

## Chapter 5

# Raising the quality and equity of Mexico's education and skills system

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Mexico has one of the largest and most complex education systems in the OECD. Despite its geographic, cultural and socio-economic diversity, Mexico has made significant progress in expanding and strengthening its education system. Today, nearly all children between the ages of 4 and 14 are in school and the country is working to raise upper secondary and tertiary education completion. Mexico's constitutional reform in 2012 made quality education a right for all Mexicans and has led to positive changes in the management of the education system and helped professionalise the teaching workforce. Effective implementation of this reform will be key to strengthening the country's education system. Mexico has also progressed towards an education and training system that is more relevant to the labour market. Despite this progress, the country still faces major challenges. To make headway on its path of educational improvement, Mexico's system-level policies should maintain their focus on improving the educational success of students from diverse backgrounds and delivering quality education across all types of schools, including upper-secondary and vocational education and training institutions. They should also work to improve students' transitions from school to work so that young people are able to reap the benefits of technological progress and find success as their country becomes more integrated into the global economy. Recent OECD evidence suggests that in complex education systems like Mexico's, implementation is not about executing education policies, but rather about building and fine-tuning them collaboratively with a range of stakeholders. Building the capacity of Mexico's states and other agencies so they are well placed to engage in the dialogue on reform implementation is therefore crucial.

Mexico has one of the largest and most complex education systems in the OECD, with over 36 million students, 2 million teachers and 260 000 institutions from primary to tertiary education. The national education system in Mexico is led by the Ministry of Public Education, which must cater to the education needs of a large and highly diverse population. For example, Mexico was the 11th most populated country in the world in 2015, with a population of 120 million people, of which about 23% lived in rural areas and 45% of the total population was less than 25 years old.

Fostering better education and skills outcomes is crucial to building a more productive, healthier, fairer and more cohesive society. A better skilled workforce would ensure that Mexico is well prepared for the changes technology is expected to have on work and its content in the coming decades. Mexico's vanishing demographic bonus further highlights the importance of making full use of all available talent. In this context, workforce adaptability will be crucial in ensuring that Mexican firms and workers can reap the benefits brought about by technological progress and further integration into the world economy.

Aware of these potential gains, Mexico has taken important steps to improve the coverage and quality of its education system. In November 2012, the Mexican government made a series of commitments, aimed at improving the quality of basic education; increasing enrolment and improving the quality of upper secondary and tertiary education; and restoring the leadership of the Mexican state in the national education system, while maintaining the system's character. A constitutional reform in 2012 made quality education a right for all Mexicans and has set out plans to increase education coverage; to improve teaching and learning conditions by providing more autonomy to schools and establishing full-time schools; to create a professional teacher service; and to promote system improvement with more transparency and consolidation of the evaluation authority. Furthermore, constitutional autonomy over the evaluation of Mexico's compulsory education system was given to the National Institute for Education Evaluation (*Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación*, INEE) in 2012. The implementation of these reforms is well underway, but efforts should be maintained to reap the benefits of these changes.

As part of the efforts undertaken to address these goals, Mexico introduced a New Education Model (*Nuevo Modelo Educativo*) in 2017. It proposes (among other things) a curriculum for compulsory education to ensure that all students are able to develop the skills required in the 21st century, focusing more on developing socio-emotional skills and core competencies rather than on memorising material through repetition. Other specific reforms are being implemented to strengthen Mexico's teaching profession, and evaluation mechanisms have been evolving to provide greater consistency and transparency in the system. For example, following the establishment of the teacher evaluation system (in 2013), nearly 87% of teachers were appraised in 2016.

Mexico has also been working to raise completion rates in education and improve the labour market relevance of its education and training system by expanding private sector involvement, increasing the number of apprenticeships, and raising the supply of training and vocational programmes. Due to the competitiveness of the global economy and labour market, more Mexican youth are being encouraged to study and pursue careers and research in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. This is particularly

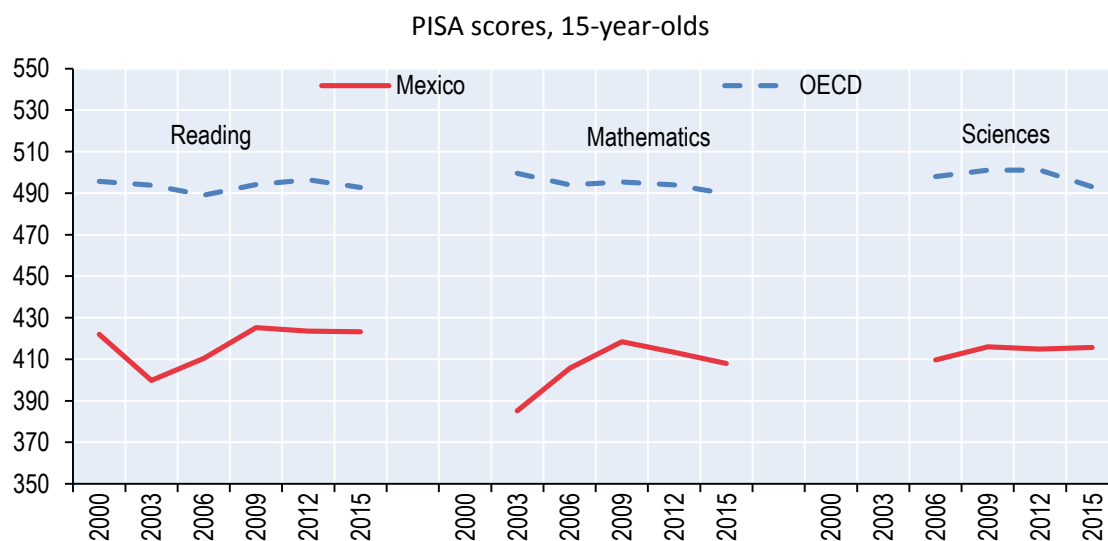
relevant for girls, and along with the OECD, the Ministry of Education launched the “NiñaSTEM Pueden” to develop a network of female mentors in the STEM fields to encourage girls to pursue these disciplines. In addition, the Ministry of Education developed new textbooks eliminating gender stereotypes.

Despite the progress that has been made, the Mexican education system is still faced with major challenges regarding coverage, the quality of student learning and transitions to the labour market. While enrolment rates in upper secondary education have seen an impressive increase from 65.9% in 2012-13 to 74.7% in 2016-17, only around half of 15-17-year-olds from a disadvantaged background are enrolled in education (53% of those in extreme poverty and 72.9% of those in moderate poverty), compared to 93.8% of their advantaged peers. And overall, student learning outcomes remain weak: Mexico was the lowest scoring OECD country in the science domain of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2015, with a mean score of 415 points, compared to the OECD average of 493 points (Figure 5.1).

Spending on education remains another challenge. Although Mexico’s education expenditure corresponds to a high share of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and total public expenditure, it remains low in absolute terms. In 2014, Mexico’s per student expenditure at the primary level was USD 2 896 compared to the OECD average of USD 8 733. Per student expenditure at the secondary level is also much lower than the OECD average. Providing sufficient funding and reflecting on how resources can be more efficiently allocated will be key to making reform happen.

Mexico’s comprehensive education reforms are well-designed to address current challenges, but implementation and subsequent evaluation will be key. Mexico’s reform processes need the appropriate capacity and clarity among stakeholders to distribute responsibilities across the decentralised education system. A stronger dialogue with the states and other agencies is also needed to make Mexico’s New Education Model a reality.

**FIGURE 5.1. LEARNING OUTCOMES IN MEXICO REMAIN WEAK**



Source: OECD (2016), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en>.

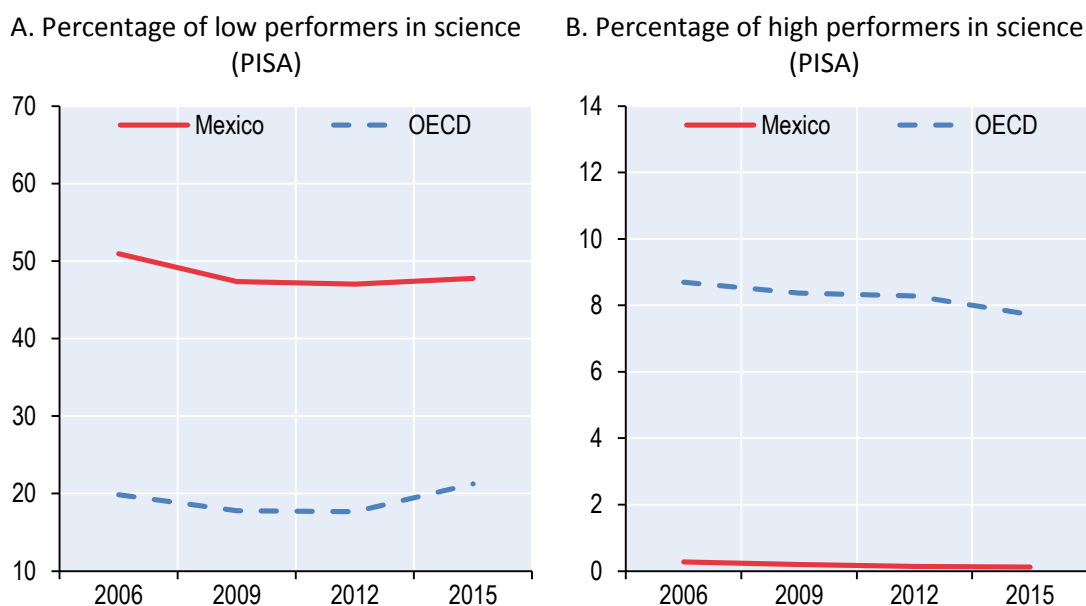
## Improving access to quality education for all students

Mexico has one of the largest and most complex education systems in the OECD. Catering to the country's geographic, cultural and socio-economic diversity is a major challenge for the definition and delivery of quality education services. Mexico recently created five regional blocks (*Regiones Educativas*) that could be helpful to increase social participation in education and improve the provision of education services across the country. Furthermore, the OECD has advised Mexico to increase synergies between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Economy, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Labour and the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT), to improve the quality and relevance of education for the country's shorter- and longer-term development needs.

Students in Mexico often attend schools with other students whose socio-economic background is similar to their own. Socio-economic status had a lower than average impact on science performance in PISA 2015, accounting for 10.9% of the variance in performance (OECD average of 12.9%). While this is positive, it is in part because the most advantaged students in Mexico perform below their peers with a similar socio-economic background in other OECD countries (with an average of 446 score points for the most advantaged Mexican students, compared to 540 score points for their peers in other OECD countries on average).

Mexico had the largest share of students performing below Level 2 in the PISA 2015 science test: 48% compared to the OECD average of just over 20%. However, this group showed an average improvement of seven score points every three years between 2006 and 2015 (Figure 5.2). Mexico should continue working to reduce its share of low-performing students, while raising the number of high-performing students. At less than 1%, Mexico's share of top performers in science remains well behind the OECD average (8%).

**FIGURE 5.2. MEXICO HAS MANY LOW-PERFORMING AND FEW HIGH-PERFORMING STUDENTS**



Source: OECD (2016), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en>.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies can improve students' opportunities to succeed later in life. While Mexico has made significant progress in expanding access to ECEC in recent years, efforts should be continued to improve access to affordable and good-quality ECEC, particularly for children under the age of three. In 2002, ECEC was made compulsory starting at three years of age and while the enrolment of three-year-olds in ECEC has nearly doubled since 2005, only one in two three-year-olds (45.8%) was enrolled in 2015, lower than the OECD average of 77.8%. By age four, nearly 90% of children were enrolled in pre-primary education in 2015 – above the OECD average of 87%. This is excellent news, as ECEC can make a substantial contribution to achieving inclusive growth: when children from vulnerable backgrounds benefit from these services, it helps to level the playing field.

At the same time, participation of children in ECEC varies widely among regions. According to national data, in 2014-15 net coverage ranged from 92.5% in Tabasco to 58% in Quintana Roo. Mexico should also take steps to improve the quality of ECEC. This could include increasing the educational requirements for care assistants working with very young children and lowering child-to-staff ratios.

Language is another equity challenge for Mexico's education system. Despite improvements, large performance gaps remain for indigenous Mexican students whose language spoken at home is different from Spanish, the language of assessment in PISA 2015 (64 score points). A national study also found that only 9.8% of monolingual indigenous students between the ages of 15 and 17 continue to be enrolled at school, and this is often in classes with lower age groups. Highly qualified teachers and school leaders are key to improving the learning outcomes for indigenous students and they should be equipped with textbooks and materials in their own languages. This is of utmost importance given that 43% of teachers in indigenous schools report a lack of specific textbooks in indigenous languages and a large proportion of them (15-25%) say that their proficiency levels in indigenous languages are low.

According to OECD evidence, certain prevailing policies in Mexico favour social equality, such as a long period of compulsory education (longer than usual for OECD countries) and limited ability grouping. Compulsory education in Mexico is longer than the typical duration across the OECD, and Students are first formally streamed into different educational pathways at the age of 15, which is later than the OECD average of 14. However, grade repetition can lead to increased student disengagement and early school leaving. In PISA 2015, 15.8% of Mexican 15-year-olds reported that they had repeated a grade, compared to the OECD average rate of 11.3%. Mexico should provide more support for low achievers and those at risk of dropping out instead of relying on costly policies like grade repetition to repair learning gaps. To encourage students to stay in upper secondary education and reduce the risk of social exclusion, the Movement Against School Dropout (*Movimiento Contra el Abandono Escolar*) (2013–14) focuses on information dissemination, participatory planning and community outreach. Activities include the physical and digital distribution of handbooks and yearly workshops in schools on dropout prevention. Some evidence suggests that the policy has had a significant impact in reducing dropout, although stronger monitoring mechanisms should be introduced to ensure efficacy.

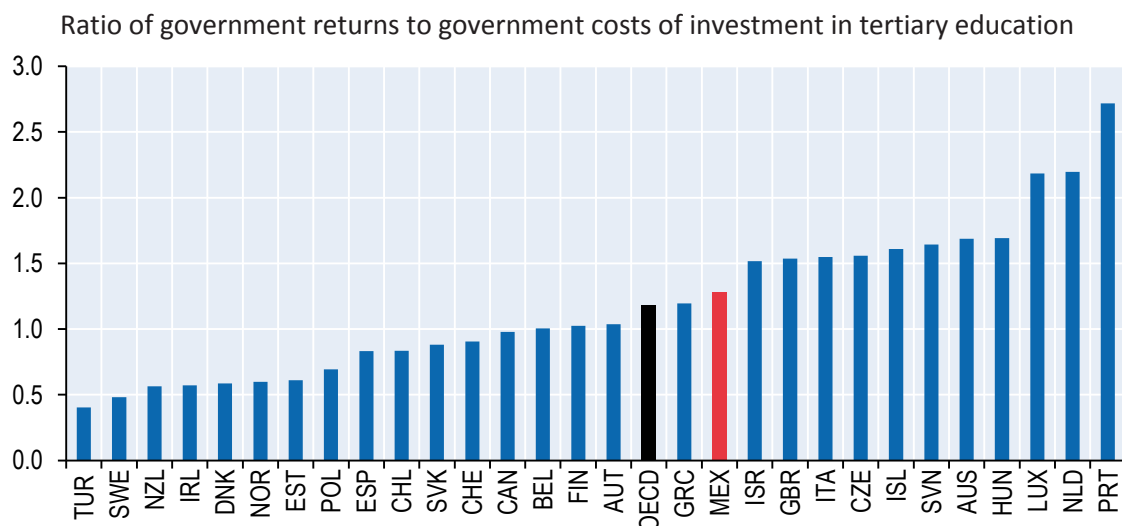
Mexico's educational geography presents another challenge to equity and quality. Around 23% of Mexico's total population lived in rural areas in 2015, nearly half of whom were less than 25 years old. PISA 2015 shows that there is a gap of over one year of schooling between students in urban and rural areas. This is indicative of the importance of the education system in delivering quality education opportunities to eventually improve life opportunities for a large and diverse population in the country. National evidence highlights that resources could be allocated more equitably across schools and municipalities, as rural, indigenous and/or multi-grade schools currently have less access to resources than more advantaged schools. Access to resources has also varied across states, the most disadvantaged being sometimes the ones that have benefited the least, even with increases of expenditure.

In addition to the comprehensive reforms mentioned above, Mexico has a number of public initiatives that address equality issues. For example, the cash transfer programme, PROSPERA, formerly known as *Oportunidades* or *Progresa*, encourages disadvantaged families to send their children to school and to medical check-ups. It covers around 6.5 million Mexican families, and has helped to increase enrolment rates for secondary school, reduce the incidence of anaemia among children, and cut poverty rates in rural areas. Along with this, additional efforts need to be continued to improve the quality of education opportunities provided for all. In 2014, the Programme for Inclusion and Educational Equity (*Programa para la Inclusión y la Equidad Educativa*) was introduced to strengthen the capacities of schools and educational services that serve indigenous children, migrants and students with special educational needs, as well as learning via television in remote areas (through the existing *telesecundarias*) and unitary multi-grade schools. This is done through financial, academic and infrastructure support to disadvantaged schools. In 2016, 170 000 students benefited from the programme. Mexico should maintain its commitment to improving and transforming the education system.

To put students and schools at the centre of its education system, Mexico needs to provide sufficient resources to make this possible. Public expenditure on education grew by 11.9% between 2008 and 2014 (the biggest increase in the OECD over the period); however, Mexico's expenditure on education remains low in absolute terms. Mexico not only needs to allocate an adequate amount of resources to education, but also to reflect on how resources

can more efficiently reach schools. Policy efforts such as the Full-time Schools Programme (*Programa Escuela de Tiempo Completo*), *Escuelas al CIEN* (National Certificates of Education Infrastructure, 2015) and the Schools at the Centre Programme (*Programa La Escuela al Centro*, 2016), aim to provide effective education materials and infrastructure, while improving the equity and delivery of education in schools.

**FIGURE 5.3. PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN TERTIARY EDUCATION IN MEXICO PAYS FOR ITSELF IN TERMS OF HIGHER TAX REVENUES FOR GOVERNMENT**



*Note:* Data are for a 17-year-old single taxpayer with no children, who undertakes a four-year course of non-job-related education.

*Source:* OECD (2017b), *Taxation and Skills*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264269385-en>.

New OECD research suggests that higher government spending on skills would even pay for itself in terms of higher tax revenues by raising the skills of those on lower incomes and, hence, raising their wages (OECD, 2017a). In most OECD countries, including Mexico, skills investments made by government are self-financing in terms of future personal income taxes (Figure 5.3).

## Supporting teachers and school leaders to raise learning outcomes

Data from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Study (TALIS) 2013 reveal a key strength of Mexico’s teaching service: 95.5% of teachers said that if they could choose again, they would still choose to become a teacher. Teachers in Mexico are committed despite having slightly longer teaching hours and larger class sizes than the OECD average. After an increase in statutory salaries between 2005 and 2015, Mexican teachers now receive pay that is competitive within the national context, although their salaries remain lower than the OECD average (except for upper-secondary teachers).

Attracting, retaining and developing good quality teachers is essential for quality learning. In TALIS 2013, nearly a quarter (24%) of Mexican teachers reported not feeling prepared to teach, compared to the TALIS average of 7%. Moreover, Mexico had the lowest proportion of teachers who reported having completed a teacher education or training

programme (62%). Fortunately, teachers reported high rates of participation in professional development activities and Mexico has been working to strengthen teaching and school leadership through comprehensive reforms focused on their overall professional pathways.

The General Law of the Professional Teacher Service (*Servicio Profesional Docente*) was introduced in 2013 to consolidate the teaching service and set out the basis for selection, appointment, promotion and tenure possibilities for teachers. The law aims to upgrade the overall status and career perspectives among quality teacher candidates. The National Strategy for Continuous Training of Teachers (2016) goes a step further and intends to improve the skills of basic and upper secondary education teachers, especially those who showed below average qualifications in teacher assessments.

Providing teachers with timely and evidence-informed feedback is another important part of strengthening the profession. Mexico's comprehensive teacher appraisal system (introduced in 2013) includes examinations and regular performance evaluations, which then serve as a criterion for potential promotions, rewards and incentives. Despite the fact that teacher appraisal was no longer mandatory in Mexico, almost 87% of teachers followed an appraisal process in November 2016, according to the Ministry of Public Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP*) statistics. After making some adjustments to the teacher evaluation process, the National Institute for Education Evaluation (*Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación, INEE*) reintroduced the mandatory nature of teacher appraisal in 2017 and over 1 million teaching staff were evaluated that year.

Good school leaders are essential for improving the quality of teaching and learning environments in schools. School leaders in Mexico score slightly lower in the PISA 2015 index of educational leadership, which measures the levels of Principals' engagement in leadership activities. Nevertheless, Mexico is taking important steps to strengthen school leadership. The General Law of the Professional Teacher Service (2013) also aims to professionalise school leaders by introducing a transparent selection and recruitment process and an induction process during the first two years of practice.

The implementation of Mexico's reforms to improve teaching and learning conditions should be continued, monitored and evaluated to ensure they produce the desired results. Teachers and school leaders should continue to be supported, both with material resources and relevant professional development opportunities, to help raise the achievement and learning outcomes of their students. This is especially important for those working in challenging contexts.

## Preparing students for the future

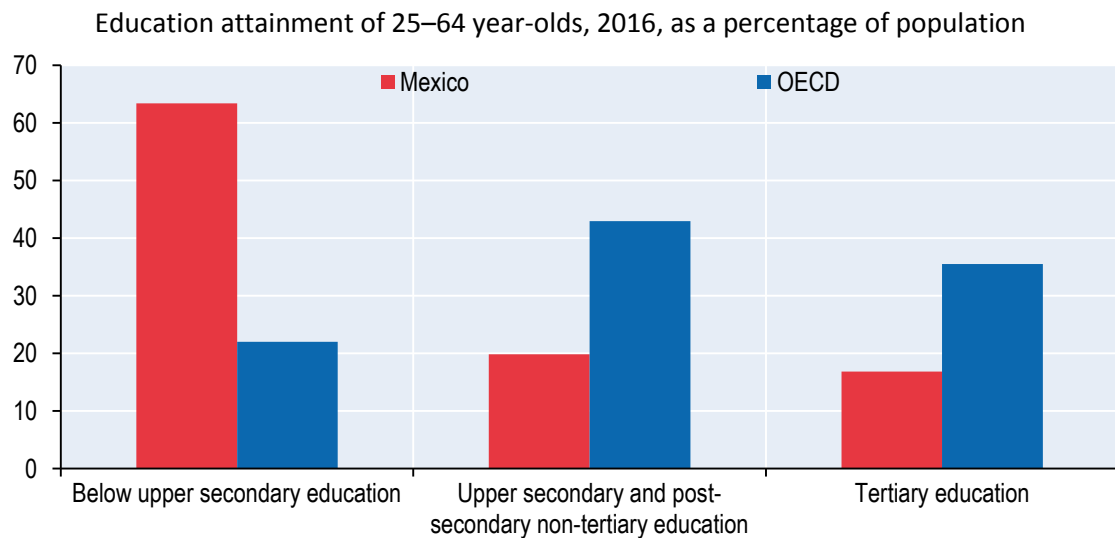
Young people need to develop the right mix of skills to keep abreast of changing labour-market needs and succeed in adult life. To raise the skills of its youth population, Mexico made upper secondary education compulsory in 2012 with the goal of attaining universal coverage by 2022. Enrolment rates in upper secondary and tertiary education have seen impressive increases (e.g. the total population of 15-year-olds enrolled in upper secondary and tertiary education secondary education and above has increased by 300 000 since 2003,



of which 60 000 have been added just since 2012), but progress has not been equitable and the share of Mexican adults with these levels of education remains below the OECD average. Moreover, Mexico has one of the largest shares of the population with an educational attainment below upper secondary (63%) among OECD countries (Figure 5.4). This leaves the country with a rather poorly qualified workforce. Furthermore, Mexico has one of the highest rates of 18-24-year-old NEET (not employed or in further education or training) in the OECD (Figure 5.5). There is also a large gender gap in NEET: one in ten young men, but more than three in ten young women are NEET.

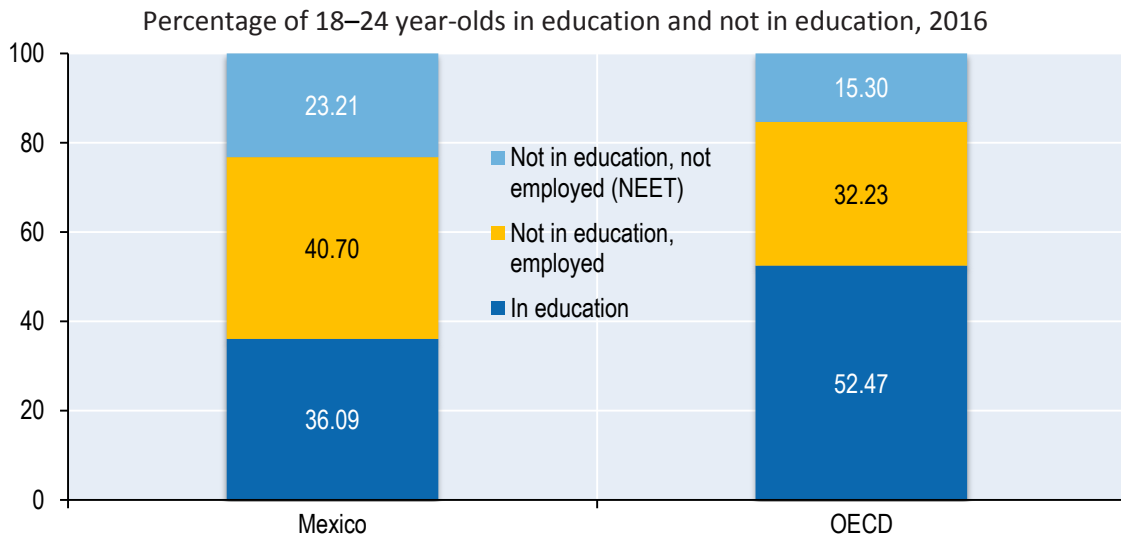
Labour market perspectives and a country’s capacity to develop skills effectively can play an important role in the educational decisions of the population. This is especially true in Mexico where attainment levels are relatively low. A boost in manufacturing activities and informal employment has also generated an increase in the relative demand for low-skilled labour and decreased the opportunity cost of leaving education. This contributes to low graduation rates from upper secondary education (Figure 5.6). At the same time, Mexico is one of the countries in which a higher number of firms report having difficulties in finding the skills they require (30.9% against 14.8% in the OECD) and where, in turn, firms’ investment in their workers is below the OECD average.

**FIGURE 5.4. MANY MEXICANS HAVE ATTAINED ONLY BELOW UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION**



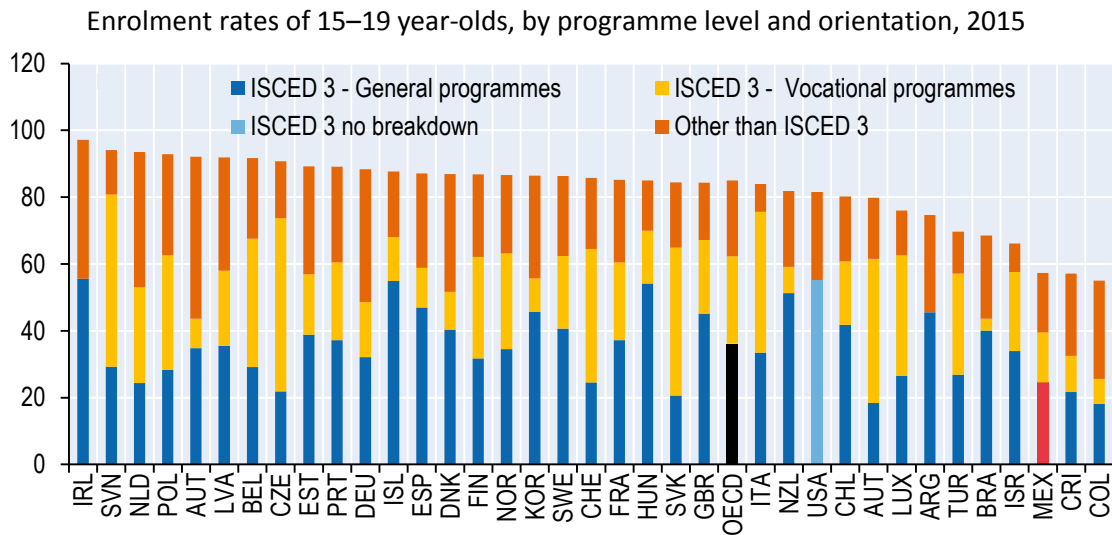
Source: OECD (2017a), *Education at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en>.

**FIGURE 5.5. MANY YOUNG MEXICANS ARE NEITHER IN EDUCATION NOR TRAINING NOR WORK**



Source: OECD (2017a), *Education at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en>.

**FIGURE 5.6. PARTICIPATION IN UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION IS RISING, BUT STILL BELOW THE OECD AVERAGE**



Note: ISCED 3 corresponds to upper secondary education.

Source: OECD (2017a), *Education at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en>.

High quality vocational education and training (VET) can help make education more attractive and relevant to students' needs, thus limiting their disengagement and ensuring successful completion. Enrolment in VET programmes at upper secondary level in Mexico (38.2% of students follow a vocational upper secondary programme) is lower than the OECD average (45.7%). Recent reforms have aimed to improve the attractiveness of VET by making it more relevant to labour market needs. Private sector involvement was expanded, the number of apprenticeship places per company increased, and the vocational component of the dual

track model strengthened. The unemployment rates for 25–34 year-old Mexicans with upper secondary education or post-secondary non-tertiary education are among the lowest in the OECD. In 2016, only 5% of all those with this level of education were unemployed, compared to the OECD average of 9.2%.

At the same time, employment rates for 25–34 year-olds with tertiary education are slightly lower than the OECD average – 79.9% were employed in 2016, while the OECD average was 82.9%. Still, higher levels of education translate into better pay in Mexico. Holders of tertiary education credentials earn over twice as much as adults with upper secondary education as their highest qualification. This is the second highest earnings differential among OECD countries after Chile. Furthermore, an average of seven out of ten tertiary graduates have stable contracts compared to only two in ten among those who did not finish compulsory education.

Due to the increasing competitiveness of the global economy, Mexico has been encouraging students to pursue careers and research in STEM fields. In 2016, one quarter of tertiary-education adults had a degree in one of these fields, on par with the OECD average. However, the expansion of tertiary education in Mexico presents challenges in terms of strengthening the system's quality and relevance to the labour market and meeting the country's development needs (OECD, 2017c). The National Productivity Committee (NPC) has been leading efforts to co-ordinate and align skills policies with the needs of Mexico's productive sectors and major clusters, such as the aerospace and automotive industry.

Closing the gap between the supply and demand of skills requires co-ordinated efforts among different ministries and stakeholders. There is scope for even greater co-operation in the NPC, especially between representatives from sub-national authorities. Tackling skills imbalances through policy requires good co-ordination between the national and regional levels. It also requires up-to-date and high-quality information on skills needs and the skill levels of the population to inform training provision and career choice. In 2019, Mexico will have data available from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (part of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, PIAAC). This will not only provide a measure of Mexican adults' skill proficiency in different areas, but also information on how skills are used at home, at work and in the wider community.

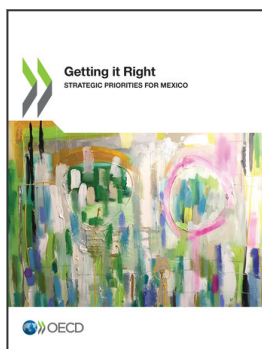
In addition to raising education attainment levels, Mexico should provide opportunities for adults to upgrade and adapt their skills. This is especially important for Mexico's most vulnerable populations and those with low levels of skills. Addressing the barriers to adult learning, especially for low-skilled individuals, will require working on various fronts such as increasing incentives for investments in training, developing mechanisms to allow the portability of training rights between employers, fostering motivation and removing time and other constraints. Such policies will be important to avoid leaving people behind, increase future prosperity and ensure the well-being of the Mexican people.

## Key recommendations

- Continue to implement the Education Reform, which includes Mexico's New Education Model, as this has the potential to provide greater transparency in the country's education outcomes, accountability systems and evaluation processes.
- To increase the reform's chances of success, ensure that stakeholders have the appropriate capacity, support and clarity regarding their various responsibilities across the different contexts of the Mexican education system.
- Maintain key stakeholder engagement to achieve greater relevance and ownership of policy changes as the education reform implementation progresses.
- Ensure adequate flexibility in the implementation roadmap to adapt to the diverse educational contexts within Mexico, while consistently moving towards the system's overall goals for improvement.
- Strengthen the understanding of evaluations as improvement instruments and ensure that the indicators used to measure the quality and progress of Mexican education capture educational improvement from within a variety of cultural and socio-economic contexts.
- Support teachers and school leaders to make the best use of assessment results to improve learning environments and student outcomes.
- As teachers are key allies for the improvement of an education system, continue to strengthen the profession through the Professional Teacher Service, by providing timely and relevant information to teachers on what they should improve (through teacher appraisal processes), how they could improve (through continuous education opportunities) and why they should improve (through incentives and stimuli practices).
- Continue to advance policies to improve the educational success of students from diverse backgrounds, regardless of their gender (for example, by continuing to support policies such as NiñaSTEM Pueden). As part of these efforts, reflect on how resources (human and material) can be allocated more efficiently and equitably to reach ECEC institutions and schools that are at greatest socio-economic disadvantage in order to raise attainment and deliver quality education across all types of schools.
- Work strongly and relentlessly to raise the quality and coverage of ECEC programmes, especially for children until the age of three, to contribute to more inclusive outcomes.
- Make upper secondary education more attractive and relevant to students' needs, encouraging their engagement and school completion.
- Continue to work towards improving the quality and coverage of VET programmes and ensure they are well-aligned to labour market needs.
- Increase synergies across the system, in order to make education more relevant for Mexico's shorter and longer term development needs, for example, between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Economy, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Labour and CONACYT.

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