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OECD Skills Summit 2026 Issues Paper

Unlocking Talent Across Generations

27-28 April 2026, Istanbul, Türkiye

The Republic of Türkiye (hereafter "Türkiye") will be hosting the OECD Skills Summit 2026 on the 27-28 April, in Istanbul, on the topic of "Unlocking Talent Across Generations".

This issues paper provides ministers and senior officials with a synthesis of the OECD's analysis on the Summit topic and proposes questions for discussion to help frame interventions and guide discussions at the Summit.

The issues paper covers the three Sessions on Day 2 of the Summit: i) Rethinking formal education – Recalibrating strategies for a lifetime of opportunities; ii) Harnessing adults' skills – Empowering workers across generations; iii) Tapping into hidden talent – Leveraging the potential of overlooked groups.

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Table of contents

FIGURES

1 Executive summary

1. “Unlocking talent across generations” means developing and using people’s skills to their potential at all stages of life. This is critical as countries navigate demographic shifts, as well as the digital and green transitions.

2. Demographic shifts pose major challenges for economic prosperity. Population ageing means working-age populations are shrinking in almost all OECD Member countries. Sustaining material living standards will require more people to work and to lead longer and more productive working lives. In some economies working-age populations are growing, which provides significant opportunities for prosperity, but major challenges for employment, especially among youth. Regular migration through authorised channels is helping to sustain working-age populations in the OECD, but even if net migration levels were to exceed historic levels in the future, it would still not be sufficient to offset the effects of population ageing.

3. Beyond demographic shifts, the digital and green transitions are transforming economies and societies, creating new avenues for productivity and sustainability, yet also posing uneven challenges across different age groups. Rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) – a key driver of the digital transition – have the potential to boost productivity growth, support job creation, and foster more inclusive labour markets, but also pose risks of job displacement and widening inequalities. Similarly, the transition to a more sustainable economy is expected to create new employment opportunities, while also resulting in job losses in some sectors. Older adults – who are more concentrated in shrinking high-emission jobs, less mobile and less engaged in advanced digital use and training – face distinct risks from these transitions.

4. These megatrends are creating challenges for skills policies by altering both the demand for and supply of skills. For example, the demographic shift is contributing to ageing teacher and trainer workforces as well as longer working lives, increasing the need for continuous upskilling and retention strategies. AI is transforming teaching, learning processes, and the nature of job tasks requiring both educators and workers to acquire new digital and cognitive skills. The green transition is shaping learning environments, transforming certain occupations and generating demand for new competencies related to sustainability.

5. Skills policies are not only challenged by these megatrends – they are also essential to addressing them. For individuals, higher skill levels help extend productive working lives as populations age, enable smoother job transitions, and open access to more stable or better-paid jobs in the context of the digital and green transitions. For countries, a more skilled workforce alleviates labour shortages, lifts productivity and innovation, accelerates digitalisation and decarbonisation, and strengthens fiscal sustainability and social cohesion. Equipping young people with a strong and diverse foundation of skills prepares them for work, life and continuous learning. Providing adults with opportunities to upskill and reskill, and to remain healthy and engaged in meaningful work, enables longer and more productive working lives. Finally, providing equal opportunities to learn and work for all groups in society enables countries to tap into hidden talent to support shared prosperity. Effective assessment and anticipation of skills needs and co-operation between government and stakeholders can facilitate progress across these areas.

6. In response to these shared challenges, the Republic of Türkiye (hereafter ‘Türkiye’) will host the OECD Skills Summit 2026 under the theme of “*Unlocking Talent Across Generations*”. The Summit will provide a platform for ministers and senior officials from diverse countries, portfolios (education, labour

market, economy, innovation, migration and others) and international organisations to have candid and open exchanges, address critical questions, and share concrete examples of skills policies.

7. This Issues paper provides ministers and senior officials with a synthesis of the OECD's analysis of the Summit theme, designed to frame their interventions and guide discussions. It covers each of the three topical sessions of the Summit – rethinking formal education, harnessing adults' skills and tapping into hidden talent. For each session, the paper sets out the importance of the topic, describes how countries are performing, provides an overview of countries' policy initiatives, and proposes discussion questions for participants.

Session 1: Rethinking formal education – Recalibrating strategies for a lifetime of opportunities

8. Young people need to develop a strong and diverse foundation of skills that enables them to adapt and learn across their lives. Formal education (pre-school, school, vocational and higher education) is critical for providing this foundation, even as the demographic shift, and the digital and green transitions, transform the skills individuals need for success in work and life.

9. Many students leave formal education without a strong foundation of skills for productive work and lifelong learning. Student performance in literacy, mathematics and science has been declining in many countries. Many young people leave formal education without strong digital skills, environmental competencies or positive learning attitudes. For example, the share of 15-year-old students who say that they love learning new things in school ranges from 26% in Poland to 85% in Peru. Teacher and trainer workforces are ageing and experiencing shortages in many countries, especially in vocational education and training (VET). Declining fertility is contributing to under-utilised educational infrastructure and rising per student costs, especially in rural areas.

10. These challenges require policymakers to rethink what and how students learn and are taught in formal education. Countries are taking policy action in several areas to rethink and recalibrate formal education for a lifetime of opportunities:

- **Reforming curricula**: What students learn must adapt as megatrends affect the skills needed for work and life. Many systems are modernising curricula to help students develop the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes needed in a changing world. Transversal skills such as critical thinking, creativity and social skills are increasingly prioritised alongside digital and green competences, often embedded across subjects. Countries are encouraging vocational and higher education providers and students to build skills in high labour-market demand through better career guidance, employer involvement in programme design and assessment, and regulatory and funding arrangements.
- **Strengthening teaching and training**: Skilled teachers and trainers in general and vocational education are critical for preparing young people for a lifetime of opportunities. Countries are making teaching more accessible and attractive, for example by reducing barriers, supporting re-entry of departed teachers, addressing targeted shortages, enhancing career structures, reviewing salaries and incentives, developing campaigns and offering alternative pathways into the profession. They are investing in more targeted continuing professional development (CPD), through needs-based diagnostics, financial incentives and mentoring, and specialised courses on technological and AI use. At the same time, countries are putting safeguards in place, such as France's 2024 digital law limiting AI in schools to pedagogical purposes.
- **Reallocating educational investments and infrastructure**: As student numbers fall and demand for adult learning grows, countries are rethinking their educational investments and infrastructure. Some systems are repurposing school buildings for VET and adult learning, and several are

consolidating small or under-used schools into larger, better-equipped clusters, with evidence suggesting this can maintain or even improve student outcomes. At the same time, countries are increasingly digitalising infrastructure – using sensors, AI and research labs (e.g. NOLAI, TüCeDE, GRAILE) and classroom initiatives like Spain's "Classrooms of the Future" – to optimise resource use and integrate advanced technologies such as virtual reality into teaching.

Session 2: Harnessing adults' skills – Empowering workers across generations

11. Harnessing the skills of adults across generations empowers workers at all life stages to have longer and more productive working lives in the face of ongoing megatrends.

12. Globally, adults' skill levels, engagement in learning and participation in the labour market remain areas of concern, especially for older adults. In most countries, a large share of adults has low levels of information-processing skills, and this share increases with age. Average skill levels among adults have declined in several countries over the past decade. Yet, across OECD countries, less than half of adults participate in education or training in a given year, with participation rates lowest among low-skilled and older adults. In some countries, adult learning participation is even declining. Many adults report lacking the motivation, time or financial resources to engage in learning.

13. These challenges require policymakers to ensure that all adults have access to relevant upskilling and reskilling opportunities, while also supporting older workers by promoting good health and providing the resources and working conditions they need, to remain meaningfully employed. Countries are taking policy action in several areas to harness the skills of adults at all life stages:

- **Making adult learning more accessible and relevant**: Education and training must be flexible, relevant and affordable for adults. An increasing number of countries are promoting modular programmes, micro-credentials and recognition of prior learning, in order to reduce the time required to complete learning. VET systems are becoming more flexible through modularisation and prior-learning recognition, as seen in Denmark's adult VET tracks. Many countries are also lowering financial barriers – through subsidies, learning accounts and dedicated funds in places like the Netherlands and Poland, or free TAFE (Technical and Further Education) in Australia. Policymakers and providers often partner with employers to ensure training remains closely aligned with labour-market needs.
- **Providing career guidance**: Countries are strengthening career guidance by combining accessible digital tools with targeted support for mid-career and older workers. Many now offer online career planners, interactive skills-matching tests, and AI-powered services – such as those in Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Brazil and Türkiye – to help adults navigate job and training options, while maintaining in-person counselling for those who need it most. Regular skills-assessment and anticipation exercises, such as Norway's Committee on Skill Needs, enrich career guidance and adult learning policy design.
- **Supporting older workers' employment and engagement**: Older adults need support and opportunities to remain meaningfully employed and engaged in their communities. In addition to promoting adult learning, more countries are boosting older workers' employment by promoting age-friendly workplaces, offering financial and reskilling incentives, and encouraging skills-based, age-inclusive hiring. Examples include Norway's senior-friendly workplace framework, Poland's wage subsidies, Japan and Korea's re-employment practices, and the growing use of AI tools in France, Germany and the United Kingdom to support fairer recruitment and retention.

Session 3: Tapping into hidden talent – Leveraging the potential of overlooked groups

14. Fostering and tapping into everyone's talent by unlocking the potential of all groups is not only justified on equity grounds, but is also essential for bolstering countries' labour forces and economic prosperity.

15. In many countries, certain groups have fewer opportunities to develop their talents in the first place. Disadvantaged students in OECD countries are on average seven times more likely than advantaged students to fail to achieve basic mathematics proficiency. Foreign-born individuals often have lower information-processing skill levels than the native born in OECD countries, partly reflecting lower proficiency in the local language and differences in their prior educational experiences.

16. The share of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) has decreased in many countries, but still represents a significant loss of potential talent. The youth NEET rate still exceeds 15% in Colombia, Costa Rica, Greece, Italy, Korea, Lithuania, Mexico, Spain and Türkiye, and is even higher in some non-Member countries. Youth with lower levels of education are up to three times more likely to become NEET than their peers with higher education.

17. In addition to older adults (see Issue 2), women and migrants are often under-represented in employment – a missed opportunity to bolster working-age populations. Across all OECD countries, progress has been made in promoting employment opportunities for women. Yet women continue to face disadvantages relative to men, including lower pay, reduced working hours and a disproportionate share of unpaid responsibilities such as caregiving. Older women in particular have much lower employment rates than men. While the employment rate gap between native- and foreign-born adults has stabilised, it remains high in several countries.

18. Addressing these challenges requires policymakers to provide support for learning for all who need it, and to ensure equal opportunities for work for all groups of adults. Countries are taking policy action in several areas to tap into hidden talent:

- **Supporting disadvantaged students in education:** Countries are working to reduce socio-economic disadvantage in schooling by expanding access to quality early childhood education, directing extra resources to disadvantaged schools, and investing in tutoring and small-group support. They also provide flexible learning pathways (Mexico), AI-enabled tutoring tools (United States), large-scale digital access initiatives (Argentina) and targeted counselling and career learning (Ireland). At the same time, many governments are improving education for children with a migrant background through expanded early childhood access, integrated language support, and specialised teacher training.
- **Targeting support to youth NEET**: Young people not in employment, education or training need accessible second chances in learning, as well as pathways into employment. Countries are addressing youth NEET by preventing early school leaving and providing flexible learning options (e.g. Türkiye's open high schools). They also offer coaching, career counselling and targeted financial support for job searches. AI tools are increasingly used to identify those most in need of support and to guide young people into work.
- **Mobilising women and migrants to work**: Women and migrants need equal opportunities to work. To promote employment opportunities for women, countries have guaranteed equal pay, encouraged women's success in entrepreneurship and decision-making positions, and promoted gender-and family-friendly policies within firms, while expanding access to quality, affordable childcare and elderly care. To promote employment opportunities for migrants, countries provide language training, recognition of foreign qualifications and prior learning, and support for immigrants to enter vocational education and training (e.g. Türkiye's "INSURE" programme).

2 OECD Skills Summit 2026: "Unlocking Talent Across Generations"

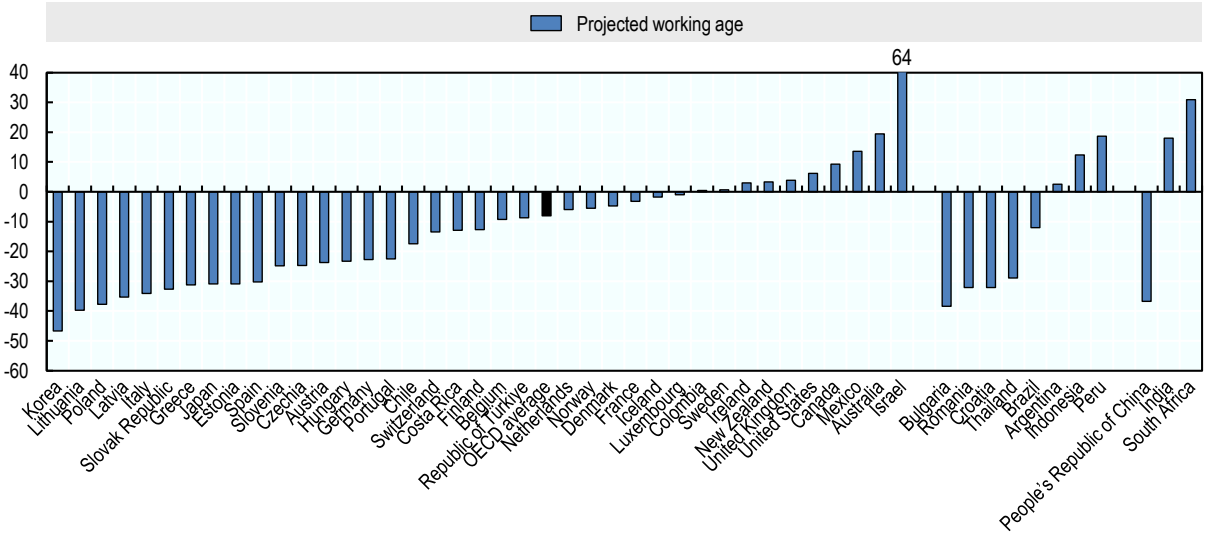
Context

19. Developing and using people's skills to their full potential at all stages of life is becoming more urgent, in light of demographic shifts and the digital and green transitions.

20. The supply of skilled workers is shrinking. The year 2025 marked a turning point in the OECD, as the working age population (traditionally defined as 20 to 64 years old) ceased to grow and began to decline. This reflects declining fertility rates over many decades and the retirement of workers from the baby-boomer generation. Overall, the working-age population in the OECD area is projected to decline by 8% between 2023 and 2060 (Figure 2.1). The workforce will shrink not only in most of Europe but also in many Asian economies – notably Japan and Korea, where it is projected to decline by 31% and 47% respectively (OECD, 2025[1]).

Figure 2.1. Projected working age (2023-2060)

Projected percentage change in the working age population (aged 20-64 years), 2023-60



Note: The medium scenario of the population projections is used. OECD: Weighted average of OECD countries.
Source: OECD (2025[1]), *OECD Employment Outlook 2025: Can We Get Through the Demographic Crunch?*, https://doi.org/10.1787/194a947b-en.

21. Young and migrant workers can offset the skills shortages – but only to a limited extent. Some countries like Egypt, India, Indonesia, Israel and South Africa maintain population growth due to higher fertility rates (World Bank, 2023[2]). While these countries can benefit from the demographic dividend, they often have relatively high and growing rates of youth NEET – exceeding 30% in South Africa, and 20% in Egypt, India, and Indonesia (World Bank Group, 2023[3]).

22. Other countries – including Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand – seek to attract, integrate and retain skilled migrants as a way to offset lower fertility rates. Labour migration (permanent-type migration for work) to the OECD area reached a record level in 2022 and 2023, with about 1.2 million entrants (OECD, 2024[4]). While migrants arriving through authorised channels are helping to sustain working-age populations in the OECD, net migration would need to exceed historical levels to deliver even modest improvements in dependency ratios and GDP per capita in the years ahead (OECD, 2025[1]).

23. The challenges of demographic shifts are compounded by the digital and green transitions, with differing effects across age groups.

24. The digital revolution, especially rapid advances in AI, is disrupting the development and use of skills. AI is outpacing humans in key information-processing skills, and experts predict that AI will correctly answer the entire literacy and numeracy assessments of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) by 2026 (OECD, 2023[5]). AI is reshaping which skills individuals need to develop for labour market success – increasing the need for management, business, and digital skills, while reducing demand for some routine cognitive and clerical tasks (Green, 2024[6]). The impact of the digital revolution and AI on workers depends on several factors, including workers' occupation, level of education and age. Young people face potential competition from AI for entry level jobs, while older workers seem less well placed to utilise AI tools at work. Older workers (55-65) are less likely than younger workers (25–54) in the same occupation to use advanced Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) skills. For example, the age gap in using specialised software within the same occupation ranges from 5% in Norway to 37% in Korea (OECD, 2025[1]). Research into the skills and employment impacts of AI should be treated with caution and regularly updated, however, as the technology is progressing so rapidly.

25. Climate change and the green transition are compounding skills challenges. Children born in 2020 will face nearly seven times more heatwaves and twice as many wildfires over their lifetimes compared to those born in 1960 (Global Commission on Adaptation, 2019[7]). Climate-related impacts such as extreme heat, air pollution and climate disasters are already impairing cognition, increasing absenteeism, closing schools and lowering achievement in some regions. At the same time, only about one-third (31%) of 15-year-olds in OECD countries achieve foundational levels of "environmental sustainability competence" (OECD, 2023[8]).[1] The green transition is reshaping labour markets. On average in OECD countries, more than 25% of existing jobs will be strongly affected by net-zero policies, in both positive and negative ways, including many professions beyond the energy sector. Older workers (55+) are more likely to work in occupations concentrated in high-emission sectors, placing them at higher risk of job displacement (OECD, 2024[9]).

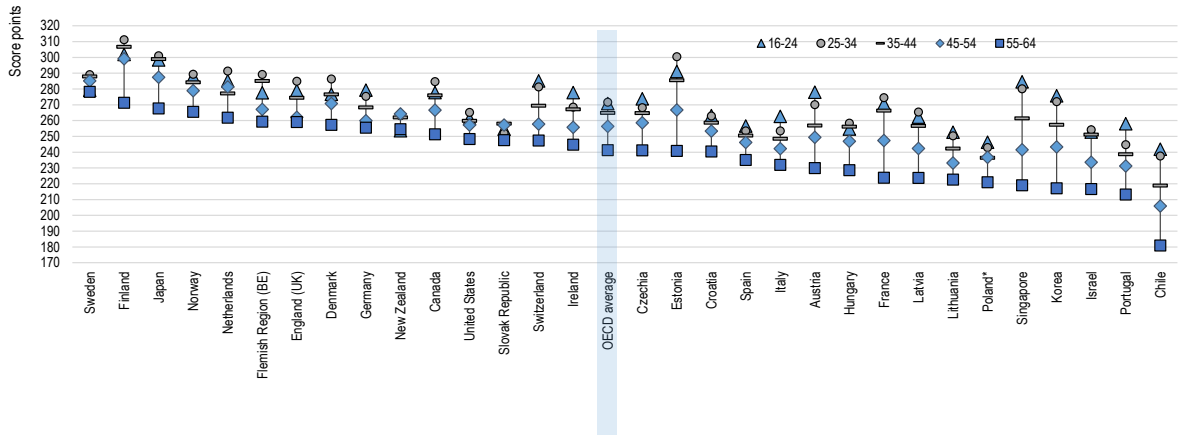
26. Developing and using people's skills to their potential across the life course is critical in response to these megatrends. Adults with higher levels of skills report higher levels of health and life satisfaction, political efficacy, trust and volunteering. High-skilled workers and those whose skills are closely matched to the requirements of their jobs earn relatively more (OECD, 2024[10]). Moreover, strengthening skills across the population contributes not only to individual outcomes but also broader economic performance,

[1] Achieve at least a foundational level of science proficiency; have an awareness of climate change and global warming; care for the environment; have environmental self-efficacy; and are engaged in behaviour to promote environmental sustainability.

as higher employment – particularly among older adults, women and migrants – can generate substantial gains in GDP per capita (OECD, 2025[1]).

27. However, many adults – particularly older ones – have low levels of skills. On average, nearly one in five adults are low performers in all three skills assessed in the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills - literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving. In many countries, adults' average literacy and numeracy skills have declined over the past decade. Skills typically decline with age, with adults aged 55-64 having the lowest literacy skills of all age groups in almost all assessed countries (see Figure 2.2). As a result, older adults are often less able to access and navigate new technologies or adapt to changing skills demands, increasing their risk of unemployment or inactivity.

Figure 2.2. Average proficiency in literacy, by age



Note: Adults aged 16-65; includes adults who were only administered the doorstep interview due to a language barrier.
*Caution is required in interpreting results due to the high share of respondents with unusual response patterns. See the Note for Poland in the Reader's Guide.
Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the average proficiency among 55-64 year-olds.
Source: OECD (2024[10]), *Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World? Survey of Adult Skills 2023*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b263dc5d-en.

28. Employment rates have reached record highs in many countries, reflecting progress in better using people's skills, yet challenges remain. The average employment rate in the OECD reached 72.1% in Q1 2025, in part as more women, older adults and migrants work. However, employment growth continues to decelerate, and jobs are now going unfilled even as people are losing work and wages barely keep up with inflation. While employment rates have increased for prime aged and older individuals, they have not improved for young adults. Furthermore, employment rates decline sharply after age 60, with large differences between countries. In 2024, employment rates for those aged 60-64 ranged from below 21% in Luxembourg to more than 84% in Iceland and Japan (OECD, 2025[1]).

29. Unlocking talent across generations can help countries confront these challenges. First, equipping young people with a strong and diverse foundation of skills prepares them for work, life and continuous learning (section 3). Second, providing adults with opportunities to upskill and reskill, and to remain healthy and engaged in meaningful work, enables longer and more productive working lives (section 4). Third, providing equal opportunities to learn and work for all groups in society enables countries to harness hidden talent to support shared prosperity (section 5). The remainder of the paper discusses these issues in turn.

3 Issue 1: Rethinking Formal Education – Recalibrating Strategies for a Lifetime of Opportunities

Summary

- Young people need to develop a strong and diverse foundation of skills that enables them to adapt and learn across their lives. Formal education (pre-school, school, vocational and higher education) is critical for providing this foundation, even as the demographic shift and the digital and green transitions transform the skills individuals need for success in work and life.
- Many students leave formal education without a strong foundation of skills for productive work and lifelong learning. Student performance in literacy, mathematics and science has been declining in many countries. Many young people also lack positive learning attitudes. For example, the share of 15-year-old students who say that they love learning new things in school ranges from 26% in Poland to 85% in Peru. Teacher and trainer workforces are ageing and experiencing shortages in many countries, especially in VET. Declining fertility is contributing to under-utilised educational infrastructure and rising per student costs, especially in rural areas.
- These challenges require policymakers to rethink what and how students learn and are taught in formal education. Countries are taking policy action in several areas to rethink and recalibrate formal education for a lifetime of opportunities:
  - **Reforming curricula**: What students learn must adapt as megatrends affect the skills needed for work and life. Many systems are modernising curricula to help students develop the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes needed in a changing world. Transversal skills such as critical thinking, creativity and social skills are increasingly prioritised alongside digital and green competences, often embedded across subjects. Countries are encouraging vocational and higher education providers and students to build skills in high labour-market demand through better career guidance, employer involvement in programme design and assessment, and regulatory and funding arrangements.
  - **Strengthening teaching and training**: Skilled teachers and trainers in general and vocational education are critical for preparing young people for a lifetime of opportunities. Countries are making teaching more accessible and attractive, for example by reducing barriers, supporting re-entry of departed teachers, addressing targeted shortages, enhancing career structures, reviewing salaries and incentives, developing campaigns and offering alternative pathways into the profession. Countries are investing in more targeted

CPD, combining needs-based diagnostics, financial incentives and mentoring, and programmes that train teachers in technological and AI use. At the same time, countries are putting safeguards in place, such as France's 2024 digital law limiting AI in schools to pedagogical purposes.

- **Reallocating educational investments and infrastructure**: As student numbers fall and demand for adult learning grows, countries are rethinking their educational investments and infrastructure. Some systems are repurposing school buildings for VET and adult learning, while several are consolidating small or under-used schools into larger, better-equipped clusters. At the same time, countries are increasingly digitalising infrastructure – using sensors, AI and research labs and classroom initiatives like Spain's "Classrooms of the Future" to optimise resource use and integrate advanced technologies into teaching.

Introduction

30. Young people need to develop a strong and diverse foundation of skills that enables them to adapt and learn across their lives, amidst the demographic shift, and digital and green transitions. Formal education is critical for providing this foundation. Individuals with higher level qualifications from formal education have higher levels of skills, on average. For example, the literacy score of tertiary educated adults is 60 points higher than for low-educated adults (with below upper secondary education) on average across PIAAC countries, even after controlling for other differences between these adults (OECD, 2024[10]). Artificial intelligence could transform formal education in many ways, by giving students greater ownership over what and how they learn, and by changing how teachers teach and assess students.

Performance

31. Countries' performance in equipping young people in formal education with a strong and diverse foundation of skills is diverse.

Students

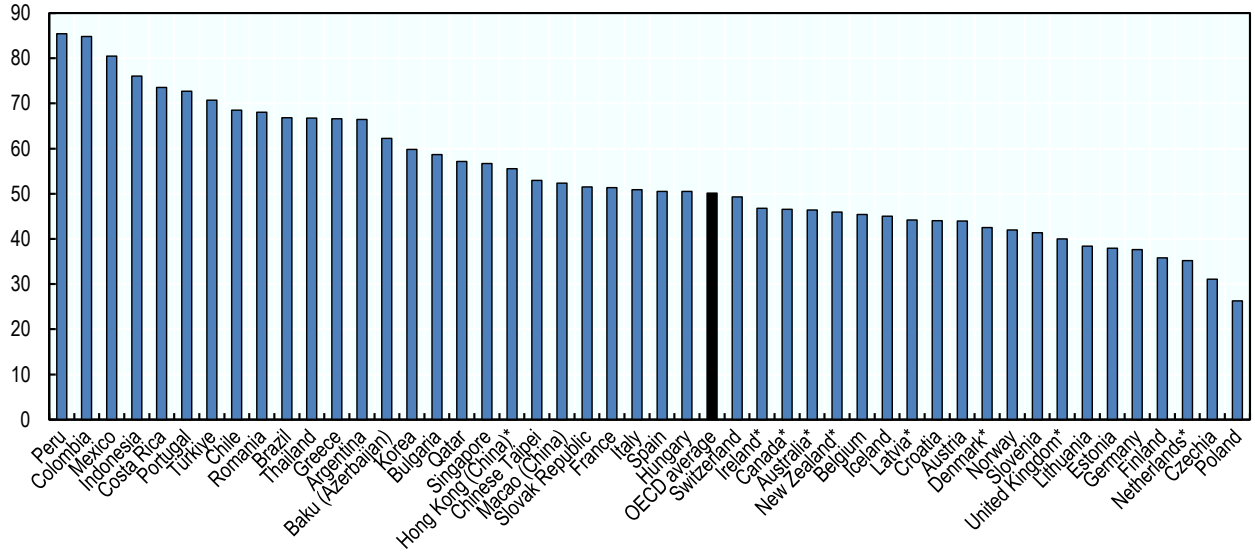
32. Student performance varies widely across countries and has declined in recent years in most of them. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, the highest performers were Hong Kong [China], Japan, Korea, Macau [China], Singapore and Chinese Taipei in mathematics, the same six East Asian countries/economies plus Canada and Estonia in science, and Singapore, Ireland, Estonia, Japan, Korea and Chinese Taipei in reading. There are large gaps in performance between the highest- and lowest-performing countries, particularly when including non-OECD-Member countries. Internationally, the average scores of 15-year-olds in science and reading have fallen over the past decade, while mathematics experienced a particularly sharp drop between 2018 and 2022 (OECD, 2024[11]). Still, some countries – such as Japan and Korea – have managed to sustain or improve their performance, in part by ensuring accessible remote learning (e.g. better access to devices/connectivity) during the pandemic (OECD, 2024[11]).

33. Adult learners are shaped from an early age. Formal education can equip young people not only with the skills, but also with the attitudes and dispositions needed to engage with lifelong learning. Lifelong learning attitudes are strongly associated with better reading, science and mathematics achievement. Critical thinking, curiosity, motivation and willingness to learn are key enablers for lifelong learning (Candy, 1991[12]; Cropley and Knapper, 2000[13]). Yet, fewer than 60% of OECD students use critical-thinking

strategies[2] regularly when forming their own opinions (OECD, 2024[11]). There is much variation within and across countries on measures of learning attitudes. For example, the share of 15-year-old students who say that they love learning new things in school ranges from 26% in Poland to 85% in Peru, see Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1. Students' intrinsic motivation

% of students reporting that they agree or strongly agree that they love learning new things in school



Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4). Countries and economies are ranked in descending order. PISA 2022 Database does not include data for Israel, Japan, Sweden and United States for this variable.
Source: Table V.2. Snapshot of motivations and growth mindset in OECD (2024[11]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume V): Learning Strategies and Attitudes for Life*, https://doi.org/10.1787/c2e44201-en.

34. Students face unequal digital access and possess varying levels of digital literacy. Most students in OECD countries have high digital access – with 96% of 15-year-olds having access to a desktop computer, laptop, or tablet at home. However, there are significant disparities in computer and information literacy (CIL) levels across countries. In Greece and Romania, over half of 14-year-old students have low digital literacy levels (below CIL Level 2) and struggle with basic tasks such as navigating to a plain-text URL, whereas digital literacy is highest in Belgium (Flanders), Czech Republic (hereafter "Czechia"), Denmark and Korea (IEA, 2025[14]). At the same time, fewer than half of the students interviewed for PISA can easily determine whether online information is credible and of good quality (OECD, 2024[11]).

35. Vocational students face particular challenges and opportunities. Compared to peers in general education, vocational students often score lower in PISA, repeat grades more often, and have weaker digital problem-solving skills. In PISA 2018 Ireland, France, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Netherlands and Romania had the largest differences in reading outcomes between students in general and vocational programmes (European Commission, 2019[15]). This partly reflects that students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to 'self-select' into VET. Yet, vocational students often better understand how their studies relate to future jobs, show stronger interest in future careers, and exhibit greater motivation to learn (OECD, 2024[11]). Vocational graduates typically find employment more easily

[2] Students' ability to view issues from different angles and belief that there is more than one correct position in a disagreement.

than other graduates initially, but this advantage tends to diminish over time (Hampf and Woessmann, 2017[16]). Moreover, VET graduates typically earn less than tertiary graduates[3]. While the wage difference is small in Denmark, Iceland and Norway (~90% of tertiary wages) it is large in Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal and Romania (~60% of tertiary wages) (Vandeweyer and Verhagen, 2020[17]).

36. Educational infrastructure and investments need to be rethought in the context of the demographic shift, especially in rural areas. Individuals who grew up in cities generally have higher literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem-solving skills, with these gaps being largely explained by differences in socio-economic background (OECD, 2025[18]). Rural schools often lag behind in certain resources, including science-specific resources, and computer and Internet access (Echazarra and Radinger, 2019[19]). At the same time, low fertility is leading to shrinking student numbers, contributing to rising per-student costs and under-utilisation of school facilities, particularly in rural areas. For example, across OECD countries, annual per-student costs in sparsely populated rural areas are 20% higher in primary schools and 11% higher in secondary schools compared with urban areas (OECD, 2025[20]), and rural schools are at higher risk of closure (OECD, 2022[21]).

Teachers and trainers

37. Teachers have a strong impact on students' skills and attitudes. For example, teacher enthusiasm and stimulation of reading significantly and positively affect students' motivation, learning goals, self-efficacy and enjoyment of reading (OECD, 2021[22]). The relationship between teacher practices and students' lifelong learning attitudes is particularly strong in Denmark, Finland, Italy, Sweden and Korea.

38. Across OECD countries, teacher and trainer workforces are ageing and facing shortages, particularly in VET. Between 2015 and 2022, the share of school principals across OECD countries reporting that teacher shortages were hindering instruction at the lower secondary level rose from 29% to 47% (OECD, 2024[23]). The rise was especially sharp in Australia, Belgium, Latvia, Netherlands and Poland, whereas Iceland and Türkiye showed improvement. Demographic pressures exacerbate the challenge, as a growing share of teachers approach retirement. In 2024, an average of about 37% of lower-secondary teachers in OECD countries were aged 50 or above. This share ranged from less than 15% in Türkiye to over 50% in Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Portugal. Overall, this proportion has been increasing, except in Austria and Korea, where it has recently declined (OECD, 2025[24]). In VET, an even higher share of teachers is aged 50 or above (OECD, 2021[25]).

39. Teachers' participation in continuous professional development (CPD) remains high in many systems, but the focus of training is shifting. While subject-specific training (undertaken by 74% of teachers) has slightly declined since 2018, participation in CPD on digital resources and tools has risen by around 12 percentage points on average, with especially large increases in Belgium (Flanders), Brazil, Czechia, Portugal and Romania. At the same time, training labelled as 'ICT' is declining in France, Iceland, Sweden and Finland (OECD, 2025[24]).

40. Countries are increasingly integrating AI into teaching, but adoption remains uneven across countries and varies in purpose. Among OECD education systems, one in three teachers reports using AI in their work, with large differences between countries. The most common uses of AI are to learn about or summarise topics (68%) and to generate lesson plans or activities (64%). Yet teachers' participation in training on AI use varies widely, from 9% in France to above 60% in Korea (OECD, 2025[24]). Older teachers often use digital technologies less, so may not be ready to harness the opportunities and mitigate the risks of AI in teaching and learning. Research shows that technology use decreases as teacher age increases (OECD, 2024[23]; OECD, 2023[26]; OECD, 2019[27]). More experienced teachers tend to participate less in

[3] Tertiary refers to International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 5-8, covering short-cycle tertiary education, Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral or equivalent levels.

AI training (36% compared to 40% of novice teachers), even though they often report higher training needs (OECD, 2025[24]).

Policies

41. Countries are taking policy action in several areas to rethink and recalibrate formal education to better prepare individuals for a lifetime of learning and opportunity.

Reforming curricula

42. Countries continue efforts to modernise curricula and improve implementation. Curricula are being redesigned to equip students with the skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes to navigate life and work in the context of the megatrends (Council of Europe, 2023[28]). Many systems now prioritise transversal skills. such as critical thinking, creativity, social skills, alongside digital and green competencies. Several countries embed cross-curricular skills within existing subjects (e.g. Estonia, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, etc.). Regular national assessments of students' critical thinking can help raise performance in this domain (Wastiau, Looney and Laanpere, 2024[29]). Countries are seeking to overcome slow and rigid curriculum renewal cycles and implementation delays. For example, countries are conducting systematic reviews to ensure relevance (e.g. Ontario (Canada), Mexico, New Zealand, etc.) and digitalising the curriculum to facilitate faster change (e.g. Australia, Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, etc.) (OECD, 2021[30]).

43. School curricula are increasingly including digital skills and benefiting from digital developments (OECD, 2021[31]). In the People's Republic of China (hereafter "China"), for instance, curriculum reforms incorporate smart technologies across all grade levels and foster AI use (The State Council The People's Republic of China, 2025[32]). Some research suggests that high computer and information literacy levels in Belgium (Flanders) and the Czech Republic (hereafter 'Czechia') result from the recent addition of these topics in the curricula (IEA, 2025[14]). AI is increasingly being used to enhance the labour-market relevance of VET curricula and to accelerate evidence-based curriculum improvements, as in Germany (BIBB's KINO), Switzerland (SFUVET), and the United Kingdom (SkillsCompass) (OECD, forthcoming[33]).

44. Countries encourage vocational and higher education students and providers to develop skills in the highest demand in the labour market in various ways, often by involving employers. For vocational and higher education providers, incentives to meet labour market needs can come in the form of regulation and funding arrangements (OECD, 2020[34]). Policies are encouraging institutions to focus on graduate labour market outcomes, by setting conditions for the accreditation of programmes, requiring institutions to collect and publish information, or making funding conditional on performance, including graduate outcomes. In many countries, employer representatives are formally involved in institutional governance, programme development, work-based learning provision and student assessment, especially in VET. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, VET programmes involve social partners at multiple levels to keep curricula updated and aligned with labour market demands (OECD, 2023[35]). In the Arab Gulf States, the *Talents and Skills of Students in the Context of Global Competencies* programme aims to strengthen students' abilities to compete in a rapidly evolving job market through practical, future-oriented learning experiences (Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States, 2023[36]). In Greece, outputs from the national labour-market diagnosis mechanism are used to revise occupational profiles and VET curricula, and to select new apprenticeship specialties (Cedefop, 2023[37]). In Croatia, the BrAIn project prioritises AI/digital competencies by piloting an AI curriculum in VET schools and providing associated training to teachers (Jeon, 2025[38]).

Strengthening teaching

45. Teacher policies are under strain from the demographic shift. One survey of over 30 education ministries showed that while over 90% of respondents consider demographic change of high/very high importance for teaching, only about 50% stated that their ministry has actions to address demographic change to a large/very large extent (OECD, 2024[23]).

46. Many countries are seeking to address ageing teacher and trainer workforces and shortages by making the profession more accessible and attractive. This includes reducing entrance barriers (Australia, England (United Kingdom), the United States, etc.), supporting re-entry of teachers who left the profession (Australia, Portugal and England (United Kingdom), etc.), addressing targeted shortages (Australia, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Portugal, etc.), enhancing career structures that support progression (Australia, the United States, etc.), reviewing salaries and incentives (e.g. Australia, England (United Kingdom), etc.), and developing campaigns to improve the status of teaching (e.g. Australia, the Flemish and French Communities of Belgium, etc.) (OECD, 2024[23]). Countries are also offering alternative pathways into the profession (Austria, Luxembourg, New Zealand, etc.). Australia is supporting entry into the VET workforce specifically, with dedicated funding for measures including mentoring and professional development opportunities.

47. Countries are seeking to improve teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). Efforts include diagnoses of teachers' CPD needs (e.g. Belgium (Flanders), Canada (Alberta), Japan, etc.), financial incentives for CPD, and mentoring and coaching for teachers (e.g. Austria, England (United Kingdom), etc.) (OECD, 2024[23]). In Czechia, Portugal and Romania, targeted teacher digital competency initiatives have contributed to high participation in technical CPD on using digital resources.

48. Technology and AI are increasingly being used to enhance teaching. Korea has specific national programmes focused on helping teachers learn how to use AI tools, and many teachers participate in these CPD programmes (World Bank Blogs, 2024[39]). Denmark's Knowledge Centres for IT in Teaching offer advanced technology courses for VET teachers. Policies often focus on fostering partnerships between educators, researchers, and EdTech developers to co-design digital tools such as video lessons or shared activity platforms (e.g. Ireland, Korea, Lithuania, etc.) (OECD, 2024[23]). While AI in education offers many opportunities, countries are enacting regulations to address risks like equity concerns. France's 2024 digital law limits AI in schools to pedagogical use, and Korea has set ten goals to ensure its ethical application (OECD, 2023[40]). In Ireland and the United Kingdom, the Big AI project supports the integration of AI tools in schools (Big Education Trust, 2025[41]).

Reallocating educational investments and infrastructure

49. Repurposing educational infrastructure is becoming essential, particularly in rapidly depopulating areas. As student numbers decline and per-student costs rise, the use of educational infrastructure is being rethought. Some countries are using school buildings for broader learning activities, including VET and adult learning (e.g. Belgium, Canada, France, Switzerland, Türkiye, etc.). Another common policy is consolidating schools as student populations decline, allowing governments to redirect resources toward more innovative uses. Latvia is pursuing a policy of streamlining the school network while investing in renovation and digitalisation projects to modernise learning environments (European Commission, 2025[42]). Other countries such as China, Hungary, Poland, and Portugal closed small, underperforming rural schools in an effort to create larger, better-equipped clusters (OECD, 2018[43]). For redirecting resources and adjusting school network's capacity and access, countries also conduct school-network capacity assessments, such as the Belgium's (the French Community – or Wallonia) school-inventory exercise, to analyse whether a reorganisation of the premises might yield a more efficient use of space. School closures and mergers in Lithuania did not harm student outcomes (Jakučionytė, Pusevaitė and Singh, 2022[44]) and such network optimisation can even improve student outcomes (J. Bobonis, J. Sotomayor and Wagner, 2022[45]).

50. Countries are increasingly digitalising educational infrastructure. China is equipping school buildings with a range of sensors and cameras and using AI to analyse data for improved resource management and educational outcomes (OECD, 2021[31]). The Dutch National Education Lab for Artificial Intelligence (NOLAI), the German Tübingen Centre for Digital Education (TüCeDE), and the United States' Global Research Alliance for AI in Learning and Education (GRAILE) are research programmes dedicated to integrating AI and innovative technologies into education (OECD, 2023[8]). Spain's "Classrooms of the Future" initiative is integrating technologies like virtual reality into classrooms (OECD, 2023[8]).

51. To guide the discussion for this session, Box 3.1 presents three key questions for discussing strategies for rethinking formal education and recalibrating strategies for a lifetime of opportunities.

Box 3.1. Questions for discussion

1. How can curricula across all levels of formal education (pre-school, school, vocational and higher education) be reformed to equip young people with a strong foundation of skills, including those aligned with labour market needs?
2. How can the teaching profession be made more attractive, and how can teachers be better prepared to implement modern curricula, apply effective pedagogy and integrate AI tools into their practice?
3. How can countries optimise educational investments to manage costs, make effective use of infrastructure, and improve learning outcomes in the context of declining student enrolment?
4. How can cross-country co-operation be improved to foster the development of innovative education models?

4 Issue 2: Harnessing Adults' Skills – Empowering Workers Across Generations

Summary

- Harnessing the skills of adults across generations empowers workers at all life stages to have longer and more productive working lives in the face of megatrends.
- Globally, adults' skill levels, engagement in learning and participation in the labour market remain areas of concern, especially for older adults. In most countries, a large share of adults has low levels of information-processing skills, and this share increases with age. Average skill levels among adults have declined in several countries over the past decade. Yet, across OECD countries, less than half of adults participate in learning each year, with participation rates lowest among low-skilled and older adults. In some countries, adult learning participation is even declining as many adults report lacking the motivation, time or financial resources to engage in training.
- These challenges require policymakers to ensure that all adults have access to relevant and accessible upskilling and reskilling opportunities, while also supporting older workers by promoting good health and providing resources and working conditions to remain meaningfully employed. Countries are taking policy action in several areas to harness the skills of adults at all life stages:
  - **Making adult learning more accessible and relevant**: Education and training must be flexible, relevant and affordable for adults. An increasing number of countries are promoting modular programmes, micro-credentials and recognition of prior learning, in order to reduce the time required to complete learning. VET systems are becoming more flexible through modularisation and prior-learning recognition, as seen in Denmark's adult VET tracks. Many countries are also lowering financial barriers – through subsidies, learning accounts and dedicated funds in places like the Netherlands and Poland, or free TAFE (Technical and Further Education) in Australia. Policymakers and providers often partner with employers to ensure training remains closely aligned with labour-market needs.
  - **Providing career guidance**: Countries are strengthening career guidance by combining accessible digital tools with targeted support for mid-career and older workers. Many now offer online career planners, interactive skills-matching tests, and AI-powered services – such as those in Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Brazil and Türkiye – to help adults navigate job and training options, while maintaining in-person counselling for those who need it most. Regular skills-assessment and anticipation exercises, such as Norway's Committee on Skill Needs, enrich career guidance and adult learning policy design.

- **Supporting older workers' employment and engagement**: Older adults need support and opportunities to remain meaningfully employed and engaged in their communities. In addition to promoting adult learning, more countries are boosting older workers' employment by promoting age-friendly workplaces, offering financial and reskilling incentives, and encouraging skills-based, age-inclusive hiring. Examples include Norway's senior-friendly workplace framework, Poland's wage subsidies, Japan and Korea's re-employment practices, and the growing use of AI tools in France, Germany and the United Kingdom to support fairer recruitment and retention.

Introduction

52. Harnessing the skills of adults across generations empowers workers at all life stages to have longer and more productive working lives in the face of fast changing trends. This requires shared efforts by governments, employers and individuals. Governments can create the conditions and incentives for individuals and employers to invest in training, while targeting support to those adults and firms facing the most significant barriers to participation (adults with low levels of skills and/or incomes, as well as smaller-sized enterprises). In particular, policymakers can invest in labour-market relevant, flexible and accessible opportunities to upskill and reskill. Beyond training, older workers require health, support and opportunities to remain meaningfully employed and have longer working lives. AI has the potential to transform learning, giving adults greater ownership over what, how, where and when they learn.

Performance

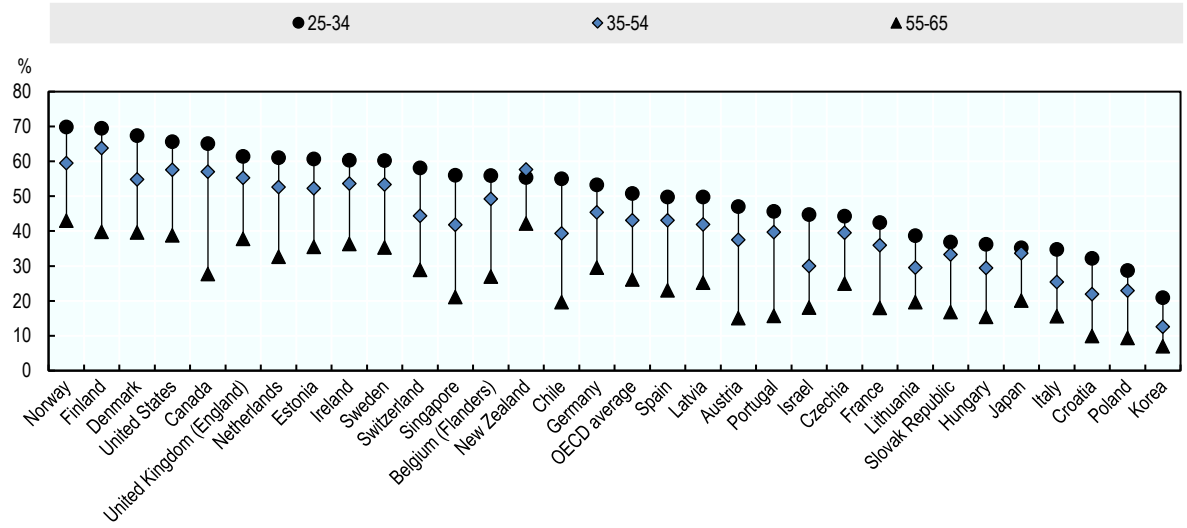
53. In most countries, a large and growing share of adults demonstrates low average levels of information-processing skills, particularly among older and low-educated adults. Adults' literacy skills levels are comparatively high in Finland, Japan, Norway and Sweden, but low in Chile, Poland and Portugal. Older adults often have lower levels of literacy skills, partly reflecting comparatively lower levels of educational attainment. Over the past decade, adult literacy skills, in most participating countries, either declined or remained unchanged according to PIAAC results. A limited of countries, including Denmark and Finland, recorded improvements, while more pronounced declines were observed in Korea, Lithuania, New Zealand and Poland (OECD, 2025[46]; OECD, 2025[47]).

54. Despite the challenges related to adults' skills, less than half of adults participate in education and training. Close to 40% of adults in OECD countries engage in formal or non-formal job-related learning on average. These rates vary widely across countries, from just 13% in Korea to 58% in Finland and Norway. Participation rates are highest in Nordic and English-speaking countries, and lower in Southern, Central and Eastern European countries. Participation has stagnated - or even declined - over the past decade. Some countries, such as Estonia and Ireland, have achieved significant increases, driven by higher participation in non-formal job-related training, while others, including Korea and Poland, have experienced sharp drops (OECD, 2025[47]).

55. Participation in learning declines sharply with age. On average in OECD countries, 24% of workers aged 55-65 took part in job-related training, compared with 41% of those aged 35-54 (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Adults' participation in formal and non-formal learning

Participation rate in adult learning by age, percentage



Note: Adults aged 25-65; formal and non-formal job-related learning in the 12 months prior to the survey. OECD is an unweighted average of all participating countries.
Source: OECD (2025[47]), *Trends in Adult Learning: New Data from the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills*, https://doi.org/10.1787/ec0624a6-en.

56. Enterprises have a critical role to play in supporting training for workers, but evidence on their contribution is mixed. Most adult learning takes place at the workplace. While over 85% of training in Denmark, Finland, France, Norway and Sweden occurs wholly or mostly during paid work time, the share is closer to 50% in Israel, Korea and Spain (OECD, 2025[47]).

57. Many adults lack motivation or face barriers to learning. Across OECD countries, about half of all adults neither participate nor want to participate in adult learning. Among those adults who do or want to participate in learning, one in two face barriers. The most common barriers are lack of time due either to family or work responsibilities (48%). This issue is particularly pronounced in Italy, Japan and Korea, where 60% or more of adults report time as a limiting factor (OECD, 2025[47]). Other barriers – such as high costs, lack of employer support and lack of suitable training opportunities – vary significantly between countries. For example, 13% of adults facing barriers state that the main reason for not participating in learning was that training would have been too expensive, on average in OECD countries. This share reaches 20% or more in Israel and Lithuania. Meanwhile, a lack of suitable training is more frequently cited in countries such as Estonia, Latvia, Poland and the Slovak Republic (OECD, 2025[47]).

58. Beyond training, older workers require health, support and opportunities to remain meaningfully employed. As noted earlier, employment rates decline sharply after age 60. The largest age gaps in employment – between adults aged 45-54 and those aged 65-69 - are found in Austria, Czechia and Luxembourg, while Colombia, Korea and Japan show much smaller gaps (OECD, 2025[1]). While there are positive productivity effects for firms from having a more balanced age structure, some employers hesitate to hire or retain older workers due to concerns about adaptability, workplace accommodations and productivity. Age discrimination remains a significant barrier, particularly for older women (OECD, 2025[1]).

Policies

59. Countries are taking policy action in several areas to better harness the skills of adults at all life stages.

Making adult learning more accessible and relevant

60. An increasing number of countries are promoting modular programmes, micro-credentials and recognition of prior learning in order to reduce the time required to complete learning. Such programmes tend to attract more adult learners than long courses (OECD, 2025[47]). Australia's MicroCred Seeker platform offers a national marketplace where learners can search and compare micro-credential courses across providers and delivery modes (OECD, 2023[48]). In the United Kingdom, Skills Bootcamps provide flexible, employer-designed programmes to upskill and retrain adults (Barnes et al., 2025[49]). France's Compte personnel de formation and Mon Compte Formation platforms give individuals direct access to a range of short training programmes (Gouvernement français, 2019[50]). Digital recognition through skills passports and verifiable e-credentials, including the European Digital Credentials for Learning, helps validate and share skills efficiently (European Commission, 2024[51]). Slovenia has introduced financial incentives and flexible entry routes to encourage adults to enrol in higher-vocational short-cycle programmes and certificate courses (Eurydice, 2025[52]). Artificial intelligence can further personalise learning experiences by matching content and pace to learners' needs (OECD, 2025[1]; OECD, 2021[53]). The EU's AI4AL project, for example, uses an AI-based tool to link digital-skills assessments with suitable micro-credentials and guidance (AI4AL, 2025[54]).

61. VET systems can play a pivotal role in reskilling and upskilling adults, including older workers, by providing recognised labour-market-relevant qualifications. Some countries are seeking to make VET programmes more flexible for adults, with shorter courses and greater modularisation and expanded online components (Jeon, 2025[38]). In Denmark, adults (25+) can enter "EUV" VET tracks that start with a formal prior-learning assessment. Relevant experience can shorten or waive basic school phases and parts of workplace training, while ensuring that the final qualification is identical to that awarded to regular VET students (Ministry of Children and Education, 2019[55]; OECD, 2023[35]).

62. Many countries are expanding investments in adult learning to reduce financial barriers to participation, including for older workers. As workers age, employees and employers can face fewer incentives to invest in training. In Poland, the National Training Fund (Krajowy Fundusz Szkoleniowy) covers up to 80% of training costs for SMEs and 100% for microenterprises, with priority given to workers aged 45 or older (Wojewódzki Urząd Pracy w Krakowie, 2024[56]; OECD, 2025[1]). The Netherlands introduced a programme offering free-of-charge job-search training, training vouchers and networking opportunities for individuals aged 50 and above. In Australia, governments are funding over 500 000 free TAFE places from 2023 to 2026, with almost two-thirds of beneficiaries so far aged 25+ (DEWR, 2025[57]). In Colombia, the National Training Service (SENA) provides free training programmes designed with firms, while Indonesia's Pre-Employment Card Programme (Kartu Prakerja) provides jobseekers and workers in transition vouchers and incentives for training (OECD, 2024[58]; Government of Colombia, 2025[59]). In Thailand, the Skill Development Fund uses incentives and financing to support employer-led adult upskilling across the workforce (OECD, 2025[60]). In addition to France, an increasing number of countries are exploring portable individual learning accounts (ILAs) or similar schemes for adult learners, including Croatia, Czechia and Lithuania. Several countries are seeking partnerships with industry to fund and provide high-quality, relevant adult learning for workers – for instance, by using training levies to better align skills development with labour market needs, as in the Netherlands and Switzerland (OECD, 2017[61]). In Ireland, increasing adult learning participation has been supported by the expansion of subsidised adult learning programmes, such as the Skills to Advance and Springboard+ initiatives (OECD, 2023[62]).

Providing career guidance

63. Many countries have invested in career-guidance services to motivate and inform adults. Career guidance is particularly important for mid-career (40-54 year-olds) and older adults (55-64 year-olds), since they are less likely to look for information on learning opportunities than younger adults (25-34 year-olds) (OECD, 2025[1]). In Flanders (Belgium), the My Career (Mijn Loopbaan) website offers a career planner with job search tips and occupation information. Complementing this, the website provides interactive tests that match individuals with suitable jobs based on their qualifications and skills (OECD, 2023[62]; VDAB, 2023[63]). Belgium's ACV-CSC trade union federation provides career counselling for workers and jobseekers, especially older unemployed workers (Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD, 2020[64]). Countries are increasingly using AI tools to improve adults' access to guidance, while maintaining in-person services for older and less-skilled workers. For example, Austria's AMS Career Information Centre uses advanced AI to quickly provide information on job profiles, training opportunities, salaries and related topics (Jobseekers Austria, 2024[65]).

64. Several countries seek to base career guidance and adult learning offerings on assessed skills needs. Regular Skills Assessment and Anticipation (SAA) exercises are key to achieving this, as they provide information for training providers, help policymakers design incentives for adult learning and guide investment towards priority skills. For example, in Norway, the Committee on Skill Needs provides evidence-based assessments - through reports and articles - of future skill requirements to guide education and labour market decision-making (Norwegian Committee on Skill Needs, 2025[66]). In Estonia, ministries work with VET providers and social partners, using evidence from OSKA (the national labour-market and skills-forecasting system) to adjust adult VET curricula and study places toward skills employers need (OECD, 2025[67]). At the international co-operation level, the OECD's Skills Strategy projects support countries to identify key skill policy priorities and devise tailored evidence-based policy recommendations (OECD, 2025[68]). For instance, the Belgium case developed a model to enhance adult participation in both formal and non-formal learning by identifying and analysing nine different adult learner profiles and their needs (OECD, 2022[69]). In Brazil, the EmpregAI tool, built into the digital work permit app, uses AI to help workers find and connect with job opportunities across the national labour system (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2025[70]).

Supporting older workers' employment and engagement

65. An increasing number of countries recognise the importance of age-friendly workplaces. As health issues often rise with age, targeted policies are needed to encourage employers to retain older workers. Current efforts focus on promoting age-friendly practices and supporting the health and employability of older employees. In Norway, the Inclusive Workplace Agreement provides a structural framework between social partners and the government to promote senior-friendly policies and measures that help retain older workers (OECD, 2019[71]). In Germany, the INQA initiative uses AI to help companies create age-friendly and modern work environments (INQA, 2025[72]).

66. To support the retention of older workers, some countries have introduced retention programmes and financial incentives for employers to offer flexible work options and hire older workers. In Poland, wage subsidies and social security contribution reimbursements are available for employers hiring older workers (over 50 years old). Subsidies cover up to 80% of the minimum wage for those eligible for early retirement and 50% for those who are not (OECD, 2019[71]).

67. In Japan and Korea, employment rules and company practices – including re-employment on new terms after mandatory retirement – encourage older workers to stay in work (OECD, 2025[1]). OECD evidence also shows that increases in statutory retirement ages, including in countries such as Iceland, are associated with higher labour-force participation among older adults by delaying exit from the labour market (OECD, 2019[71]).

68. Skills-first hiring and age-inclusive recruitment can help increase employment among older adults. An increasing number of countries are promoting hiring and workforce development practices that prioritise demonstrated skills over formal qualifications, with the United States among the early movers in adopting skills-based hiring for public jobs. Governments are also building HR capacity by piloting AI-enabled recruitment tools that match candidates' skills to vacancies, as in France and the United Kingdom (OECD, 2025[18]). At the same time, they are encouraging age-diverse workplaces through guidance such as the United Kingdom's Good Recruitment for Older Workers (GROW) toolkit, which helps employers reduce age bias in recruitment and retention (OECD, 2025[1]).

69. To guide the discussion for this session, Box 4.1 presents key questions on empowering workers across generations.

Box 4.1 Questions for discussion

- How can education and training programmes, including vocational and higher education, be made more flexible and accessible for busy adults balancing work, caregiving and other responsibilities?
- How can the costs of adult learning be shared effectively between governments, employers and individuals to ensure affordability, particularly for learners and smaller enterprises?
- What role can career guidance services and skills needs intelligence play in encouraging greater adult participation in education and training, including older workers?
- How can governments and employers support older workers to remain meaningfully employed and active, including as contributors to intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer?

5 Issue 3: Tapping Into Hidden Talent – Leveraging the Potential of Overlooked Groups

Summary

- Fostering and tapping into everyone's talent by unlocking the potential of all groups is not only justified on equity grounds, but is also essential for bolstering countries' labour forces and economic prosperity.
- In many countries, certain groups have fewer opportunities to develop their talents in the first place. Disadvantaged students in OECD countries are on average seven times more likely than advantaged students to fail to achieve basic mathematics proficiency. Foreign-born individuals often have lower information-processing skill levels than the native born, partly reflecting lower proficiency in the local language and differences in their prior educational experiences.
- The share of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) has decreased in many countries, but still represents a significant loss of potential talent. The youth NEET rate still exceeds 15% in Colombia, Costa Rica, Greece, Italy, Korea, Lithuania, Mexico, Spain and Türkiye, and is even higher in some non-Member countries. Youth with lower levels of education are up to three times more likely to become NEET than their peers with higher education.
- In addition to older adults (see Issue 2), women and migrants are often under-represented in employment – a missed opportunity to bolster working-age populations. Across all OECD countries, progress has been made in promoting employment opportunities for women. Yet women continue to face disadvantages relative to men, including lower pay, reduced working hours, and a disproportionate share of unpaid responsibilities such as caregiving**.** Older women in particular have much lower employment rates than men. While the employment rate gap between native- and foreign-born adults has stabilised, it remains high in several countries.
- Addressing these challenges requires policymakers to provide support for learning for all who need it, and to ensure equal opportunities for work for all groups of adults. Countries are taking policy action in several areas to tap into hidden talent:
    - **Supporting disadvantaged students in education**: Countries are working to reduce socio-economic disadvantage in schooling by expanding access to quality early childhood education, directing extra resources to disadvantaged schools, and investing in tutoring and small-group support. They also provide flexible learning pathways (Mexico), AI-enabled tutoring tools (United States), large-scale digital access initiatives (Argentina) and targeted counselling and career learning (Ireland). At the same time, many governments are improving education for children with a migrant background through expanded early childhood access, integrated language support, and specialised teacher training.

- **Targeting support to youth NEET**: Young people not in employment, education, or training need accessible second chances in learning, as well as pathways into employment. Countries are addressing youth NEET by preventing early school leaving and providing flexible learning options (e.g. Türkiye's open high schools). They also offer coaching, career counselling and targeted financial support for job searches. AI tools are increasingly used to identify those most in need of support and to guide young people into work.
- **Mobilising women and migrants in work**: Women and migrants need equal opportunities to work. To promote employment opportunities for women, countries have guaranteed equal pay, encouraged women's success in entrepreneurship and decision-making positions, and promoted gender-and family-friendly policies within firms, while expanding access to quality affordable childcare and elderly care. To promote employment opportunities for migrants, countries provide language training, recognition of foreign qualifications and prior learning, and support for immigrants to enter vocational education and training (e.g. Türkiye's "INSURE" programme).

Introduction

70. Fostering and tapping into everyone's talent by unlocking the potential of all groups is not only justified on equity grounds, but is essential for countries' economic prosperity. Education and training can be a powerful equaliser among different groups, but unequal access and outcomes in learning may reinforce socio-economic disparities (UNESCO, 2020[73]). Ensuring all groups of adults, including women and migrants, have equal access to job opportunities can help offset shrinking labour forces and bolster material living standards. For example, closing the gender employment gap could increase annual GDP per capita growth by 0.2 percentage points across the OECD, while closing the gender gap in hours worked could double that figure. Policymakers can realise these opportunities by providing support for learning for all who need it, and ensuring equal opportunities to work for all groups of adults.

Performance

71. Individuals with lower-educated parents or fewer resources at home face disadvantages and have lower academic performance on average compared to their peers. Across countries, those with tertiary-educated parents tend to develop higher levels of information-processing skills – literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving (OECD, 2025[18]). In PISA 2022, students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background[4] were seven times more likely than advantaged students to have a low score (below Level 2) in mathematics (OECD, 2023[74]). Between 2018 and 2022, this socio-economic gap in mathematics widened in some countries (e.g. Chinese Taipei, due to higher performance among advantaged students) and narrowed in other countries (e.g. Argentina, Saudi Arabia and the Philippines, where disadvantaged students improved). Socio-economic background also affects individuals' access to technology and their digital skills (OECD, 2025[75]).

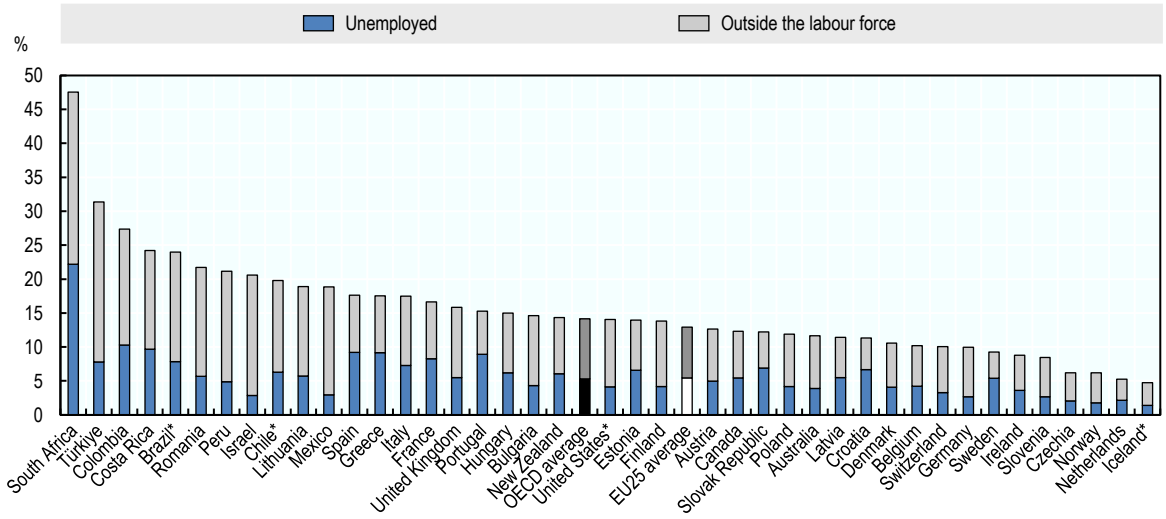
72. Individuals with a migrant background often need support to achieve the same outcomes in education and the labour market than the native born population. On average in OECD countries, foreign-born individuals have lower literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem-solving skill levels than the native born, often reflecting migrants' lower proficiency in the assessed language and differences in where and how their education was acquired (OECD, 2024[10]). In the labour market, immigrant employment across

[4] A socio-economically advantaged (disadvantaged) student is a student in the top (bottom) quarter of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) in his or her own country/economy.

OECD countries has reached a record high in recent years but remains a challenge in some countries. The employment rate gap between native and migrant adults exceeds ten percentage points in favour of native-born adults in Germany, Mexico and the Netherlands. Immigrants often face employment challenges, including overqualification for available jobs, limited recognition of equivalent education and language barriers. In some countries however (including Chile, Costa Rica and Luxembourg), foreign-born workers actually have higher employment rates than the native born (OECD, 2023[76]).

73. The share of youth NEET has decreased in many countries, but remains a challenge. While the youth NEET rate (18-24 year-olds) is less than 5% in Iceland, it exceeds 15% in several OECD Member countries and is even higher in some non-Member countries (Figure 5.1). In most OECD countries, inactive youth not seeking work make up the largest share of NEETs (OECD, 2024[77]). Youth with low education levels (no more than a lower-secondary education) are three times more likely to be NEET than those with a university degree (OECD, 2024[77]). Over the past five years, NEET rates have fallen most sharply in Italy, followed by Brazil and Chile, but have risen most sharply in Estonia, Israel, Lithuania and Romania (OECD, 2025[46]).

Figure 5.1. Share of 18-24 year-old NEETs, by labour force status (2024)



Note: NEET refers to young people neither employed nor in education or training. Data usually refer to the second quarter of studies, which corresponds in most countries to the first three months of the calendar year, but in some countries, to the second three months.
* Year of reference differs from 2024: 2022 for Chile; 2023 for Brazil, Iceland and the United States.
Source: OECD (2025[46]), *Education at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1c0d9c79-en.

74. Gender skills and employment gaps have narrowed over time, yet some differences remain. Girls typically outperformed boys in reading, while boys outperformed girls in mathematics in PISA 2022. This may contribute to the underrepresentation of girls and women in certain STEM fields in vocational and higher education. In the labour market, women are often paid significantly less, work fewer paid hours and take on more unpaid work, such as family and caring responsibilities. Women earn on average 11% less than the median full-time working man across OECD countries, ranging from 2% less in Colombia to 29% less in Korea (OECD, 2023[78]). Across the OECD, women spend about twice as much time in unpaid care and domestic work each day than men, limiting their employment opportunities. The gaps are much greater for older women. Among those aged 60-64, about 48% of women and 64% of men are employed, and among those aged 65-69, only 24% of women and 36% of men are employed. The employment rate of 65-69 year-old women ranges from as low as 6% in Slovenia and Belgium to over 43% in Japan and Korea (OECD, 2025[1]).

75. In all countries, some workers are in informal employment with fewer opportunities and support to use and develop their skills. Globally, almost 60% of workers are estimated to be in informal jobs, with the share rising to around 90% in low-income countries (OECD, 2024[79]). In OECD countries, informality often takes the form of undeclared employment or wages, low-paid own-account work and platform work that fall outside standard labour law and social protection. Informal workers are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, low-productivity activities, and many have only basic schooling: close to 45% of informal workers have at most primary education, compared with about 7% among formal workers (OECD, 2024[79]). They also have fewer opportunities to participate in employer-provided training or public skills programmes, and the learning they do on the job is rarely recognised, which makes it harder to upgrade their skills or transition into better-quality or formal employment.

Policies

76. Several countries are seeking to prevent and address socio-economic disadvantage during the school years. Policy efforts include expanding equitable access to, and quality of, early childhood education, allocating more resources to schools serving disadvantaged students, and investing in tutoring and small-group instruction for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In Mexico, the Education Model for Life and Work offers flexible learning opportunities to obtain or update qualifications through modular programmes in community learning (OECD, 2021[80]). The United States is trialling Tutor CoPilot to provide expert-like AI guidance to tutors in under-served communities (E. Wang et al., 2025[81]). In Argentina, the Conectar Igualdad programme offers devices, school-level infrastructure and a national online platform of virtual classrooms and resources, in order to guarantee access to and use of technology for all students and teachers in state schools (Alderete and Formichella, 2016[82]; Secretaría de Educación, 2025[83]). In Ireland, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) action plan supports disadvantaged students by funding one-to-one counselling and integrating career learning into academic subjects (DCU Institute of Education, 2024[84]; OECD, 2023[8]).

77. Some governments have sought to improve access to, and outcomes in, education for children with a migrant background. Policies have focused on expanding immigrant children's access to early childhood education and care, integrating language support into school curricula, and providing training to teachers dealing with multilingual and multicultural classrooms. In Germany, vocation-specific language training is embedded within VET programmes (Bergseng, Degler and Lüthi, 2019[85]), while in Switzerland, migrant students can be offered preparatory "admission" classes before joining full VET programmes. In Canada, the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) programme offers school-based settlement services – needs assessments, orientation, referrals and support activities – for newcomer (immigrant and refugee) students and families (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022[86]). Finland, Germany and Sweden have developed AI-driven digital tools to provide language training to immigrants (OECD, 2025[87]).

78. Countries are implementing holistic efforts to reduce the share of youth NEET. Policy efforts often start with preventing early school leaving. For example, in Türkiye, open high schools (açık liseler) provide flexible distance learning for at-risk groups such as children from families facing economic hardship, young people under social services protection, and other groups requiring targeted policy support (Ministry of National Education, 2023[88]). Countries also offer youth-focused coaching and motivation programmes (e.g. Luxembourg and Netherlands), career-counselling services (e.g. France), work-experience opportunities for higher-education students (e.g. Bulgaria) and targeted financial support for job searches (International Labour Organization, 2025[89]) (OECD, 2023[90]). In Bulgaria, the "inter-institutional mechanism", a multi-stakeholder initiative, helps reintegrate out-of-school children into the educational system (OECD, 2025[91]). Italy's NEET Working Plan – with outreach, public employment services, work-based learning and hiring incentives for youth – contributed to the country's declining youth NEET rate (OECD, 2025[46]). In Peru, the Jóvenes Productivos programme supports unemployed youth through training, guidance and job placement (International Labour Organization, 2025[89]). AI is being harnessed

as a virtual job assistant for young people in Italy (through the AppLI website) and to efficiently identify and support the most vulnerable job seekers in Flanders (INPS, 2025[92]; Cargill et al., 2023[93]).

79. Countries are implementing a range of initiatives for girls and young women to address gender differences in skills development. Several countries seek to facilitate girls' access to STEM studies. In the Slovak Republic, the You Too in IT initiative offers coding workshops and other inclusive activities for secondary school girls. Similarly, in France, the Girls and Maths plan encourages girls to pursue mathematics-intensive study. Several countries (e.g. Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, etc.) run initiatives and campaigns to attract more men and achieve a better gender balance in the nursing profession (OECD, 2025[18]).

80. Countries are implementing a range of policies to address gender gaps in the labour market. Governments have guaranteed equal pay, encouraged women's success in entrepreneurship and decision-making positions, and promoted gender- and family-friendly policies within firms, while expanding access to quality affordable childcare and elderly care (OECD, 2025[1]). For example, Iceland, Japan, Mexico, and Portugal have introduced legal instruments to promote women's access to leadership roles in public institutions (OECD, 2023[94]). Iceland has also introduced an Equal Pay Standard, auditing companies for compliance and imposing fines on those that fail to meet it (Wagner, 2022[95]). AI can help recruiters by removing language that discourages women from applying and by identifying job opportunities women might otherwise overlook (Broecke, 2023[96]). To retain older women in the labour market, some countries provide subsidies that support unemployed women returning to work (e.g. Austria) (OECD, 2019[71]).

81. A range of policies aim to facilitate immigrants' integration into the labour market. Countries have introduced language training to enhance migrants' labour market access (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands), improved qualification recognition schemes (e.g. Canada, Germany, Australia, etc.), and provided support for migrants to gain apprenticeships (e.g. Germany). Some countries have strengthened rights-based frameworks and licensing systems for migrant workers, including Costa Rica and Israel (OECD, 2018[97]; OECD, 2025[87]). In Chile, the ChileValora initiative supports migrant integration by formally recognising and certifying previously acquired skills (Dehays Rocha, 2021[98]).The "INSURE" project in Türkiye provides language instruction, soft skills development and practical training for Syrians under temporary protection, as well as for individuals with international protection status or pending applications (UNDP Türkiye, 2025[99]). AI is increasingly used in immigrant integration – for example, to identify effective interventions (Norway and Canada), optimise refugee allocation through tools like GeoMatch (Netherlands and Switzerland), and provide multilingual chatbot career guidance (Sweden) (OECD, 2025[87]).

82. Countries employ a range of policies to tackle the skills disadvantages faced by those in informal work. These include creating learning opportunities for informal workers, for example through short "skill-gap" training within RPL schemes in India (Skill India, 2022[100]), or through the certification of skills and experience from formal or informal jobs within Portugal's RPL scheme (RVCC) (Meghnagi and Tuccio, 2022[101]). Some countries extend social protection to informal and self-employed workers through simplified regimes and contribution subsidies, as in Brazil's *Simples Nacional* regime (ILO, 2022[102]), which, by reducing informal workers' vulnerability, can empower them to invest in their skills. Formalising high-informality sectors through tax incentives and voucher schemes, for example Belgium's service voucher scheme for domestic services (*titres-services*) (OECD, 2021[103]), and offering local integrated services and entrepreneurship support for informal workers can also help to improve access to training and career progression.

83. To guide the discussion for this session, Box 5.1 presents key questions on how to unlock the potential or overlooked groups.

Box 5.1. Questions for discussion

- How can educational gaps and disadvantages be reduced, for example between boys and girls, among students with low-educated or foreign-born parents, or for other disadvantaged groups?
- How can policymakers more effectively prevent and address youth NEET, including with the help of technology?
- How can policymakers reduce employment gaps among older workers, women and migrants, as well as the share of informal employment, to better harness the skills of under-utilised groups?

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