Introduction

This introduction describes the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Educational Career questionnaire that was distributed among students with the 2009 PISA survey, and how they can be used to study students' educational career expectations and the behaviours rewarded by school systems through school marks.

OVERVIEW

Based on the wealth of information that is available in the optional PISA 2009 Educational Career questionnaire (ECQ), this report focuses on two aspects of students' educational experience that could shape how well they do at school, how much effort they put into their studies, and what lies ahead of them once compulsory education is over: educational expectations and school marks (grades).

Most countries have recorded sharp increases in average educational attainment – so much so that while, at the beginning of the 20th century, university attendance was a reality for less than 1% of the university-age population around the world, by 2010 around 20% of this age group attended tertiary education. Among OECD countries the expansion of higher education has been more pervasive still: in many OECD countries, 50% or more of university-age young adults are enrolled in higher education (OECD, 2011; Schofer and Meyer, 2005).

This report identifies students who expect to complete a university degree and discusses these expectations in light of the likelihood of attaining one. The report also explores the gender and socio-economic inequalities that may exist in educational expectations. Although having a university degree is a common way of gaining access to high-skilled occupations, many students do not enter post-secondary education. Many do not even expect to continue on to tertiary education; rather, they expect to enter the labour market after completing secondary school. This report focuses on this group of students as well, highlighting the need for school systems to provide these students with the skills needed to ease their transition onto the labour market and adult life. The students' own expectations, as well as those of their parents and peers, are key in determining whether they decide to work hard in their studies. Moreover, expectations to pursue university predict whether these students will apply for university admission and, ultimately, whether they will attend and graduate from university (Campbell, 1983; Carbonaro, 2005; Carbonaro, Ellison and Covay, 2011).

This report also focuses on a second aspect of students' educational experience: school marks. School marks are an important source of information for students about their progress and standing within the school, their abilities, and whether they have the potential to succeed in further education. Marks are also the primary reward system teachers use to guide and motivate students to perform, behave well, and have positive attitudes towards learning and habits that are conducive to learning. Marks are, however, sometimes imperfect sources of information for students, as they are prone to contextual effects, such as differences in school characteristics, and, as results from this report show, tend to favour girls and students from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds.

Acknowledging that students form their expectations based on their aspirations and the information they have on the likelihood of realising them, the final section of this report links expectations and marks. Many studies link student achievement as measured by standardised test scores with student aspirations and expectations. A study of school marks makes a stronger connection between those expectations and the incentives and information the students themselves have, and underscores the potentially long-term importance of the information captured by marks. It also highlights the challenges teachers and schools face in motivating students through the use of marks while communicating realistic expectations about their prospects.

INTRODUCTION TO PISA AND THE EDUCATIONAL CAREER QUESTIONNAIRE

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), offers an opportunity to study patterns of educational expectations and school marks across many countries and economies. The assessment examines how well 15-year-old students are able to use the knowledge and skills they have acquired to solve standardised tasks in reading, mathematics and science as they approach the end of secondary school. It also collects contextual information about the students, their families and their schools, as well as a host of information gathered directly from parents. The PISA surveys and assessments are specifically designed and tested to ensure comparability across countries and economies.

In 2009, the PISA assessment focused on reading and gathered a rich set of information on factors potentially related to performance in this domain. Some 75 countries and economies and more than 500 000 students participated in PISA 2009. In addition to the student and school questionnaires that are distributed in every country and economy that participates in PISA, in 2009, PISA offered three optional questionnaires. Countries and economies could voluntarily disseminate a questionnaire on students' educational careers, a questionnaire on access and use of information technology, and/or a questionnaire that students could take home that would be completed by their parents. The ECQ seeks information on: students' continuity and mobility in primary and lower secondary schooling, attendance in out-of-school lessons, the marks students receive in the test language course, and their expectations of future educational attainment.[1]

Twenty-one countries and economies distributed the ECQ: 14 OECD countries (Australia, Austria, Belgium,[2] Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia) and seven partner countries and economies (Croatia, Hong Kong-China, Latvia, Macao-China, Serbia, Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago). Australia, Hong Kong-China, Korea and Slovenia did not include the question on school marks and are thus excluded from the analyses that involve marks. Portugal has different systems across ISCED levels, so results for Portugal are separated in analyses that involve marks. In 2009, Italy and Mexico

sampled a large population of students to have a sample that is representative at the regional level, so regional results for Italy and Mexico are also presented in the tables.

Because only 21 countries and economies provided information on students' expectations and 17 on student marks, the results in this report cannot be easily generalised to other countries in the OECD area or to countries and economies that did not distribute the ECQ. Caution must be taken when using the results for this limited set of countries and economies to draw conclusions regarding student expectations and school marks in other countries and economies.

The report highlights country/economy-level results and comparisons as well as within-country differences across Italian and Mexican regions. Regional results are included, whenever possible, to paint a more accurate picture of the factors that shape student outcomes and how individual teacher- and system-wide education policies promote better skills acquisition and expectations of further education. In many countries, labour markets follow region-specific or state-specific patterns, and Italy and Mexico are two such cases. Educational expectations in these countries, therefore, not only reflect the academic performance of students and what happens in schools, but also students' perceptions of the demand for skills and career opportunities that are available in their local/regional labour market. Moreover, in these countries, state and regional educational authorities play an important role in determining how schools are organised and how nationwide policies are implemented, for example with respect to marking schemes. As a result, region- and state-specific results can be of greater use for these countries in their efforts to help students make the most of their potential.

Notes

1. The Educational Career questionnaire for PISA 2009 is available in Annex A and can be downloaded at: *http://pisa2009.acer.edu.au/downloads.php*.
2. The French and German-speaking Communities of Belgium administered the Educational Career questionnaire, but chose to withdraw their data from this report because some features of their secondary and tertiary education systems could not be adequately reflected in the analysis.

References

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