

Executive summary

The Western Balkans region (defined by the European Union as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia) is undergoing a period of rapid economic transition. Despite achieving considerable progress, however, the region is struggling to attain the same level of development as many of its neighbours, with per-capita gross domestic product being lower and youth unemployment rates being higher than most countries in Central and Eastern Europe. A knowledgeable and skilled population is an indispensable component to the dynamic economies and inclusive, cohesive societies that the Western Balkans aspire to build, which makes education reform a central pillar of regional development efforts.

To better understand learning outcomes and benchmark their education systems, Western Balkan economies have continuously participated in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and did so simultaneously for the first time in 2018. This paper analyses PISA 2018 data to help determine what 15-year-olds in the Western Balkans know and can do. Based upon these findings, and drawing upon an international knowledge base that includes several OECD-UNICEF policy reviews, this paper also suggests policy considerations about how education systems in the region can improve schooling and teaching to help all students learn and succeed.

Learning outcomes

Results from PISA 2018 reveal that overall outcomes from the region are improving. All systems that participated in PISA prior to 2015 raised their performance in 2018 while also testing a greater share of 15-year-old students, demonstrating that educational improvement and expansion are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, performance in the Western Balkans (average score in reading, 402) is generally lower than that of countries across Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) (476)¹, the European Union (EU) (481), and the OECD (487). Achievement within the region also varies, with Kosovo scoring 353 in reading and Serbia scoring 440.

Worryingly, PISA 2018 results show that learning outcomes in the region are highly inequitable. Boys perform worse than girls at rates exceeding international averages. In systems with linguistic minorities, learning gaps between linguistic student groups can be greater than 70 points in reading. Compared to students enrolled in general upper-secondary programmes, students enrolled in vocational programmes underperform to larger degrees than across OECD countries.

Delivering effective and equitable schooling

The educational outcomes of the Western Balkans region can be partly explained by policies related to schooling. Enrolment into upper-secondary education is very academically selective when compared to international benchmarks, and the difference in achievement between students in different tracks reflects that selectivity. Nevertheless, evidence from PISA suggests that how regional systems assess students, which then influences how they track students, might capture students' backgrounds (i.e. their gender and

socio-economic status) in addition to their abilities. This finding raises questions about the fairness of student tracking decisions, especially given the size of vocational sectors in the region (which are much larger than vocational sectors in OECD and EU countries), the lack of permeability between tracks and the extent to which a student's upper-secondary track can shape their future success. Education systems in the region are addressing these issues by improving student assessment practices, in particular by introducing standardised, national assessments that can provide external validation of student learning and can help teachers improve their own judgements.

Another unique feature of Western Balkan education systems is their level and distribution of school resources. Compared to international benchmarks, education spending in the region is low, especially when considering the significant infrastructural investment that many schools need. In addition, spending is inequitable. Schools with more socio-economically advantaged student intakes tend to enjoy greater resourcing than schools with more disadvantaged student intakes, which can contribute to inequitable learning outcomes. Western Balkan systems can consider several strategies to address these concerns, such as establishing re-distributive resourcing policies and strengthening school evaluation to better identify the needs of schools.

Finally, Western Balkan systems, like many around the world, are confronting issues related to demographic changes, such as declining birth rates and increasing urbanisation. These issues include overcrowded schools in urban areas, and shrinking schools in rural areas that can sometimes have more staff than students. This situation is leading to inefficient resource allocation in some cases, which exacerbates existing concerns about inadequate and inequitable resourcing. Rationalising school networks might help consolidate resources where they are needed most, though policy makers should take care to ensure that all students still have access to appropriate educational services.

Assuring high quality teaching

Teaching is one of the most important factors of an education system and can significantly shape student learning. In the Western Balkans, teacher practices are largely traditional and centred around the teacher (e.g. delivering a lecture to the whole class), with less emphasis on individualised, adaptive instruction (which is associated with higher student outcomes) compared to international benchmarks. These circumstances might also contribute to inequities in learning, as teachers might not instruct students from diverse backgrounds in ways that best help them learn. To improve the situation, Western Balkan systems have developed teacher standards that spell out how teachers are expected to teach. Using these standards to help determine career progression and professional development can further encourage teachers to implement the desired practices in their classrooms.

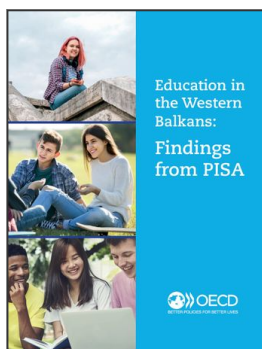
Requirements related to certification and qualifications can help ensure high quality teaching. Like most teachers in OECD and EU countries, most teachers in the Western Balkans are fully certified, though fewer hold master's degrees. Unlike international benchmarks, however, teacher certification and advanced qualifications are not positively associated with increased student performance or improved teacher practices, suggesting that these quality assurance mechanisms are not always fulfilling their purposes. To address this issue, Western Balkan systems can consider introducing consistent and rigorous accreditation criteria for initial teacher education providers, along with aligning certification requirements, such as examinations, with the practical demands of the job.

To improve teacher practice, many education systems appraise teachers to identify their needs and then offer them relevant professional development. In the Western Balkans, teacher appraisal differs from international benchmarks by relying heavily upon student assessment results. This practice does not accurately capture the extent to which teachers help all students learn and could incentivise teachers to focus their attentions on the highest performing students. Regarding professional development, teachers in the region participate at rates comparable to international benchmarks, but do so inequitably. Teachers

who teach in schools with more advantaged students usually participate more than teachers who teach in schools with more disadvantaged students. Worryingly, more professional development in the region, unlike in OECD countries, is not associated with more frequent use of desired teaching practices. To strengthen teacher appraisal, education systems in the region can consider adopting a more holistic approach to teacher appraisal, such as by de-emphasising student assessment results and relying more on classroom observations and reviewing teacher portfolios. Western Balkan systems might expand the availability of professional development by considering digital training options so more teachers can access the opportunities, and strengthen the quality of professional development by introducing accreditation of training providers.

Notes

¹ The OECD considers CEEC to be composed of Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia. For this paper, results that represent the CEEC average are calculated without data from Albania to avoid overlap with results that represent the Western Balkans average.



From:
Education in the Western Balkans
Findings from PISA

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/764847ff-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2020), “Executive summary”, in *Education in the Western Balkans: Findings from PISA*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/cb6d2611-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area. Extracts from publications may be subject to additional disclaimers, which are set out in the complete version of the publication, available at the link provided.

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>.