Executive summary

This Review of Inclusive Education in Portugal was conducted as part of the OECD Strength through Diversity project. Based on the project's framework, it analyses how to promote inclusive education in Portugal through dedicated policies and practices in the following areas: governance, resourcing, capacity building, school-level interventions, and monitoring and evaluation. The analysis presented refers to the situation faced by the Portuguese education system in 2021, when the review team held a series of meetings with stakeholders and visited schools in mainland Portugal. The most recent statistical data in the report reflect the situation during the 2019/2020 school year, although some data are from previous school years.

Portugal has made important progress in establishing a strong framework for inclusive education that is focused on responding to the needs of all students. In 2018, Decree Law 54/2018 on Inclusive Education was enacted, accompanied by Decree Law 55/2018 on Autonomy and Curriculum Flexibility as well as a series of guiding documents. This new framework sees inclusive education as a process under which the education system must be reformed and continually challenged so that it can adapt to the needs of all students. This process is ongoing in Portugal, although inevitably it has been slowed down by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key findings

The Portuguese education system has witnessed historic improvements in access and attainment over the past 25 years. Nearly all school-aged children are enrolled in compulsory education since the 2009 extension of compulsory schooling to 18 years of age. During this period, Portugal has also shown significant improvement in overall student performance. It is one of the few countries with a positive trajectory of improvement in all subjects: reading, mathematics and science, assessed by OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Finally, the rate of early leavers from education reduced significantly in Portugal, in spite of great variations between regions.

Despite these impressive accomplishments, Portugal faces some challenges to achieve an inclusive education system. Important differences in student learning and well-being outcomes persist for students from disadvantaged and/or diverse backgrounds, students from low-income families, students with an immigrant background and students from Roma communities.

Priority areas and recommendations for next steps

The OECD review team identified three priority areas for improving Portugal's inclusiveness of the education system, with an additional priority of strengthening monitoring and evaluation of inclusive education interwoven across all the chapters. The key strengths and challenges in each of the areas are summarised below and elaborated in subsequent chapters, which also have detailed short- and long-term policy recommendations.

Priority 1: Strengthening the governance and financing of inclusive education (Chapter 2)

Since 2018, Portugal has developed a comprehensive legal framework on inclusive education, although there have been earlier efforts to promote equity and inclusion since the 1980s. This has involved significant efforts to grant more flexibility and autonomy to local actors, including schools. Moreover, many programmes, structures and human resources are now available to support equity and inclusion. However, challenges remain regarding the management of these resources, the administration of inclusive education at all levels, and the shift of the approach to inclusive education from group-focused to across the board.

The OECD review team offers the following recommendations to help Portugal overcome challenges related to the governance and financing of inclusive education:

- Recommendation 1: Improve the governance of inclusive education through better synergies and accountability mechanisms between the different levels of the education system.
- Recommendation 2: Sustain collaboration and consultation strategies to broaden the understanding of inclusive education.
- Recommendation 3: Improve the management of resources for inclusive education and continue efforts to build a coherent funding system to support equity and inclusion.
- Recommendation 4: Strengthen the management of system-level monitoring and evaluation of inclusive education.

Priority 2: Developing capacity for diversity, equity and inclusion in education (Chapter 3)

In the past few years, Portugal has implemented progressive measures aimed at addressing diversity among students and providing support for teachers and broader school personnel to develop and improve their professional practice. However, important challenges remain, such as inadequate initial teacher preparation and continuous professional learning for diversity, equity and inclusion and a narrow view of diversity, largely focused on students with special education needs (SEN).

The OECD review team offers the following recommendations to help Portugal overcome challenges related to developing capacity for inclusive education:

- Recommendation 1: Identify and build on good practices to promote collaboration and capacity building to address all dimensions of diversity.
- Recommendation 2: Expand continuous professional learning opportunities for teachers to support diversity and inclusion.
- Recommendation 3: Implement multicultural teacher education to mainstream diversity, equity and inclusion courses.
- Recommendation 4: Improve the recruitment, retention, and attractiveness of the teaching profession to strengthen inclusive education.
- Recommendation 5: Promote the recruitment of teachers from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
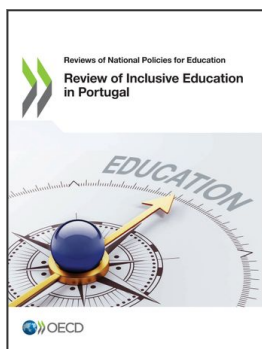
Priority 3: Promoting school-level responses to student diversity (Chapter 4)

In Portugal, there is widespread commitment to the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion across the education system, but practices in schools vary considerably. Examples of effective practices exist that can be built upon to address these inconsistencies. There are also significant human resources that can be mobilised to support such developments. The well-established school clusters offer possibilities for

supporting the development of more inclusive arrangements. However, there are challenges around the use of resources in schools that encourage separate arrangements, limited professional learning opportunities for teachers and school leaders, a lack of local area coordination, and limited strategies for monitoring and evaluation of policies and practices.

The OECD review team offers the following recommendations to help Portugal overcome challenges related to school-level responses to student diversity:

- Recommendation 1: Introduce a programme of professional learning that is focused on the promotion of inclusive classroom practices.
- Recommendation 2: Formulate clear guidance on the use of support resources within schools and communities.
- Recommendation 3: Ensure that there is a coordinated structure of local support to schools and school clusters in promoting equity and inclusion.
- Recommendation 4: Strengthen strategies for monitoring and evaluating inclusive education practices at the local and school levels.