

# EDITORIAL

## Education's promise to all

We are all born equal, but we are not all born with the same opportunities. Some will be born to wealthy families, others will struggle to make ends meet. Some will grow up in an environment of conflict and turmoil, and will face the challenges of displacement and settling in a country that is not their own, others will benefit from a climate of social stability and prosperity their whole lives. Some will cope with a disability, struggling to learn to perform even basic tasks, while others may never realise the fortune of their good health. The conditions and social environments we are allotted at birth may seem as random as a lottery draw, yet they will define our starting position on the path of life by affecting not only the opportunities available to us, but also the social and emotional capital needed to ease our way.

“The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life,” said Socrates to Adeimantus in Plato’s *Republic*. Indeed, education is the cornerstone of individuals’ progression through life. No one would refute that every child, every human being, deserves the same opportunities to gain skills and progress through society regardless of their gender, socio-economic, ethnic or cultural background. Equity is indeed one of the fundamental values on which so many countries around the world have chosen to build their societies.

In addition to the strong moral and ethical grounds supporting the demand for equity, there is also sound evidence of the economic and social benefits of an inclusive society, as our Inclusive Growth Initiative has highlighted. Higher educational attainment leads to higher skills, which lead to higher lifetime earnings. The quality of education can be a strong predictor of a country’s economic prosperity. Shortfalls in academic achievement are extremely costly, as governments must then find ways to compensate for them, and ensure the social and economic welfare of all.

The impact of skills inequality, however, extends much farther than a nation’s economic wealth; it ripples out to all aspects of society such as, in poorer health, in a climate of violence or social unrest – all of which show how inequality can have long-term, and often tragic, consequences for individuals and communities. This is why the *OECD Framework for Inclusive Growth* emphasises investing in people and places that have been left behind, while supporting inclusive labour markets. Using a dashboard of indicators, the Framework identifies the mechanisms through which inequalities unfold, and offers suggestions on how countries can design and implement policies that promote opportunities for all. Fighting inequality in education is central to all these efforts.

Recognising these challenges, this year’s edition of *Education at a Glance* focuses on equity in education. It shows that although educational attainment increased significantly over the past decade, inequities that start early tend to accumulate throughout life, first in education and then in the labour market, and through a number of channels: socio-economic status, gender, immigrant background and geographic location.

Among the channels of inequity considered, socio-economic status has the strongest impact on participation in education and learning, and on economic and social outcomes. Children without tertiary-educated mothers are less likely to be enrolled in early childhood education and care programmes. Although it is widely acknowledged that a child’s cognitive development begins well before he or she reaches school age, governments still spend less on this level of education than on any other. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are also less likely to pursue further education opportunities as inequalities build on each other throughout life. Those without tertiary-educated parents are more likely to enrol in vocational than in general upper secondary programmes and are less likely to complete those programmes. This, in turn, affects their participation in higher education, where the share of entrants without a tertiary-educated parent is small. Still, two in three adults from low-educated families attain a higher level of education than their parents, a sign that those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are now acquiring more skills.

Participation in higher education today matters more than ever. About one in three children of manual workers is also a manual worker. Technological change, digitalisation and innovation have placed a significant premium on advanced skills, as lower-skilled jobs are being squeezed out of the market. Those who have attained only upper secondary education will earn 65% as much as a tertiary graduate, on average, perpetuating this vicious cycle over the next generations. On average, it takes around four to five generations for children of families in the bottom earnings decile to attain the mean level of earnings across OECD countries.

Gender differences also remain a reality despite the many efforts to reduce or eliminate them; but the dynamics play out differently in school and in the labour market. Boys are more likely than girls to repeat a grade, drop out of school, and not attain a tertiary education. However, despite their better performance at school, women still have worse employment and earning outcomes. This is partly the result of the different choices men and women make when deciding on a field of study. Although there have been widespread attempts to encourage gender diversity across different careers, women are still less likely to enrol in and graduate from high-paying fields at the tertiary level. For example, even though engineering skills are in high demand today, only 6% of women graduates complete an engineering degree compared to 25% of men. Cultural norms and preconceived notions of women's roles in life, absorbed during childhood, still influence these choices, often unconsciously.

Migration patterns are also profoundly changing our communities and education systems. Fostering a cohesive society depends on the capacity to integrate immigrants and ensure that they develop the skills required to contribute to the labour market and to their communities. However, first- and second-generation immigrants are less likely to enter and graduate from bachelor's or long first-degree tertiary programmes in countries with available data; and foreign-born adults are also less likely than their native-born peers to participate in formal and/or non-formal education throughout their lifetime.

At first glance, it appears Socrates's words ring true: those who start at a disadvantage are less likely to have access to a high-quality learning environment or acquire the skills or will to develop and grow in society. But more than a prophecy, these words are, in fact, a call to action for education systems, a reminder that providing a high-quality, nurturing learning environment can help narrow these opportunity gaps.

This is exactly the ambition framed by world leaders when they set out to define the Sustainable Development Goals for education. By committing themselves to ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030, they set in motion one of the most comprehensive global education agendas ever attempted. Among the ten targets of this goal, target 4.5 is dedicated to equity and specifically aims to "eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations". In addition to addressing gender disparities, the agenda invites countries to monitor equity along a range of other dimensions that are as relevant for developed countries as for developing countries.

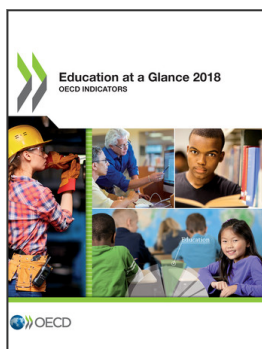
Given the transversal nature of inequities in education throughout the 2030 agenda, this year's *Education at a Glance* marks a substantial contribution to all Sustainable Development Goals by dedicating its chapter on the Sustainable Development Goals specifically to target 4.5, providing an assessment of where OECD and partner countries stand on their way to achieving their equity objectives. Results show that achieving equitable participation in education and quality in learning outcomes remains a challenge for many OECD countries. The gender gap in the participation rate of adults in formal and non-formal education varies greatly across countries, with women in some countries, and men in other countries, less likely to participate. Disparities in achieving equity in learning outcomes are also stark: in all OECD countries, the mathematics performance of 15-year-olds is strongly associated with students' socio-economic status and the location, urban or rural, of their school. In most countries, this association has not weakened at all over the past decade

Every individual has a potential for greatness, and deserves the opportunity to grow, develop and contribute fully to society. Achieving equity in education will require a range of interventions through different policy mechanisms: targeting funding and resources for education to the most vulnerable; preventing grade repetition and encouraging those from minority backgrounds to enter mainstream education, with its greater opportunities; ensuring teachers are equipped with the right training and pedagogical knowledge to identify and support struggling students; and increasing access to and provision of affordable, high-quality early childhood education.

A lot has already been achieved in bridging some of the opportunity gaps our children face, but this edition of *Education at a Glance* reminds us that the path to achieving equity in education remains strewn with obstacles. We have the responsibility to ensure that personal or social circumstances do not impede students from realising their potential. This should be education's promise to all.



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