

# Executive summary

Lifelong learning is key for individuals to adapt and succeed in labour markets and societies shaped by longer life expectancy, rapid technological advances, globalisation and demographic change, as well as sudden shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Lifelong learning starts in childhood and youth, continuing throughout adulthood and old age. It encompasses formal learning in settings such as schools and training centres, informal and non-formal learning derived from colleagues and workplace trainers, and unintentional learning stemming from spontaneous social interactions.

The *OECD Skills Outlook 2021* provides insights on how countries can best support lifelong learning for all and individuals' ability to learn how to learn.

## Building the foundations of lifelong learning

Early learning is crucial to equip children with strong skills and learning attitudes, with the crucial support of teachers and parents. Positive learning attitudes are associated with higher proficiency in mathematics, reading and science, as well as ambitious educational and career expectations. Not all youngsters develop them: socio-economically disadvantaged children, boys and children with an immigrant background too often develop lower skills and learning attitudes. Yet these were especially important as a result of disruptions to regular schooling created by the COVID-19 pandemic: remote schooling required even more intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning than regular schooling.

The disruptions to regular schooling caused by the pandemic led many children to progress less than expected in skill development. The sudden and forced closure of schools may have led some to build a strong attachment to learning but for others school closures may have meant lack of engagement and motivation. In the short term, the pandemic could lead to increases in early school leavers. In the medium and long term, lower engagement could result in the current generation of students failing to develop positive learning attitudes, at a time of profound structural changes that will require individuals to upgrade their skills throughout their life.

## Promoting effective transitions into further education, training and the labour market

Before the pandemic, low-achieving secondary-school students in many OECD countries were already displaying declining levels of proficiency in literacy.

The period between the end of compulsory schooling and young adulthood is generally marked by a rapid increase in foundation skills, such as, for example, literacy. Results suggest that on average literacy achievement was 14 points on the PIAAC scale higher at age 27 than that observed among the same birth cohort at age 15. Differences in skill growth across countries were strongly related to the share of individuals not in education, employment or training (NEET). Reductions in NEET rates resulted in decreased disparities in achievement and intergenerational transmission of educational advantages.

High-quality orientation programmes (including internships and job shadowing) informing school-aged children about further education and the labour market can reduce NEET rates. Creating stronger connections between schools and the labour market could be especially important in the wake of the pandemic, not only to reduce the number of school leavers who will become NEET, but also to ensure that youngsters understand changing workplace requirements.

## Engaging adults in learning

The pandemic caused major disruptions in the provision of higher education programmes, vocational education and training, potentially creating difficulties during the transition from compulsory schooling into young adulthood and compounding the risk of low investment in adult learning.

Willingness to participate in adult learning is already modest: on average, around one in two adults in OECD countries was already disengaged from adult learning before the pandemic. Educational attainment was one of the strongest predictors of the willingness to learn: on average, tertiary-educated adults were half as likely to be disengaged from adult learning than workers with lower-secondary education or below.

Containment and mitigation strategies related to the pandemic have also had large direct and indirect effects on participation in adult learning among those willing to participate. Estimates suggest that across the OECD region, non-formal learning opportunities may have decreased by an average of 18% and informal learning opportunities by 25%.

## The role of transversal skills in enabling individuals to thrive in the labour market

Evidence from online job vacancy data reveals that communication, teamwork and organisational skills are among the transversal skills most frequently demanded by employers in a wide variety of occupations. Cognitive skills, such as analytical, problem-solving, digital, leadership and presentation skills are also highly transversal across jobs and work contexts. While the pandemic heightened the importance of building skill sets that strengthen individuals' resilience to change, evidence shows that the labour market returns associated with transversal skills can vary depending on how they bundle with other skills and across job roles. Employers should be supported in providing effective lifelong learning to their employees so that they can develop the right mix of transversal and technical skills that they need to thrive.

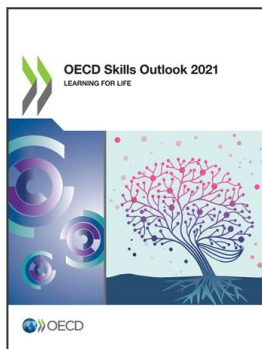
## Protecting workers from demand shocks and long-term structural changes

COVID-19 caused major disruptions to labour markets worldwide, including large contractions in employment and in job creation. Evidence shows that by May 2020, the volume of online job vacancies had dropped by more than 40% in most countries compared to the beginning of the year. Job postings requiring individuals to work from home soared, driving home the need for workers to possess digital skills. Low-educated workers were particularly affected by declining openings in the early phase of the pandemic.

In the longer term, the effect of the pandemic on jobs is likely going to interact with existing structural changes such as digitalisation and population ageing, reshaping the demand for digital skills and occupations in the healthcare sector. Similarly, across the OECD, planned investments in green technologies and renewable energy are likely to increase the demand for specialists in those areas, potentially creating skill gaps that lifelong learning systems will be called to fill.

## Key recommendations

- **Place learners at the centre of learning:** Diversified learning opportunities can enhance the quality of education and training. They can also empower individuals to make relevant choices, thus sustaining their motivation to participate in lifelong learning. Policy design must be inclusive, affordable, accessible and adaptable.
- **Skills for a lifetime:** Lifelong learning rests on strong foundation skills, the willingness to learn and a habit of learning, all of which are vital if individuals are to acquire the skills and knowledge to navigate changing labour-market needs and life circumstances. Policies should harness the power of technology, but doing so considering the effects technology can have on existing skills inequalities and the creation of new ones.
- **Strong co-ordination is needed to support learning providers in developing high quality, inclusive learning:** Diversified learning systems can spur innovation in creating successful learning programmes. However, policies should build strong co-ordination, knowledge management and information sharing in order to bring such initiatives to scale. Policies should also be aimed at improving recognition, validation and accreditation procedures to enhance the visibility and transferability of the skills taught in these programmes. Finally, partnerships across different actors should be promoted to create synergies and maximise learning opportunities.



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