#104

PISA in Focus

Are students' career expectations aligned with their skills?

Programme for International Student Assessment

OECD
BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

Are students' career expectations aligned with their skills?

- In Austria, Germany, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, Poland and Switzerland, one in two disadvantaged students who saw themselves working as professionals or managers at the age of 30 did not expect to pursue any tertiary education. On average across OECD countries, one in three disadvantaged students, compared to only one in ten advantaged students with similar career goals, so reported.
- On average across OECD countries, only 7 in 10 high-achieving disadvantaged students reported that they expect to complete tertiary education, while 9 in 10 high-achieving advantaged students reported so.
- Four in ten students, on average across OECD countries, reported that they do not know how to get information about student financing (e.g. student loans or grants). In Belgium, Denmark, Hong Kong (China), Ireland, Morocco and New Zealand, more than one in two disadvantaged students reported so.

Adolescence is a period when young people start to prepare for adult life. Teenagers have to make important decisions relevant to their working lives later on, such as what field of study or type of education they will pursue. But young people often lack sufficient knowledge about the breadth of job opportunities and careers open to them; their career and education aspirations are often shaped more by their personal background. In addition to perpetuating existing inequalities in the labour market, this may lead to expectations that are not aligned with the needs of the job market these students will soon enter, particularly in the context of rapid technological advances. While the mismatch between labour market needs and prospective employees' skills sets is growing, countries need to adapt the supply of skills in order to fuel economic prosperity and ensure that no one is left behind. Education systems can play a crucial role in channelling skills and talent into the labour market and helping young people develop a fair assessment of the opportunities available to them.

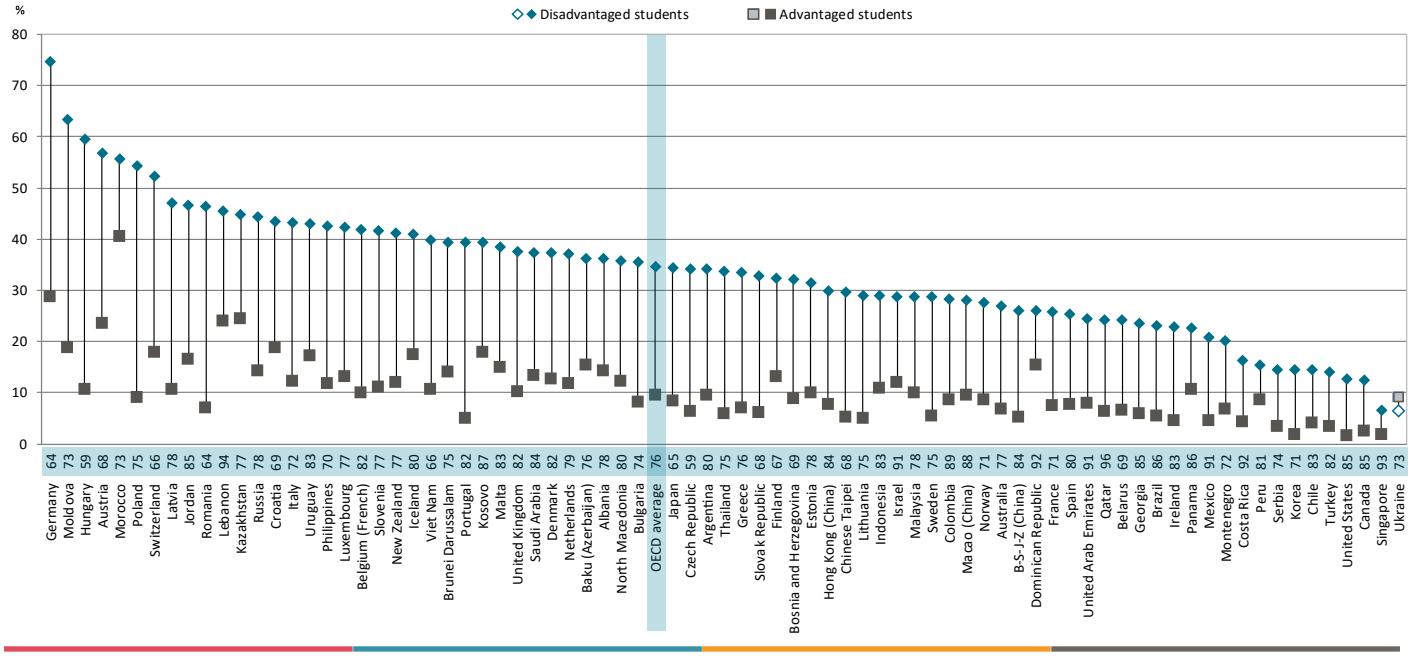
A large proportion of 15-year-old students hold expectations for further education that are not aligned with their career aspirations

PISA 2018 asked students which education level they expect to complete and what occupation they expect to be working in when they are 30 years old. The 15-year-olds who sat the PISA test may be just beginning to think about what they want to do later on. They may be weighing two or more options, or they may feel that they have insufficient knowledge about careers to answer the question in anything but the most general terms. Yet in most countries and economies, fewer than one in four students who answered the question about career expectations gave vague answers (such as "a good job", "in a hospital") or explicitly indicated that they were undecided ("I do not know").

However, even when they appeared to have a precise idea of what they want to do in their future working lives, teenagers might not have had a clear notion of what they need to do to achieve their goal. On average across OECD countries, 76% of students who did cite an expected occupation envisioned themselves as managers or professionals. But amongst them, one in five did not expect to attain a tertiary degree, defined as a short-cycle tertiary diploma, a bachelor's degree or equivalent, a master's degree or equivalent, or a doctoral degree or equivalent – in other words, the level of education usually required for these kinds of occupations.

Students whose education and career expectations are not aligned, by socio-economic status

Percentage of students who do not aspire to complete a tertiary degree amongst those who expect to work in a high-skilled occupation



Notes: The percentage of students who expect to work in a high-skilled occupation is shown next to the country/economy name.
Statistically significant differences are marked in a darker tone (see Annex A3, PISA 2018 Results [Volume II]: Where All Students can Succeed, OECD [2019]).
Tertiary education corresponds to ISCED levels 5A, 5B or 6 according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-1997).
Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the percentage of disadvantaged students.
Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table II.B1.6.3.

This kind of misalignment between education and career expectations was observed more frequently amongst socio-economically disadvantaged students than advantaged students. On average across OECD countries, 34% of disadvantaged students who expect to work in a high-skilled career held expectations of future education that were not aligned with their career goals. In Austria, Germany, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, Poland and Switzerland, more than one in two disadvantaged students had such misaligned expectations, while only one in ten advantaged students did.

Many students, especially disadvantaged students, do not expect to pursue higher education – even when they performed well in PISA

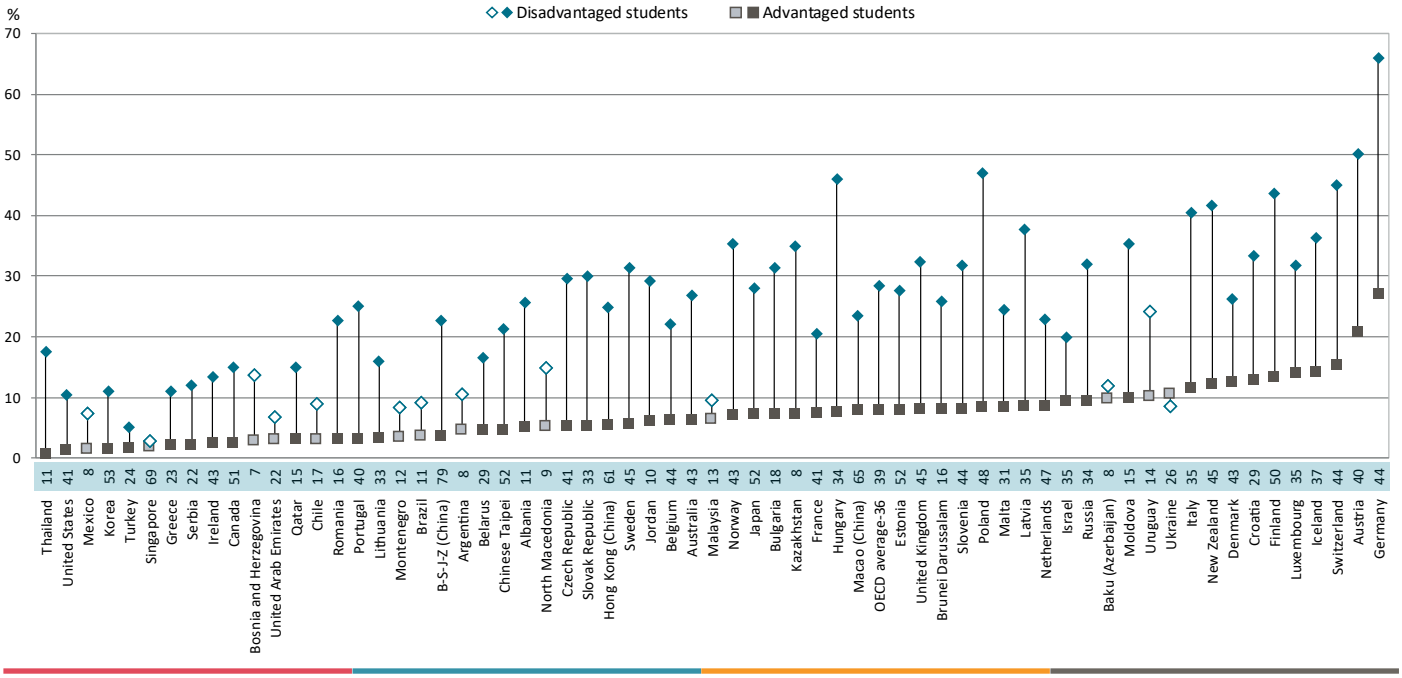
That disadvantaged students are more likely than advantaged students to hold low ambitions for their future education reflects, to some extent, the fact that disadvantaged students are more likely than their advantaged peers to struggle at school. The expectation to complete tertiary education builds on a student's belief about his or her likelihood of successfully completing the programme, and in a reasonable amount of time. As advantaged students tend to outperform their disadvantaged peers academically, they are also more likely to believe that they can succeed in further academic studies.

However, many students, especially disadvantaged students, hold lower ambitions than would be expected given their academic achievement.
In almost all countries/economies in 2018, of the high-achieving students who attained proficiency Level 4 in at least one of the three core PISA subjects (reading, mathematics and science) and attained at least proficiency Level 2 in the other two, three in ten disadvantaged students did not expect to complete tertiary education, while only one in ten high-achieving advantaged students had similarly low expectations of further education. In Austria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, the Republic of Moldova, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland, the difference in students' expectations

related to socio-economic status was greater than 25 percentage points. Only in a few countries, namely Canada, Ireland, Korea, Singapore, Ukraine and the United States, were students' expectations of further education both ambitious and aligned with their academic performance, regardless of the students' socio-economic status.

High performers who do not expect to complete tertiary education, by socio-economic status

Percentage of students amongst those who have attained at least minimum proficiency (Level 2) in the three core PISA subjects and are high performers (Level 4) in at least one subject



Notes: The percentage of high performers is shown next to the country/economy name.
Statistically significant differences are marked in a darker tone (see Annex A3, PISA 2018 Results [Volume II]: Where All Students can Succeed, OECD [2019]).
Only countries and economies with sufficient proportions of high performers amongst advantaged/disadvantaged students are shown in this figure.
OECD average-36 refers to the arithmetic mean across OECD countries (and Colombia), excluding Spain.
Countries and economies are ranked in ascending order of the percentage of advantaged students.
Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table II.B1.6.7.

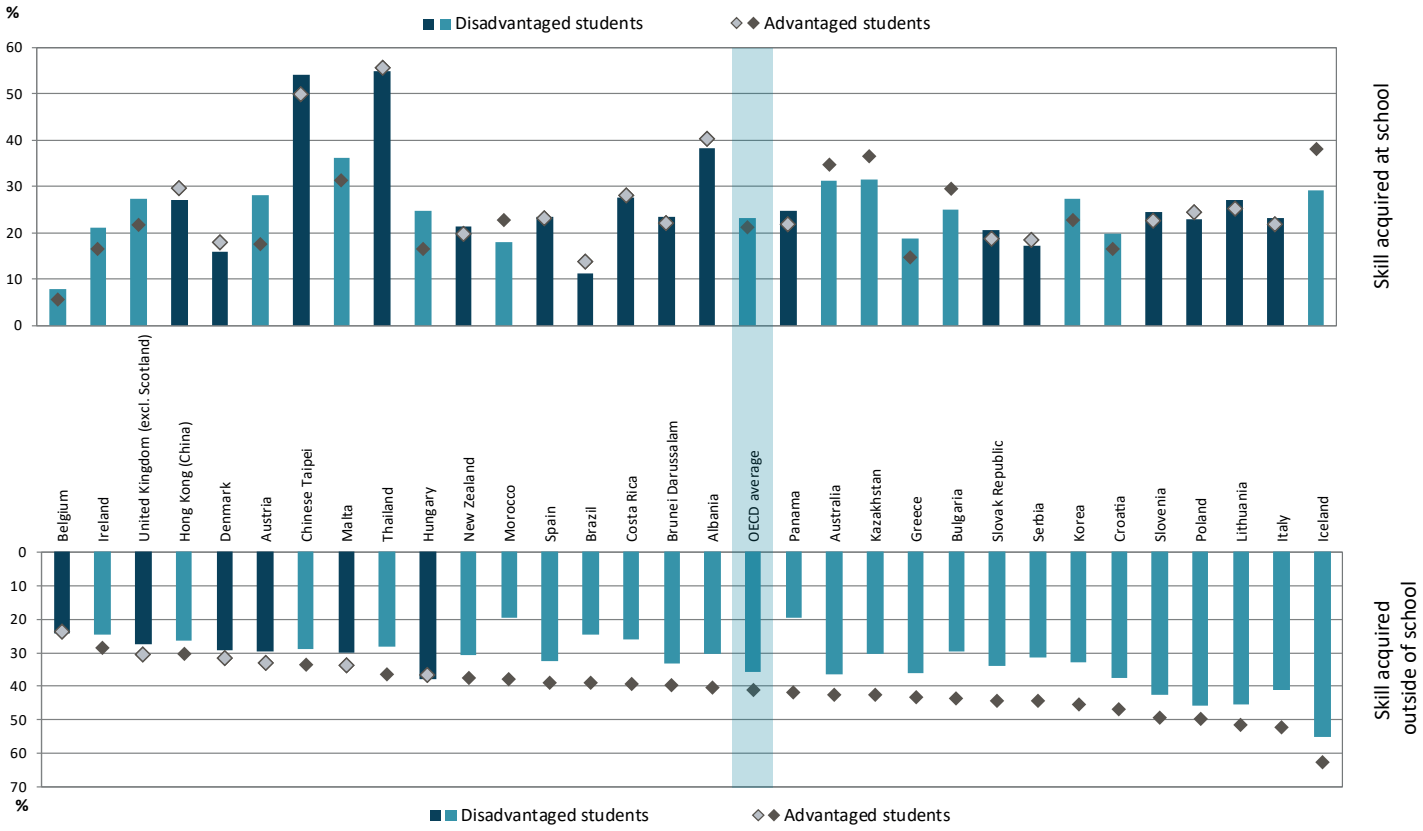
Students often lack sufficient information about the cost of and returns to higher education

Such misalignments between performance at school, expectations of further education, and career aspirations may be due to students' anticipation of difficulty in progressing through a long and costly education, as well as a lack of information about the common pathway towards the career to which they aspire. The family is often the most easily available source of advice and influence on a teenager's career plans; but parents are not always aware of the range of career options available to their child, or about higher education. They may overestimate the academic prerequisites for university education, and underestimate the economic returns to completing a university degree, such as the likelihood of finding a job after graduation. Evidence suggests that students from disadvantaged families have less knowledge about the choices of tertiary programmes available to them and are not always aware of the financial aid they could receive to help them meet the cost of tertiary education.

Only a small proportion of disadvantaged students reported that they know how to get information about student financing (e.g. student loans or grants). On average across OECD countries with

available data, fewer than three in five disadvantaged students reported that they had acquired such skills, and of those who had, more had acquired those skills outside of school (36%) than at school (23%). In Iceland, Malta and Thailand, fewer than one in four disadvantaged students reported that they had not acquired those skills; but in Belgium, Denmark, Hong Kong (China), Ireland, Morocco and New Zealand, more than one in two disadvantaged students so reported.

Students who reported knowing how to find information about student financing, by socio-economic status



Notes: Statistically significant differences are marked in a darker tone (see Annex A3, PISA 2018 Results [Volume II]: Where All Students can Succeed, OECD [2019]).
Only countries and economies with available data are shown in this figure.
Countries and economies are ranked in ascending order of the percentage of advantaged students who acquired skills outside of school.
Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table II.B1.6.13.

The bottom line

Encouraging students, especially those from low-educated families, to set high, yet realistic, expectations for future education and work is not only a way of promoting social mobility, it is necessary to fuel economic prosperity. As technologies continue to advance, the demand for highly educated workers will increase. Low expectations of high-performing students may deprive societies and economies of valuable and much-needed talent. Given that they can reach many young people in a systematic way, schools are a key access point for formal career guidance and for information about financial aid for further education. Financial constraints should not prevent disadvantaged students from participating in tertiary education.

For more information

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See: OECD (2019), "How school systems prepare students for their future", in *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, OECD Publishing, Paris https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en

Geven, K. and E. Herbaut (2019), "What works to reduce inequality in higher education?", *International Higher Education*, Vol. 99, pp. 10-11. https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2019.99.11649

Coming next month: Do boys and girls have similar attitudes towards competition and failure?

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