TAKING STOCK OF EDUCATION REFORMS FOR ACCESS AND QUALITY IN **TÜRKIYE**

OECD
BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

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Introduction

From the early 2000s, the Republic of Türkiye (hereafter Türkiye) has made important progress towards expanding access to education for learners of all ages along with progress to increase educational quality. Türkiye has managed this progress despite substantial global headwinds, including the 2008-09 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the last decade, Türkiye also welcomed over three and a half million Syrian refugees, among them 1.2 million children (UNICEF, 2017[1]; UNHCR, 2023[2]). Referred to as the top child refugee hosting country in the world, ensuing access to education for Syrian refugee children has added to the complex challenges facing the Turkish education system.

Key policies aimed at expanding access to education have sought to expand participation in levels of education before and beyond primary education. Expanding access to early childhood education (ECE) and to pre-school education in the year before primary school, have been an area of policy focus for much of the last decade, with a number of measures taken in recent years. With regards to older students, enrolment and attainment rates have increased more noticeably in Türkiye, along with expanding the number of years of compulsory education from 8 years to 12 years (4+4+4 reform).

In addition to expanding access, elevating the quality of the education offer has also been an identified area of policy action in Türkiye and a challenge, as shown by outcomes in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), or the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Efforts to improve quality have been pursued at various levels of policy. Some school level-initiatives, for example, have focused on improving education resources and infrastructure, such as increasing the availability and quality of equipment for science classrooms, while others have sought more widespread distribution of education tools, such as connected whiteboards or personal learning devices. Significant steps to improve quality have also been taken at the system level. One key development in this area was the introduction of legislation in 2021 to establish career pathways for teachers and improve the professionalisation of the teaching profession overall.

At the same time, important challenges remain for Türkiye, which relate to ensuring access to education for the youngest and ensuring students remain engaged in learning as they progress through the system. This includes particularly supporting the most vulnerable due to their gender, socio-economic or cultural background, or geographic location. With a smaller share of education expenditure compared to other OECD education systems despite significant increases in recent years, Türkiye will need to ensure as well that efforts in education policy are directed where they can be most impactful.

This report considers a selection of policies operating from the levels of learners and institutions to system-level policies. These are investigated through the lenses of comparative international data and OECD analysis of policies, programmes, and interventions that aim to support better outcomes and greater equity across national education systems. Conducted as a desk-based analysis, this report draws from the knowledge base of the OECD on education policy in Türkiye, national and international sources, and responses from the Ministry of National Education to a survey conducted for this report. The report provides an overview of educational progress in Türkiye in the last two decades and reviews education policies which were developed and implemented during the same period. However, while it presents some evidence of their impact when available during the preparation of this report, it does not establish causal links between these policies and educational outcomes in the country.

Section 2 focuses on policies that have sought to increase access to education in Türkiye from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to upper secondary education, while Section 3 builds on this discussion with analysis of how educational quality has been improved in concert with expansion of access. Finally, the conclusions offer some policy pointers to help Türkiye strengthen outcomes and equity going forward in the years to come.

Policies for access

Since 2000, Türkiye has achieved a certain increase in access to education, although with persisting challenges to ensure access from the earliest ages by all children and to ensure completion of studies, particularly by those at most disadvantage.

Türkiye has achieved progress in enrolment rates over the last years particularly for the older age groups. Between 2012 and 2020, Türkiye reached increases well beyond the OECD average increase for the population groups between 20 and 39 years old, which reached 13 percentage points for the 25-29 year-olds, and 9 percentage points among the 30-39 year-olds. Furthermore, these increases in enrolment among older age groups correspond with a raise from 43.5% to 63.7% between 2011 and 2021 in the rates of 25-34 year-olds in Türkiye who had attained upper secondary, post-secondary non-tertiary, or tertiary education as the highest level of attainment. Beyond policy priority, possible potentialising factors for expansion in education access among these age groups include the need to cater to the large number of immigrant population that has reached Türkiye in recent years. For students aged 5 to 14, education enrolment has evolved on par with the OECD average, with almost universal enrolment for this age group between 2013 and 2020. This corresponds to a 20.2 percentage point jump in ten years, compared to an increase of around 5 percentage points for other OECD countries on average (OECD, 2022[3]).

At the same time, enrolment rates have remained practically unchanged for 3-4 year-olds and 15-19 year-olds over the same period in Türkiye. During those years, the percentage of 3-4 year-olds enrolled in education in Türkiye remained well below the OECD average, with a persisting gap of 60 percentage points. Additional OECD data of enrolment rates for 3-5 year-olds in pre-primary education show an increase for Türkiye of 10 percentage points between 2014 and 2020, possibly driven by an increase in the enrolment rates of 5-year-olds. In a similar vein, although with some increases, in 2020 enrolment rates for 15-19 year-olds in Türkiye had returned to the level of 2013, with 69% (compared to the OECD average of 83%) (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1. Enrolment rates in Türkiye had some increases for the older age groups (2013-2020)

Percentage of population enrolled in education by age group
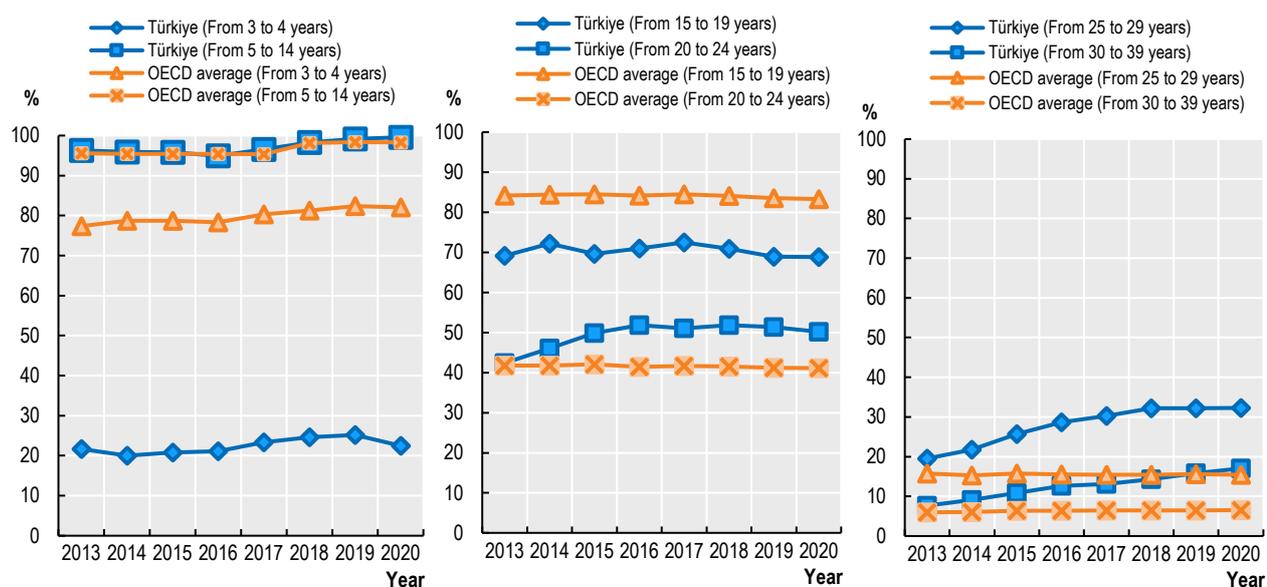
Source: OECDStat. Data extracted on 7 April 2023.

Figure 2.Türkiye has increased the share of children in pre-primary education (2014-2020)

Enrolment rate of 3 to 5 year olds in pre-primary education

Source: OECD (2022[3]), Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.
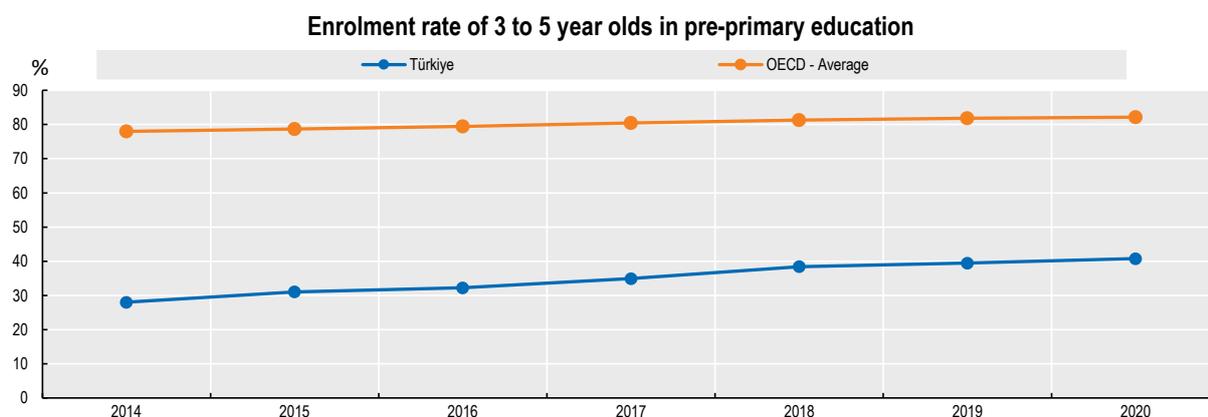
Closest to the learners and the institutions where they study, some policy efforts to increase education access have focused on removing financial or non-financial barriers for students due to their gender or background, such as for students from immigrant communities, to increase their access to education. At system level, Türkiye has also been active in setting a vision and goals that bring participation rates in education and training closer into line with those of OECD peers.

These efforts have included expanding the duration of compulsory education, setting participation targets, and providing and improving education infrastructure. Through the expansion of the years in compulsory education, in 2020, students in Türkiye were expected to stay in education or training for a total of 12 years, compared to other OECD countries where this ranges from 8 to 14. This commitment of Türkiye was matched by at least 90% of the population enrolled in education at the age of 6 in 2020, which is the minimal age of compulsory education in Türkiye.

Moving forward, the challenge will remain in ensuring that children can access education from an earlier age before compulsory education, and then retaining students in formal education at least up to the end of compulsory education. In the majority of OECD countries, the highest age at which at least 90% of the population is enrolled in education is equal to or greater than the end of compulsory education. In Türkiye, this number stood at 15 in 2020; this was 2 years below the end of compulsory education in Türkiye (age 17). Furthermore, Türkiye is among the countries with the shortest age spans at which at least 90% of the population is enrolled in education, with a total of 9 years (see Figure 3).

However, understanding issues of access to education in Türkiye requires considering regional disparities that go beyond the education system. Among 29 OECD countries with comparable data, Türkiye had the highest regional disparities in 2018 in terms of GDP per capita. The richest regions had a GDP per capita more than three times higher than the poorest regions (when considering the richest and poorest regions representing at least 20% of the population). In terms of population well-being, regional disparities were particularly broad in aspects related to community and access to services. Although regional disparities were lower for education services, improving their quality will need to take into consideration other dimensions of well-being that may be equally or less well performing, such as those related to income or for the creation of jobs (OECD, 2020[4]).

Figure 3. Türkiye's number of years of compulsory education need to become effective (2020)

Age range of compulsory education and enrolment of at least 90% of the population in education
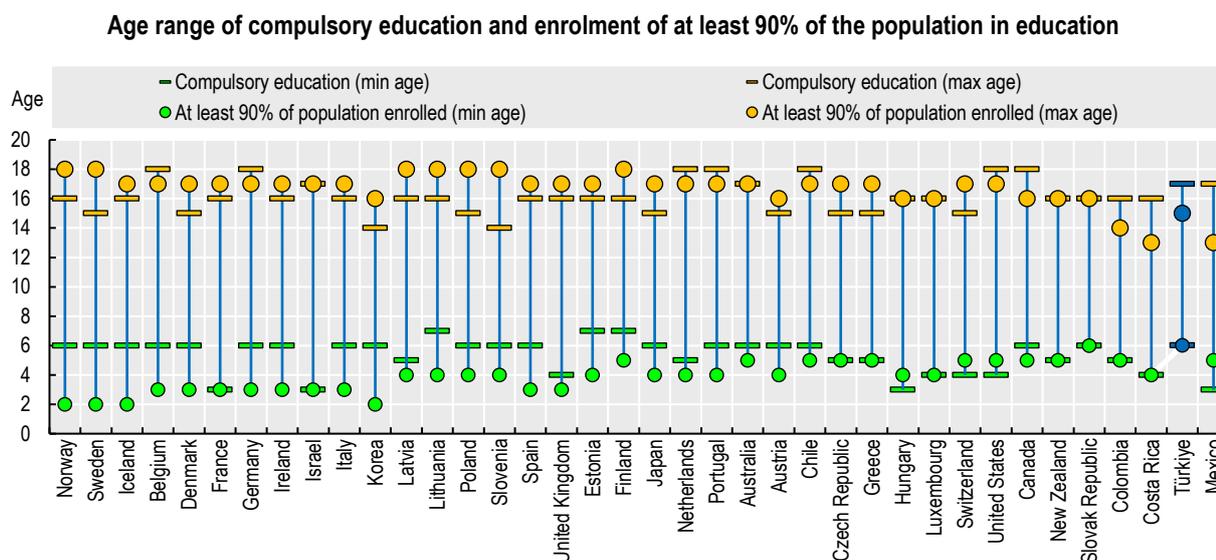
Notes: This figure compared the formal minimum age and maximum age of compulsory education by country (horizontal bars) and the minimum and maximum age range at which at least 90% of the population are enrolled in education (circles). The data are ranked by decreasing order of the age range at which at least 90% of the population are enrolled in education.

Source: OECD (2022[3]), Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en

Weathering global crises

In a world in constant change and disruption, expanding access to education can help increase the resilience of the population. As mentioned previously, over the past 20 years, Türkiye's enrolment rates have remained below the OECD average. At the same time, the progress achieved so far points to Türkiye's education systems as a perceived alternative by young people to cope with global distress through its education system, such as during the 2008-09 Global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

In response to the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, young people in Türkiye sought to participate in education to a greater extent than in other OECD countries; nevertheless, the enrolment rate of 15-29 year-olds has remained persistently below OECD average, despite edging closer in recent years. Between 2008 and 2009, the share of people aged 15 to 29 enrolled in education rose by more than 20%. A similar pattern emerged in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; although preceded by a strong decrease in the percentage of 15-29 year-olds in education between 2018 and 2019, data for 2021 shows a recovery practically to pre-pandemic level in 2018. Türkiye needs to continue working to bridge enrolment gaps with the OECD average beyond moments of crisis (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. During crises, a larger share of youth enrolled in education in Türkiye (2008, 2020)
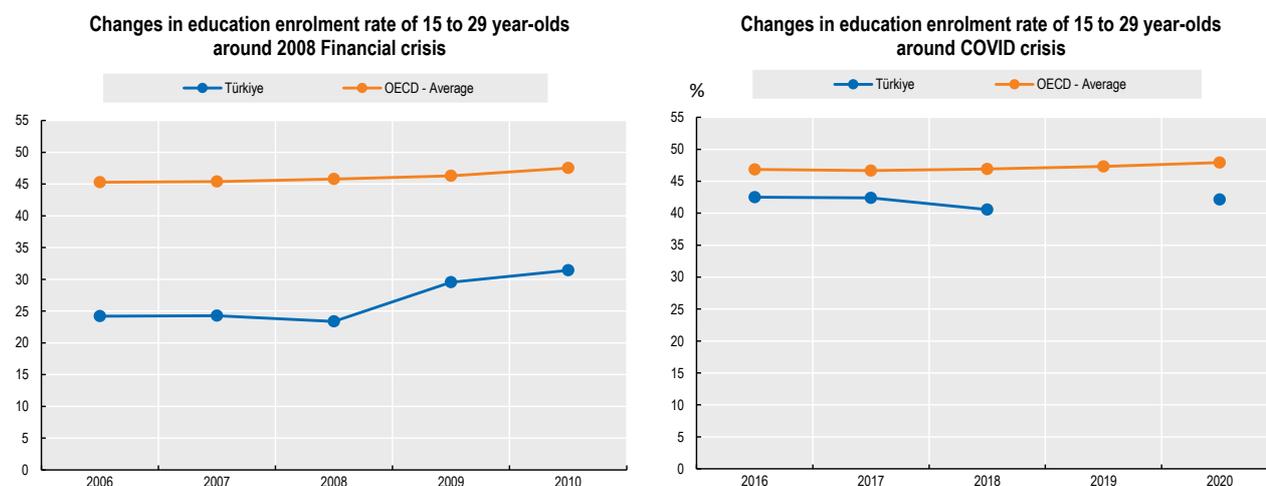
Changes in education enrolment rate of 15 to 29 year-olds around 2008 Financial crisis

Changes in education enrolment rate of 15 to 29 year-olds around COVID crisis

Source: OECD (2022[3]), *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.

In the same way, although employment rates of 15-29 year-olds remain below the OECD average, available data for 2006-2021 suggests capacity of Türkiye to ensure some stability in youth employment rates compared to the OECD average for the same years (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Youth employment rates in Türkiye have also fared comparatively better (2008, 2020)
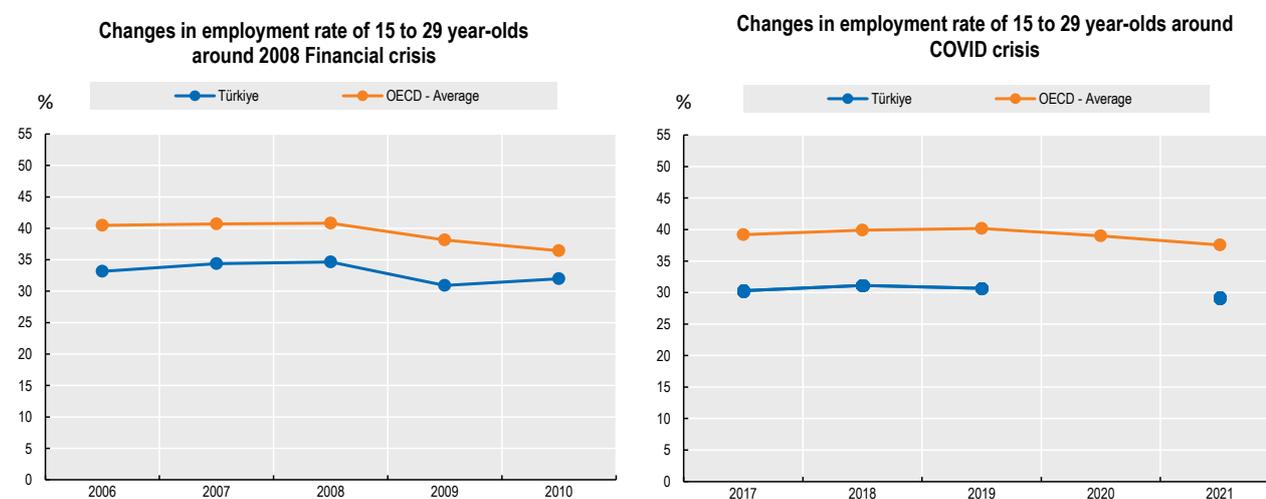
Changes in employment rate of 15 to 29 year-olds around 2008 Financial crisis

Changes in employment rate of 15 to 29 year-olds around COVID crisis

Source: OECD (2022[3]), *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.

These trends also apply to the share of people in Türkiye aged 15 to 29 not in education, employment or training (NEET) over the same period, where Türkiye's performance gaps with the OECD average are more significant. The panel on the left below shows that the share of 15 to 29 year-old NEETs in Türkiye was stable prior to the 2008 Financial crisis and then decreased in the two years following the crisis. By comparison, Türkiye also fared better than the average of its OECD peers during the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, with the average share of NEETs remaining stable from 2019 to 2021 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Türkiye's share of younger NEETs has remained stable during global crises (2008, 2020)

Changes in NEET rate of 15 to 29 year-olds around 2008 Financial crisis

Changes in NEET rate of 15 to 29 year-old around COVID crisis
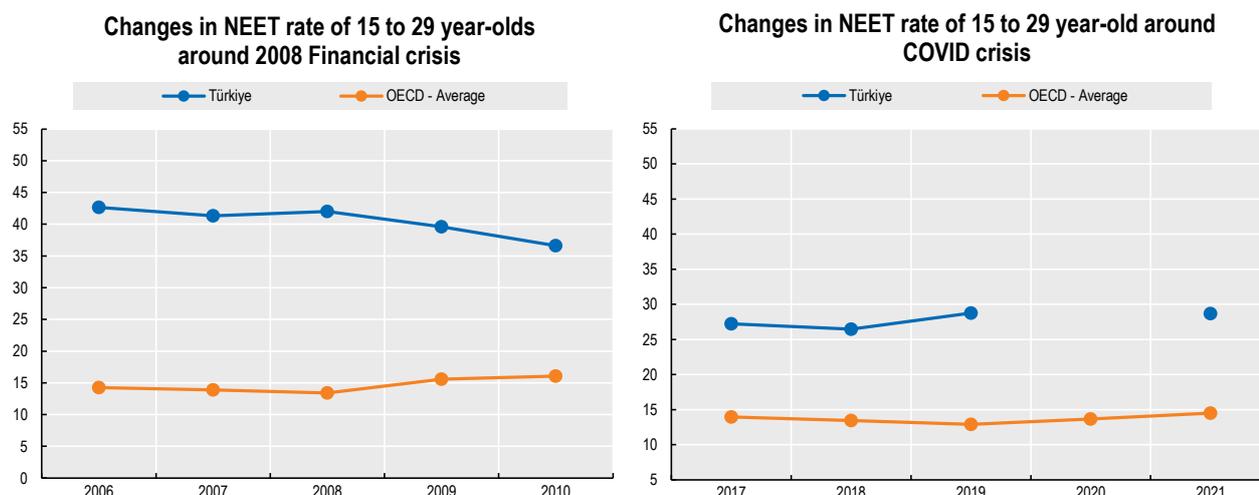
Note: Data for 2020 not available for Türkiye.

Source: OECD (2022[5]), *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.

At the same time, outcomes for young people aged 20 to 24 suggest that there is room to continue building on the gains brought by increased access to education over the past 20 years for this age group. Between 2008 and 2018, Türkiye remained the country with the highest rates of 20-24 year-old NEETs among OECD countries and economies, although the overall share of NEETs dropped from near half of the age group in 2008 to less than one-third in 2018. In line with the evidence from the trends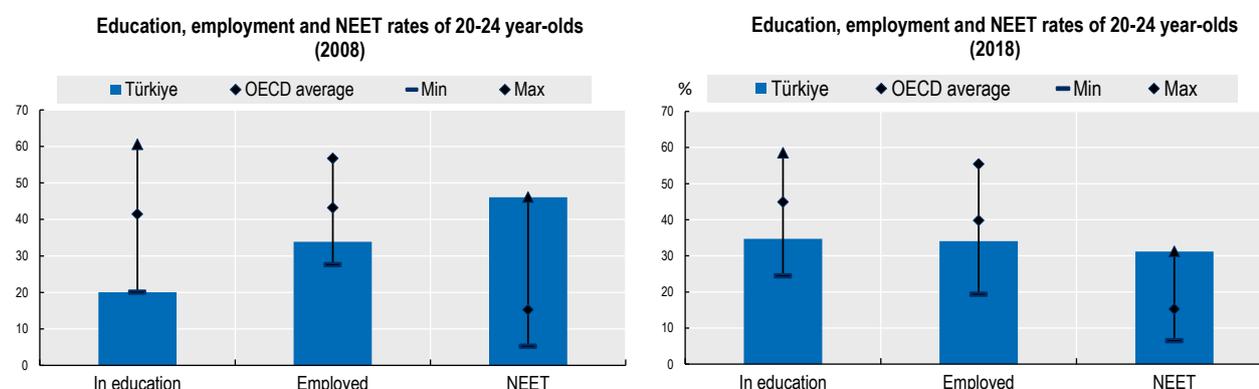 on the share of 15-29 year-olds in education or employment above, increased participation in education is key in explaining the contraction of NEETs in the 20-24 year-old age group between periods (see Figure 7).

According to previous OECD analysis, this high share of NEETs is driven to a large extent by a wide gender gap, where females are inactive (OECD, 2016[6]). Policy developments that have more specifically aimed to address the issue of NEET include the Vocational Training Centres (VTC) Programme (targeting school students) and its associated VTC Skill Development Programme (targeting adults) (Ministry of National Education, n.d.[7]; Turkish Employment Agency, n.d.[8]; OECD, 2020[9]) (See the section 'Enhancing Access in VET').

Figure 7. Türkiye has made progress in education access for 20-24 year-olds (2008, 2018)

Education, employment and NEET rates of 20-24 year-olds (2008)

Education, employment and NEET rates of 20-24 year-olds (2018)

Source: OECD (2022[3]), *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.

In fact, Türkiye took off from having the lowest participation rate of 20-24 year-olds in education in 2008, to moving closer to the OECD average in 2018. This suggests that expansion of access to education both through targeted interventions for specific groups of learners, such as female students or students in vocational education, and under systemic policy changes, such as the 4+4+4 policy, may have contributed to young people pursuing higher attainment following upper secondary education. Furthermore, Türkiye's achievement of doubling the share of 25-34 year-olds reaching tertiary education as the highest level of educational attainment between 2011 and 2021, offers additional evidence of this trend.

The following section then looks into a selection of policies at the learner and institution-level which may have contributed to increased access to education in Türkiye over the past two decades.

Providing supports to learners and schools to increase access

Increasing access to education relies on a combination of inputs ranging from adequate and appropriately equipped physical learning environments, staffing of quality teachers, or the availability of resources in support of learning. Countries with large populations of socio-economically disadvantaged students, a large share of students in rural communities, or with a combination of these factors can look to expanding access to education through these channels, although each comes with distinct challenges (Echazarra and Radinger, 2019[10]).

Learner and institution-level policies have been specifically designed to increase access to education in Türkiye since the early 2000s. These have included efforts to expand access to pre-primary education, especially in the year immediately prior to the start of primary education, through converting disused infrastructure into educational spaces, setting equity goals in conjunction with access goals, and establishing robust budgetary outlays to reduce or eliminate pre-school education expenses for families of disadvantaged children. At primary and secondary level, efforts to expand access have focused on provinces with low enrolment rates, while looking at bridging gender gaps. Finally, considering the international context, education policy in Türkiye has also included efforts to expand access for students from migrant or refugee backgrounds. These policies have ranged from providing financial incentives to language programmes, additional support, and transportation.

Policies in this sub-section operate at the level of learners and institutions. This means that these policies focus on targeted interventions that frequently centre around fostering opportunities for all; engaging parents, communities, and the private sector; and ensuring that funding matched specific priorities.

Setting foundations through early childhood education

Early childhood education (ECE) is critical to help equip learners with stronger learning foundations from their first years. Yet, as shown in Figure 2 above, enrolment in pre-primary education for 3-5 year-olds had important increases but remained well below the OECD average between 2014 and 2020. Available evidence also points to the challenge of ensuring that the expansion of ECE benefits those at greater disadvantage, with ECE remaining more common among wealthier and more educated backgrounds (European Commission, 2022[11]; World Bank, 2013[12]).

Ambitious goals for expanding access to pre-primary education have been set under consecutive Development Plans, while targeted initiatives to support groups facing complex barriers to access have aimed to promote equity. Through multiple initiatives, according to internal data provided by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), the number of pre-school institutions in Türkiye has more than tripled over the past 20 years. During this period, institutions have increased from 8 255 to 36 650, a peak that was reached in 2021 under the Early Childhood Education Campaign, with some additional 6 000 pre-school institutions established during its first year (2021-2022). Efforts have focused on prioritising universal access to pre-school in provinces where conditions allowed, while simultaneously attempting to build new infrastructure or convert disused infrastructure in provinces where a lack of suitable education spaces into education infrastructure inhibited immediately pursuing universal access (see 'System-level policies to increase access').

As such, under the **Early Childhood Education (ECE) Campaign** (2021), various projects sought to increase access to the early childhood education in areas of lower population, or to reduce gaps in access connected to low socio-economic status. One such project involves the renovation and reopening of disused school buildings as "Village Life Centres". Over 2 400 centres have been established in the first year of implementation (Ministry of National Education, 2022[13]). Furthermore, the associated Supporting Children with Pre-School Education project (2022) provided TRY 500 million (roughly USD 26.6 million) to cover the educational expenses of children from families that receive social assistance (Özer, Aşkar and Suna, 2023[14]).

In a similar vein, among these efforts is the **Increasing Quality of and Access to Early Childhood Education Project** (2020), through which Türkiye has aimed to install 300 containers and 600 pre-school classrooms in support of schools that lack the physical space needed to meet demand children in hard-to-reach situations (UNICEF, 2022[15]; European Commission, 2022[16]). The project is estimated to have extended access to some 30 000 children. In addition to facilitating the expansion of physical infrastructure, the project also provides for alternative and flexible pre-school education models involving the use of education kits that can be used by children in areas where pre-school education services might not be available (European Commission, 2022[16]).

Previous efforts also include the **Regulation on Preschool Education and Primary Education Institutions** (2014), which sought to address the needs of students unable to attend during the regular educational term to access pre-school institution during the summer. In addition, the law opened free mobile classes aimed at expanding access to students in rural areas for whom economic disadvantage might otherwise inhibit access to pre-primary services.

Expanding access to ECE in the coming years will remain an important target for Türkiye, both in terms of providing access to the most disadvantaged, as well as addressing regional disparities. This expansion will need to be paired with efforts to attract teaching staff and support them to be able to deliver quality education in sometime challenging contexts.

Supporting girls to attend education

At multiple age ranges, girls' enrolment rates in Türkiye have historically lagged behind those of boys within the same age group, although these gaps have steadily narrowed between 2013 and 2020. In 2013, for example, the enrolment rate of female students aged 20 to 24 was approximately four percentage points less than that of their male peers. By comparison, across the OECD, the average enrolment rates of male students aged 20 to 24 was more than six percentage points lower than that of females of the same age group in 2013. This enrolment gap persisted between 2013 and 2017, but started to steadily decline in 2018. In fact, by 2020, the enrolment gap between female and male students had fallen to less than one percentage point across different age ranges.

These fluctuations have coincided with a period in which the government has also adopted policies specifically targeted at improving access of girls to education. Adopting a gender perspective, the **Project for Increasing Enrolment Rates Especially for Girls** (ISGE, 2011-2013), sought to ensure that access to education for girls kept pace with greater access overall. This project contributed to this goal by targeting 16 regions with the lowest enrolment rates among girls to increase primary and secondary school participation, improve family educational awareness, and enhance labour market links. Work towards these goals was grouped by service, supply, and grant components (Human Resources Development Operating Structure, 2018[17]).

Key objectives of the service component included field research on guidance and counselling services as well as workshops and trainings to improve their quality, envisaging steps to lower rates of early school leaving among girls, and incentives to families to enrol and keep their children in education. Measures related to supply aimed to support access through learning materials to be used during their instruction (e.g. IT resources, food technology equipment, and cosmetics and hair care services equipment). The final component envisaged grants to investigate the factors contributing to early school leaving and absenteeism. Other elements included in the design of the project included training and "catch-up courses" to help girls who have left school early,

as well as events in collaboration with local administrations, NGOs and the media, to raise awareness among parents on the importance of girls participating in education.

Building on the progress achieved under the first operation, the **Increasing School Attendance Rates Especially for Girls** (IAREFG-II, 2015-2017) involved outreach activities along similar lines of the initial project and aimed to expand access with the purchase of additional lots for schools and the provision of additional equipment for pilot schools (Human Resources Development Operating Structure, 2018[18]; OECD, 2020[9]). A review of the second project details the progress of various components of the project, such as 15 990 families reached through home visits to convince parents to send their daughters to schools (Human Resources Development Operating Structure, 2018[18]).

While Türkiye has made significant progress in increasing enrolment rates among girls, ensuring equal access to education will involve addressing issues such as early school leaving, absenteeism, and grade retention. This is the focus of the **Operation to Increase Attendance and Schooling Rates** (IPA-II, 2021), which targets 50 schools in 14 provinces through a prevention, intervention, and compensation model and which identifies girls as a target group in some regions (Human Resources Development Operating Structure, 2021[19]; Ministry of National Education, 2022[20]). In a similar vein, previous reviews of Türkiye's efforts to expand access to education point to a need to move beyond numerical targets such as enrolment ratios and to attach greater importance to the experience of children in the education system (Sasmaz, 2015[21]).

Enhancing access and infrastructure in VET

Increasing access to vocational education and training (VET) has also emerged as a policy priority in recent years. In 2020, some 36% of 17-year-olds were enrolled in VET in Türkiye, which was slightly above the OECD average of 31% (OECD, 2022[3]). Although Türkiye has over 3 500 VET institutions serving approximately 1.5 million students, achievement gaps have been identified in terms of absenteeism, lower academic achievement, grade repetition and early school leaving as a pernicious issue in VET education (OECD, 2022[22]; Özer, 2020[23]). Besides the development of education infrastructure, efforts to improve access in Türkiye have focused on changes to the delivery of VET in Türkiye to facilitate access, particularly for the most disadvantaged.

For example, the **1 000 Schools in Vocational Education and Training Project** (2020) has aimed to increase access to education by focusing on geographical areas and student populations in greater need of support. This project targets the 1 000 schools facing the most significant disadvantage. It started by looking into the physical environment of schools, but also includes measures to strengthen the capacity of teachers, school leaders and parents to support learning, and academic support for low-performing students. Improvements to the educational environment have focused primarily on maintaining and repairing schools, enhancing libraries with information and communication technologies (ICT), upgrading existing school laboratories, or establishing at least one laboratory in schools without one, and providing at least two smart boards per school (OECD, 2022[22]; Ministry of National Education, 2021[24]). As part of this initiative, each of the 1 000 schools has been equipped with at least one new library, with further maintenance and repairs taking place in 692 schools.

Efforts to improve the accessibility of VET have also focused on enhancing its attractiveness and relevance. These include changes introduced through the Vocational Education Law No 3308 (2021), through which students who successfully complete the 11th grade receive half, instead of one-third of minimum wage when they enter 12th grade (Ministry of National Education, 2021[25]). Furthermore, the **Specialised Vocational Training Centres Skills'10 Project** (UMEM, 2010) was launched in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and sought to address high unemployment via multiple components. Under this project, the **Labour Market Needs Analysis** (2010) aimed to involve employers in developing a better understanding of how mismatches between skills supply and demand contributed to high unemployment. This analysis contributed to the identification of skills needs and the development of courses which would close the identified skills gaps. Courses consisted of a three-month in-school theoretical component and a subsequent internship period of equal duration. Under UMEM, support was provided to 140 VET secondary schools to expand their technical infrastructure and to accommodate higher enrolment demand, and trainees received financial support while

participating in the programme and seeking a job following programme completion. The OECD reported that some 225 000 people received training under UMEM and that roughly 75% attained employment (OECD, 2017[26]; OECD, 2020[9]).

Türkiye's efforts to increase access and attractiveness of VET, particularly for the most disadvantaged and in the regions where offer is low, need to continue. As highlighted in a previous OECD report, conducting a full evaluation of the 1 000 Schools in Vocational Education and Training Project would enable Türkiye to identify and mainstream key elements that improve learning environments and outcomes in disadvantaged VET schools (OECD, 2022[22]). Along with enhancing infrastructure, it is critical for Türkiye to ensure the relevance of the training offer and that it effectively contributes to preparing students for their next educational or professional stages as their contexts evolve.

Students in motion

Several initiatives have aimed to facilitate access among disadvantaged groups by removing obstacles to participation beyond education. In this context, for example, the **Social Assistance and Solidarity Encouragement Fund** (1990, 2006-07) provides school meals to students facing various types of disadvantage, including living far from schools, being highly vulnerable, or requiring free transportation to access school (World Food Program, 2022[27]). These assistance programmes have especially sought to target vulnerable students in pre-school and kindergarten. Funding for these free meal programmes is provided by the Social Assistance and Solidarity Fund of the Ministry of Family and Social Services, although the MoNE has had a role in implementing an existing school meal programme. Furthermore, collaborations with the World Food Programme (WFP) have sought to ensure that non-tuition costs do not prevent access to education (Ministry of National Education, 2023[28]).

The MoNE has recently sought to bolster the availability of free school lunches for children in ECE, with VET secondary schools being engaged in the production. According to national-level data, Türkiye increased the capacity of free school meals from 1.8 million per day to 5 million per day in February 2023 (Özer, Aşkar and Suna, 2023[14]). Much of this increased capacity was used to provide meals to those affected by the earthquakes that took place in the same month.

Türkiye's geographical location has also translated into a unique challenge for the country in terms of catering to the needs of a high number of refugee students. In 2015, Türkiye was hosting the largest refugee population in the world, with over two million people at that time. From this population, MoNE estimated that around 589 500 were school-aged children and that up to 250 000 were enrolled in school, with an additional 137 650 planned to be enrolled by the end of the 2015-2016 school year (World Bank, 2015[29]). By the end of 2017, UNICEF estimated that the number of Syrian refugees had increased to over 3.4 million, with over 600 000 refugee children enrolled in formal education in Türkiye (UNICEF, 2017[30]). This followed a policy shift in 2016 that witnessed the integration of Syrian children into Turkish public schools (TPSs), whereas they had previously received education services in temporary education centres (TECs). According to UNICEF, 2017 was the first year that the enrolment of Syrian students in TPS was greater than their enrolment in TECs (UNICEF, 2017[30]). As of 2022, national data suggest that most Syrian refugee children in Türkiye are enrolled in mainstream education, with the focus of policy action shifting to the most vulnerable.

Among the initiatives put in place to cater to the needs of Syrian youth were adaptations to the **Conditional Cash Transfer for Education** (CCTE) (2003, 2017). This programme was launched in 2003 to encourage participation in education among disadvantaged Turkish children, particularly those in rural areas, but was expanded to include refugee children from 2016. The programme requires that children attend school with a minimum attendance record of 80%. The incentive covers students at a wide range of educational levels, from pre-primary to upper secondary; furthermore, as of 2017, families of children between 48 and 66 months of age could receive the incentive for pre-school enrolment. The programme was expanded in various iterations to encourage refugee families to enrol and support the persistence of their children in formal education. By the end of 2017, over 188 000 refugee children were receiving cash assistance (UNICEF, 2017[30]; OECD, 2020[9]). The overall reach of the programme had massively expanded by early 2021, with close to

683 000 children receiving conditional cash transfers. Similarly, the **Accelerated Learning Programme**, implemented in 2018 by MoNE with UNICEF to help youth out of school to bridge learning gaps and re-enter formal education, was also used to support the reintegration of Syrian refugee children. Later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it helped students in general to keep up with education delivery, through an online modality (UNICEF, 2020[31]; OECD, 2020[9]). Another key initiative was the **Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System Project** (2016-18), which, with EU support, included language programmes, catch-up and extra-support classes, transportation and educational material, teacher training, and awareness raising in the 24 provinces with the highest concentration of Syrian refugees (OECD, 2020[9]).

Other initiatives pursued through partnerships between the Turkish government and international organisations show that expanding access to refugee children is as much a question of ensuring the availability of infrastructural resources and teachers to meet the needs of this population as it is of encouraging participation. With this in mind, the **MoNE-PTT (National Postal Service)-UNICEF Teacher Incentives Programme** (2015) was created to provide a monthly stipend to over 13 000 Syrian volunteer teachers, also with support from Germany (UNICEF, 2017[30]). The programme has expanded from 2 500 education staff in 2014 to over 12 000 in 2019 (UNICEF, 2019[32]). Oher initiatives, such as the Syrian Education Personnel Management Strategy (EPMS, 2017), have focused on improving the status of Syrian staff in light of the 2016 integration of Syrian youth into the regular Turkish education system, given the role these teachers can play in supporting a smooth transition (UNICEF, 2017[30]). Türkiye has also collaborated with international organisations to provide targeted training to over 100 000 Turkish teachers and close to 19 000 Syrian volunteer teachers on supporting refugee children's integration into the regular school system.

Programmes undertaken with international partners also supported the construction of prefabricated schools in camps and host communities with capacity for close to 10 000 students. Other infrastructure developments saw the creation of 520 classrooms for formal education with capacity to serve 38 000 students, as well as 304 early childhood education classrooms with capacity for over 15 000 children (UNICEF, 2017[30]). Finally, efforts have been made to raise the quality of VET infrastructure in areas with the highest numbers of non-native students. For example, the **Programme for Facilitating the Access of Syrian and Host Communities to Employment through Quality Apprenticeships and Vocational Training in Türkiye (IMEP)** (2020) aimed to improve the infrastructural quality of VTCs, raise awareness through information campaigns, and provide Turkish language lessons to facilitate the integration of immigrant students in vocational and apprenticeship pathways.

In spite of these efforts, it is estimated that some 350 000 of the 1.2 million school-aged Syrian refugee children in Türkiye remain outside of education (UNICEF, 2022[33]). The **Support for School Enrolment** (SSE, 2019) initiative aims to address this challenge by bringing an additional 60 000 refugee children aged 5 to 17 into formal or non-formal education programmes by October 2023. The programme was launched with international partners such as UNICEF and works through outreach teams who identify children in the target group and assess their needs before referring them to specialised services (UNICEF, 2022[33]). Such comprehensive, targeted efforts will play a crucial role in increasing the participation of refugee children in mainstream education, since those remaining outside are likely to be the hardest-to-reach and to have the most complex needs.

Promoting systemic changes to enhance access to education

System-level policies have also been designed to contribute to the expansion of education access in Türkiye from the outset of the 21st century. These efforts have included setting participation targets, such as the goal to achieve full participation in primary and secondary education under the National Education Goals for 2023, or the priority under the **Eleventh Development Plan of the President** that every child receive at least one year of early childhood education (ECE) before starting school. Other policy documents, such as the **Presidential Annual Programme**, echo the focus on expanding participation in pre-primary to 3-4 years-olds (OECD, 2022[22]). In conjunction, Türkiye has made major system level changes in support of greater participation, such as increasing the number of formal compulsory years of education from 8 to 12 years at the start of the 2010s, making a four-year course of upper secondary compulsory. Finally, Türkiye has taken

steps to improve access to education when in-person participation is not possible. This was especially the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, when educational television programmes were provided on a handful of national public television channels with content to support children and students from ECE to upper secondary.

Policies analysed in this sub-section operate at the level of the education system and, therefore, contribute to setting major goals and an overall vision for the country. As such, efforts identified for Türkiye at this level frequently revolve around setting new standards of education, improving the governance of education, or supporting the funding needs of the system in a broad way.

Strengthening access to school education through infrastructure capacity and structural change

At system level, consecutive five-year development plans have focused on gradually increasing enrolment goals for pre-school education. For example, the **Eighth Five-Year Development Plan** set a target of 25% enrolment in pre-school education by 2005 (State Planning Organisation, 2001[34]). Later, in the **Strategy Action Plan for ECE** accompanying the **9th Development Plan (2007-2013)**, Türkiye set targets of universal enrolment in kindergarten for children between five and six years of age, and 50% enrolment in pre-primary education for children between the ages of three and five. This priority was re-emphasised by the World Bank in 2011, with the deadline for these targets moved to the 2014/15 school year (World Bank, 2011[35]). The government prioritised implementation in provinces with the highest kindergarten participation rates with a view to more quickly achieving universal kindergarten enrolment where infrastructure conditions were already favourable, while allowing time to develop the necessary preconditions to expanded access where resource or infrastructure barriers would have slowed progress. With enrolment rates for ECE still below the OECD average, these efforts need to continue.

Perhaps one of the most significant developments for schools over the past 20 years of Turkish education policy was the introduction of **compulsory education for 12 years**, along with a reorganisation of education (also known as the 4+4+4 policy,2012). These measures increased the number of years of compulsory education from eight to twelve years and redefined the education system into three four-year levels for primary, lower, and upper secondary (OECD, 2013[36]). The preceding change to compulsory education was in 1998, when the number of required years was increased from five to eight. The introduction of 12 years of compulsory education under the 4+4+4 policy in 2012 brought some benefits and potential challenges. Although this reform increased access to education, equity concerns emerged due to the comparatively early tracking of students into different education pathways. Students are mainly tracked into education pathways at the age of 14, when students access upper secondary education and can be sorted into different programmes of general education or vocational and technical education. If the different pathways vary in quality, this can widen achievement gaps and hinder equity (OECD, 2020[9]). Across OECD countries, the most frequent age at which students are sorted into different educational tracks is 16.

As part of systemic efforts to expand VET, the Ministry of National Education sought to enable greater flexibility and individualisation in VET programmes. This included introducing practice-based programmes and making available to Grade 12 students some options of courses to provide exposure to fields they might later pursue in tertiary education (OECD, 2022[22]). Furthermore, actions undertaken by Türkiye to increase access to vocational education and training at system level include revisions to entry requirements for certain types of VET institutions in order to increase their attractiveness. Vocational training centres (VTCs) provide vocational training through skills development programmes with practice-based training (Ministry of National Education, n.d.[7]). Programmes offered by these centres are aimed at more closely addressing skills needs indicated by the labour market. Previously considered a non-academic pathway, since 2017, VTC students may also gain an upper secondary diploma (OECD, 2020[9]). Recent reforms undertaken to the VTC model sought to increase access by eliminating the obligation that VTC students enrol in open high schools—corresponding to second-chance programmes for adults and alternative education for youth aged under 18 who have fallen behind in mainstream schooling—and complete certain courses to receive a high school diploma in conjunction with the completion of the VTC course. Under these reforms, VTC students only need to take and

complete courses offered by the VTC to receive an upper secondary education diploma upon completion of studies at the VTC (Ministry of National Education, n.d.[7]; Özer, 2020[37]).

As Türkiye continues its efforts to enhance access across the education spectrum, it will need to remain mindful of the importance of ensuring that structural arrangements sorting students into different pathways still present them with options for quality education and training.

Ensuring continued access to education in the context of pandemic

Along with their OECD peers, Turkish policymakers took action to support continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UNESCO data, between 16 February 2020 and 30 June 2022, excluding academic breaks, Türkiye's schools remained fully open during 290 days, partially open during 149 days and closed due to COVID-19 during 196 days (UNESCO, 2022[38]).

A core effort was the transition to online learning, through the **EBA Platform in 2020** or the support of television broadcasting, while efforts took place to develop teaching staff capacity to deliver online learning. The EBA platform provided lessons to students from primary to secondary education. This platform initially hosted over 1 600 courses and over 20 000 interactive activities and later allowed teachers to deliver live classes, along with learning powered adaptive support tools. The EBA platform was supplemented by education delivery through **national public television** on six channels. These programmes provided educational content to children from ECE to upper secondary education. In the same way, during school closures in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the MoNE published **different materials to provide broader support to students and their families**. These included a psychoeducational activities booklet, as well as guidebooks for students and their families. A telephone hotline also offered them advice and support (OECD, 2020[9]).

The provision of distance learning training for teachers and school leaders, developed in collaboration with UNICEF, aimed to support the development of professional skills not only in the context of the pandemic, but also beyond. The **Development of Design and Management Skills in Distance Education** course (2020), for example, aimed to strengthen teacher capacity in promoting three kinds of interactions in distance education: student-student interaction; student-teacher interaction, and student-material interaction. Another course under the programme, **Development of Distance Education, Design and Management Skills of School Administrators**, provided opportunities for school leaders to connect and share experiences, facilitating the acquisition of administrative, technical and communications skills to lead learning in uncertain times. As of October 2020, roughly 150 000 teachers and 40 000 school leaders had taken part in the new courses (OECD, 2021[39]).

Another key measure involved including teachers as a priority group for vaccination to reduce the spread of the virus in schools; national-level data indicate that around 80% of teachers had received at least one dose (8% higher than the vaccination rate of the general population in Turkey) and 70% of teachers had received two-doses (about 15% higher than the vaccination rate of the general population in Turkey) (Ministry of National Education, 2021[40]). The MoNE also created a tracking system to monitor positive COVID-19 cases at the provincial, district and school levels and used the data to inform decisions on quarantines and class closures (Ministry of National Education, 2021[41]). In addition to this, VET institutions have played a role in supporting Türkiye's broader response to the pandemic in education institutions (See Box 1).

Box 1. An insight into how VET in Türkiye supported the country's COVID-19 response

Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions and their students appear to have played a key role in Türkiye's response to COVID-19, supporting the provision of essential materials to decrease the spread of the pandemic. Within months of the outbreak of the pandemic, 50 vocational and technical Anatolian upper secondary institutions (VTAHs) had begun to produce 10 million surgical masks per month. Other materials included some 6 million litres of surface disinfectant and 400 000 litres of hand disinfectant as well as aprons and protective face shields. National data indicate that as of June 2020, VET upper secondary institutions had attained a production capacity that could meet the needs of 54 000 schools in all Türkiye's 81 provinces. The MoNE supported this rapid shift in production by directly supplying VET schools with raw materials.

VET institutions also supported the transition to face-to-face learning when schools reopened in September 2021 by producing low-cost rapid antigen tests. One of Türkiye's research and development (R&D) centres—established to strengthen links between vocational and technical education and R&D—played a key role in designing and producing the tests. This was one of several measures implemented to ensure the safe and sustainable reopening of schools.

Sources: Ministry of National Education (2020[42]), *Turkish Vocational Schools Help Fight Against Covid-19 Pandemic*, https://www.sesric.org/imgs/news/2390-Country-Presentation-Turkey.pdf (accessed on 25th April 2023).
Ministry of National Education (2021[40]), *6 Eylül'de Tam Zamanli Olarak Yüz Yüze Eğitim Başlayacak [Full-time Face-to-face Teaching Will Start on September 6]*, https://www.meb.gov.tr/6-eylulde-tam-zamanli-olarak-yuz-yuze-egitim-baslayacak/haber/23878/tr
Ministry of National Education (2021[43]), *Meslek Lisesinde Geliştirilen Kovid-19 Hizli Antijen Kitine Avrupa Da Talip Oldu [Developed in Vocational High School, Europe Also Demanded the Covid-19 Rapid Antigen Kit]*, https://www.meb.gov.tr/meslek-lisesinde-gelistirilen-kovid-19-hizli-antijen-kitine-avrupa-da-talip-oldu/haber/24831/tr

Some considerations on access for Türkiye

Türkiye has been able to increase access to education over the past 20 years through a combination of systemic reforms and local initiatives. Raising compulsory education requirements under the 4+4+4 policy prompted a need for greater educational supply in terms of facilities, teachers, and resources. At the same time, targeted initiatives directly impacting learners and their families—including the Conditional Cash Transfer Scheme and initiatives to increase attendance among girls—appear to have encouraged ever greater numbers of families to send their children to school. An apparent result has been higher education attainment. There has also been some resilience to macroeconomic distress with a drop between 2008 and 2018 of the shares of 20-24 year-old NEETs, although Türkiye continues to perform comparatively less well than its OECD peers. Policy makers in Türkiye will need to remain focused on expanding access to the hardest-to-reach student populations. They must also keep important unrealised access ambitions in front of mind while addressing urgent challenges, including ensuring that most people complete at least compulsory education, and for the 300 000 Syrian refugee children currently out of school.

Policies for quality

Efforts to improve the quality of the educational offer have taken place at multiple levels of the education system in Türkiye. At the systemic level, various policy documents strive to define the priorities of policy makers and education system actors. Türkiye has developed policy initiatives, regulation and legislation to define a system-wide vision for education reform in the country. This signalling of goals is important in any

policy reform effort, and especially relevant in Türkiye where, according to OECD data from 2017, over 70% of decisions in lower secondary education are taken at the level of the central government, considerably above the OECD average (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. In Türkiye, a large share of decisions in education are taken at the central level (2017)

Share of decisions taken at each level of government in public lower secondary education, 2017
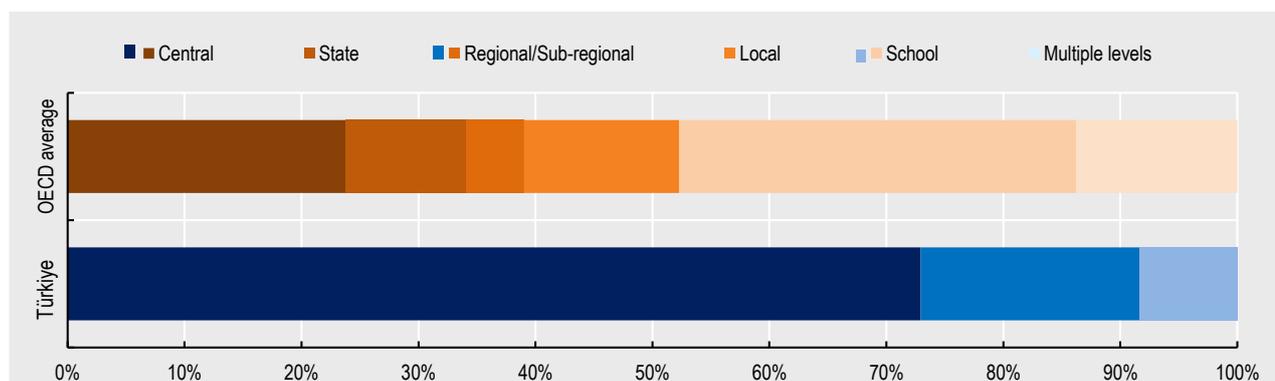
Source: OECD (2017[44]), *Education at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en.

Along with these agenda-setting documents, efforts to improve educational quality have also been supported by curricular reforms and standards setting over the past 20 years. The mid-2000s saw the first major curricular overhaul in primary education in over 30 years. In the past five years, new curricular reforms have covered primary education and then secondary and vocational education and training (VET). These efforts have aimed to bring the curriculum in line with the requirements of the labour market while also considering regional differences and varied teacher capacity. Other recent system-level reforms have sought to professionalise the role of teachers with the establishment of teaching career paths.

Furthermore, other policy efforts related to quality have sought to address specific challenges that called for urgent responses. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and institutional lockdowns, efforts to provide teachers with training for remote learning have sought to improve the quality of education delivery in a new environment, while a network of peer learning for school leaders aimed to promote the sharing of good practices. Through both targeted initiatives and system-level policy measures, Türkiye appears to have kept educational quality a priority while continuing progress towards expanding access to education.

According to OECD data, the performance of Turkish students in PISA has improved over the period between 2003 and 2018 in reading and mathematics, while Turkish students performed better in science in PISA 2018 than they did when Türkiye first participated in the PISA science assessment in 2006 (see Figure 9). Despite improvements to performance in all three subjects assessed by PISA, Türkiye has neither reached nor surpassed the OECD average in any PISA assessment cycle.

Figure 9. Trends in mean performance in PISA
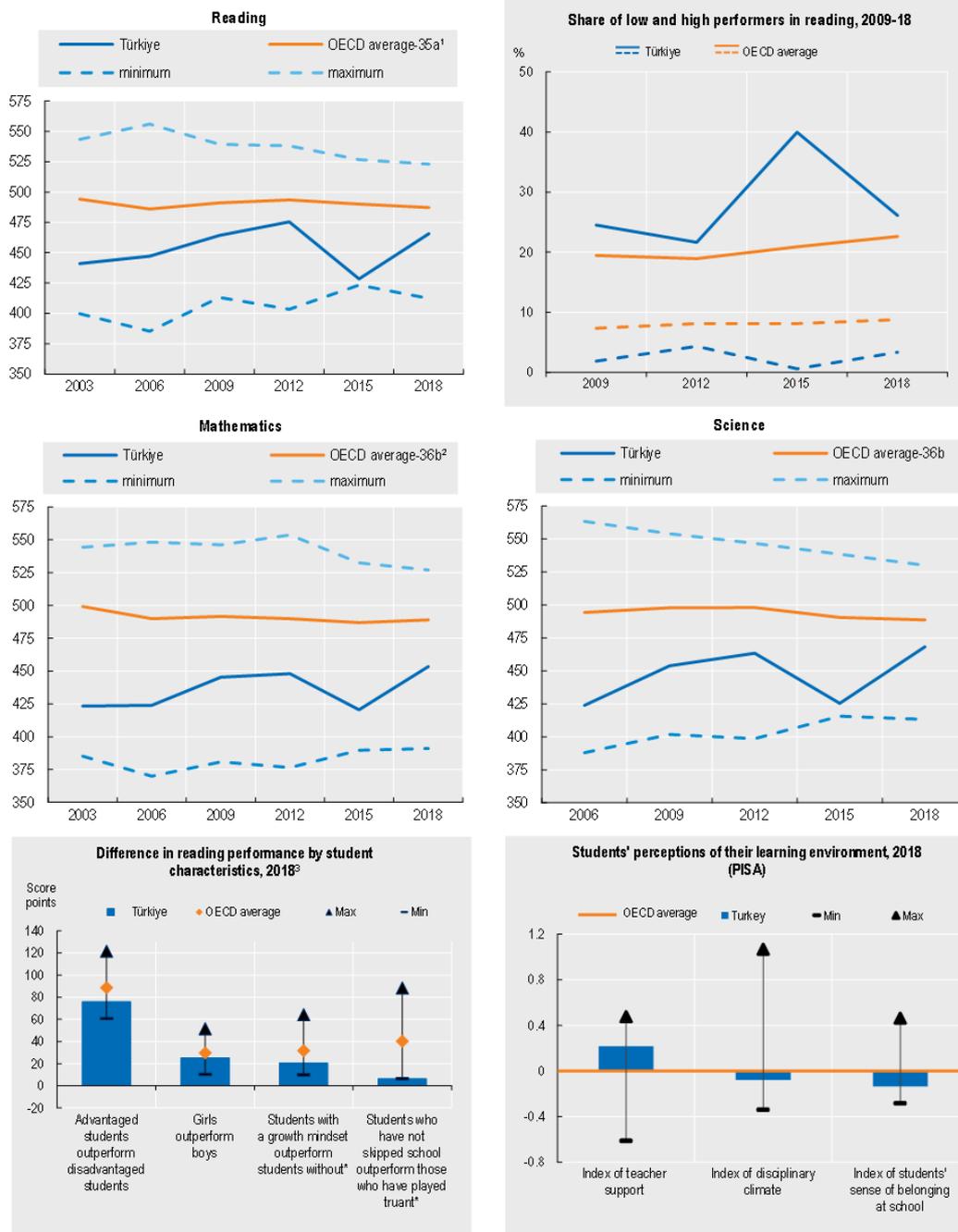
Note: "Min"/ "Max" refer to OECD countries with the lowest/highest values. For a detailed description of OECD averages in PISA, please consult the Reader's Guide in *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I)*, https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en. 1: Except for 2003 and 2006, the OECD average mean reading score refers to OECD average-35a; the OECD average mean reading score for 2003 refers to OECD average-29b, while the OECD average mean reading score for 2006 refers to OECE average-35b. 2: Except for 2003, the OECD average mean mathematics score refers to OECD average-36b; the OECD average mean reading score for 2003 refers to OECD average-30. 3: Statistically significant values [*]: Score point difference after accounting for students' socio-economic status and language spoken at home.

Source: OECD (2019[45]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en; OECD (2019[46]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en; OECD (2019[47]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/acd78851-en.

At the same time, Türkiye has experienced a decrease in performance for the three main subjects assessed between 2012 and 2015 (OECD, 2019[45]). Possible explanations identified for this fluctuation in previous analysis include the expansion in the number of schools prior to taking the PISA test, which made a larger and more varied share of the population eligible to take it (OECD, 2022[48]). When controlling for the impact of increased participation in education resulting from the expansion in the number of years of compulsory education (following the 4+4+4 policy), Türkiye managed to maintain or improve performance of 15-year-olds in PISA 2018 while also expanding access (OECD, 2019[45]). Since 2003, Türkiye has added more than 400 000 students to the total population of 15-year-olds eligible to participate in PISA. Viewed in relative terms, the percentage of 15-year-olds in Türkiye covered by PISA has increased from 36% in 2013 to 73% in 2018. Beyond these key performance outcomes and expanded coverage, Turkish students participating in PISA 2018 also reported feeling supported by their teachers, and performance gaps in reading based on socio-economic background or gender were lower among 15-year-olds in Türkiye compared to other OECD countries.

At the same time, PISA data suggests that schools can do more to further increase their value as places for learning. The country had some of the smallest performance gaps among OECD countries between students who have not skipped school and those who have played truant. Türkiye also performed less well compared to the OECD average in the index of disciplinary climate (with a value of -.08) and students' sense of belonging at school (with a value of -.14).

Important gaps also persist between the achievement of urban and rural students. In PISA 2015, Türkiye exhibited the highest degree of disparity in learning outcomes between rural and urban areas among upper middle-income countries and OECD countries that participated in PISA 2015 (Kitchen et al., 2019[49]). The urban-rural performance gap persisted in PISA 2018, with students in urban areas performing better than students in rural areas by at least 40 score points in all three subjects covered by PISA (OECD, 2022[22]).

Recent OECD analysis also shows that students in Türkiye tend to be more isolated in both socioeconomic and academic terms compared to their peers in other OECD countries participating in PISA 2018 (OECD, 2022[22]). Analysis conducted on the results of Türkiye's national high-stakes examination by MoNE also highlight achievement gaps between schools as a long-standing challenge facing the Turkish education system (Özer and Suna, 2021[50]; OECD, 2022[22]).

In PISA 2018, Türkiye had the lowest variation in reading performance within schools, while exhibiting higher between-school variation in reading performance compared to the average of its OECD peers. This implies that socio-economic diversity amongst students attending the same school was lower than amongst students attending different schools; although this was largely due to variation by geography (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Student performance in reading varies more between schools than within schools in Türkiye compared to other countries and economies (PISA 2018)
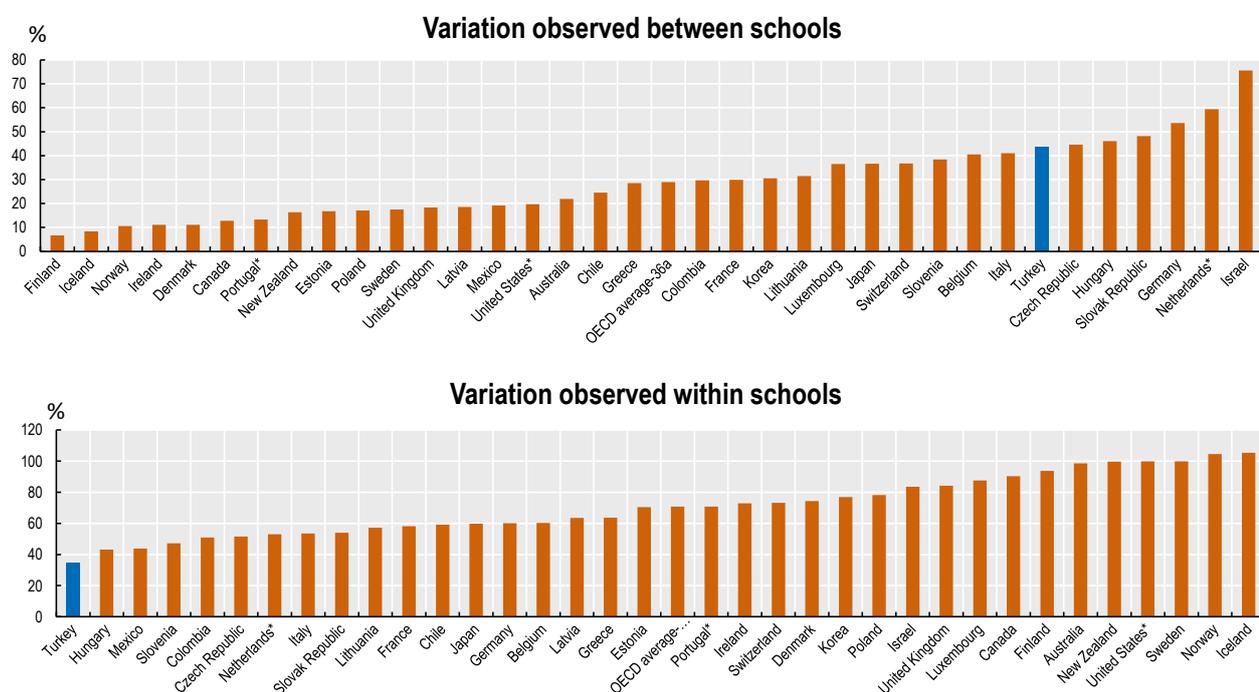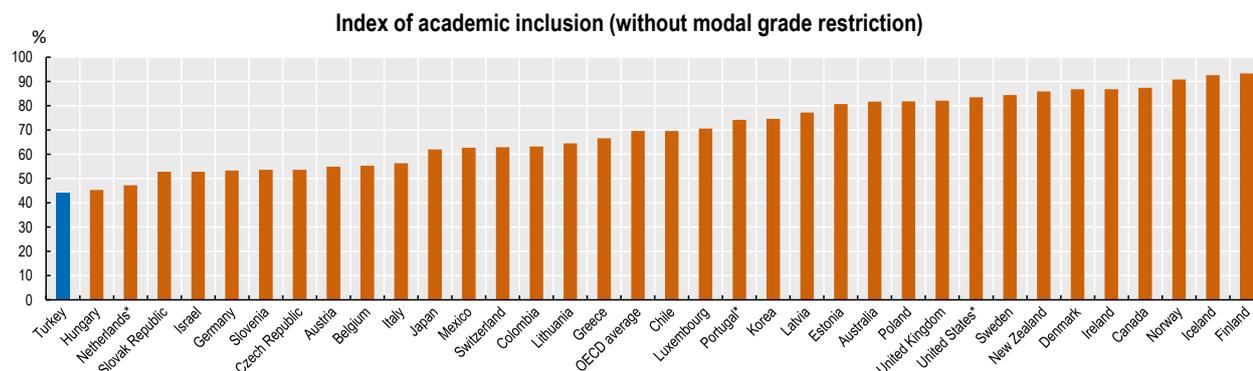

Source: OECD (2019[46]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en.

Compared to other education systems, Türkiye fares below the OECD average in terms of social inclusion, or the extent to which students of different socio-economic backgrounds attend the same school (OECD, 2015[51]). Türkiye experienced the largest statistically significant increase in the index of social inclusion between 2003 and 2012; however, the fact that Türkiye, at 67.0%, remains below the OECD average (75.7%) in PISA 2018 suggests that more room for progress remains.

Looking at indices of academic inclusion can also provide valuable information on the extent to which students with different academic abilities and needs share the same school (OECD, 2015[51]). In 2018, Türkiye ranked the lowest amongst OECD countries for academic inclusion. Education systems where students are admitted to schools based on academic performance or other individual characteristics experience a more direct relationship between education policies and levels of academic inclusion (OECD, 2015[51]) (see Figure 11). This was one of the issues associated with Türkiye's previous use of assessment for placement in upper secondary education.

## Figure 11. Türkiye has lower levels of academic inclusion (PISA 2018)

Index of academic inclusion (without modal grade restriction)

Source: OECD (2019[46]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en.

Recent reforms have the potential to promote better academic inclusion in Türkiye. For example, the **Transition from Primary Schools to Secondary Schools Exam** was introduced in the 2013/14 school year but abolished in 2017 after being found to create a high level of competition between students for school places. Under the new **Transition to High Schools System**, implemented since 2018, Türkiye made the central exam to enter upper secondary education optional except for the most competitive routes. Through this system, Türkiye aimed to place 90% of students based on residence and prior school performance (Ministry of National Education, 2021[52]; OECD, 2020[9]).

National-level data from 2021 points to a gradual decrease in the proportion of students being placed through the central examination and a higher rate of students being placed at one of their preferred upper secondary institutions. As pointed out in a previous OECD study, however, the use of lower secondary school data as a deciding factor when schools are oversubscribed may mean that disadvantaged students continue to be overrepresented in lower-performing upper secondary schools, because these students performed less well on the examination on average (OECD, 2022[22]). Türkiye has set out a medium-term goal to reduce achievement gaps between schools through support programmes for students (Ministry of National Education, 2021[52]). Other steps to address this include making optional the examination for upper secondary entry. **Türkiye's Education Vision 2023** (2019) lays out this priority and specifically aims to address downsides of the previous system, in particular the focus on memorisation, the contribution of multiple-choice exams to the development of private course centres, and the subsequent delinking of exam results from the quality of educational provision at school (Ministry of National Education, 2019[53]). Among the recommendations previously provided by the OECD to help address emerging challenges is considering a system to manage overdemand in student placement that provides clear factors of selection (e.g. having a sibling in school, the age of the student), or to provide more information to guide student choice, while improving flexibility between pathways (Kitchen et al., 2019[49]).

Furthermore, Türkiye showed above OECD average variation in performance for mathematics between schools in Grades 4 and 8 (as measured by TIMSS; see Figure 12) and at age 15 (as measured by PISA 2018) based on student background, with students of similar academic performance clustering into schools based on socioeconomic background (OECD, 2022[48]).

Figure 12. Students from advantaged backgrounds perform better than students from disadvantaged backgrounds in mathematics (TIMSS)

Performance difference between advantaged and disadvantaged students
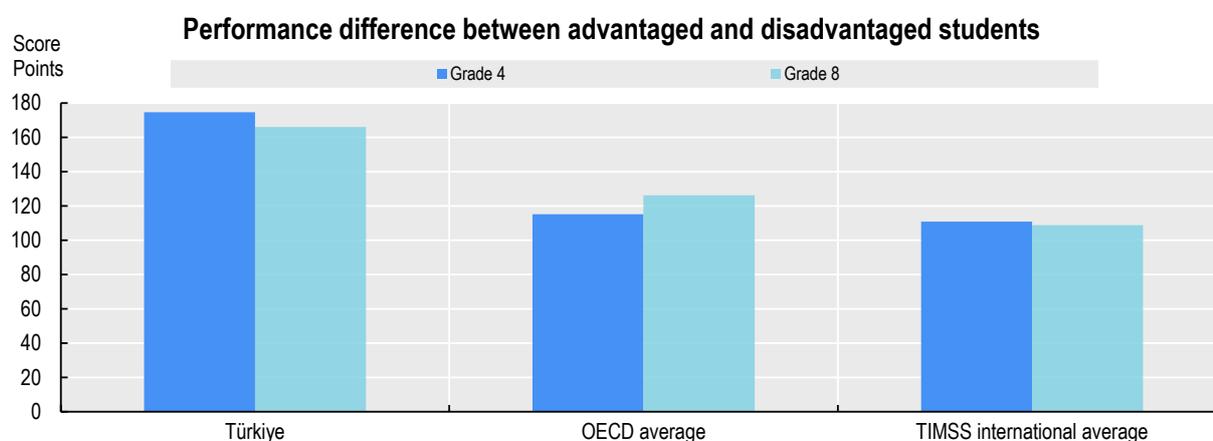
Note: The bar for each country shows the score point difference between students with "many" resources and those with "few resources".
Source: Adapted from OECD (2022[48]), *Student Achievement in Türkiye: Findings from PISA and TIMSS International Assessments*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c8a84283-en.

The following section looks further into other policy efforts related to improving quality taking place since 2000, to identify policy pointers to help Türkiye move forward.

Supporting learners to achieve better educational outcomes

Supporting learners to achieve better educational outcomes requires education systems to empower learners to confidently navigate their worlds by fostering their agency and co-agency, identifying and supporting needs in their learning processes, and nurturing positive climates for learning (OECD, 2021[39]). It also relates to bringing together adaptive pedagogies and sustained supports for vulnerable learners. Advancing these objectives requires education systems to provide personalised and flexible learning for all, while also ensuring that vulnerable learners receive targeted support regardless of the school they attend. This is especially critical in education systems where learners face multidimensional disadvantages that heighten the risk of disruptive events interrupting their ability to access quality education. Furthermore, the elevated sensitivity to changing contexts amongst learners in vulnerable situations call for a long-term vision by education system actors to ensure that equity of access to a high-quality educational offer is sustained, monitored and enhanced coherently over sustained time periods (OECD, 2021[39]).

Drawing on OECD data, this section provides an overview of the evolution of policy efforts in Türkiye over the past two decades related to efforts to improve the quality of the education offer[1] (Burns and Köster, 2016[54]). Key policies identified for education advancement include the establishment of a vision and goals for the system, the definition of learning contents, or specific efforts to integrate refugee youth into the Turkish education system, along with policies implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Establishing a vision

In education, a whole-of-system vision that keeps the focus on agreed goals and principles is key for effective education system governance (Burns and Köster, 2016[54]). Türkiye has undertaken efforts to establish a vision, setting out goals for education improvement. These include key development plans steering education in Türkiye, such as: the **Strategic Plans for the Ministry of National Education** (with three implemented since 2010), the **Development Plans** (with three implemented also since 2010) and the **Lifelong Learning Strategy Document and Action Plan** (2014-18) (OECD, 2020[9]).

For example, the five-year strategic plans established by Türkiye since 2010 outline the medium-term goals, along with the quantitative progress indicators, responsible actors and financial resources to each goal that guide across different levels of the government administration, including the central, provincial and district levels. As part of this, Türkiye publishes annual progress reports. While the first strategic plan (2010-14) focused on access, the second (2015-19) emphasised quality and institutional capacity. An evaluation praised the focus on disadvantaged groups and good governance while noting gaps in performance indicators and funding. The third plan (2019-23) aims to improve transitions to tertiary and employment, as well as support for special educational needs, and modernising structures for greater efficiency.

More recently, the **For a Stronger Tomorrow: Education Vision 2023** (2019), established 8 targets to promote a holistic, human-centred approach to education. These targets focus on key challenges facing the education system, which include: reducing gaps between schools, improving school learning environments, improving the attractiveness of VET, reducing exam pressure; developing 21st century skills; improving educators' job satisfaction; expanding ECEC; and improving inclusive practices for students with special educational needs (OECD, 2020[9]). For example, the target of closing gaps among schools includes measures to ensure that disadvantaged schools are given investment priority in School Development Plans. Türkiye has also regionally undertaken monitoring and evaluation activities to identify schools that fall short of their School Development Plan as the result of socioeconomic disadvantage, for targeted support programmes.

National strategies and plans have been a major part of educational governance during the last decade among OECD countries (OECD, 2019[55]). These policies serve to set up policy goals, actions, and monitor results. In the context of Türkiye, their importance relies in helping different actors understand the goals of the system and define actions to reach them. For this, it is essential that actions are supported by the necessary resources to make them happen, but also to monitor their progress.

### *Efforts to define learning content and quality strategies at specific education levels*

Efforts to improve the relevance of education delivery in Türkiye include broad **curricular reforms** aiming to promote student-centred and competence-based teaching and learning. These efforts had been found valuable by the OECD in 2019, while noting a further need to help teachers and learners translate into practice the expectations of the curriculum (e.g. addressing gaps in teachers' competences, changing the focus on high-stakes examinations, and ensuring clear communication to avoid reform fatigue) (Kitchen et al., 2019[49]).

In 2004/05, a new curriculum was implemented **at primary education level** (Çobanğlu and Yildirim, 2021[56]). This curricular reform—which replaced a curriculum in place since 1968—included aspects related to how students learn and increasing their participation in learning processes. Analysis conducted on the curricular reform of 2004/05 at primary level found that the new curriculum implemented, adopting a competence-based approach, aimed to strengthen students' involvement in the learning process, prioritising aspects related to problem solving, exploration, reflection, and communication. As such, it did not significantly modify the goals of what to teach regarding the previous reform, but how to teach it. Training courses took place to help teachers make the transition towards the new curriculum and pilot studies were conducted in nine provinces (Koc, Isiksal and Bulut, 2007[57]). At the same time, additional evidence highlights challenges met during the implementation of this reform, including relative to the quality of the training received by teachers and the textbooks, highlighting the importance of policy adaptation during implementation processes based on the context of education delivery (Koşar-Altınyelken and Akkaymak, 2012[58]).

In a similar vein, the MoNE implemented **Standards for Primary Education** in 2011, with a pilot process that started in 2010 and was then expanded to all primary education schools from 2011-12. These standards had the following objectives: a) defining what quality means for primary education institutions; b) guiding primary education institutions to achieve the defined quality; c) developing a system through which every school would be able to carry out a self-assessment to determine the extent of its quality status and make its own improvement plans; and d) providing a basis to plan activities at the central and local level (provincial and district) to address differences in quality. Self-assessment of schools would be provided through a module added to the e-school database and schools would develop an improvement plan based on their self-assessment (OECD, 2013[36]). However, progress in the implementation of this reform is unclear.

Revisions to primary curriculum and the implementation of new standards have coincided with an increase in the performance of Grade 4 students in international assessments. For example, in TIMSS 2019, Grade 4 students in Türkiye performed better than the TIMSS international average in mathematics and slightly below the OECD average (see Figure 13). These improvements have occurred in the context of systematic revisions to primary curriculum and standards highlighted above that aim to improve the quality of primary education in Türkiye.

Figure 13. Students' mathematics performance at Grade 4 surpasses TIMSS international average and approaches OECD average
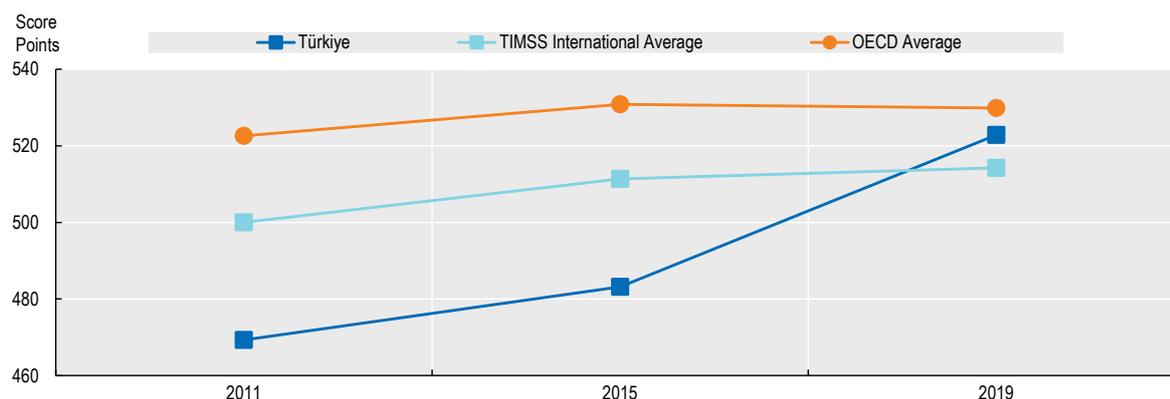
Source: OECD (2022[48]), *Student Achievement in Türkiye: Findings from PISA and TIMSS International Assessments*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c8a84283-en.

In 2018, new **curricular reforms covered primary, secondary and VET.** These revisions focused on the promotion of 21st century competences, along with considering the knowledge and skills required for the information age, reducing curriculum overload, and enhancing labour market relevance. Other aspects considered included students' needs depending on the specific context of their schools across regions in the country, as well as diversity in teacher competences, and alignment with the Turkish Qualifications Framework. In VET, revisions were completed in 2020 in collaboration with sector representatives and in consideration of National Occupation Standards (OECD, 2020[9]). In VET specifically, previous efforts to define curricular content include the piloting in 2002 of a curriculum of 17 fields (2004-05) for upper secondary education VET, through the **Strengthening Vocational Education and Training System project** (SVET, 2002-07). The SVET was built around modular training also oriented at delivering student-led activities during class, ateliers, or laboratory work, providing teachers with autonomy to select these activities (European Commission, n.d.[59]). This piloting was conducted in collaboration with social partners and with support from the European Union (OECD, 2013[36]).

In addition to the development of standards and implementation of curricular reforms, Türkiye has also put in place programmes to support learners who show a need for additional support. The **Remedial Education Programme** (İYEP, 2017) uses diagnostic and summative assessments to identify students in primary school with low core skills in literacy and numeracy for personalised or small-group instruction. The programme, implemented in collaboration with UNICEF, had reached over 302 000 students in its initial two years of implementation (OECD, 2020[9]). At secondary level, the DYK (2014) programme is the main source of academic support at secondary level, providing remedial learning to disadvantaged students through support and training courses (Ministry of National Education, n.d.[60])

Major curricular reforms in the past five years have also included revisions to the VET curriculum, seeking to bring what students learn closer in line with labour market needs while also placing an emphasis on digital and socio-emotional skills. In addition, over the years, multiple efforts have also taken place to increase the relevance of VET in Türkiye through enhanced collaborations with industry including at regional level. For

example, a labour market survey and efforts to strengthen links between the curriculum and future professions have taken place to align the curriculum in vocational and technical upper secondary schools to labour market needs (2019). More recently, in 2021, the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Industry and Technology signed a **protocol to strengthen co-operation between VET institutions and Organised Industrial Zones (OSB)** under which each OSB is now linked with at least one VET provider and has a dedicated liaison office. To facilitate institutional collaboration for curriculum planning, each OSB liaison office has a formal attachment with a teacher or training manager from each institution. Furthermore, in conjunction with improving in-school learning environments, teacher quality, and resource availability, access has also been expanded in terms of linking Organised Industrial Zones (OSBs) with VET providers. Other related efforts have aimed to strengthen links with Research and Development (R&D) through the establishment of **55 R&D centres in vocational and technical upper secondary schools across 25 provinces** (OECD, 2022[22]) (Ministry of National Education, 2022[61]). Through them, in 2019/20, over 1 655 patent, utility model, design and trademark applications were made and 366 of these applications were registered (OECD, 2022[22]).

Furthermore, Türkiye has taken actions to make VET more relevant in the eyes of students. This includes **simplifying or consolidating the offer of education and training courses** (2020-21), as well as **introducing practice-based training programmes** in grade 12 (2020-21) to inform students' aspirations before entering tertiary education or the labour market. In a similar vein, in Anatolia, the Turkish Employment Agency provided an increased practical training for upper secondary VET students to help them increase the knowledge, skills and experience about future professions of potential interest to them (OECD, 2022[22]).

All these reforms have required an important effort for the system in their design and include aspects, such as 21st century competencies, which are essential to help learners thrive in their future personal and professional lives. At the same time, previous OECD evidence has identified a persistent need to change assessment practices in line with the new curriculum. These recommendations referred both to the format of the assessments, as well as supporting teachers to strengthen their assessment practices (Kitchen et al., 2019[49]). Moving forward, Türkiye needs to continue efforts to help curriculum become alive in the teaching and learning processes at the classroom.

Professionalising teachers

Enhancing teacher professionalism has been shown to support strong student outcomes and increase teachers' sense of ownership of their practice. Professionalising the teaching career can also contribute to strengthening the resilience of education staff, giving teachers the necessary skills and professional disposition to understand, analyse and adapt to unexpected situations (OECD, 2021[39]).

Policy actions to enhance the professionalisation of teachers can include building professional knowledge, committing to high-quality practice and continuing development, increasing opportunities for collaboration, entrusting teachers with responsibility and autonomy, and recognising the teaching profession as one worthy of status and value by society (Mezza, 2022[62]). In parallel, improving teacher well-being and the provision of quality leadership also contributes to greater professionalism in teaching (OECD, 2021[39]).

While increasing education coverage, Türkiye has managed as well to reduce the ratio of students to teaching staff between 2013 and 2020. At every level of education, from primary to upper secondary, increases to the number of teachers have outpaced the rise in the number of students. This means that education in Türkiye has avoided greater access coming at the cost of higher student-teacher ratios. In fact, in upper secondary education, Türkiye has attained a lower ratio of students to teachers than the average of its OECD peers. Beyond steadily lowering student-teacher ratios at all levels between 2013 and 2020, the gap between student-teacher ratios in Türkiye and the OECD average has also narrowed, with noteworthy improvements at primary and lower secondary levels. (see Figure 14) (OECD, 2022[3]).

Figure 14. Türkiye has slightly reduced the ratio of students to teaching staff (2013-2020)
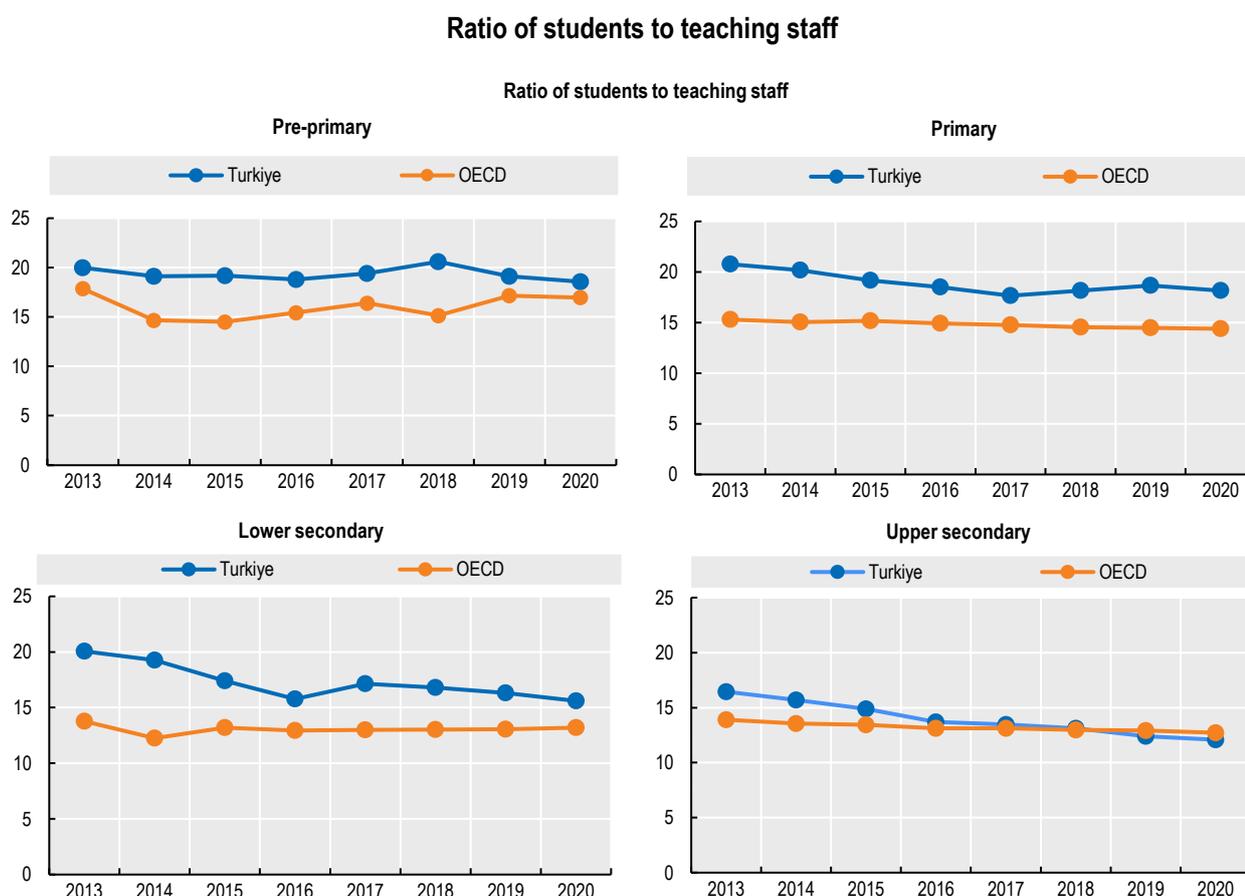
Ratio of students to teaching staff

Ratio of students to teaching staff

Source: OECD (2022[3]), *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.

Teachers in Türkiye are among the youngest in the OECD and among those who spend the least time in non-education roles prior to or during their teaching career. This is an opportunity for Türkiye as it means that they can potentially stay longer in the profession, hence decreasing the pressure of ensuring continuity in education delivery. At the same time, this presents challenges in ensuring that early career teachers have opportunities to develop their practice, in order to help schools meet their needs for quality teaching staff. According to school principals' reports, the rates of students in schools hindered by inadequate or poorly trained teaching and assisting staff was above OECD average in PISA 2018. Although the percentage of students at schools where instruction is hindered by inadequate or poorly qualified teaching staff dropped by 6.0 percentage points between PISA 2015 and PISA 2018 (OECD average: 5.1 percentage point decline), this decline was not significantly different from PISA 2015 (OECD, 2019[63]).

Statistically significant improvement was observed, however, with regards to the quality of assisting staff: according to principal reports in PISA 2018, the portion of students in schools where instructional capacity is hindered by inadequate or poorly qualified assisting staff dropped from one-in-two in 2015 to just over one-in-four in 2018 (26.6%). This remains above the OECD average of 16.5% for 2018, but represents a significant 24.3 percentage point decline for Türkiye between 2015 and 2018 cycles of PISA, compared to a significant 2.6 percentage point decline on average amongst OECD peers (OECD, 2020[64]).

Participation in professional development has been compulsory in Türkiye since at least 2013. On average, teachers in Türkiye participated in 4.3 different professional development activities in the 12 months prior to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). This is in line with the TALIS average (4.3 activities) and slightly above the OECD average (4.0 activities). Recent policies aim at improving the quality and

relevance of teachers' professional development; this has previously been identified as a challenge for Türkiye.

Setting a vision and building capacity in the teaching profession

Türkiye has taken important steps to strengthen the teaching profession in recent years. Policy efforts have ranged from system level legislative action to local level initiatives aimed at addressing specific areas of need.

More recently, Türkiye's **Teacher Strategy (2017-23)** has been developed through a consultative approach with a variety of stakeholders across the education system, including policymakers, non-governmental organisations and unions, as well as educators, students, and parents. The strategy is guided by the three core objectives of: building a cohort of highly qualified, well-trained, and professionally qualified teachers; ensuring continuous personal and professional development; and improving societal perceptions and status of the profession. These were supported by 11 goals and 35 strategic actions that have performance indicators, responsible actors, and an implementation timeline. This strategy also underpinned preparations for a consultation process that led to the updated **General Competencies for the Teaching Profession** (2017), which had been in place since 2006. In 2019, the OECD highlighted the importance of ensuring that these competencies are aligned with curricular updates and act consistently as a framework for all aspects of the teaching career, including appraisal and professional development, a practice that has not always been embedded previously (OECD, 2020[9]; Kitchen et al., 2019[49]).

Also, at system-level, to continue to address important longer-term needs of education quality, the introduction of the **Teachers' Profession Law in 2021**—which defines teaching as a profession with an independent law— has been a major step at orienting the Turkish education system toward professionalising teaching careers. This law establishes a teaching career pathway based on tenure and specific training requirements, with opportunities for compensatory rewards. Teachers with 10 years' experience may follow training and pass an exam to receive the title of "expert teacher" (with a 180-hour training programme required) or "head teachers" (with a 240-hour training programme required) (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2022[65]). An exemption exists for teachers who hold a master's degree, although the proportion of lower secondary teachers holding a master's degree is comparatively low in Türkiye (6.9%, compared to 44.2% on average at the OECD). Teachers who successfully obtain either of the titles receive an increase in compensation, which is equivalent to a 60% increase for expert teachers and 120% for head teachers. At the time the law was enacted, the Minister of Education estimated that 517 000 teachers met the 10-year tenure threshold qualifying them to pursue the training course and examination to become an expert teacher (OECD, 2019[63]).

The priority to pass such legislation was highlighted in **For a Stronger Tomorrow: Türkiye's Education Vision 2023** (2018) and in **the 11th Development Plan of Türkiye** (2019). Efforts at improving the professionalism of teachers will need to be sustained in bringing the best teachers into the profession, supporting their development over the course of a teaching career, and keeping quality educators in the profession over the long term.

In a similar vein, more targeted efforts specifically focused on developing teacher capacity at more regional and local levels of the system - and to support the development of novice teachers - have taken place over this period. Action in this direction is particularly important considering that Türkiye not only has the greatest proportion of novice teachers in lower secondary schools amongst all countries participating in TALIS 2018 (Türkiye: 31.3%; TALIS average: 19.0%), but also has the greatest disparity between rural areas and cities in the proportion novice teachers. In 2018, novice teachers accounted for half (50.4%) of the teachers staffing lower secondary schools in rural areas in Türkiye (TALIS average: 20.8%), while novice teachers only accounted for 22.0% of teachers at lower secondary schools in Turkish cities (TALIS average: 19.1%). As such, addressing the specific professional development needs of novice teachers and those working in rural areas will be a crucial step in addressing performance gaps between urban and rural schools.

The **revised model for teachers' professional development** (2021) aims to provide schools with the resources and greater autonomy they need to define and address teachers' development needs while promoting school-based, practical approaches to professional learning. As such, the reform aims to address

concerns that previous training courses lacked relevance to teachers, and disrupted learning by taking teacher away from their school (OECD, 2022[22]). As part of this model, training resources are made available to teachers through the Teacher Informatics Network (ÖBA). Data from the MoNE indicate that the proportion of pre-primary to upper secondary teachers that participated in at least one professional development activity within a year increased from 65% in 2018 to 99.1% in 2022. The average number of professional development hours per teacher increased from 39 to 250.1 during the same period (Özer and Suna, 2023[66]; General Directorate of Teacher Training and Development, 2022[67]). Furthermore, the **Teacher Training Programmes of Education Faculties** (2008) were implemented for teachers from primary to upper secondary level. Through them, the government aimed to increase the offer of general knowledge and elective courses and credits, and grant increased autonomy to faculties on the courses taught, in order to link their courses to the MoNE's primary and secondary curricula and classroom practice, and to introduce a new course entitled, "Community Services Practices" (OECD, 2013[36]). Along with these efforts to facilitate teachers' access to professional development opportunities, moving forward, it will be important for MoNE to ensure that this offer is of quality, relevant, accessible, and provided in such a way that it can bring meaningful benefits at school level.

Given the young profile of the profession, helping new professionals to succeed in the early stages of their practice will also remain particularly important for Türkiye. Recent efforts in this regard include the **Teacher Induction Programme** (2016), which was initially implemented for 30 000 teachers from early childhood education to secondary education. This programme targets teachers who are in the first six months of their practice and provides for the assignment of a mentor, various development activities inside and outside the school setting, and assessment support. A formal probation appraisal at the end of the programme included evaluations by the principal, the mentor, and an inspector, in addition to a written examination. Candidates who successfully complete the programme gain certification, while unsuccessful candidates can repeat the induction process in another school. An early evaluation of the programme in 2018 suggests it was well-received, with classroom observations seen as particularly valuable, and highlighting the important contribution of the mentors. However, the implementation of the programme also has implications for teachers' workloads, and evaluations point to a need to focus on the quality, as well as the quantity of induction activities (Çobanoğlu and Ayvaz-Tuncel, 2018[68]; OECD, 2020[9]).

Enhancing the **professional development of teachers, administrators and other staff in VET** fields has also been an area of policy action in recent years. The number of teachers, administrators and other staff in these fields receiving training has steadily increased, with training provided to 18 000 vocational and technical teachers in 2019, some 46 580 administrators, teachers and other staff in 2020, and 70 430 administrators and teachers in 2021 (OECD, 2022[22]). Earlier efforts include the **Teaching, Entrepreneurship and Leadership Training Cooperation Protocol for managers and teachers** (2012), signed between MoNE and the Scientific and Technical Research Council of Türkiye, to provide training in real work environments. Through this protocol, three rounds of the **Improving the Quality of Vocational and Technical Education in Türkiye** project have been completed or are underway, with the latest one being IQVET-III 2020-23. This project has included both training for teachers and vocational and career guidance services for students. Building on this, and within the scope of the new co-operation protocols, from 2019, VET teacher professional development increased, including distance education. In 2019, nearly 35% of VET teachers participated in teacher professional development programmes and the scale of in-service professional development had increased six times from 2018 (OECD, 2020[9]). Other earlier efforts include the **Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training project** (MVET, 2003-06), which include initiatives to improve VET teacher quality, such as the introduction of VET teacher competencies, the development of modular curricula based on competencies, seminars on student-centred education and basic skills in select provinces, and quality assurance based on the European Network System (OECD, 2013[36]).

Recent efforts to promote responsive, school-based, forms of professional learning and to better prepare new entrants to the profession have the potential to address long-standing challenges identified in the Turkish context. Emerging evidence from these efforts point to a need to monitor the quality of professional learning activities and to assess their impact on student learning outcomes. It is equally important that professional

learning, competency frameworks, and appraisal mechanisms support the overarching goals of the education system, notably the emphasis on 21st-Century competencies (Kitchen et al., 2019[49]).

Supporting teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about great challenges for education systems around the world, to meet both urgent and important needs. Teachers, school leaders, students, and families, around the world had to adapt very quickly to new modes of education delivery, as they strove to prevent the exacerbation of learning gaps. In the context of the Turkish education system, important efforts took place to help teaching staff cope with change, sometimes in collaboration with other international organisations.

To help respond to the most urgent needs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Türkiye implemented distance learning training for teachers and school leaders in 2020 with the support of UNICEF. Through the rapid implementation of the training, 40 000 school leaders and 150 000 teachers had completed the new courses by October 2020. Examples of these courses include one aimed to strengthen teacher capacity in promoting student-student interaction, student-teacher interaction and 'student-material' interactions during distance education. To help teachers prepare their lessons and monitor learning progress, another course was made available to teach them how to design digital learning activities and environments (through the V-factory application), or the effective use of Türkiye's online learning and assessment platform (EBA). Specifically for school leaders, another course sought to give them the opportunity to share their experiences and develop the administrative, technical, and communication skills needed in the current context of crisis. In parallel, efforts to reduce the administrative workload of school leaders aimed to help them to focus on educational activities.

Monitoring education quality

Over the last 20 years, Türkiye has also undertaken efforts to improve the monitoring mechanisms of the performance of its education system. Advances in the collection and use of data in Turkish education have also resulted from initiatives external to the education policy environment. One example includes enhancements to how Türkiye monitors population statistics, which have also aimed to improve education authorities' ability to monitor students that become disengaged from education.

The **National Assessment of Student Learning (ABIDE)** (2016) has been one important step towards changing how Türkiye measures learning outcomes against the national curriculum. In addition to providing more reliable and comparative data, the introduction of ABIDE has also aimed to give Turkish policymakers the opportunity to trial question types such as open-ended questions, which differ from those previously used on the high-stakes central examination. Initially implemented every two years (2016 and 2018), the 2020 cycle was postponed and implemented in 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to ABIDE, the more recent **Turkish-Mathematics-Science Student Achievement Monitoring Survey (TMF-ÖBA)** (2019) study was implemented to carry out curriculum-based monitoring of student achievement. The TMF-ÖBA samples students in grades 4, 7 and 10. The participation of around 112 470 grade 4 students in 2019 represented coverage of approximately 10% of students at this grade level (Ministry of National Education, 2019[69]).

Türkiye has also strived to use data to improve the quality of education in more fundamental ways. For example, the **Address-Based Population Register System** (ABPRS, 2006) provides publicly available aggregated data on the attained level of education of all Turkish citizens aged 6 and above who are currently residing within the territory. It draws on data from a large-scale study which sampled every household in the country as well as more recent enrolment data from the Ministry of National Education and universities (Tasti and Demirci, 2009[70]). Beyond the ABPRS, as of 2023, a new early warning and student-tracking system was developed to allow provincial managers of the Ministry of National Education to reach students through site visits. The Early Warning and Student-Tracking System is the responsibility of MoNE's IT Department. Through it, the Department is intended to track student performance and attendance using demographic variables to identify the risk of early drop out using Artificial Intelligence technologies. The aim of the system is to share this information—of students at the risk of dropping out, absenteeism, and low performance—with

MoNE's provincial departments. Then, the provincial managers should reach out to families and students. According to internal information provided by MoNE, initial results show that this policy is particularly effective on students in schooling age, but who do not attend school.
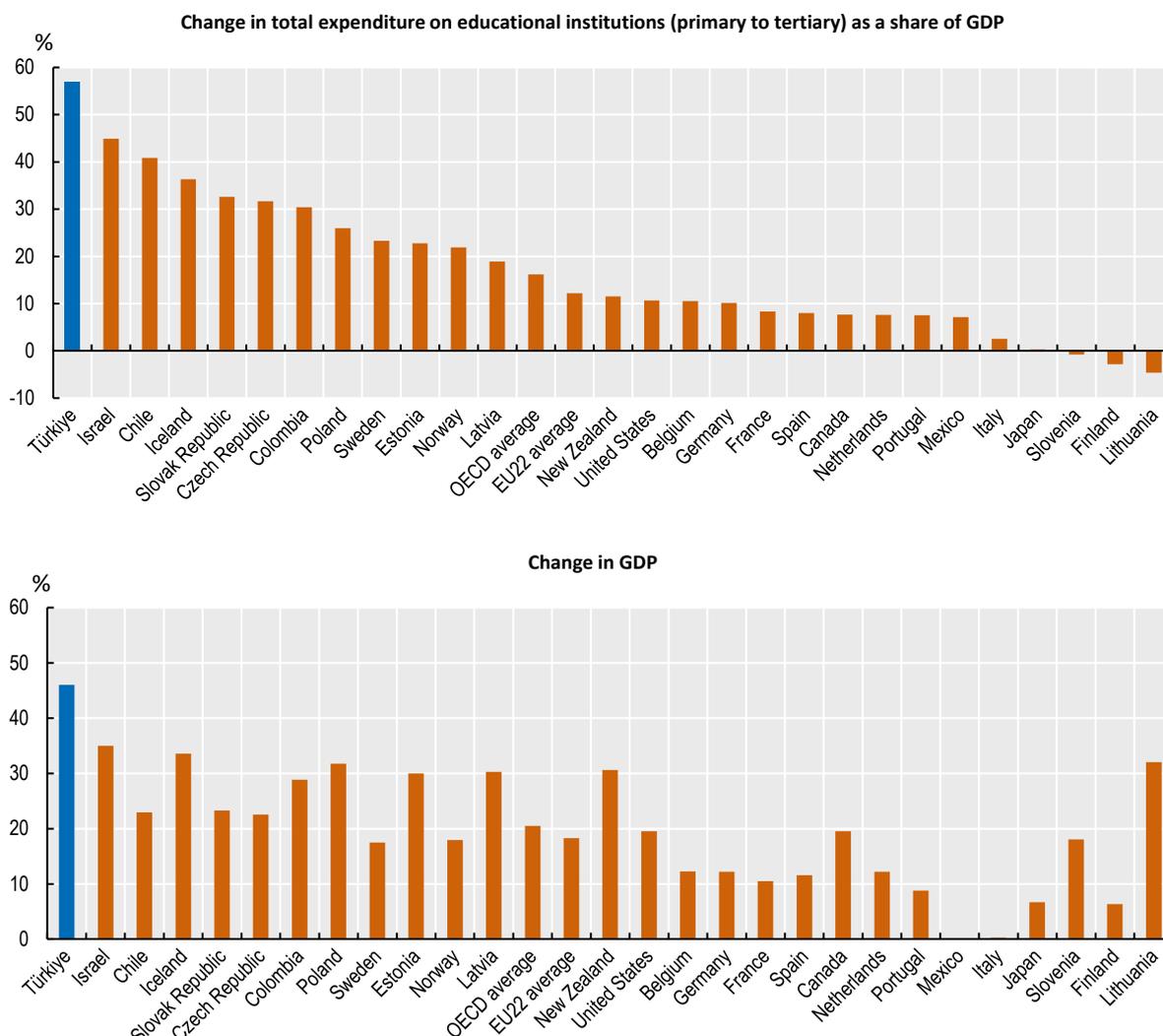
These examples suggest that Türkiye is taking steps to improve the use of data in its education system. These efforts seem to be occurring both at a more fundamental level of monitoring educational attainment within the population and early school leaving, as well as at a more technical level involving concerted efforts to help better student assessment in and between primary and secondary schools serve its purpose to support learning processes.

Strengthening the quality of resources in education institutions

Along with efforts to expand access over the past 20 years, Türkiye has also been working to improve the availability and quality of educational resources and infrastructure at different levels of the education system. These efforts have aimed, for example, to provide more schools and classrooms, to improve the educational resources available to students, and to help schools adapt to the unique needs of students of varying levels of ability. The past two decades have seen Türkiye pursue improvements on all three fronts.

These initiatives have been supported by increases in education spending. Türkiye remained one of the lowest spenders on education among OECD countries in absolute terms in 2019, with the third lowest total expenditure on primary to tertiary educational institutions per full-time equivalent student (Türkiye: 5 402 USD PPP; OECD: 11 087 USD PPP). At the same time, in 2019, Türkiye spent on average of 5.2% of its GDP on educational institutions from primary to tertiary levels, which was above the OECD average of 4.9%. In Türkiye, total expenditure from all sources on primary to tertiary educational institutions increased by 57% between 2011 and 2019, outpacing GDP growth (46%). At OECD average, these increases reached only 16.2% and 20.5%, respectively (see Figure 15).

Figure 15. Türkiye experienced one of the largest increases in education expenditure (2011-2019)
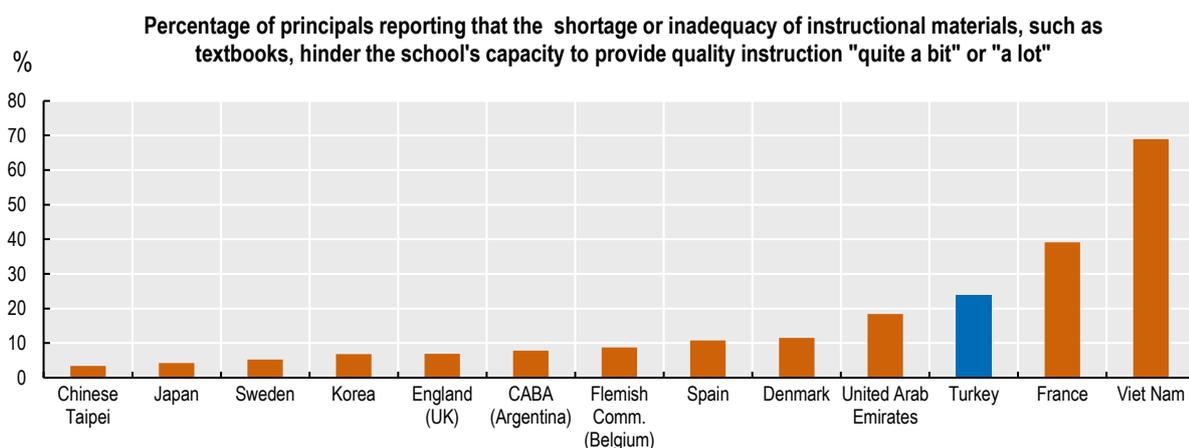
Change in total expenditure on educational institutions (primary to tertiary) as a share of GDP

Change in GDP

Source: OECD (2022[3]), *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.

Continuing to allocate more resources to education, and doing so in a cost-effective way, is essential to better serving the needs of the education system, students, families, and staff. Indeed, PISA data shows that, up to a certain threshold, increasing education expenditure correlates with improved student performance. Countries and economies with a cumulative expenditure per student below USD 50 000 (including Türkiye) showed a significant association of higher expenditure and higher performance in the PISA reading test. However, for those countries above this threshold, factors beyond education spending were better predictors of student performance, underscoring anew the importance of efficient resources allocation (OECD, 2020[64]).

One approach to gauging the impact of education spending is to measure school actors' perceptions of how missing or inadequate resources or infrastructure impacts a school's ability to provide quality instruction. The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) analyses this by seeking school leaders' perceptions on the availability and quality of instruction materials at various education levels. In TALIS 2018, some 25% of primary school principals in Türkiye reported that a shortage or inadequacy of instruction materials hinders their capacity to provide quality instruction to a meaningful degree, among the highest rate of the 13 countries with available data (see Figure 16). At lower secondary level, 19.9% of principals reported that a shortage or inadequacy of instruction materials hindering their school's capacity to provide quality education, a level higher than the 12.9% average of OECD principals reporting the same. With one-quarter of primary students and

one-in-five lower secondary students enrolled at schools where the capacity to provide quality instruction is hindered by lacking or inadequate instruction materials, the efficiency of greater education spending warrants ongoing attention.
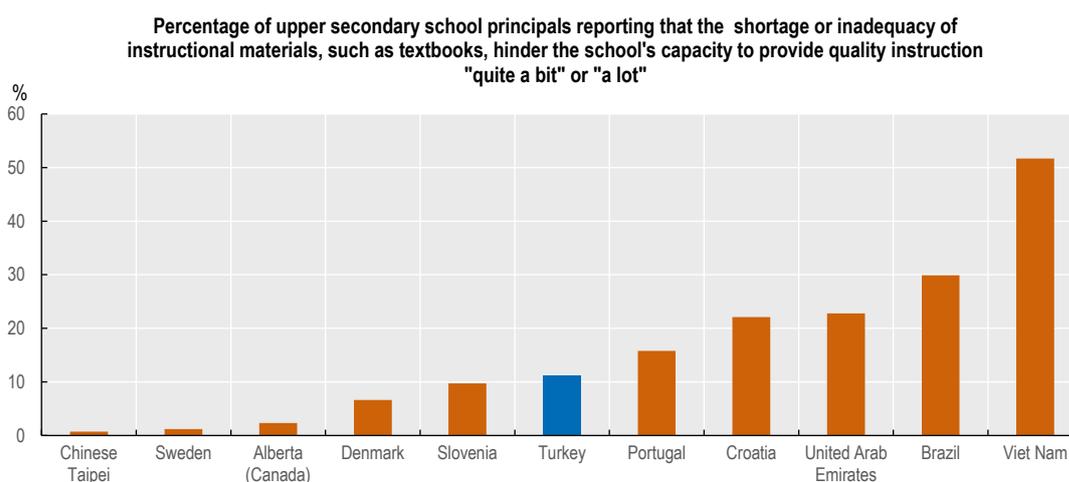
Figure 16. School principals at primary level tend to report more often that a shortage or inadequacy of instruction materials hinders instruction (TALIS 2018)

Percentage of principals reporting that the shortage or inadequacy of instructional materials, such as textbooks, hinder the school's capacity to provide quality instruction "quite a bit" or "a lot"

Source: OECD (2019[63]), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en.

Türkiye performed comparatively better in school leaders' perceptions of the availability of school resources at upper secondary level. In TALIS 2018, only slightly over one in ten (11.2%) upper secondary school principals reported that a shortage or inadequacy of instructional materials was a hindrance to providing quality education at upper secondary level (see Figure 17) (OECD, 2019[63]).

Figure 17. At secondary level, school principals tend to report less often that a lack of instruction materials hinders instruction (TALIS 2018)

Percentage of upper secondary school principals reporting that the shortage or inadequacy of instructional materials, such as textbooks, hinder the school's capacity to provide quality instruction "quite a bit" or "a lot"

Source: OECD (2019[63]), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en.

PISA also considers school leaders' perceptions of the impact of shortages on the ability of their schools to provide instruction. Evidence from the 2018 PISA assessment cycle aligns with evidence from TALIS 2018 suggesting resources and infrastructure concerns are less prevalent at schools where 15-year-olds study. In PISA, Türkiye had below average shares of students attending schools where principals reported that instruction was hindered to "some extent" or "a lot" by lacking, inadequate or poor-quality educational material (e.g. textbooks, laboratory equipment, among others). In 2018, only 13.3% of Turkish students attended schools where a lack of educational material hindered the school's capacity to provide instruction, compared to an OECD average of 28.4%. Inadequate or poor-quality education material hindered the instructional capacity at schools for 11.4% of Turkish students, as opposed to an OECD average of 25.3%.

Turkish principals reported improvements regarding the availability and quality of physical infrastructure (e.g. building, groups, among others) and education material between PISA 2015 and PISA 2018; in fact, Türkiye experienced a 35.8 percentage point decrease in the percentage of students in schools whose principal reported that a lack of education material impacted the school's capacity to provide instruction, the greatest such decrease amongst all countries participating in the 2015 and 2018 cycles of PISA, while OECD countries averaged a 6.7 percentage point decrease for the same metric. Lacking physical infrastructure also dropped markedly between the two PISA assessment cycles, with the percentage of student in schools whose principal reported a lack of infrastructure as hindering the school's capacity to provide instruction dropping from 35.3% in PISA 2015 (OECD average: 37.2%) to 12.5% in PISA 2018 (OECD average: 33.1%).

In the context of further reducing the impact of lacking or inadequate educational material or physical infrastructure, initiatives including the **10 000 Schools in Primary Education Project (2021)** and the **10 000 Schools in Upper Secondary Education Project (2023)** have been launched with the intention of improving school infrastructure and providing additional resources for schools. As of September 2022, maintenance repairs had been carried out at 8 324 primary schools, with 6 260 schools receiving additional computers and photocopiers, and 3 745 receiving new sports equipment or sporting grounds (Özer, 2022[71]; Ministry of National Education, 2023[72]). Furthermore, starting in 2022, the MoNE started to provide all public schools with a direct budget to be spent on improvements to infrastructure or educational materials (e.g. cleaning, stationery, repairs, equipment). This total budget of 7 billion TRY aims to increase the autonomy of school leaders—who decide on how to spend the additional funds—and to reduce differences between advantaged and disadvantaged schools (Ministry of National Education, 2023[73]). Future cycles of international surveys, such as PISA or TALIS, will be helpful to understanding the effect systemic policy reforms have on curbing the portion of students in schools where missing or poor-quality resources and infrastructure hinder instruction.

Steps taken towards improving educational infrastructure include policies addressing improvements to physical environments such as buildings and classrooms and expanded access to physical and digital classroom resources. Some policies covered in this analysis stem from longer-standing efforts, while others are more specific responses to disruptions in education access and quality that flowed from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **1 000Schools in Vocational Education and Training** project, for example, sought to improving physical environments at VET high schools in all 81 provinces. These measures were put in place along with other efforts to improve the infrastructure of vocational training centres (VTCs) in areas with high concentrations of non-Turkish students (see *Supporting education advancement* for more details) (OECD, 2022[22]).

Expanding digital infrastructure has also been a major area of policy effort in Türkiye in recent years. Some steps are outlined in the **Strategic Vision 2023** to expand digital education infrastructure. Also, under the ongoing work of the **Movement and Enhancing opportunities and Improving Technology Project** (FATIH, 2011), the Strategic Vision 2023 set goals of equipping teacher rooms and kindergartens with at least 450 000 interactive whiteboard and providing some 11 million tablets to students (OECD, 2020[9]). To date, the FATIH project has delivered over 660 000 tablet computer sets, and 545 690 classes were equipped with digital boards in 2022 (equivalent to 90% of classrooms in public schools providing formal education in the country) (Ministry of National Education, 2023[74]). In TALIS 2018, only 22% of lower secondary principals in Türkiye reported a lack of digital technology for instruction as a hindrance to quality instruction in 2018 (compared to an OECD average of 24.6%).

Efforts to improve the educational infrastructure in Türkiye have also sought to respond to needs resulting from exogenous shocks to the education system. These include the initial inflow of refugees, their eventual integration into the main education system, and acute needs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts suggest the prioritisation of enhancing the quality of the educational offer by ensuring the places where education takes place and the tools that fill them contribute to the delivery of high-quality education.

While Türkiye has expanded education spending at all levels of the education system, ensuring that additional spending corresponds with greater quality in educational is a top priority. For Türkiye, this is especially relevant at the primary and lower secondary levels, where work can be done on reducing the share of students in schools where the educational offer is hindered by lacking or poor resources. Improvements in similar metrics at the upper secondary level between 2015 and 2018 cycles of PISA can serve as inspiration for Türkiye's ability to make significant improvement in educational resources and infrastructure over a relatively short time horizon. Policy efforts in this direction around physical environments, educational resources and digital tools may build on previous efforts but continuing to monitor the impact of these initiatives remains all but essential.

Some considerations on quality for Türkiye

Türkiye has undertaken important efforts towards improving the quality of education over the past two decades. Establishing quality goals at system level has aimed to provide guidance to programmes and initiatives operating closer to learners and the institutions that serve them. Curricular reforms have taken place at nearly every level of education, with primary education receiving an overhaul in the early 2000s which sought to change not only what was taught, but how learning happens. This involved a greater focus on problem solving, exploration, and communication, among other aspects of a competence-based learning process. Primary education was revisited as part of a larger 2018 curriculum reform which also covers secondary education and VET. These more recent reforms seek to align what students learn more closely with the competencies needed for better lives in the 21st century and the skills required in a modern, global, and rapidly digitalising economy.

System-level policy initiatives focused on education quality play a major role in Türkiye, not least because of the high degree of centralisation in education decision-making. The Teachers' Profession Law in 2021 is a significant step towards achieving a professional career path for teachers in Türkiye. With the creation of career pathways and a focus on professionalising the teaching career, it is hoped that the status of the profession—and ultimately, the quality of teaching—will further increase. This and other system-level policies focused on improving quality are key to ensuring that the rapid expansion of access to education in Türkiye does not come at the cost of quality learning.

Conclusions and pointers for action

Observers of Turkish education will note that the country has made important progress to increase access to education from early childhood education through to upper secondary and tertiary education. Expansion of access has been accompanied by concerted work to develop the quality of the education offer. These efforts have simultaneously prioritised strengthening core educational outcomes in Türkiye while also pursuing equitable access to quality education for learners of all backgrounds by providing targeted support for groups at greatest risk of educational disadvantage.

Evidence of the progress of these policies includes maintained formal enrolments in education when confronted by global economic upheaval, as observed during the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic or increased academic attainment especially at tertiary level. Türkiye also expanded expenditure on primary to tertiary education more than any other OECD country between 2012 and 2019.

At the same time, opportunities to entrench and advance these positive developments on both access and quality remain, as shown by Türkiye's performance in international assessments. Below are some highlights

of strengths, challenges, and pointers for action, to help Türkiye move forward its education agenda for the coming years.

Türkiye has achieved important progress in expanding access and quality

Over the last 20 years, Türkiye has achieved important progress in the expansion of access to education. This expansion includes greater access to pre-school education, with four times as many pre-school institutions today as there were twenty years ago, or one of the largest increases in educational attainment for 25-34 year-olds at upper secondary non-tertiary or tertiary education between 2011 and 2021. These efforts need to continue in Türkiye in order to bridge the gap with its peer OECD countries.

As for other education systems, this progress has been achieved by a multi-dimensional systemic approach that includes the expansion of compulsory education, underpinned by other policy efforts such as curriculum change to help the system transition towards competence-based learning. At learner level, they include more targeted efforts, such as through policies to promote participation from young population in rural areas, from girls in education, or to support the integration of Syrian refugees into the education system. In VET, Türkiye has also undertaken important and sustained efforts to expand both its access and relevance, for example, through the increased number of education institutions.

In contexts of emergency, Türkiye has managed to combine new approaches with adaptations to already successful policies, such as through the provision of conditional cash transfers for Syrian students and their families. Expanding coverage in the Conditional Cash Transfer has contributed to increasing the number of Syrian refugee students in the main Turkish-language based education system. In the same way, improvements to digital education infrastructure have not only supported higher quality education offer but also resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Türkiye has been working for an improved understanding of where learners are and whether they have left education early, as well as increased ability to pursue their re-entry into education. Also, legislation passed in 2021 to professionalise the teaching profession is an important step forward to attracting, developing, and retaining quality teachers.

These and other efforts appear to have helped Türkiye to make progress in terms of quality, while expanding access to education, as suggested by PISA data. Furthermore, they appear to have contributed to greater resilience of the education system in contexts of international crises, with Türkiye being able to keep young people in education or employed to a larger extent, or with important decreases in the share of NEETs, also among the young population.

But important challenges remain…

Despite these multiple efforts, challenges remain in the Turkish education system to improve the quality of education opportunities that it can provide to all learners, as shown by national and international evidence.

In terms of access, these include an uneven access to quality pre-primary, with children from higher income families still more likely to have access to education with specific resources, pedagogy and other characteristics suited to the needs of very young children. Urban/rural gaps also remain in education at school level, despite government efforts regionally, and a large share of youth continues leave education before they graduate. Furthermore, the arrival of many Syrian refugee students has also translated into a need for the education to rethink how to better integrate them into the Turkish education system.

At a more systemic level, data also shows that Türkiye still faces a challenge in ensuring greater equity in student outcomes, with large performance gaps between schools as shown in PISA 2018, along with comparatively lower levels of academic inclusiveness, combined with a high degree of ability grouping within schools. On that note, from a policy perspective, for example, Türkiye needs to ensure that reforms to testing for upper secondary are implemented and do not lead to exam culture competition and that targeted supports are delivered in such a way that they effectively support inclusive learning processes. Moreover, the comparatively young age of the teaching body translates into both an opportunity and a challenge. While retirement appears as less of a risk for Türkiye in terms of ensuring continuity in the profession, Türkiye will

need to nurture and motivate teachers so they effectively remain and grow as professionals. For this, along with the increase in the offer of professional development opportunities, Türkiye needs to ensure the quality, relevance, and capacity of impact at school level based on evidence.

Furthermore, the numerous efforts undertaken by Türkiye are a testament to the strong importance provided to education in the country. Developing a more systemic approach to policy evaluation will also be crucial to help Türkiye ensure that these efforts are fruitful and useful to students, teachers, families, and the community at large.

This scanning exercise highlights some of the key policy developments that have taken place in Türkiye over the past 20 years. The report does not provide evidence of impact of the individual policy initiatives described but the multiplicity of efforts covered provides at least a sense of the government priorities and strategic approach adopted over this period to meet them.

Some pointers for action

Building on this analysis of policy efforts undertaken by Türkiye over the past 20 years, some pointers for action emerge for Türkiye to support equity and quality in its education system:

1. Ensure that the rate of increased access to ECEC for 3-4 year-olds is maintained and accelerated where possible. While expanding pre-school access to hard-to-reach children has been an important policy effort, it is equally important to monitor the impact of off-term and non-institution-based pre-school provision to ensure that increased access does not mask gaps in quality, or due to regional location.

2. Expanding enrolment and completion of upper secondary education, providing particular support to those at greater disadvantage due to their socio-economic or cultural background, or regional location.

3. Considering the comparatively lower average age of teachers, envisage further measures to ensure current teachers remain in the profession so that institutional knowledge can be built. As Türkiye will certainly need more teachers as it continues to expand access, it is also important that the more experienced teachers can be systemically engaged in the education policy development process as well as on an interpersonal level as mentors to new entrants to the profession. Furthermore, as the teaching profession becomes stronger, there need to be as well open spaces for teachers to play a driving role in the development of the profession, in the content taught, and in pedagogy.

4. Ensuring the availability of teachers, and in particular teachers with skills and competencies to meet the needs of vulnerable groups, for example, by clarifying how Syrian volunteer teachers may be regularised within the education system in light of the fact that Syrian students have been integrated into the main, Turkish-language based education system since 2016.

5. Monitoring academic inclusiveness in the education system, by looking into the use of ability grouping within and between schools and addressing major increases to use of ability grouping in some subjects in 12-year period between 2006 and 2018. Ensure that reforms to testing for upper secondary are carefully evaluated for impact, considering future refinements to promote their original ambitions.

6. Investigating the impact of digital learning modalities, in particular distance learning modalities, to ensure that these support stronger outcomes beyond contexts of emergency.

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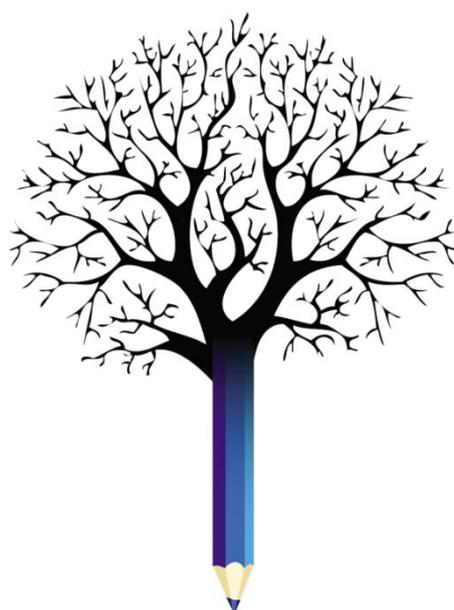
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