

# Executive Summary



**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. Individuals who attend university receive substantial economic payoffs and societies also benefit from a highly skilled workforce.**

Enrolment in tertiary education has increased dramatically in the past decades: 50% or more of university-age young adults are enrolled in higher education. However, many students still do not enrol in tertiary education nor expect to complete a university degree. The fact that not all students are willing and able to attend university creates a challenge for education systems. While it is important to promote high educational expectations among students to maximise the economic opportunities available in a knowledge-based economy, it is equally important to leverage expectations and ensure that students form realistic expectations. Mismatches between expectations and actual abilities can result in economic and social costs.

**Countries, and regions within countries, vary in the percentage of students who expect to complete a university degree.**

In 2009, students in 21 of the 75 countries and economies that participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) were asked about their expected educational attainment. In nine countries, over 50% of 15-year-old students expected to complete a university degree; in Korea, four out of five students expected to graduate from university. In Latvia, by contrast, one out of four students expected to graduate from university, while in Austria, Belgium (Flemish Community), Macao-China and Slovenia less than 40% did. Expectations of completing university remained relatively stable between 2003 and 2009, but Austria, Iceland, Mexico, New Zealand and Poland recorded a statistically significant increase in students' expectations of completing a university degree. These expectations did not change between 2003 and 2009 in Australia, Belgium (Flemish Community), Ireland, Korea, Latvia, Portugal and the Slovak Republic, and declined in Hungary, Italy, Hong Kong-China and Macao-China.

**Students who expect to complete a university degree show significantly better performance in mathematics and reading when compared to students who do not expect to earn such a degree. However, in many countries and economies, expectations of graduating from university do not match students' performance or their education and labour-market prospects.**

The difference in reading performance between students who expect to complete a university degree and those who do not is most pronounced in Australia, Austria, Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Hungary and the Slovak Republic. This difference is smaller – yet still marked – in Hong Kong-China and Macao-China. While performance is closely associated with educational expectations, sizeable proportions of students hold misaligned expectations. For example, the percentage of low-performing students who expect to complete a university degree is relatively high in Australia, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago, even though these students are less likely to enrol in higher education and complete a university degree. In contrast, a large proportion of high-performing students in Austria, Iceland, Italy and the Slovak Republic expect to finish their educational careers in upper secondary school, implying a potential loss of valuable talent to the economy and society.

**Engagement with school can help to promote expectations of completing a university degree among high-performing students; it can also lead to better performance among low-performing students that, in turn, can result in a better alignment between expectations and ability.**

School systems with a high percentage of low-performing students who expect to complete a university education face the challenge of improving student performance to the extent that all students who expect to pursue a university education have a good chance of completing a university degree. These school systems can capitalise on students' motivation and their intention to continue on to higher education by improving students' engagement with school, which, in turn, can lead to better performance. School systems with a comparatively large proportion of high-performing students who expect to complete, at most, an upper secondary degree should provide opportunities for these students to raise their expectations so as to avoid a potential loss of talent for the economy and society. This can also be accomplished by promoting these students' engagement with school and by ensuring that any selection into different education programmes, such as academic or vocational, is based on merit.

**Systems that separate students into different types of schools provide for more realistic expectations if differentiation is based on merit; but they may create mismatched expectations or reinforce social inequalities if differentiation favours some groups over others.**

Education systems that separate students into different types of schools create explicit paths that shape students' expectations of further education. In almost all of the subset of countries and economies that differentiate programmes according to their academic or non-academic orientation, students in academic programmes are significantly more likely to expect to complete a university degree. Countries that do not use differentiation have a higher percentage of students who expect to complete a university degree; and expectations grow at a faster pace than in countries that stratify their educational paths.

**Many students expect to complete, at most, an upper secondary degree; and the proportion of these students is highest in countries with large shares of students who are enrolled in vocationally oriented programmes.**

On average, across participating countries and economies, one out of every four students expects to complete his or her studies at the upper secondary level and, presumably, enter the labour force upon graduation. This proportion is highest in Austria, Croatia, Italy and the Slovak Republic and is lowest in Korea and Singapore. Three of the four countries with the highest proportion of students expecting to finish their educational careers upon acquiring an upper secondary degree are characterised by early differentiation of students into academically and non-academically oriented programmes, and have a comparatively large proportion of students in non-academic programmes. Upper secondary education should equip students who expect to end their schooling at that level with the skills needed for a successful transition to the labour market and civic life.

**In most countries and economies, performance is only one of the factors that determine expectations: on average, girls and socio-economically advantaged students tend to hold more ambitious expectations than boys and socio-economically disadvantaged students who perform just as well.**

In all countries and economies that were considered, students from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely than their more advantaged peers to expect to complete a university degree. On average, a large fraction of socio-economic inequalities in expectations can be explained by socio-economic inequalities in performance: disadvantaged students tend to show poorer performance in reading and mathematics than their more advantaged peers. Yet in Croatia, Hungary, Iceland, Korea and Serbia, advantaged students who have the same reading and mathematics scores as disadvantaged students are over four times more likely to expect to complete a university degree than disadvantaged students. On the contrary, disadvantaged students are more likely than advantaged students to expect to complete their schooling with an upper secondary degree in all countries and economies, even after adjusting for PISA reading and mathematics scores.

**In all participating countries and economies, marks are positively related to reading performance in PISA. Teachers also reward other attitudes and behaviours, such as students' approaches to learning and their reading practices.**

Teachers use grades not only to provide feedback and identify whether students have mastered a set of skills, but also to communicate expectations and foster motivation in their students. Students in 18 countries and economies were asked to report what mark (grade) they received in their language-of-assessment course. Countries with specific criteria associated with each mark (e.g. "fail", "satisfactory", "good", "very good", "excellent") tend to differentiate students better than countries where a continuum of marks is possible. Although countries vary considerably in terms of their marking schemes and policies, students who score higher in the PISA reading assessment also tend to be rewarded with good marks in their language courses. This relationship is most pronounced in Hungary, Latvia, Poland and the Slovak Republic.

Teachers also generally reward attitudes, behaviours and habits that directly benefit performance: in practically all countries and economies, and particularly in Poland and the Slovak Republic, students who are able to identify effective summarising and understanding and remembering strategies also report receiving higher marks. Similarly, in seven countries and economies there is a moderate to strong relationship between students' enjoyment of reading and the marks they receive; this relationship is particularly strong in Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Serbia.



**Girls and socio-economically advantaged students are more likely to receive better marks, even when compared to boys and socio-economically disadvantaged students who perform equally well in reading and have similar attitudes and behaviours.**

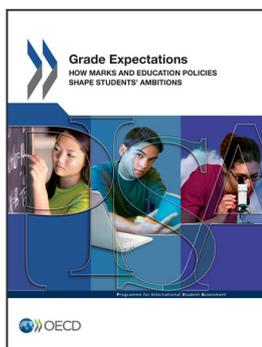
Girls are more likely to receive better marks than boys in most countries and economies, even when they have similar reading performance and learning habits. The exceptions to this trend are Iceland, Portugal (lower secondary), Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago, while girls are especially more likely to receive higher marks in Poland and the Slovak Republic. When comparing students of similar performance, habits and attitudes, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to receive lower marks in most countries and economies, with the exceptions of Belgium (Flemish Community) and Croatia. This relationship is strongest in Iceland.

**In many countries and economies, the marks students receive depend on the school they attend.**

In nine countries and economies, students who attend higher-achieving schools receive lower marks when compared to students with similar performance and learning habits who attend poorer-performing schools. In Austria, Poland and Portugal (upper secondary), students are particularly likely to be graded in comparison to their peers. In Italy and Portugal (lower secondary), students in private schools tend to have better-than-expected marks; in Italy, such difference is substantial in quantitative terms. In Austria, Croatia and Latvia, selective schools tend to deflate grades relative to performance, possibly because of normative grading practices. For similar reasons, in at least six countries and economies, there is evidence of grade inflation in schools that cater to a relatively disadvantaged student population.

**Students with higher marks are more likely to expect to complete a university degree.**

Marks are positively related to the expectation of completing a university degree in all participating countries and economies, even after accounting for differences in performance in reading and mathematics and in the programme a student attends. On average across these countries, students who receive marks that are one standard deviation above the national mean are as likely to expect to earn a university degree as students who have a 40 score-point performance advantage in the PISA mathematics and reading assessments. In this context, marks may have particularly long-lasting consequences for some students, as students may interpret marks as being the best guide when choosing their path beyond school. As a result, for example, marks alone help to explain more than 25% of the relationship between expectations and gender among boys and girls who perform equally well in similar programmes.



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