

# Bulgaria

This country note provides an overview of key characteristics of the education system in Bulgaria based on Education at a Glance 2024. In line with the thematic focus of Education at a Glance 2024, it highlights issues of equity in education. Data in this note are provided for the latest available year as indicated in Education at a Glance 2024.

## Highlights

- The difficult labour-market situation faced by workers without an upper secondary qualification is reflected in employment rates among 25-34 year-olds. In Bulgaria, 47% of 25-34 year-olds without an upper secondary qualification are employed, compared to 79% of those with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification. The corresponding OECD averages are 61% and 79%, respectively. Moreover, workers without an upper secondary qualification are at risk of earning very low wages in most OECD countries. In Bulgaria, 42% of 25-64 year-olds with below upper secondary educational attainment earn at or below half the median income compared to 17% of workers with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary educational attainment and 8% of workers with a tertiary qualification. Across the OECD, the respective shares are 28%, 17% and 10%.
- Parents' education has a strong impact on the educational attainment of their children. In Bulgaria, 80% of 25-64 year-olds who have at least one parent with tertiary attainment also attained a tertiary qualification. In contrast, only 5% of 25-64 year-olds with parents without an upper secondary qualification have obtained a tertiary qualification themselves. This compares to the averages of 72% and 19%, respectively.
- Although most children and youths participate in education in the years before and after compulsory education, not all do so. In order to increase enrolment in the early years or among youths, twelve OECD member and accession countries have increased the duration of compulsory education over the past decade. Bulgaria is one of them as the start of compulsory education was brought forward by 1 year. Compulsory education in Bulgaria now lasts from the age of 4 to 16 for a total of 12 years, which is above the OECD average of 11 years (Figure 2).
- The distribution of government expenditure on education by level of government differs between countries. In some countries, all final expenditure on education comes from central governments, whereas in other countries all final expenditure comes from local or regional governments. In Bulgaria, the central government is responsible for 29% of final expenditure on primary education and local governments are responsible for 71%.
- The work of teachers consists of a variety of tasks including teaching, as well as preparing lessons, grading assignments and communicating with parents. The number of hours that teachers are contractually obliged to teach varies greatly across countries. In Bulgaria, teachers at lower



secondary level have to teach 444 hours annually. This is much lower than the OECD average of 706 hours per year.

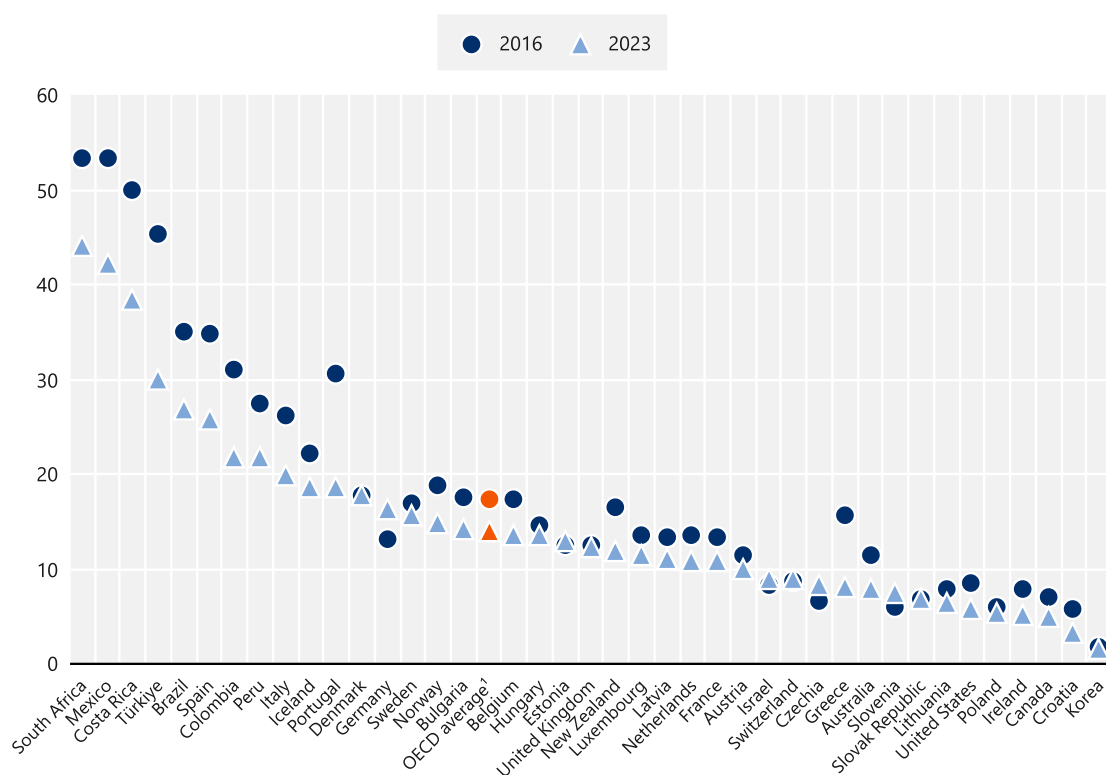
## The output of educational institutions and the impact of learning

- Adults without upper secondary qualification are at considerable risk of poor social and labour-market outcomes throughout their lives. Reducing the share of young adults without an upper secondary qualification has been a priority in many countries and their share has decreased between 2016 and 2023 in 28 out of 35 OECD member countries. This is also the case in Bulgaria. Their share of 25-34 year-olds without upper secondary educational attainment decreased by 3 percentage points between 2016 and 2023. At 14%, it is the same as the OECD average in 2023 (Figure 1).
- The difficult labour-market situation faced by workers without an upper secondary qualification is reflected in employment rates among 25-34 year-olds. In Bulgaria, 47% of 25-34 year-olds without an upper secondary qualification are employed, compared to 79% of those with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification. The corresponding OECD averages are 61% and 79%, respectively. Moreover, workers without an upper secondary qualification are at risk of earning very low wages in most OECD countries. In Bulgaria, 42% of 25-64 year-olds with below upper secondary educational attainment earn at or below half the median income compared to 17% of workers with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary educational attainment and 8% of workers with a tertiary qualification. Across the OECD, the respective shares are 28%, 17% and 10%.
- By almost all available measures, girls and women have better educational outcomes than boys and men, and in many cases the gap is widening. This is reflected in gender gaps in educational attainment. In all OECD member countries, women aged 25-34 are as likely or more likely than their male peers to have a tertiary qualification (54% compared to 41% on average across OECD countries). With a tertiary educational attainment rate of 43% for women and 29% for men, the gap is similar to the OECD average in Bulgaria.
- Although girls and women clearly outperform boys and men in education, the picture is reversed when they enter the labour market; the key measures of labour-market outcomes are generally worse for women than for men. Women aged 25-34 are less likely to be employed than men, with the gap typically widest for those with below upper secondary educational attainment and narrowest for those with tertiary attainment. In Bulgaria, only 31% of young women with educational attainment below upper secondary educational level are employed, while the corresponding share for young men is 63% (the corresponding OECD averages are 47% and 72%). In contrast, 88% of young women with a tertiary qualification are employed, while the corresponding share for young men is 92% (the corresponding OECD averages are 84% and 90%). However, tertiary attainment does not help to close the wage gap between men and women. Across the OECD, young women with a tertiary qualification earn on average 83% of the wage of their male peers, while the corresponding fraction is 78% in Bulgaria. Among those with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment, young women earn on average 84% of the wage of their male peers across the OECD and 107% in Bulgaria.

- Parents' education has a strong impact on the educational attainment of their children. In Bulgaria, 80% of 25-64 year-olds who have at least one parent with tertiary attainment also attained a tertiary qualification. In contrast, only 5% of 25-64 year-olds with parents without an upper secondary qualification have obtained a tertiary qualification themselves. This compares to the averages of 72% and 19%, respectively.

**Figure 1. Trends in the share of 25-34 year-olds with below upper secondary educational attainment (2016 and 2023)**

In per cent



1. The OECD average is derived from the unweighted mean of all countries with available and comparable data for both years. Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of 25-34 year-olds with below upper secondary attainment in 2023.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table A1.2. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

### Access to education, participation and progression

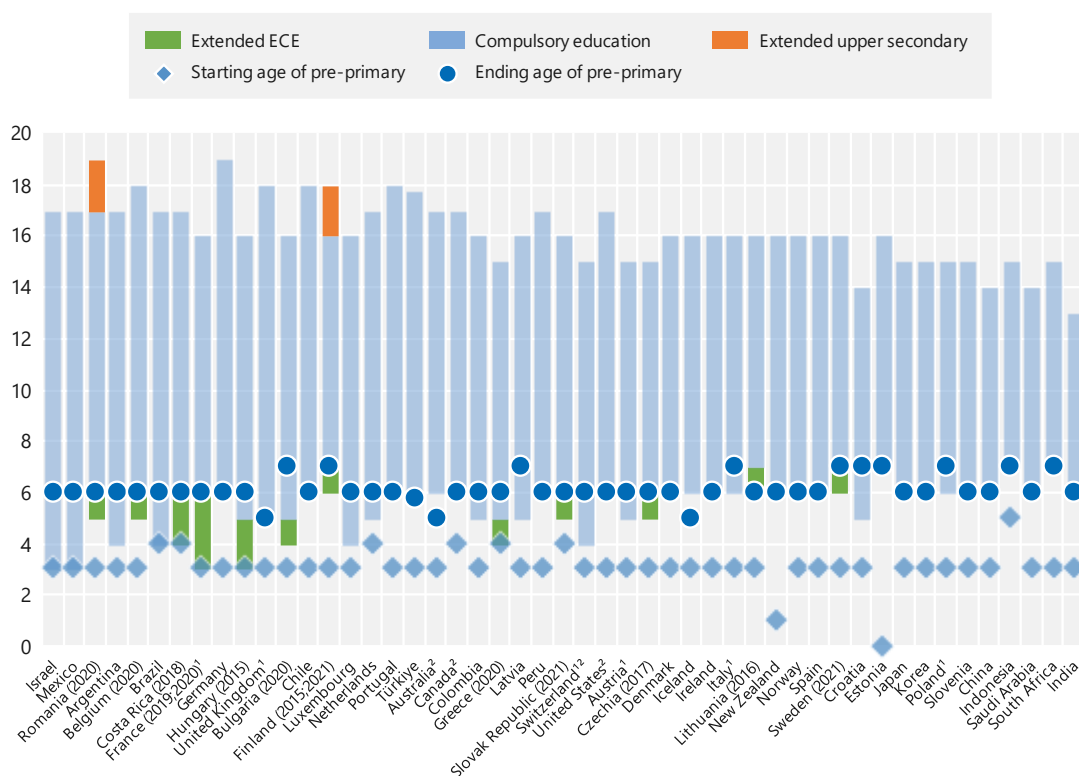
- Participation in early childhood education and care is particularly important for children from disadvantaged families. In Bulgaria, in contrast to most other OECD countries, children aged 0-2 from families in the bottom income tertile are more likely to participate in childcare than children from the top income tertile (22% compared to 19%).
- Early childhood education can help to reduce the developmental gaps that put some children at a disadvantage when they enrol in primary school. In most OECD countries, the large majority of

children are enrolled in early childhood education one year before the start of primary education. In Bulgaria, 86% of children in this age group are enrolled, compared with an OECD average of 96%.

- Although most children and youths participate in education in the years before and after compulsory education, not all do so. In order to increase enrolment in the early years or among youths, twelve OECD member and accession countries have increased the duration of compulsory education over the past decade. Bulgaria is one of them as the start of compulsory education was brought forward by 1 year. Compulsory education in Bulgaria now lasts from the age of 4 to 16 for a total of 12 years, which is above the OECD average of 11 years (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Duration of compulsory education (2022)**

In years



**Note:** The year in parentheses indicates when policy changes were made to the duration of compulsory education. In addition, extended ECEC/extended upper secondary refers to the extension in the duration of the relevant level since 2013.

1. There are other compulsory activities to complete by the end of compulsory education (see Table B2.1).
2. Starting age, ending age, and duration of compulsory education may vary at sub-national level.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the duration of compulsory education.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table B2.1. For more information see Education at a Glance 2004 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

- Grade repetition is common in many countries to allow students more time to achieve the targeted learning outcomes, although its effectiveness is debated. In Bulgaria, 0.2% of primary, 1.8% of lower secondary and 0.4% of general upper secondary students repeat a grade in their current



level of education, while the OECD average is 1.5% at primary, 2.2% at lower secondary and 3.2% at general upper secondary level.

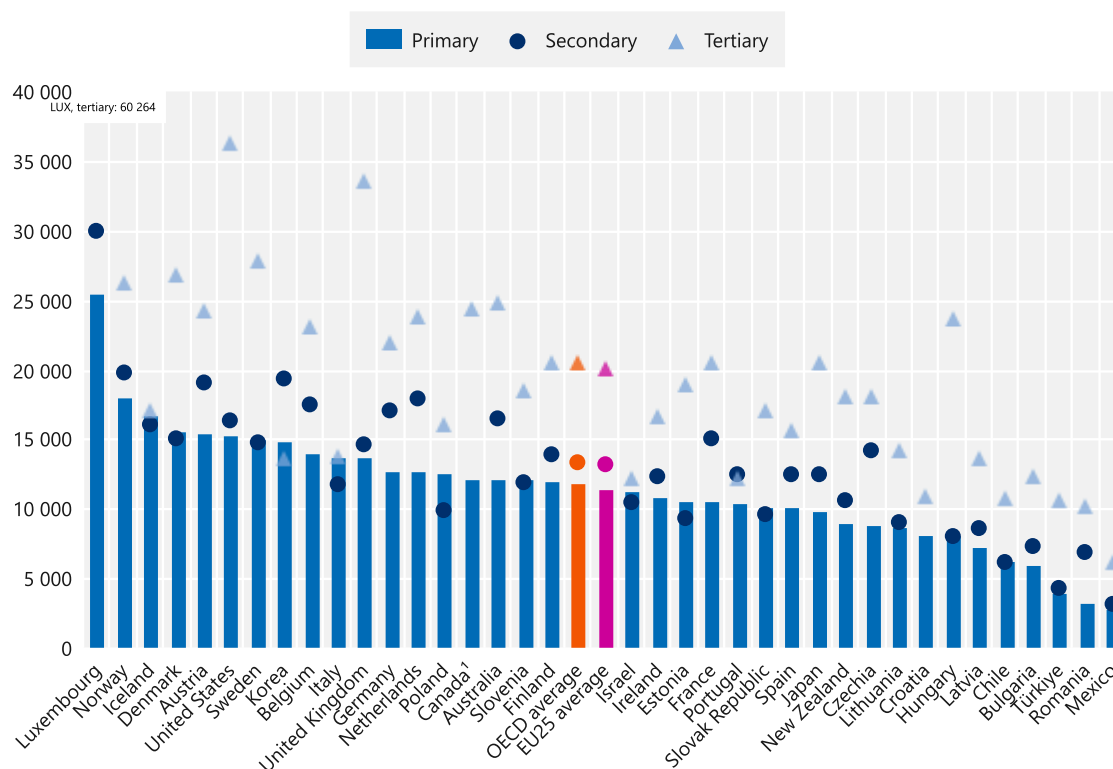
- Women are significantly over-represented in tertiary education and the gap is widening in most countries. In Bulgaria, 56% of new entrants to tertiary education are women, which is identical to the OECD average. As women are also more likely than men to complete tertiary education, the gap is even greater among graduates (see Education at a Glance 2022). However, there are large differences between fields of study in all OECD countries. In Bulgaria, only 13% of women entering tertiary education were studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields, while only 6% of men were entering education-related fields.
- In most OECD countries, a large majority of 15-19 year olds are still enrolled in education, even though compulsory education usually ends before the age of 19. However, in most countries there are large differences in enrolment rates between sub-national regions. In Bulgaria, 76% of 15-19 year olds are enrolled at national level, whereas in the region with the lowest enrolment rate, South East, only 66% of this age group are enrolled.

### Financial resources invested in education

- The average annual expenditure per student from primary to tertiary education (including R&D) in Bulgaria is USD 8 018 compared to an average of USD 14 209 in OECD countries. In most countries, expenditure increases by level of education. In Bulgaria, spending per student is USD 5 976 in primary education, USD 7 314 in secondary education and USD 12 305 in tertiary education (Figure 3).<sup>1</sup>
- Bulgaria spends 3.5% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on educational institutions at primary to tertiary levels (including R&D). This is less than the OECD average of 4.9% of GDP. On average across the OECD, the share of GDP dedicated to educational institutions (from primary to tertiary levels) has been broadly stable, with 4.9% in 2015 and 2021. However, trends vary considerably between countries. Bulgaria is among the countries where expenditure as a share of GDP increased from 3% to 3.5%.
- Early childhood education has received much attention in recent years because of its importance, especially for children from disadvantaged families. In Bulgaria, public investment in early childhood education relative to GDP has increased by 8% between 2015 and 2021. Across the OECD, it has increased on average by 9% over this period.

<sup>1</sup> All expenditure figures in this note are expressed in USD calculated based on purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates.

**Figure 3. Total expenditure per full-time equivalent student in primary, secondary and tertiary education (2021)**



1. Primary education includes pre-primary and lower secondary programmes.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the total expenditure per full-time equivalent student in primary education.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table C1.1. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

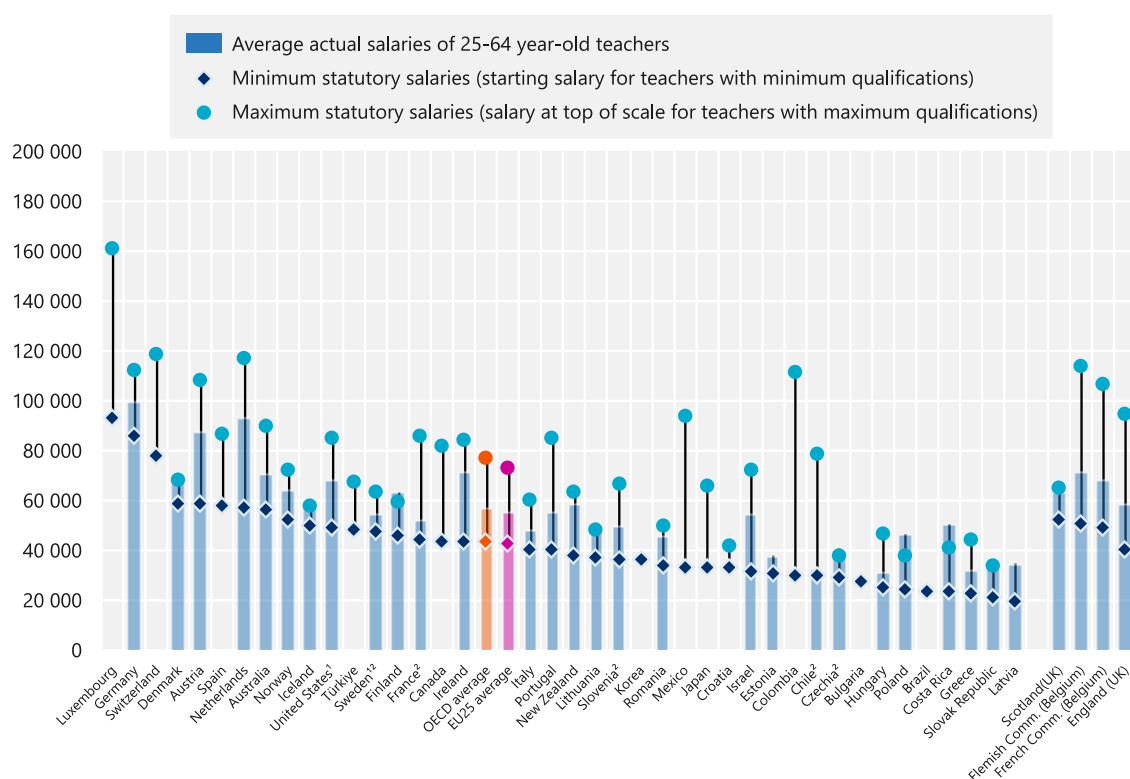
- Across the OECD, public authorities are responsible for the vast majority of spending on education, particularly at compulsory levels. In Bulgaria, 99% of total expenditure on primary institutions comes from public sources, which is above the OECD average of 93%. Private expenditure makes up a greater share in pre-primary and tertiary education in many countries. In Bulgaria, the share of public expenditure on pre-primary education is 96%, above the OECD average of 86%, while for tertiary education it is 63%, compared to an OECD average of 68%.
- The distribution of government expenditure on education by level of government differs between countries. In Bulgaria, 92% of expenditure on primary education initially comes from central government, but most of this is transferred to local level. The central government is responsible for 29% of final expenditure on primary education and local governments are responsible for 71%.
- Governments have to decide how to allocate funds across policy areas. Education (including R&D) is a major expenditure item and accounts for 10.0% of all public expenditure on average across the OECD. In Bulgaria, this share is lower with 8.9% of public expenditure going to education.

## Teachers, the learning environment and the organisation of schools

- In 2023, the minimum statutory salaries (starting salary with minimum qualifications) of lower secondary teachers in Bulgaria reached USD 26 907, 38% lower than the OECD average of USD 43 058 (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Lower secondary teachers' average actual salaries compared to the statutory minimum and maximum salaries (2023)**

Annual salaries of teachers in public institutions, in equivalent USD converted using PPPs for private consumption



**Note:** Actual salaries include bonuses and allowances.

1. Actual salaries for minimum and maximum statutory salaries.

2. Year of reference for actual salaries differs from 2023. Refer to the source table for more information.

Countries and other participants are ranked in descending order of the starting salaries for teachers with the minimum qualifications.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table D3.3 and the OECD Data Explorer, <https://data-explorer.oecd.org/>. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

- The work of teachers consists of a variety of tasks including teaching, as well as preparing lessons, grading assignments and communicating with parents. The number of hours that teachers are contractually obliged to teach varies greatly across countries. In Bulgaria, teachers at lower secondary level have to teach 444 hours annually. This is much lower than the OECD average of 706 hours per year.



- Countries make different choices about whether to operate many small schools or fewer large schools. In Bulgaria, the median primary school has 19 students per grade compared to the OECD average of 27. The largest 5% of primary schools in Bulgaria have 102 or more students per grade, while the OECD average is 91 or more. At the other end of the scale, the smallest 5% of primary schools have 3 or fewer students per grade compared to an OECD average of 5 or fewer students per grade. Although small schools are important for ensuring primary education is accessible, especially in sparsely populated rural areas, they can be costly to run and may have to resort to multi-grade teaching.
- Most education systems involve students and parents in the governance of public schools. In most countries, it is compulsory for parents' representatives to be included in the governing board of public schools. Student participation is less widespread, but still common. In Bulgaria, the participation of parents in governing body of public schools is required, and the participation of students is possible.
- Student-teacher ratios vary between countries and between levels of education. On average across the OECD, there are 14 students per teacher in primary education, 13 students in lower secondary education and 13 students in upper secondary education. In Bulgaria, the corresponding numbers are 10 in primary education, 11 in lower secondary education and 12 in upper secondary education. While lower student teacher ratios allow teachers to focus more on the needs of the individual, they require higher overall spending on teacher salaries and have to be weighed against alternative spending priorities.
- Between 2013 and 2022, the average age of teachers has increased across the OECD. In lower secondary education, 36% of teachers are 50 years or older, compared to 35% in 2013. Bulgaria has more teachers aged 50 or older, with 48% of teachers being in this age category, unchanged from 2013.

## More information

For more information on Education at a Glance 2024 and to access the full set of indicators, see: <https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en>.

For more information on the methodology used during the data collection for each indicator, the references to the sources and the specific notes for each country, see Education at a Glance 2024: Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

For general information on the methodology, please refer to the *OECD Handbook for Internationally Comparative Education Statistics 2018* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264304444-en>).

Updated data can be found on line at <http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/5q> and by following the StatLinks  in the publication.

Explore, compare and visualise more data and analysis using the Education GPS: <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/>.

Questions can be directed to the Education at a Glance team at the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills: [EDU.EAG@oecd.org](mailto:EDU.EAG@oecd.org).



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