

Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators is the authoritative source for information on the state of education around the world. It provides data on the structure, finances and performance of education systems in OECD and partner countries.

## United Kingdom

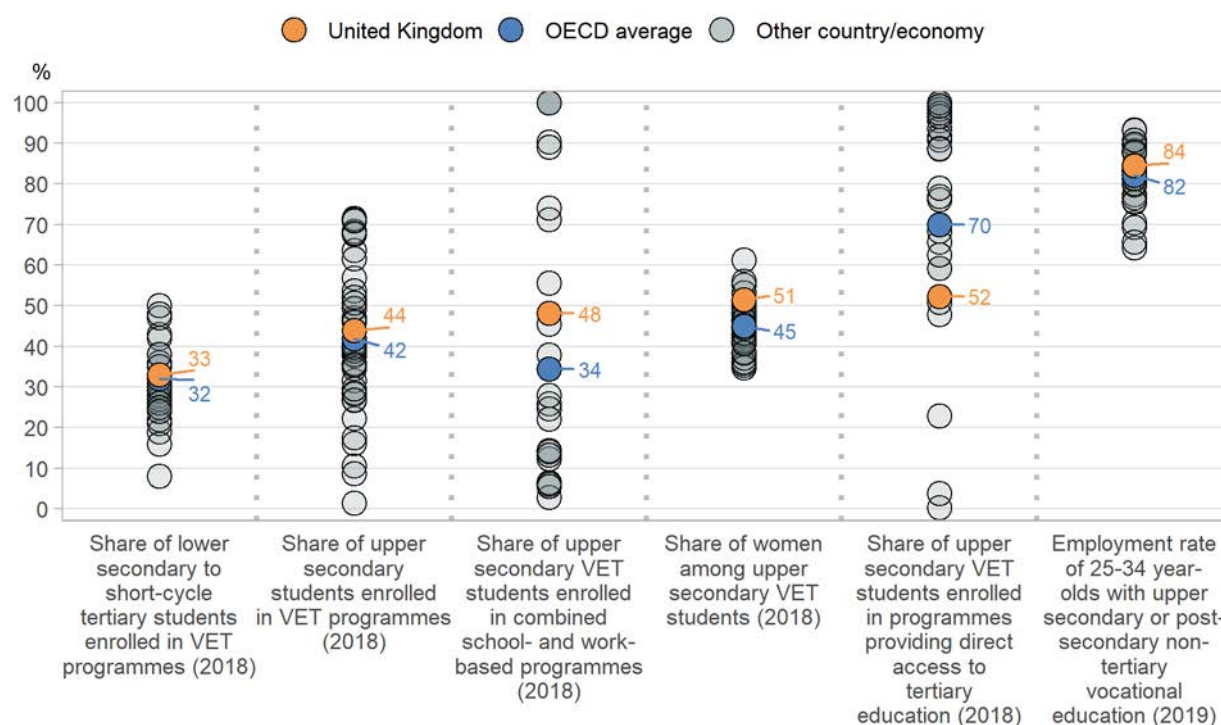
### Highlights

- Compared to other OECD countries, **there is no employment premium for young adults with upper secondary vocational education over upper secondary general education** in the United Kingdom. Young adults in the UK with a vocational qualification at this level have similar employment prospects to those with general qualifications due to much higher than average prospects for general education in the UK.
- **The earnings premium from a tertiary degree is lower in the United Kingdom than the OECD average.** In 2018, 25-64 year-olds with a tertiary degree earned 37% more for full-time full-year work than those with upper secondary education, compared to 54% on average across OECD countries.
- While compulsory education begins at age 4-5 in the United Kingdom, **all 3-5 year-olds are enrolled in early childhood education and care (ECEC) programmes or primary education**, compared to 88% on average across OECD countries.
- The United Kingdom is one of the few OECD countries where **spending per student in upper secondary vocational programmes (USD 8 978) is lower than in general ones (USD 13 429).**
- **The United Kingdom has a younger teaching workforce than on average across OECD countries.** At primary level, 29% of teachers are under the age of 30, more than double the OECD average of 12%.
- The global spread of COVID-19 may have a severe impact on the internationalisation of higher education. The United Kingdom accounts for 8% of the market share for international tertiary students; about a quarter of international students studying in the country come from China.

### Participation and outcomes of vocational education and training

- Vocational education and training (VET) programmes attract a diverse range of students, including those seeking qualifications and technical skills to enter the labour market, adults wishing to increase their employability by developing their skills further, and students who may seek entry into higher education later on.
- About one in three students from lower secondary to short-cycle tertiary level are enrolled in a VET programme in the United Kingdom, a similar value to the average across OECD countries. The United Kingdom is one of the few countries where VET can begin at lower secondary level. While 6% of VET students from lower secondary to short-cycle tertiary level are enrolled in lower secondary education on average across OECD countries, 19% do so in the United Kingdom.

Figure 1. Snapshot of vocational education



**Note:** Only countries and economies with available data are shown. The years shown in parentheses is the most common year of reference for OECD and partner countries. Refer to the source table for more details.

**Source:** OECD (2020), indicator A3 and B7. See Education at a Glance Database. <http://stats.oecd.org/> for more information and Annex 3 for notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>).

- VET is an important part of upper secondary education in most OECD countries. On average, 44% of all upper secondary students are enrolled in VET programmes in the United Kingdom, a slightly higher proportion than the OECD average of 42% (Figure 1). Certain fields of study are more common than others at this level. In the United Kingdom, the most common broad field is arts and humanities with 21% of upper secondary vocational graduates earning a qualification in this field, compared to 6% on average across OECD countries.
- The organisation and delivery of upper secondary VET programmes varies considerably from country to country. In combined school- and work-based programmes, between 25% and 90% of the curriculum is taught as work-based learning, while the remainder is organised within the school environment. In the United Kingdom, 48% of upper secondary vocational students are enrolled in these type of programmes, compared to 34% on average across OECD countries (Figure 1).
- The average age of enrolment in upper secondary vocational programmes across OECD countries (21 years) tends to be higher than for general programmes (17 years). The United Kingdom follows this pattern, although the age difference across programme orientations is considerably larger: vocational upper secondary students are 24 years old on average compared to 15 years old for those enrolled in general programmes.
- To support upper secondary vocational students' transition to post-secondary education and improve their career prospects, many countries have created direct pathways from vocational programmes to higher levels of education. The United Kingdom is one of the few countries where the share of upper secondary students with direct access to tertiary education is larger among

those enrolled in a vocational orientation (52%) than in a general one (33%)<sup>1</sup>. However, both shares are lower than the average across OECD countries (70% for upper secondary students with a vocational orientation and 92% for those with a general one

- Compared to other OECD countries, young adults have similar employment prospects for upper secondary general and vocational qualifications at 84-85%. In contrast, on average across OECD countries, the employment rate of young adults with a vocational upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education is 9 percentage points higher than the employment rate of those with a general qualification at this level on average across OECD countries. The lower advantage of young adults with a vocational qualification in the United Kingdom is mostly due to the higher than average employment prospects of an upper secondary general qualification, at 85% compared to 73% on average across the OECD (Figure 1).
- On average across OECD countries, adults with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary vocational education have similar earnings to their peers with a general education at this level. While the difference in relative earnings between adults with general and vocational upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment is less than 5 percentage points in about one quarter of OECD and partner countries, it is 17 percentage points in favour of general qualifications in the United Kingdom, one of the highest across OECD countries.
- While the share of adults with an upper secondary vocational qualification has declined across generations in many countries, it has remained generally stable in the United Kingdom: 18% of 55-64 year-olds (older adults) and 19% of 25-34 year-olds (younger adults) held this qualification in 2019. However the attainment level across both age groups is lower than the average across OECD countries, where 26% of older adults and 21% of younger ones have attained an upper secondary vocational qualification.
- Spending per student on upper secondary vocational programmes tends to be higher than for general ones in most OECD countries due to the higher cost of equipment, lower student-to-teacher ratios, and work-based requirements of such programmes. On average across OECD countries, expenditure per student in upper secondary vocational programmes was USD 1 470 higher than in general programmes in 2017. However, the United Kingdom is one of the few countries with the opposite pattern: spending per student in upper secondary vocational programmes was USD 8 978 in 2017, USD 4 451 lower than in general ones. Human resources invested in vocational education is also lower than in general ones: While on average across OECD countries the ratio of students to teaching staff is similar in both upper secondary vocational and general programmes, there are 10 students more per teacher in vocational programmes (25) than in general ones (15) in the United Kingdom.

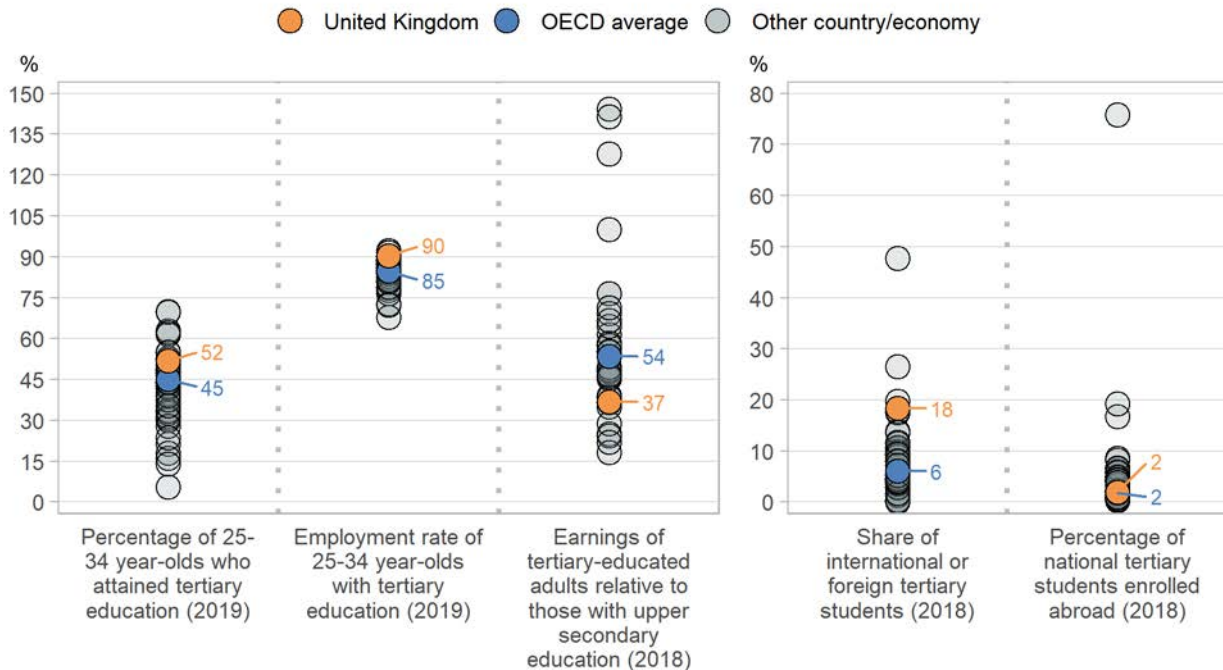
## The rising demand for tertiary education

- The expansion of tertiary education is a worldwide trend. Between 2009 and 2019, the share of 25-34 year-olds with a tertiary degree increased in all OECD and partner countries. In the United Kingdom, the share increased by 7 percentage points during this period, lower than the average increase across OECD countries (9 percentage points). In 2019, 52% of 25-34 year-olds had a tertiary degree in the United Kingdom compared to 45% on average across OECD countries (Figure 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Some of those students enrolled on upper secondary courses that do not lead directly to tertiary will progress on to upper secondary courses that do lead directly to tertiary.

- In the United Kingdom, the average age of first-time entrants to tertiary education in 2018 was 22 years, the same as the OECD average. Structural factors, such as admission procedures, the typical age at which students graduate from upper secondary education, or cultural perceptions of the value of professional or personal experiences outside of education may explain the differences in the average age of entry to tertiary education across countries.
- If current entry patterns continue, it is estimated that 49% of young adults will enter tertiary education for the first time in their life before the age of 25 on average across OECD countries (excluding international students). In the United Kingdom, 54% of young adults will enter tertiary education by that age and most of them will enter at bachelor's or equivalent level.
- While short-cycle tertiary programmes are generally designed to be vocationally oriented in the majority of OECD countries, half of students at this level are enrolled in general programmes in the United Kingdom. This level represents the second most common route of entry into tertiary education on average across OECD countries, after bachelor's programmes. If current entry patterns continue, 8% of adults are expected to enter short-cycle tertiary education before the age of 25 in the United Kingdom, compared to 10% on average across OECD countries.
- Higher educational attainment increases the likelihood of young adults being employed and is associated with higher incomes. In the United Kingdom, employment rates for young 25-34 year-olds are higher than the OECD average for all levels of educational attainment, with 67% for those with below upper secondary, 85% for upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary and 90% for tertiary attainment. However, a tertiary degree brings on a lower earnings premium in the United Kingdom than on average across OECD countries. In the United Kingdom, in 2018, 25-64 year-olds with a tertiary degree earned 37% more for full-time full-year work than those with upper secondary education compared to 54% more on average across OECD countries (Figure 2).
- International student mobility has been expanding quite consistently in the past twenty years. In 2018, 5.6 million tertiary students worldwide had crossed a border to study, more than twice the number in 2005. In the United Kingdom, the share of foreign or international students remained stable at 18% between 2014 and 2018. Meanwhile 2% of British tertiary students are enrolled abroad, a similar value to the total across OECD countries (Figure 2). Among students leaving the United Kingdom to study, the most popular destination country is the United States.
- Beyond the economic and employment outcomes, higher educational attainment brings greater social benefits. For example, those with a tertiary education are more likely to feel they have a say in what their government does. In 2018, on average across OECD countries participating in the European Social Survey, 52% of tertiary-educated adults agreed with this sentiment compared to 26% of those with below upper secondary education. In the United Kingdom, 52% of tertiary-educated adults feel this way compared with 30% of those with below upper secondary education.

**Figure 2. Snapshot of tertiary education**

**Note:** Only countries and economies with available data are shown. The years shown in parentheses is the most common year of reference for OECD and partner countries. Refer to the source table for more details.

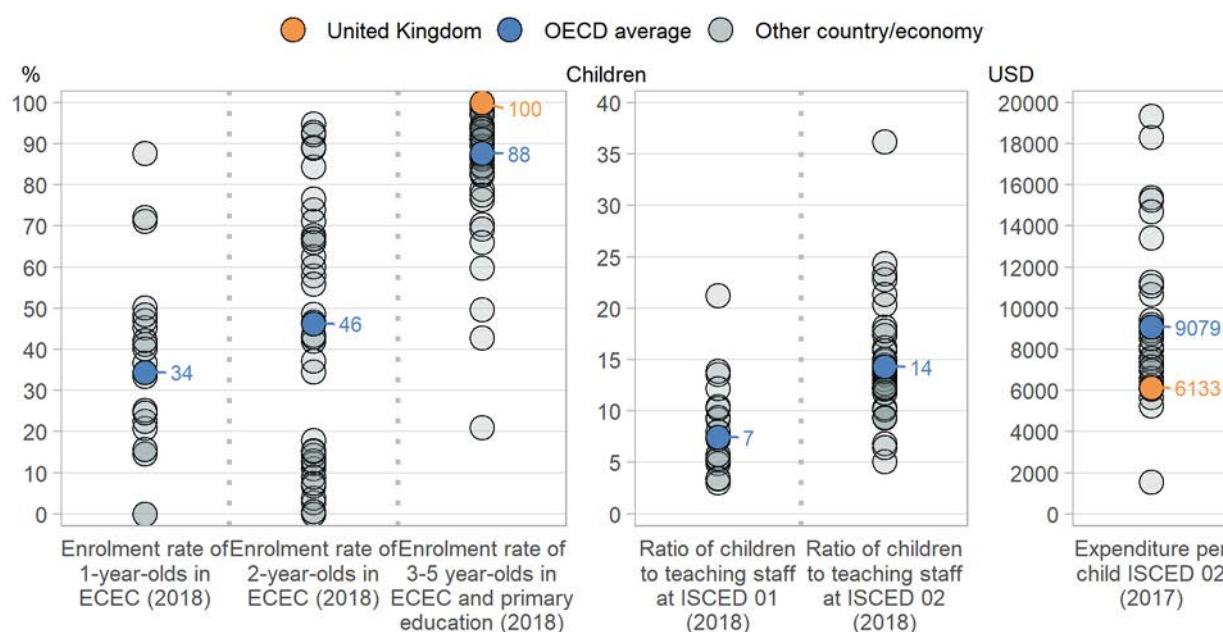
**Source:** OECD (2020), indicator A1, A3, A4 and B6. See Education at a Glance Database <http://stats.oecd.org/> for more information and Annex 3 for notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>).

## Starting strong

- In many OECD countries, ECEC begins for most children long before they turn 5 and there are universal legal entitlements to a place in ECEC services for at least one or two years before the start of compulsory schooling. While compulsory education begins at age 4-5 in the United Kingdom, all 3-5 year-olds are enrolled in ECEC programmes and primary education in the United Kingdom, compared to 88% on average across OECD countries (Figure 3).
- Public provision of early childhood education and care is an important factor in ensuring broad access to affordable ECEC. On average across OECD countries, more than one in two of the children in early childhood educational development services (ISCED 01) are enrolled in private institutions. In the United Kingdom, 82% of children enrolled in ISCED 01 programmes attend private ECEC institutions. Enrolment in private institutions is usually less common for 3-5 year-olds, who are usually enrolled in pre-primary education (ISCED 02), than for younger children. In the United Kingdom, 59% of children attending pre-primary education are enrolled in private institutions, compared to about one in three children on average across OECD countries.
- Sustained financial support is critical for the growth and quality of ECEC programmes. In 2017, annual total expenditure in pre-primary settings averaged USD 6 133 per child in the United Kingdom<sup>2</sup>, lower than the average across OECD countries (USD 9 079) (Figure 3).

<sup>2</sup> This figure will be an underestimate as any children who are enrolled in two different types of institutions will be counted twice.

Figure 3. Snapshot of early childhood education and care



**Note:** Only countries and economies with available data are shown. Annual expenditure per child is shown in equivalent USD converted using PPPs. The years shown in parentheses is the most common year of reference for OECD and partner countries. Refer to the source table for more details.

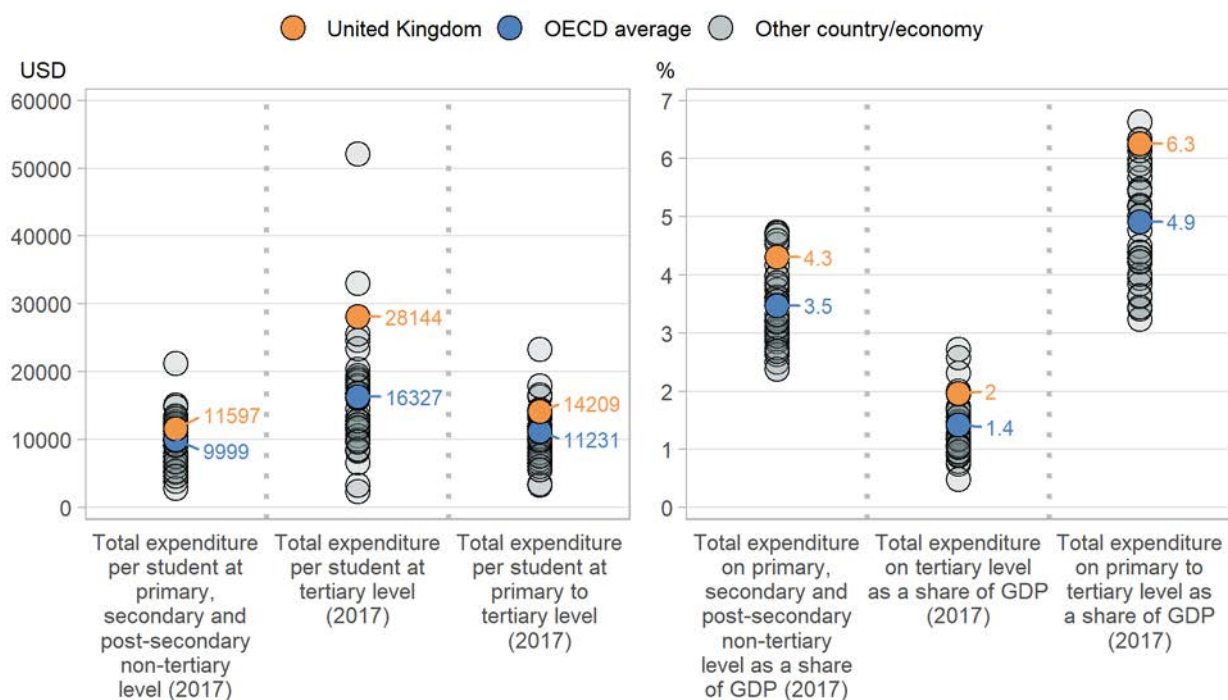
**Source:** OECD (2020), indicator B2. See Education at a Glance Database <http://stats.oecd.org/> for more information and Annex 3 for notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>).

## Investing in education

- Annual expenditure per student on educational institutions from primary to tertiary level provides an indication of the investment countries make in each student. In 2017, the United Kingdom spent more on primary to tertiary educational institutions per full-time student than the OECD average, investing a total of USD 14 209 per student compared to USD 11 231 on average across OECD countries (Figure 4).
- The way education is provided influences how resources are allocated between levels of education and between public and private institutions. In 2017, the United Kingdom spent USD 11 597 per student at non-tertiary level (primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education), USD 1 599 higher than the OECD average of USD 9 999. At tertiary level, the United Kingdom invested USD 28 144 per student, USD 11 817 more than the OECD average (Figure 4).
- Between 2012 and 2017, expenditure per student from primary to tertiary education increased by an average annual growth rate of 1.3% across OECD countries. In the United Kingdom, expenditure on educational institutions grew at an average rate of 2.4% a year, while the number of students grew on average by 1.1% per year. This resulted in an average annual growth rate of 1.2% in expenditure per student over this period.
- The United Kingdom spent the fourth highest proportion of its gross domestic product (GDP) on primary to tertiary educational institution among OECD countries. In 2017, the United Kingdom spent on average 6.3% of GDP on primary to tertiary educational institutions, 1.3 percentage points higher than the OECD average. Across levels of education, the United Kingdom devoted an above average share of GDP at both non-tertiary and tertiary levels of education (Figure 4).

- Tuition fees in England are among the highest for a bachelor's programme across countries with available data: national students in government-dependent private institutions were charged USD 12 038 per year in 2016/17, more than three times the amount they paid on average in 2006/07. Public transfers to the private sector play an important role in the financing of tertiary education and in providing financial support to students in the United Kingdom. They account for 26% of the total funds devoted to tertiary educational institutions, the highest share across OECD countries. Almost all students benefit from publicly subsidized loans with 94% of students graduating with some form of debt. Loan repayment is contingent on a minimum yearly income of USD 30 500. However 7 out of 10 students benefit from some form of loan forgiveness and 40% of loans are not repaid.

Figure 4. Snapshot of the financial resources invested in educational institutions



**Note:** Only countries and economies with available data are shown. Expenditure in national currencies is converted into equivalent USD by dividing the national currency figure by the purchasing power parity (PPP) index for GDP. The years shown in parentheses is the most common year of reference for OECD and partner countries. Refer to the source table for more details.

**Source:** OECD (2020), indicator C1 and C2. See Education at a Glance Database <http://stats.oecd.org/> for more information and Annex 3 for notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>).

- Capital costs represent a lower than average share of expenditure on primary to tertiary institutions in the United Kingdom. At primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary level, capital costs account for 4% of total spending on educational institutions, 4 percentage points below the OECD average. At the tertiary level, capital costs represent 13%, higher than the average across OECD countries of 10%.
- Compensation of teachers and other staff employed in educational institutions represents the largest share of current expenditure from primary to tertiary education. Staff compensation tends to make up a smaller share of current expenditure on tertiary institutions due to the higher costs of facilities and equipment at this level. In the United Kingdom, staff compensation represents 59%

of total current expenditure on tertiary institutions compared to 78% at non-tertiary levels. On average across OECD countries, the share is 67% at tertiary level and 77% at non-tertiary level.

### Working conditions of school teachers

- The salaries of school staff, and in particular teachers and school heads, represent the largest single expenditure in formal education. Their salary levels also have a direct impact on the attractiveness of the teaching profession. Statutory salaries of teachers (and school heads) in public educational institutions increase with the level of education they teach. In most OECD countries and economies, they also increase with experience. On average, the statutory salaries of teachers with maximum qualifications at the top of their salary scales are 78-80% higher than those of teachers with the minimum qualifications at the start of their career at pre-primary, primary and general lower and upper secondary levels. In England and Scotland, maximum salaries are 152% and 33% higher than minimum salaries at each level of education respectively.
- Teachers' actual salaries in England are similar to the average across OECD countries, but remain lower than those of tertiary-educated workers at all levels of education. While teachers' average actual salaries at pre-primary, primary and general secondary levels of education are 80-94% of the earnings of tertiary-educated workers on average across OECD countries and economies, the proportion ranges from 83% at primary level to 92% at lower and upper secondary level in England.
- The average number of teaching hours per year required of a typical teacher in public educational institutions in OECD countries tends to decrease as the level of education increases, from 993 hours at pre-primary level, to 778 hours at primary level, 712 hours at lower secondary level (general programmes) and 680 hours at upper secondary level (general programmes). In Scotland, teachers are required to teach 855 hours at all levels of education.
- Large proportions of teachers in many OECD countries will reach retirement age in the next decade, while the size of the school-age population is projected to increase in some countries, putting many governments under pressure to recruit and train new teachers. In the United Kingdom, 29% of primary teachers are considered young teachers (under the age of 30), more than twice the OECD average of 12%. On average across OECD countries, the proportion of young teachers decreases at other levels of education, to 10% in lower secondary education and 8% in upper secondary education. In the United Kingdom, the proportion of young teachers decreases to 22% at lower secondary level and to 17% at upper secondary level (Figure 5). Between 2005 and 2018, the proportion of young teachers at upper secondary level increased by 4 percentage points in the United Kingdom, whereas it fell by 4 percentage points on average across OECD countries during this period.

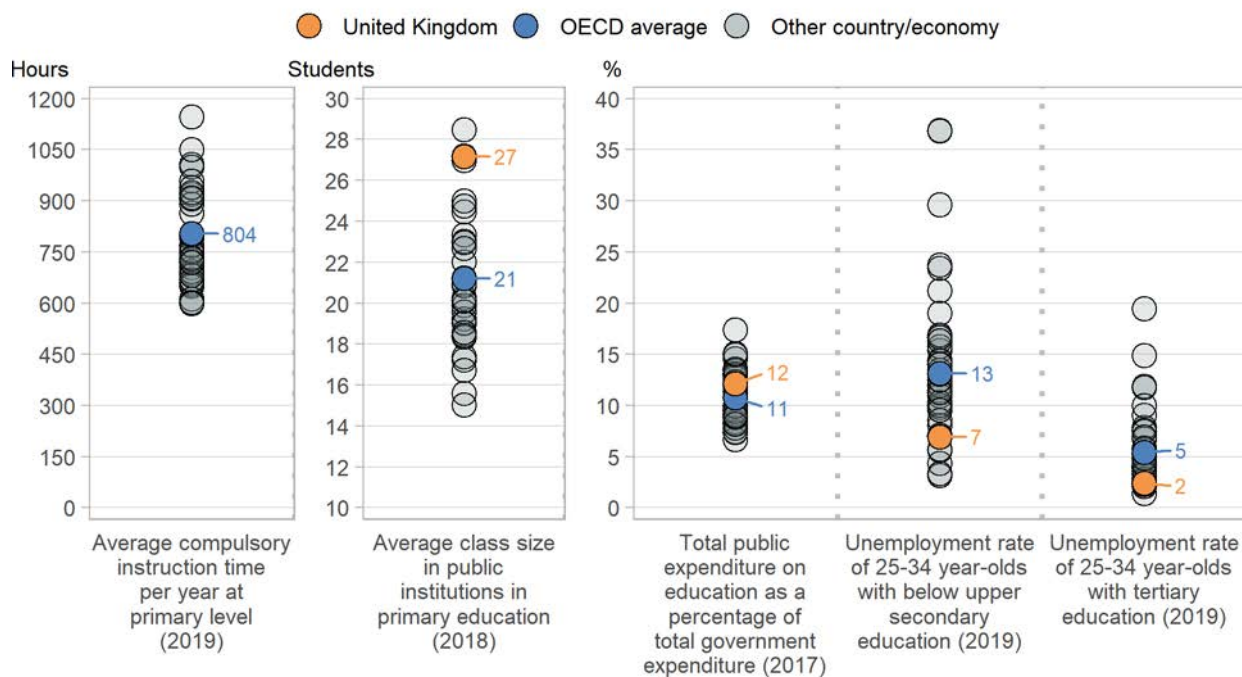
### The impact of COVID-19 on education

- The global 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has sent shockwaves around the world. In a first effort to contain the virus, many countries have imposed a lockdown and schools and/or universities have closed for several months across all OECD and partner countries. In the United Kingdom, closures were nationwide from 23 March 2020. Schools started progressively reopening on 1 June 2020 in England, 29 June in Wales, 11 August in Scotland and 24 August in Northern Ireland. By the end of June, the United Kingdom had experienced 14 weeks of effective school closures in some form, the same as the average across OECD countries (UNESCO, 2020). However, the actual impact may have been less severe as these periods included scheduled school breaks. In the United Kingdom, this period includes two weeks of Easter holiday.
- School reopening in the context of the pandemic is contingent on the capacity to maintain a safe distance of 1-2 metres between pupils and staff. Countries with smaller class sizes may find it

easier to comply with new restrictions on social distancing. In the United Kingdom, the average class size at primary level is 27 students in public institutions, which is larger than the OECD average of 21. In public lower secondary institutions, there are 24 students per class in the United Kingdom, compared to 23 students per class on average across OECD countries. However, the need to reduce class sizes may depend on other factors such as physical space, the availability of rooms and staff, and personal decisions by students and staff on whether to return to school (Figure 6).

- While there is uncertainty about the likely overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education expenditure, governments will face difficult decisions on the allocation of resources, as government funds are injected into the economy and the health sector. In 2017, public spending on primary to tertiary education as a share of government expenditure in the United Kingdom was 12%, slightly higher than the OECD average of 11% (Figure 6).
- As unemployment rises, private funding of education may also be at risk. In the United Kingdom, the impact may be most severe at the levels of education that rely most heavily on household expenditure, in particular early childhood education and care and tertiary education. In pre-primary education, private sources accounted for 41% of total expenditure in the United Kingdom in 2017, more than double the OECD average of 17%. At tertiary level, 71% of total expenditure comes from the private sector, compared to 29% on average across OECD countries.

**Figure 6. Snapshot of indicators relevant to the impact of COVID-19 on education**



**Note:** Only countries and economies with available data are shown. The years shown in parentheses is the most common year of reference for OECD and partner countries. Refer to the source table for more details.

**Source:** OECD (2020), indicator A3, D1, D2, and C4. See Education at a Glance Database <http://stats.oecd.org/> for more information and Annex 3 for notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>).

- The crisis may have a severe impact on the internationalisation of higher education as the delivery of online course material and travel restrictions may raise questions among international students'

perception on the value of obtaining their degree from a foreign institution. The United Kingdom, which accounts for 8% of the market share for international tertiary students, may be more strongly affected, although the UK's new student visa policy and blended learning concessions may mitigate declines to an extent. About a quarter of international students studying in the United Kingdom come from China.

- Unemployment may increase, as the economy struggles to cope with the reduced activity that resulted from the lockdown. Those with lower educational attainment are the most vulnerable, as they are the most unlikely to benefit from remote working. In 2019, before the pandemic hit, 7% of 25-34 year-old adults with below upper secondary education in the United Kingdom were unemployed compared to 2% of tertiary-educated young adults (Figure 6). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the unemployment of young adults without an upper secondary education increased by 5 percentage points between 2008 and 2009 in the United Kingdom compared to 0.7 percentage points among those with tertiary education.

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## More information

**For more information on Education at a Glance 2020 and to access the full set of Indicators, visit [www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance-19991487.htm](http://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance-19991487.htm)**

For more information on the methodology used during the data collection for each indicator, the references to the sources and the specific notes for each country, visit Annex 3 of the publication (<https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>).

For general information on methodology, please refer to the OECD Handbook for Internationally Comparative Education Statistics: Concepts, Standards, Definitions and Classifications (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264304444-en>).

Updated data can be found on line at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-data-en> and by following the StatLinks  under the tables and charts in the publication.

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<https://gpseducation.oecd.org/>

The calculation on the number of weeks of school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic is based on data from UNESCO (UNESCO, 2020). For general information on the methodology considered for the data, please refer to the [methodological note](#).

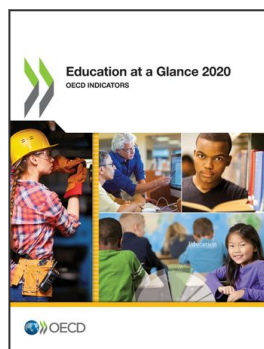
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On 15 May 2020, the OECD Council invited Costa Rica to become a Member. While Costa Rica is included in the OECD averages reported in this note, at the time of its preparation, Costa Rica was in the process of completing its domestic procedures for ratification and the deposit of the instrument of accession to the OECD Convention was pending.

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