

EDITORIAL

Building for the future

Who has not seen the glow in a child's eyes when asked what they want to be when they grow up? Who does not reminisce about their own childhood dreams of a career? Typically, such dreams revolve around saving people, conducting breakthrough scientific research, fighting for justice, conveying emotion through the arts, or teaching the children of tomorrow. But often the careers people choose for themselves are nothing like the ones they dreamed of as children; this is because the factors that motivate students to pursue a career in a given field can be much more complex than assumed.

At a relatively early age, students are asked to make important decisions about the paths they will follow towards their future: whether or not to continue in formal academic or vocational education, pursue a tertiary degree in a selected field of study, or enter the labour market. They will factor in their personal interests, beliefs about their capacity to excel, and the economic rewards of the different pathways. Their decision will affect the rest of their lives – a daunting prospect for a teenager – and will have repercussions on the societies we build in future generations.

In whatever the field of study chosen, higher education programmes help students develop a broad range of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are indispensable for navigating through life, and not just through the labour market. Proficiency in critical thinking and problem solving, and in social and emotional skills, such as teamwork, communication and cultural awareness, are all essential to ensure an individual's inclusion and constructive engagement in society.

This edition of *Education at a Glance* focuses on fields of study, analysing various indicators through the prism of young adults' career choices. Results show that the most common field of study in which tertiary students enrol is business, administration and law, whereas science, technology, engineering and mathematics, commonly referred to as the STEM fields, are less attractive: approximately 23% of new entrants into tertiary education select to study business, administration and law compared to 16% in engineering, construction and manufacturing, and 6% in natural sciences, mathematics and statistics. The field of information and communication technologies (ICT) in particular attracts less than 5% of new entrants, the smallest share to a field of study, yet yields the highest employment rate on average across OECD countries – even exceeding 90% in about a third of them – signalling a shortage of supply.

However, not all science-related fields have high employment outcomes. Although there has been a recent push to produce more scientists in many OECD countries, the employment rate of graduates from the fields of natural science, statistics and mathematics is more comparable to the lower employment prospects of arts and humanities graduates than to the higher rate enjoyed by engineers and ICT specialists.

In addition, the persistent differences in the way men and women select their future careers are disturbing. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the teaching profession, where more than seven out of ten teachers, on average across OECD countries, are women – and there is no sign that this gender gap is narrowing among young adults entering the field of education. The opposite is observed in science and engineering where men still outnumber women. Results from the PISA 2015 assessment indicate that boys' and girls' career paths start to diverge well before they actually select a career. On average across OECD countries, although girls outperform boys in the PISA science test, boys are more likely than girls to envision themselves in a science-related career when they are 30. Gender differences are even starker when young adults select a field of study at the tertiary level: close to three out of four engineering students and four out of five ICT students are men.

Enrolment in higher education has exploded over the past decade and the strong labour market outcomes associated with tertiary qualifications signal that this has not led to a decline in graduates' employment prospects. Vocational programmes have long promoted their ties with the labour market and their ability to produce graduates with trade-specific skills. Meanwhile, apprenticeships and work-study programmes have promoted more flexible pathways into the labour market, although the earning prospects for graduates of these types of programmes have generally remained poor.

To participate fully in their society, people need to develop a transferable skillset over a lifetime. This is the objective at the heart of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by world leaders in New York in September 2015. By advocating “inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all”, Goal 4 establishes an ambitious agenda to ensure that every adult has an equal opportunity to a quality education and to contribute to society.

Education at a Glance dedicates an entire chapter to the SDGs, providing an assessment of where OECD and partner countries stand on their way to meeting the SDG targets. The results show that, for certain targets, the disparities across OECD countries are substantial. On average over the past 12 months, OECD and partner countries have achieved gender parity in the participation rate of adults in formal and non-formal education and training. However, this result masks one of the largest variations among all gender parity indicators, with the ratio of women to men participating in such programmes in the past 12 months ranging between 0.7 and 1.4 across countries. Similarly, the share of men and women achieving minimum proficiency in literacy and numeracy varies widely, reflecting inequalities in basic skills across OECD countries.

More than an end in itself, education is a means to deliver our vision of tomorrow. It is the foundation for promoting development, reducing economic disparities and creating a society of inclusiveness. Prosperous countries depend on skilled and educated workers, but more than ever, they also depend on a set of coherent strategies that link education outcomes to the needs and demands of society in a way that fosters inclusive growth.

Designing these strategies requires close alignment with the organisations, markets and industries that make up today’s world, but also strong leadership with the foresight to identify where we want to be in the next 30 years. More guidance and support must be provided to young students as they select their future careers. Young people need to find the right balance of personal interests, potential social and economic outcomes, and the skills they can expect to develop in the selected education programmes that will carry them through their lives.

Education fuels personal growth, particularly when it is of high quality and provided equitably, as well as economic growth, particularly when it is accompanied by a thorough understanding of how skills are linked with the labour market. Our responsibility is to ensure that education meets the needs of today’s children and informs their aspirations for the future, both personal and professional. We cannot let them down.



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