PISA

IN FOCUS 23

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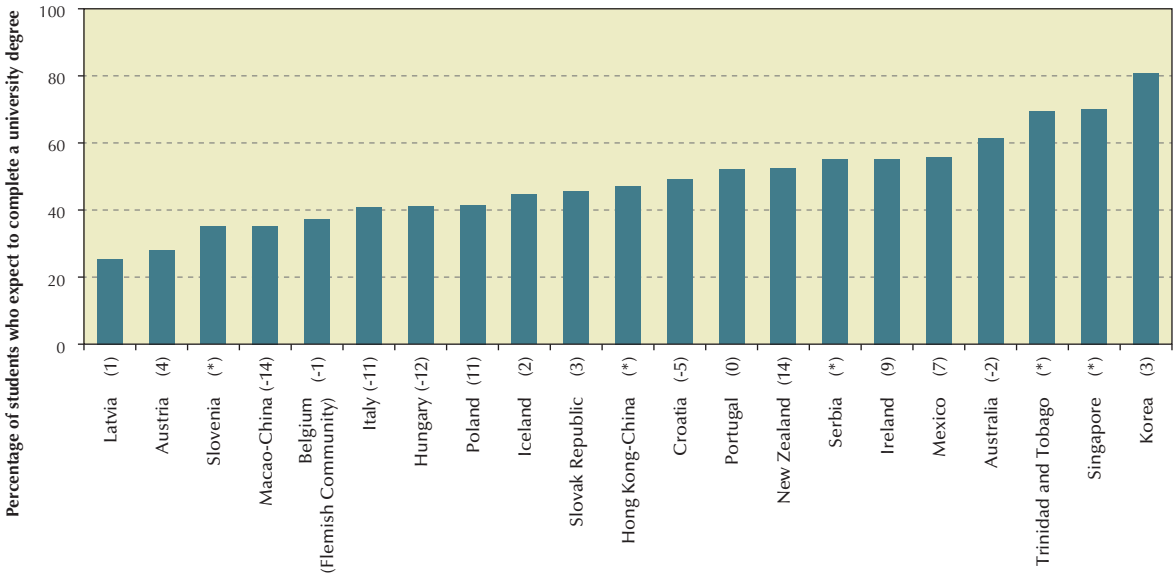
What do students expect to do after finishing upper secondary school?

- The percentage of students who expect to complete university is highest in Korea (80%) and lowest in Latvia (25%).
- Many high-performing students do not expect to go to university, representing potentially lost talent to an economy and society while many low-performing students think they will make it to university, even if their current performance suggests they are not likely to succeed.
- Around one in four students expects to end his or her formal schooling at the upper secondary level and thus needs the skills to make a smooth transition into work and adulthood.

Education systems play a crucial role in channelling skills and talent into the labour market and helping young people to make the transition from adolescence into adulthood. The challenge for school systems is to guide this transition effectively. This process begins early, as students develop expectations about themselves and their future. School systems must manage these expectations to ensure that students' skills and interests find a suitable match in the economy and society.

PISA 2009 asked students in 21 participating countries and economies what they expected to be their highest level of educational attainment. Responses varied widely, depending on the country/economy. For example, in Latvia only one in four 15-year-old students expected to complete a university degree, while in Korea four out of five students expected to do so. More than 60% of students in Australia, Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago reported that they expect to complete university, while fewer than 40% of students in Austria, Belgium (Flemish Community), Macao-China and Slovenia expected to do so. Since 2003, New Zealand and Poland have recorded a steep increase in the proportion of students who expect to complete a university degree while this proportion has declined significantly in Hong Kong-China, Hungary, Italy and Macao-China.

Fifteen-year-olds' expectations of completing university



Note: The number indicated between parentheses is the change in the percentage of students who expect to complete university from 2003 to 2009.
Data for 2003 is unavailable for countries and economies marked (*).
Countries are sorted in ascending order of the percentage of students who expect to complete a university degree.

Source: OECD (2012), *Grade Expectations: How Marks and Education Policies Shape Students' Ambitions*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Table B1.1.

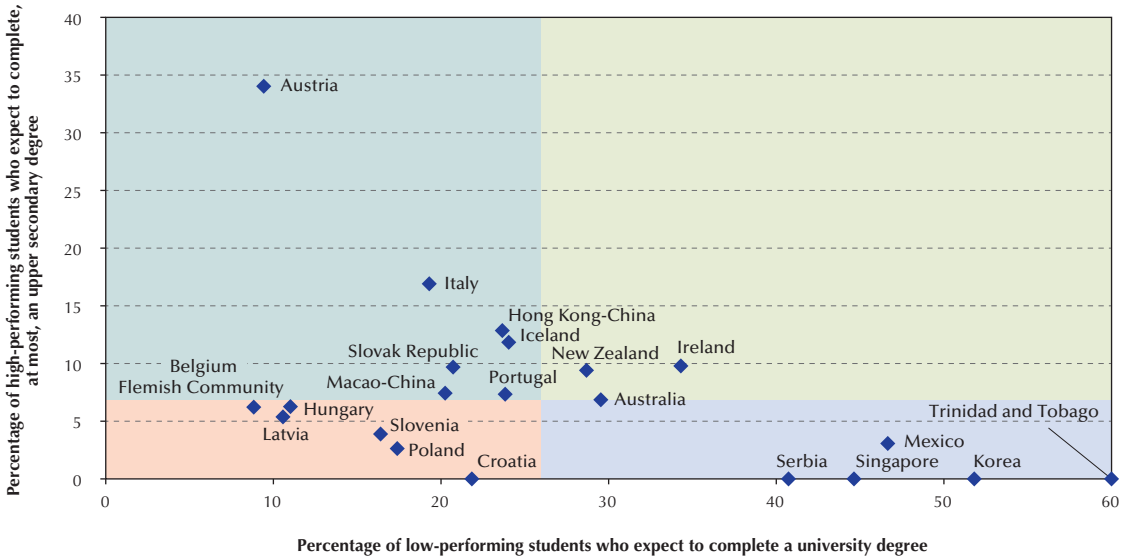
StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932733279

But are those expectations realistic? Largely, yes. In all countries and economies, the students who expect to complete university education perform significantly better in mathematics and reading than students who do not expect to complete that level of education. The difference in reading performance is most pronounced – greater than 90 PISA score points, which is the equivalent of more than two years of schooling – in Australia, Austria, Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Hungary and the Slovak Republic. The difference is smaller (50 score points), but still notable, in Hong Kong-China and Macao-China. Students who expect to earn a university degree are also more likely to be in academic, rather than vocational, programmes. In Croatia, Belgium (Flemish Community), Hungary, Korea, Serbia and the Slovak Republic, for example, there is at least a 40 percentage-point difference between the proportion of students who follow an academic programme and expect to complete a university degree and the proportion of students who follow a vocational programme and expect to complete that level of education. In these countries, students who attend vocationally oriented programmes either feel that it is unlikely that they would be granted admission to and succeed in university or they prefer other career options and have adjusted their expectations accordingly.

Yet in all countries there is a reasonable proportion of students whose expectations are not well-aligned with their current abilities: some low-performing students and students in vocationally oriented programmes expect to complete university while some high-performing students, who are most likely to succeed in further education, do not expect to earn a university degree. The percentage of low-performing students who expect to complete a university degree is relatively high in Australia, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, Serbia, Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago. These school systems therefore need to capitalise on their students' desire to continue their education by encouraging greater engagement with school and offering better opportunities to learn so that low-achieving, but ambitious, students can improve their performance and have a better chance of succeeding.

The proportion of high-performing students who do not expect to continue on to post-secondary education is relatively large – more than 10% – in Austria, Hong Kong-China, Iceland and Italy. These school systems should aim to raise their students' expectations by, among other measures, enhancing engagement with school and ensuring that placement in academic or vocational programmes is based on merit, not on students' background.

Is students' performance in school related to their expectations of further education?



Notes: High-performing students are those at or above PISA proficiency Level 4 in reading performance.
Low-performing students are those at or below PISA proficiency Level 2 in reading performance.
Lines dividing the quadrants are the country/economy averages.
Estimates for Croatia, Korea, Serbia, Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago are indistinguishable from zero.

Source: OECD (2012), *Grade Expectations: How Marks and Education Policies Shape Students' Ambitions*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Table B1.4.

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932733336

University degrees include liberal arts and professional degrees, but not degrees from technical or vocational post-secondary educational institutions.

Students in vocationally oriented programmes might find it difficult to attain a university degree, either because their academic training is inadequate for this purpose or because there are structural impediments to doing so. In Ireland, Korea, Serbia and Trinidad and Tobago, more than 40% of students in these kinds of programmes expect to earn a university degree. These systems also need to ensure that students are placed into particular education programmes based only on merit, because if selection favours one type of background over another, it could reinforce social inequalities and potentially result in a loss of talent to the economy and society.

Although most school systems are committed to expanding access to tertiary education, around 25% of students expect to finish their formal education at the end of upper secondary school. Education systems must provide these students with the skills needed for a smooth transition into the labour market and adulthood. The proportion of students who expect to complete their studies at the upper secondary level and, presumably, enter the labour force upon graduation, is highest in Austria (53%), the Slovak Republic (40%), Italy (39%) and Croatia (34%). This group of students poses a significant challenge for most countries as unemployment rates are high among persons with only an upper secondary degree, and they are especially high among 15-24 year-olds.

The bottom line: School systems must both provide students with the skills needed to meet their high expectations and promote high expectations to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy. They must also offer sufficient learning opportunities, in relevant skills, to those students who do not expect to go to university.

For more information

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See OECD (2012), *Grade Expectations: How Marks and Education Policies Shape Students' Ambitions*, PISA, OECD Publishing.

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Coming next month
What do students think about school?