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## Nurturing learners' aspirations through outreach, perspective and agency

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The current context, which anticipates the continuation of important labour market transformations, adds momentum to the long-recognised need for policy to guide and support career aspirations for learners and workers, young and old. Looking towards 2023, this chapter proposes options for policy makers to develop strategies for this through: *outreach* (efforts of governments, private sector and civil society to engage with target populations to inform their aspirations or guide them back to education or training), *perspective* (the strategic use of realistic and relevant information on education, training, and employment opportunities to modify the perceptions of a target population) and *agency* (interventions that aim to develop learners' capacity to identify and capitalise on the opportunities provided by the education system and labour market, and to create their own opportunities, in order to bring their aspirations to fruition). Lessons are synthesised into key policy pointers.

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# In Brief

## Nurturing learners' aspirations through outreach, perspective and agency

In 2023, governments need to further support learners and workers to gain realistic, relevant and ambitious aspirations to navigate change. Learners also need to be able to take steps to turn these aspirations into reality. However, aspirations are shaped very early on in a learner's journey and are narrowed by disadvantage. The current context, which anticipates the continuation of important labour market transformations, therefore adds momentum to the long-recognised need for policy to nurture learners' aspirations, enhancing career guidance for learners and workers, young and old.

### Infographic 4.1. Nurturing learners' aspirations

	Key messages	Emerging policy pointers
Nurturing learners' aspirations through outreach, perspective and agency	Outreach strategies can help engage target learners in education, training or work opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Combine</b> datasets and monitoring eligibility to help identify target groups more effectively</li> <li>• <b>Design</b> special incentives to help engage those hardest to reach</li> <li>• <b>Curate</b> information for different actors and their needs to enhance impact</li> </ul>
	Learners' <b>perspectives</b> need to be enriched and expanded from an earlier age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Shift</b> younger learners' perspectives by shifting those of the adults in their lives</li> <li>• <b>Upskill</b> teachers/guidance professionals to positively shape young people's aspirations</li> <li>• <b>Engage</b> employers in career education by creating the right conditions</li> <li>• <b>Reiterate</b> action to shift perspectives across the life cycle as learners' needs and contexts evolve</li> </ul>
	Learners need <b>agency and co-agency</b> to identify and capitalise on opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Consider</b> that some younger learners may need additional support to develop professional behaviours</li> <li>• <b>Give</b> additional time to some individuals who may need it more to develop agency</li> <li>• <b>Provide</b> practical tools to motivate and empower individuals with longer unemployment periods to support their resilience</li> </ul>

### Key messages emerging from this chapter

1. ***Outreach strategies can help engage target learners in education, training or work opportunities.***

Younger workers were over-represented in the sectors most affected by the pandemic, and were more likely to be on temporary contracts. While youth unemployment across OECD countries had been in decline in the decade prior to the pandemic, the weighted average unemployment rate among 15-29 year-olds increased from 8.6% at the end of 2019 to 11.5% at the end of 2020. Yet OECD data from 2021 suggest that outreach and registration challenges in the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis may have contributed to a further decline in the share of young people registering with employment services. Beyond the data, previous policy analyses indicate that target populations do not always use career guidance or employment services even when in place, skills policies often fail to reach higher-risk adults, and outreach efforts are underdeveloped.

Countries have been implementing measures to support young people who have fallen out of work, education, or training since 2020. One approach to the outreach challenge involves providing learners in compulsory education with regular career learning and planning opportunities, from an early age.

Many countries and economies are developing or revising inter-sectoral youth strategies, often with a focus on strengthening employment services, career guidance, and training and upskilling opportunities.

Analysis from recent policy efforts undertaken mostly since 2020 point to some **emerging lessons** that can help governments improve their outreach to learners for 2023:

- Combining datasets and monitoring eligibility helps identify target groups more effectively.
- Designing special incentives can help engage those hardest to reach.
- Curating information for different actors and their needs enhances impact.

## ***2. Learners' perspectives need to be enriched and expanded from an earlier age.***

Students' perspectives for the future can be distorted by stereotypical thinking from the youngest age. As they grow, their perspectives of educational and employment opportunities can be narrow and outdated. Overcoming self-limiting perspectives is also even more crucial in contexts of crisis and change, where particularly the most disadvantaged can be at risk of making biased decisions with longer-term implications for their future career pathways. In PISA 2018, 93% of school leaders reported that career guidance was available in their school. However, in some of these countries and economies, no single delivery method of delivery at school dominates, which may inhibit the system's ability to ensure efforts reach all learners.

Policy efforts identified for this analysis to enrich and expand learners' perspectives focus on enhancing career guidance from primary education level, either as part of wider national frameworks, or as part of deliberate efforts to overcome barriers to participation, including in high-priority science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) pathways.

Analysis from recent policy efforts undertaken mostly since 2020 point to some **emerging lessons** that can help governments improve their efforts to enrich and expand learners' perspectives for 2023:

- Shifting younger learners' perspectives requires shifting those of the adults in their lives.
- Upskilling teachers/guidance professionals can positively shape young people's aspirations.
- Engaging employers in career education can be encouraged by creating the right conditions.
- Shifting perspectives requires reiterated action across the life cycle as learners' needs and contexts evolve.

## ***3. Learners need agency and co-agency to identify and capitalise on opportunities.***

As educational pathways become more flexible, and labour markets experience short-term disruptions and longer-term transformations, learners' agency is critical in ensuring that they continue to reflect and act upon their changing aspirations and opportunities, as well as engaging in lifelong learning.

Policy efforts analysed in this report include some efforts to help strengthen social capital, or more holistic interventions that address more complex barriers to employment or education, including non-vocational barriers. At the same time, these policies suggest that some individuals or groups may benefit from more targeted or specific measures.

Analysis from recent policy efforts undertaken mostly since 2020 point to some **emerging lessons** that can help governments improve their efforts to develop learners' agency for 2023:

- Younger learners may need support in developing professional behaviours.
- Some individuals need more time than others to develop agency.
- Motivating and empowering individuals with longer unemployment periods through practical tools can support resilience.

## Introduction

In 2023, governments need to further support learners and workers to develop realistic, relevant and ambitious aspirations to navigate change. Learners also need to be able to take steps to turn these aspirations into reality.

Despite the current tight labour markets, in many countries, the job losses associated with the pandemic disproportionately affected young workers, often on more precarious contracts and in hard-hit sectors, while the entry-level professions in which young people are concentrated are at greatest risk of automation (Nedelkoska and Quintini, 2018<sup>[1]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[2]</sup>). In addition, the fiscal pressures associated with ageing populations and a concurrent decline in fertility rates mean workers will remain in the labour market for longer. But older adults may experience additional challenges finding work or changing paths, and are at risk of skills obsolescence as societies strive to transition to greener, digital economies. They may also be less predisposed to investing in adult learning (OECD, 2020<sup>[3]</sup>). Across all OECD countries, regardless of survey method, adults' participation in non-formal education and training decreases with age. The same is true for enrolments in formal tertiary programmes: an OECD adult aged 25-29 years old is 12 times more likely to be pursuing a tertiary degree than one aged 40-64 years old (OECD, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). These challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which sped up longer-term trends towards a digital transformation.

The emerging global energy and food crisis, brought about by Russia's illegal war against Ukraine, adds to the challenges facing education systems (see Chapter 1). This current context, which anticipates the continuation of important labour market transformations, adds momentum to the long-recognised need for policy to enhance career guidance for learners and workers, young and old. Contexts of change and disruption can lead individuals to make poor assessments of risk and reward and take decisions that could negatively affect their future careers (Biddle, 2021<sup>[5]</sup>). Disadvantaged people, who are already less likely to have aspirations that match their abilities or the needs of the 21st century job market, and whose educational choices may be constrained by financial or social barriers, are also at greater risk of making decisions that are either biased or based on stereotypes (Biddle, 2021<sup>[5]</sup>; Mann et al., 2020<sup>[6]</sup>). Disadvantaged students participating in PISA 2018 were less likely to aspire to getting a tertiary education than their advantaged peers, but also less likely to exhibit a growth mindset (i.e. disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that "your intelligence is something about you that you can't change very much"). This is important as students holding a growth mindset establish more ambitious academic goals for themselves, ascribe greater importance to school and are more likely to report a stronger belief in their general capabilities (OECD, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>). On average in PISA 2018, students reporting a growth mindset performed 32 score points higher in reading compared to their peers not reporting it, even after controlling for socio-economic background.

Meanwhile, OECD surveys across different age groups illustrate that learners shape their aspirations from a very early age. In 2018, when asked what future career they aspire to, 5-year-olds and 15-year-olds gave very similar answers, with four of the top ten responses for girls aligning across the age groups, and the same for boys (Mann et al., 2020<sup>[6]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[8]</sup>).

In response to the need for education systems to better nurture learners' aspirations, various policy options are available including providing guidance and information via compulsory education, targeting extra efforts to groups who are most likely to benefit, and adult learning specifically targeting older workers. Whatever the selected policy intervention, a focus on strengthening learners' aspirations to make them more coherent and well-informed will be important. This requires that education policy makers develop strategies focused on:

- **Outreach:** this refers to the efforts of governments, the private sector and civil society to engage with target populations to inform their aspirations or guide them back to education or training.

- **Perspective:** this involves the strategic use of realistic and relevant information on education, training and employment opportunities to modify the perceptions of a target population.
- **Agency:** this encompasses interventions that aim to develop learners' capacity to identify and capitalise on the opportunities provided by the education system and labour market, as well as creating their own opportunities, in order to bring their aspirations to fruition.

For each of these areas, this chapter analyses selected emerging policy initiatives, principally across OECD education systems. As in previous chapters, this analysis leads to some lessons of interest to guide policy makers' efforts in 2023 (see Table 4.1 at the end for the list of policies and practices included in this chapter). Lessons are then synthesised into key policy pointers for the longer term.

## Outreach strategies can help engage target learners in education, training or work opportunities

In 2021, in the context of strengthening system-level responsiveness and resilience in education, the Education Policy Outlook asked for critical and courageous reflection on the following question: what if students' futures were no longer defined by students' backgrounds? (OECD, 2021<sup>[9]</sup>). Outreach—an education system's capacity to access and engage with target populations to inform educational or professional aspirations, or guide them back to education or training—is critical to achieving this.

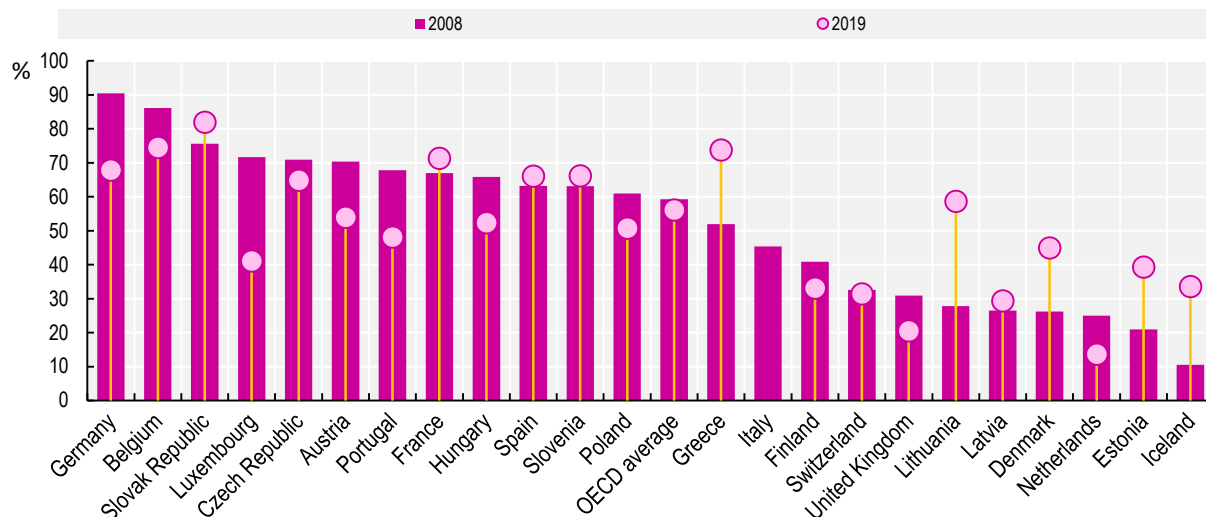
The capacity to aspire is unequally distributed across society: the more disadvantaged or marginalised a young person is, the less access they have to quality information and support regarding educational and professional opportunities (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>). If education systems fail to break this link in the earliest stages of education, inequalities will likely endure, or even intensify, as those young people move through education and into work. At the individual level, this can negatively impact students' efforts in school and their insertion into the labour market; at societal level, it can prolong or reduce education completion, increase the share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and inhibit social mobility (Covacevich et al., 2021<sup>[11]</sup>; OECD, 2019<sup>[12]</sup>).

Current contexts of disruption and change, along with longer-term evolutions, intensify the need for outreach to help people upskill, reskill and access future-relevant programmes. As illustrated by the current and previous crises, disadvantaged or marginalised young people are more vulnerable to economic and societal shocks. Younger workers were over-represented in the sectors most affected by the pandemic, and more likely to be on temporary contracts (OECD, 2021<sup>[2]</sup>). While youth unemployment across OECD countries had been in decline in the decade prior to the pandemic, the weighted average unemployment rate among 15-29 year-olds increased from 8.6% at the end of 2019 to 11.5% at the end of 2020 (OECD, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>).

Nevertheless, OECD data indicate that many young people do not have access to key career guidance opportunities. On average across the OECD, the share of unemployed 15-29 year-olds registered with the public employment service decreased between 2008 and 2019, with considerable declines in several European countries (see Figure 4.1). OECD data from 2021 suggest that outreach and registration challenges in the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis may have contributed to a further decline in the share of young people registering with employment services (OECD, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>). Among younger students, PISA 2018 data reveal that on average across participating OECD countries, disadvantaged 15-year-olds are less likely to have the opportunity to engage in career exploration (e.g. career conversations, job fairs worksite visits) despite longitudinal data indicating that career development activities at this age are associated with better employment outcomes (Covacevich et al., 2021<sup>[11]</sup>). Disadvantaged students are also more likely to misalign education and career expectations (OECD, 2019<sup>[12]</sup>). Beyond the data, previous policy analyses indicate that target populations do not always use career guidance or employment services

even when in place, skills policies often fail to reach higher-risk adults, and outreach efforts are underdeveloped.

**Figure 4.1. The share of unemployed youth registered with public unemployment services has decreased**



Source: OECD (2021<sup>[13]</sup>), "What have countries done to support young people in the COVID-19 crisis?", *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ac9f056c-en>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/q73nsx>

### **Selected recent policy efforts**

The lockdowns and economic instability of the last three years have increased the need for governments to build on lessons learnt from previous outreach experiences, and to harness new approaches and tools that enhance flexibility. Countries have been implementing measures to support young people who have fallen out of work, education, or training due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These outreach efforts require strategic and concerted efforts from a variety of actors (e.g. governments, private sector, civil society) to provide adapted support to youth at risk of disengagement from education, training or work. These new efforts can also provide lessons to move forward in 2023.

*Countries and economies need to reach out to learners from a younger age to inform their first and future aspirations*

One approach to the outreach challenge involves providing learners in compulsory education with regular career learning and planning opportunities, from an early age. Compulsory education has a democratising effect, and embedding career guidance early on can reduce the need for outreach strategies later. This is important because once young people have fallen out of the system, they are much harder to re-engage (OECD, 2019<sup>[12]</sup>).

In **New Brunswick (Canada)**, the Future Ready Learning K-12 strategy (2019) aims to embed evidence-informed career education practices from ECEC through to upper secondary education. The strategy takes a whole-school approach to career learning, recognising the important role all adults play in influencing young people's ideas about careers. The strategy draws on insights from a review of best practice in career education and interviews with educators, parents, current school students, and adults (2013-15). This evidence highlighted a need to develop basic career and labour market awareness among all teachers

and to make intentional efforts to integrate careers education from grade 5 onwards while including labour market themes in all subjects (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2015<sup>[14]</sup>).

To facilitate implementation, a series of online modules supports teachers of all subjects and grades to embed career development practices. Examples include social-emotional learning, experiential learning, making use of labour market information, and career planning. Some address the specific needs of at-risk students, such as those from a migrant background. Furthermore, a personal development and career planning course for students in grades 9 and 10—a graduation requirement for all students—enables staff to offer more individualised support to target learners (OECD, n.d.<sup>[15]</sup>). Established shortly before the pandemic, evidence suggests students' and teachers' engagement with the platform grew significantly during the first year of implementation, and that many continued to use the platform in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Berry, 2021<sup>[16]</sup>). The use of digital tools likely facilitated this.

*Many countries and economies are relying on inter-sectoral youth strategies to reach out to disengaged youth in a more intentional way*

Disruptions to learning in the early stages of the pandemic may have led some vulnerable young people to fall off their education or training pathway (see Chapter 3). In response, many countries and economies are developing or revising inter-sectoral youth strategies, often with a focus on strengthening employment services, career guidance, and training and upskilling opportunities.

For example, in 2020, EU member states reinforced their commitment to ensure that all young people under 30 receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within four months of leaving employment or education. This builds on the Youth Guarantee (2013) by extending the target group to include 25-29 year-olds and requiring member states to develop targeted, individualised measures for vulnerable groups (European Commission, n.d.<sup>[17]</sup>).

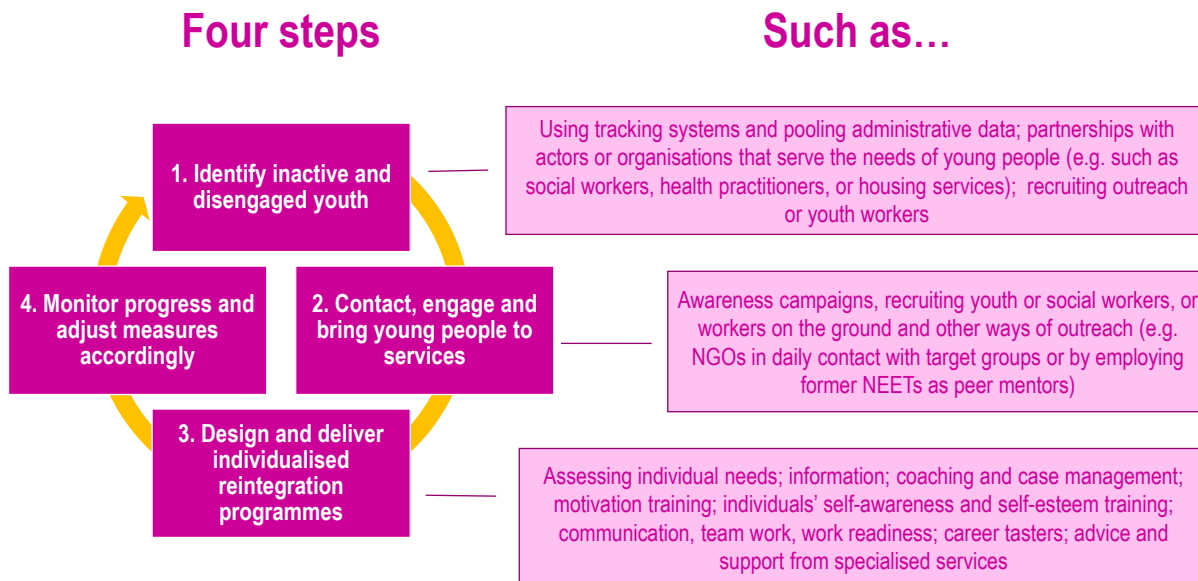
Implementation experiences from the Youth Guarantee (2013) point to a need to improve outreach to NEETs who do not receive support from any public service providers and are therefore 'off the radar' (ILO, 2017<sup>[18]</sup>). Analysis of implementation plans revealed that few included explicit outreach measures. Furthermore, the authors urge governments to adopt identification approaches that take the whole life situation of the most vulnerable young people into account. This may involve engaging actors outside of the education and employment sectors, as more holistic outreach approaches tended to be organised at the local or community level (Andersson and Minas, 2021<sup>[19]</sup>). Further evaluative evidence emphasises the importance of better meeting the needs of disengaged young people through more personalised guidance and greater co-operation between the employment, social and education sectors (European Commission, 2020<sup>[20]</sup>).

Based on evaluations of interventions piloted as part of the Youth Guarantee, the European Commission and the International Labour Organisation developed a four-step intervention model to support governments to design effective outreach (see Figure 4.2). Echoing the findings outlined above, the model focuses on identification, pro-active engagement, individualised interventions and monitoring progress. (ILO, 2017<sup>[18]</sup>).

Recent outreach strategies in some European countries draw on this approach. Through **Latvia's** Know and Do initiative, mentors and programme managers identify inactive NEETs within municipalities through strategic partnerships with actors in NGOs, social services, youth centres, police, and trade unions. Once engaged, staff develop an individual needs profile of the young person, drawing on factors such as psycho-social and economic problems, as well as education and labour market experience. This informs a personalised support programme combining group activities, specialist support and mentoring. The strategic partnerships have been identified as a key strength, since the knowledge and skills of different partners helped reach and support target groups. The sharing of best practices between mentors and

programme managers in different municipalities was also valuable (European Commission, 2018<sup>[21]</sup>; Agency for International Youth Programs (Latvia), n.d.<sup>[22]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>)

**Figure 4.2. A model of outreach approaches (EC and ILO)**



Source: Adapted from ILO (2017<sup>[23]</sup>), *Guide for developing national outreach strategies for inactive young people*, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/documents/publication/wcms\\_613351.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_613351.pdf) (accessed on 30 August 2022).

In 2021, the **Netherlands** announced additional funding for its 35 Regional Mobility Teams, established early in the pandemic to provide personal guidance, support, and training opportunities to workers affected by COVID-19, including young people. The teams work with employment services, employer organisations and trade unions to access individuals in the identified target groups (OECD, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>; Government of the Netherlands, 2021<sup>[24]</sup>). Also in the context of the pandemic, **Luxembourg**'s revised implementation plan for the Youth Guarantee includes measures for mapping and reaching out to vulnerable groups (OECD, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>). Demonstrating the need for flexibility, **Germany**'s Federal Employment Agency adapted its outreach practices when COVID-19 made face-to-face engagements more difficult, conducting virtual career orientation and providing open-air counselling in parks to reach target groups (OECD, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>).

### ***Some policy lessons emerge on outreach to learners for 2023***

Recent data and analysis from these and other policy experiences since 2020 that employ outreach strategies to inform targeted learners' aspirations offer some lessons to help guide policy makers in 2023.

#### **1. Combining datasets and monitoring eligibility helps identify target groups more effectively.**

Policy experiences indicate that some target groups may be difficult to identify and less likely to reach out for training opportunities (e.g. NEETs, the long-term unemployed, and adults with low qualifications) while overly specific eligibility criteria can limit the scope of outreach efforts.

- *Recent OECD data from the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that only some countries implemented such approaches as part of their outreach efforts for young NEETs. For example, while 86% of countries participating in the OECD Questionnaire on Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis reported having established local-level partnerships between the Public Employment Services*



*(PES) and key stakeholders such as schools and civil society organisations by November 2021, only 39% reported the same for formal tracking systems of school dropouts, with the same share reporting publishing official guidelines for PES and other stakeholders on outreach measures (OECD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>).*

- In **Australia**, building data systems that link administrative datasets to better identify and recruit participants has been an important practical solution to these challenges (Institute for Social Science Research/The Melbourne Institute, 2021<sup>[26]</sup>). Similarly, **the Netherlands'** regional approach to tackling early school leaving and youth unemployment sees Regional Registration and Coordination Centres use early school-leaving data from schools and Public Employment Service data to identify young people who have fallen out of the system (see Chapter 3) (OECD, 2021<sup>[9]</sup>).
- Integrating mechanisms for the continuous monitoring and evaluation of policies allows policy makers to identify issues with defining and engaging target groups early on and to adjust the design of policies accordingly (OECD, 2019<sup>[27]</sup>). **Australia** has adjusted the eligibility criteria for its Transitions to Work programme (2022) to capture a broader range of risk factors associated with youth unemployment.

## 2. Designing special incentives can help engage those hardest to reach.

Evidence collected from reviews of more established policies offer some lessons on ways in which governments can attract target groups which are particularly hard to reach.

- *Recent OECD data indicate that during the pandemic, many countries looked to provide more comprehensive, tailored measures to support labour market inclusion for young people facing major or multiple employment obstacles. At the end of 2021, three-quarters of OECD countries reported providing individualised support to unregistered NEETs to better establish their relationship with PES and support them to find work (OECD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). Where this increases pressure on resources, contracting out employment services to external providers or collaborating with local stakeholders could increase capacity to personalise supports.*
- Evaluative work from **Austria's** Initiative for Adult Education calls for a focus on areas where the demand for places outstrips supply, as this discourages providers from actively engaging those who do not reach out for support. The study therefore recommends introducing funding targets to incentivise participation among harder-to-reach groups, providing financial support for local targeted information campaigns and community outreach work, as well as collaborating with local organisations with established connections to under-represented groups (Steiner et al., 2017<sup>[28]</sup>).
- Evidence from **Estonia** highlights some solutions to the challenge of motivating participants from key target groups (e.g. older adults, men, and workers with lower qualification levels) to participate in non-formal learning. These include strengthening collaboration between services that have contact with these groups and developing the competencies of guidance counsellors to direct adults towards training tailored to their needs (Praxis/CentAR, 2019<sup>[29]</sup>). Moreover, the evidence indicates that engaging unemployed populations may require addressing practical barriers such as individuals' physical distance from high-demand industries, or disparities in wage levels across sectors (OSKA, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>).

## 3. Curating information for different actors and their needs enhances impact.

In order to have impact, information about education and skill needs and pathways must be engaged with and understood by different audiences (i.e. learners and workers from target groups, employers, and teaching and guidance professionals) with different information needs. Policy experiences indicate that this requires balancing oversimplification and excessive technical detail, and investigating how different groups use information to make decisions (OECD, 2021<sup>[9]</sup>).

- *Recent OECD data indicate that 14 out of 27 (50%) countries and economies for whom data is available had specific labour market or social policies for racial/ethnic minorities in place during the*

*COVID-19 pandemic to reach out to them and help them with their specific needs. For 8 of these countries and economies, these were new measures introduced since the start of COVID-19. However, many (68%) also reported experiencing new or intensified difficulties in providing individualised support to jobseekers from racial/ethnic minorities since the start of the crisis. In 17 of 25 OECD countries for which data are available, the PES experienced such difficulties in job searches for people from racial/ethnic minorities (OECD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>).*

- **Canada's** Future Skills Council has identified the need for the provision of relevant, reliable and timely labour market information and tools, to ensure that Canada's skills policies and programs respond to the needs of Canadians. At user level, suggested efforts include developing a platform where individuals can generate personalised training plans that link jobs and skills profiles to training options and related supports. At institutional level, Canadian governments and relevant organisations are encouraged to focus on disseminating the necessary information to education, training, and counselling providers to support them to align their services with evolving skills needs (Future Skills Council, 2020<sup>[31]</sup>). The Future Skills Centre is collaborating with the Labour Market Information Council to pilot the creation of an open cloud-based data repository to facilitate and streamline access to practical and relevant information to support the development of front-line career-planning and guidance tools.
- The **United Kingdom's** Discover Uni platform provides prospective higher education students with information for different stages of the application process. From 2020, the platform has synthesised information on how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting admissions and enrolments procedures (Discover Uni, n.d.<sup>[32]</sup>). Previous to this, in the design of the platform, insights from behavioural economics and social psychology, as well as qualitative interviews and large-scale student surveys, revealed that different population groups consider different factors when making a decision, and therefore have different information needs. Part-time and mature students, for example, value practical information such as the costs involved in study. Furthermore, the quality of information was found to be more important than the quantity, especially since users can easily become overwhelmed (Office for Students, 2018<sup>[33]</sup>; Diamond et al., 2018<sup>[34]</sup>). As such, Discover Uni aims to provide a personalised experience for users, with an emphasis on reducing clutter and helping them to navigate and make sense of the different datasets the platform draws upon. This includes data visualisations shown to help with information overload (Office for Students, 2018<sup>[33]</sup>).

## Learners' perspectives need to be enriched and expanded from an earlier age

As well as reaching out to target groups specifically, the Education Policy Outlook has previously highlighted that responsive and resilient education systems support all learners to develop ambitious and realistic career expectations (OECD, 2021<sup>[9]</sup>). This often entails working with children, young people and adults to help them develop career aspirations that are both achievable and reflective of their interests and ambitions through a more strategic use of realistic and relevant information on education, training, and employment opportunities. Such efforts can widen the scope of learners' aspirations, ensure alignment with present and future labour needs, and overcome potentially inhibiting biases.

Recent OECD analysis of longitudinal datasets in multiple countries has provided new insight into the power of career guidance to enhance the employment outcomes of young people. Young adults, typically aged 25, have been found to commonly exhibit lower NEET rates, higher wages and greater job satisfaction if they had participated in a range of career guidance activities and demonstrate clearer career thinking at age 15. Such benefits typically amount to wage premia of 5% to 10% in periods of both economic growth and contraction (Covacevich et al., 2021<sup>[11]</sup>). Unfortunately, data suggest that relatively few young people at age 15 are being well prepared for their working lives (OECD, 2021<sup>[35]</sup>).

At the same time, OECD data indicate that students' perspectives of educational and employment opportunities are commonly narrow from an early age, as well as outdated:

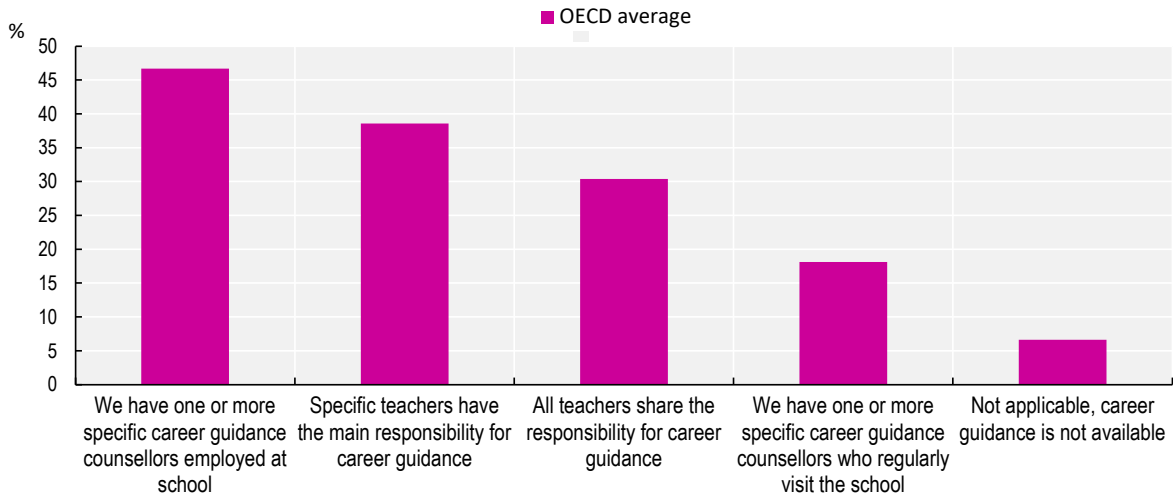
- Even from a very young age, students' perspectives of the futures available to them can show bias. In a survey of 5-year-olds in Estonia and England, one-quarter of the most popular roles girls reported aspiring to were in traditionally female-dominated occupations; the equivalent share among boys was over half, meaning that starting efforts to overcome such bias in secondary education is too late (OECD, 2021<sup>[8]</sup>).
- On average across OECD countries, half of 15-year-olds identified an occupation from the same pool of 10 jobs when asked in PISA 2018 what job they expected to be doing at age 30 (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>). This career concentration has been growing since 2000 and is particularly common among girls and advantaged students.
- At the same time, in some OECD countries, up to half of students selected jobs at risk of automation, with higher shares among disadvantaged students and boys (Mann et al., 2020<sup>[6]</sup>).
- Bias may be particularly influential in students' perspectives of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) careers. Evidence indicates that, besides women and girls, ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups are under-represented in STEM fields (Mohr-Schroeder et al., 2020<sup>[36]</sup>; Buck, Cross Francis and Wilkins-Yel, 2020<sup>[37]</sup>).

In many societies, narrow, outdated and biased perspectives are self-perpetuating as young people often turn to parents and their immediate social network to discuss career plans, whose support is constrained by their own experiences (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>). High-quality, school-based career guidance is therefore one intervention seen to have a positive impact (Covacevich et al., 2021<sup>[11]</sup>). In PISA 2018, 93% of school leaders reported that career guidance was available in their school. Commonly reported approaches included having specific, school-based career guidance staff or teachers. However, significant shares of students were in schools where the responsibility was shared across existing teaching staff or external career guidance staff. Further analysis indicates that in some education systems, such as Norway, Ireland, Finland or Germany, the vast majority of students are covered by the same delivery method, suggesting a comprehensive system-level policy is in place. However, in others, no single model dominates; this may inhibit the system's ability to ensure efforts reach all learners (see Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4). Beyond the data, previous policy analysis by the Education Policy Outlook has revealed that young people, particularly those with complex needs, benefit from career guidance with multiple complementary actions, that the quality of information provided is crucial, and that links with employers are important (OECD, 2021<sup>[9]</sup>; OECD, 2018<sup>[38]</sup>).

Adults' perspectives matter too. With rapidly changing job markets, guidance enables reskilling, upskilling and mobility. It is especially important to older workers needing to move within the labour market and to people who have migrated between countries and who want to have their skills validated. However, according to one major study in Europe, only one adult in four ever uses a career guidance service. This is even less among individuals with lower levels of qualifications whose employment is most commonly precarious. Awareness of services can be low and adults can be confused by what support they are entitled to (Cedefop, European Commission, European Training Foundation, OECD, ILO and UNESCO, 2019<sup>[39]</sup>).

**Figure 4.3. School-based career guidance is the predominant approach on average across OECD countries**

Percentage of students in schools where the principal reported the following about who has the main responsibility for career guidance for 15-year-old students at school (PISA 2018)

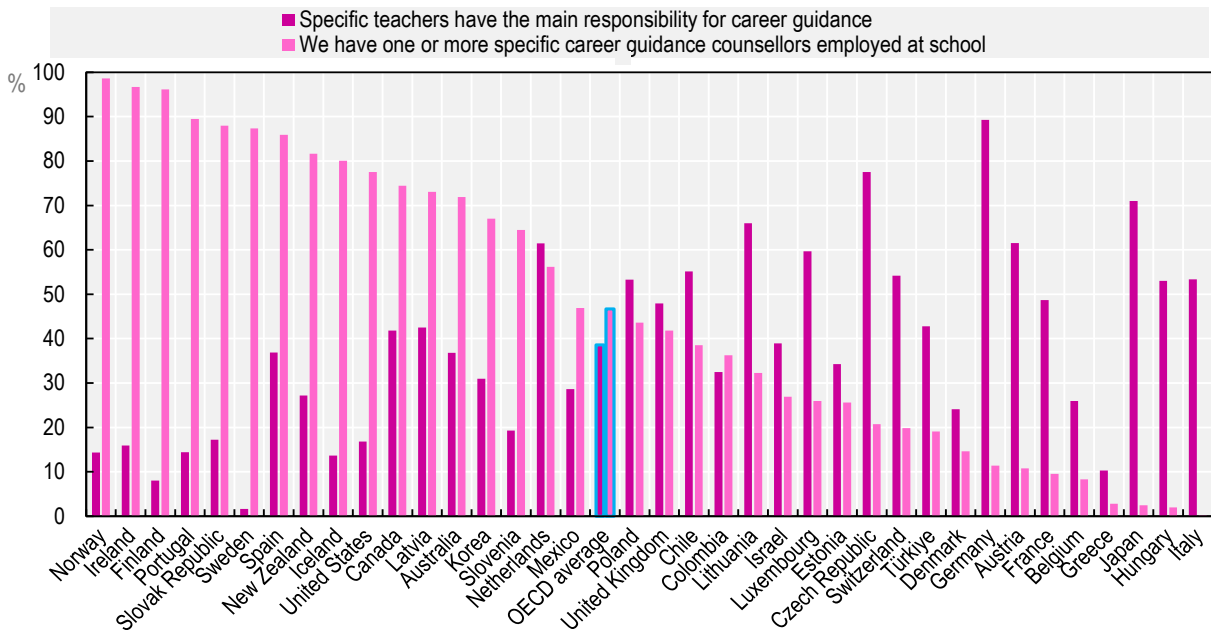


Source: OECD (2019<sup>[12]</sup>), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>.

StatLink <https://stat.link/542sk3>

**Figure 4.4. Within schools, responsibility for career guidance can vary across countries**

Percentage of students in schools where the principal reported the following about who has the main responsibility for career guidance for 15-year-old students at school (PISA 2018)



Source: OECD (2019<sup>[12]</sup>), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>.

StatLink <https://stat.link/6swat5>

### **Selected recent policy efforts**

Policy efforts identified for this analysis to enrich and expand learners' perspectives focus on enhancing career guidance, either as part of wider national frameworks, or as part of deliberate efforts to overcome barriers to participation in high-priority STEM pathways.

#### *Some career guidance efforts are taking place as part of broader national strategies*

Several ongoing policy developments to improve guidance support are part of more comprehensive system-level efforts that include the update of national frameworks. Where these cover lifelong learning, policy makers could explore introducing them from the earliest age, although policy action at these levels remains less evident. Nevertheless, by incorporating them into national frameworks, efforts to modify perspectives can help promote career and study paths that support the needs of wider society.

In 2022, **Ireland** established a National Policy Group for Lifelong Guidance charged with developing a strategic framework for lifelong guidance. Reflecting the focus on lifelong learning, the group brings together representatives from multiple ministries (e.g. Department of Social Protection; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Department of Education). The group aims to ensure progress on the implementation of recommendations from an independent review which highlighted the crucial role played by guidance counsellors and other teachers, particularly among disadvantaged students (Department of Education of Ireland, 2022<sup>[40]</sup>).

According to findings from this work, students from the lowest income groups were less likely to report that they had consulted with their parents about their career plans than those from higher-income backgrounds. They were also more likely to report that one-to-one counselling had played an important or very important role in helping them decide what to do after school (Indecon, 2019<sup>[41]</sup>; Department of Education of Ireland, 2022<sup>[40]</sup>). With this in mind, Ireland has already taken steps to strengthen professional development for school guidance. From September 2022, school leaders and guidance counsellors will have access to related professional learning and collaboration opportunities, as well as support in using evidence-based practices.

**Finland** has also implemented a Career Guidance Development Programme to support the extension of compulsory schooling and implementation of the whole-of-government Lifelong Guidance Strategy (2020-22). The Career Guidance Development Programme targets students in basic, upper secondary, and vocational education and training (VET) and aims to strengthen existing career guidance practices, provide more personalised guidance, and promote equity—particularly for Special Education Needs (SEN) students, students with an immigrant background, and students with mental health issues (Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2020<sup>[42]</sup>).

Since 2021, schools in Finland have been required to provide enhanced career guidance for students in grades 8 and 9 identified by teachers and counsellors as requiring extra support for the transition into upper secondary education. VET providers are also required to set out the procedures for collaboration with parents, employers, and other partners, including arrangements for bringing students into contact with the world of work. The Lifelong Guidance Strategy includes broader measures to evaluate and strengthen the training of career guidance professionals, and the National Board of Education established a working group to rewrite criteria for effective career guidance, paying particular attention to inter-professional co-operation between education levels (Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2020<sup>[43]</sup>; Council of State of Finland, 2020<sup>[44]</sup>; Covacevich et al., 2021<sup>[45]</sup>; Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2020<sup>[42]</sup>).

In **Estonia**, in response to recommendations from an interim evaluation of the Lifelong Learning Strategy, the government has introduced mandatory career counselling for low-skilled adults wishing to access free labour market training. The employment service agrees on an individual training plan for successful applicants, guiding them towards areas where there is a demand for skills, including areas with growth in demand since COVID-19. This training plan is based on an assessment of the skills the individual needs

to continue working or find new work. Such measures help to make adult learning more responsive to individuals' skills gaps and to ensure public investment leads to meaningful employment (Praxis/CentAR, 2019<sup>[29]</sup>; Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, n.d.<sup>[46]</sup>).

Furthermore, career guidance efforts in **New Zealand** aim for a more holistic approach to support learners' transitions from school to tertiary education. As part of these, the School Leavers' Toolkit provides information to students about tertiary education options for study and training. This information also covers aspects such as scholarships and other types of financial support available to them to pursue their studies. Practical guidance on skills that employers are looking for, how to prepare a curriculum vitae, or to prepare for an interview is also included. The toolkit is designed as a dual set of resources addressed to students, but also to teachers and career advisors in schools.

Furthermore, the toolkit aims to help learners progress into other broader aspects related to adult life, such as moving out of home, civics and politics, managing their finances and tax obligations, or taking care of oneself and others (e.g. discrimination, mindfulness, sexual health) (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2022<sup>[47]</sup>).

*In some countries and economies, career guidance efforts are specifically promoting STEM pathways*

Strengthening STEM learning in education and training goes beyond the need of governments to prepare its population for technological change. STEM is associated with key competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, or a growth mindset, among others (National Inventors Hall of Fame, 2022<sup>[48]</sup>). In 2023 and beyond, all of these are valuable to both individuals and societies to help shape technological evolutions, address climate change challenges, or even interact better in a world of ubiquitous online information, misinformation and disinformation.

Recognising the importance of STEM pathways for the future of their economies and society, several countries are implementing strategies to improve the quality of learning and increase participation in related fields. These aim to overcome challenges experienced in many countries in encouraging young people to pursue STEM pathways, in part due to prevailing biases in young peoples' perspectives.

The **Flemish Community of Belgium** is currently moving to a broad STEM agenda for 2030 to better link up existing initiatives and broaden the focus beyond the education system. The previous STEM Action Plan (2012 - 2020) largely focused on increasing STEM participation in secondary and higher education, although some measures targeted individuals who had already entered the labour market. Building on the successes of the STEM Action Plan, the STEM Agenda 2030 places a strong focus on the adult population and training for guidance professionals outside of school settings. The new agenda is informed by evidence of the impact of different intervention approaches, and aims to respond to trends that have been accelerated by COVID-19, such as digitalisation.

The STEM Action Plan involved measures to improve study and career guidance processes, such as training for teachers and workplace experiences for job seekers and school students in STEM professions. Over 100 STEM academies were established in municipalities across the region to provide young people with informal learning opportunities in STEM. Representatives from different sectors signed agreements setting out actions they would take to promote STEM careers. For example, to improve the offer of STEM subjects and the quality of teaching, the Department of Education and Training developed a Quality Framework for STEM Education based on international best practice and research on motivating students in STEM. This informed the development of STEM attainment targets for the end of primary and secondary schooling (2018). There were also efforts to improve STEM pedagogy through professional learning networks (De Coen et al., 2019<sup>[49]</sup>; Government of Flanders, n.d.<sup>[50]</sup>).

Monitoring data of the Action Plan show progress in increasing the share of female entrants to STEM pathways in upper secondary and higher education: by 2020/21, the share of female entrants was 50% in

the academic track of upper secondary school and 37% in academic bachelor programmes. Measures contributing to this success include teaching materials to combat gender stereotypes (De Coen et al., 2019<sup>[49]</sup>; Government of Flanders, n.d.<sup>[50]</sup>).

Furthermore, **Ireland's** STEM Education Policy Statement (2017-26) includes objectives to increase participation in STEM subjects at upper secondary level, particularly among girls. An implementation group within the Department of Education co-ordinates the various actions laid out in the statement (Department of Education of Ireland, 2017<sup>[51]</sup>). Recent measures include a set of recommendations on promoting gender balance in STEM education (2022) to inform the second phase of implementation. This drew on a literature review of broadening girls' perspectives and overcoming bias. The review pointed to the need for multiple interventions that address different aspects of the ecosystem—including school culture and students' home lives—as well as a need to move away from seeking to change girls' attitudes and behaviours towards a focus on policy and broader representation in society. Recognising the importance of gender-inclusive language, visual prompts, and examples in STEM curricula and resources, Ireland has been advised to review these in national curriculum specifications and in a national programme of mathematics and science resources, as well as in teacher Continuous Professional Development (Gender Balance in STEM Education Advisory Group, 2022<sup>[52]</sup>).

Further recommendations include embedding training within initial teacher preparation on the barriers to participation of under-represented groups in STEM and introducing a related Continuous Professional Development programme for early years educators. Finally, the Department of Education has been advised to evaluate and develop current practices that provide learners from under-represented groups with access to meaningful role models and career awareness activities that challenge stereotypes (Gender Balance in STEM Education Advisory Group, 2022<sup>[52]</sup>).

Other education systems have undertaken more targeted efforts to promote participation in STEM. These are more centred on raising awareness among key relevant actors. Since 2020, for example, **New South Wales' (Australia)** STEM Industry School Partnership has organised a free, online and on-demand event to promote STEM careers and learning. The 2022 edition brings together a series of talks and practical workshops that teachers can use with their students in the classroom, or for their own STEM professional development. These are released in a single webpage to coincide with events such as Australia's National Science Week, National Cyber Week, and World Space Week. For example, one video introduces teachers to a Careers with STEM platform that enables students to find pathways that suit their interests and inspires them to pursue careers in STEM by challenging stereotypes, showcasing diversity, and revealing unexpected career paths (Department of Education of New South Wales, 2022<sup>[53]</sup>). The online format emerged as a response to the outbreak of COVID-19 when the planned face-to-face conference was cancelled (Department of Education of New South Wales, n.d.<sup>[54]</sup>). This and the new on-demand format have the potential to reach a wider audience, with teachers across the state using the materials at their own convenience.

The STEM Industry School Partnership was established in 2018 as part of the New South Wales government's response to Australia's National STEM School Education Strategy (2016–26). Through collaboration with Australian companies, industry, universities, and government agencies, the programme aims to inspire young people to study STEM subjects and prepare them for STEM careers. Key objectives include developing school-industry partnerships to provide students with real-world STEM experiences and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, females, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Department of Education of New South Wales, n.d.<sup>[55]</sup>). Schools work with partners such as Google, Microsoft, Engineers Australia, and the Australian National University to ensure that curriculum is engaging and relevant (Department of Education of New South Wales, n.d.<sup>[56]</sup>).

Another recent effort includes **Mexico's** NiñaSTEM initiative (2017), which reached 3 200 girls across the country by 2020. Recent developments include a hybrid mentoring programme launched in the State of Coahuila, aiming to reach 25 000 female students during 2021/22. The programme included 12 virtual

mentoring sessions that were broadcast live and repeated face-to-face in schools for students without digital access. Each session was also followed by a classroom discussion led by teachers (OECD, n.d.<sup>[57]</sup>).

In 2021, **Hungary** launched a career orientation and measurement tool aimed at students in primary and secondary education. It contains self-reflection questions and tasks to assess students' STEM-related competencies and direct them to the most suitable careers and learning paths. To support successful implementation, some 4 000 teachers participated in professional development activities aimed at supporting their integration of the tool into their everyday classroom practice and raising awareness of the importance of career guidance. This included workshops and fora to share best practices (Office of Education of Hungary, 2021<sup>[58]</sup>; Office of Education of Hungary, n.d.<sup>[59]</sup>).

### ***Some policy lessons emerge to shift learners' perspectives for 2023***

Recent data and analysis from these and other policy experiences since 2020 to enrich and expand learners' perspectives offer some lessons to help guide education systems' efforts in 2023.

#### **1. Shifting younger learners' perspectives requires shifting those of the adults in their lives.**

Families, teachers, guidance professionals, and other adults play an important role in influencing young people's aspirations and career or study decisions. As such, measures that address the perspectives of these significant adults and support their capacity to guide learners can contribute to strengthening learners' aspirations.

- *Recent OECD data illustrate the persistence of gender-based professional stereotypes among adults. On average across OECD countries in 2020, 21% of new entrants to STEM short-cycle tertiary programmes were women, rising to 31% at bachelor's level. As this field of study is associated with high earnings, in comparison to the relatively lower earnings of female-dominated fields (e.g. education, arts and humanities) this gender imbalance exacerbates the wage gap between men and women. Nevertheless, across the OECD even when comparing tertiary-educated workers from the same field of study, women's work is less well-remunerated than men's (OECD, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>).*
- Recognising that career education is a collaborative effort between educational institutions, communities, and families, **New Brunswick's (Canada)** career education strategy includes measures to better connect families with labour market information. The online career planning tool also supports families with career development discussions and decisions (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, n.d.<sup>[60]</sup>).
- Recent recommendations provided to **Ireland** on promoting gender balance in STEM include developing guidance on STEM subject choices for primary school children and their parents to be provided at key transition points, and implementing a large-scale awareness campaign aimed at parents and other significant adults, with a focus on challenging stereotypes in STEM (Gender Balance in STEM Education Advisory Group, 2022<sup>[52]</sup>).

#### **2. Upskilling teachers/guidance professionals can positively shape learner's aspirations.**

Teachers and guidance counsellors have a crucial role to play in ensuring learners from all backgrounds have access to information on the full range of educational and professional opportunities. However, it cannot be taken for granted that they will have the information and skills they need to have meaningful careers conversations with young people. Enhancing their connections to others, particularly people in different professional sectors, can help update their knowledge on an ongoing basis.

- *Recent OECD data reveal that teachers are commonly expected to engage in student counselling, including career counselling, but they do not always receive training to prepare for this role. In 2021, 27 countries reported that student counselling activities are mandatory for all or some upper secondary teachers, while 5 reported that participation is voluntary. However, only 5 of those with*



*available data reported that student counselling was among the mandated content components of professional development for upper secondary teachers (OECD, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>).*

- Evidence from the **Flemish Community of Belgium** draws attention to some of the challenges teachers face in keeping up to date with rapid changes in the labour market and the need to provide career-wide professional learning opportunities. It highlights a need to develop teachers' capacities for career coaching, as well as keeping them abreast of technical innovations in STEM fields (De Coen et al., 2019<sup>[49]</sup>). The Flemish Community of Belgium plans to expand its STEM Learning Networks for teachers as part of the STEM Agenda 2030 (Government of Flanders, n.d.<sup>[50]</sup>).
- Survey data from **Ireland** suggest that only a minority of guidance counsellors are satisfied with the quality of available information on labour market trends and pathways such as self-employment and apprenticeships. Options identified for addressing this include investing in providing accessible labour market intelligence to educational professionals and increasing the participation of parents and teachers in careers information activities (Indecon, 2019<sup>[41]</sup>).

### 3. Engaging employers in career education can be encouraged by creating the right conditions

Employers, entrepreneurs, and other labour market partners can play a crucial role in widening learners' perspectives and supporting teaching professionals in the delivery of career education.

- *Recent OECD data show that during the COVID-19 crisis, around one-third of OECD countries for whom there is available data introduced new or extended existing hiring subsidies for employers who recruited young people. Another third continued schemes already in place prior to 2020. To foster longer-term benefits, these subsidies can be paired with additional support measures as a condition of their payment. Only some OECD countries reported doing so: 8 had on-the-job training requirements; 7 countries requested on-the-job mentoring; and 4 obliged companies to keep the subsidised employee for a certain period after the contract ends (OECD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>).*
- Recent evidence from **Australia** highlights three ways that school-industry partnerships can support the broader aim of increasing the supply of STEM skills: improving careers awareness and understanding of the opportunities afforded by STEM through work-related activities; supporting teachers' professional learning through collaboration on learning materials and providing opportunities such as industry requirements; increasing outcomes and impact through use of data and evidence (Education Services Australia, 2018<sup>[61]</sup>).
- However, evidence from **Ireland** points to a need for mechanisms to bring employers and schools or other educational institutions together. There is a risk that employer involvement in career education could be ad hoc and dependent on pre-existing local relationships. There is also a need to make the case to employers and to overcome some of the barriers they may face in engaging with schools. Possible solutions include implementing a programme to highlight benefits for the enterprise of participating in career guidance and the support measures that exist to help them. Encouraging schools to collaborate on workplace visits to ensure employers' time can be used efficiently has also been recommended (Indecon, 2019<sup>[41]</sup>).

### 4. Shifting perspectives requires action across the life cycle as learners' needs and contexts evolve.

Evidence from recent policy efforts highlights the importance of starting guidance efforts early, opening learners' minds to a range of possible pathways from a young age, and reiterating this guidance as learners evolve along their career pathways (Covacevich et al., 2021<sup>[11]</sup>). However, policy makers must also take a global vision, providing opportunities for individuals to change pathways after they enter the workforce.

- In the **Flemish Community of Belgium**, the initial STEM Action Plan (2012-20) overlooked the monitoring of impact on older women's participation in STEM occupations, despite including indicators to monitor participation at secondary and higher education levels in STEM subjects.

Similarly, actions to improve career and study guidance only targeted school students. While measures to promote STEM in compulsory education will continue, the STEM Agenda 2030 deepens the focus on adult career guidance and training and includes measures to support upskilling and reskilling. This includes an initiative aimed at promoting STEM adult learning opportunities among young people in insecure or temporary work. Achieving this aim will be especially important in the current context, since recent data suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing skills deficits in STEM professions (Government of Flanders, n.d.<sup>[50]</sup>).

## Learners need agency and co-agency to identify and capitalise on opportunities

Policy analysis undertaken by the Education Policy Outlook in 2021 indicated that in order to implement policy efforts that help nurture resilient learners, education systems should favour approaches that foster learners' agency and co-agency (OECD, 2021<sup>[9]</sup>). When it comes to aspirations, this means empowering learners to identify and capitalise on the opportunities given to them by the education system, and create their own, in order to bring their aspirations to fruition.

As educational pathways become more flexible, and labour markets experience short-term disruptions and longer-term transformations, such agency is critical in ensuring that learners continue to reflect and act upon their changing aspirations and opportunities, and proactively engage in lifelong learning. Moreover, many of the competences and attitudes contributing to a sense of agency are particularly important in times of stress, helping young people respond positively to uncertainty (Chernyshenko, Kankaraš and Drasgow, 2018<sup>[62]</sup>; Jiao et al., 2020<sup>[63]</sup>).

Previous international work on career guidance also emphasises the need to develop students' agency. A joint report from several high-level organisations stated that effective career guidance should empower learners by allowing them to get to know themselves, their talents, interests and potential, and by encouraging them to think critically about personal or common assumptions (Cedefop, European Commission, European Training Foundation, OECD, ILO and UNESCO, 2019<sup>[39]</sup>). The OECD has also pointed to evidence that the primary purpose of career guidance should be to help students visualise and plan their futures within a self-driven cyclical process, shaping the ways in which they seek out and engage in future career-related activities (Covacevich et al., 2021<sup>[11]</sup>).

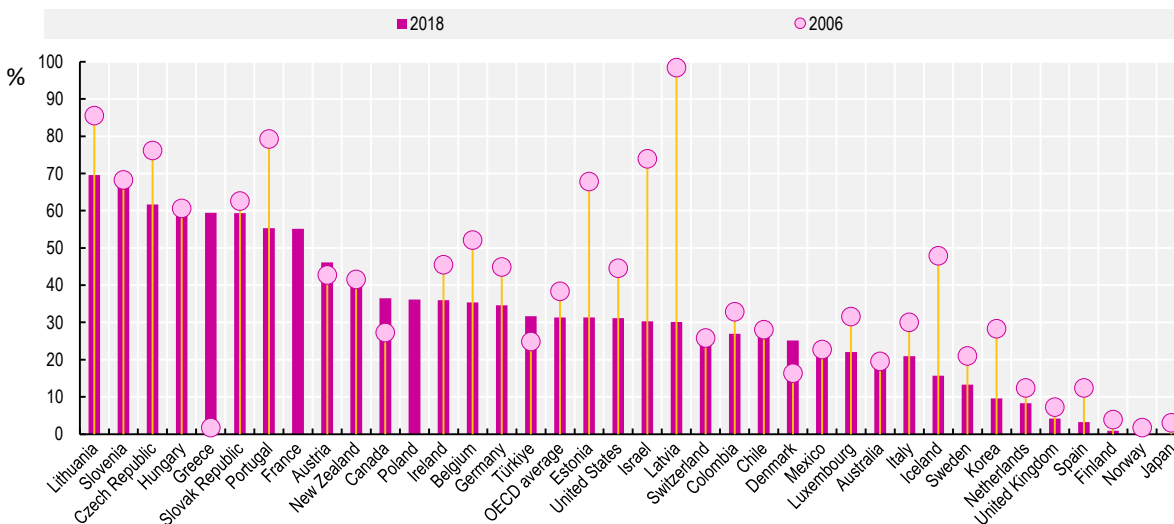
Enhancing students' agency through career guidance initiatives requires addressing a range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and social connections. For example, development activities focused on application and interview skills have been shown to support career readiness (Covacevich et al., 2021<sup>[11]</sup>). Career conversations that encourage critical reflection, both school-based and work-based, are seen to provide young people with greater benefits than other interventions such as presentations (OECD, 2021<sup>[64]</sup>; Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>). At the same time, wider definitions of student agency highlight the importance of social-emotional skills and transformative competencies such as motivation, self-regulation, growth mindset and self-efficacy (OECD, 2021<sup>[9]</sup>; Talreja, 2017<sup>[65]</sup>). However, OECD data indicate that an important share of learners need further support to develop their sense of agency. For example, in PISA 2018, 16% of 15-year-olds disagreed that in difficult situations, they can usually find a way out, and 43% felt that it was only somewhat or not at all like them to be able to adapt to different situations even when under stress or pressure (OECD, 2020<sup>[66]</sup>; OECD, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>). Further research reveals that youth who work part-time, intern or volunteer are significantly more likely to be confident in dealing with unfamiliar situations (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>).

Efforts to enhance learner agency when it comes to their aspirations may include helping them develop a broad social network made up of people with different expertise and connections, explicitly teaching skills that individuals may need to look for work and supporting them to critically reflect on work and workplaces through work experience placements. When it comes to career guidance among younger learners, nurturing students' agency requires, among other things, creating space for it.

Figure 4.5 shows the change in the shares of 15-year-olds in PISA 2018 who must voluntarily seek out career guidance. In the vast majority of education systems, this share has decreased since 2006, and in some cases by a large amount. The average drop in the share of students for which receiving career guidance depended on voluntarily requesting it (for countries with data in both periods) was 7.8 percentage points. This suggests that more education systems are prioritising formally scheduled career guidance, displacing the voluntary approaches. However, while the former approach is important in democratising access to career guidance and ensuring comprehensive coverage, the latter is crucial in promoting agency. As such, education systems will need to find ways to promote and protect the two.

### Figure 4.5. More formally scheduled career guidance is being favoured among OECD countries

Percentage of students in schools where the principal reported that career guidance is formally scheduled into students' time (PISA 2006, 2018)



Source: OECD (2019<sup>[12]</sup>), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/scgb8m>

### Selected recent policy efforts

Although the policies collected for this section target different age groups, they include practices that can support the agency of individuals at any stage of their education or career. Some measures aim at developing participants' social capital through activities that expand their network, such as work placements. Countries are also developing holistic interventions that address more complex barriers to employment or education, including non-vocational barriers. At the same time, the policy examples from this report suggest that some individuals or groups may benefit from more targeted or specific measures.

A programme developed by a Community College in **New York State (United States)**—which has now spread to other HEIs—aims to strengthen the agency and social capital of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (many of whom have narrow and limited family-based networks and face additional challenges transitioning to the workplace) through critical investigation of the labour market (Guttman Community College, n.d.<sup>[67]</sup>; Bunker Hill Community College, n.d.<sup>[68]</sup>). *Ethnographies of Work* is a compulsory course for first-year students, who use ethnographic and other social science methods to investigate a range of careers and work-related issues. Students begin by exploring dimensions of working

life in contexts of disruption, uncertainty and innovation, and are encouraged to uncover myths and stereotypes about the world of work. They then conduct an ethnographic investigation on an occupation of interest to them, carrying out fieldwork at a worksite. They also research quantitative data on occupations and employment trends (Guttman Community College, n.d.<sup>[67]</sup>).

Findings from student focus groups following the pilot of the programme (2018) indicate that students had become more metacognitive about their career choices, showed better understanding that they may change pathways over time, and that they could follow routes that did not conform with family expectations. Students also showed better understanding of the importance of social capital in the job market, such as the role of gatekeepers and networking. Finally, contact with the world of work challenged some of the myths students held about certain occupations (Gatta and Hoffman, n.d.<sup>[69]</sup>). The OECD has found that while the programme was designed for higher education students, there are several useful lessons that could apply to programmes for younger students (OECD, n.d.<sup>[70]</sup>).

Other programmes aim to support the agency of older workers by targeting specific skills related to looking for work. The **Netherlands'** Successful Transitions to Work programme targets over-50s and consists of ten group meetings and three individual interviews led by a PES employee. It aims to decrease long-term unemployment among older adults by strengthening job search skills such as self-presentation, use of social media, networking, and interview technique. Early monitoring mechanisms enabled policy makers to adjust the initiative considering emerging evidence. For example, since take-up of the training was lower than expected in the first year, the eligibility criteria was reduced from over 55s to over 50s (Institute of Employee Benefit Schemes, n.d.<sup>[71]</sup>; Institute of Employee Benefit Schemes, n.d.<sup>[72]</sup>).

The Netherlands also conducted a randomised field experiment to assess the impact of the first phase of implementation (2013-2016). This found that, compared to the control group, participants had a better knowledge of different application methods, were more likely to use social media platforms such as LinkedIn, and reported increased confidence and better social support. They also spent more time on job applications. There was a smaller positive effect on the number of job interviews they gained and the chance of returning to work (van Hooft and van den Hee, 2017<sup>[73]</sup>).

In 2022, **Australia** adjusted its Transition to Work programme, which provides support to young people aged 15-21 at risk of long-term unemployment. While the maximum duration of 18 months remains in place for young people with mainly vocational barriers, the programme can now be extended to 24 months for those with more complex non-vocational barriers (Department of Education, Skills and Employment of Australia, 2021<sup>[74]</sup>). In a summative evaluation of the first phase of the programme (2021), providers indicated that having a small caseload enabled caseworkers to adopt a participant-centred approach, incorporating feedback. Another key success factor was the use of a broad range of assessment tools, dedicated case managers, and specialists such as youth workers and Indigenous mentors increased over time (Department of Education, Skills and Employment of Australia, 2021<sup>[75]</sup>).

The programme was delivered by youth providers with strong existing connections to local schools and the community. Caseworkers and providers tailored support to the agency of participants, enabling them to drive their own skill development, and identifying appropriate education and training opportunities. Upfront payments also gave flexibility to providers to support young people in covering costs related to pursuing employment opportunities, such as enrolling for training, paying for interview clothes or work uniforms, or covering transportation costs (Department of Education, Skills and Employment of Australia, 2022<sup>[76]</sup>).

## **Some policy lessons emerge on developing learners' agency at different ages for 2023**

Recent data and analysis from these and other policy experiences since 2020 on supporting learners to develop agency offer some lessons to help guide education systems' efforts in 2023.

### **1. Younger learners may need support in developing professional behaviours.**

Although contact with the working world can support the agency of younger learners, many will be entering the workplace for the first time. Policy makers or education professionals will need to take steps to ensure they know what to expect, and how to develop a network, but also what employers expect of them.

- This was a challenge identified in **New York State (United States)**, where employers reported that some participants in the Ethnographies of Work programme exhibited behaviours that did not meet their standards of professionalism. Recognising that visiting a workplace was a new experience for learners—many of whom had only recently left secondary education—teaching staff developed a workshop on the theme of professionalism that was delivered as part of the institution's transition programme. This aimed to prepare young people for the workplace visits (Gatta and Hoffman, n.d.<sup>[69]</sup>).

### **2. Some individuals need more time than others to develop agency.**

Circumstances experienced by some individuals may be more complex than for others, meaning that additional resources or time should be factored into the design of a policy aiming to provide support for agency.

- Recent experiences from **Australia** point to the need to allow sufficient time and resources to address the more complex non-vocational barriers that prevent some people from entering education or employment. Providers reported that the most common non-vocational barriers related to substance misuse and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Identifying and addressing these barriers was often time-consuming, especially since some providers experienced delays when referring young people to mental health services and other forms of support (Department of Education, Skills and Employment of Australia, 2021<sup>[77]</sup>). As such, Australia has extended the maximum duration of the Transitions to Work programme and has sought stakeholder feedback on what characteristics should be used to decide if a young person may need more time (Department of Education, Skills and Employment of Australia, 2022<sup>[76]</sup>). This underlines the fact that addressing more complex needs holistically may require additional resources as well as additional time.

### **3. Motivating and empowering individuals with longer unemployment periods through practical tools can support resilience.**

Maintaining a sense of agency and motivation to find work can be difficult for individuals who have been unemployed for longer periods of time, and who have experienced challenges in their job search. Programmes should therefore focus on strengthening participants' autonomous motivation while helping them navigate challenging circumstances.

- *Recent OECD data reveal that, during 2021, long-term unemployment increased in many countries despite the general improvement in labour market conditions. By early 2022, long-term unemployment was still above pre-crisis levels in 20 of the 32 countries with available data and on average across the OECD for younger adults (15-24 year-olds) (OECD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). Responses to the OECD Questionnaire on Policy Responses to the COVID-19 show that many countries (63%) adapted the design of employment incentives to better suit the needs of target groups, including those at risk of long-term unemployment. However, a much smaller share (23%) adapted job search support and counselling in the same way (OECD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>).*

- A surprising finding in the **Netherlands** was that the focus on networking in the Transitions to Work programme may have had the perverse effect of convincing participants that finding work depends on factors outside of their control, such as being in the right place at the right time. More broadly, the data suggest that participants' motivation to look for work declined the longer they were unemployed—possibly because of unsuccessful applications—and that the training had done little to compensate for this decline. Previous research suggests that giving participants the opportunity to share their negative thoughts and experiences of looking for work and seeking to transform these thoughts through motivational interviewing can support autonomous motivation. The research also recommends that the training should focus less on the importance of the network as such, and more on providing them with tools to create a network and manage it. The focus should then be on empowering the participant as the agent of change (van Hooft and van den Hee, 2017<sup>[73]</sup>).

## Policy pointers to move forward

In 2023, as governments continue to face the implications of local and global change and disruption in 2020-2022, undergoing policy efforts provide guidance on steps they could take to nurture learners' aspirations as they transition through their education pathway. Key messages of the policy lessons mentioned earlier in this chapter follow below.

### *Outreach to engage target learners*

1. **Combine datasets and monitoring eligibility to help identify target groups more effectively.** Policy makers need to consider that some target groups may be difficult to identify and less likely to reach out for training opportunities (e.g. NEETs, the long-term unemployed, and adults with low qualifications) while overly specific eligibility criteria can limit the scope of outreach efforts.
2. **Design special incentives to help engage those hardest to reach.** Evidence collected from reviews of more established policies offer some lessons on ways in which governments can attract target groups that are particularly hard to reach.
3. **Curate information for different actors and their needs to enhance impact.** In order to have impact, policy makers need to help so that information about education and skill needs and pathways is engaged with and understood by different audiences with different information needs. Policy experiences indicate that this requires balancing oversimplification and excessive technical detail, and investigating how different groups use information to make decisions.

### *Enriching and expanding learners' perspectives*

1. **Shift younger learners' perspectives by shifting those of the adults in their lives.** Families, teachers, guidance professionals, and other adults play an important role in influencing young people's aspirations and career or study decisions. As such, it is important that policy makers consider measures that address the perspectives of these significant adults and support their capacity to guide learners to strengthen their aspirations.
2. **Upskill teachers/guidance professionals to positively shape young people's aspirations.** Teachers and guidance counsellors have a crucial role to play in ensuring learners from all backgrounds have access to information on the full range of educational and professional opportunities. However, policy makers cannot take for granted that teachers and guidance counsellors will have the information and skills they need to have meaningful careers conversations with young people. Enhancing their connections to others, particularly people in different professional sectors, can help update their knowledge on an ongoing basis.
3. **Engage employers in career education by creating the right conditions.** Employers, entrepreneurs, and other labour market partners can play a crucial role in widening learners' perspectives and supporting teaching professionals in the delivery of career education.

- 4. Reiterate action to shift perspectives across the life cycle as learners' needs and contexts evolve.** Opening learners' minds to a range of possible pathways from a young age and reiterating this guidance as learners evolve along their career pathways is important, as well as providing opportunities for individuals to change pathways after they enter the workforce.

*Developing learners' agency at different ages*

- 1. Consider that some younger learners may need additional support to develop professional behaviours.** Although contact with the working world can support the agency of younger learners, many will be entering the workplace for the first time. Policy makers or education professionals will need to take steps to ensure they know what to expect, and how to develop a network, but also what employers expect of them.
- 2. Give additional time to some individuals who may need it more to develop agency.** Circumstances experienced by some individuals may be more complex than for others, meaning that additional resources or time should be factored into the design of a policy aiming to provide support for agency.
- 3. Provide practical tools to motivate and empower individuals with longer unemployment periods to support their resilience.** Maintaining a sense of agency and motivation to find work can be difficult for individuals who have been unemployed for longer periods of time. Programmes should therefore focus on strengthening participants' autonomous motivation while helping them navigate challenging circumstances.

**Table 4.1. Selected education policies and practices on nurturing learners' aspirations**

<i>Outreach to engage target learners in education, training or work opportunities</i>		
<b>Austria</b> – Initiative for Adult Education (2012)	<b>Germany</b> – Adaptations to youth outreach strategies during COVID-19 (2020)	<b>Netherlands</b> – Regional approach to addressing early school leaving (2005); Regional Mobility Teams (2021)
<b>Canada</b> – Future Skills Council (2018)	<b>Latvia</b> – Know and Do (2014)	<b>United Kingdom</b> – Discover Uni (2019)
<b>New Brunswick (Canada)</b> – Future Ready Learning K-12 (2019)	<b>Luxembourg</b> – Revised Youth Guarantee (2021)	
<i>Enriching and expanding learners' perspectives</i>		
<b>Australia</b> – National STEM Education Strategy (2016-26)	<b>Estonia</b> – Career guidance for adult learners (2020)	<b>Ireland</b> – STEM Education Policy Statement (2017-26); Indecon Review of Career Guidance (2019); National Policy Group for Lifelong Guidance (2022)
<b>New South Wales (Australia)</b> – STEM Industry-School Partnership (2018)	<b>Finland</b> – Career Guidance Development Programme (2020); Lifelong Guidance Strategy (2020-22)	<b>Mexico</b> – Niña STEM (2017)
<b>Flemish Community of Belgium</b> – STEM Action Plan (2014-20); STEM Agenda 2030 (2021)	<b>Hungary</b> – Career orientation and measurement tool (2021)	<b>New Zealand</b> – School Leavers' Toolkit (2019)
<i>Developing agency in learners</i>		
<b>Australia</b> – Transition to Work (2022)	<b>Netherlands</b> – Successful Transitions to Work (2013)	<b>New York State (United States)</b> – Ethnographies of Work (2018)

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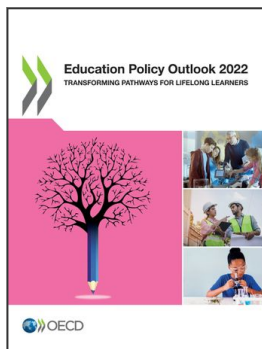
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