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Education Today
The OECD Perspective

Chapter 3

Transitions beyond Initial Education

OECD analyses have shed extensive light on the issues, arrangements, and policies surrounding the transitions beyond compulsory schooling. Extended education with at least completion of the upper secondary cycle is increasingly the norm right across the OECD countries. Alongside shared patterns are marked differences on such matters as the relative proportions who engage in general or vocational study, as well as the possibilities to combine education with employment. OECD studies on guidance, information systems and qualifications have shown that there is much scope for improving transitions. Vocational education and training have not been studied by OECD so extensively until recently and this is now being addressed. Policy orientations have stressed the need to improve the existence, diversity, relevance and transparency of different pathways, while protecting those left most vulnerable as others advance to further education and employment.

3.1. Key findings and conclusions

Secondary education has become the dominant experience for 17-year-olds in OECD countries: At age 17, over 8 in 10 young people in OECD countries are in secondary education (82%). In some it is the quasi-totality of the age group at 90% or more (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Korea, Norway, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and Sweden). 17-year-olds in education are only the minority in Mexico (43%) and Turkey (34%). Not all countries have figures for 17-year-olds already in post-secondary non-tertiary education but among those that do, Austria stands out as having a sizeable minority of this teenage group (15%) transferred to such programmes. And in some countries, a small number have already launched on tertiary education even at this young age (the highest proportions being in Australia [4%], Canada [7%], Greece [14%], Ireland [6%], the Netherlands [6%], New Zealand [4%], Turkey [6%], and the United States [4%]).

📖 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, Chapter C.

Nearly three-quarters of 18-year-olds are still in education across OECD countries (73%), with already over a fifth in post-secondary education: In certain countries, the large majority of the age group continues in secondary education at 18 years: 80-90% in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, and Norway, and over 90% in Finland (93%), Poland (92%), and Sweden (93%). In others, significant numbers have already embarked on tertiary programmes – a third or more of the age band in Belgium (36%), Canada (36%), Ireland (34%), and the United States (40%), rising to two-thirds in Greece (69%) and Korea (66%). Over a quarter of Austrian and Irish 18-year-olds (both at 26%) are in non-tertiary post-secondary programmes.

📖 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, Chapter C.

Completion of upper secondary education has become the norm over the past 20-30 years: Compared with more than three-quarters younger adults with upper secondary level education (78%), this stood at just under two-thirds for the older 45-54-year-olds in 2006 (65%) and just above half (55%) for the 55-64-year-olds. In certain countries, the increase in attainment between the younger and older adult cohorts separated by 30 years of age is dramatic: in Greece, it goes from 34% to 75%; in Spain, from 27% to 64%; and especially in Korea where it has exploded from 37% to a universal 97%.

📖 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, Chapter A.

For young adults across OECD countries, very nearly 7 years can now be expected to be spent in education between the ages of 15 and 29: Synthesising current enrolment patterns for young people in their latter teens and twenties, not far off half (6.7 years) of the 15 years between mid-teenage years and the end of their twenties will now be spent in education. Eight years or more of this age span is spent in education in Denmark, Finland (women), Germany (men), Iceland, the Netherlands (men), Poland (women), and Sweden (women). The "educational expectancy" of this transition age group tends to be longer among young women than young men though there are still exceptions to this (Australia, Austria, Germany, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Turkey).
📖 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, Chapter C.

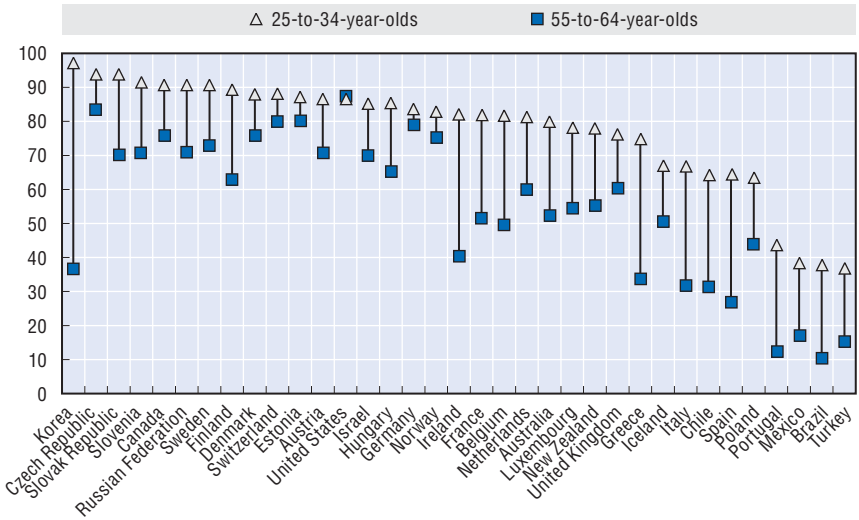
A relatively even balance between students enrolled in upper secondary general and vocational programmes across OECD as a whole hides very large differences across countries: Just over half of upper secondary level students (53.8%) are in "general" and the others are in pre-vocational and vocational tracks and those combining work with school. Over 65% are in "general" tracks in Canada, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Portugal and the United States. On the other hand, over 65% are in the vocational tracks in Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, the Netherlands, and the Slovak Republic.
📖 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, Chapter C.

The educational foundation – effective professionalised pedagogy and guidance – in vocational education and training (VET) programmes is often under-developed: Teaching vocational subjects requires special competence but, outside systems in the German tradition, pedagogical and teaching issues tend to be neglected. This is compounded by the perception of VET as "low status" which can impact on the quality of teacher recruits. Career guidance for job-bound, vocational careers is under-developed, in part because it is assumed that occupational choice is already clear. Attention to educational and vocational issues tends to be squeezed by the personal and social guidance needs of a minority of students with particular difficulties.
📖 *Education Policy Analysis – 2004 Edition*, Chapter 1; *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap*, 2004, Chapter 3.

Certain countries do not mix education with employment together for young adults ... How the average 6.7 of the 15 years between 15 and 29 years will be experienced – in particular whether it will include being in employment status while also in education – varies sharply from country to country. There are some where these years will be primarily devoted to education without mixing this with employment status. For instance, less than 12 months on

Figure 3.1. **Completion of upper secondary education is now the norm across OECD countries**

Population attaining at least upper secondary education (2005), percentage by age group



Note: Countries are in descending order left to right based on the percentage of the 25-to-34-year-olds having attained at least upper secondary education.

Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/401474646362

average from age 15 to 29 are counted as being in both education and employment (combining males and females) in the following countries: Belgium (0.5 in the total 6.5 years in education between these ages), Greece (0.3 in 6.3), Hungary (0.7 in 7.1), Ireland (0.9 in 5.2), Italy (0.5 in 6.4), Japan (0.7 in 5.7 up to the age of 24 years), Luxembourg (0.3 in 7.4), Portugal (0.6 in 5.9), the Slovak Republic (0.9 in 6.3), Spain (0.9 in 5.6), and Turkey (0.4 in 3.1).

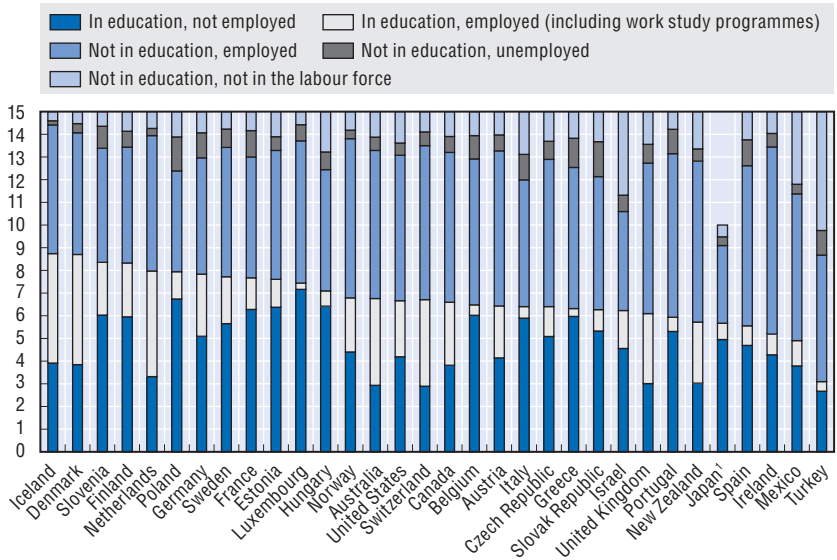
… in others, being in "education" means being in employment as well for many young people: There are other countries with a "mixed model" where an important part of the years in education are counted as being simultaneously in employment, including on work study programmes. In some countries indeed, more than half of this time in education will have the double status combining it with employment (Australia, Denmark, Iceland [for women], the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom [for women]).

📖 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, Chapter C.

Across the OECD, 6.5% of 15-19-year-olds are not in education or employment, with more than double this level (14.6%) for 20-24-year-olds and significantly more in some countries: The countries where the shares of

Figure 3.2. **Expected years in education and not in education for 15-to-29-year-olds (2006)**

Division of the 15 years, by education, work and unemployment status



Note: Countries are ranked in descending order left to right according to expected years in education.
1. Data refer to 15-to-24-year olds.

Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/402165765880

the teenage group out of education and employment in 2006 reach double figures are Italy (11.8%), Mexico (17% in 2004), New Zealand (11.3%), Spain (10.1%), with a high 37.7% in Turkey in 2005. The numbers out of education and employment among adults in their early twenties tend to be significantly higher: more than 20% of the 20-24-year-olds are in this situation in Italy (22.8%), Mexico (27.4%, 2004), Poland (20.7%), and the Slovak Republic (22.8%), with very high levels (47.1%) in Turkey in 2005.

📖 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, Chapter C.

The problems faced by those who do not complete upper secondary education increase and are long lasting in countries where there are relatively fewer of them with this low attainment: A group of young people – defined for the OECD study as young adults aged 20-24 who do not have upper secondary education and are not currently in education – are facing difficult transitions from education to work and are at great risk of marginalisation. The numbers falling into this at-risk group varied from 4.6% in Norway in 2002 to as high as 48.8% in Portugal. A low level of education becomes a greater handicap as a

country's global level of qualification goes up and as post-secondary education in different forms spreads among its population. What is worse, more experience – a longer potential presence on the labour market – does not make up for an initial deficit of educational credentials. The consequences of this initial lack of education may thus be long-lasting.
📖 *From Education to Work: A Difficult Transition for Young Adults with Low Levels of Education*, 2005, Chapter 2.

In most countries, there is a drop in the students at upper secondary level with special needs and receiving additional resources compared with the primary and lower secondary levels: For students with disabilities, a median of 1.6% receive additional funding at this level as against 3.3% for lower secondary. (The only exception to the drop between levels among the countries with data is England.) Similarly, the proportion getting additional financial resources specifically for learning difficulties is lower at the upper than the lower secondary level, again with the exception of England. For those recognised as having disadvantages and being thereby entitled to additional resources, there is again a drop between the two levels in most countries, with only the Slovak Republic showing a marginal increase from lower to upper secondary.
📖 *Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages: Policies, Statistics and Indicators – 2007 Edition*, Chapter 4.

There is an important gap between the developed cognitive capacity in mid teenagers ("high horsepower") and their emotional maturity ("poor steering"): The insights provided by neuroscience on adolescence are especially important as this is the period when so much takes place in an individual's educational career. The secondary phase of education brings key decisions to be made with long-lasting consequences regarding personal, educational, and career options. At this time, young people are already well-developed in terms of cognitive capacity ("high horsepower") but they are immature ("poor steering"), not just because of inexperience but because of under-developed neurological emotional development.
📖 *Understanding the Brain: The Birth of a Learning Science*, 2007, "Conclusions and Future Prospects".

3.2. Orientations for policy

There are different ingredients for successful arrangements and systems, over and above a healthy economy, which may be more or less present and combine in different ways but which are all conducive to effective transition:

- **Well-organised pathways that connect initial education with work and further study:** The chances of solid transition outcomes are higher where

young people have available learning pathways and qualifications frameworks that are clearly defined, well organised and open, designed and developed in a lifelong learning perspective, with effective connections to post-school destinations, whether work or further study.

- **Effective institutions and processes:** Countries with good transition outcomes are characterised by strong institutional frameworks to support the transition, normally developed over an extensive period. Such institutional frameworks appear to be most effective when they are able to combine central regulation with local flexibility.
- **Widespread opportunities to combine workplace experience with education:** Workplace experience combined with education can be important in order to: improve the quality of learning by making it more applied and relevant; develop important work-related knowledge and skills; have a positive impact on the firm as a learning organisation.
- **Good information and guidance:** Good information and guidance become increasingly important as the education and employment choices that face young people change and become more complex. This in turn calls for approaches that place much more emphasis on active career planning and development rather than "matching" to particular jobs or programmes.
- **Tightly-knit safety nets for those at risk:** High rates of upper secondary completion and achievement are important in reducing the numbers at risk and in reducing disparities between social groups; they are also important in making safety nets more affordable for those who do drop out of school.

📖 *From Initial Education to Working Life: Making Transitions Work*, 2000, Chapter 4.

The lifelong learning approach entails a broad conception of foundation learning at the end of the secondary cycle: Most countries report reforms in this area that are aimed at raising the level of qualification of school-leavers and retaining more young people in upper secondary education. These include:

- **Increasing the relevance of initial education to work and the value of work-related qualifications in the job market:** This general aim to create a better match between the objectives of education systems and the needs of the firm can be done in various ways, including, for instance, the broadening and development of new frameworks for vocational education for young people in schools (as in Australia) or through reinforcing collaboration between the different partners (as in the reform of the dual system in French-speaking Belgium).
- **Broadening criteria for reforming school qualifications:** Looking beyond particular knowledge or competence sets, reforms include the recognition of prior learning (*e.g.* Australia); recognition of achievement across a whole

programme rather than specific subject attainment (*e.g.* Ireland); the development of a national certificate using "achievement standards" developed for the school curriculum and unit standards from the national qualifications framework (*e.g.* New Zealand).

- **Developing better progression routes for young people within and between qualifications:** Examples include enabling the easier vertical and horizontal transfer from one educational level to another (Slovenia) and flexible dual trajectories combining learning and work (the Netherlands).

📖 *Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning*, 2007, Chapter 2.

Enhance the leadership capacity and function of guidance services as well as co-ordination between education and employment: Current mechanisms for leadership and co-ordination are generally weak though being tackled in some places (such as Luxembourg, Norway and the United Kingdom). Governments can provide strategic leadership, exercising this in partnership with other stakeholders: education and training providers, employers, trade unions, community agencies, students, parents, consumers, and career guidance practitioners. Strong co-operation between education and employment portfolios is particularly important so as to integrate educational and occupational information and to include a strong labour market perspective in schools' career guidance programmes.

📖 *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap*, 2004, Chapter 9

Recognise the gap between the cognitive capacity and emotional maturity in teenagers to avoid definitive choices: The gap between intellectual and emotional capacity cannot imply that important choices should simply be delayed until adulthood when the gap closes. It does suggest, with the additional powerful weight of neurological evidence, that the options taken should not take the form of definitively closing doors.

📖 *Understanding the Brain: The Birth of a Learning Science*, 2007, Chapter 2.

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