Editorial

In the past two decades, the share of young adults with advanced qualifications has risen sharply across OECD countries: 48% of 24-34 year-olds had a tertiary degree in 2021, compared to just 27% in 2000. This is due to the growing need for advanced skills in labour markets and has profound implications for our societies and the future of education.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that educational attainment is one of the best protections against economic risks: during the peak of the pandemic, unemployment increased much more for those with below upper secondary attainment than for those with tertiary attainment. A similar pattern was observed in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

Better-educated adults may also find it easier to adopt new technologies that improve their quality of life. For example, 71% of 55-74 year-olds with tertiary attainment used online or video calls during the pandemic, allowing them to stay in touch with family and friends and avoid social isolation. In contrast, only 34% of similarly aged adults with below upper secondary attainment reported making online or video calls.

This year's edition of *Education at a Glance* focuses on this changing environment for tertiary education.

Adapting tertiary education to meet the needs of all students

The rising number of tertiary students is leading to growing diversity in their socio-economic and educational backgrounds. To meet their needs, tertiary education needs to become more diverse too. Models of tertiary education that worked when only a small share of each cohort entered university – often those from privileged backgrounds – will no longer be adequate when more than half of young adults are obtaining tertiary degrees.

Tertiary education systems must be prepared for students looking for new skills at various stages of their careers. For example, micro-credentials offer a promising approach to give students greater ownership over what they learn, how they learn, where they learn and when in their life learning works best for them. As labour-markets change, these and similar approaches will be important to prevent young graduates from struggling to find good jobs even as employers cannot find people with the skills they need.

Further, not all students are best served by a tertiary degree. The general increase in tertiary attainment may have led employers to expect a tertiary degree as the new normal, pushing students who would benefit more from vocational education and training (VET) into academic tertiary education instead. To avoid this, vocational upper secondary programmes that can compete with tertiary education in terms of quality and labour-market outcomes are important, but they remain rare. Making VET a first choice rather than a last resort for students requires new links between upper secondary VET and professional tertiary education to give VET graduates the opportunity to obtain additional qualifications at a later stage.

Maintaining the momentum on digitalisation

The pandemic demonstrated the value of digital tools for tertiary education institutions. Innovative models of remote teaching and learning were developed that allowed students to continue learning even during the peaks of the pandemic.

To facilitate the use of these tools, around half of OECD countries reformed their regulatory or institutional frameworks during the pandemic. Most OECD countries also found resources to purchase digital tools for in-classroom and remote learning and to train teachers in their use. These pandemic-related measures implemented by many countries were a big step in the right direction, but they do not go far enough.

To fully benefit from digitalisation, we must strengthen the innovation culture in education. This requires the right institutional and regulatory frameworks, in particular those governing digital education. It requires public procurement in the education

sector to become more responsive to digital opportunities and create stronger incentives for private sector innovation. It also requires teachers to acquire the skills needed not only to use digital tools in the classroom, but also to enhance their own professional development.

Providing data for innovative education policies

The policy issues described above provide several avenues for the development of OECD education statistics. Currently, robust cross-country data on non-standard modes of education such as micro-credentials are scarce, even though these programmes will become increasingly important in the future. Likewise, little data exists about the quality of tertiary programmes and their relevance to the labour market, despite this being essential information for policy makers. Statistics on the use of digital solutions are also needed to ensure education systems respond to current and future labour-market needs. Capturing these dimensions will require looking beyond existing data sources. For example, measuring the impact of lifelong learning and workplace training will require the use of data from employers and from education technology companies.

The OECD will continue working with its members and partners to provide the data policy makers need to evaluate learning recovery policies, build on the digital initiatives and innovations adopted during the pandemic, and develop the education systems that can power better jobs and better lives into the future.

Mathias Cormann
Secretary-General, OECD