



Career guidance, social inequality and social mobility: Insights from international data

Across the OECD, a majority of students now expect to work in adulthood as either senior managers or professionals. However, in the competition for such work, young adults from more socially disadvantaged background struggle to compete equitably with similarly attaining peers from advantaged backgrounds. Career guidance has a key role to play in challenging social inequalities and supporting social mobility. New analysis of data from longitudinal surveys and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) provides insight into the impact of socio-economic background on teenage career development and the forms of intervention that can be most confidently expected to enhance employment outcomes for young people.

This policy brief draws on evidence from the OECD Career Readiness project to explore the following questions:

- How does socio-economic status shape the career development of young people?
- How can schools challenge social inequality and enhance social mobility through guidance interventions?

The most ambitious generation in history

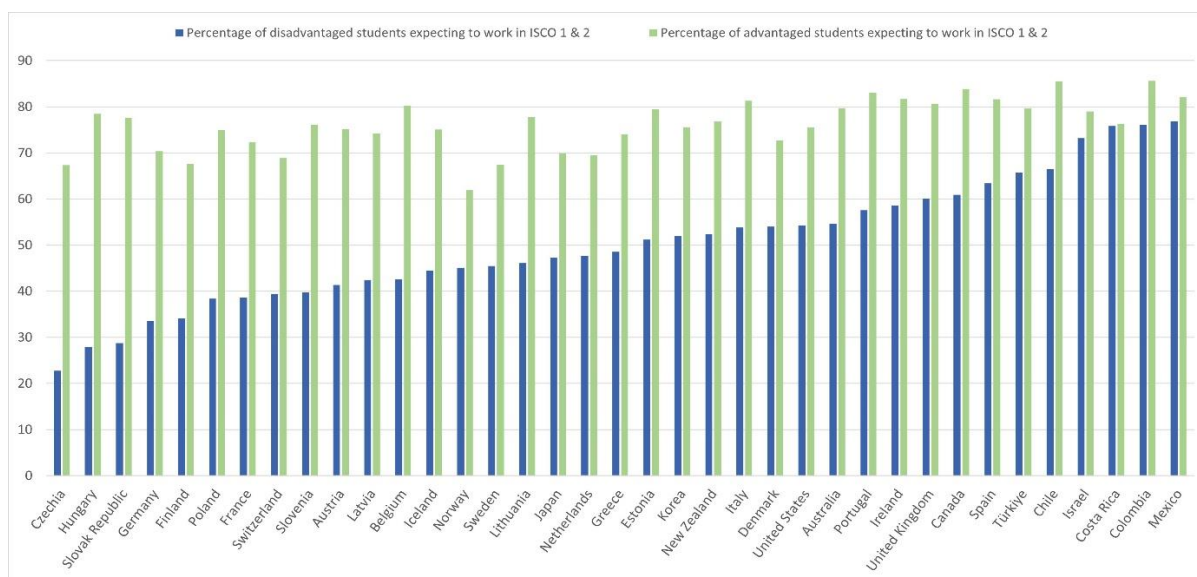
Since 2000, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study has asked secondary school students at ages 15 and 16 what type of job they expect to have around age 30. The results are coded using International Standardised Classification of Occupations (ISCO) categories widely used to describe the segmentation of the labour market. There are ten major categories in all and since 2000, the career expectations of students across the OECD and many non-OECD countries have increasingly focused on two fields: ISCO major category 1 (senior managers) and most notably ISCO major category 2 (professionals, such as doctors, engineers, lawyers and teachers). In 2000, around half (53%) of students across the OECD who expressed an occupational expectation said that they would go on to work in one of these categories. By 2022, this figure had risen to 63%. As Figure 1 illustrates, while this number is driven by interest from students from high economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) backgrounds, such aspirations are also very popular among their more ESCS disadvantaged peers.

Defining socio-economic status in PISA

The PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) makes it possible to draw comparisons between students and schools with different socio-economic profiles. The index is based on three components: parents' educational attainment, the status of their occupation and home possessions (OECD, 2024^[1])

Figure 1. Percentage of students expecting to work in ISCO major categories 1 & 2, by ESCS

Self-reported, PISA 2022.



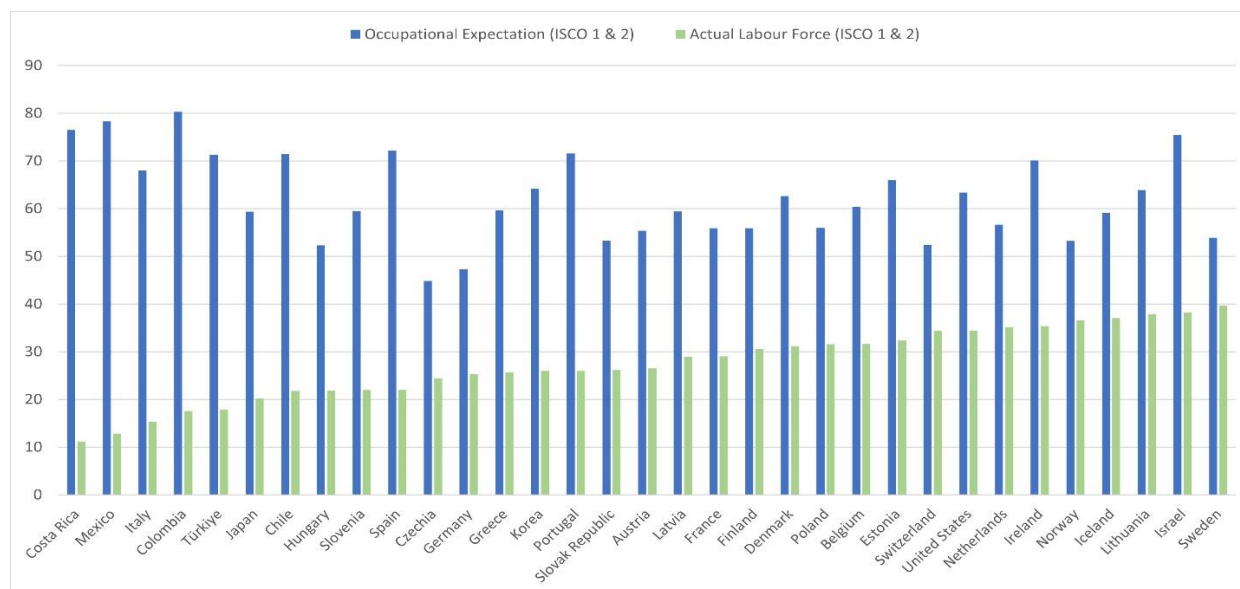
Note: Countries/economies are in ascending order of percentage of disadvantaged students expecting to work in ISCO 1 & 2
 1. ESCS refers to the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status 2. A socio-economically advantaged (disadvantaged) student is a student in the top (bottom) quarter of ESCS in his or her own country/economy. 3. ISCO refers to International Standardised Classification of Occupations: ISCO major category 1 (senior managers), ISCO major category 2 (professionals, such as doctors, engineers, lawyers and teachers)

Source: PISA 2022 database

However, many of those young people who plan on careers as a senior manager or professional are destined for disappointment. Figure 2 compares the percentages of students expressing such an expectation against the actual proportions of adults who work in ISCO 1 and 2 categories within OECD labour markets. In no country does demand match supply. Often, student interest is four or five times the level of actual demand.

Figure 2. Percentage of young people who expect an occupation in ISCO major categories 1 or 2 at age 30 compared to actual labour force distribution of the country

Self-reported, PISA 2022 and Eurostat 2023.



Note: Countries/economies are in ascending order of Actual Labour Force (ISCO 1 & 2)

1. ISCO refers to International Standardised Classification of Occupations: ISCO major category 1 (senior managers), ISCO major category 2 (professionals, such as doctors, engineers, lawyers and teachers)

Source: PISA 2022 database and Eurostat 2023 database

Who then succeeds in obtaining one of these dream jobs?

The OECD Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) provides an insight into the relative success of young people in the early labour market. PIAAC gathers considerable data both about the jobs that individuals do and factors which commonly influence success in the labour market, such as their levels of skills (literacy), education and qualifications, gender, and migrant status. Using these variables as statistical controls, it is possible to assess the extent to which young people who were born into socio-economically disadvantaged families go on to face additional barriers as they seek to convert their qualifications and skills into successful employment. Presented in the OECD study *Challenging social inequality through career guidance* (OECD, 2024^[11]), the analysis shows that the labour market outcomes of young adults (under the age of 35) across the OECD are heavily influenced by their social and economic background. Even with the same levels of education and skills, across the OECD young adults whose parents had not completed upper secondary education are three and half times more likely than their socially advantaged counterparts (with at least one parent with tertiary education) to be NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training). Socially disadvantaged young adults are also less likely to be employed in the services sectors and more likely to find employment in fields such as construction and manufacturing. Even with the same levels of education, young adults from high socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to work in high skilled sectors, such as the professions, than their peers from low socio-economics status (SES) backgrounds. Wage penalties can also be identified within PIAAC data. In a regression analysis of wage penalties across OECD countries using pooled data and controlling for a range of variables including educational attainment and literacy level, young adults whose parents had not attained upper secondary education were found to earn 6% less, and those with at least one parent who had attained upper secondary education 4% less than peers with at least one adult who had obtained tertiary education. The impact of ESCS on employment outcomes varies across countries and national studies offer deeper insight into the experiences of individuals. In the UK where studies have confirmed

the heavy over representation of children from fee-paying schools in high social status professions, analysis of Labour Force Survey data show that adults from low SES backgrounds earn 16% less than peers from more socially advantaged backgrounds with wage penalties for women and workers from ethnic minority backgrounds greater than average. An Italian longitudinal study finds moreover that an additional year of parental education increases the weekly wages of their son(s) by 12% after twenty years of work, irrespective of the child's educational levels (OECD, 2024^[1]). In the competition for work, while higher levels of qualifications and skills are strongly related to better employment outcomes, they do not fully determine success. While many young people from all backgrounds aspire to work in high status occupations, the children of more socially advantaged parents enjoy a considerable advantage when it comes to securing and prospering within such employment.

In their study of inequality in the UK, Friedman and Laurison (2019^[2]) introduce the concept of a 'class ceiling': class-based gaps in access to elite professions (such as managers, lawyers, doctors and other professional occupations) and pay within those professions that are linked to SES. According to the authors, the class ceiling describes frequently found limits on the career advancement of individuals from working-class backgrounds. Elite occupations are dominated by workers from privileged families and those inequalities cannot be fully explained by ability. Even when holding constant educational attainment including attendance at elite schools, people from working-class backgrounds are still less likely than people from privileged backgrounds to work in elite occupations.

Understanding variations in employment outcomes

Consideration of the labour market experiences of comparably educated and skilled young adults allows for a confident, if *de minimus*, understanding of the impact of socio-economic background on labour market success. Such studies compare young people with similar levels of academic achievement and do not take account of the fact that young people from low SES backgrounds are less likely to leave education highly qualified (OECD, 2018^[3]) – an important factor in itself in understanding the ways that socio-economic background can shape outcomes. Students from low SES backgrounds commonly face additional barriers in securing the highest levels of educational success. They are less likely to have access to books, computers and other learning resources, to participate in extra-curricular activities, to have their learning supported by private tutors and to benefit from parental insight into the operation of tertiary education and how it enables access to particular occupations.

What then is the role of education systems in further enabling social mobility by going beyond academic success? A productive means of conceptualising the role of schools in supporting more equitable employment outcomes is to draw upon theoretical approaches commonly used by labour market analysts to make sense of variations in labour market experiences. Capitals theory explores the ways in which economic, human, social and cultural capital shape success in the world of work (Bourdieu, 1986^[4]; Brown, Hooley and Wond, 2020^[5]; Friedman and Laurison, 2019^[2]; Tomlinson et al., 2022^[6]). Recruitment processes for example are structured around the specific qualifications and experiences that an applicant offers (human capital), but it is also well attested that personal contacts and networks provide considerable advantage both through active support and sources of information in the search for employment (social capital) (Chetty, 2022^[7]). More recently, analysts have focused too on cultural capital as a term used broadly to refer to what an individual thinks about themselves and their possible future within society. Strongly influenced by the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, studies highlight the ways in which the attitudes, assumptions and expectations of individuals reflect their social backgrounds, varying in what they consider reasonable to pursue in terms of career ambitions. Some young people more than others demonstrate confident understanding of, and ease with, the 'rules of the game' as they relate to specific careers as they embark on their working lives (OECD, 2024^[1]).

Career guidance and the development of human, social and cultural capital

A growing international research literature has explored teenage career development through the lens of capitals theory, exploring both the ways in which guidance interventions can be seen to enhance ultimate human, social and cultural capital of young people and how these accumulations of resources can shape engagement within guidance provision (OECD, 2024^[11]). While studies have initially explored career-related development and its outcomes related to all students, increasingly studies are highlighting variation in impacts linked to SES which can serve to either narrow social inequalities or contribute to their maintenance or growth. PISA data provide means of assessing the extent to which such theorisations can help make sense of variations in career development and their long term implications.

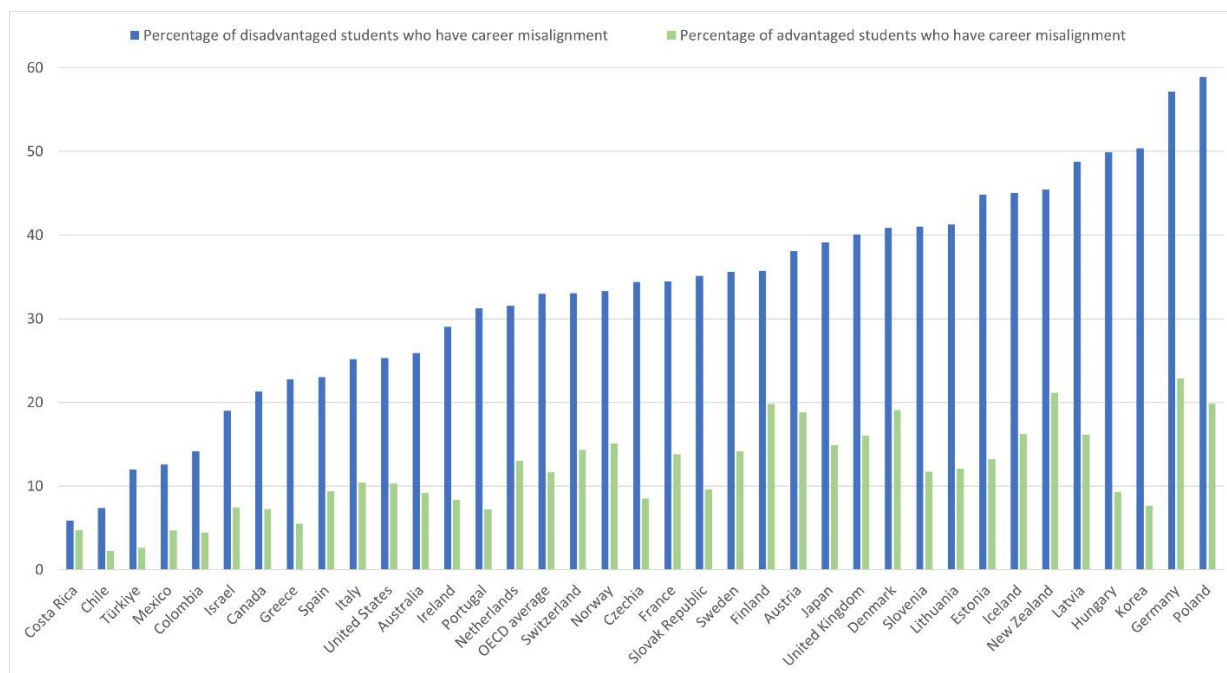
Human capital accumulation can for example be understood in terms of a young person's capacity to make informed decisions about their engagement in education and training. Across the world as young people stay longer in education, they face mounting decisions about how to build their personalised human capital through investments in learning. As former editor of the *Journal of Education and Work* Hugh Lauder explains such investment decisions are both important and often difficult for young people.

If we think of young people making investment decisions as they decide on the qualifications, training and experience (collectively, the human capital) they plan to accumulate prior to leaving education to optimise their ultimate earnings in the labour market, we need to recognise the importance of access to good information about what that labour market actually wants and demands in order for properly informed decision making to take place. In the absence of good labour market signalling, it can be no surprise that poor investment decisions will be made and ... skills mismatches ... become a predictable result. Young people ... have one big shot at getting their primary human capital accumulation right. If what they accumulate isn't what employers want—and the [UK] estimates that young people graduating today will never earn enough to pay back more than 60% of what they borrowed on what are currently preferential grounds from the state—then the cash investment (regardless of the psychological price) required of the individual is frighteningly high. Lauder in (Mann, 2017^[9])

At the age of 15, PISA 2022 shows that more than one-third of students across the OECD can be designated as career uncertain. Such uncertainty is strongly associated in longitudinal studies with poorer ultimate employment outcomes at age 25 (Covacevich et al., 2021^[9]) and PISA shows that career uncertainty is most commonly found among lower academic performers, boys and students from low ESCS backgrounds. Such students are at greater risk of aimlessness as they progress through education (Staff, 2010^[10]). For those students who do express an occupational expectation moreover, PISA shows widespread confusion. Across the OECD, a minimum of one student in five can be categorised as misaligned, a term used to describe circumstances when the occupational plans of students do not align well with their educational plans (Perry, 2016^[11]). Where students underestimate the levels of education required for their job plan, risks are strong of long-term employment outcomes being poorer than would be expected given education levels (Covacevich et al., 2021^[9]). Within OECD data, such misalignment is assessed when students state that they will work in a job typically requiring tertiary education (ISCO 1 and 2 major categories), but do not plan on attending tertiary education. Misalignment is strongly associated with socio-economic backgrounds (Covacevich et al., 2021^[9]). Across OECD countries in PISA 2022, 12% of students from the highest ESCS backgrounds could be classified as misaligned, compared to 33% of low ESCS students (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of students whose education and career expectations are not aligned

Self-reported, PISA 2022.



Note: Countries/economies are in ascending order of percentage of disadvantaged students whose career expectations to work in an ISCO 1 or 2 profession are not aligned with their education plans which do not include tertiary education.

1. ESCS refers to the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status 2. A socio-economically advantaged (disadvantaged) student is a student in the top (bottom) quarter of ESCS in his or her own country/economy.

Source: PISA 2022 database

Looking solely at the highest performing students on the PISA tests (defined in terms of students achieving at least level 4 on one of the tests on reading, mathematics and science and at least level 2 on all assessments), further evidence of the role of ESCS in shaping aspirations emerges. Considering just those students who performed at the highest levels on the science test, high-achieving advantaged students are more than twice as likely as disadvantaged students, on average across the OECD, to express both an intention to pursue tertiary education and to anticipate working in a professional or managerial occupation by age 30 (OECD, 2020_[12]). PISA shows that students commonly exhibit narrow interests in the labour market, focusing their career expectations on a small number of occupational areas. Indeed, across the OECD half or more of girls and boys at 15 with a clear job plan expect to work in one of ten choices that are most popular among their peers (OECD, 2020_[12]). At an age when students in most OECD countries anticipate specialising their studies (and so constraining potential future opportunities) within upper secondary education, uncertainty, confusion and heavy concentration in career thinking is widespread. PISA shows that low ESCS students are more poorly placed to make investment decisions in education and training, demonstrating forms of career thinking that in longitudinal studies are significantly associated with employment penalties in the early labour market (Covacevich et al., 2021_[9]).

However, PISA also shows that engagement in career guidance activities serves to enhance the career thinking of students. Analysis of PISA data illustrates that with statistical controls in place for gender, ESCS and academic performance that students who participate in a range of guidance activities (including speaking with a guidance counsellor, participating in career focused conversations, completing psychometric questionnaires, participating in job fairs and workplace visits/job shadowing, using the internet to research careers and first-hand work experiences through internships, volunteering and

part-time work) are significantly less likely to be uncertain about their career thinking or misaligned in their career planning (Covacevich et al., 2021^[9]).

There are also significant links between these activities and students being more likely to express ambitious plans for the future (defined as an expectation of working in an ISCO 1 or 2 profession) and to demonstrate instrumental motivation towards school, believing that it can help them to succeed in the jobs market – two further aspects of teenage career thinking that are associated with better ultimate employment outcomes in longitudinal studies (Covacevich et al., 2021^[9]). Through career guidance interventions, students can be seen to gain the capacity to enhance their career thinking allowing more informed investment in their accumulation of human capital.

Turning to social capital formation, first-hand experiences of workplaces and with people from the world of work provide means for students to build resources in forms relevant to their career plans. Social contacts can provide access to valuable work-based experiences which in turn can lead to recommendations and job offers (OECD, 2021^[13]). Less intense forms of employer engagement can also enhance outcomes for students. Longitudinal studies highlight positive relations between a range of student encounters with people in work and better ultimate employment outcomes (Covacevich et al., 2021^[9]). Studies exploring teenage participation in career talks with guest speakers in Canada, United Kingdom and Uruguay all show positive impacts in terms of better employment outcomes (lower NEET rates, higher than expected earnings) at age 25. Surveys of young adults reveal that career talks are widely viewed as being helpful in deciding on a career, getting a job and getting into university (OECD, 2023^[14]).

Work initiated by US sociologist Mark Granovetter conceptualises the value of more transient forms of social capital as the ‘strength of weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1990^[15]). Through social interactions with people outside of their immediate social circles, individuals can be seen to gain access to additional sources of useful information from people who know different things (Mann, 2021^[16]; Staff, 2010^[10]). The power of the interaction lies in the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of the information source. Through career talks and job fairs, guidance systems can provide students with the opportunity to engage with multiple individuals from the world of work – and studies show that the higher the volume of teenage contacts, the greater the long term benefits they enjoy (OECD, 2023^[14]). Through such interactions, students gain potential access to new, trusted information that helps shape their self-conceptions and their understanding of whether potential career pathways would be attractive and suitable for them as individuals (OECD, 2023^[14]). Access to such sources of information outside of schooling is linked to student SES. PISA 2018 data from 14 OECD countries show for example that whereas 87% of students from the highest ESCS quartile agreed that they had talked to someone about the type of job they would like to do when they leave education, this applied to only 79% of students from the lowest ESCS backgrounds.

Personal interactions can provide students with the opportunity to connect directly with people working in industries of interest. In this way, as well as gaining valuable information about more productive investments in education and training linked to specific careers, they are exposed to distinct workplace cultures. Described often as understanding the ‘rules of the game’ (Archer, 2015^[17]), students can be presented with powerful opportunities to learn what employers most value in potential recruits and the forms of behaviour and display which can be expected to provide a recruiter with confidence that a young person would fit in well with the working culture. For students, authentic experiences of this nature will provide opportunities to observe and practice potential vocational identities. For some, this might lead to a rejection of a potential career path, for others it provides deeper insight into how it is that some succeed and others fail in achieving their ambitions, so underpinning emergent senses of personal agency.

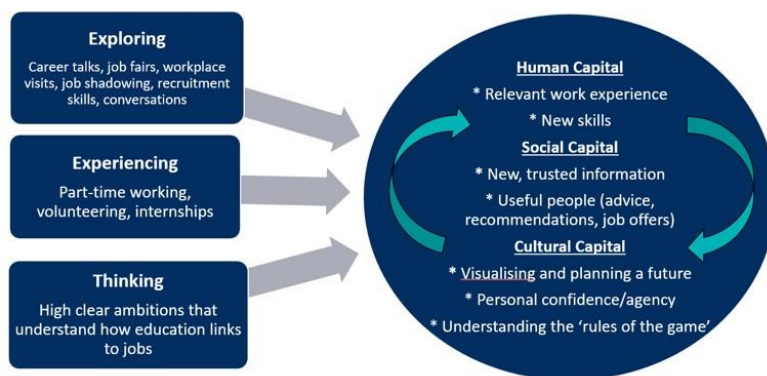
In textual analysis of written statements by 190 young British adults aged 19-24 who felt that they had gained something of value from their engagements with employers through their secondary schools, Jones, Mann and Morris (2016^[18]) find that while evidence of human and social capital accumulation are found, most frequently the benefits that students felt they gained from such forms of guidance are related to such cultural capital. Respondents reported growing confidence, clearer career thinking and better understanding of the need for educational investment that underpinned stronger senses of agency and

direction through education and training towards desirable work. However, the forms of career development observed in these reflections indicate continual interactions between the different forms of capital.

Through [school-mediated] employer engagement activities, a teenager may make the contacts needed to be offered a job (social capital ... as access to employment) while simultaneously acquiring the expertise or ability to make them employable in that role (human capital ... as skills development). Or, to give another example, a young adult may report maturing and becoming more assured about themselves (cultural capital ... as enhanced personal confidence) as a result of trusted information from employers (social capital ... as authentic guidance) (Jones, Mann and Morris, 2016^[18])

As Figure 4 illustrates, engagement in those forms of career development which are most strongly evidenced in longitudinal studies as linking to better employment outcomes provides resources for young people which build upon each other in similar ways. A student’s confidence in career progression for example enables greater value to be extracted from workplace experiences and interaction with people in work.

Figure 4. Conceptualisation of the relationship between participation in career development and capitals enhancement



Social mobility or social reproduction?

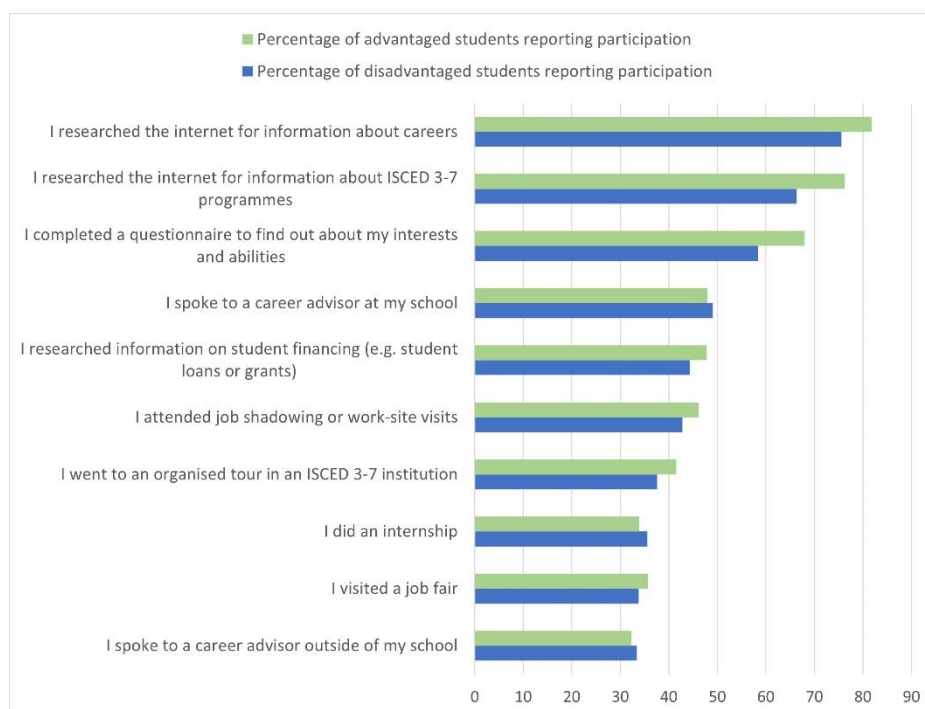
In their conceptualisation of the relationship between career development and capitals, Stanley and Mann (2014^[19]) highlight the ways in which preceding levels of human, social and cultural capital can be expected to shape the benefits which students might anticipate from engagement in career development activities that involve employers and people in work. Conceiving a guidance activity as a means to build the capacity for career progression through access to information and experiences, students can be pictured as beginning with different collections of resources which can be augmented through multiple guidance interventions over time taking place within and outside of schools. Noting for example the importance of preceding social connections in accessing desirable work placements where students and their families are tasked with sourcing opportunities, they argue that guidance provision can serve to either enhance social mobility or support social reproduction (LeGallais, 2008^[20]). The social composition of educational institutions can moreover be seen to provide structural disadvantages or advantages to students, as is the case where parents and alumni work in fields of strong interest to students as found by Huddleston (2012^[21]) in her review of employer engagement in guidance delivered by English fee-paying schools.

Consequently, it might be expected that public education systems desiring greater equity in career progression will ensure that students from lower SES backgrounds have access than their high SES peers to greater levels of guidance through their schools, compensating for family-based gaps in knowledge and career-related opportunities. Analysis of PISA 2022 data from OECD countries shows however that on

average it is students from the most socially advantaged quartile who are more likely than students from the least advantaged quartile to engage in career development activities.

Figure 5. Participation in career development activities

OECD average by ESCS



Note: 1. ESCS refers to the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status 2. A socio-economically advantaged (disadvantaged) student is a student in the top (bottom) quarter of ESCS in his or her own country/economy.

Source: PISA 2022 database

Addressing social inequalities through guidance interventions

Recent OECD reviews of practice in relation to the capacity of guidance systems to challenge social inequalities identify particularly valuable provision in terms of four areas: providing more intense support; developing professional capacity and providing dedicated resources; building social capital; and, developing a critical understanding of personal relationships with the labour market (OECD, 2024^[1]).

Given the greater dependence of low ESCS students on their schools for career development, effective systems will ensure a strong baseline of provision for all students and as PISA 2022 data illustrate considerable opportunity exists for increasingly the availability of guidance through schools. In analysis from Korea (Lee et al., 2021^[22]) found that when students receive more career education, the link between competence in career management and social background weakens with positive impacts strongest when students express satisfaction with the guidance received. By beginning guidance activities for all students at an earlier age and focusing on the development of individuals' capabilities to understand the possibilities available to them, as found in a Danish study at lower secondary level (Skovhus, 2016^[23]), the capacity of low SES students to take greater agency over their career journeys can also be seen to grow. A number of longitudinal studies have moreover found that students in greatest need of guidance do gain more from it than higher SES peers, suggesting a compensatory effect as lower SES peers benefit disproportionately from provision of new information (Mann, Percy and Kashefpakdel, 2018^[24]; Resnjanskij, 2023^[25]).

In some systems students experiencing higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage can expect greater levels of guidance. In Ireland notably, schools serving lower SES students can expect greater financial resources. Within the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, eligible secondary schools receive funding for 44 hours of weekly dedicated staff time to support guidance activities. By contrast, weekly funding for more advantaged schools amounts to 18 hours. DEIS schools are expected to provide greater provision, including more 1-2-1 interactions with guidance counsellors, more engagement with employers and tertiary institutions, greater integration of career learning within academic subjects and engagement of families (OECD, 2023^[14]).

Further means of enhancing the progression of disadvantaged students towards successful careers lies in the provision of career pathways where students typically aged 15-18 undertake a programme of study focused around a broad vocational sector such as healthcare or Information Technology. They engage in programmes rich in work-related and work-based learning designed to help students develop human, social and cultural capital that will ease entry into related tertiary programmes or post-secondary training provision. Importantly, such programmes operate within general secondary education, commonly over one day a week. They allow students to explore a vocational area of interest without shutting down other possible options. The results of a large scale randomised control trial of the US Career Academies programme show that eight years after completing high school, participating students enjoyed wage premiums of 8% over a relevant control sample of peers with students whose personal characteristics suggested the highest risks of non-completion of upper secondary education gaining the greatest benefits (Kemple, 2008^[26]).

Programmes specifically designed to enhance the social capital of students can also be targeted at student groups in greater need. Here, online provision provides a convenient mechanism for enhancing opportunities for students. In the UK for example the national [Inspiring the Future](#) programme which is responsible for millions of interactions between students and people in work deliberately excludes fee-paying schools from participation in a free programme that targets campaigns on low-income areas such as seaside towns and former mining areas. In Finland, [Virtual TET](#) is a one-week period of familiarisation with working life where students combine exploration of vocational sectors and workplaces while undertaking work assignments. This provides students with the opportunity to engage with workplaces not easily accessible within their locality. In France, [JobIRL](#) allows students to communicate online with mentors to explore their career ambitions. While evaluations of online provision are currently limited, such initiatives enhance the possibility of students gaining access to experiences and sources of advice not easily found within immediate social circles and/or geographic locations (OECD, 2024^[11]).

In many jurisdictions, career guidance is left until secondary school and often concentrated in the years linked to key decision-making points and immediate entry to the labour market. However, considerable evidence suggests that young people develop their career identities, aspirations and career thinking early in life and that early aspirations are influenced by socio-economic status (OECD, 2024^[11]). As a UK study of 27 000 university students shows for example the age at which young people begin thinking about higher education varies with more socially advantaged students more likely to begin considering it during primary school (OECD, 2024^[11]). This creates a strong rationale for starting institutional career education and guidance early to disrupt processes of social and occupational reproduction linked to socially constructed expectations and assumptions that may be locked in by the later years of secondary school.

In response, a growing number of countries have introduced policies to increase primary-age participation in guidance, creating opportunities for students to begin thinking about their potential futures in work and to better see the connections between what they do in the classroom and the working world (OECD, 2024^[11]). Such initiatives can be expected to reduce the likelihood of students ignoring or ruling out potential pathways without due consideration. The Swedish [Welcome to the university!](#) programme for example seeks to break the cycle of reproduction which sees the children of higher educated parents following their parents into university while other children are less likely to make the choice. The programme aims to demystify the idea of higher education early on in compulsory schooling (OECD, 2024^[11]).

In the Canadian province of New Brunswick, students are expected to develop critical perspectives on the operation of the labour market and how it might relate to them in relation to different aspects of their personal identity, including such factors as disability, gender, sexual orientation, migrant status and SES. The New Brunswick Career Education framework, co-designed with the OECD, is intended to provide students with a realistic understanding of the labour market to underpin psychological resiliency within transitions (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023^[27]). Drawing on conceptions of critical consciousness (Diemer, 2009^[28]), the framework anticipates students entering the labour market with their eyes open to its challenges as well as its opportunities, particularly with regard to social inequalities in order to enable students to become better equipped to deal with its economic and psychological challenges. Students for example are expected to learn about how the structure of labour market can work against good transitions for many young people despite their own best intentions. The Career Education Framework is structured around statements articulating the expected student understanding at different ages. These include:

- I have learned why it might be harder for some people to secure their desired careers (Grades 6-8)
- I can explain why some people might face additional barriers in securing their desired career pathways (Grades 9-12)

Students are expected to be critical in their understanding of how the operation of the labour market influences individual outcomes, but also to identify resources of potential value to smooth transitions. Learners are encouraged to think about the diversity of experiences that people have in the labour market, going beyond individual approaches to career development to consider the possibility of changing their career environment:

- I have learned that not everybody works in a full-time permanent job and that people are working in different ways because they want to or because they have no choice (Grades 6-8)
- I have learned that there are protections that exist to ensure workplaces are free from discrimination (Grades 6-8)
- I have shared my ideas on how inequities may be solved (Grades 6-8)
- I can identify how individual and collective actions can help create a fairer working world (including the role of labour unions) (Grades 9-12)
- I have learned about the legislative protections that exist to ensure employment processes (recruitment, promotion, assignment, and termination) are free from discrimination (Grade 9-12) (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023^[27])

Where fully successful, it will be expected that programmes designed to enhance social mobility will not only support the greater progression of low SES students into competitive high status ISCO 1 and 2 professions, but also facilitate the entry of high SES students into a wider range of professions better linked to their personal interests and skills. In Canada, a long-term randomised control trial has followed high school students through and beyond a four-year programme of additional support in career development and higher education planning. The *Explore Your Horizons* programme was conducted in 30 New Brunswick high schools and involved over 4 000 students who were randomly assigned to two groups. A first group participated in 20 after-school workshops designed to help them understand the importance of career planning, explore educational and career options and transitions from high school to tertiary education. The workshops actively engaged parents, included a focus on resilient life skills and engaged post-secondary students. The high school students also had access to media materials about career planning. A second group simply received additional financial support on enrolment in tertiary education. Following the students up to age 29, significant positive results were identified in relation to tertiary enrolment, graduation rates and average earnings of the first group. That group was divided moreover into two halves based on parental income. Linked to the intervention, the tertiary enrolment rates of higher income students were seen to drop (if modestly), while that of lower income students rose

significantly, leading to a substantial decrease in the gap between the two groups in enrolment in four-year programmes of tertiary education (Renée, 2023^[29]). See also: (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2009^[30]).

The New Brunswick Career Education Framework includes items that prompt guidance counsellors, teaching staff, students and their families to consider whether individual students may be in need of additional support. In this, the province draws upon an adaptation of a Response to Intervention model used widely across educational provision to identify students in greater academic need. The model is based upon three categories of intervention: interventions aimed at all students (Tier 1), interventions aimed at some students in small groups, for example a group working on the development of social and emotional competencies (Tier 2), and interventions aimed at a few students delivered on an individual basis, perhaps through one-to-one counselling (Tier 3). The approach points towards personalised guidance provision that acknowledges students may anticipate additional barriers as they seek to convert their human capital into successful careers.

Towards fully personalised career guidance

In the twentieth century, the employment outcomes of young people were typically heavily shaped by their biographical characteristics. Social class, gender and ethnicity notably served to track young people through education systems into predictable roles in the labour market. Over the last two generations in many OECD countries, more individualistic approaches have become apparent, as growing numbers of students from all social backgrounds have stayed on in upper secondary and tertiary education. Increasingly focused on a small number of professional occupations, students engage in what is ostensibly a fair competition for employment. However, as analysis of large data sets shows, students are not equally prepared to activate their qualifications and experiences to their fullest extent within the labour market. High aspirations are widespread, if not universal, but access to useful resources to enable progression remains tied to socio-economic background. Career guidance systems can compensate for gaps in knowledge and resources that enable confident progression and these can be productively conceptualised through capitals analysis. While attention in this context is most heavily focused on what this means for entry into high status professions by young people low SES backgrounds, it is not the full story. Within a socially mobile society, young people should be encouraged and enabled to explore the breadth of the labour market and helped by their schools to understand and progress towards careers in which they feel greatest confidence of securing fulfilling employment. By implication, this will mean action both to raise understanding of the professions among low SES students, but also initiatives to ensure that high SES students feel enabled to pursue careers in fields such as the skilled trades. In this, the guidance community can do little to influence the quality of jobs, but it can ensure that students gain informed understanding of them through trustworthy and timely interventions. New insights from longitudinal data provide useful benchmarks in this regard and the growing use of digital technologies within guidance provides considerable opportunity to enhance personalised provision. Digital delivery remains very poorly evaluated however, and is a priority for further research as is the need for a more sophisticated understanding of the desirable quantity and quality of interventions of all types. Further analysis is also required to better understand intersectionality in the career development of students as other personal characteristics, most notably gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, can also be seen to hinder career progression.

The bottom line: career guidance can and should address social inequalities to enhance social mobility

Young people from low SES backgrounds face additional barriers as they seek to convert their qualifications and experience into successful employment. They encounter particular challenges in seeking to enter high status jobs. The barriers they face can be productively conceptualised in terms of economic, human, social and cultural capital accumulation. Schools can help to build these resources through programmes of career guidance, but to be successful they must actively respond to predictable barriers relating to access to trusted information and useful experiences. PISA shows a need for socially focused interventions. Career uncertainty and confusion is shaped by SES. Low SES students are also less likely to engage in most commonplace career development activities. Equitable guidance systems will target greater provision at low SES students and aim ultimately to provide personalised provision to all students, encouraging and enabling understanding of and progression towards careers promising greatest personal fulfilment. Insights from longitudinal data provide new opportunities for more scientific and strategic approaches to delivering effective provision.

Career Readiness

This document was prepared by the Career Readiness team at the OECD.

The OECD Career Readiness project provides analysis and policy advice in relation to the effective, efficient and equitable design and delivery of career guidance in schools to enhance the ultimate employment outcomes of young people.



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See: [OECD Career readiness project](#)

[OECD \(2024\), Challenging Social Inequality Through Career Guidance: Insights from International Data and Practice, OECD Publishing, Paris](#)

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