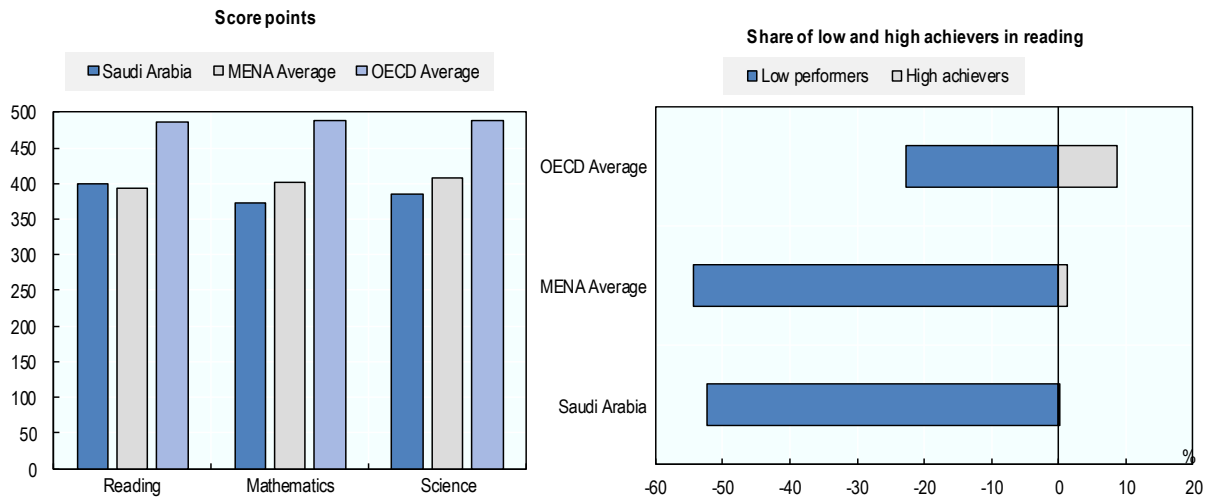
Chapter 1. Introduction

Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has embarked on an unprecedented cross-sectoral reform agenda known as Vision 2030 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.[1]). The goal of Vision 2030 is to reduce the country's dependence on fossil fuels and create a diverse, dynamic and sustainable economy. To achieve these ambitions, Saudi Arabia has introduced 13 programmes, including the Human Capability Development Program (HCDP), which aims to improve the country's education system in order to create a highly-skilled and productive population that can meet the needs of a 21st century, knowledge-based labour market.

Saudi Arabia has been investing heavily in its education sector for several decades. In 2015, expenditure on education represented 7.8% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), considerably higher than the average across OECD countries (5.2%) (World Bank & Education Evaluation Commission, 2016[2]) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020[3]). This investment has helped achieve tremendous success in expanding access to education, with present enrolment rates in primary and secondary education being nearly universal (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020[3]).

However, these gains in participation have not yet been matched by equivalent progress in learning and skills. To better understand the quality of education outcomes, Saudi Arabia participates in several international surveys, such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and most recently the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Results from these surveys show that there has generally been a low return on educational investment in terms of the country's learning outcomes. According to PISA 2018, students in Saudi Arabia consistently scored lower than in reading, mathematics and science compared to OECD countries and lower in mathematics and science compared to other participating countries in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA)[1] that participated in PISA. Over half of students from Saudi Arabia were unable to achieve the baseline level of reading proficiency needed to participate fully in society, compared to less than a quarter across OECD countries (OECD, 2019[4]) (Figure 1.1). These results suggest that improving the learning outcomes of students is urgently needed if Saudi Arabia is to achieve the economic goals set out in Vision 2030.

Figure 1.1. PISA 2018 results

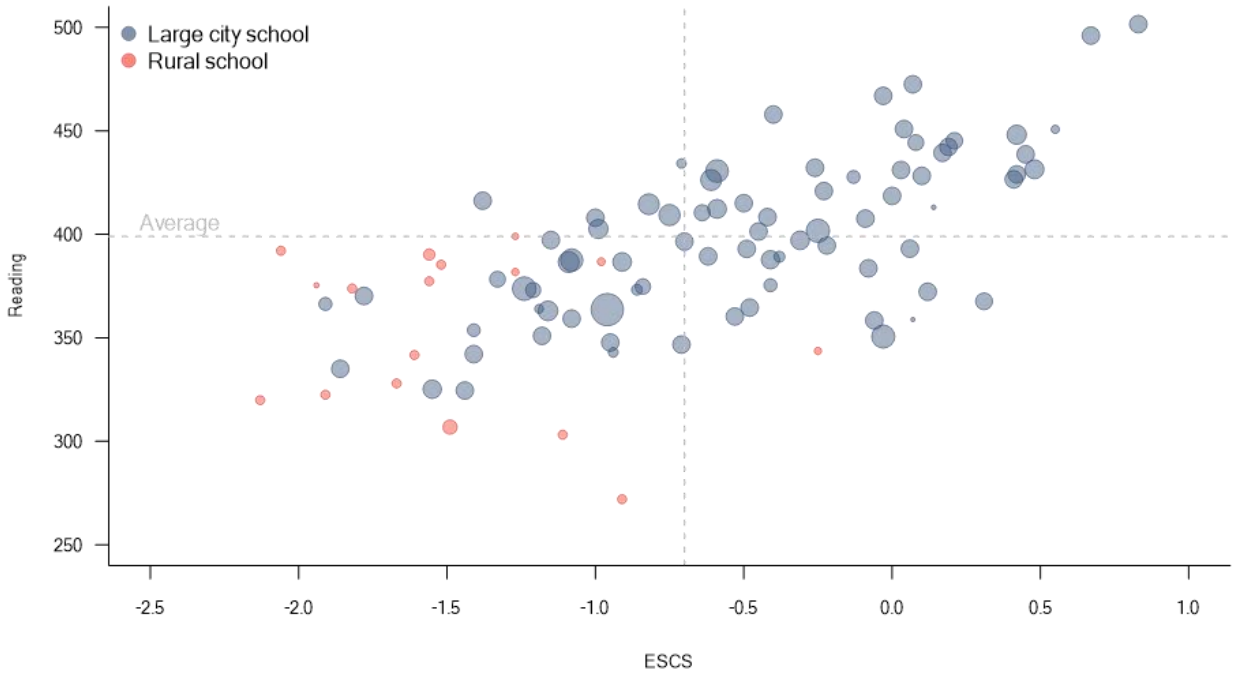


Source: PISA 2018 database.

Improving overall outcomes in Saudi Arabia will require reducing inequities in the country's education system. In PISA 2018, students from urban schools scored on average 415 points on reading, while students from rural schools had an average score of 356 points. Similarly, the bottom quarter of students in terms of socio-economic background scored 74 points lower than the top quarter of students in terms of socio-economic background, a difference equivalent to roughly three years of schooling. Importantly, student background in Saudi Arabia is more closely associated with performance than in other MENA countries. In Saudi Arabia, 12% of the variance in reading performance is explained by socio-economic status, compared to 9% across MENA countries.

The nature of Saudi Arabia's learning outcomes can be partly explained by demographic trends. The rapid expansion of access to education has coincided with high population growth and increasing urbanisation. In 2018, over 25% of the country was under the age of 15, compared with 18% across OECD countries. As of 2017, three out of the country's 13 regions (Riyadh, Makkah and the Eastern Region) enrol over 60% of all general education students. These circumstances have contributed in an unbalanced school network. Schools in wealthier, urban cities are becoming overcrowded, while universal access to education has led to a proliferation of small schools in poorer, rural areas. Figure 1.2 shows the difference in school-level performance between students in rural areas and students in large cities.

Figure 1.2. School-level reading performance in Saudi Arabia in PISA 2018



Note: Bubbles on the chart represent the average for selected schools, while lines represent the average for all students in the country.
Note: The size of the bubbles represent the size of the school.
Note: ESCS refers to the PISA index for socio-economic and cultural status.
Source: PISA (OECD, 2019[4]).

Nevertheless, demographic factors alone do not fully explain the differences in student learning. How education policy supports schooling in different environments also contributes to the observed outcomes in Saudi Arabia. Given their circumstances, rural schools tend to need more support and the support that is provided should be relevant to their environments. However, in PISA 2018, 30% of schools in rural areas in Saudi Arabia report that instruction is hindered by a lack of infrastructure, compared to 21% in large cities. Almost 40% reported that instruction is hindered by a lack of educational materials, compared to 20% in large cities.

To improve student outcomes across the country, Saudi Arabia has launched an ambitious set of educational reforms. These include introducing a new school evaluation system that focuses on student learning, developing a teacher career path based upon performance, revising the curriculum and methods of assessment to focus on the most important skills and strengthening early learning so all students can enter school ready to succeed. Successfully conceptualising and rolling out these reforms could greatly aid Saudi Arabia in its mission to develop human capital and build a modern, knowledge-based economy. On the other hand, introducing these reforms also pose challenges to the system. They will require that all components of the system be aligned around common goals and that the technical capacity to implement the reforms be built.

This OECD country review was conducted to help Saudi Arabia effectively reform its education policies in order to help raise learning outcomes for all students. In doing so, this review draws upon international research and experience while recognising the unique

context of Saudi Arabia. Specifically, this review examines four policy issues that Saudi Arabia can address to help its educational goals. These issues, and how the review was conducted, are explained in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1. The OECD's country review of the education system of Saudi Arabia

This policy perspective is one of four such perspectives that draw on OECD reviews of education policies in over 60 education systems around the world. Each policy perspective in this series addresses a different educational policy issue in Saudi Arabia:

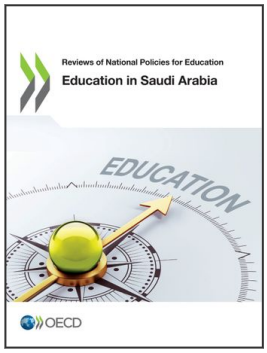
- Improving school quality through better governance, leadership and support
- Strengthening the quality of the teaching profession
- Modernising the curriculum and assessment practices;
- Strengthening the foundations for learning

The evidence upon which this review is based consists of national information that Saudi Arabia provided to the OECD, background research and data collected during three visits to different parts of the country, all of which was completed in 2018. Specifically, the OECD visited Riyadh, Jeddah and Al Lith and met with over 200 different people, including ministry leadership, the Education Evaluation and Training commission, Tatweer for Education, universities, and teachers and principals from eight schools.

Since this report was published in 2020, some policies have changed between the time of writing this report and the time of publication. Other policies that are discussed as planned in the report have since been implemented. Where relevant, this report indicates these developments, though the subsequent analysis is based on the educational landscape in 2018.

Notes:

[1] The countries from MENA that participated in PISA 2018 are, in addition to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates



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