PISA

IN FOCUS 29

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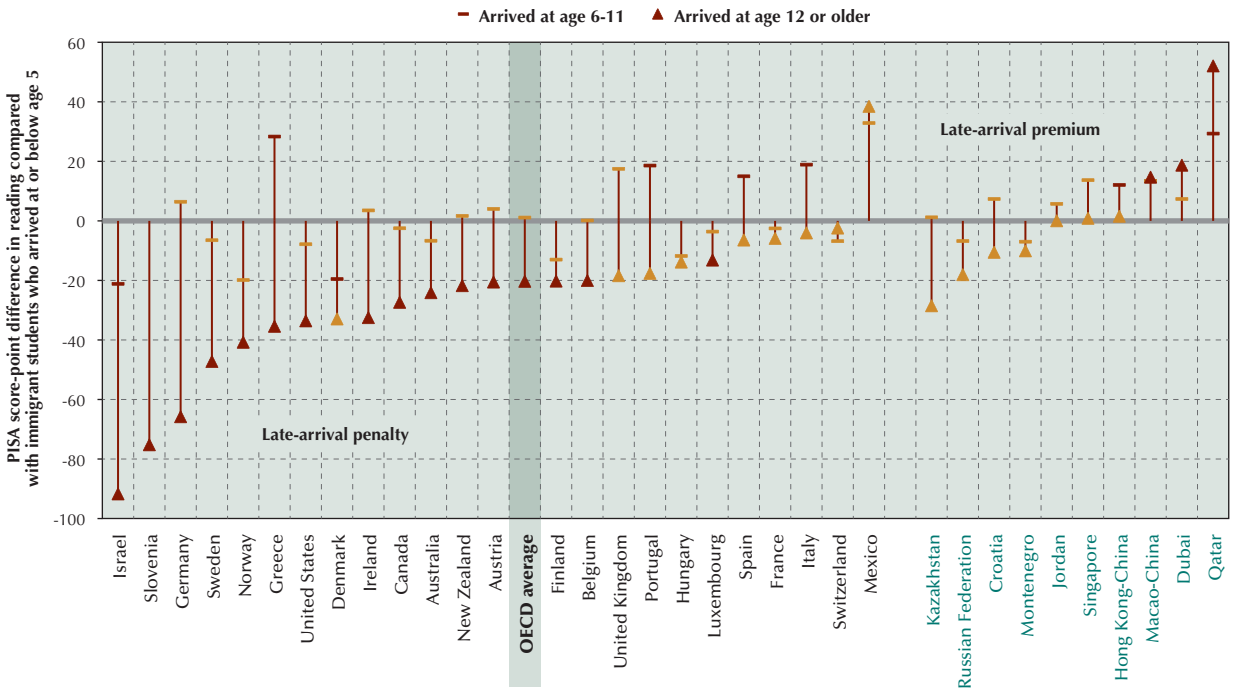
Do immigrant students' reading skills depend on how long they have been in their new country?

- In most OECD countries, newly arrived 15-year-old immigrant students show poorer reading performance than immigrant students who arrived in their new country when they were younger than five.
- Students who emigrated from less-developed countries where the home language differs from their new language of instruction are particularly vulnerable to the "late-arrival" penalty in reading performance.
- Immigrant students from countries with similar levels of development and the same language as the host country do not suffer any late-arrival penalty at all.

When families move to a new country, it is often with the parents' hope of offering their children a better living standard and a brighter future. However, children of immigrants have to overcome many barriers in order to succeed at school. For some, the lack of familiarity with the language of instruction and precarious living conditions can turn the first years spent in their new country into a particularly stressful experience.

Some countries, notably Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, New Zealand and Switzerland, have succeeded in narrowing the gap in performance between students with an immigrant background and non-immigrant students over the past decade. But in most countries, 15-year-old immigrant students lag behind native students in reading performance, and newly arrived immigrant students perform even worse.

The price of late arrival for immigrant students



Note: Only country/economies with at least 40 immigrant students in the early- and late-arrival categories are included; darker tones indicate statistically significant differences. PISA score-point differences are estimated controlling for PISA survey year, whether the student is a girl, and the grade in which the student is enrolled.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the score-point difference between early and late arrivers.

Source: OECD (2012), *Untapped Skills: Realising the Potential of Immigrant Students*, Figure 4.1, OECD Publishing; and Table B4.3, based on analysis by Heath and Kilpi-Jakonen (2012) on PISA pooled data 2003, 2006, 2009.

Fifteen-year-olds who are new to their country lag farther behind their classmates than immigrants who arrived at younger ages.

An analysis of PISA data shows that among immigrant children, there are no marked differences in reading proficiency between those who arrived before the age of five and those who arrived between the ages of six and 11. In contrast, in most OECD countries, immigrant students who arrived at age 12 or older – and have spent at most four years in their new country – lag farther behind students in the same grade in reading proficiency than immigrants who arrived at younger ages. In countries with high rates of grade repetition, a smaller penalty for immigrant students who arrived when they were older might conceal the fact that these students are more likely to have been held back one or several grades.

Countries and economies vary markedly in the magnitude of this "late-arrival penalty" for immigrant students. The largest penalties, in descending order, are found in Israel, Slovenia and Germany; while in Qatar, Dubai (UAE) and Macao-China, recent immigrants tend to perform better than older immigrants.

The magnitude of the late-arrival penalty depends on the particular combination of country-of-origin and country-of-destination.

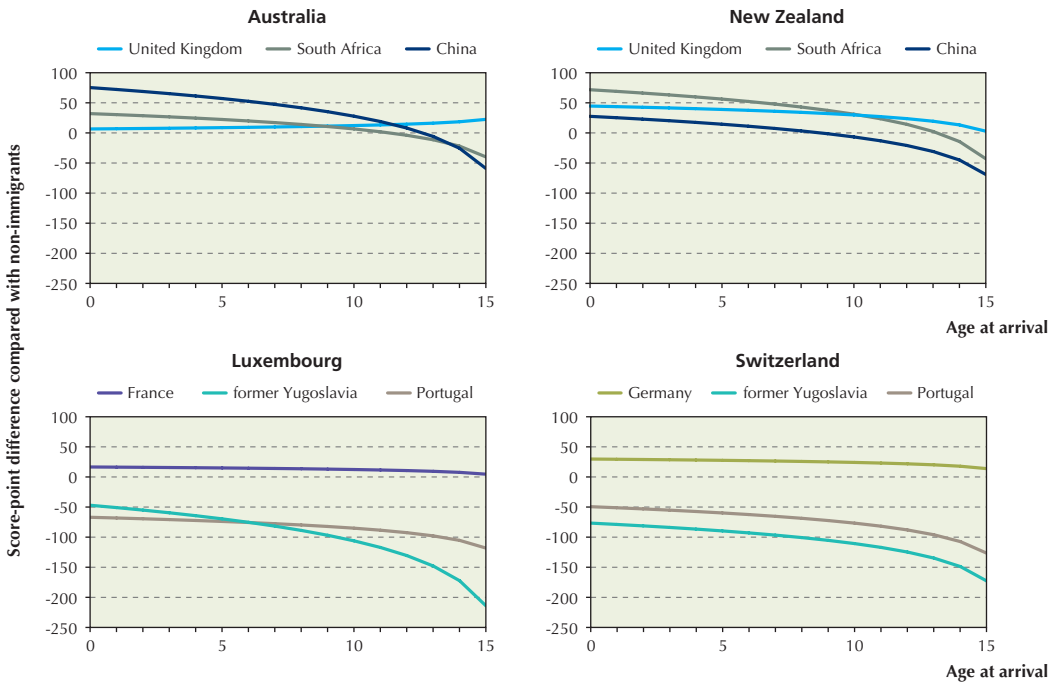
Differences in late-arrival penalties across countries and economies tend to reflect the composition of the immigrant populations. Australia, for instance, has a large proportion of immigrants from the United Kingdom who already speak the same language as non-immigrant Australians. As a result, the average late-arrival penalty for immigrants in Australia is smaller than that in Germany, for example, where the largest groups of students who were born abroad come from the former USSR, the former Yugoslavia and Turkey.

When considering the reading performance of 15-year-old immigrant students, **age at arrival and length of stay are two sides of the same coin.** Immigrant students who arrived at or before age five learned to read and write in their new country, and their families have spent ten or more years in the host country. In contrast, those who arrived when they were already of lower secondary school age had spent several years in a different school system before moving. At the age of 15, these students are still new to the host country.

For recent immigrants, lack of familiarity with their new country's language and institutions, as well as insecure living conditions, can result in lower reading performance; but in time, these factors tend to improve. At the same time, age at arrival has its own effect on reading proficiency: learning a second (or third) language is more difficult for older children, and the school curriculum tends to be freighted with many more competing demands as students progress from primary to lower secondary school. Unfortunately, given that differences in age at arrival correspond to differences in length of stay, it is impossible for PISA to disentangle the effect on reading performance of students' age at arrival from the effect of how long they have been in their new country.

A higher language barrier when immigrant students arrive later

Relationship between PISA reading score and age at arrival in selected destination countries, by immigrants' origin



Note: PISA score-point differences are estimated controlling for PISA survey year, whether the student is a girl, and the grade in which the student is enrolled.

Source: OECD (2012), *Untapped Skills: Realising the Potential of Immigrant Students*, OECD Publishing, Figure 4.3, based on analysis of PISA pooled data 2003, 2006, 2009 by Heath and Kilpi-Jakonen (2012). Only immigrant groups with more than 100 observations are shown.

An examination of age-at-arrival profiles for the major immigrant groups in selected countries confirms the importance of language barriers. Take Australia and New Zealand: British students who immigrate to these countries do not suffer a late-arrival penalty. In contrast, children who were born in China but immigrated to Australia or New Zealand suffer steep late-arrival penalties. The same pattern is seen in European countries: in Luxembourg, French children do not suffer a late-arrival penalty; and age-at-arrival seems to make no difference to the reading performance among German students who immigrated to Switzerland. In contrast, 15-year-old students from the former Yugoslavia or Portugal who arrived in Switzerland or Luxembourg within the previous few years fare much worse in reading than immigrant students from the same countries who had spent all their school years in their new country.

But language may not be the only factor involved. Differences in educational and living standards between the origin and destination countries may also be relevant. Overall, an analysis of PISA data finds that immigrant students are particularly at risk of suffering a late-arrival penalty if they arrived at lower secondary-school age from less-developed countries where the home language is not the same as their new language of instruction. These students have to quickly acquire language skills and catch up with the higher levels of attainment achieved by their peers, all while coping with the difficulties of adjusting to a new school and social environment.

The bottom line: In many countries, decisions about further education taken around the age of 15 shape students' employment prospects later on. Targeted help with language skills and flexible arrangements to defer tracking can mitigate the adverse consequences of late arrival on the career opportunities available to immigrant students. Where late arrival is the result of migration policies that delay family reunification, the intended benefits of such policies should be carefully weighed against the costs of remedial assistance.

For more information

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See OECD (2012), *Untapped Skills: Realising the Potential of Immigrant Students*, OECD Publishing and the full set of related tables;
Heath, A. and E. Kilpi-Jakonen (2012), "Immigrant Children's Age at Arrival and Assessment Results", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 75, OECD Publishing;
PISA in Focus n°11, *How are school systems adapting to increasing numbers of immigrant students?*

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