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Inclusive education

PROMOTING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND WELL-BEING OF ALL STUDENTS

- In the face of population ageing and related rapid social and economic changes, skills are increasingly crucial to support inclusive growth and social cohesion.
- Evidence from large-scale international assessments, such as PISA and PIAAC, indicates that both adults and 15-year old students in the Netherlands are among the highest skilled. Gender gaps in reading and mathematics proficiency in primary and secondary school are on average smaller in the Netherlands than in other countries.
- However, some groups of individuals in the Netherlands do not fully benefit from learning opportunities. Dutch boys, like in most countries, are more likely to be lower-performers than girls and there is evidence of a widening gender gap in reading proficiency among 4th graders.
- Socio-economically disadvantaged Dutch students are also less likely to perform at high levels than their more advantaged peers.

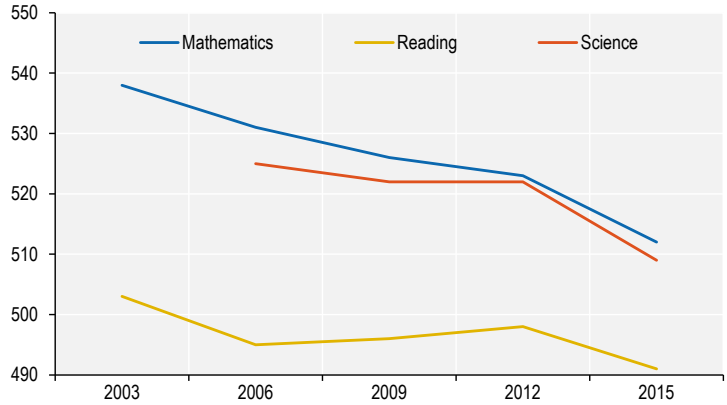
What's the issue?

The Netherlands is a prosperous country in large part due to its highly skilled population. However, continued success is not guaranteed and efforts to ensure that all students reach their potential should be sustained. Given the profound economic and social transformation the country is currently undergoing in the face of population ageing, strong skills are even more essential to support inclusive growth and social cohesion.

Overall, the cognitive skills of the Dutch population are strong. Results from PISA 2015 reveal that 15-year-old students in the Netherlands perform above the OECD average in all three of the key PISA domains: reading, mathematics and science. In fact, the average score of 15-year-old students in mathematics was 512 points, significantly higher than the OECD average of 490 points in PISA 2015. The OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) also demonstrates high levels of skills in the Netherlands: nearly 20% of 16 to 65 year-olds reached the highest levels of proficiency in literacy and numeracy. Despite this good performance, the Netherland's has seen a fall in PISA results over the last 15 years (see Figure), a trend which could put at risk the country's place among top-performing education systems and may create skills challenges in the future.

Performance of Dutch students in PISA 2003-2015

Mean scores in science, mathematics and reading



Source: OECD (2016b), PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en.

This weaker performance is partly due to a significant increase in the percentage of students who do not reach the baseline levels of achievement in PISA (proficiency Level 2). In 2006, only 13% of students in the Netherlands reached this level of proficiency in the PISA science assessment, meaning they struggled to identify a question being addressed in a simple experiment or make use of basic scientific knowledge. However, the number of low performing science students increased by 6 percentage points to around 19% of all students who took the test in 2015. In particular, boys in the Netherlands are more likely than girls to be low performers in all subjects measured by PISA 2015. The largest gender gap was in reading where over 20% of boys and around 15% of girls are low-performers. Across OECD countries, boys tend to have lower literacy outcomes than girls and feel less engaged in reading.

The Netherlands has introduced a number of initiatives to promote inclusive education in recent years and promotes work-based learning as an alternative way for students to develop skills for success in the labour market. However, students with disadvantaged backgrounds are concentrated in vocational education and training tracks, which risks exacerbating educational challenges if these students do not receive the support they need. Moreover, despite improvements in some equity indicators between 2006 and 2015, the growing share of low-performing 15-year-old students is accompanied by equity challenges. For example, 13% of the overall variation in performance can be explained by a student's socio-economic status and a one point index difference in the PISA index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS) corresponds to a difference of 47 points on the PISA science scale, compared to the OECD average of 38 points. The Netherlands has been working to reduce these gaps starting with the early years. For example, VVE (*voor en vroeg schoolse educatie*) has had positive emotional and educational effects on disadvantaged children of preschool and kindergarten age (Slot, 2014 as cited in OECD, 2016a).

Students with special education needs (SENs) are another important equity concern. A recent OECD education policy review of the Netherlands (OECD, 2016a) found that the number of students identified as having SENs nearly doubled between 1990 and 2011. Boys are often over-represented in SEN due to their increased risk of suffering from reading disabilities.

Why is this important for the Netherlands?

Evidence from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills indicates that adults who have built solid literacy and numeracy skills have better labour market opportunities, such as higher employment rates and higher wages, as well as better non-labour market outcomes, reporting better general health outcomes and higher levels of interpersonal trust. They also volunteer more frequently in their communities and report higher levels of political efficacy. In other words, skills matter to maintain prosperous and cohesive societies. Unless all individuals are able to build a solid foundation of skills, inequalities in life chances will likely grow stronger.

The barriers faced by diverse students in the Netherlands, specifically those who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds or those with special education needs, could stand to benefit from targeted educational policies and strategies that build on the country's existing efforts to promote equitable and inclusive education. Gender gaps in student achievement, in particular the lack of engagement of boys in reading, could also be addressed. Helping all students to make the most of learning opportunities and building solid skills to be able to thrive in the labour market and society is fundamental if the Netherlands is to be able to remain successful in the future.

What should policy makers do?

- Identify gaps in educational outcomes among groups of students, who persistently perform below their peers using evidence from a wide range of sources.
- Build on existing efforts to promote equitable and inclusive education by developing targeted educational policies and strategies to ensure that all children, across all levels of education can meet their potential.
- Address the intersectionality of different forms of educational disadvantage and their implications on student well-being.

Further reading

OECD (2013), OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en

OECD (2016a), Netherlands 2016: Foundations for the Future, Reviews of National Policies for Education, OECD Publishing, Paris. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264257658-en

OECD (2016b), PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en

OECD (2017), Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report Netherlands, OECD Publishing, Paris. http://www.oecd.org/skills/nationalskillsstrategies/OECD-Skills-Strategy-Diagnostic-Report-Netherlands.pdf