Policy pointers for equitable, effective and personalised upper secondary transitions

An effective transition into upper secondary education supports learners to identify how their talents and strengths can be supported by different learning pathways. By contrast, weak transitions can lead to learners entering programmes that do not promote their aspirations or deepen their interests, putting their engagement and motivation at risk. At a systemic level, when transition systems do not function effectively, they can amplify inequities, and jeopardise the formation of an appropriate skills mix for an economy.

This Education Spotlight explores how countries manage transitions into upper secondary education and proposes policy pointers to guide transitions that support each learner to identify and pursue pathways that reflect and harness their personal talents and interests. It is based on the key findings from the working paper "Managing student transitions into upper secondary pathways" (Perico e Santos, 2023[1]).

Why do transitions into upper secondary education matter?

An effective transition into upper secondary education enables students to pursue programmes that match their interests and abilities and open opportunities for their future. While transitions are challenging, careful consideration and investment is important because the costs of weak transitions can be high for learners, education systems and society. These include:

- Learners not transitioning into upper secondary education at the theoretical age because of high entry barriers, making learners who enter later on vulnerable to disengagement and early school leaving.
- Learners entering programmes that do not reflect their talents and ambitions. Some students may find that they are not well-prepared for the more complex content in a specific programme, while others may end up in programmes that do not reflect their interests. Both situations can have an impact on students' motivation and learning outcomes, contributing to repetition, early school leaving, limited lifelong learning opportunities and decreased personal fulfilment.
- Learners entering programmes that do not enable them to pursue their aspirations: At the end of upper secondary, some students may find that the pathways open to them do not enable them to achieve their ambitions and they may struggle to find a job or progress to post-secondary education.

Smooth transitions as a policy goal

To support systems' policy goals of full completion in upper secondary education where learners develop the skills and agency for success in life and work, smooth transitions into upper secondary education are essential. Smooth transitions are characterised by few barriers to student progression when moving from lower to upper secondary education which relate to the institutional structures and design of education systems as well as how effectively students are supported when they make this transition (Perico e Santos, 2023[1]).

What are the features of a "smooth transition" into upper secondary education?

Education is characterised by a series of transitions to higher levels of education, employment, and perhaps back to education. The transition into upper secondary education is one of the most stressful events in an adolescent's life, potentially influencing their well-being, the skills they acquire and their future opportunities. This transition coincides with the time of life when marked social, biological and psychological development occurs (Evans, Borriello and Field, 2018[2]). Systems that achieve smooth transitions help to manage the educational and socio-emotional challenges of this moment, encouraging learners to start defining and pursuing pathways to achieve their goals and potential.

A system with smooth transitions can be broadly characterised as follows:

- The full cohort enters upper secondary education at the expected time (i.e. the theoretical age of entrance).
- Students are given the support they need to make informed decisions about their aspirations.
- Students are placed into, or choose programmes and options that match their skills and interests.
- Students remain in education until the completion of upper secondary education.

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

In which systems does the full cohort enter upper secondary at the expected time?

One feature of a system with smooth transitions is when all (or almost all) students transition into upper secondary education at the expected time. Based on this indicator, Iceland, Ireland, Japan and Korea appear to have particularly smooth transitions with 95% or more students at the theoretical transition age enrolled in upper secondary education (Figure 1). In 15 countries, a large share of students (25% or more) is still in lower secondary education at the theoretical age of transition to upper secondary. In some systems – notably, Denmark, Flemish Community of Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Israel, the Netherlands and Switzerland, this likely reflects the design and structure of their education systems, particularly the length of certain educational programmes. After accounting for the structure of education systems, there are still countries where students are not transitioning when they are expected to. In Colombia, Czechia, Luxembourg and the Slovak Republic, for example, at least 40% of students remain in lower secondary education at the transition point, and in Colombia and Luxembourg over 15% are still enrolled in lower secondary one year after the transition age. Countries with higher rates of repetition tend to have lower shares of students who transition at the expected age. Repetition rates are partly related to policies around student assessment and progression during lower secondary education but can also be related to the requirements for entry and selection into upper secondary education.

Figure 1. Share of students enrolled in lower or upper secondary education at transition age and one year after transition age
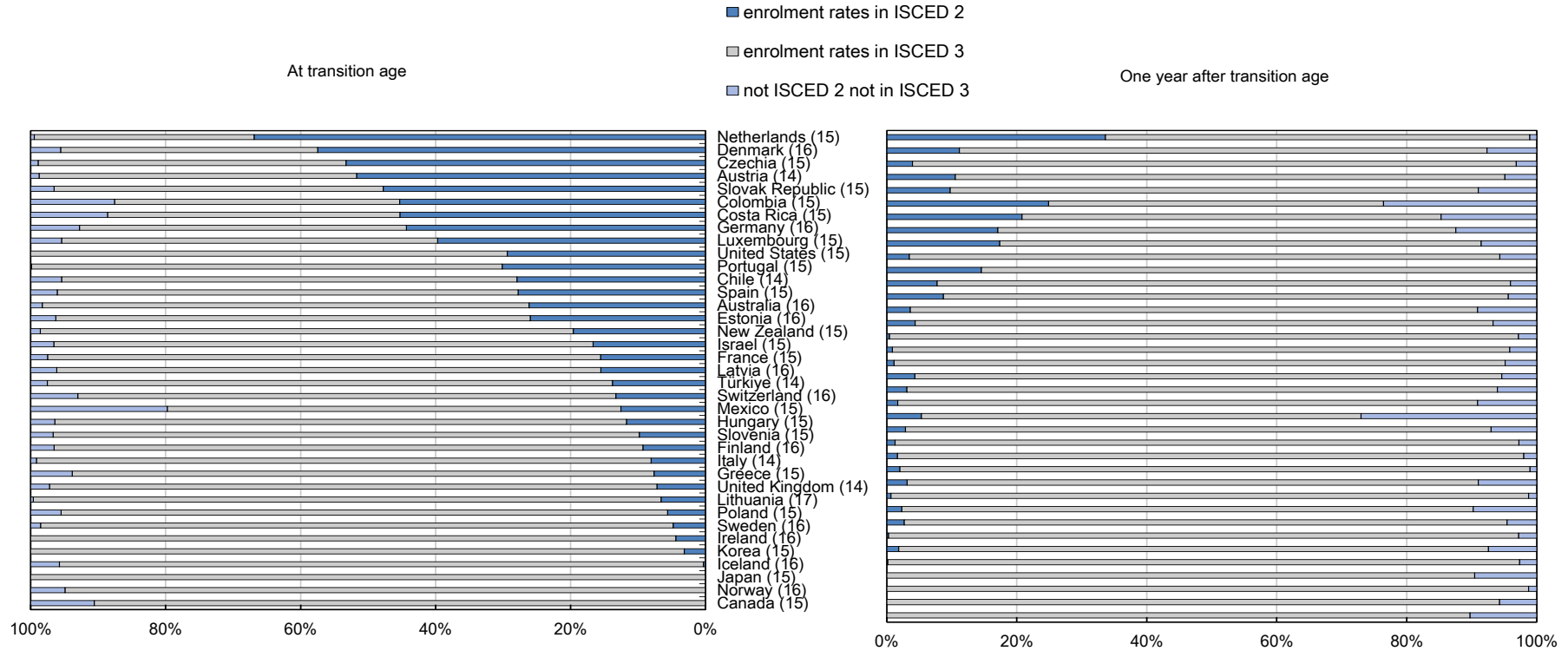
Note: The number in parentheses represents the theoretical age of transition into upper secondary education for each country. The left panel shows enrolment rates in ISCED 2 and ISCED 3 at the theoretical transition age, so the theoretical age during the first year of upper secondary education. The right panel shows enrolments in ISCED 2 and ISCED 3 one year after the theoretical transition age, so the theoretical age during the second year of upper secondary education. It is assumed that age references in the enrolment data refer to age on 1 January of the reference year.
*Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of students enrolled in lower secondary education (ISCED 2) at transition age.*
Source: OECD (2021[3]), *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en.

In some countries, enrolment rates fall as students transition into upper secondary education

Transitioning to a higher level of education can be cognitively, socially, emotionally and logistically challenging for students. Transitions create vulnerability for students to disengage and perhaps even leave education early. Across OECD countries, only around 1% of students appear to no longer enrol in education at the transition point into upper secondary education (Figure 2). However, in Mexico, Norway and Switzerland, the overall share of students enrolled in education falls by 5% or more between the final year of lower secondary education and the first year of upper secondary education. In these countries, there might be specific reasons related to transitions that are associated with some students leaving education (at least temporarily), such as strict entrance requirements, complex selection systems or selection systems perceived to carry high stakes.

Figure 2. Enrolment in education before and at theoretical age of transition into upper secondary education
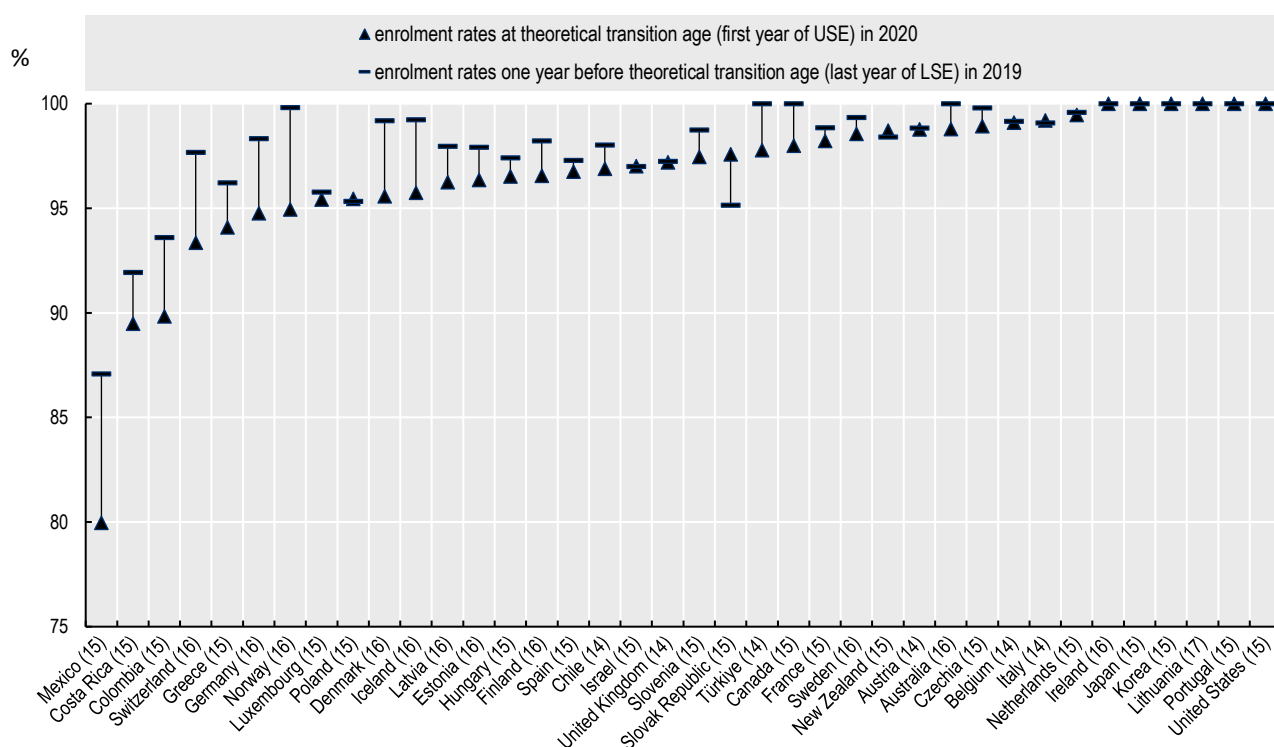
Note: The number in parentheses represents the theoretical age of transition into upper secondary education for each country. The figure shows enrolment rates in any ISCED level in 2019 of students one year younger than the theoretical transition age, so the theoretical age during the last year of lower secondary education, and in 2020 of students at the transition age, so the theoretical age during the first year of upper secondary education. Information regarding Canada only contains aggregated data by grade and aggregated data by age, and it does not contain age and grade data that is cross-tabulated. The process of reconciling the age data to the grade data, for UOE reporting purposes, has an impact on the age data. The result is that ISCED 2 enrolments become somewhat inflated, while ISCED 3 enrolments become somewhat deflated. Poland has anticipated the starting age of upper secondary education from 16 to 15 since 2020.
Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of students enrolled in 2020 in any ISCED level at the theoretical transition age into upper secondary education.
Sources: Above and Beyond project (2022[4]), Country mapping; OECD (2019[5]), INES 2019 ad hoc survey on upper secondary completion rate.

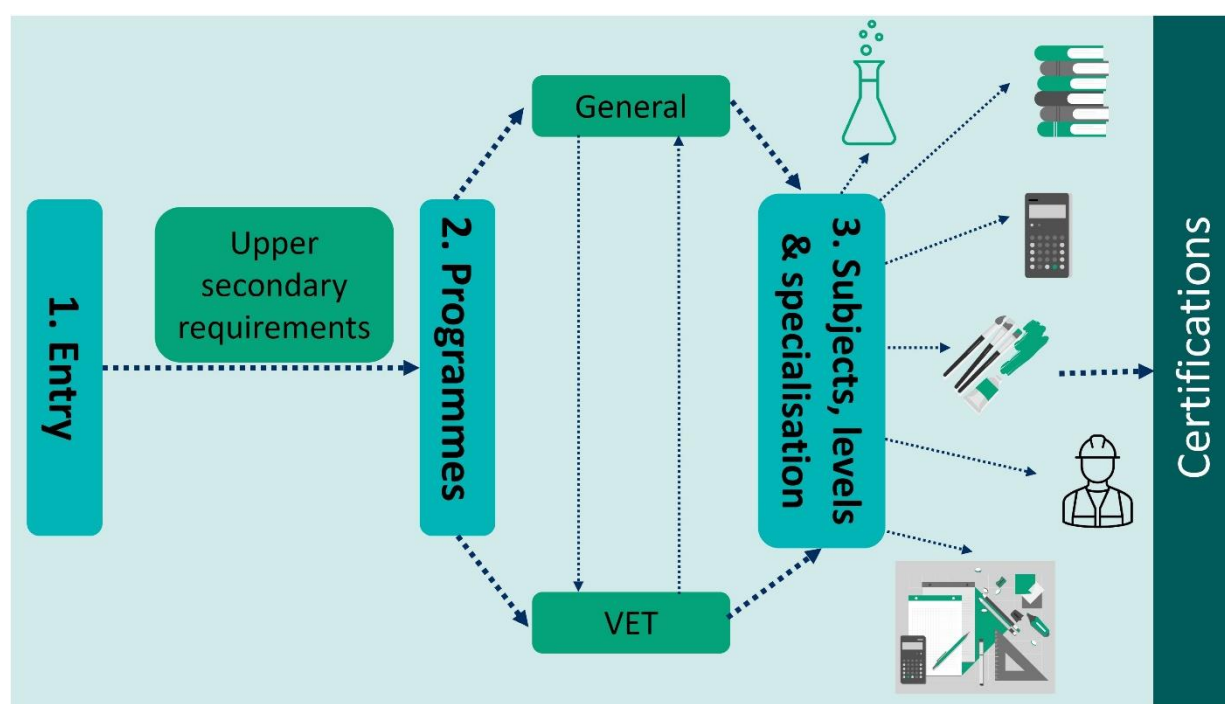## Defining transitions into upper secondary education

Upper secondary education

Upper secondary education refers to ISCED 3, in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Some of the defining features of upper secondary are the increasing range of options and differentiation in content students can engage with, and the preparation it provides for individuals to either enter work or tertiary education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012[6]). Given the greater options and choices that upper secondary education provides, an important feature of education at this level is also supporting learners to start defining their future ambitions and developing an informed understanding of the available educational pathways to achieve their career and life goals.

Three points of transition

In most OECD countries, students typically experience three points of selection and orientation as they transition into upper secondary education, although this depends on the education system (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Framework of student transitions into upper secondary education

1. ***Requirements to enter upper secondary education:*** The first point of transition into upper secondary education is determining eligibility to enter this level of education. Most OECD countries set requirements, such as academic achievement, that students need to meet as they transition into upper secondary education (Table 2). Since most countries now target universal completion of upper secondary, the overarching policy goal at this level is to ensure that all students progress into upper secondary education.

2. ***Different types of programmes in upper secondary education:*** This typically includes students having to choose, usually between vocational or general programmes, or variations of the two. On average across the OECD, students typically choose (or are placed into) one of three upper secondary programmes, although some countries have many more and others have only one programme (Stronati, 2023[7]).

3. ***Different options and specialisations within upper secondary education:*** In many countries, students can be further placed into different levels, subjects or specialisation within their upper secondary programme, according to their interests, abilities and future aspirations.

The presence and weight of each of these transition points varies across education systems. Typically, transition point 2 – selection and orientation into different types of programmes – is a defined, high stakes transition point in systems with separate vocational and general programmes such as many of the systems across Europe. In contrast, in comprehensive systems where the whole cohort remains in a single general programme during upper secondary education, as is the case in the Canada, New Zealand or the United States, transition point 2 is not present, but transition point 3, when learners select or are oriented towards different subjects, specialisations and options, is far more influential for their future pathways.

Policy framework for managing transitions into upper secondary education

The framework provides a guide for countries to situate their systems in an internationally comparative perspective and insights on how different systems tackle shared challenges and manage competing policy objectives.

- **Policy goals and challenges for entry into upper secondary education**: Countries must balance the objective of supporting universal progression into upper secondary education against ensuring that all students have a minimum level of basic skills necessary to succeed at the upper secondary level. Policies range between setting strict entry standards to the absence of any requirements with all learners automatically progressing into upper secondary education.

- **Policy goals and challenges for selection and orientation into upper secondary programmes:** The main challenge is to helpfully orient students to different programmes, based on their interests, preparedness for learning and ambitions for the future. How information is used is as important as the information itself. Selection and orientation practices influence perceptions of upper secondary programmes, and systems that automatically direct lower-performing students to vocational programmes are likely to reinforce perceptions of lower prestige.

- **Policy goals and challenges for selection and orientation into subjects, levels and specialisations:** Decisions at this point are rarely codified nationally and there is no internationally comparative data. The absence of national procedures can provide teachers and students with space to draw on different sources of information and respond to student interests in a personalised way. However, countries' national data suggest that there are inequities in the choices that students make (or are guided to), and many students are unaware of the consequences of certain choices.

One way to help mitigate the risks of transitions – that learners unknowingly end up in options that will not enable them to access tertiary education or the jobs they want, or that lower-performing students are automatically directed to certain programmes, reinforcing perceptions of lower prestige - is to use the transition as a moment when students, guardians, teacher and schools reflect together on the upper secondary pathway that might best meet the needs and aspirations of an individual. Rather than focusing on binary decisions between general and vocational programmes, transitions advice can encompass the range of choices about subjects, specialisation and learning levels that face learners as they transition into and through upper secondary education.

Table 1. Policy framework for managing student transitions into upper secondary education

Transition point	Policy objectives	Practices	Examples	Policy Pointers
1. Entry	Encourage high transition rates Identify and support struggling students Set standards to guide learning in lower secondary education	Set requirements for entry and use academic information to check	32 countries, including Colombia, France, Italy, Japan and the Netherlands	• Repetition is only used in exceptional cases and determined on individual basis
		Promote students automatically	10 countries, including Australia, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Türkiye and UK systems	• Use academic information to identify struggling students and put in place additional support during upper secondary
2. Programmes	Respond to diversity in student interests Match students, their aspirations and skills with education programmes	Use academic information to place students	21 countries, including Czechia, Denmark, Korea, Norway and Poland	• Use academic information to set thresholds, not competitively select • Limit examinations to a few subjects, make them optional
		Use teacher/school recommendations to place students	5 countries, including France and Switzerland	• Provide national guidance to teachers for making recommendations
		Give students choice for placement	All OECD countries, to varying extent	• Student guidance begins early with guided reflection • Information is accessible and up to date
3. Subjects, levels and specialisation	Respond to diversity in student interests, knowledge and skills Provide choice for students in comprehensive programmes Provide direct pathways into diverse jobs/alignment with labour market needs	Give students options for subject selection and different specialisation possibilities	Almost all OECD countries, to varying extent, depending on the structure of their education systems	• Encourage greater transparency on how decisions should be made • Student guidance on options and how they link to future pathways

1. Entry: Requirements to enter upper secondary education

In upper secondary, learners are expected to draw on the basic foundations acquired in lower secondary to build higher-order, more complex knowledge and skills. Entrance requirements are one approach that countries use to ensure students' preparedness for learning at this level. When setting requirements to enter upper secondary education, countries need to balance national goals for universal completion with ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to succeed at this level – and, if not, providing them with appropriate supports to address fragile competencies.

For countries with available data, completion of lower secondary education is required to access upper secondary education. Countries vary in how they ensure that students have met this condition (Table 2):

- In the majority of OECD systems (32), students are considered to have successfully completed lower secondary education based on their grades in classroom-based assessments. This might be set out in an end-of-year report card (as in Austria) and/or a certificate of lower secondary completion that includes classroom grades (as in Portugal).

- In about a quarter of OECD systems (10), student promotion to upper secondary education is largely automatic, meaning students are not required to demonstrate through classroom

assessments or external examinations that they have met any academic requirements to progress into upper secondary education.

- In a few countries (Estonia, Italy and Latvia), students are required to pass an external examination to access upper secondary education. Examinations at this stage are usually used to certify completion of lower secondary education but this may create a real barrier for progression: only 70% of students in Estonia and 81% in Latvia transition to upper secondary education at the time of transition (Figure 1) (Perico e Santos, 2023[1]).

Table 2. Requirements to enter upper secondary education

OECD countries and systems	Students need to demonstrate having met academic standards by:			
	Complete ISCED 2 to enter ISCED 3	Passing the last grade of ISCED 2 (through classroom-based assessments)	Passing an external examination at the end of ISCED 2	Students are automatically promoted
Australia	Yes	No	No	Yes
Austria	Yes	Yes	No	No
Belgium	Yes	Yes	No	No
Canada	Yes	Yes	No	No
Chile	Yes	Yes	No	No
Colombia	Yes	Yes	No	No
Costa Rica	Yes	Yes	No	No
Czechia	Yes	Yes	No	No
Denmark	Yes	Yes	No	No
England (UK)	Yes	No	No	Yes
Estonia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Finland	Yes	Yes	No	No
France	Yes	Yes	No	No
Germany	Yes	Yes	No	No
Greece	Yes	Yes	No	No
Hungary	Yes	Yes	No	No
Iceland	Yes	No	No	Yes
Ireland	Yes	No	No	Yes
Israel	Yes	Yes	No	No
Italy	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Japan	Yes	Yes	No	No
Korea	Yes	Yes	No	No
Latvia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Lithuania	Yes	Yes	No	No
Luxembourg	Yes	Yes	No	No
Mexico	Yes	Yes	No	No
Netherlands	Yes	Yes	No	No

| OECD countries and systems	Students need to demonstrate having met academic standards by:			
	Complete ISCED 2 to enter ISCED 3	**Passing the last grade of ISCED 2 (through classroom-based assessments)**	**Passing an external examination at the end of ISCED 2**	**Students are automatically promoted**
Northern Ireland (UK)	Yes	No	No	Yes
New Zealand	Yes	No	No	Yes
Norway	Yes	No	No	Yes
Poland	Yes	Yes	No	No
Portugal	Yes	Yes	No	No
Scotland (UK)	Yes	No	No	Yes
Slovak Republic	Yes	Yes	No	No
Slovenia	Yes	Yes	No	No
Spain	Yes	Yes	No	No
Sweden	Yes	Yes	No	No
Switzerland	Yes	Yes	No	No
Türkiye	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
United States	Yes	Yes	No	No
Wales (UK)	Yes	No	No	Yes

Note: This table focuses on ISCED 3 programmes that lead to full level completion. In some countries, completing ISCED 2 can simply mean attending ISCED 2 programmes, as it is a compulsory education level. In Estonia, students following the simplified national curriculum for basic schools shall pass school examinations for graduating from lower secondary education. In Slovenia, there is an exception for students who have been in the education system for nine years and are 15 years old who, if they have successfully completed at least seven grades, can enrol in ICSED 3 (short upper secondary vocational education programmes).

Sources: Above and Beyond project (2022[4]), *Country mapping*; OECD (2019[5]), *INES 2019 ad hoc survey on upper secondary completion rate;* European Commission (2022[8])*, National Education Systems,* https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/national-description_en (accessed on 21 April 2022); WES (2022[9]), *Education System Profiles,* https://wenr.wes.org/category/education-system-profiles (accessed on 8 August 2023).

Student progression may be hindered by strict requirements for entry to upper secondary education. In ten countries with available data, repetition rates increase in the final year of lower secondary education (Figure 4). In all these countries, students must meet academic requirements demonstrated through either classroom assessments or an examination to progress into upper secondary education. However, setting requirements alone does not necessarily lead to lower rates of transition or higher rates of repetition. In several countries that set requirements, repetition rates either do not increase or in fact decline in the year before students' transition into upper secondary education. This likely reflects different cultural and educational practices. In these countries, there might be a greater emphasis on supporting student progression to the next stage of education.

In countries with automatic progression, only in exceptional circumstances would students be asked to repeat a year before moving to upper secondary education (e.g. Australia). These systems tend to have "smoother" transitions, with 90% or more of students transitioning to upper secondary at the expected time.

Figure 4. Share of repeaters in the last grade of lower secondary and lower secondary overall
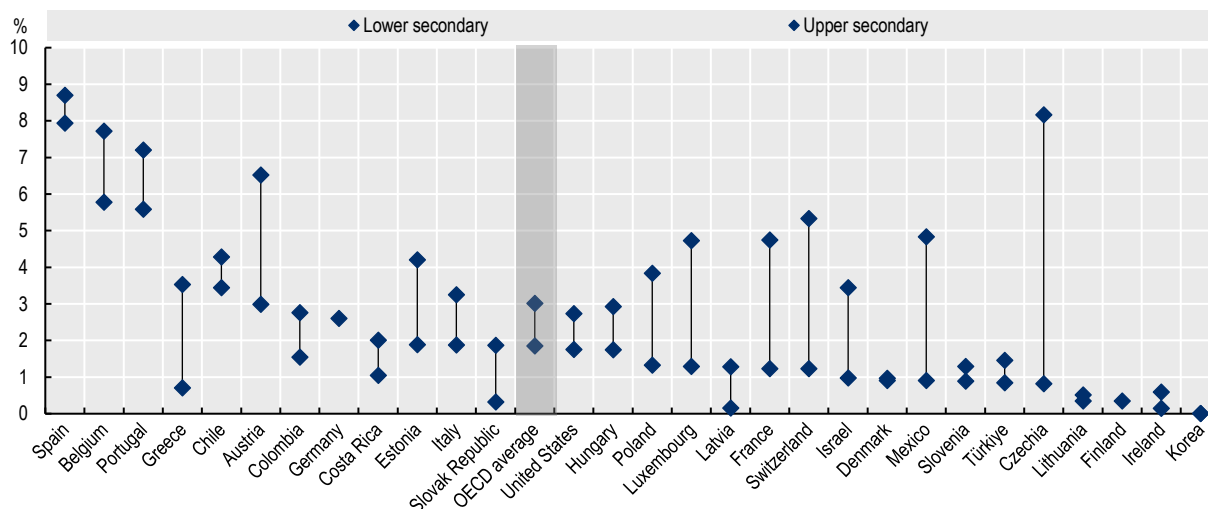
Note: *Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of repeaters in lower secondary education.*
Source: Author adaptation from OECD (2021[3]), *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en.

2. Programmes: Orientation and selection into upper secondary education programmes

A defining feature of upper secondary education is the range of choices, options and programmes that are available to students compared with lower levels of schooling. Many systems (34) provide more than one educational programme in upper secondary education – general, vocational and sometimes multiple options of each (Stronati, 2023[7]). Among OECD countries, student placement into different educational programmes most frequently takes place at age 16, when students are entering upper secondary education. However, there are a few countries where selection into different programmes takes place much earlier. For example, students are placed in different pathways after the end of primary education at age 10 in Germany and at age 12 in Switzerland.

When they are well-designed, selection and orientation mechanisms as part of upper secondary transitions can support students to better understand their interests and place them in programmes that reflect their skills and aspirations. There are three main factors that influence student transitions across OECD countries (Table 3):

- In almost all OECD countries, student and family preferences influence selection or orientation into upper secondary programmes. Giving students autonomy to decide on the upper secondary programme they want is key to helping them start their pathways towards areas they are interested in, and the skills they want to develop.

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

- Just five countries use teacher or school recommendations for upper secondary transitions. Teacher or school recommendations have the potential to be more comprehensive than academic information alone for student placement because teachers' judgement does not rely solely on students' academic achievement.

Table 3. Main factors that influence placement into upper secondary education programmes

	Academic performance		Students' interests/preferences	Teacher/school recommendation
	Previous classroom assessment results[1]	**Standardised external examinations**	**Students' interests/preferences**	**Teacher/school recommendation**
Australia	No	No	Yes	No
Chile	No	No	Yes	No
Colombia	No	No	Yes	No
Costa Rica	No	No	Yes	Yes
Denmark	No	Yes	Yes	No
England (UK)	No	Yes	Yes	No
Estonia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Finland	Yes	No	Yes	No
France	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Greece	No	No	Yes	No
Iceland	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ireland	No	No	Yes	No
Israel	Yes	No	Yes	No
Italy	No	No	Yes	No
Japan	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Korea	Yes	No	Yes	No
Latvia	No	No	Yes	No
Lithuania	No	No	Yes	No
Mexico	No	No	Yes	No
Northern Ireland (UK)	No	Yes	Yes	No
Norway	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Poland	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Portugal	No	No	Yes	No
Scotland (UK)	No	Yes	Yes	No
Slovenia	No	No	Yes	No
Spain	No	No	Yes	Yes
Sweden	Yes	No	Yes	No
Türkiye	No	No	Yes	No
Wales (UK)	No	Yes	Yes	No
Countries with early tracking systems				
Austria*	No	No	Yes	No
Belgium*	No	No	Yes	No
Czechia*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Germany*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Hungary*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Luxembourg*	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Netherlands*	Yes	No	Yes	No
Slovak Republic*	Yes	No	Yes	No
Switzerland*	Yes	No	Yes	No
Total	17	10	32	5

Notes: Early tracking systems are systems where students are separated as early as lower secondary level into different educational programmes or "tracks" according to their abilities. *In the countries marked with an asterisk, selection happens earlier than upper secondary education. Under "Academic performance", countries where "No" is indicated in both columns do not use academic performance to select students into the different programmes, but might consider it for attesting to lower secondary education completion (e.g. passing all compulsory subjects).

Sources: Above and Beyond (2022[4]), Country mapping; OECD (2019[5]), *INES 2019 ad hoc survey on upper secondary completion rate*; European Commission (2022[8]), *National Education Systems,* https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/national-description_en (accessed on 21 April 2022); WES (2022[9]), *Education System Profiles*, https://wenr.wes.org/category/education-system-profiles (accessed on 8 August 2023).

I.   Student and family preferences

The influence of student and family preferences varies

While the choice of students and their parents/guardians are commonly part of upper secondary transitions decision, their influence and how they are balanced with other factors varies. Most commonly, student and family preferences are considered alongside academic information and teacher / school recommendations. In France, student choice is considered alongside information about student performance from academic information (classroom assessments) and/or recommendations by teachers and schools. Similarly, in systems like those of Denmark, Sweden, England (United Kingdom) and Norway, where academic information is used to ensure that students meet minimum requirements for specific programmes, once students have met these requirements, they are free to choose among the available upper secondary programmes. In a few systems, student and family preferences play a minimal role. In Czechia, Japan and Türkiye, student and family views become secondary to the process because it is ultimately academic results that determine placements.

Young people need time and guidance to help exercise their agency

Perceptions of pathways are frequently informed by past experiences and societal views which may not always reflect up-to-date, accurate information. Learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be aware of the educational opportunities available, and to be able to access a network of informed views. Young people without educated parents are more likely to enrol in vocational education and training (VET) programmes instead of general education, which is the traditional pathway into tertiary education in most countries (OECD, 2021[3]). This pattern of intergenerational replication of pathways is the result of several factors, including the association between socio-economic background and academic performance and teachers' and schools' bias when making recommendations but also a lack of information and guidance to support decision making.

To provide young people and their families with support for informed decisions and to develop their understanding of, and capacity to use, their own agency, systems should ensure the accessibility of accurate and transparent information about programme choices and future pathways. Creating space for critical self-reflection well before selection decisions allows students to better match their skills and interests with education programmes. Since parents or guardians frequently have a strong influence over students' decisions, education systems also need to ensure that information reaches and is accessible for parents/guardians to guide their children towards informed decisions.

II.   Academic performance

There are two main forms of information about individuals' academic performance that education systems use for upper secondary transitions: external, standardised examinations and information based on classroom assessments. Using multiple sources of academic information to guide selection can improve the accuracy and fairness of allocation processes, including relying on both examinations and classroom-based assessment results.

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

External, standardised examinations provide externality and reliability, which are important for high-stakes decisions about a student's future. In highly stratified systems where selection takes place early on (as in Austria and the Netherlands), external examinations are perceived to play an important role by being more reliable than teachers' judgements (Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, 2019[10]). However, examinations also risk amplifying existing inequities in education systems as the academic achievement of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds is, on average, lower than that of their more

advantaged peers (OECD, 2021[11]). Students from more advantaged backgrounds typically accumulate several benefits related to their background when taking examinations, such as access to private tutoring.

In some countries, the use of examinations to rank students for school places (with those with the highest marks being awarded the most competitive places) raises also concerns for student well-being. Highly competitive admission systems, focusing mostly or exclusively on students' academic performance for student placement can create significant anxiety and stress for students. For example, in Japan, the pressure to enter prestigious high schools can have a negative impact on students' mental health (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020[12]). Using academic information to set minimum thresholds for upper secondary programmes, rather than using it to competitively rank students by performance can reduce the weight that academic information carries. Where examinations are important because of high demand for limited places, countries might also consider making them optional and limiting the range of subjects covered. Türkiye in 2018, started reducing competition and pressure associated with the national examinations by changing the criteria for student placement in upper secondary schools. Student placement is now based on their place of residence, regardless of exam scores while placement in the most prestigious schools and programmes (approximately 10% of all places) will continue to be determined by student performance on a centralised examination (Kitchen, H., et al., 2019[13]).

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

Classroom assessment results, in the form of students' average grades from all or certain subjects, across single or across multiple years of lower secondary education, are more commonly used for student selection. As countries move towards more competence-based curricula, performance-based assessments such as experiments or projects have become more important because such assessments usually require students to use a wide range of skills and knowledge, demonstrating complex competencies such as critical thinking and problem solving. Classroom assessments can generate important information about student performance, as they can be based on multiple assessments of different skills and knowledge, at different times over an extended period of schooling. However, teachers' classroom-based assessments can have limitations in terms of objectivity and reliability. When relying on classroom assessments to inform placements into upper secondary programmes, countries need to ensure that teachers are well-supported to develop their assessment literacy (Perico e Santos, 2023[1]).

III.   Teacher and school recommendations

In five OECD countries, teacher and school recommendations influence placement decisions. Teachers' views can consider other characteristics of students, such as an individual student's development and ambitions. In France, for example, students receive a non-binding recommendation from class councils (which include teachers) as to what would be the most appropriate pathway for students to follow. In Germany, depending on the federal state, either teachers or students and their parents have the discretion to decide which lower secondary programme a student will follow. However, teachers can be influenced, positively or negatively, by their perceptions of students and their characteristics. Reliance on other sources of student information and clear criteria and guidance to help teachers and schools reach decisions and recommendations might help to create fairer, more objective decisions.

Combining multiple sources of information to provide personalised advice

While no single source of information is without benefits or risks, effective transitions tend to combine different sources of information. Relying on multiple sources helps to ensure that selection better reflects the capacities and interests of students and helps to counteract the risks of specific sources of information for a more balanced perspective.

The perennial question that most transition systems face is how to create an equitable, high-quality system where low performers are not confined to certain educational options (usually vocational programmes) that become associated with low prestige and where, inversely, all students and families want to enter general education because it is perceived to be a more valued route, resulting in greater demand than places. Upper secondary transitions can contribute to perceptions of upper secondary programmes by not automatically directing learners with lower academic results to certain programmes and instead drawing on multiple sources of information to make a personalised recommendation for each learner based on what is likely to best reflect his/her ambitions and interests.

When transition decisions focus on choices between two binary options – such as vocational or general education - the scope to provide tailored recommendations for each learner is limited. Since most systems also provide learners with some degree of choice about the subjects, specialisations and options that they will pursue during upper secondary education, transitions decisions can also encompass directions about these choices (3. Subjects, levels and specialisation: Placement into subjects, levels and specialisations within upper secondary programmes) to provide a pathway recommendation focused on an individuals' future career ambitions.

3. Subjects, levels and specialisation: Placement into subjects, levels and specialisations within upper secondary programmes

Many OECD countries give students some degree of choice, not only when it comes to the types of secondary programmes available, but also regarding subjects to follow and the types of specialisation they can pursue within these study programmes (Stronati, 2023[7]). Alongside programme choice, this is one way to enable students to try out subjects and progressively define their interests and deepen their skills for further education and employment.

The stakes and equity of placements into subjects, levels and subjects

While student decisions around subjects, levels and specialisations might not occur at the same moment as entry into upper secondary education and tend not to be perceived as a defined moment of high stakes decisions, these decisions often have implications for learners' future pathways. In the United States for example, based on academic performance and teachers' recommendations, students can follow higher level honours classes which usually cover more content and are faster paced than corresponding non-honours courses (College Board, 2022[14]). In New Zealand, learners choose among many standards (commonly referred to as subjects) at the appropriate level that cumulatively provide the credits for their upper secondary certification – the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). These include a wide range of standards set by industry standard setting bodies and general and Māori knowledge standards. However, only 62 of these standards can count towards the University Entrance requirements, meaning that learners might make or be directed to choices that close pathways to tertiary education (New Zealand Government, 2023[15]; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2023[16]). In the United Kingdom, the subjects that learners take for A-Level can influence their access to tertiary education and even future earning options (Robinson and Bunting, 2021[17]).

International data on equitable access to different subjects, levels and specialisations is limited but national research suggests that disadvantaged or minority students can be underrepresented in the most prestigious options. Research from Virginia (United States) shows that economically disadvantaged students are four times less likely to follow Advanced Placement courses and there are ethnic disparities with only 15% of Black students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, compared to 50% of Asian students and 30% of White students (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2021[18]).Similarly, in New Zealand, evidence suggests that, throughout schooling, ability grouping results in marginalised student cohorts especially among Māori and Pacific learners, being disproportionately allocated to lower streams (Ministry of Education, 2021[19]). When it comes to upper secondary education, this results in Māori learners, as well

as those from disadvantaged backgrounds, being more frequently directed to take classes which do not provide the prior learning or prerequisites for degree-level study (Davy, 2021[20]).

Procedures often vary widely across schools, but academic information is often important

There is little information available at the national level about how students choose the specialisations they follow. In some countries, such as in the United States, the processes can differ across schools. In most cases, across all countries, the process is often relatively informal, with teachers and students drawing on a combination of available information such as their academic performance, teachers' guidance and their future ambitions and aspirations to guide their decisions (Perico e Santos, 2023[1]). National guidance and transparent procedures around student placement within upper secondary programmes, including clear selection criteria, could help countries ensure a higher level of fairness and consistency in this transition stage.

In most countries, there is no specific academic requirement to take certain subjects or specialisations, but teachers and schools will orient students to the options that they consider the best fit for their profile, often based on previous academic results. Students themselves will also likely choose to focus on subjects or study areas in which they have had good academic results. For example, in Ontario (Canada), students start making decisions about what subjects to choose from Grade 9 onwards. There is no pre-requirement to follow the more academic or applied courses. However, as students move to higher grades, their course options are influenced by their previous choices, and those choices affect students' post-secondary options.

High-quality student guidance can have a positive effect on students' choices

Students do not always have equal access to information when making decisions about their upper secondary programmes, and those coming from less advantaged backgrounds with less educational support might make less-informed choices. The provision of early and systematic student guidance, especially that considers inequities within the system, can help students make informed decisions regarding subject and specialisation choices within upper secondary programmes.

As when students are making decisions about selection into upper secondary education, when they are making decisions about subjects and options within upper secondary programmes, counselling and guidance need to be responsive to students' individual needs and contexts and reach them early in their education, so they have enough time to critically reflect on their future. Students could benefit from accessing a range of information when making their decisions, including data on labour market outcomes. When thinking about taking occupationally oriented options for example, it is helpful if students can explore the different careers and workplace environments in order to make informed decisions.

The bottom line: recommendations that reflect an individual's talents, aspirations and interests can support effective and equitable transitions

When designed and delivered well, transitions into upper secondary education can be a useful, informative step that help young people to understand their talents and strengths and how these relate to the range of options in upper secondary education. The risks for individual learners, education systems and society of ineffective transitions when learners end up in pathways that do not reflect their strengths or interests are high. Transitions that automatically direct lower-performing students to certain programmes – often vocational – without a broader reflection on their talents and personal pathways create high risks for society by contributing to their perception as being of lower prestige.

While the transition into upper secondary education in many countries tends to focus on a binary choice between vocational and general education, transitions should provide learners with advice that influences their initial entry into upper secondary education and the options, choices and specialisations that they make during upper secondary education. Providing advice from multiple sources of information and which encompasses the many decisions that a learner faces during their upper secondary pathway will help to guide them through the many high stakes decisions that they face.

Above and Beyond: Transitions in Upper Secondary Education

This document was prepared by Camilla Stronati, based on the working paper by Anna Vitoria Perico e Santos as part of the work within the Above and Beyond: Transitions in Upper Secondary team within the Policy Advice and Implementation Division at OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills.

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

For more information

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See: OECD Above and Beyond

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

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