

Executive summary

The employment advantage of an upper secondary vocational qualification over a general one tends to weaken over the life-course

Although the provision of formal vocational education and training (VET) can extend from lower secondary to short-cycle tertiary level, more than two-thirds of VET students are enrolled at upper secondary level. In some countries, where vocational education is more common, adults with VET qualifications enjoy high employment rates. However, the employment advantage of a vocational qualification tends to weaken over the life-course. On average across OECD countries, the employment rate of 25-34 year-old adults with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary vocational qualification (82%) is similar to that among 45-54 year-olds (83%), whereas employment increases from 73% to 80% among those with a general qualification. In contrast, the employment advantage for tertiary-educated adults widens among older age groups. Earnings are also lower: while adults with an upper secondary vocational qualification have similar earnings to those with a general one, they earn 34% less than tertiary-educated adults on average across OECD countries. Poorer labour-market prospects may have contributed to the decline in the share of adults with an upper secondary vocational qualification across the generations: 21% of 25-34 year-olds held such a qualification in 2019 compared to 26% of 45-54 year-olds on average. In contrast, the share of tertiary-educated adults has risen from 35% among the older generation to 45% among young adults.

Combined school- and work-based learning is relatively uncommon despite the benefits

The countries with strong integrated school- and work-based learning vocational programmes are also those with the highest employment rates for adults with vocational qualifications, even surpassing those for tertiary-educated adults in some cases. However, only one-third of all upper secondary vocational students are enrolled in such programmes on average across OECD countries. The duration of the work-based component varies across countries, from less than 30% of the length of the programme in Estonia and Israel to at least 80% in Austria, Finland and Switzerland. The most popular fields of study among vocational graduates vary at different levels of education. While engineering, manufacturing and construction is the most common broad field at upper secondary level, at short-cycle tertiary level, most students graduate from business, administration and law, or health and welfare.

Enabling VET students to pursue tertiary studies can improve their learning and employment outcomes

Around two-thirds of OECD countries have introduced pathways for vocational upper secondary students to continue their education at the tertiary level. On average across OECD countries, almost 7 out of 10 upper secondary vocational students are enrolled in programmes that provide direct access to tertiary education after completion. Better prospects for further education may encourage students to complete their upper secondary vocational qualification. Although the share of vocational upper secondary students who complete their programmes within the theoretical duration plus two years (70%) is lower than for general ones (86%), vocational students are more likely to complete their qualification if their programme provides direct access to tertiary

education than if it does not. The most common direct route from upper secondary vocational programmes to tertiary education is through short-cycle tertiary programmes, which are predominantly vocational in most OECD countries, but also through bachelor's programmes or equivalent. On average across OECD countries, 17% of first-time tertiary entrants enter short-cycle tertiary programmes. The employment rate of adults with a short-cycle tertiary degree is 4 percentage points higher than those with an upper secondary vocational attainment and they earn 16% more on average across OECD countries.

Vocational programmes are often designed to allow older students who wish to develop new skills to re-enter education later in life. While 37% of 15-19 year-old upper secondary students are in vocational programmes, the share increases to 61% among students over 25. Similarly, first-time entrants to short-cycle tertiary education also tend to be older than entrants to long-cycle tertiary programmes (bachelor's or master's long first degrees).

Total spending on educational institutions has increased at a lower rate than GDP

In 2017, total expenditure amounted to approximately USD 9 100 per student in primary institutions and USD 10 500 in secondary institutions on average across OECD countries. Programme orientation influences the level of spending: at upper secondary level, vocational programmes cost around USD 1 500 more per student than general ones on average, as they tend to require more sophisticated equipment and facilities, and training in the workplace can incur additional costs. At the tertiary level, total spending amounted to USD 16 300 per student in 2017 on average across OECD countries. At this level, 68% of total spending comes from public sources compared to 90% at lower levels of education. The largest share is devoted to staff compensation, which accounts for 77% of expenditure at pre-tertiary level, and 67% at tertiary level. After increasing between 2005 and 2012, total expenditure on primary to tertiary institutions as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) has fallen to 4.9% in 2017 on average, below its 2005 value of 5.1%. This is due to educational expenditure rising more slowly than GDP over this period, growing by 17% while GDP grew by 27%.

Instruction and teaching time have remained relatively stable over time

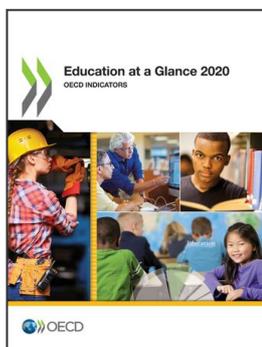
In 2019, compulsory instruction time was 804 hours per year on average at primary level and 922 hours at lower secondary level. This has remained relatively stable since 2014, with changes exceeding 5% in only a few countries. While instruction time for students increases at higher educational levels, statutory teaching time in public institutions decreases: teachers in OECD countries and economies are required to teach on average 778 hours per year at primary level compared to 680 hours at upper secondary level (general programmes). Since 2015, the number of teaching hours per year declined by about 2% at both primary and lower secondary education. Between 2000 and 2019, on average across OECD countries and economies with available data, the statutory salaries of primary and secondary general teachers – with 15 years of experience and the most prevalent qualifications – increased by 2-3%, despite salaries falling after the 2008 economic crisis. However, among countries with available data for all reference years, salaries have remained about constant since 2015.

Other findings

On average across OECD countries in 2018, 26% of children under 3 were enrolled in early childhood education and care (ISCED 0).

The number of international and foreign tertiary students has grown on average by 4.8% per year between 1998 and 2018. Although OECD countries host the great majority of international and foreign students, the fastest growth has been among internationally mobile students enrolled in non-OECD countries.

An upper secondary qualification still offers good protection against unemployment. On average across OECD countries, 61% of 25-34 year-olds without upper secondary education are employed, compared with 78% of those with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education as their highest attainment.



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