

Education at a Glance 2020 - OECD Indicators

EI Commentary

Introduction

Education at a Glance (EAG) is the OECD's annual compilation of its most recent education statistics and is gathered around a set of indicators. This year it has focussed on 'The Output of Educational Institutions' (Chapter A), 'Access to Education, participation and progress' (Chapter B), 'Financial resources invested in education (Chapter C) and 'Teachers, the Learning Environment and the organisation of schools (Chapter D). This year's version has highlighted Vocational Education and Training (VET) as a key focus.

Unlike educational research such as PISA and TALIS, EAG does not include policy conclusions. Nevertheless, it is a valuable document in that it provides useful country comparisons. At one level it would be reasonable to conclude that EAG's data gathered before the Covid 19 pandemic would be out of date. Yet there is a different way of reading EAG. The pandemic has exposed the fragilities, weaknesses and inequalities of life in all aspects of society and nowhere more than in education. So wherever there are disparities highlighted in education data, between countries and within countries, it is reasonable to predict that those disparities will have been exacerbated by the effects of Covid-19.

EAG itself includes Covid commentary boxes which highlight the impact of the pandemic on aspects of education.

EI's commentary summarises some key highlights of EAG 2020 which have had little or no profile in other OECD studies, and concludes with an analysis.

A summary of Education at a Glance 2020 by Education International

Editorial by OECD Secretary General, Angel Gurría (pages 9-11)

Gurría predicts that 'even in the most optimistic scenarios there will be a brutal recession' as a result of the pandemic. In education, the most disadvantaged students have had the hardest time adjusting to distance learning. Long term public spending is at risk despite short term stimulus packages.

He highlights the fact that this year's EAG spotlights (VET) is often disregarded in education policy debates and has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic. He believes that there is

a need to enhance work-based learning. Only a third of upper secondary courses have such learning. Gurria argues that there is a need for students to be able to progress into higher education via short cycle programmes from VET rather than long cycle degrees. Women are under-represented in VET. He emphasises that VET is vital for fostering resilient societies.

Gurria concludes by arguing that, 'if anything the pandemic has exposed our vulnerability to crises and revealed how precarious and interdependent the economies we have built can be', and that 'through their role developing the competencies and skills needed for tomorrow's society, education systems will need to be at the heart of this planning.' 'More than ever', he says, 'the pandemic is a call to renew our political commitment to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals'.

Executive Summary (page 25)

On average, 17% VET students enter short cycle tertiary education programmes.

After increasing between 2005 and 2012, total expenditure on primary to tertiary institutions as a share of GDP has fallen to 4.9% on average, below its 2005 value of 5.1%. Teachers' salaries have remained constant since 2015.

The Youth in the Education SDG (Page 28)

On average lower secondary teachers earn 89% of actual salaries of other tertiary educated workers.(SDG 4.5) 95% of teachers are in professional development activities (SDG 4.7) with the highest percentage in Lithuania and the lowest in France, for example. The highest out of school rate is in Mexico and the lowest in The Netherlands. VET participation is highest in Slovenia and lowest in Brazil (Page 35).

The chapter indicators

Fourteen per cent of youth aged 18-24 are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The larger the share of NEETs in a country, the larger the share it has of PISA low performers. However, the average share of NEETs has dropped to its lowest since 2000- largely to do with continuing education. There have been drops in Turkey, Israel, Latvia, UK, Ireland and Austria. (Page 55)

The average employment rate for 25-34 year olds without an upper secondary qualification is 61%, 78% for those with an upper secondary qualification and 85% for those with a tertiary qualification. The employment rate for young adults with an upper secondary vocational qualification is 82% and with a general qualification, 73%. (Page 68)

There is a focus in EAG 2020 on bullying among students. A larger share of children from low educated families report being bullied. (Page 120) China and the UK have the highest percentage of students who believe that it is wrong to join in bullying, with Colombia and

Indonesia with the lowest percentage for example. (Page 124)

Political efficacy also features in EAG 2020. Whereas 52% of tertiary educated adults say that their political system allows them to have a great deal of say in what the government does, only 20% of those who had not completed upper secondary education took the same view. (Page 127)

EAG contains a section on Adult Learning. (Page 136) Employer sponsored training is much more prevalent in larger firms than smaller ones. Working in the public sector is associated with greater participation in training than working in the private sector. Adults with highest educational attainment are likely to participate in training. There is also a wide country variation for teachers taking part in professional development. For example, secondary teachers in Lithuania report 100% participation in professional development whereas Belgium (French Community) have the lowest percentage involvement(40%).

The OECD reports a surge of policy attention in Early Childhood education with near universal participation of children in at least one year although only 26% of children under three receive ECE. (Page 166) On average public sources account for 70% of ECE funding compared to 83% for pre-primary.

At the other end of the spectrum the OECD reports that international students have been particularly badly hit by the pandemic with students not only losing transactional learning experiences but their access to foreign job markets and learning the language of their host country. EAG also reports that the funding models of HE institutions have been severely hit particularly in the US, Australia, the UK and Canada. (Page 231)

Much of the public focus on the pandemic and education has been on the impacts of school closure on student learning but EAG 2020 highlights the severe crisis faced by VET which has not yet received the same profile. The OECD reports that VET programmes have faced disadvantages additional to those faced by schools. (Page 253) Many VET programmes also include practical teaching and cannot involve distance learning. Many VET programmes also have a sizeable work-based component which cannot be delivered because of lockdown. Indeed, the OECD warns that with the looming economic crisis, businesses may not prioritise the employment of apprentices over their attempts to relaunch. The OECD highlights best practice in some countries where measures have been taken to mitigate this potential destruction of VET, including wage support for apprentices and an increase in investment for VET (Page 254).

Page 270 outlines the amount spent per student on educational institutions although there is a very wide variation, with Luxembourg, the highest, spending five times as much as the lowest, Mexico for example. There is interesting data on the private/public expenditure split with the US, the UK, Australia, Japan and Canada having significant private sector spending levels per student in the private sector.

Page 287 highlights the percentages of GDP spent on education as a whole with Norway having the highest percentage and Luxembourg, the lowest. Page 284 provides an index of change in education spending and shows considerable changes in sectoral spending most notably in tertiary, where Chile showed the most significant increase in tertiary spending and the UK, the biggest drop. Page 310 makes it clear that the pandemic will affect education budgets more quickly than the 2008 financial crash, although examples are given of emergency funding measures in some countries including Australia, Canada and Italy.

EAG data on the amount of instruction/teaching time in schools, which hitherto had changed little year on year, has been overtaken by the impact of the pandemic. During the pandemic the vast majority of OECD countries closed schools fully or partially and there has yet to be data on the amount of time spent on distance teaching or learning. However, page 359 provides examples of substitute teaching initiatives including distance learning.

The pandemic has highlighted a new and unforeseen consequence of large class sizes. Large class sizes are much more likely to place a strain on social distancing measures for students returning to school and to lead to shift systems for students. Indeed, EAG reports that 60% of OECD countries are organising shift systems for student return. (Page 375)

EAG provides data on teachers' salary levels (p 384). Teachers' actual salaries at pre-primary, primary and general secondary levels of education are 80-94% of the earnings of tertiary educated workers on average across the OECD. In addition, school heads' salaries are higher than those of classroom teachers by an average of 53%. The greatest variation between principals' salaries and classroom teachers is in England (UK) and the smallest in Latvia for example (p 392).

There appears to no correlation between student achievement and the number of teaching hours. Teachers in Costa Rica, for example, experience the highest number of teaching hours and Iceland, the lowest. (Page 408)

An initial analysis of Education at a Glance 2020 by Education International

In the vast majority of OECD countries and in many others, the pandemic has shut down education systems which are only just now restoring themselves with students returning to schools and colleges. Angel Gurría, the OECD's Secretary General, describes the situation in stark terms. All countries, however well prepared they were for the pandemic, now face a brutal economic recession. Countries must place education at the centre of economic revival planning if they are to have a hope of being successful. Indeed, as he says, a global revival effort is needed with a renewed commitment to the Education Sustainable Development Goal to restore optimism and hope for young people.

In these circumstances EAG may seem irrelevant since practically all its data was gathered before the pandemic, yet this is far from being so. Covid-19 has stress tested all aspects of

society, and education is no different. The best way of using EAG's data is to detect where the greatest disparities are, whether by country comparison, by inequity of provision or by evaluation of differences in student socio-economic background, gender and race. In the vast majority of cases those disparities will have been massively amplified by the effects of Covid-19.

Looking at the EAG indicators it is clear where the major stresses are. Distance learning has its limits particularly for disadvantaged students and early evidence shows that the gap between the achievement of students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds has widened significantly in many countries. This has proved particularly obvious in Vocational and Educational Training (VET) where many students come from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds. Take VET courses for instance. In many of them practical and work-based engagement is essential. With institutional lockdown however, practical courses have been almost impossible to implement. Apprenticeships are heavily reliant on employers enabling them. However, as the EAG warns, employers may prioritise business recovery rather than appointing apprentices. The pandemic came at a time when VET already had a low policy profile and inadequate funding. In short, many VET training courses are disappearing and apprenticeships are threatened at precisely the point when society's need for VET trained workers is at its most acute. Despite this, alongside teachers and doctors, VET trained workers have been and remain essential to public services especially during the crisis. They are therefore vital in fostering resilient societies and will be in future. As the EAG makes clear, VET must now be given equal ranking with schools and universities in a new post pandemic settlement for education. The programme of measures already adopted by some countries and set out in EAG need strengthening and converted into a coherent policy thrust which governments must be persuaded to adopt. Education unions have a vital role in achieving this.

There are plenty of other examples where the Covid crisis has shown up both dangers and opportunities for education. EAG reports that the number of eighteen to twenty four year old students not in education, employment and training (NEETs) has dropped to its lowest since 2000. With the danger of a huge increase in unemployment in many countries, it is highly likely that NEET numbers will now exponentially increase. Again, education unions have a vital role in setting out a strategy for enhancing education and training for young people who have left statutory education.

In schools, despite the EAG continuing to reflect the OECD's doubt about any correlation between class size and student achievement, the strains of ensuring students' safe return to school have been highlighted by the fact that schools with historically large class sizes will find it that much harder to carry out full time return. Indeed, the EAG reports that 60% of countries are now organising shift systems for student attendance. As the EAG says itself, 'countries with smaller class sizes will find it easier to comply with restrictions on social distancing'. In short, evidence that large class sizes contribute to teacher burnout has now been supplemented by the need to reduce class sizes for health reasons.

Another issue is that of time spent by teachers on instruction/teaching. The amount of teaching time has changed little year on year but the pandemic's triggering of distance and blended learning and the phased return of students, may well place new and unpredicted demands on teachers which cannot be quantified using previous measures of instruction time. The demands on teachers are not reflected in their pay/compensation. The fact that teachers' actual salaries are between 80-94% of earnings of workers with equivalent qualifications in other sectors reflects the overall gender gap in pay and the fact that teachers' pay continues to be inadequate.

There is course the issue of school and education institution funding. Unless measures are taken to protect education funding the brutal recession predicted by the OECD will affect it as much as other areas of government spending if not more. Measuring what is happening will be vital, but what is plain from the EAG is that using the Gross Domestic Product as a benchmark for measuring education spending of countries will be increasingly unreliable. GDPs are likely to reduce, in many cases significantly, and it will be quite possible for countries to demonstrate that they are spending more on education as a percentage of their GDPs when in fact education funding is being slashed.

Throughout the EAG there are pointers such as those above which should cause teacher unions, and all those involved in education, to interrogate which parts of education are open to threat as a result of a Covid inspired recession.