



Foreword

Equipping citizens with the skills necessary to achieve their full potential, participate in an increasingly interconnected global economy, and ultimately convert better jobs into better lives is a central preoccupation of policy makers around the world. Results from the OECD's recent Survey of Adult Skills show that highly skilled adults are twice as likely to be employed and almost three times more likely to earn an above-median salary than poorly skilled adults. In other words, poor skills severely limit people's access to better-paying and more rewarding jobs. Highly skilled people are also more likely to volunteer, see themselves as actors rather than as objects of political processes, and are more likely to trust others. Fairness, integrity and inclusiveness in public policy thus all hinge on the skills of citizens.

The ongoing economic crisis has only increased the urgency of investing in the acquisition and development of citizens' skills – both through the education system and in the workplace. At a time when public budgets are tight and there is little room for further monetary and fiscal stimulus, investing in structural reforms to boost productivity, such as education and skills development, is key to future growth. Indeed, investment in these areas is essential to support the recovery, as well as to address long-standing issues such as youth unemployment and gender inequality.

In this context, more and more countries are looking beyond their own borders for evidence of the most successful and efficient policies and practices. Indeed, in a global economy, success is no longer measured against national standards alone, but against the best-performing and most rapidly improving education systems. Over the past decade, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, has become the world's premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems. But the evidence base that PISA has produced goes well beyond statistical benchmarking. By identifying the characteristics of high-performing education systems PISA allows governments and educators to identify effective policies that they can then adapt to their local contexts.

The results from the PISA 2012 assessment, which was conducted at a time when many of the 65 participating countries and economies were grappling with the effects of the crisis, reveal wide differences in education outcomes, both within and across countries. Using the data collected in previous PISA rounds, we have been able to track the evolution of student performance over time and across subjects. Of the 64 countries and economies with comparable data, 40 improved their average performance in at least one subject. Top performers such as Shanghai in China or Singapore were able to further extend their lead, while countries like Brazil, Mexico, Tunisia and Turkey achieved major improvements from previously low levels of performance.

Some education systems have demonstrated that it is possible to secure strong and equitable learning outcomes at the same time as achieving rapid improvements. Of the 13 countries and economies that significantly improved their mathematics performance between 2003 and 2012, three also show improvements in equity in education during the same period, and another nine improved their performance while maintaining an already high level of equity – proving that countries do not have to sacrifice high performance to achieve equity in education opportunities.

Nonetheless, PISA 2012 results show wide differences between countries in mathematics performance. The equivalent of almost six years of schooling, 245 score points, separates the highest and lowest average performances



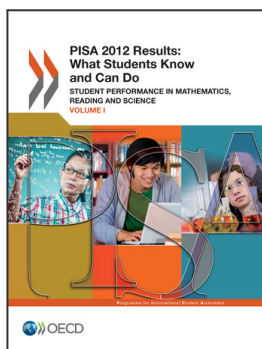
of the countries that took part in the PISA 2012 mathematics assessment. The difference in mathematics performances within countries is even greater, with over 300 points – the equivalent of more than seven years of schooling – often separating the highest- and the lowest-achieving students in a country. Clearly, all countries and economies have excellent students, but few have enabled all students to excel.

The report also reveals worrying gender differences in students' attitudes towards mathematics: even when girls perform as well as boys in mathematics, they report less perseverance, less motivation to learn mathematics, less belief in their own mathematics skills, and higher levels of anxiety about mathematics. While the average girl underperforms in mathematics compared with the average boy, the gender gap in favour of boys is even wider among the highest-achieving students. These findings have serious implications not only for higher education, where young women are already under-represented in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields of study, but also later on, when these young women enter the labour market. This confirms the findings of the OECD Gender Strategy, which identifies some of the factors that create – and widen – the gender gap in education, labour and entrepreneurship. Supporting girls' positive attitudes towards and investment in learning mathematics will go a long way towards narrowing this gap.

PISA 2012 also finds that the highest-performing school systems are those that allocate educational resources more equitably among advantaged and disadvantaged schools and that grant more autonomy over curricula and assessments to individual schools. A belief that all students can achieve at a high level and a willingness to engage all stakeholders in education – including students, through such channels as seeking student feedback on teaching practices – are hallmarks of successful school systems.

PISA is not only an accurate indicator of students' abilities to participate fully in society after compulsory school, but also a powerful tool that countries and economies can use to fine-tune their education policies. There is no single combination of policies and practices that will work for everyone, everywhere. Every country has room for improvement, even the top performers. That's why the OECD produces this triennial report on the state of education across the globe: to share evidence of the best policies and practices and to offer our timely and targeted support to help countries provide the best education possible for all of their students. With high levels of youth unemployment, rising inequality, a significant gender gap, and an urgent need to boost growth in many countries, we have no time to lose. The OECD stands ready to support policy makers in this challenging and crucial endeavour.

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