

Foreword



The expansion of the knowledge-based economy and technological progress has created a large market of highly paid jobs for individuals who are highly skilled. Moreover, in much of the industrialised world, the demand for highly-skilled individuals is rising faster than supply, as mirrored in rising wage premia on university-level qualifications. Leveraging the talent of all individuals, whatever their social background, must therefore be an important goal for educators and policy makers alike.

This PISA report provides a first systematic attempt to examine the performance of students in school jointly with the expectations they have for their own educational future. First of all, the range of educational expectations which the report reveals is striking: in Korea, four out of five 15-year-olds expect to graduate from university, while in Latvia it is just one out of four. Second, given the changes in skill requirements in most labour-markets, and the rapidly rising number of university graduates, the educational expectations of students in school have remained surprisingly stable. Third, while, overall, performance on PISA tends to be associated with educational expectations, the data show that not all 15-year-olds with advanced knowledge and skills aspire to high levels of further education and not all 15-year-olds who aspire to a university degree possess the knowledge and skills needed to pursue such pathways successfully. Such mismatches between expectations and actual abilities can result not just in personal disappointments but also incur important economic and social costs.

While performance in school is an important factor shaping students educational expectations, there are worrying signs that other contextual factors interfere with this relationship. In most countries and economies, boys and socio-economically disadvantaged students tend to hold far less ambitious expectations than girls and socio-economically advantaged students who perform just as well.

The findings of this report have far-reaching implications. Students who hold ambitious – yet realistic – expectations about their educational prospects are more likely to put effort into their learning and make better use of the educational opportunities available to them to achieve their goals. Therefore educational expectations, in part, become self-fulfilling prophecies. Education systems need to strike a careful balance between promoting ambitious expectations among students – because the labour-market demand for high-level skills is surging and will probably continue to grow in the future – while not neglecting those students who aim for a smooth transition from upper secondary school into the labour market. School systems also need clearly marked occupational pathways and high-quality information, guidance and support so that they understand the demands of the labour market and have the kinds of skills that employers need.

Since many 15-year-old students have only limited understanding of their underlying skills and potential to succeed in higher education and in the labour market, school marks are an important source of information for students about their potential success in subsequent education. Not least, in many countries and economies, marks directly determine the educational opportunities available to students and thus contribute to students' eventual educational attainment and labour market prospects because, in many countries, student marks help to determine access to higher education.

Perhaps the most crucial finding of the report is that socio-economically advantaged students and girls are more likely to receive better marks from their teachers, even when compared to socio-economically disadvantaged students or boys who perform equally well in PISA and report similar attitudes and behaviours. What this suggests is that teachers give higher-than-expected marks to girls and socio-economically advantaged students, possibly because they tend to reward, on top of performance and the set of attitudes and behaviours that are measured by PISA, other attitudes and behaviours that girls and advantaged students are most likely to adopt. Whatever the reason, inequalities in marking practices may lead to inequalities in educational expectations, and, later, to inequalities in educational attainment and labour-market outcomes, thus perpetuating social disparities and reducing opportunities for upward mobility, especially among disadvantaged boys.

Teachers can use marking practices to positively influence their students' educational trajectories. For example, teachers can develop in-class assessments throughout the year that clearly explore student mastery of different sets of skills; and they should mark such assessments on the basis of proficiency in those specific skills, including both cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Teachers and schools can best serve their students if they use marking practices that are objective and criterion-based, whereby teachers give marks to students according to absolute levels of mastery rather than according to students' performance relative to their peers. They should also accompany quantitative marks with in-depth qualitative evaluations that explore students' progress, strengths and weaknesses, giving students the tools to develop the skills that matter for eventual success in further education and beyond.

School systems can encourage effective marking practices and align them with broader assessment policies. Because marks may ensue such important consequences, effective marking practices can promote the kinds of classroom dynamics that enhance learning. School systems can also evaluate how school marks fit with their broader assessment policies. Given that practically all

schools use marks to evaluate students, marks should be an important part of the general policy regarding assessment. An integrated policy of assessment that covers student marks and standardised assessments will highlight the different forms of assessment and the complementary nature of, for example, standardised assessments and criterion-based assessments conducted at the school level. An integrated assessment and marking policy will also give teachers more clarity on what attitudes, behaviours and mastery of skills should be rewarded through marks, and will allow students to have clearer and more specific information about their standing in the learning process and what steps they should take to enhance their learning experience. School systems should thus promote research that provides a complete picture of the assessments used in their school system, their purpose, and what schools, teachers and students are doing with this information.

Last but not least, many education systems need to address inequalities in performance that are reflected in inequalities in educational expectations. Where such inequalities are prevalent, opportunities for social mobility are limited, and societies lose potentially valuable workers to an intergenerational cycle of deprivation and low expectations. The findings from this report show that teachers reward proficiency, but they also suggest that teachers reward a large set of measureable and immeasurable student characteristics. While some of these characteristics undoubtedly promote educational success and thus, by rewarding them, teachers provide an extra set of useful information to students, other characteristics may have little to do with students' chances of completing a university degree or of excelling in the labour market. As such, inequalities in marking practices may unduly restrict the opportunities some students have to acquire high-level skills and competencies and overcome social inequality.

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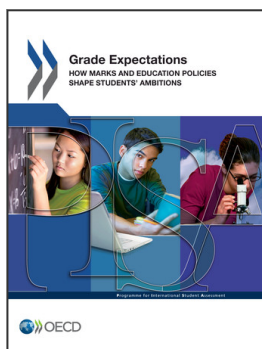
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