ages to acquire the skills that power better jobs and better lives.

Too many from disadvantaged backgrounds remain less likely to participate in education, perform well, find suitable employment, or pursue lifelong learning. As a result, they are also less likely to develop the skills needed to succeed in our changing economy. On average across OECD countries, a child from a disadvantaged family is expected to take five generations to reach the average national income.

Accordingly, the theme of this edition of *Education at a Glance* is equality of opportunity for access, participation, and progression in education. It focuses on participation in education, learning outcomes and teacher training for diversity in the classroom. Factors such as gender, socio-economic status, country of origin or geography, are also shown to influence performance and trajectories. And it includes a spotlight on COVID-19, by exploring measures implemented around the world to ensure continuity and equitable learning during school disruptions.

Differences in educational progress and outcomes

While the short and long-term effects of COVID-19 on learning are still uncertain, the pandemic risks exacerbating these existing learning gaps. We know that those from disadvantaged backgrounds face greater challenges adapting to the changes imposed by the pandemic. School closures have tended to last longer in countries with lower learning outcomes. Moreover, disadvantaged children are less likely to have access to adequate tools for remote learning, a quiet place to study at home, or the support of their parents or guardians.

Socio-economic status also influences educational pathways. Those students without at least one tertiary-educated parent are more likely to enrol in upper secondary vocational programmes than in general ones and less likely to complete the level. Those without upper secondary education face disadvantages in the labour market. In 2020, the unemployment rate of young adults that had not completed upper secondary education is almost twice as high as for those with higher qualifications. In contrast, those from advantaged backgrounds are overrepresented in general upper secondary programmes and among entrants to bachelor programmes, which risks amplifying perceptions that certain educational tracks hold more societal value than others.

Children from an immigrant background tend to be at a disadvantage compared to their native-born peers when it comes to access to and participation in education, even after accounting for social background. Labour market outcomes vary greatly for foreign-born adults with different levels of education, reflecting the supply and demand for different skills, the difficulties tertiary-educated foreign-born adults face in gaining recognition for their education and experience earned abroad, and lower wage expectations of foreign workers in some countries.

Gender disparities also persist and influence educational trajectories and opportunities in the labour market. Boys are more likely than girls to repeat a grade and underperform in reading, and less likely to complete upper secondary education. When it comes to selecting an educational trajectory, boys are usually overrepresented in vocational paths and less likely to enter and graduate from tertiary education. Women outnumber men in participation rates to formal adult learning. Yet they remain less likely to be employed and earn less than men across all levels of educational attainment and OECD countries, even among those having graduated from the same field of study.

Rethinking equity in education in today's digital world

Despite these findings, this edition of Education at a Glance also shows that those challenges can be successfully addressed. Comparative data, policy analysis and best practice provide important insights.

The comparisons show that improved social mobility and better equality of opportunity is indeed possible, with lessons from the most equitable education systems highlighting the importance of starting early, so that children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, acquire solid foundations, including cognitive, social and emotional skills, and a sustained habit of learning which will carry them through life.

Towards this, investment in teachers is needed to develop capacity in understanding individual students' needs and tailor their learning strategies accordingly. However, while 94% of teachers across the OECD countries participating in the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reported having participated in continuous professional development activities over the past 12 months, only around 20% reported participating in training about teaching in a multicultural or multilingual settings, with significant cross-country variation.

Technological innovation has implications for education changing the demand for knowledge and skills, but it is also transforming the education sector itself. During the pandemic, we have seen some of the downsides, from student screen fatigue and adaptation stress, to the risk of those without access to adequate tools for remote learning falling behind. But we have also seen how technology can make learning more granular, more adaptive and more interactive for students. It can help teachers better understand how different students learn differently and it can assist education systems better match resources to needs. Here, the knowledge and confidence that teachers have in utilising technology and integrating it into education is essential.

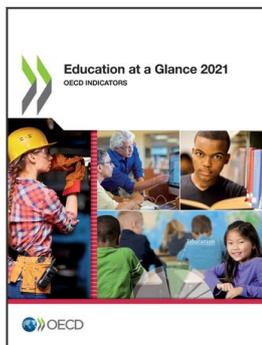
Finally, we know that preparing students for lifelong learning to up-skill and re-skill as adults is key to ensuring they are resilient to mega trends and external shocks. Yet, on average across OECD countries, participation in adult learning by low-skilled individuals is a staggering 40 percentage points below that of high-skilled adults. Older adults are 25 percent less likely to train than 25-34 year-olds. So in addition to starting early, educators need to work more closely with other government sectors and business to help promote flexible pathways in and out of education that evolve alongside labour market demands.

As we navigate through the immediate and longer-term effects of the pandemic, the continued globalisation and digitalisation of our economies, the OECD will continue the essential work of rigorous evidence-based analysis and policy innovation to help address education and skills needs.

We all benefit when we all grow and prosper.



Mathias Cormann
Secretary-General, OECD



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