

# OECD FUTURE OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS 2030

Student voices  
from the  
Global Forum  
October 2020



**The OECD 2nd Global Forum on the Future of Education and Skills 2030 was a two-day workshop aimed at generating solutions for reducing education equity gaps through curriculum adaptation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The event brought together more than 250 participants from 40 countries and jurisdictions, of whom 60 were secondary education students.**

Participants, including policymakers, school leaders, educators, students, researchers and social partners, discussed ways to adjust curriculum content, assessments and evaluation, as well as the role of teaching to support students facing difficulty without stigmatisation. Forum attendees also explored their future visions of teachers and teaching, student-teacher relationships and learning environments.

Ahead of the 2nd Global Forum, the OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 team conducted a student survey, "Addressing equity in a time of crisis", to collect student narratives about school closures, curriculum adjustments in the pandemic context, and difficulties students face in learning, among others. Students were also asked to reflect on strategies and ideas for improving the future of education. The survey received 30 responses from students across 15 countries.

This brochure is the culmination of student interviews conducted with survey participants in the weeks leading up to the 2nd Global Forum. Through in-depth discussions, students whose voices are featured in the brochure, were able to shed light on their individual experiences with learning during and after pandemic-related school closures. They shared concerns for mental and physical well-being, exposed learning difficulties and curriculum gaps, reflected on learning inequities, and offered bold ideas for how to make education better.

The brochure is organised according to the most widespread and salient challenges and proposals for the future that students articulated in their interviews. It also includes a Resources page that will allow you to delve further into the findings of our project and deepen your understanding of the challenges facing education today.

### CHALLENGE 1: STRUGGLE WITH LEARNING

During the pandemic, it became apparent to many students that their grasp on content learned online was noticeably weaker than on content learned in school. Some students felt that they often had to learn the material on their own without hands-on support from their teachers, leading to reduced comprehension and information retention. For others, the online workload felt burdensome, and they weren't able to find adequate time to study. Upon returning to school, students frequently found themselves having to work harder in order to achieve the same results and maintain their grades.

*Compared to how I did before undergoing online learning, I can see that my performance [on assessments] is worse. It's hard to pin down specific factors, but I think maybe it's harder to absorb content just from watching lectures on your computer screen because in times of regular schooling, there are so many different ways of absorbing content like working with other people and just helping each other. At least my school is taking this into consideration. They're trying to show that these are different circumstances in the exams I actually will have at the end of this year. In the IB Diploma, there have been some amendments, for example there is less content in the exams this year.*

— Paulina, 18, Poland



*I take descriptive geometry, because in Portugal, your subjects are divided in specialization areas, and I'm in the sciences & technology track. One of my subjects is geometry that involves architecture and engineering, and we would do, in the first two weeks of distant learning, more than 100 exercises. They take at least 15-45 minutes to be done. It was tough, but I do feel that most teachers made adjustments somehow. Yet sometimes, the workload was even bigger than during in-person learning.*

— Carina, 16, Portugal

*We have two sets of exams each year, and it was weird because we had an entire term online, and then we had a week back at school studying, and then we took the exams. Everything we had learned for the exams we had learned online. I think it was different for different people, but it was definitely more stressful because you didn't know if you knew everything. For most people, it was half self-taught because online it's a bit harder, and you don't know if all the content is there.*

— Zoe, 16, Australia





### CHALLENGE 2: PHYSICAL OR MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES

Mental and physical health have been major obstacles for students across the globe in navigating online learning and the transition back to in-person instruction. Separation from friends and peers during periods of school closure amplified feelings of social isolation. Anxiety about academic performance, whether during routine assessments such as quizzes and papers or high-stakes examinations, mounted during and following the months of online learning. Spending hours in front of a computer screen during the school day led to physical discomfort and illness.

*I believe that overall the anxiety levels increased [during the pandemic] not only in online learning, but also when we went back to school in September. [...] A strong factor that influences that is the lack of emotional contact [with peers and teachers], it really influences mental well-being. In my school, anxiety attacks are really more common. A lot of students have to leave the class because they're having a really strong anxiety attack, and it's not only during the online learning, but the fact that we all spent three, four, five months at home, it really influences the learning now. We can't go back to normal, as if nothing happened.*

— Manuel, 16, Portugal



*I've heard of people with very different, practically opposite experiences. I had people I know who struggled a lot during online learning, who suffered a lot from not being able to be with people, to connect with them, and just isolated themselves, and they are now absolutely thriving from being able to be around everyone again. But I also know of people, who were struggling with mental health issues before online learning, and they actually enjoyed being left to their own devices for a little bit, being more isolated from certain environments. They are now having a hard time transitioning back to talking to everyone all the time, being so close to people.*

— Maria, 15, Portugal

*The biggest obstacle that I faced in online education? I started to have some headaches due to looking at a screen all day long. Sometimes, I couldn't focus on the paper that our teacher gave us because of my headache. [...]*

*I was fine being at home because I'm not an extroverted person. But after some time in lockdown, I felt really bad. I started having headaches, and I was always moody. I would get angry for no reason, and I would just go to my room, pull the blanket on my head, and try to sleep. Now that we are able to go out, it's fine.*

— Begüm, 16, Turkey



### CHALLENGE 3: LOSING MOTIVATION IN LEARNING

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During school closures, many students reported struggling with staying focused on their studies. Learning and studying alone, outside the classroom, made it difficult to concentrate and stay motivated. Students found it difficult to monitor and keep track of their progress without routine feedback from teachers. Some felt that their academic performance suffered, either during online learning or upon return to school. The pressures of routine assessments, such as in-class quizzes, as well as high-stakes examinations were particularly challenging to navigate during online learning.

*Clear communication between students and teachers that allows questions to be asked [was a challenge]. If you were lost, I felt that there was a bigger barrier to figuring the problem out, and I think that stopped a lot of students from moving on in the programme. It was a lot easier to just not turn up because you're at home. One of my good friends, she just slowly stopped coming to all the classes. At the start, she would turn up and she just wouldn't talk, and at the end, she just wasn't there. I think that's mainly due to falling behind and not really having support readily available. It's hard for the teachers, too, to know who is falling behind.*

– Zoe, 16, Australia



*I should have accepted myself, I should have understood that it is really natural for me to struggle during the distance learning. That's the whole point. During distance learning, I added too much pressure on myself, and I felt like I wasn't doing very well and failed to motivate myself. This is a totally new experience for everyone, not just for me but for every student, and not just for students but also for teachers. [...] There should be some space for us to fail and struggle and explore new approaches to studying.*

– Ayumi, 17, Japan



*The truth is that for many students, the only motivation that they have is because they're being assessed, and they're going to have a grade, and that grade depends on their attention, on their participation, on their studying. Most teachers just gave everyone the grade they had before or a better one, there wasn't any real thought put into that. A lot of people just thought, 'Why am I working hard? Why am I trying my best if I don't need to in order to be successful?' [...] I had people in my classes who, because they were demotivated, their grades dropped, they just stopped doing things. We just had our first assessments a couple of weeks ago, and many people haven't been able to pick the pace back up.*

– Maria, 15, Portugal





### CHALLENGE 4: LIMITED TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

Access to a reliable Internet connection was a major obstacle for many students across the globe. Although the majority of students who participate in the OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project had access to Internet and a computer, they pointed out that access was vastly unequal, particularly in public schools. Sharing computers with family members or accessing lessons through an unreliable WiFi connection undermined the quality of education students received during school closures. Moreover, Internet quality created routine class disruptions and was a source of anxiety.

Throughout Turkey, there are a lot of students who have problems connecting to their online lessons. They cannot afford an Internet connection, and they do not have electricity in their home or their region. In Ankara, there is a project to send free Internet to some villages so that students can have their online classes. [...] I am one of the luckiest students in my country, so I think that saying I would change something in my education in the last six months would be a little bit selfish. For my whole country, I would want every student to have an Internet connection that our Ministry of Education has to provide to them, to give them access to any kind of education that they need.

— Begüm, 16, Turkey



My school lent a few computers for students because a lot of students have siblings, and not everyone has four computers to spare at home. So they lent a few computers for students that have scholarships or for students that have siblings. What happened was that, with a lot of people using WiFi, I don't think the network can handle too many people. So what would happen is that some neighborhoods would just have power outages or WiFi outages, and we even lost a class because of that once. My philosophy teacher wasn't there, we waited for him for 40 minutes. In the end he was able to let someone know that he was having a WiFi outage.

— Carina, 16, Portugal

Some of our teachers had problems connecting to the lessons. For example, our physics teacher had an Internet problem, so for the second term under COVID, we couldn't really have physics lessons. When teachers have Internet connection problems, it's more prominent than the students, it affects the whole lesson. [...] I know that in public schools that use the Ministry of Education's system, their lessons were pre-recorded, and students were supposed to watch them. Sometimes, the teachers forgot that they were being recorded, and they would make mistakes. But they couldn't erase their mistakes because the videos were being recorded, and the students were supposed to watch it.

— Dilay, 16, Turkey



### FUTURE WE WANT 1: ADJUSTMENT TO CONTENT FORMATS

Students with successful online learning experiences reported that interactive content improved their ability to comprehend, process and retain material. In fact, students found that online learning frequently inspired teachers to devise new, creative ways to engage students, through debates, group projects and interactive quizzes, among others. This was a welcome change of pace to curricula grounded in rote memorisation and written regurgitation of facts. With the return to in-person learning, however, many students expressed doubt that such engaging activities could easily be integrated back into classroom instruction.

*It wasn't much of a difficulty adjusting to online learning for me because we had interactive lessons, which means that we could talk to our teachers, and our teachers could talk to us. So we were able to ask questions. However, in public schools in Turkey, they were only able to watch videos on television as lessons. So I don't think most people in our age group were able to get as much information as we were because they just watched videos, they didn't have any assignments, they weren't able to ask questions.*

– Dilay, 16, Turkey



*Teachers started discovering new platforms, like quizzes we could do individually or all together. I think we all really liked the competition quizzes because they gave us that drive to do better. Or for example, team projects, we had a lot of those, and those are very easy to apply to in-person learning. It really does motivate us; it motivates the better students and students that have more difficulties alike. Teacher [were] realizing that writing on a piece of paper was not the only way for us to show that we retained information.*

– Maria, 15, Portugal

*The one positive thing to me about online learning is, you can have the textbook and the information inside and you can consult it [during assessments]. When you're taking a test, you can read the book and use the information from it in your tests. To me, this was a really positive thing because we could consult not only textbooks but also the Internet and go deeper in our answers. In my exams, I really went deeper because I could investigate my subject more. It really developed my critical thinking more than memorizing facts from textbooks.*

– Manuel, 16, Portugal





### FUTURE WE WANT 2: TEACHERS BECOMING MENTORS

With the challenges of distance learning, many students gained a newfound appreciation for teachers who moved beyond their role as lecturer and keeper of knowledge to get to know their students on a more personal level. Students highlighted the importance of informal discussions with teachers and of teachers taking their mental, emotional and environmental challenges into account. Teachers who checked in with students and kept track of their well-being received praise, and students often expressed a hope that this mentoring role of teachers takes hold outside the online environment.

*Teachers encouraged us to share our opinions about learning materials, such as documentaries or videos related to the curriculum. They preferred these activities for evaluating us. They really adapted well because it became more engaging for us. Beyond that, teachers, when they spent time really realising how we were doing emotionally and the types of problems we were experiencing, emotionally and with access to technology, they tried to adjust. It was really good, and we as students really appreciated them taking this into account. It was the teachers who took the initiative to adapt to students' difficulties with learning and access to technology.*

— Manuel, 16, Portugal



*It would be nice to see teachers who are more concerned about a student's whole life. I find that, especially with going into higher levels of education where your teacher isn't teaching all the subjects and everyone is specialised, teachers completely focus on your performance in their particular subject. I don't think there's a lot of communication between teachers in my experience, with how everyone is doing and with giving students too much to do. That could definitely be improved so that teachers would look to our well-being as well. A teacher should be a mentor, as in looking after students beyond just their academics.*

— Zoe, 16, Australia



*I appreciate getting encouragement from teachers. Usually, before distance learning started, there were plenty of chances for me to have conversations with teachers, and I could see how much I've grown up and how I'm performing. Through those informal conversations, I could keep track of my learning. During distance learning, these informal conversations were totally cut off. There should be more of those casual conversations among teachers and students, and it would really help me with my academic progress.*

— Ayumi, 17, Japan





### FUTURE WE WANT 3: DIFFERENT WAYS TO ASSESS LEARNING

Online learning has exposed both students and teachers to new ways to assess knowledge acquisition and retention. With the use of online tools and project-based assignments, students were able to reflect on the nature of standardised assessments and imagine alternatives for the future. Simply listening to lectures, absorbing and then regurgitating content proved to many to be far less stimulating than deeper learning that required hands-on engagement with the material. As a result, students envisioned and offered new possibilities for assessments of the future.

*I think that this experience has made me reflect on assessments in a new way. I want them to actually try to test us in terms of knowledge and how well we absorb knowledge, our real understanding of the content. I think that because of these circumstances with COVID-19, even though you observe new content through online lectures, your understanding may be much worse [than with in-person learning] – this is now reflected in our assessment results. Even if there have been certain adjustments, the whole nature of exams has stayed the same. Assessments, as they are, are something that made this experience more challenging.*

– Paulina, 18, Poland



*Having fixed dates and fixed assessments is important for us. It gives us perspective, it gives us a sense of organization. But they don't always have to be standardised tests, just writing for an hour on a piece of paper. I think online learning really showed that there are other ways to test students other than the regular pen-and-paper tests. We can have quizzes, more interactive activities. I think teachers should pick some stuff from online learning and apply it now.*

– Maria, 15, Portugal

*With online learning, we did more work individually. So, I was the one to know most about what I've done and how much progress I've made. During distance learning, the line between our personal lives and our schooling got very blurred. In these periods, I found that self-reflection [exercises] were an opportunity for me to keep track of my learning and to do peer assessments. Teachers encouraged us to do self-reflection, and that's how I learned how effective it can be. This may be specific to my school's IB program, where self-reflection on essays, reports, and presentations is done according to criteria provided by IB. We do have guidelines, and without them, it may be hard to adapt this model to other programmes.*

– Ayumi, 17, Japan



## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

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- **OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project website:** <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/>
- **OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 publications:** <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/contact/>
- **The OECD Learning Compass 2030:** <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/>
- **The Future We Want - Student voices from the OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project:** <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/well-being/>
- **OECD TopClass podcast episode 21 - The view from the classroom: What do today's learners say about the future of education?:** <https://soundcloud.com/oecdtopclasspodcast/episode-21-the-view-from-the-classroom-what-do-todays-learners-say-about-the-future-of-education>
- **OECD TopClass podcast episode 22 - What life is like for high schoolers during the coronavirus crisis:** <https://soundcloud.com/oecdtopclasspodcast/episode-22-what-life-is-like-for-high-schoolers-during-the-coronavirus-crisis>



