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DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS
EDUCATION POLICY COMMITTEE

Managing student transitions into upper secondary pathways

2nd meeting of Country Representatives to the "Above and Beyond: Transitions in Upper Secondary Education" project, 25 November 2022

Document for comment – Working paper: Managing Transitions into Upper Secondary – please note deadline 25 November 2022.

Please find below a draft working for discussion at the upcoming 2nd Meeting of Country Representatives to the "Above and Beyond: Student Transitions in Upper Secondary Education" project. Expected publication date: 3 February 2022. The working paper is part of a series to build comparative knowledge and evidence on upper secondary education.

In reviewing the working paper, countries are requested to:

- Verify descriptions of national policies, practices or structures in their countries where they are discussed.
- Provide further data or information on specific practices where requested (indicated in comments).
- Comment on the relevance of the policy framework for managing student transitions into upper secondary education and the stages of transitions developed by the paper for your country's context.
- Indicate which further questions or analysis suggested by this paper would be particularly valuable for your country.
- Please send any comments by 25 November 2022

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OECD EDUCATION WORKING PAPERS SERIES

Comment on the series is welcome, and should be sent to edu.contact@oecd.org.

This working paper has been authorised by Andreas Schleicher, Director of the Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD.

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www.oecd.org/edu/workingpapers

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1. Introduction

Why do student transitions into upper secondary education matter?

An effective transition into upper secondary education may be defined as a transition that enables students to pursue programmes that match their interests and abilities and open up opportunities for their future. Many factors influence students' experiences in upper secondary education and beyond, including upper secondary curricula, programme design and student support. But a good transition from earlier levels of education is the first, essential step in a successful journey through upper secondary education and into further education and/or employment.

Systems where transitions into upper secondary do not function effectively create challenges for individual students, education systems and society by:

- **Creating high barriers to enter upper secondary education:** This means that not all students are able to make the transition at the theoretical age, resulting in repetition or perhaps even dropout.
- **Orienting students towards programmes that do not suit them in some way:** Some students, for example, may find that they are not well-prepared for the more complex and technical content in a specific programme, while others may end up in programmes that do not reflect their interests. Both situations can have an impact on students' motivation and learning outcomes, contributing to repetition, dropout, limited lifelong learning opportunities and decreased personal fulfilment.
- **Orienting students towards programmes that do not enable them to advance in their education and life:** At the end of upper secondary, some students may find

that the pathways open to them do not enable them to achieve their ambitions. They might find it difficult to enter the labour market or progress to further education.

The design of transition systems can mitigate existing inequities in education, but it can also accentuate them, notably by creating a two-tier education system where higher-performing, and often more advantaged students end up in the most prestigious programmes with the best labour market returns. Transitions can also influence student well-being. They can have either a negative impact, for example through highly competitive systems that can be stressful for students and narrow their development, or a positive impact, for example by helping to construct young people's sense of agency and ability to make informed decisions about their future. Getting transitions right matters, and how to do so is the subject of this paper.

The aims of this working paper

This paper looks at how students transition into upper secondary education. It is part of a series of working papers on upper secondary education from the OECD's Above and Beyond: Transitions in Upper Secondary Education project (**Error! Reference source not found.**). In contrast with lower levels of schooling, upper secondary education is characterised by greater diversity in terms of the programmes, options and specialisations available to students (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012[1]). Most education systems provide greater diversity at this level to respond to student interests and abilities and to help orient students towards future pathways in further education and employment.

Box 1.1. Above and Beyond: Transitions in Upper Secondary Education

The OECD Above and Beyond: Transitions in Upper Secondary Education project focuses on transitions into, through and out of upper secondary education. The project's goal is to build policy advice and guidance on how upper secondary transitions can be implemented so that all learners have the opportunity to create the foundations that will enable them to successfully navigate the choices and demands of further education and employment over their lifetime.

The project is organised around three main outputs:

- working papers – to build knowledge
- peer learning discussions – to learn from and share experiences across countries
- country-specific work – to provide policy advice tailored to countries' national contexts.

Above and Beyond Working Papers

The Above and Beyond working papers aim to support countries' policy making decisions by:

- **Scanning available evidence and information to establish categories of practices or policies across countries:** For example, what are the different policies that countries use to manage transitions into upper secondary education across the OECD?
- **Identifying the policy trade-offs associated with different approaches:** For example, using teachers' judgement to inform selection into upper secondary programmes can provide a comprehensive view of which programme best suits each student, but teachers' views can be subjective and biased.
- **Developing strategies that countries can use to maximise the benefits of different policies while mitigating the risks:** For example, what steps can be taken to promote fairness and equity in teachers' judgements that inform upper secondary selection?

The Above and Beyond working papers also look at the design and structure of upper secondary programmes and pathways (Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]). Future working papers will examine promoting the completion of upper secondary education and pathways out of upper secondary education.

While there is country-specific information about selection practices from upper secondary education into tertiary education and some comparative work available (European Commission, 2017[3]) (OECD, 2019[4]), there is no widely based international analysis on the diversity of practices that guide transitions into upper secondary education. This paper aims to respond to this gap by:

- identifying the policies that typically influence choice and placement into different programmes and specialisations in upper secondary education and how they differ across countries
- setting out the policy implications that are associated with different approaches to student selection to help guide countries when determining and adjusting their own choice and selection policies for transitions

- identifying any gaps in international data or information about student transitions into upper secondary education and making proposals for how they may be addressed.

Structure of this working paper

This paper contains six sections:

1. **Introduction:** Sets outs out the paper's aims, structure and methodology.
2. **Understanding transitions into upper secondary education:** Defines three stages of upper secondary education transitions, sets out how and when selection occurs internationally and brings together available data across OECD countries on student enrolment at transition points.
3. **Requirements to enter upper secondary education:** Identifies the different requirements that OECD countries set for students to enter upper secondary education (the first stage in upper secondary transitions) and discusses the policy implications of different approaches.
4. **Orientation and selection into upper secondary programmes:** Identifies the main approaches that countries use to select or orient students to different upper secondary programmes (the second stage of upper secondary transitions) and their policy implications.
5. **Placement into options, subjects and specialisation in upper secondary education:** Explores countries' approaches for helping students to choose among, or placing them in, different subjects, specialisations and levels within upper secondary programmes (the third and final stage of upper secondary transitions) and the related policy implications.
6. **Initial policy framework and further work:** Draws together the findings of this working paper into a framework to guide countries when developing and refining their systems for transitions into upper secondary education and also identifies topics for further work.

Methodology

This working paper was initiated with the goal of collecting comparable information available on the topic of transitions into and within upper secondary education. The paper is structured around three broad policy issues:

- **The requirements for students to enter upper secondary education:** What are the policy implications of different approaches in terms of student completion and progression through education?
- **How students are selected into different programmes when moving into upper secondary education and how these approaches differ across countries:** What are the policy implications of different approaches, in terms of: 1) student outcomes like learning, completion, progression to tertiary education and transition to the labour market; 2) equity; and 3) student well-being?
- **How students are oriented or placed into different options and specialisations within upper secondary programmes:** What are the policy implications in terms of: 1) student transitions through and out of upper secondary; 2) preparation to enter the labour market; and 3) equity?

The paper draws on literature about the organisation and structure of upper secondary education, in particular the research analysing how different systems for upper secondary selection are associated with student learning outcomes and equity. This literature provided an initial basis to structure and orient the paper's development.

To provide a comparative analysis of country practices, OECD member countries were mapped by the different requirements and selection mechanisms they use to place students into upper secondary education programmes and the specialisations within these programmes. The mapping was based on: 1) information collected through desk research, looking at both national and international available literature; 2) country responses to OECD surveys, notably from the OECD's Indicators of Education Systems (INES) programme; 3) information provided by countries to the Above and Beyond project; and 4) discussions with countries' representatives in order to better understand national contexts and policies. The mapping was used to identify different categories of country practises. The paper also draws on examples of OECD partner countries, where relevant.

Analysis of the potential associations between transition policies and student and system outcomes is based on data mainly collected through different OECD sources, including the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and information from the INES programme.

2. Understanding transitions into upper secondary education

Defining transitions into upper secondary education

This working paper focuses on student transitions into upper secondary education. The paper uses the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), the standard framework used to categorise and report cross-nationally comparable education statistics, to define upper secondary education. A defining characteristic of upper secondary education is its more varied and specialised instruction when compared to lower levels of education. This is reflected in study being more differentiated across different options and streams (Box 2).

Box 2.Principal characteristics of upper secondary education, ISCED 2011

ISCED was developed to provide an international system for classifying countries' education systems, in order to understand and properly interpret the inputs, processes and outcomes of education systems from a global perspective and ensure comparable data. For international comparability purposes the term "upper secondary education" is used to label ISCED level 3. Programmes classified at ISCED level 3 may be referred to in many ways, for example secondary school (stage two/upper grades), senior secondary school or (senior) high school. According to ISCED 2011, the principal characteristics of upper secondary education are:

- Programmes at ISCED level 3, or upper secondary education, are typically designed to complete secondary education in preparation for tertiary education or provide skills relevant to employment, or both.
- Programmes at this level offer students more varied, specialised and in-depth instruction than programmes at ISCED level 2. They are more differentiated, with an increased range of options and streams available. Teachers are often highly qualified in the subjects or fields of specialisation they teach, particularly in the higher grades.

- ISCED level 3 begins after 8 to 11 years of education since the beginning of ISCED level 1. Pupils enter this level typically between age 14 and age 16. ISCED level 3 programmes usually end 12 or 13 years after the beginning of ISCED level 1 (or around age 17 or 18), with 12 years being the most widespread cumulative duration. However, exit from upper secondary education may range across education systems usually from 11 to 13 years of education since the beginning of ISCED level 1.

Source: (UNESCO, 2012[5]), *International Standard Classification of Education: ISCED 2011*, http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/international-standard-classification-education-isced.,

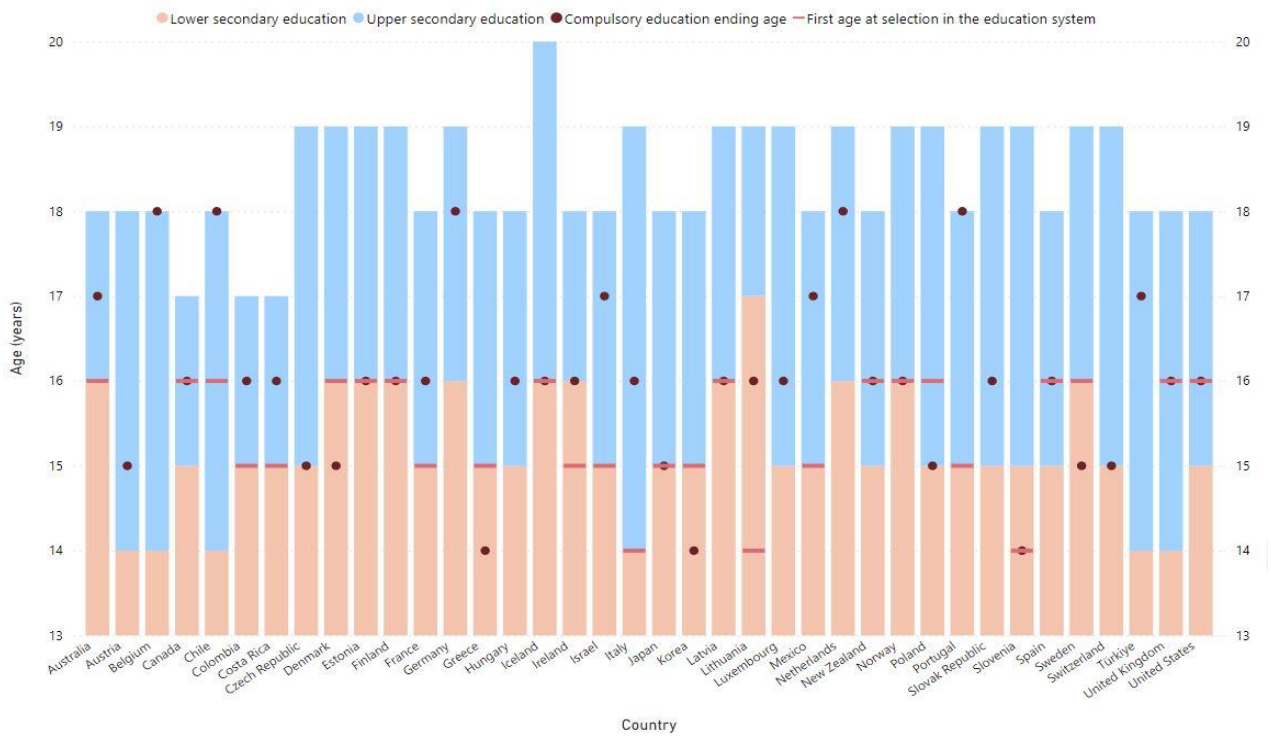
Among OECD countries, student placement into different educational programmes most frequently takes place at age 16, when students are entering upper secondary education (Table 1) (OECD, 2020[6]). However, there are a few countries where horizontal stratification takes place much earlier. In Switzerland and Germany, for example, students are placed in different pathways after the end of primary education, at age 12 and 10 respectively. Since this selection happens before upper secondary education, these kinds of early selection are not the central focus of this work. However, the paper draws on evidence of their experiences, particularly the policy outcomes of different approaches to student placement in these countries in terms of student learning and equity.

Table 1. Age of first placement and entrance to upper secondary education (ISECD 3)

	Age of first selection	Selection into lower secondary education?	Selection into upper secondary education?
Australia	16	No	No
Austria	10	Yes	No
Belgium	12	Yes	No
Canada	16	No	No
Chile	16	No	Yes
Colombia	15	No	Yes
Costa Rica	15	No	Yes
Czech Republic	11	Yes	Yes
Denmark	16	No	Yes
Estonia	16	No	No
Finland	16	No	Yes
France	15	No	Yes
Germany	10	Yes	No
Greece	15	No	Yes
Hungary	10	Yes	No
Iceland	16	No	Yes
Ireland	15	No	Yes
Israel	15	No	Yes
Italy	14	No	Yes
Japan	15	No	Yes
Korea	15	No	Yes
Latvia	16	No	Yes
Lithuania	14	Yes	No
Luxembourg	12	Yes	No
Mexico	15	No	Yes
Netherlands	12	Yes	No
New Zealand	16	No	No
Norway	16	No	Yes
Poland	16	No	Yes
Portugal	15	No	Yes
Slovak Republic	11	Yes	No
Slovenia	14	No	Yes
Spain	16	No	Yes
Sweden	16	No	Yes
Switzerland	12	Yes	No
Türkiye	11	Yes	No
United Kingdom	16	No	No
United States	16	No	No

Source: (OECD, 2020[6]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume V): Effective Policies, Successful Schools*, https://doi.org/10.1787/ca768d40-en.

Figure 1. Upper secondary systems across OECD countries

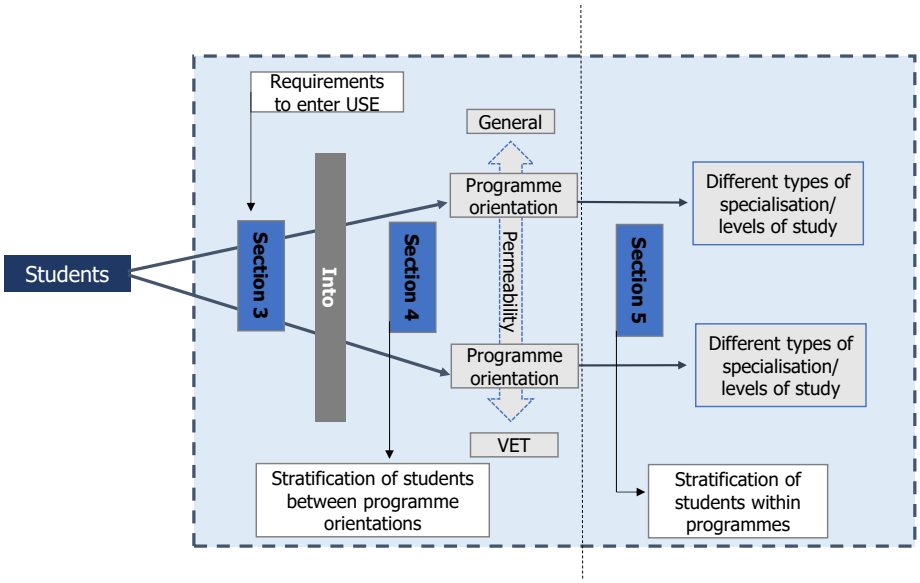


Notes: Ending age of compulsory education might refer to the age that each individual student reaches depending on the birth date, meaning that students can leave school during the school year whenever they turn such age, or it can refer to the age that students have during the school year, meaning that students have to complete the school year during which they reached the compulsory ending age.
The age of selection is not shown for countries where the first age of selection occurs in primary or at the beginning of lower secondary education. This will be updated in the final version of the paper to include the first age of selection in all countries.
Countries are ranked in alphabetical order.
Source: (Above and Beyond Project, 2022[7]), *Country mapping;* (OECD, 2022[8]), *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.

Identifying three stages of upper secondary transitions

In most OECD countries, students typically experience three stages of selection and orientation as they transition into upper secondary education, but this depends on the education system (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Student transitions into upper secondary education



Most countries set requirements to enter upper secondary education

The first stage in upper secondary transitions is determining eligibility to enter this level of education. Most OECD countries set requirements that students need to meet as they transition into upper secondary education. Since most countries now target universal completion of upper secondary, the overarching policy goal at this level is to ensure that all students are able to progress into upper secondary education. This goal would encourage countries to set requirements that are achievable for all students. However, education systems also need to ensure that students have acquired the basic skills that will enable them to access the more demanding content at this level. Section 3 discusses how countries manage these potentially competing goals and identifies key considerations for countries when determining the requirements for students to transition into upper secondary.

Countries balance two types of stratification within upper secondary education systems

A defining feature of upper secondary education is the range of choices, options and programmes that are available to students compared with lower levels of schooling (UNESCO, 2012[5]). These different options are a type of horizontal stratification, which refers to policies to place students from the same grade into different instructional programmes, ability groups and schools (OECD, 2020[6]). Stratification in upper secondary education aims to respond to students' different interests, performance levels and needs.

The OECD working paper "The design of upper secondary education across OECD countries: Managing choice, coherence and specialisation" (Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]) identifies two types of stratification that define upper secondary systems:

- **Different types of programmes in upper secondary education:** This typically includes students having to choose, usually, between vocational or general programmes, or variations of the two. On average across the OECD, students typically choose (or are placed into) one of three upper secondary programmes, although some countries have many more (for example, Italy and Japan have four different vocational programmes). (Table 2) Some countries (such as Canada, New Zealand and the United States) have only one general programme. but they have no selection upon entry into upper secondary education. This approach is the focus of Section 4 of this paper.
- **Different options and specialisations within upper secondary education**: In many countries, students can be further placed into different levels, subjects or specialisation within their upper secondary programme, according to their interests, abilities and future aspirations (Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]). In Finland, for example, students can opt to take basic or advanced mathematics. Some countries also provide students with the opportunity to specialise in a group of subjects or domains. In France, from the second year of upper secondary, students can choose what specialisation they want to follow within the general track, including mathematics and/or humanities (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, n.d.[9]). This type of stratification is also common in comprehensive systems where students are all enrolled in the same upper secondary programme. In the United States, for example, students can take career and technical education classes during upper secondary education, and students wishing to apply to certain universities frequently take subjects at a higher level via "honours classes" or "Advanced Placement" programmes (Above and Beyond Project, 2022[7]) . Section 5 of this paper looks at how students are oriented towards different options and specialisations within their upper secondary programmes

Table 2. Dimensions of horizontal stratification in selected OECD countries

Country	Separate provision of general and vocational programmes	Number of general programmes	Number of vocational programmes	Total number of education programmes into which students can be sorted[2]

Australia	no	1	0	1
Austria	yes	1	4	5
Belgium Flemish	yes	2	3	5
Belgium French	yes	2	2	4
Canada[1]	no*	1	0	1
Chile	yes	2	1	3
Colombia	yes	1	1	2
Costa Rica	yes	1	1	2
Czech Republic	yes	4	3	7
Denmark	yes	2	2	4
Estonia	yes	1	1	2
Finland	yes	1	1	2
France	yes	1	2	3
Germany	yes	6	3	9
Greece	yes	1	1	2
Hungary	yes	1	2	3
Iceland	yes	1	3	4
Ireland	no	3	0	3
Israel	yes	2	3	5
Italy	yes	1	3	4
Japan	yes	3	3	6
Korea	yes	2	2	4
Latvia	yes	1	2	3
Lithuania	yes	1	1	2
Luxembourg	yes	1	3	4
Mexico	yes	1	2	3
Netherlands	yes	2	3	5
New Zealand	no	2	0	2
Norway	yes	1	1	2
Poland	yes	1	2	3
Portugal	yes	1	2	3
Slovak Republic	yes	2	3	5
Slovenia	yes	1	3	4
Spain	yes	1	2	3
Sweden	yes	1	1	2
Switzerland	yes	4	2	6
Türkiye	yes	2	3	5
England, Northern Ireland, and Wales (United Kingdom)	yes	2	2	4
Scotland (United Kingdom)	yes	2	1	3
United States	no	1	0	1

Notes: Programmes that do not provide full completion of upper secondary education (341/351 or 342/352), programmes that are only available part-time, programmes that are fully work-based, non-formal education programmes, programmes aimed at adults and other second-chance programmes, programmes for learners with special learning needs and programmes that include less than 1% of the students enrolled in upper secondary education are excluded. For further detail see Annex A in (Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]).
[1] except for Quebec.
Source: OECD-INES data collection on ISCED programmes 2020.

The presence and importance of the two types of stratification for students and education systems differ across countries. Countries fall on a continuum in terms of how they balance

the range of options across upper secondary programmes compared with the range of options and choices within programmes. Broadly speaking, countries that provide a lot of choice in one type of stratification provide less in the other type of stratification. There are also countries in the middle range that provide some choice for both. Considering the structure of countries' upper secondary systems, they can be categorised in three broad groups:

- **Little programme diversity but large choice in the subjects / levels / options within upper secondary programmes:** These tend to be comprehensive upper secondary programmes (as in Canada, New Zealand and the United States), where there is no choice or orientation into different programmes at the start of upper secondary (see Section 3). This is counterbalanced by the significant choice that students have among the types of specialisation and subjects. In some of these countries, students can even mix general and vocational content (e.g. New Zealand's National Certificate of Educational Achievement and the United States' high school diploma offer this possibility).
- Large programme diversity but little to no student choice in the subjects and levels that they study in general programmes: This is usually the case for countries that are sometimes viewed as "highly stratified" because students are placed in multiple different programmes in upper secondary education. Typically, countries in this category have more than just a vocational and general programme. For example, in Japan there are six upper secondary programmes, and in Italy there are five. In these countries, compulsory subjects in general upper secondary programmes take up almost all of students' curriculum (students in vocational upper secondary programmes tend to have significant choice regarding their vocational specialisation across all systems). Countries with "early selection" (i.e. students who are stratified into different educational programmes relatively early, before age 15-16) also tend to fall into this category, as in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland.
- **Combining some programme diversity and opportunities to specialise:** Upper secondary education starts relatively broadly based on the programme a student decides to follow (e.g. either vocational or general), and students can become gradually more specialised by taking specific courses and following different subject levels. This is the case in Sweden and France for example, where students can specialise in particular subjects/areas of study as they progress through upper secondary education.

The role of transitions in students' lifelong trajectories

Students' experiences during upper secondary education shape their choices and opportunities over their lifetime. Successful transitions into upper secondary education – when students transition smoothly into a pathway that interests and motivates them and helps them start to define their future trajectories – are fundamental to having a positive upper secondary experience and providing the foundations for lifelong learning.

Who transitions into upper secondary education at the expected time?

While universal completion of upper secondary education is a goal across OECD countries, data shows that entering this level of education can be a hurdle in some places. This working paper looks at how far education systems encourage a smooth transition into upper secondary education (Box 3). The enrolment data presented in Figure 3 shows where students at the theoretical age of transition in each OECD country are enrolled (from lower

to upper secondary education). One feature of a smooth transition is when all (or almost all) students transition into upper secondary education at the expected time. Iceland, Ireland, Japan and Korea appear to have a particularly smooth transition, with 95% or more students at the theoretical transition age[1] enrolled in upper secondary education (Figure 3). In contrast, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal have comparatively "unsmooth" transitions, where more than 10% of the cohort has still not transitioned one year after the expected transition time. However, as discussed below, there are a variety of structural and pedagogical reasons, as well as practices specifically related to transitions, that might explain divergences across countries in patterns of enrolment around the transition point.

Box 3. What does a smooth transition into upper secondary education look like?

Transitions in education are a process of change learners go through when they are move from one stage of education to another. Transitions can be horizontal or vertical. Horizontal transitions can be explained as children's displacements on a single day, for example, going from a primary school to an after-school centre. Vertical transitions relate to the change between different educational settings, such as when children move from an early childhood education and care setting to school, or from lower to upper secondary education.

Throughout their education, learners make a number of transitions to higher levels of education and ultimately into employment. The transition from primary to secondary education is categorised as one of the most stressful events in an adolescent's life, potentially having a negative impact on students' well-being and their academic performance. This transition coincides with the time of life when marked social, biological and psychological development occurs.. When students are entering upper secondary education, the sometimes high-stakes decisions – such as choosing a programme of study - they have to make can also add a layer of stress to their transition. As students enter upper secondary education, they have to make socio-emotional investments to get used to a new and sometimes challenging learning environment.

The transition from lower secondary into upper secondary can be divided into similar categories. This paper focuses on how smooth transitions systems are (i.e. how few barriers there are) in the move from lower to upper secondary education. Smooth or disruptive transitions are related in part to the institutional structures and design of education systems (i.e. the design of upper secondary education and the transition into it), but also to how students are supported when they make this transition (i.e. student/career guidance). The Above and Beyond Project analyses smooth transitions through both of these lenses. At this stage of education, a smooth transition could be broadly characterised as follows:

- The full cohort enters upper secondary education at the expected time (i.e. the theoretical age of entrance).
- Students are given the support they need to make informed decisions about their aspirations.

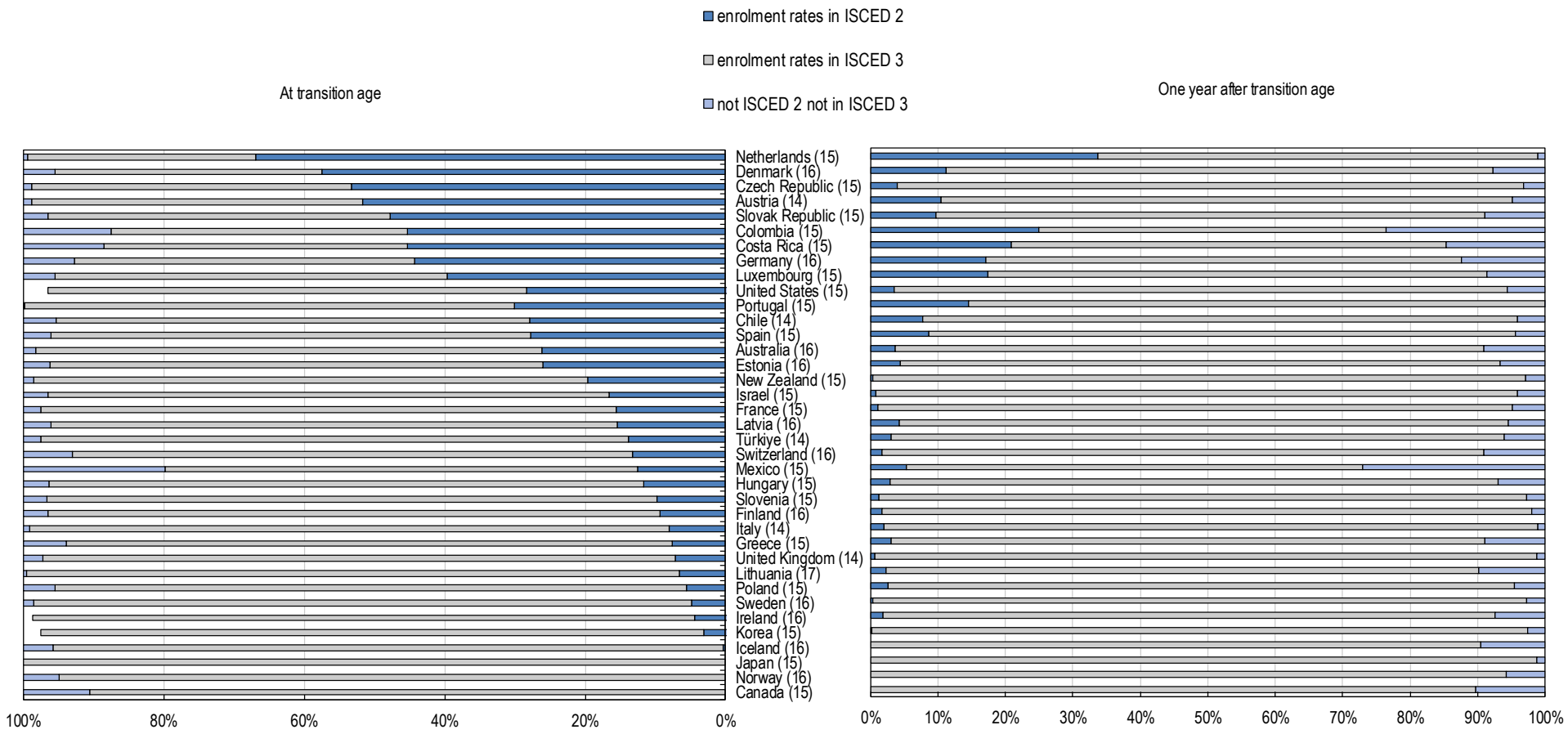
[1] Theoretical transition age refers to the age when students are typically expected to enter upper secondary education. In some countries, however, depending on the type of lower secondary programmes or upper secondary education requirements, some students are not transitioning at the expected typical age.

- Students are placed into, or choose, programmes and options that match their skills and interests.
- Students remain in education until the completion of upper secondary education.

Ensuring a smooth transition from lower to upper secondary education is the shared responsibility of many stakeholders, including school staff, parents, social services and national and local authorities.

Source: (UNICEF, 2019[10]), *Transitions from School to Work: UNICEF Technical Note*, https://www.unicef.org/media/60366/file/Transitions-from-school-to-work-2019.pdf (accessed on 26 September 2022); (OECD, 2017[11]), *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264276253-en; (Evans, Borriello and Field, 2018[12]), *A Review of the Academic and Psychological Impact of the Transition to Secondary Education*, https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01482.

Figure 3. Share of students enrolled in lower or upper secondary education at transition age and one year after transition age



Note: The number in parenthesis represents the theoretical age of transition into upper secondary education for each country. The left panel shows enrolments rates in ISCED 2 and ISCED 3 at the theoretical transition age, so the theoretical age during the first year of upper secondary education. The right panel shows enrolments in ISCED 2 and ISCED 3 one year after the theoretical transitions age, so the theoretical age during the second year of upper secondary education. *Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of students enrolled in lower secondary education (ISCED 2) at transition age.*
Source: (OECD, 2021[13]), *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en.

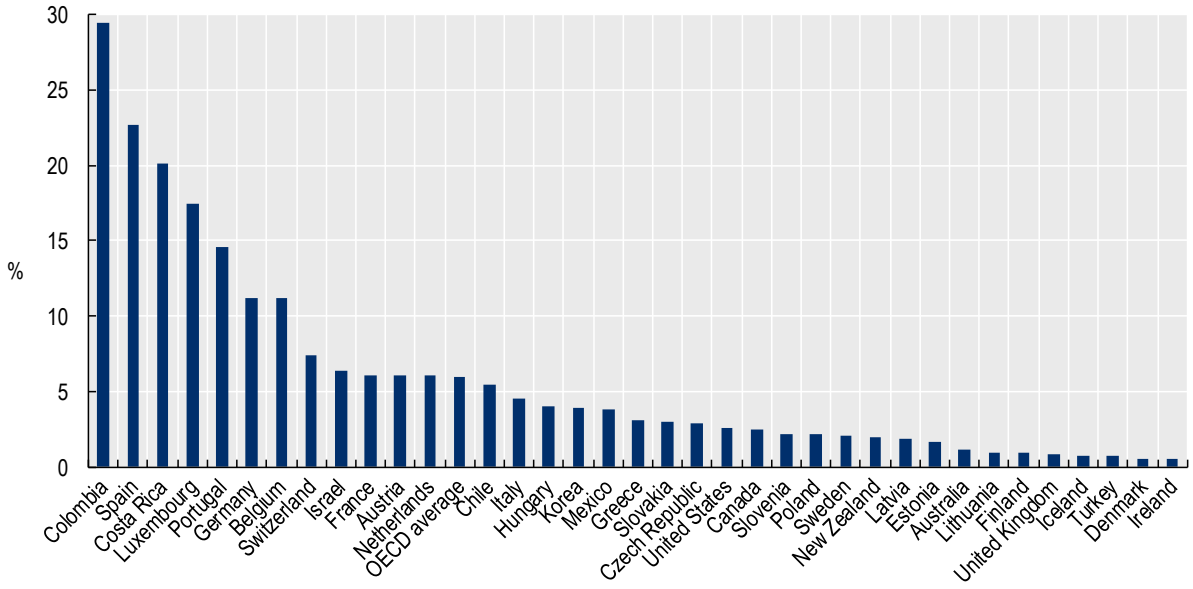
In 15 countries, at least a quarter or more of students are still in lower secondary education at the time of transition, but this can reflect differences in the duration of programmes

The reasons why a large share of students do not transition to upper secondary education at the expected time can vary by country. In some places, this reflects the design and structure of their education systems, particularly the length of certain educational programmes. In the Netherlands, although two-thirds (67%) of the cohort is shown as being in lower secondary education at the theoretical time of transition (Figure 3), two lower secondary vocational programmes require extra time compared to students who transition from lower secondary general programmes. Pre-vocational secondary education requires one extra year in ISCED 2, and practical training requires two extra years (OECD, 2022[14]). In Denmark, over half (57.5%) of the cohort are still in lower secondary education at the theoretical time of transition, but students have the option to leave lower secondary education after three or four years (OECD, 2022[14]). Other jurisdictions where the length of lower secondary (and sometimes primary) programmes can differ, perhaps resulting in some students remaining in lower secondary education after the theoretical transition age, include South Australia (Australia), Flanders (Belgium), Germany, Hungary, Israel and Switzerland (OECD, 2022[14]).

Countries with higher rates of repetition have lower shares of students who transition at the expected age

After accounting for the structure of education systems, there are still countries where students are not transitioning when they are expected to. In Colombia, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg and Slovakia, for example, at least 40% of students remain in lower secondary education at the transition point, and in Colombia and Luxembourg over 15% are still enrolled in lower secondary one year after the transition age (Figure 3). This might be related to pedagogical practices, such as repetition. Countries with higher rates of repetition tend to have lower shares of students who transition at the expected age. In Colombia, almost one-third of lower secondary students report repeating a grade during lower secondary education, according to PISA 2018, and this is the case for over 10% of students in Belgium, Costa Rica, Germany, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain (Figure 4). Repetition rates are partly related to policies around student assessment and progression during lower secondary education, which is not the focus of this paper. However, repetition can be related to the requirements for entry and selection into upper secondary education, which are discussed in Sections 3 and 4 of this paper.

Figure 4. Share of 15-year-old students who have repeated at least one grade during lower secondary education, PISA 2018



Source: (OECD, 2019[15]), *PISA 2018 Database*, https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/ (accessed on 6 April 2022).

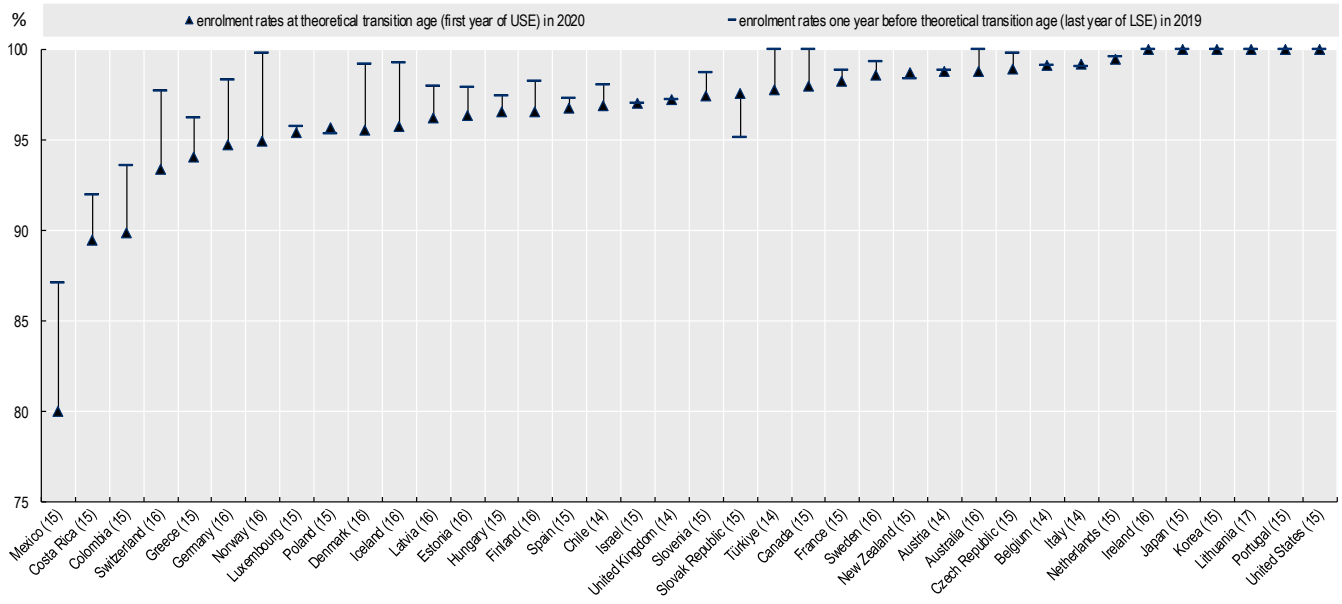
In some countries, the share of students enrolled in all levels of education falls as students transition into upper secondary education

Transitioning to a higher level of education can be cognitively, socially, emotionally and logistically challenging for students. Transitions create vulnerability for students to disengage and perhaps even drop out of education. Compared with lower levels of schooling, students transitioning into upper secondary education tend to be slightly more vulnerable to these challenges for a number of reasons. While there is a universal expectation that young people complete upper secondary education, this expectation has developed only within the last one to two generations in most OECD countries, and some barriers remain: 1) upper secondary education is rarely compulsory in its entirety (see Section 3); 2) students typically have to travel farther to upper secondary institutions; 3) content is more complex; and 4) the range of programmes and options at this level can be difficult to understand and navigate.

Across OECD countries, only around 1% of students appear to stop being enrolled in education at the transition point (Figure 5). However, in Canada, Mexico, Norway and Switzerland, the overall share of students enrolled in education falls by 5% or more between the final year of lower secondary education and the first year of upper secondary education. The fall in enrolments in some countries might be related to general patterns of enrolment and early school leaving in general. For example, in Mexico 92% of young people are enrolled in lower secondary education, while only 73% are enrolled in upper secondary education, and in Colombia 99% of young people are enrolled in lower secondary education, while only 83% are enrolled in upper secondary education. So the fall in enrolments at the transition point is consistent with national patterns of enrolment in these countries (UNESCO UIS, n.d.[16]). However, in Canada, Norway and Switzerland, overall enrolment rates in lower and upper secondary education are comparatively high

compared with other OECD countries. In these countries, there might be specific reasons related to transitions that are associated with some students leaving education (at least temporarily), such as strict entrance requirements, complex selection systems or selection systems perceived to carry high stakes. These issues are discussed in Section 4.

Figure 5. Enrolments in education before and at theoretical transition age



Note: The number in parentheses represents the theoretical age of transition into upper secondary education for each country. The figure shows enrolment rates in any ISCED level in 2019 of students one year younger than the theoretical transition age, so the theoretical age during the last year of lower secondary education, and in 2020 of students at transition age, so the theoretical age during the first year of upper secondary education.
Information regarding Canada only contains aggregated data by grade and aggregated data by age, and does not contain age and grade data that is cross-tabulated. The process of reconciling the age data to the grade data, for UOE reporting purposes, has an impact on the age data. The result is that ISCED 2 enrolments become somewhat inflated while ISCED 3 enrolments become somewhat deflated.
Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of students enrolled in 2020 in any ISCED level at the theoretical transition age into upper secondary education.
Source: (Above and Beyond Project, 2022[7]), Country mapping; (OECD, 2019[17]), INES 2019 ad hoc survey on upper secondary completion rate.

Transition data and completion of upper secondary education

[Placeholder for paragraph and figure that compares the transition data with overall completion or graduation data of USE].

How does selection into different programmes and options impact students and education systems?

The programmes that students enter in upper secondary education and how they make choices about, or are oriented towards, specialisation and subjects to take during upper secondary often carry significant stakes for their future.

Selection carries stakes for students' future

Transitions into upper secondary education carry stakes for students because choices made at this level of education are frequently associated with students' future academic and job opportunities. In many countries, student outcomes (completion rates, progression to tertiary, employment and income) vary widely according to the programme that students graduate from. For example, while completion rates and transition to tertiary education are higher for learners in and graduating from general programmes, employment rates for young people with upper secondary education as their highest attainment are greater for graduates from vocational programmes (OECD, 2021[13]). How far students achieve "good" outcomes either on the labour market or in education depends in part on how well a programme suits an individual's needs and interests. For example, while general programmes are usually associated with higher rates of completion and progression to tertiary education, a learner who struggles with the content in this programme risks non-completion and inactivity post-secondary. This learner may achieve better outcomes with a vocational programme, in terms of completion and a smoother transition into the workforce. Selection needs to be carefully designed so that it is sensitive to each individual's needs and interests, supporting them to achieve their individual potential.

In countries where there is little opportunity for students to move from one programme to another, the stakes of initial selection into upper secondary are even greater for students, societies and economies. While the discussion about the stakes and equity implications of student placement into upper secondary education has tended to focus on the impact of selection and placement into different programmes, further placement within upper secondary education programmes can also determine the opportunities and options students will have once they finish upper secondary education. In some countries, the specialisation choices, subjects and levels of study at which students are certified affect their eligibility for progression, especially when it comes to accessing tertiary education (Dufaux, 2012[18]). In New Zealand, for example, students normally progress through Levels 1-3 of the National Certificate for Educational Achievement during Years 11, 12 and 13. Level 2 is required to certify completion of secondary education, and Level 3 is required for admission to tertiary education. Not all subjects are available as a Level 3 qualification, and students have to decide to take specific programmes so that they are eligible for tertiary education. Similarly, in England (United Kingdom), tertiary institutions often require certain subjects when looking at students' admission applications. Certain types and combinations of subjects are associated with better outcomes in the labour market, making students' choices even more high-stakes for them. Studies show that in England, 26-year-olds who took A-Levels from at least two different subject groups earned more than those who took subjects from only one group (Robinson and Bunting, 2021[19]; Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]).

Selection can contribute to inequities

A major concern related to transition systems in many countries is avoiding a two-tier education system, where general programmes or those options which enable students to access tertiary education or particular institutions or courses are often seen as more prestigious and attractive than others. By using information about student academic performance and placing or orienting students to lower-class options, selection systems can contribute to these perceptions. For example, in systems that use academic information to orient students into upper secondary programmes, lower-performing students are often directed towards vocational programmes. This contributes to the lower average performance of students in vocational programmes (in PISA 2018, on average, students in general programmes scored 70 points higher in reading than those enrolled in vocational

programmes) (OECD, 2019[20]). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are also overrepresented in vocational programmes (OECD, 2019[20]). In many countries, the profile of students in vocational programmes contributes to the perception that they are less prestigious. Grouping together lower-performing, more disadvantaged students also hinders equity and risks reinforcing low performance (OECD, 2016[21]).

In countries where students have to make choices within programmes, for instance deciding what specialisation to follow, issues around inequity are also present, although little international data are available. Country data and research show that gender, socio-economic background and other social markers that can influence factors other than academic performance are often associated with certain subjects and specialisations. In particular, countries report and data suggest that disadvantaged students might be guided to follow certain specialisations or subjects considered less challenging and can be impacted by teachers' biases (see Section 5). Another example has to do with the gender differences in enrolment between vocational education and training (VET) and general education. Traditionally, men have received higher incentives to graduate from VET programmes. Across OECD countries in 2019, women made up 45% of graduates of VET upper secondary education, compared to 55% of men (OECD, 2021[13]). Significant gender differences are also reflected in the choice of field of study during VET upper secondary education, influencing students' options for higher education and their expected labour market outcomes. Part of these gendered preferences or allocations can be explained by social perceptions of gender roles and identities, as well as by cultural values. For example, women are much more likely than men to study subjects relating to business, administration and law, as well as health and welfare. Men, on the other hand, are overrepresented in engineering as well as information, communication and technology, fields of study in great demand in the labour market in OECD countries (OECD, 2021[13]). Reporting this kind of data and understanding such differences in choice and student allocation based on gender and other social markers are key to ensuring more inclusive educational opportunities and putting in place policies that address inequalities.

Selection and the broader upper secondary system

The level of flexibility of countries' upper secondary systems impacts the stakes that are associated with initial selection. When selection happens, especially early selection, flexibility can ensure that students do not feel (or actually are) "stuck" in a programme that no longer suits or interests them or is not in line with their future ambitions. In Switzerland for example, while students are selected into different programmes relatively early, at age 12, the education system is built to allow students to change programmes if they wish to (EDK, n.d.[22]). There are bridge or transfer classes that prepare students to move between vocational and general programmes. Norway is also an interesting example. It is fairly common for students to transfer to a general programme after the first two years of VET. This is also a typical route when, after two years of study, students cannot find an apprenticeship placement to complete their work-based learning (Above and Beyond Project, 2022[7]).

Selection needs to be linked with attractive high-quality programmes and specialisations

When programmes or specialisations do not offer or are not perceived to offer good opportunities in terms of education and labour market outcomes, there is greater demand for the perceived high-quality programmes, putting pressure on selection systems to distinguish between individual students for the potentially limited places available. For example, a persistent challenge in many countries is the attractiveness and prestige of

vocational education. This perception is influenced by a variety of factors, some of which are structural, including programme design and content, post-secondary pathways (not all vocational programmes are pathways to tertiary education) and selection into upper secondary education. Other factors are related to a lack of accurate information about the employment outcomes and progression possibilities linked to different upper secondary programmes, as well as societal misconceptions about vocational and general education. Therefore, developing effective selection systems goes hand in hand with developing a range of programme options that provide genuine opportunities for students (i.e. provide the diverse range of skills and knowledge they need) to successfully continue their studies or enter the job market.

3. Requirements to enter upper secondary education

Why do countries set requirements for entry into upper secondary education?

Young people's completion of upper secondary is recognised as essential for their success in life and work in today's knowledge-based economies (OECD, 1999[23]). For upper secondary education to be a rewarding and fulfilling experience where students develop the competencies for lifelong learning, they need to be prepared for the complex content at this stage. In upper secondary, learners are expected to build on the basic foundations acquired in lower secondary to build higher-order, more technical knowledge and skills. Entrance requirements are one approach that countries can use to ensure students' preparedness for learning at this level. When setting requirements to enter upper secondary education, countries need to balance national goals for universal completion while ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to succeed at this level – and if not, directing them to the right supports to acquire essential, basic skills.

Upper secondary is a distinct phase of schooling that is increasingly close to universal but rarely fully compulsory across OECD countries

Across the OECD, a full cycle of upper secondary education is compulsory in only 14 education systems. However, participation in upper secondary education is partially or fully compulsory (i.e. compulsory for the first years) in 23 OECD countries (Figure 1) (OECD, 2022[24]). In countries where this level of education is entirely compulsory, this decision is often linked to efforts to increase participation in secondary education (Benavot and Resnik, 2006[25]). This was the case in Portugal, for example, where the government increased the upper age limit of compulsory schooling in 2009 to include a full cycle of upper secondary education (CNE, 2017[26]), and in Mexico, which made upper secondary education compulsory in 2012 (WES, 2019[27]). However, it is hard to establish a relationship between compulsory school attendance and enrolment rates. Evidence suggests that, in most cases, the benefits in terms of participation are experienced primarily by the most disadvantaged, marginal students and rely heavily on countries' financial resources and capacity to ensure compliance (Harmon, n.d.[28]). Moreover, enrolment rates are influenced by a broad range of factors and policies, including how countries manage transitions into upper secondary education.

In countries where compulsory education finishes at the end of lower secondary education, or did so until very recently, students are provided with certificates of completion and/or are required to pass national examinations to certify achievement. Students can use certificates of lower secondary achievement to progress to the next level of education or to enter the labour force. In many countries that used to finish compulsory education at the end of lower secondary education but have since made upper secondary education (partially) compulsory, requirements to enter upper secondary education still reflect this historical situation. In Italy, for example, students still need to pass an examination to acquire their end-of-lower-secondary certification and be able to enrol in the next education level. In contrast, in countries where upper secondary education has always been compulsory, notably Canada and the United States, there is no distinction between lower and upper secondary education or related requirements.

What requirements do OECD countries set for students to enter upper secondary education?

Since the end of lower secondary education represents the end of the basic education cycle in most OECD education systems, many countries set specific standards that students are

expected to master before progressing to the next education level. These standards tend to be distinct from standards or policies governing student progression to the next grade within the same cycle. The section below identifies policies across OECD countries on students' entrance into upper secondary education.

Comparative data and evidence

Most OECD systems require learners to complete lower secondary to enter upper secondary education

For most countries with available data, completing lower secondary education is required to access upper secondary education (Table 3). However, countries vary in how they ensure that students have met this condition. In the majority of countries (32), students prove competencies at the end of lower secondary education through national examinations or classroom assessments, while passage into upper secondary education is automatic in a minority of countries (9).

Table 3. Requirements to enter upper secondary education

OECD countries and systems

		Students need to demonstrate having met academic standards by:		
	Complete ISCED 2 to enter ISCED 3	Passing the last grade of ISCED 2 (through classroom-based assessments)	Passing an external examination at the end of ISCED 2	Students are automatically promoted
Australia	Yes	Yes	No	No
Austria	Yes	Yes	No	No
Belgium	Yes	Yes	No	No
Canada	No	Yes	No	No
Chile	Yes	Yes	No	No
Colombia	Yes	Yes	No	No
Costa Rica	Yes	Yes	No	No
Czech Republic	Yes	Yes	No	No
Denmark	Yes	Yes	No	No
England	Yes	No	No	Yes
Estonia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Finland	Yes	Yes	No	No
France	Yes	Yes	No	No
Germany	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Greece	Yes	Yes	No	No
Hungary	Yes	Yes	No	No
Iceland	Yes	No	No	Yes
Ireland	Yes	No	No	Yes
Israel	Yes	Yes	No	No
Italy	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Japan	Yes	Yes	No	No
Korea	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Latvia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Lithuania	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Luxembourg	Yes	Yes	No	No
Mexico	Yes	Yes	No	No
Netherlands	Yes	Yes	No	No
New Zealand	Yes	No	No	Yes
Norway	Yes	No	No	Yes
Poland	Yes	Yes	No	No
Portugal	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scotland	Yes	No	No	Yes
Slovak Republic	Yes	Yes	No	No
Slovenia	Yes	Yes	No	No
Spain	Yes	Yes	No	No
Sweden	Yes	No	No	Yes
Switzerland	Yes	Yes	No	No
Türkiye	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
United States	No	Yes	No	No
Wales	Yes	No	No	Yes

Note: Since Canada and the United States have comprehensive systems, having to complete lower secondary education to enter upper secondary education does not apply. This table focuses on ISCED 3 programmes that lead to full level completion.
Source: (Above and Beyond Project, 2022[7]), *Country mapping*; (OECD, 2019[17]), *INES 2019 ad hoc survey on upper secondary completion rate.*

Only six OECD countries require students to pass external examinations at the end of lower secondary education to progress to upper secondary education

In five OECD countries, students are required to pass an examination to access upper secondary education (Table 3). Examinations at this stage are usually used to certify completion of lower secondary education. In Italy, for example, all students need to pass an examination at the end of lower secondary that certifies their completion of basic education and is a requirement for enrolment in any upper secondary school. In theory, this examination carries high stakes for students because they may fail the examination and not progress. More frequently, teachers or schools may decide that students are not ready to take the examination yet and not submit them for it. In both cases, students are required to repeat the year, although the relatively high share (91%) of students who transition to upper secondary education at the expected time in Italy suggests that the examination is rarely a barrier to student progression (Figure 3). Indeed, according to the latest results, 98.5% of students in Italy were admitted to take the end of lower secondary education examination and 99.9% of them have passed it (Grassucci, 2022[29]). However, in the other countries that report formally requiring students to pass an examination to access upper secondary education, it may create a real barrier for progression: less than three-quarters of students in Estonia (70%) transition to upper secondary education at the time of transition and 81% in Latvia[2] (Figure 3).

Most countries require students to successfully pass the last grade of lower secondary education

In the majority of OECD systems (31), students are considered to have successfully completed lower secondary education based on their grades in classroom-based assessments (Table 3). This might be set out in an end of year report card (as in Austria) and/or a certificate of lower secondary completion that includes classroom grades (as in Portugal). In some countries, the process of using classroom-assessment marks to determine entry to upper secondary education is distinct from processes that govern student progression to the next grade within the same cycle. In Portugal, for example, when academic performance suggests that students are struggling in grades within the same education cycle, grade repetition is decided on a case-by-case basis. However, at the end of lower secondary, a specific policy stipulates that students cannot normally progress to upper secondary education if they do not have passing marks in Portuguese and mathematics or in three or more other subjects (European Commission, 2022[30]). Two exceptions, however, are Canada and the United States, where students attend the same school during compulsory education and there is no formal distinction for students, teachers or schools on the transition to upper secondary education. In these countries, students are only required to pass the last grade of lower secondary in the same way as they would for any other grade.

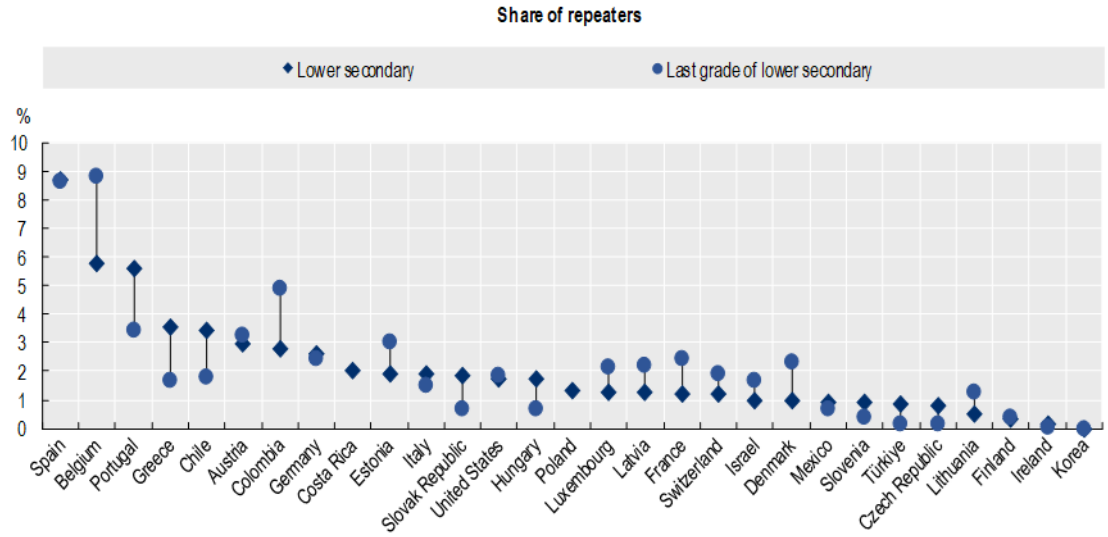
[2] In Germany, the high share of students remaining in lower secondary education at the time of transition is also likely influenced by some longer lower secondary programmes (see Section 2).

Some requirements to enter upper secondary can hinder student progression

Student progression may be hindered as a consequence of setting strict requirements for entry to upper secondary education. In ten countries with available data, repetition rates increase in the final year of lower secondary education (Figure 6). In all these countries, to complete lower secondary education and be eligible to progress into upper secondary education, students must meet academic requirements, demonstrated either through classroom assessments or an examination (Table 3).

Figure 6. Share of repeaters in the last grade of lower secondary and lower secondary overall, 2019

General education programmes



Note: Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the share of repeaters in lower secondary education.
Source: Author adaptation from (OECD, 2021[13]), Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators, https://doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en.

However, setting requirements alone does not necessarily lead to lower rates of transition or higher repetition rates. In a number of countries that set requirements similar to those in the countries mentioned above, repetition rates either do not increase or in fact decline in the year before students' transition into upper secondary education, reflecting the low level of repetition in all grades in some countries. This likely reflects different cultural and educational practices. In these countries, there might be a greater emphasis on supporting student progression to the next stage of education.

In about a quarter of OECD systems (9), student promotion to upper secondary education is largely automatic

In Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the countries of the United Kingdom, students are not required to demonstrate through classroom assessments or external examinations that they have met any academic requirements to progress into upper secondary education (Table 3). Countries with automatic progression tend to have "smoother" transitions with 90% or more of students transitioning to upper secondary at the expected time, except in New Zealand (79%) and Türkiye (84%) (Figure 3).

These countries often balance automatic progression with requirements or standards to determine whether students have met the required level before progressing on to more

advanced content in upper secondary education. Students' performance against these requirements might be used to direct them to specific programmes in upper secondary education. There are some programmes in countries such as Norway and Sweden that do not lead to full level completion and are offered alongside "regular" ISCED 3 programmes. They serve students who lack the usually required entry qualification to continue upper secondary education (e.g. apprenticeship candidate programmes in Norway and introduction programmes in Sweden) and are designed to provide a potential bridge into upper secondary studies. In Sweden, for example, students who do not meet the minimum grade thresholds for the main vocational and general upper secondary programmes are directed to introductory programmes designed to enable them to strengthen their foundational skills (Gymnasieantagningen Storsthlm, n.d.[31]). In England, Wales and Scotland (United Kingdom), students who do not meet the minimum requirements can enter less academically oriented programmes, such as apprenticeships (see Section 4). Students promoted to the upper secondary level may still be expected to work towards the end of lower secondary standards alongside their main upper secondary programme (UCAS, 2022[32]). In England, for example, students who have not obtained passing grades in English and mathematics in national examinations at age 16 are required to continue studying for these examinations alongside their other studies in upper secondary education.

Policy considerations for setting requirements to enter upper secondary education

In setting requirements for student entry to upper secondary education, education systems need to balance different considerations. There is the concern to ensure that students are ready to master the more complex content in upper secondary education and, in VET, also the technical content. Such requirements can have a positive backwash on teaching and learning by signalling expectations and learning standards to meet and potentially strengthening rigour in lower levels of education. At the same time, governments are also concerned with ensuring that all students remain in school and have the opportunity to progress to the next education level in a way that responds to their skills, knowledge and interests. These two imperatives need to be carefully balanced to ensure that requirements to maintain rigour and ensure minimum learning standards at the end of lower secondary education do not present obstacles to student progression.

Requirements can hinder student progression

The requirements that some countries set for students to progress into upper secondary education seem to be limiting progression. In some countries that set examinations at the end of lower secondary education (as in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) or in others that require students to demonstrate that they have met academic standards by the end of lower secondary education (as in as Belgium, Colombia, Denmark, France, Israel, Luxembourg and Switzerland), rates of repetition increase compared to previous years of lower secondary education, and in some countries they rise to more than double in the last year of lower secondary education. High rates of repetition can be negative for students in the medium and long term. Literature shows that grade repetition can be costly for education systems and ineffective in raising learning outcomes. It can also have negative effects on students' well-being and motivation, apart from increasing the likelihood of student dropout (OECD, 2012[33]).

In the countries with increased rates of repetition at the end of lower secondary education, teachers and schools are perhaps more likely to enforce standards stringently as students come to the end of basic education and are expected to master more complex content in upper secondary education. In all these countries, less than 90% of students transition into upper secondary education at the theoretical time.

How requirements influencing student progression are shaped by national policies and implementation

In contrast to the countries where requirements seem to hinder progression, there are also countries with theoretically similar requirements but high rates of progression and low rates of repetition. In Italy, for example, while students are expected to pass an examination at the end of lower secondary to access upper secondary education, 91% of students transition into upper secondary at the expected time (Figure 3). Similarly, Canada and Korea also set requirements for completion of lower secondary education, but more than 90% of students transition at the expected time (Figure 3). How countries' requirements to enter upper secondary education influence student progression is also shaped by educational and cultural practices and the overall quality of the education system. In contrast, in countries where grade repetition is an established policy or practice, a strict requirement that students demonstrate mastery to progress to the next level can reinforce the tendency of teachers to require students to repeat a grade.

In countries with requirements to enter upper secondary education but where transition rates into upper secondary education are relatively high at theoretical transition age and the vast majority of students transition after one year, repetition might be used less systematically, on a case-by-case basis and only in exceptional cases. For example, in the United States, repetition is a last resort and, when learning gaps are identified, students are usually, offered academic support and guidance instead of being retained. Repetition might also be limited to specific subjects or modules with targeted educational assistance, allowing students to move on to the next education level while still addressing their learning gaps (OECD, 2012[33]; Above and Beyond Project, 2022[7]). In practice, that means that not all countries that set specific requirements for students to enter upper secondary education implement these requirements strictly or rigidly, that there is some flexibility to adjust to specific circumstances of the individual student.

Countries respond to the challenge of having requirements but still being flexible enough as to facilitate students' progression in a number of ways:

- applying requirements flexibly on a case-by-case basis in response to individual students and their circumstances
- using a broad range of assessment instruments (such as classroom assessments from a range of assessment tasks, occasions, subjects and teachers) to determine student readiness to move to the next education cycle
- where necessary, introducing alternatives to grade repetition, such as providing student support (as in the US example above), or allowing students to continue but requiring them to repeat content in the subject (as in England)
- providing high-quality education systems that set high expectations for all students and supporting them to achieve those standards.

Automatic progression creates the risk of some students lacking the foundations to tackle upper secondary content

While automatically enabling all students to move into upper secondary education might support higher transition rates, it does not ensure that all student have the knowledge and skills necessary to tackle the complex content at this stage. Across the OECD on average, according to PISA 2018, 23% of 15-year-olds – the age when students are usually transitioning into upper secondary education in most countries – are not proficient in reading (measured as scoring below Level 2 in PISA) (OECD, 2019[15]). Even in countries

that perform highly on average in PISA, such as Ireland over 10% of students have not mastered basic reading skills (ibid).

Automatically promoting students without helping them to acquire the necessary skills puts them in a situation where they are likely to struggle, risking that they become disengaged and demotivated from education. Some of the most visible risks of enabling students to progress with major gaps in their learning are repetition and dropout. Across the OECD, repetition rates almost double when students move into upper secondary education, increasing from 2% to 3% (OECD, 2020[34]).

Countries respond to this challenge in a number of ways:

- **Using academic information at the end of lower secondary education diagnostically to identify students with major gaps in their learning and provide more individualised, targeted support during upper secondary**: This might be organised alongside main upper secondary programmes so that students can participate alongside their peers.
- **Providing students with a diverse range of skills and ways of learning in upper secondary education:** Students with lower levels of preparedness for upper secondary content need to be provided with opportunities where they can thrive. In the Netherlands, for example, students who enter upper secondary education with lower levels of preparedness attend vocational programmes with more practical, on-the-job learning which they often find motivating, especially if they have experienced repeated failure in a classroom setting during lower secondary education.
- Providing upper secondary content at different academic levels so that it is accessible for students at varying levels of preparedness.

Box 4. Policy considerations for requirements to enter upper secondary education

- Most countries set expectations in terms of basic learning standards that students are expected to reach by the end of lower secondary, so that they are ready for upper secondary education. Countries can, for example, require students to get their certification of basic education completion either by sitting an examination or they can measure the expectation based on students' grades from classroom assessments.
- Policies that require certain grades in examinations or classroom assessments to enter upper secondary education without additional support can create barriers that impact repetition rates in lower secondary education and lower transition rates into upper secondary education. To reach a more effective transition system that aims to certify attainment of a minimum level of knowledge and skills but still allows students to progress through education, countries could ensure that requirements are implemented in a way that uses academic information to direct greater resources and support to students who are struggling. This might help to ensure that students are better prepared to continue in education.
- Policies that enable all students to transition without ensuring attainment of basic levels risk having those students struggle later on. Countries can

implement more flexible policies by enabling all students to move into upper secondary education (which is important for student motivation, well-being, etc.) while still putting in place mechanisms that allow systems to address students' learning gaps.

4. Orientation and selection into upper secondary education programmes

Why do countries use selection or placement mechanisms?

While removing barriers to access upper secondary education supports goals of national completion, countries still need to manage wide variations in student interests and preparedness for upper secondary education. Having more than one educational programme to cater to different student needs is one way for countries to manage these variations (Table 1). Countries with systems that provide some diversity in upper secondary programmes need to determine how to place students in these different options. When they are well-designed, selection and orientation mechanisms as part of upper secondary transitions can support students to better understand their interests and place them in programmes that match their skills and aspirations. When students are in ill-suited programmes, there is a risk of negatively affecting their motivation and engagement, as well as their progression into further education and employment.

The section below looks at how students are oriented towards, or selected into, different programmes in upper secondary education. It identifies and discusses three main factors that influence student transitions across OECD countries:

- student and family preferences
- academic performance
- teacher and school recommendations.

The information presented in this paper covers the public sector only. In some education systems, private schools might have complete autonomy for decisions on their admission criteria, selection and placement into upper secondary education.

Table 4. Main factors that influence placement into upper secondary education programmes

OECD countries and systems

	Academic performance			
	Previous classroom assessment results[1]	Standardised external examinations	Students' interests/preferences	Teacher/school recommendation
Australia	No	No	Yes	No
Chile	No	No	Yes	No
Colombia	No	No	Yes	No
Costa Rica	No	No	Yes	Yes
Denmark	No	Yes	Yes	No
England	No	Yes	Yes	No
Estonia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Finland	Yes	No	Yes	No
France	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Greece	No	No	Yes	No
Iceland	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ireland	No	No	Yes	No
Israel	Yes	No	Yes	No
Italy	No	No	Yes	No
Japan	Yes	Yes	No	No
Korea	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Latvia[3]	No	No	Yes	No
Lithuania	No	No	Yes	No
Mexico	No	No	Yes	No
Norway	Yes	Yes	No	No
Poland	Yes	Yes	No	No
Portugal	No	No	Yes	No
Scotland	No	Yes	Yes	No
Slovenia	No	No	Yes	No
Spain	No	No	Yes	No
Sweden	Yes	No	Yes	No
Türkiye*	No	No[4]	Yes	No
Wales	No	Yes	Yes	No
Countries with early tracking systems				
Austria*	No	No	Yes	No
Belgium*	No	No	Yes	No
Czech Republic*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Germany*	Yes	No	Yes[2]	Yes
Hungary*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Luxembourg*	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Netherlands*	Yes	No	No	No
Slovak Republic*	Yes	No	Yes	No
Switzerland*	Yes	No	No	Yes
Total	17	11	32	5
ADD COUNTRY NAME AND RANK FACTORS IN THIS ROW				

Notes: Early tracking systems are systems where students are separated as early as lower secondary level into different educational programmes or "tracks" according to their abilities.
*In the countries marked with an asterisk, selection happens earlier than upper secondary education. 1. Countries marked with a "No" do not use academic performance to select students into the different programmes, but might consider it for attesting to lower secondary education completion (e.g. passing all compulsory subjects). 2. In some regions in Germany, teachers' recommendations are binding. 3. In Latvia, there is no state or local level policy on student placement; schools are allowed to set their own admission criteria and they usually rely on entrance examinations. 4. In Türkiye, there are standardised external examinations only for the most selective schools.
Source: (Above and Beyond Project, 2022[7]), Country mapping; (OECD, 2019[17]); *INES 2019 ad hoc survey on upper secondary completion rate*.

Student and family preferences

Comparative data and evidence

In almost all OECD countries, student and family views influence selection or orientation into upper secondary programmes. While systems do not differentiate between students' views and those of their parents or guardians, it is important to highlight that their views and choices are both distinct and closely intertwined. Parents or guardians frequently have a strong influence over students' decisions, and so education systems and policy makers need to ensure that information reaches and is accessible for parents/guardians to guide students towards informed decisions. Giving students autonomy to decide on the upper secondary programme they want is key to helping them start their pathways towards areas they are interested in and skills they want to develop.

In a few countries, the views of students are decisive

In some systems, it is the choice of students and their parents/guardians that primarily determines the upper secondary programme that students enter. Other factors are secondary or are only used to make decisions when demand for places is greater than supply. In Chile, for example, student preference is central in the process of entrance to upper secondary education. A centralised system for school admission enables students to rank the schools they would like to attend, with placement determined by a lottery mechanism. When there are more applicants than places available, the system uses four priority criteria for student selection (including whether students have siblings in the same school), but academic performance is not part of the process[3] (Carrasco and Honey, 2019[35]; Ministério de Educación, n.d.[36]). This system was approved in 2015 and has been slowly implemented across the country to create more socially mixed schools in the context of a very socially segregated education system (Carrasco and Honey, 2019[35]).

In some other countries, even when academic information is taken into account, students and families have the final say on the programme that students attend, creating the space for students and families to challenge decisions when they are oriented to pathways that do not reflect their interests or preferences. In some German *Länder,* for example, teachers' recommendations are not binding for selection into lower secondary. Their recommendations play a role in which programme students enter, but families and students themselves have the final say on the programme they follow (Blossfeld, H.-P., Buchholz, S., Skopek, J., Triventi, M, 2016[37]).

[3] A few highly competitive schools might also apply entrance exams.

Most commonly, student and family preferences are considered alongside academic information and teacher / school recommendations

This is the most common model for incorporating student choice in decisions regarding transitions to upper secondary education. In France, student choice is considered alongside information about student performance from academic information (classroom assessments) and/or recommendations by teachers and schools. Similarly, in systems like those of Denmark, England (United Kingdom) and Norway, where academic information is used to ensure that students meet minimum requirements for specific programmes, once students have met these requirements, they are free to choose among the available upper secondary programmes.

In a few systems, student and family preferences play a minimal role

In systems where academic information is used to determine students' upper secondary programmes on a competitive basis, as in the Czech Republic, Japan and Türkiye, student and family views become secondary to the process because it is ultimately academic results that determine placements. Similarly, in some German *Länder*, where teacher recommendations are binding (Blossfeld, H.-P., Buchholz, S., Skopek, J., Triventi, M, 2016[37]), student and family views are effectively inconsequential. At the same time, it is important to mention that in Germany, students are allocated to different programmes before they enter upper secondary education. Therefore, when students transition to upper secondary education, decisions about programme choice have already been made.

Students need support to exercise their agency

Young people are often influenced significantly by their parents' pathways and occupations. For example, young people without at least one tertiary-educated parent are more likely to enrol in vocational education and training (VET) programmes instead of general education, which is the traditional pathway into tertiary education in most countries (OECD, 2021[13]). In almost every country with available data, the percentage of students whose parents have not attained upper secondary education is at least twice as high among students in vocational programmes as among entrants to general programmes (ibid). This pattern of intergenerational replication of pathways is the result of several factors, including the association between socio-economic background and academic performance, the role of academic performance in determining upper secondary programme placement and teachers' and schools' bias when making recommendations (European Commission, 2017[3]).

It also reflects a lack of guidance and student support. Like all individuals, young adults often take shortcuts when making decisions about their future. They do not always take the time to rationally review all the relevant information available, especially if sources of guidance are confusing and hard to navigate (Education Council of Australia, 2020[38]). Young people tend to look for information which confirms rather than challenges their pre-established preferences (ibid) and, therefore, may unconsciously limit their own choices. In particular, disadvantaged families are found to be less aware of the educational opportunities offered to their children. Moreover, among the countries that participated in PISA 2018, one in five young people had misaligned education and career expectations (i.e. they underestimated the levels of education typically required to secure professional or managerial positions) (Mann et al., 2020[39]). Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to demonstrate misaligned expectations: more than one in three disadvantaged students had misaligned aspirations compared to one in ten advantaged students (Mann et al., 2020[39]).

Policy considerations for student and family views and selection

While allowing space for the views of students and parents/guardians provides important agency, it is important to ensure that students and their families are supported through accessible information and guidance to understand the options available and their consequences for the future. It is thus important that transition systems find guidance mechanisms to encourage all students to set their own expectations for future education and help to promote social mobility (OECD, 2019[40]).

Ensuring that accurate and transparent information about programme choice and future pathways is accessible

The growing individualisation and diversification of school programmes in some countries has made student guidance an even more important tool to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of education systems and support students to make better informed decisions. Having access to adequate information can contribute to a successful learning path. Such information may be about the academic requirements, the technical complexity of a programme and the possible job opportunities a pathway can lead to. In 2016, for example, as high as 49% of general education students in the European Union stated that they had not received information about VET when making their decision about what programme to follow during upper secondary education (CEDEFOP, 2016[41]).

In Finland, for example, besides being required to follow compulsory career education, students also have access to school guidance counsellors who are specifically responsible for following up and ensuring that students who complete lower secondary apply to upper secondary general or vocational education (Finish National Agency for Education, 2022[42]). In this process, counsellors are required to provide students with information about the different programmes available, their content and future job and educational opportunities (ibid).

It is also important that counsellors and teachers receive appropriate training in recognising and avoiding biases based on factors such as socio-economic background, ethnicity, race, gender and other social markers, to avoid certain groups of students being systematically guided towards pathways that are sometimes perceived as less prestigious based on stereotypes. It is also key that schools provide in-service training and other resources that inform teachers and counsellors about updated higher education requirements and job market dynamics, as it can be hard for them to keep abreast of how higher education programmes and labour market demands are evolving. Governments recognise that career guidance, informed by accurate and updated labour market data, can help learners make education choices that match their interests and skills and will eventually lead to rewarding employment (Hoferi, Zhivkovikj and Smyth, 2020[43]).

Providing support to students' parents/guardians is also key in the process of student guidance in the transition to upper secondary education. In Scotland, in a website dedicated to career guidance, parents can also make use of the different online tools available and find information on how to help their children discover their interests and find a pathway that aligns with their skills and knowledge. For example, a webinar series dedicated to parents is available with information about students starting secondary school and their option choices, etc. (Skills Development Scotland, 2022[44]).

Scheduling specific time for student guidance activities

While the vast majority (94%) of students in OECD countries attend schools with career guidance (OECD, 2020[6]), the format and availability of career guidance can vary

significantly among countries. In Finland and Norway, student guidance is formally scheduled into students' time at schools. In Norway, guidance is an individual right for all pupils, regulated by the Education Act. During lower secondary education, for example, students have a mandatory subject called "education choices" devoted to student guidance and support (Directorate of Education of Norway, n.d.[45]). The course's main goal is to help students make informed educational and career choices. It provides students with knowledge about opportunities and requirements in the education system and how they can influence future possibilities when it comes to their working life. By following this subject, students are supposed to develop the competences needed to succeed in transition periods and the knowledge needed to make informed decisions (Directorate of Education of Norway, n.d.[45]). In contrast, in other countries, such as the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia, more than half of 15-year-old students need to voluntarily seek guidance (OECD, 2020[6]).

Creating space for critical self-reflection before selection decisions are imminent

Decisions about upper secondary programmes carry or can be perceived as carrying high stakes, since they can define and limit, or at least influence, students' academic and job opportunities in the future. It is crucial to give students the tools and sufficient time to think about their choices. Research shows that early student guidance on future education options and career paths (even before lower secondary education) can benefit students and education systems by increasing students' engagement in school and their capacity to plan for the future (Akos, 2020[46]). Evidence shows that career guidance can be beneficial, especially if it begins before secondary education, by providing adequate time for personal reflection as well as access to information and experiences throughout the schooling path (OECD, 2021[47]).

Academic performance

Comparative data and evidence

Most OECD systems that place students in different programmes use academic information to inform placements

In most OECD systems where students are placed in different programmes (21), academic performance has a direct role in determining student placement in upper secondary programmes. The frequent use of academic information reflects that it is seen as a way to indicate a students' academic ability and their likely success in more academically oriented programmes (Fernandez, 2015[48]), although it also reflects students' background and their previous education opportunities.

According to PISA 2018, 66% of students at upper secondary schools were enrolled in academically selective institutions (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020[49]) (Figure 7).[4] Countries where academic performance is frequently used to inform student selection tend to use academic information both to ensure that students have met requirements for entry into upper secondary (see Section 3) and to determine student placement into highly stratified systems with a large number of programmes available. In

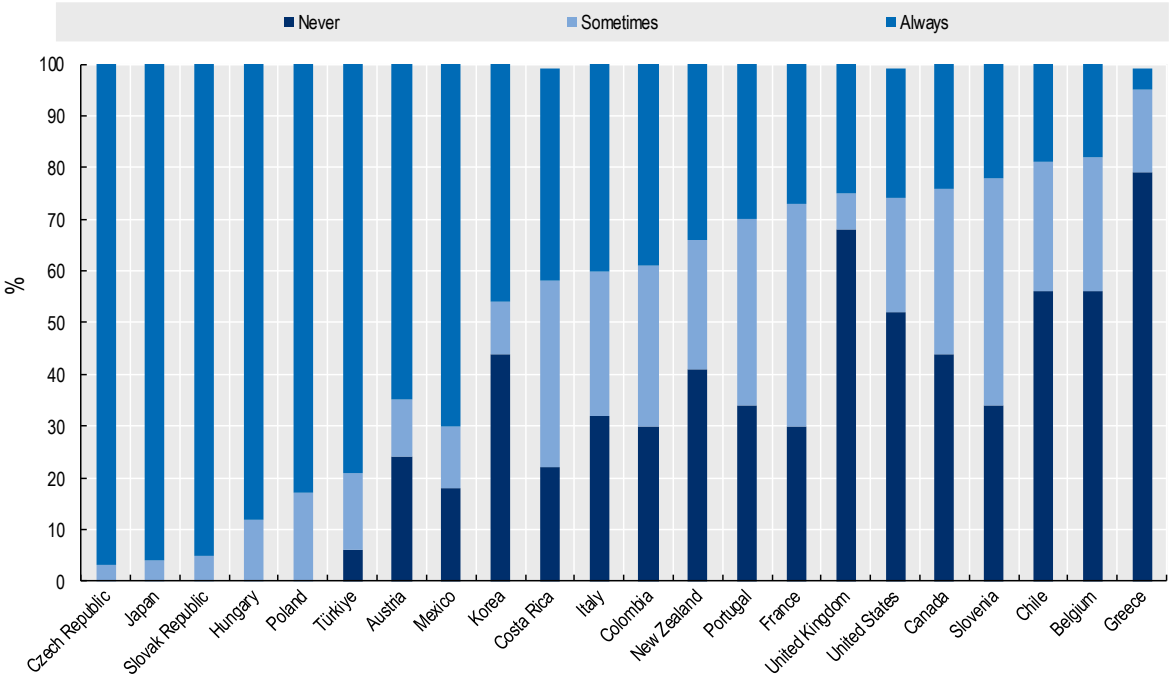
[4] Although this data does not reflect system-level policies but rather what happens in individual schools, this information allows for a macro picture of how far academic performance is influencing school entrance and student placement across countries. Moreover, where the majority of principals in a country report that academic performance is used a lot, this is likely to match with national policies overall.

Japan, for example, academic performance is the main criterion (along with students' academic record and extra-curricular activities) to select students into eight different programmes in upper secondary education. Similarly, many education systems in eastern European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic, rely heavily on academic performance for selection. This partly reflects their history and the structure of their upper secondary systems where the future role of individuals in the economy was clearly defined and students were selected into programmes to prepare them for their job position (Cedefop, 2002[50]). On the other hand, countries where academic information plays a less influential role include those where requirements to enter upper secondary education tend to be limited and those with comprehensive upper secondary systems like the Canada, New Zealand and the United States, where there is no selection into upper secondary education programmes

There are two main forms of information about individuals' academic performance that education systems use for upper secondary transitions: external, standardised examinations and information based on classroom assessments.

Figure 7. Student admission to school based on student's academic performance (including placement tests), PISA 2018

Public, upper secondary schools



Note: Only countries in which at least 50% of students taking the PISA assessment are enrolled in upper secondary education are included in this graph.
Source: (OECD, 2021[51]), *"PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment", OECD Education Statistics (database)*, https://doi.org/10.1787/data-00365-en.

Just over one quarter of OECD countries (11) use standardised central (or local) examination results

External, standardised examinations provide externality and reliability, which are important for high-stakes decisions about a student's future (OECD, 2013[52]). In particular, in highly stratified systems where selection takes place early on (as in Austria and the Netherlands), examinations are perceived to play an important role by being potentially more reliable than teachers' judgements. In the Netherlands, a country with early selection into different programmes, the education system has experimented with both examinations and teachers' judgements for student progression. The Netherlands has found that examinations can provide an important challenge or counterweight to teachers' judgements for certain groups of students – often students from ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic backgrounds who can outperform teachers' judgements in examinations (Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, 2019[53]).

However, examinations also risk amplifying existing inequities in education systems. Achievement at school of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds is, on average internationally, lower than that of their more advantaged peers (OECD, 2019[40]). In addition, advantaged students can benefit from additional tutoring and home support in preparation for examinations. These two factors mean that students from more advantaged backgrounds typically accumulate a number of benefits related to their background when taking examinations. Greater access to resources for examination preparation was one of the reasons why the Netherlands recently reduced the importance of the examination at the end of primary education for selection by moving it later in the academic year (Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, 2019[53]). However, because the examination was also found to play an important role in counter-balancing teachers' biases, it was later reinstated.

In the Netherlands, some schools use intelligence tests rather than an assessment of academic knowledge and skills (Hurks and Bakker, 2016[54]), since they consider that such tests can provide a better indication of a student's future achievement and development. While there is limited research on the predictive validity of examinations of academic performance at the end of primary or lower secondary education, research on selection into tertiary education provides some relevant insights. It suggests that the predictive validity of external standardised examinations of students' performance in tertiary education is lower than when looking at high school scores (Galla et al., 2019[55]). This may be especially true for an even younger cohort of students at the end of primary or lower secondary education, since children develop at different rates (Sawyer et al., 2018[56]). In particular, intelligence tests might provide a more accurate predication of future achievement for students with a later development trajectory or for immigrant students who are adjusting to a new language, for example.

In some countries, the use of examinations for selection purposes also raises concerns for student well-being. Highly competitive admission systems, focusing mostly or even exclusively on students' academic performance for student placement can create significant anxiety and stress for students. For example, students in Japan and Korea, where there are examinations for upper secondary placement and a very competitive schooling environment, report feeling stressed about examinations and feeling anxious about a test even if they are prepared for it, and they are more likely to suffer from mental health issues (Ng, 2020[57]; Xiaojun et al., 2022[58]). Until very recently in Türkiye, the results of a national examination at the end of lower secondary education were used to rank students, and upper secondary places were awarded competitively on the basis of examination scores. Concern about the pressure that this created for students was a key factor leading to reform in 2018 (Kitchen et al., 2019[59]).

Around half of OECD countries (17) report using the results from classroom-based assessments

Classroom assessment results, in the form of student's average grades from all or certain subjects, across single or across multiple years of lower secondary education, are more commonly used for student selection. In Finland, for example, students' placement in the general programme is based on their grade point average for the subjects included on the basic education certificate (Finnish National Agency for Education; Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.[60]). Some schools might also rely on entrance and aptitude tests, and pupils may be awarded extra points for hobbies, for instance (ibid). In France, students' results in classroom assessments are one of the main sources that guide class councils and teachers in their student placement recommendations (Box 5).

Classroom assessments can take a variety of formats and can assess a wide range of skills and competencies. As countries move towards more competence-based curricula, performance-based assessments such as experiments or projects have become more important because such assessments usually require students to use a wider range of skills and knowledge, demonstrating complex competencies such as critical thinking and problem solving (OECD, 2013[61]). Classroom assessments can generate important information about student performance, as they can be based on multiple assessments of different skills and knowledge, at different times over an extended period of schooling. Research on selection into tertiary education suggests that results of classroom assessment provide greater predictive validity than external standardised examinations of students' outcomes in tertiary education (Galla et al., 2019[55]). This perhaps reflects that success at the university level requires not only cognitive ability, but also self-regulatory competences which might be better evidenced in upper secondary report card grades. The predictive validity of examinations tends to be limited because they do not assess the diverse array of skills and knowledge that students will need in a new education cycle (Galla et al., 2019[55]).

However, without sufficient support for teachers' assessment literacy and a strong national framework for assessment, teachers' classroom-based assessments can have limitations in terms of objectivity and reliability (OECD, 2013[52]). Performance-based assessments in particular can be hard to construct, demanding a high level of knowledge from teachers, and challenging in terms of ensuring grade reliability. When relying on classroom assessments to inform placements into upper secondary programmes, countries need to ensure that teachers are well-supported to develop their assessment literacy. Decisions for student placement should also be based on a wide range of results over time and from different subjects to provide a broad base for decision-making.

How academic information is used for transitions is critical

The challenges associated with using academic information for upper secondary transitions are not just related to the design of the examination or classroom assessment. As the discussion above shows, the evidence is ambivalent in terms of best assessment tools for student transitions. Crucially, it is about how the information is used for selection purposes. In systems where achievement standards for entry are higher for more prestigious programmes, this makes access more difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Fernandez, 2015[48]). Across OECD systems, when academic information is used for selection into upper secondary education, students with lower marks are usually directed to vocational programmes. Unsurprisingly then, PISA data shows that socio-economically disadvantaged students are more likely to be enrolled in vocational programmes than advantaged students (around 20% among OECD countries) (OECD, 2019[15]).

However, there are crucial differences in how countries use and combine different sources of information. One approach is to ensure that information from examinations is combined with a broad range of information about an individual student. On this topic, the Dutch Education Council has recently recommended that student selection should happen later and that the admission process should combine standardised testing with a broad spectrum of information input, such as in-classroom assessments (The Dutch Education Council, 2021[62]). The information collected from different sources and from several testing moments would then be used by teaching teams as a basis to formulate recommendations for students' education programmes in secondary education. According to the Council, such a system would ensure a more systematic and robust selection process, as well as better reflect students' diverse range of skills and knowledge (The Dutch Education Council, 2021[62]).

Policy considerations when using academic information for selection

In systems that need to orient or place students in different upper secondary programmes, there is an inherent tension between promoting equity – in terms of promoting equitable access and outcomes – and encouraging students to define their interests by creating different programmes and options. There are risks in placing students in programmes in which they are likely to struggle or that do not reflect their ambitions. While each system will need to balance various trade-offs in the context of their own systems, this working paper has identified key considerations for countries when using academic information for selection.

Using academic information to indicate the upper secondary programmes that students can apply to, rather than competitively selecting students

Some countries, notably some Nordic countries, Ireland and systems in the United Kingdom, set grade thresholds for entrance to certain programmes:

- **Using examination results to set thresholds to enter upper secondary general programmes**: In Denmark, students need to achieve a certain mark in their examination at the end of lower secondary, depending on the upper secondary programme that they wish to enter (general or VET) (European Commission, 2022[63]). In England, Scotland and Wales (United Kingdom), students typically need to achieve passes in five subjects at lower secondary to enter a general upper secondary programme (European Commission, 2022[63]; UCAS, 2022[64]).
- **Using classroom assessment results to set thresholds for upper secondary general programmes:** In Sweden, students' grades from classroom assessments are used to determine if they have met the passing grades for upper secondary programmes. Students wishing to enter general programmes need passing grades in Swedish (or Swedish as a second language), English and mathematics, and at least nine other subjects, while those wishing to enter vocational programmes need passing grades in Swedish (or Swedish as a second language), English, mathematics, and at least five other subjects (Above and Beyond Project, 2022[7]). Students who do not meet these thresholds have to enter introductory programmes designed to help them to develop their foundational skills before transitioning into one of the main upper secondary programmes.

These approaches help to mitigate some of the challenges associated with using academic information for upper secondary selection (such as student pressure), and they can help to slightly moderate the negative impacts for equity. In contrast, systems that use academic information competitively to rank students based on their performance, with those with the highest marks being awarded the most competitive places, risk accentuating equity

concerns and pressure on students. Until very recently, Türkiye had a similar system, where all students were required to sit a national examination with the results used to rank students and award upper secondary places competitively on the basis of results. This created a highly segregated system. There were also concerns about excessive stress and pressure on students. In 2018, to address these concerns, Türkiye made the competitive national examinations optional for those students who wish to attend the most competitive upper secondary programmes (Kitchen et al., 2019[65]). In Japan, students' academic marks in local examinations are used to select students into three different types of programmes and schools. Admission into public upper secondary schools is extremely competitive, with schools taking into account each student's performance on entrance examinations. This contributes to significant levels of student stress, although the use of classroom-assessment results, extra-curricular activities, and volunteer work are also taken into account in the process of student selection into upper secondary education (Above and Beyond Project, 2022[7]; WENR, 2021[66]).

Limiting the scope of examinations

Limiting the scope of examinations in some way can enable systems to draw on the positive contributions that examinations can provide for selection while minimising their potentially negative impacts. Countries limit the scope of examinations in different ways:

- **Limiting the subjects that an examination assesses:** In Norway, for example, the national examination is limited to only one out of three subjects (Norwegian, mathematics, Sami or English) (European Commission, 2022[63]).
- **Making the examination optional for students who wish to access the most competitive programmes:** In the Czech Republic, for example, after lower secondary education, students who choose to enrol in either the vocational or general four-year programmes need to pass a common admission test assessing students in mathematics and Czech language (OECD, 2021[67]). Students who want to follow the two- or three-year vocational programmes (around one-third of students) are not required to take an entrance examination and can move straight into these upper secondary programmes (ibid). In Türkiye, students opt to take an examination only to enter the most competitive schools (Kitchen et al., 2019[59]). This approach can help to limit the stress that examinations place across the whole student cohort, although it likely has negative impacts for equity.

Combining information from classroom assessment and external examinations

Combining information from different sources of academic performance enables selection systems to draw on the positive contributions of examinations (their externality and objectivity) and classroom assessments, providing more multi-faceted, valid information. At the same time, combining these sources of information helps to address the inherent limitations of examinations (their weak predictive validity and the possibility of amplifying existing inequities) and those of classroom assessments (their lack of reliability and susceptibility to bias). When focusing on using classroom assessment results, teachers need to be trained and supported to acquire assessment literacy skills, including assessment methods that are aligned with the national curriculum and the need to have consistent assessment criteria and guidance within countries. Across the OECD, only the systems in the United Kingdom use solely information from examinations as the unique form of academic information to inform selection into upper secondary programmes (Table 4). Countries can also offset the limitations of academic information by drawing on a wider range of sources, such as teacher and school views, and discussions with students and parents.

Teacher and school recommendations

Comparative data and evidence

In five OECD countries, teacher and school recommendations influence placement decisions

Teacher or school recommendations have the potential to be more comprehensive than academic information alone for student placement, because teachers' judgement does not solely rely on students' school results. Teachers' views can consider other characteristics of students, such as an individual student's development and future plans (Urhahne and Wijnia, 2021[68]). In France, for example, students receive a non-binding recommendation from class councils (which include teachers) as to what would be the most appropriate scholastic path for students to follow (Box 5). In Germany, depending on the federal state, either teachers or students and their parents have the discretion to decide which lower secondary programme a student will follow (Box 5).

However, teachers can be influenced, positively or negatively, by their perceptions of students and their characteristics (Urhahne and Wijnia, 2021[68]). Research has shown that teachers' recommendations systematically guide students from lower socio-economic and immigrant backgrounds away from more academic programmes (European Commission, 2017[3]; Blossfeld, H.-P., Buchholz, S., Skopek, J., Triventi, M, 2016[37]). The subjective nature of teachers' judgements was a key reason why examinations were given greater weight in selection in the Netherlands (Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, 2019[53]). Data shows that students with lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to receive teacher advice that was lower than their test marks suggested (ibid).

Policy considerations for the use of teachers' recommendation for selection

Teachers and schools can draw on significant knowledge and interactions with an individual student to inform their views about student placement. However, they are often subject to biases and subjectivity, which can limit their fairness. Countries can consider some of the following approaches to mitigate the biases of teacher recommendations.

Teachers' recommendations can provide important advice, but systems need to take steps to mitigate for biases

Teachers' knowledge of individual students and their opportunities to see them learning and interacting in a variety of circumstances mean that they are able to draw on a wide set of information about students when providing advice for selection into upper secondary education. Given their position in the education system, teachers might be expected to have strong knowledge of different educational options in upper secondary education, their demands and the future pathways that they connect to. In France, teachers provide recommendations for students' future upper secondary programmes, and in Germany, teachers provide recommendations for students' lower secondary programmes (Box 5).

While teachers can be well-informed about the education system and individual students, their views can be unreliable and subject to bias. In the Netherlands, where the selection policy into lower secondary education has been extensively researched, the evidence shows that teachers are more likely to underestimate the ability and potential of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (The Dutch Education Council, 2021[62]; Timmermans, Kuyper and van der Werf, 2015[69]). The same happens in Germany, where research shows that teachers' recommendations can be socially biased and particularly discriminatory against socio-economically disadvantaged students and students coming from minority groups

(Boone and Van Houtte, 2013[70]; Sprietsma, 2013[71]). Education systems need to take steps to offset teachers' biases, for example, by countering their recommendations with other sources of information and providing teachers with information about how to make fair judgements. Transition systems can also consider allowing students and their families to question and appeal teachers' recommendation and offer easy and clear mechanisms so they can do so. In France and in some regions in Germany, although teachers' recommendations are the main source for student placement, teachers' decisions are not fully binding. In France, students and parents can appeal the class council's decision on student placement if they do not agree with what has been recommended (Box 5).

Across countries, when high stakes decisions are being made about student certification or progression, teachers' views tend to be combined with other sources of information to counteract the potential subjectivity of teachers' advice. In the Netherlands, when students are transitioning into lower secondary programmes, teachers' recommendations, part of what is called school advice, are complemented by external test results considered to be more objective and that serve as a second piece of information for student placement. Students take an examination at the end of primary education and, if the final test score is higher than what has been established in the school advice decision, a reconsideration and if necessary an upward adjustment can take place (Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, 2019[53]). Evidence shows that results from the test can contribute to a programme recommendation that is more aligned to the level of the child. In particular, students from more disadvantaged programmes more frequently outperform their teacher's or school's expectations in the external test. Research shows that students whose school advice is not adjusted despite having performed better in the final test are more likely than other pupils to change level during secondary education (Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, 2019[53]). However, this system in the Netherlands may still disadvantage students because, by the time adjustments to teacher recommendations are made on the basis of examination results, many students can no longer apply for the schools of their adjusted advice, as there are no more places available (NOS, 2019[72]; House of Representatives of the States General, 2020[73]).

Box 5. The role of teachers' recommendations in selection

Teacher and class councils in France

In France, class councils (*conseils de classe*) take into account a range of evidence about a student's academic performance and interests to discuss which programme will best meet the strengths and needs of an individual student. Class councils evaluate each student's performance throughout the year. Each grade has a council that includes the school principal, teaching staff, parent representatives, student representatives and guidance counsellors. The class council is responsible for reviewing students' academic performance (e.g. school reports, containing their grades) and students' particular interests, also taking into account medical and social well-being, in order to advise students on what programme would best suit them. Students and their families can appeal decisions made by the class council if they wish, and their request is examined by an appeal commission. This commission, which is usually composed of an academic inspector, a school principal, teachers, psychologists and parent representatives, is

responsible for making a decision. If students and their families are still not satisfied with the commission's decision, they can ask to stay in the same grade for another year – which is not to be confused with the practice of repetition.

Teacher recommendations in German *Länder*

In Germany, students are selected into different lower secondary programmes at the end of primary school. In all German *Länder*, teachers' recommendations play a role in the placement process. In some *Länder*, teachers' recommendations are binding and students can only attend academic programmes if they have received a recommendation to do so. In other *Länder*, teachers provide a recommendation, but students and families are still free to make their own decision about the lower secondary programme the student enters.

German *Länder* have gone back and forth on their selection policy, with some going from having binding recommendations to giving more freedom and autonomy to students and vice-versa. Evidence shows that teachers can be better placed to asses a child's academic potential than parents or students themselves and therefore binding recommendations can lead to a more efficient allocation of students to the different secondary education programmes. On the other hand, non-binding recommendations can be beneficial for equity reasons, as they theoretically allow any student to access more academic programmes, despite their learning outcomes. There are also perceptions that binding recommendations might exercise strong pressure on students on their last years before accessing secondary education and also that binding recommendations based on students' short educational history can be unfair and limit their future educational opportunities.

Source: (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, n.d.[74]), *Le choix d'orientation d'un élève [A student's orientation choice]*, https://www.education.gouv.fr/reussir-au-lycee/le-choix-d-orientation-d-un-eleve-7382 (accessed on 27 July 2022) ; (Onisep, 2020[75]), *La commision d'appel: qu'est-ce que que c'est?*, https://www.onisep.fr/Choisir-mes-etudes/College/Organisation-des-etudes/les-instances-officielles/la-commision-d-appel-qu-est-ce-que-c-est (accessed on 8 July 2022); (Grewenig, 2021[76]), *School Track Decisions and Teacher Recommendations: Evidence from German State Reforms*, https://www.ifo.de/DocDL/wp-2021-353-grewenig-teacher-recommendation.pdf (accessed on 8 July 2022).

Guiding teachers in how to form recommendations and how to detect their own biases

Few countries seem to provide clear advice and guidance for teachers or schools when providing judgements. While this provides space for teachers to exercise their professional judgement and draw on a wide range of information and interactions that might be pertinent, it reduces the reliability of the recommendations, since the information that teachers draw on for each student will naturally differ widely. One way to ensure that teachers draw on common information and are encouraged to question their own views for biases would be through national guidance. External and fixed standards for measuring student performance, as well as increased awareness of possible discrimination (e.g. by offering training for teachers) might help transition systems to limit the inequalities of educational opportunities.

While the context is very different, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, teachers were required to provide estimated grades for their students for the first time without students having completed any prior work explicitly for this purpose. National guidance

for teachers set out different types of unconscious bias, both negative and positive, and provided guidance on how to avoid it influencing their judgements about student performance (Department of Education and Skills of Ireland, 2020[77]). National guidance might specify the evidence that teachers should focus on and also the questions that they should ask themselves when forming judgements on the development of individual students and their future aspirations. Guidance might also help teachers to detect biases in their own judgements.

Combining different sources of information to determine selection

This paper's review of international systems for selecting students into upper secondary programmes shows that there is no single selection system that is perfect. Different sources of information – student and family views, classroom assessment results, examinations and teacher recommendations – have both benefits and risks. Box 6 sets out the different sources of information that systems draw on internationally. The policy considerations set out in Box 6 also identify some of the key issues and strategies, based on country experiences, to mitigate the risks and maximise the benefits of each source of information.

While no single source of information is without benefits (or risks), what does stand out from this review of country practices, data and research is that effective systems tend to combine different sources of information for transitions. The combination of different sources allows selection systems to be more robust. Relying on multiple sources helps to ensure that selection better reflects the capacities and interests of students and helps to counteract the risks of specific sources of information for a more balanced perspective.

A key question about selection systems is not just the information that is used, but how those sources of information are combined to form a decision about student selection. The perennial question that most transition systems face is how to create an equitable, high-quality system where low performers are not confined to certain educational options (usually vocational programmes) that become low prestige and where, inversely, all students and families want to enter general education because it is perceived to be a more valued route, resulting in greater demand than places. This paper has highlighted aspects of transition systems that can contribute to or reduce the likelihood of this situation, notably: 1) using multiple sources of academic information (and avoiding reliance on examinations alone); 2) using academic information to set thresholds rather than competitively ranking students; 3) providing guidance to teachers on how to provide recommendations and avoid biases; and 4) providing thoughtful, accurate advice to students and their families that helps them to develop achievable yet ambitious aspirations and understand how to realise them.

Ultimately students and their families need to feel that all upper secondary programmes will provide them with an education that is valued by the labour market and society, which goes far beyond the transition system itself. In Switzerland, unlike in many OECD countries, vocational programmes hold the same esteem as general programmes in society, and all vocational options lead to quality jobs and higher-level vocational studies across further and tertiary education. There is also significant flexibility in the system, which is underpinned by a philosophy that it is never too late to change tracks. The OECD Working Paper "The design of upper secondary systems: Managing choice, coherence and specialisation" explores some of these issues (Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]).

Box 6. Policy considerations when determining systems for upper secondary placement

Student preference to inform selection

- Providing students with supportive tools is essential to help them make informed decisions and develop their understanding of and capacity to use their own agency.
- Ensuring the accessibility of accurate and transparent information about programme choices and future pathways is key.
- Creating space for critical self-reflection before selection decisions are imminent allows students to better match their skills and interests with education programmes.

Academic information used to inform selection

- Academic information is a common and useful source of information about student preparedness for different upper secondary programmes. However, there are challenges in using it fairly and equitably.
- Using academic information to set minimum thresholds for upper secondary programmes can reduce the weight that academic information carries.
- Where examinations are important because of high demand for limited places, countries can make them optional and limit the range of subjects covered.
- Using multiple sources of academic information to guide selection can improve the accuracy and fairness of allocation processes, including relying on both examinations and classroom-based assessment results. For classroom-based assessments, teachers need support to improve their assessment literacy. Ensuring that classroom assessment reaches minimum levels of objectivity and reliability throughout the country is key.

Teachers' recommendations influence placement decisions

- Recommendations from teachers and schools create space to draw on a broad range of information about students, including their development, learning style and interests.
- Views of teachers and schools can be influenced by biases. Reliance on other sources of student information and clear criteria and guidance to help teachers and schools reach decisions and recommendations might help to create fairer, more objective decisions.

5. Placement into subjects, levels and specialisations within upper secondary programmes

Why is there further placement or orientation?

Many OECD countries give students some degree of choice, not only when it comes to the types of secondary programmes available, but also regarding subjects to follow and the types of specialisation they can pursue within these study programmes. Alongside

programme choice, this is one way to enable students to try out subjects and progressively define their interests and deepen their skills for further education and employment. Options to take different subjects and specialisation during upper secondary education respond to: 1) students' diverse needs and interests, especially in countries where there is little to no differentiation in upper secondary programmes; and 2) students' desire to develop increasing specialisation as they move through upper secondary education, helping them to define their future aspirations. Specialisation is particularly important in vocational programmes, where it enablers learners to develop skills specific to individual jobs or job families. Providing students with the choice to study certain subjects or study at greater depth in areas that interest them also has an impact on their motivation and engagement during upper secondary education. Research shows that being able to choose what subjects to follow helps to incentivise students. It allows them to direct their learning efforts towards topics of personal interest, with positive effects on their likelihood to progress into tertiary education and to continue in education in the long term (Smyth and Hannan, 2007[78]).

What are the different ways in which further placement or orientation occurs?

In most countries, once students have been selected into, or have chosen, an upper secondary programme, they are given the choice to select some of the subjects they want to follow and also, sometimes, the level at which they will pursue the subjects they choose. In vocational programmes, students almost always choose a specialisation. The stage in which these choices happen varies according to countries' upper secondary education structure and curriculum design. In general however, there are three non-exclusive ways in which further student placement and orientation can happen during upper secondary education:

- **Through specialisation:** In some countries, as students move through upper secondary education, they can choose to study a selection of subjects at greater depth, based on their interests and competencies. This can start right at the beginning of upper secondary education in countries such as Austria and Mexico, but in others, such as Italy, two years into the upper secondary cycle (Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]). Specialisation is a common feature of vocational programmes and is important for the development of job-specific or technical skills.
- **Through different levels of study:** Many OECD countries also allow students to choose the level they want to study the subjects within the general curriculum or within their specialisation focus. In Finland, for example, students can choose from basic and advanced mathematics, based on their knowledge (Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]). In the United States, based on academic performance and teachers' recommendations, students can follow higher-level honours classes which usually cover more content and are faster paced than corresponding non-honours courses (College Board, 2022[65]). Honours classes can help student get into the most prestigious tertiary institutions.
- **Through subject options:** Education systems can also offer students the chance to study optional courses or content of specific interest (Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]). Most countries give students some degree of choice over at least some of the subjects they study, but this differs across upper secondary systems. Systems with a high degree of programme differentiation (i.e. where students are separated into multiple [>3] programmes) tend to provide fewer subject choices, while systems with little differentiation at the programme level, tend to provide far greater scope for differentiation within programmes. For example, in comprehensive systems, such as those in Canada, New Zealand and the United States, students can choose to follow

vocational education and training (VET) courses as part of their upper secondary certification. In these countries, the availability and extent of choice offered to students often depends on the state, province or region or even the school students attend. Such a choice is usually linked to the desire of some students to bridge their studies with some form of post-secondary education, rather than directly enter the job market (Kuczera and Field, 2013[66]). Apart from the compulsory subjects then, students can also normally choose additional courses from those approved for credit, including vocational ones.

- **Through school-based or work-based options in vocational programmes:** A final possible level of differentiation in vocational programmes is between school-based or work-based and apprenticeship options. In many systems, these are separate vocational programmes (see Section 3), but in some systems, students make this choice within programmes. In the Netherlands, for example, the upper-secondary VET programme (MBO) offers two parallel learning pathways that lead to the same diploma: a predominantly school-based track and a work-based track. The school-based track consists of 20-60% of learning in the workplace, while the work-based track includes 60% or more learning in the workplace**Invalid source specified.** (Stronati and Kitchen, forthcoming[2]).

As discussed in Section 2, generally countries that provide more choice in the options, subjects and levels that students study within upper secondary programmes tend to provide fewer or no separate upper secondary programmes (although all vocational programmes provide students with a choice of specialisation) In countries where there is no selection into upper secondary programmes, the choices that students make within upper secondary programmes tend to carry high stakes for students' futures (similar to the high stakes associated with programme choices in countries with multiple programmes).

How are decisions regarding further placement or orientation made?

Overall, countries can be grouped as those where students' choice regarding their specialisation or level of study carries stakes for them (e.g. by determining what kind of tertiary education they can follow) and those where this choice carries limited to no official consequences in terms of further education opportunities for students. Comprehensive education systems, since they do not place students into different secondary programmes, are usually those where student certification is highly individualised based on students' choice of specialisations and subjects. In countries such as New Zealand and the United States, for example, such choices carry high stakes for students, as they can define what tertiary programmes they can access. In vocational programmes, specialisation choices have a direct impact on the types of jobs available after graduation (and sometimes also on the type of tertiary education options they can follow).

While student placement into upper secondary programmes tends to have clearly defined rules and procedures (see Section 4), there is little transparency or clarity around the mechanisms in place to allocate students or guide them in their decisions around further placement. There is also comparatively little data available on the choices that students make and how different types of student groups tend to combine and take different subjects. While this is a challenge for general upper secondary programmes, the challenge is even greater for vocational upper secondary programmes, where students may choose among hundreds of specialisations in some countries.

Comparative data and evidence

Procedures often vary widely across schools, and codified procedures for guiding choice or orienting students towards different options are rare

There is little information available at the national level about how students choose the specialisations they follow. In some countries, the processes seem to differ across schools. In the United States, for example, some schools use a placement test in order to select students into specific subjects or levels, while others do not. In most cases, it seems that the process is relatively informal, with teachers and students drawing on a combination of what is available at the school level in terms of subjects (this is a particular concern for vocational programmes where availability depends on having specialised equipment and teachers), student academic performance, teachers' guidance and students' future ambitions and aspirations.

The availability of options can shape students' choices

Specialisations and other options within general education programmes might not always be the same throughout different upper secondary schools. As institutions usually have some autonomy to develop part of their curricula, schools can, for example, put in place specialisations or subject levels based on students' interests and their needs. Moreover, schools' programme options can also vary within a country, depending on their capacity to develop and implement them (e.g. availability of specialised teachers). Therefore, it might be that some students, depending on the school where they study, might not have the same options as their peers enrolled in a different geographic location within the country. The United States is a good example of this scenario.

A similar situation can be seen within VET institutions, which by their nature, are even less likely to provide all the different specialisations, as they generally require dedicated equipment, and not all programmes are equally relevant in specific regions/localities. In some countries, some types of VET institutions focus on a particular sector or field. In Denmark, for example, out of 103 institutions, 89 of them are technical colleges, business colleges, agricultural colleges or combination colleges (with technical and business colleges representing the largest number of institutions), and 14 colleges offer social and health care training programs. Technical colleges usually cover topics such as technology, construction and transport, whereas combination colleges usually offer a variety of subjects, including those related to the hospitality sector, and business and administration.

Choice within VET programmes can also be constrained by some indication of labour market needs (e.g. past information on the availability of apprenticeship places and quotas defined through stakeholder consultation/ labour market intelligence).

Academic performance often informs decisions about the subjects, levels and specialisations within general upper secondary programmes

While students' academic performance might not be a specified criterion for determining the options and specialisations that students take within upper secondary programmes, in practice it often influences these decisions. Student performance might be measured or reflected in different ways in a system (e.g. through student grades or teacher recommendations). In the United States, for example, high school students have the option to follow "honours classes", which usually offer the same curriculum as regular classes but are meant for high-achieving students and cover some topics in greater depth. Taking these classes usually increases students' chances of being admitted to higher education (College Board, 2022[79]). Typically, in order to enrol, students need to show high levels of

performance in the subject they apply to, based on classroom-based assessments and teachers' recommendations. Students in the United States can also enrol in Advanced Placement courses, which prepare students for university education, allow them to earn college credit and/or qualify them for more advanced classes when entering university, as they are an important criterion for admission to tertiary education.

In most countries, there is no specific academic requirement to take certain subjects or specialisations, but teachers and schools will orient students to the options that they consider the best fit for their profile, often based on previous academic results. Students themselves will also likely choose to focus on subjects or study areas in which they have had good academic results. For example, in Ontario (Canada), students start making decisions about what subjects to choose from Grade 9 onwards. There is no pre-requirement to follow the more academic or applied courses. However, as students move to higher grades, their course options are influenced by their previous choices, and those choices affect students' post-secondary options (People for Education, 2017[81]). Similarly, in New Zealand, students are streamed from an early age in primary education into different groups within classes and later different classes based on their perceived ability, although there is currently a strong public debate to end this practice in the country (PPTA Te Wehengarua, 2022[82]; The Conversation, 2022[83]). Teachers' rely on their own perceptions of learners' potential ability and prior academic achievement for grouping students. In upper secondary education, this practice informs how students chose subjects for upper secondary certification. In New Zealand, students need to choose subjects at Level 3 in order to obtain an upper secondary diploma that provides access to tertiary education. Perceptions of students' academic ability, both from teachers and students, often influence the level at which students select upper secondary subjects.

There is often an association between student background and the options that students select within upper secondary programmes

While there is limited international data, national research suggests that disadvantaged students are often underrepresented in the most prestigious options. Research about the education system in the state of Virginia (United States), and more specifically about school social segregation, shows that: 1) economically disadvantaged students are four times less likely to follow advanced placement courses; 2) access to these courses is partly related to where students live and attend school; 3) racial/ethnic disparities are significant: and 4) only 15% of Black students in the state enrol in Advanced Placement courses,[5] compared to 50% of Asian students and 30% of White students (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2021[84]).

Similarly, in New Zealand, evidence suggests that, throughout schooling, ability grouping results in marginalised student cohorts especially among Māori[6] and Pacific learners, being disproportionately allocated to lower streams (Davy, 2021[85]; Ministry of Education, 2021[86]). There is evidence that teachers have lower expectations of Māori and Pacific learners than of Pākehā[7] and Asian students and that these expectations are influenced and informed by stream placement, reinforcing socially constructed patterns of achievement and underachievement (ibid). When it comes to upper secondary education, this results in Māori learners, as well as those from disadvantaged backgrounds, being more likely to be

[5] Advanced Placement (AP) is a programme created by the College Board in the United States that offers college-level curricula and examinations to high school students.

[6] Māori refers to indigenous New Zealander, aboriginal inhabitant, Indigenous person, native, Indigenous person of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

[7] Pākehā is generally a Māori-language term for New Zealanders primarily of European descent.

directed to lower streams/classes which lead to levels of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement that sometimes do not provide them with eligibility to access tertiary education (Davy, 2021[85]).

Students' perception of their own academic performance and skills also influences their field choices. In France, for example, students from both the general and vocational programmes (two of the three programmes available) follow one year of general courses after being able to choose their specialisation for the last two years of upper secondary education. Such choices are supposed to be made based on students' interests, knowledge and skills, and their career aspirations, and students are encouraged to talk to their teachers about their education plans. Although there is no official barrier to follow whatever specialisation students might want to choose, evidence shows that students very often base their choices on their academic performance and may feel discouraged by their results and even by their teachers from choosing certain specialisation pathways. Girls, for example, are underrepresented in most specialisations related to natural science subjects, especially mathematics and physics (Depp, 2021[87]). Research shows that girls describe their chances of success as much lower in natural sciences than in literary specialty courses (Régner and Huguet, 2011[88]). Such a scenario is linked to the fact that although they have the same academic capacity to succeed, girls have a tendency to underestimate their potential to succeed in the field of natural sciences. Indeed, a study carried out in the United States shows that beliefs about mathematics ability influence students' choices in upper secondary education. Boys hold a growth mind-set more often than girls and perceive their mathematics ability to be stronger than girls do, especially in 10th grade (Perez-Felkner and Nix, 2017[89]). Gendered divisions are also pronounced within VET and field choices (see Selection can contribute to inequitiesSelection can contribute to inequities) (Lappalainen, Mietola and Lahelma, 2013[90]; OECD, 2021[13]). Students' choices are highly influenced by social identities that are built around gender norms that tend to reinforce that boys naturally go into science while girls choose other pathways.

Another example is England (United Kingdom), where students have a lot of freedom to choose the A-Levels subjects they will follow for the last two years of upper secondary education. Evidence shows, however, that students are not always satisfied with their subject choices and are sometimes unaware of the classes they must take in order to receive the qualifications they want for entrance to higher education (Dilnot, 2016[91]). Research also shows that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be at a disadvantage and held back by their A-Level subject choices when applying for prestigious courses at leading universities (Dilnot, 2016[91]). Such a scenario is related to a lack of or very limited availability of student career guidance (UCAS, 2021[92]). In England, career guidance is organised at the school level, and quality can vary depending on several factors, including the level of school funding and teacher support.

Access to information can be unequal, but high-quality student guidance can have a positive effect on students' choices

As seen in Section 4, students do not always have equal access to information when making decisions about their upper secondary programmes, and those coming from less advantaged backgrounds with less educational support might make less-informed choices. This lack of access to information and information asymmetries based on student background are also prevalent when students are making decisions about their choices, subjects and specialisations within upper secondary programmes. A study carried out in Ireland highlights that the provision of student guidance is unequal among Irish schools, which can reinforce existing social inequalities (Smyth and Hannan, 2007[78]). Some schools in Ireland were found to have a historically stronger orientation to tertiary education, which

influences students' aspirations and choices (Smyth and Hannan, 2007[78]). In schools where students are more likely to pursue tertiary education, students have more time and guidance to select their upper secondary subjects, which impacts their pathways into and through tertiary education (ibid). The results from Ireland are consistent with findings in the United Kingdom and the United States, where some schools were found to provide more time for student guidance and to reinforce social inequities by providing greater access to information and guidance to students from more advantaged backgrounds (Smyth and Hannan, 2007[78]).

As when students are making decisions about selection into upper secondary education, when students are making decisions about subjects and options within upper secondary programmes, counselling and guidance needs to be responsive to students' individual needs and contexts and make sure it reaches them early in their education so they have enough time to critically reflect on their future (see Section 4). Students could benefit from accessing a range of information when making their decisions, including data on labour market outcomes. When thinking about what VET option to follow for example, it is helpful if students are able to explore the different VET careers and workplace environments in order to make an informed decision about their VET specialisation.

In Canada, for example, career preparation in many provinces is part of students' compulsory education. In Ontario, during secondary education, students need to follow guidance and career education from Grade 9 (last grade of lower secondary education) until Grade 12 (last grade of upper secondary education) (Queen's Printer for Ontario, n.d.[93]). Similar to guidance when entering into programmes, counsellors need to be trained and prepared to avoid biases and judgements when helping students make decisions on subject and specialisations options (see Section 4). At this transition stage, however, student guidance can play an even stronger role in supporting students to make informed decisions, because there is usually very limited information within countries on procedures regarding how choices or allocations into options or specialisations are made. In this scenario, students can find themselves in options which affect their eligibility for further education or job options. In England, for example, the choice of A-Level subjects is complex, with universities prioritising a combination of subjects depending on the student's choice of education field (Rodeiro, 2019[94]). However, such information is not always straightforward, and less advantaged students, for example, may not always receive the same level of advice as their better-off peers (ibid).

Policy considerations for making decisions about student placement or orientation into options and subjects within upper secondary programmes

While much of the discussion on fairness and equity in upper secondary placement has focused on selection into different programmes, it has so far largely missed the discussion on placement into different options and specialisations. There is a perception that more comprehensive systems are more equitable and fairer because there are not the disparities in student profile and outcome that are often visible in more stratified systems. However, to an extent this simply reflects the absence of international information. Comparable international data based on ISCED level classifications does not provide the information needed to understand how students are placed into different options within upper secondary programmes.

Where is it available, national data from more comprehensive systems also points to significant inequities and differences in outcomes across different subject and options within upper secondary education. This working paper puts forward some basic principles

that seem important to bear in mind when considering subject and option decisions within programmes.

Developing national guidance for decisions related to the options within upper secondary programmes

Few countries have specified procedures for allocating students within upper secondary programmes. Having flexible procedures gives students and teachers space to draw on different information and make personal decisions about what is best for individual students. But at the same time, the lack of clear, transparent criteria on practices guiding student allocation can also reinforce existing educational inequalities.

While there is likely no perfect system (as for programme decisions, see Section 4), transparent procedures help to ensure some fairness, as all students across all schools are judged consistently, and they provide the space to make both teachers and students aware of their own conscious and unconscious biases. Such a scenario would also create the space to draw on the research and findings from programme selection about what makes for an effective selection system (e.g. combining multiple sources of information and considering the risks of different sources of information and how they can be counterbalanced by other sources of information).

Ensuring that students have enough information and support when making decisions about their future placement

Just as students need support and guidance to choose a programme when entering upper secondary education, it is important they have equal support and guidance when making decisions involving subject choice and specialisation, as both scenarios can limit students' future education and job opportunities. As seen above, students coming from different backgrounds do not have the same access to information and education opportunities. Moreover, certain groups of students might be less likely to choose or be guided towards subject choices or classes that lead to more academically oriented pathways.

Having a transition system that takes these differences into account and provides students with individual guidance could ensure a fairer transition to upper secondary education. Analysis of country examples shows that there are wide variations regarding whether student guidance is offered or not and also in what format. However, research shows that if guidance is provided early on and systematically for all students, they are more likely to have the time and space to critically understand the consequences of the options that they choose.

Ensuring that students have the possibility of changing their choice of subject or specialisation

Giving students the possibility to change their minds and reassess their needs and interests related to their study choices can be a key characteristic of upper secondary education transition systems, especially if there are stakes attached to specialisation and subject choices. In France, for example, students have the duration of what is known as the "orientation consolidation period" which allows them to change specialisation (and even programme) between the beginning of the school year in September until around the end of October. These adjustments are limited to the correction of "obvious errors" of orientation towards the diploma, professional path or speciality and need to be supported by the teaching team (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, 2022[95]). In VET, when compared to general education, such flexibility might be even more important for students, as specialisation choices tend to directly influence students' future education

and career options (e.g. a student following an initial VET programme focused on mechanics will have a hard time entering the market for a technical health-related job).

Collecting more comparative data on selection procedures at this level

Nationally, and even more so internationally, it is important to have more information on student allocation and choice within upper secondary programmes to better understand the main implications of the mechanisms used to further place students in upper secondary education, especially concerning equity. Policy makers would benefit from learning about the main policies in place and their implications, not only for students, but also the education system as a whole. Comparative data would allow countries to rely on international examples of best practices and design their transition systems based on their own local contexts and needs.

Box 7. Policy considerations when managing selection within upper secondary programmes

- National guidance and transparent procedures around student allocation within upper secondary programmes, including clear selection criteria, could help countries ensure a higher level of fairness and consistency in this transition stage.
- The provision of early and systematic student guidance, especially guidance that considers inequalities within the system, can help students make informed decisions regarding subject and specialisation choices within upper secondary programmes.
- Flexibility in students' specialisation and subject-level choices can be especially important in education systems where such decisions can carry high stakes for students when continuing their studies.
- The availability of both national and international comparable data on student allocation within upper secondary programmes could help countries to understand potential issues around their transition systems and to design policies based on best practices and local needs.

6. Policy framework and further work

Towards a policy framework for student transitions

The policy framework in Table 5 summarises the findings of this working paper. The framework identifies three main stages of student transitions from lower into upper secondary education and the categories of country practices at each of these stages:

1. **Entry into upper secondary education**

   1. The policy discussion at this stage focuses on how countries set and verify standards for entrance to upper secondary education. Countries must balance the objectives of supporting universal progression into upper secondary education against ensuring that all students have a minimum level of basic skills necessary to succeed at the upper secondary level.

   2. Practices range between countries that set standards to countries that enable students to automatically progress into upper secondary education.

2. **Selection and orientation into upper secondary programmes**

   3. The policy discussion focuses on how countries select and orient students into different upper secondary programmes. The main challenge for systems here is to accurately match students with different programmes, based on an understanding of their interests, preparedness for learning and ambitions for the future. To do this, countries typically use a combination of academic information about students and students' own views to inform these decisions.

   4. The way information is used is as important as the information itself. Using academic information to set thresholds for eligibility for programmes, rather than competitively ranking students to assign places, might be associated with less student stress and avoid amplifying educational inequities in the system. More broadly, selection and orientation practices play a role in perceptions of upper secondary programmes, and systems that automatically direct lower-performing students to vocational programmes are likely to reinforce perceptions of lower prestige. More comprehensive selection systems, based on a range of information about individual students, with selection decisions reflecting individual students and their circumstances, can help to mitigate this risk. However, transition systems need to be complemented by a range of high-quality upper secondary programmes that provide a genuine pathway into valued employment and further education options.

   5. This policy discussion does not apply to the minority of OECD countries where students do not have a choice of upper secondary programmes and remain in a comprehensive programme for the duration of upper secondary education.

3. **Selection and orientation into subjects, levels and specialisations**

   6. Similar to selection and orientation across upper secondary programmes, the policy discussion here focuses on how to select and orient students to subjects, levels and specialisation within upper secondary programmes that best respond to their interests and ambitions. A key difference

Table 5. Policy framework for managing student transitions into upper secondary education

Transition stages	Policy objectives	Country practices	Country examples	Opportunities	Risks	Mitigation strategies
1. Entry into upper secondary education	• Encourage high transition rates • Identify and support struggling students • Set standards to guide learning in lower secondary education	Set requirements for entry and use academic information to check	31 countries, including Colombia, France, Italy, Japan, Lithuania and the Netherlands	Ensures that all students have necessary skills before entering upper secondary	Repetition and low transition rates	Repetition is only used in exceptional cases and determined on individual basis
		Promote all students automatically	9 countries, including Iceland, Ireland, Norway and UK systems	Supports universal transition	Students transition with gaps in knowledge	Use academic information to identify struggling students and put in place additional support during upper secondary
2. Orientation into upper secondary programmers	• Respond to diversity in student interests • Match students, their aspirations and skills with education programmes	Use academic information to place students	33 countries, including the Czech Republic, Denmark, Korea, Norway and Poland	Ensures students have the academic prerequisites for programmes	Creation of "two-tier" system Amplification of existing inequities in education system High stress for students	Use academic information to set thresholds, not competitively select Limit examinations to a few subjects, make them optional
		Use teacher recommendations to place students	5 countries, including France and Switzerland	Teachers have more rounded picture of student achievement and interests	Teacher recommendations are subjective and vary across individuals	Provide national guidance to teachers for making recommendations
		Give students choice for placement	All OECD countries, to varying extent	Builds student agency and makes students active participants in their future	Students lack accurate and relevant information about future pathways	Student guidance begins early and is given sufficient time Information is accessible and up to date
3. Selection and orientation into subjects, levels and specialisations	• Respond to diversity in student interests, knowledge and skills • Provide choice for students in comprehensive programmes • Provide direct pathways into diverse jobs/alignment with labour market needs	Give students options for subject selection and different specialisation possibilities	Almost all OECD countries, to varying extent, depending on the structure of their education systems	Allows students to define their future aspirations Makes students active participants in their future	Students lack accurate and relevant information about future pathways Certain choices can prevent students from continuing on pathways of another focus	Encourage greater transparency on how decisions should be made, guidance Student guidance on options and how they link to future pathways

7. for policies at this point of selection is that decisions are often less transparent and there is no internationally comparative data. The lack of codified procedures provides teachers and students with space to draw on different sources of information and respond to student interests in a personalised way. However, countries' national data suggests that there are inequities in the choices that students make (or are guided to), and many students (and sometimes their families) are unaware of the consequences of certain choices. Students can unknowingly end up in options that will not enable them to access tertiary education or certain programmes or institutions.

8. This policy discussion is particularly relevant for comprehensive systems where students remain in the same programme during upper secondary and choice is provided through different subjects, levels and specialisations within upper secondary programmes themselves.

As well as highlighting the main categories of country practice and where different countries are situated across these categories, the policy framework sets out the key policy implications related to specific transition policies and practices. The framework provides a guide for countries to situate their systems in an international comparative perspective and insights on how different systems internationally tackle shared challenges and manage competing policy objectives.

Further work

This working paper has identified a number of gaps in current comparative data, information and analysis about how students' transitions into upper secondary education internationally that might addressed in future work. These topics include:

1. **Data about student transitions into upper secondary education**

This working paper has brought together data about student enrolment at the moment of transition into upper secondary education. The figures presented in this paper could be further developed and refined by working with countries to ensure that transition ages are accurate and exploring how to account for and represent systems where transition ages are flexible or differ across programmes to better understand why some students in some systems do not transition at the expected time.

In countries where enrolment rates in education appear to fall at the time of transition, discussions with countries could help to understand if these students are enrolling elsewhere, are leaving education or later return to the system.

2. **Better understanding the diversity of upper secondary programmes and how students are selected or oriented towards them**

This working paper has brought together some national information about how students' choices within upper secondary programmes are made. An important insight is that while systems where students are stratified across programmes are often presented in the literature as being less equitable in terms of access and outcomes, systems where students are stratified within programmes may have similar inequities, although this is not visible in international data.

The OECD Working Paper "The design of upper secondary systems: Managing choice, coherence and specialisation" has suggested further work to understand the range of subjects, levels and specialisations that are available to students within general and

vocational upper secondary programmes in order to better reflect the wide variations in programmes that are masked by the ISCED international classifications. This work could be complemented by further analysis to understand how decisions about choices and specialisations are made within programmes, especially in vocational upper secondary education, which are not addressed by this paper.

3. Managing diverse levels of student preparedness for upper secondary education

A recurrent theme for countries is how to effectively meet the needs of students who transition into upper secondary education with low levels of preparedness for the more complex content at this level. Data from PISA shows that all countries have some students who are transitioning into upper secondary education without basic competence in mathematics and reading (Level 2), ranging from 50% in Colombia to around 23% of students on average across the OECD (PISA 2018). Work could review country practices and literature to establish a range of policy tools that countries could draw on to ensure that upper secondary is an effective phase for enabling students to develop the foundational knowledge and personal understanding of where and how they thrive that will set them on a path of lifelong learning.

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