



Education in Costa Rica

HIGHLIGHTS

2017



Costa Rica

WHAT ARE REVIEWS OF NATIONAL POLICIES FOR EDUCATION?

OECD Education Policy Reviews provide tailored advice to governments to develop policies that improve the skills of all members of society, and ensure that those skills are used effectively, to promote inclusive growth for better jobs and better lives. The OECD works with countries to identify and understand the factors behind successful reform and provide direct support to them in designing, adopting and implementing reforms in education and skills policies.

WHY A REVIEW OF EDUCATION IN COSTA RICA?

In 2015, the OECD opened discussions for the accession of Costa Rica to the OECD Convention. As part of this process, Costa Rica has undergone in-depth reviews in all the relevant areas of the Organisation's work including a comprehensive review of the education system, from early childhood education and care to tertiary education.

The report *Reviews of National Policies for Education: Education in Costa Rica* evaluates national policies and practices in Costa Rica in education and skills, compared to OECD member countries and other reference countries in the Latin American region. It does so according to five core principles that are essential to effective education systems:

a strong focus on improving learning outcomes; equity in educational opportunity; the ability to collect and use data to inform policy; the effective use of funding to steer reform; and the extent of multistakeholder engagement in policy design and implementation.

Based on these tough benchmarks, the review both underlines the many strengths of Costa Rica's education system and provides recommendations on how to improve policies and practices so that the country can advance towards OECD standards of education attainment and outcomes. These highlights summarise the main findings of the Review:

- **Early childhood education:** Higher priority should be given higher priority in public spending and policy, given the vital role it can play in tackling disadvantage and poverty.
- **Basic education:** The quality and equity of learning outcomes should become the centre point of policy and practice.
- **Upper secondary (diversified) education:** It should be made more inclusive to reflect its new role as the final stage of schooling and career gateway for all Costa Ricans.
- **The tertiary education system:** This needs extensive reform in quality assurance, funding and governance to ensure that it supports Costa Rica's development goals.



“The accession process can be a catalyst for Costa Rica to undertake other far-reaching structural reforms that support national public policy priorities. Our intention is for the accession process to drive growth, contribute to reducing inequalities, strengthen the fight against corruption, and increase the transparency and efficiency of government. The beneficiaries of these changes, as well as membership of the OECD, will be the country and each of its citizens.”

Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General, San José, 15 February 2016

Basic indicators (2015 or latest year available)	Costa Rica	OECD
Population aged less than 15 as a percentage of total population	22%	18%
GDP per capita (USD PPP)	15 594	40 589
Gini coefficient	0.48	0.31
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP	7.6%	5.6%
Age range at which over 90% of the school age population is enrolled	5-13	4-16
PISA mean performance in sciences	420	493
Share of low achievers in PISA	46.4	21.2
Share of top performers in PISA	0.1	7.7
Percentage of 25-34 year-olds who have attained tertiary education	28%	42%

Above: 5 June 2015
 – **Angel Gurría**, Secretary-General of the OECD meets **Luis Guillermo Solís Rivera**, President of Costa Rica during his first official visit to the OECD, Paris, France.
 © OECD





Towards greater coverage, quality and equity

Costa Rica’s progress in expanding access to education has been impressive. Preschool education has increased sharply, primary school is effectively universal, and retention rates in secondary school have been substantially improved. Upper secondary education is now formally compulsory, and around half of young adults (25-34 year olds) attained at least this level in 2014, up from one third among their parents’ generation (55-64-year-olds). Enrolment in tertiary education has also roughly doubled since 2000. Costa Rica has expanded access to education much faster than most Latin American countries in the last decade and is closing the gap with OECD countries.

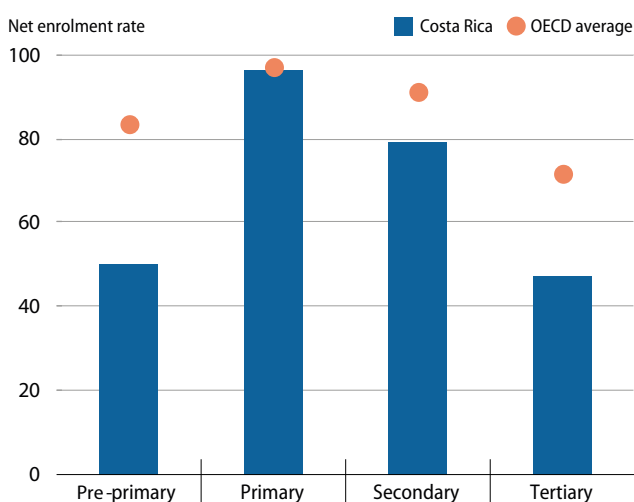
In terms of completion and learning outcomes, performance is less encouraging. Dropout rates, both in school and in tertiary education, are high in Costa Rica. In 2015, those students who were still in school at age 15 were two years behind their OECD peers. Among Latin American participants in PISA, Costa Rica’s performance was below Chile, while similar to Colombia and Mexico, and above Brazil and Peru. Costa Rica has seen little improvement in student achievement in recent years, despite significant increases in spending. Other rapidly developing countries in Latin America and elsewhere, have, like Costa Rica, enrolled more children in secondary school, but also managed to raise student outcomes.

Education has a major role to play in tackling inequality and poverty, growing challenges in Costa Rica, where the poverty rate is twice the OECD average. In absolute terms, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely than ever to receive a full school education and to graduate at tertiary level. But, as young people from all social backgrounds have

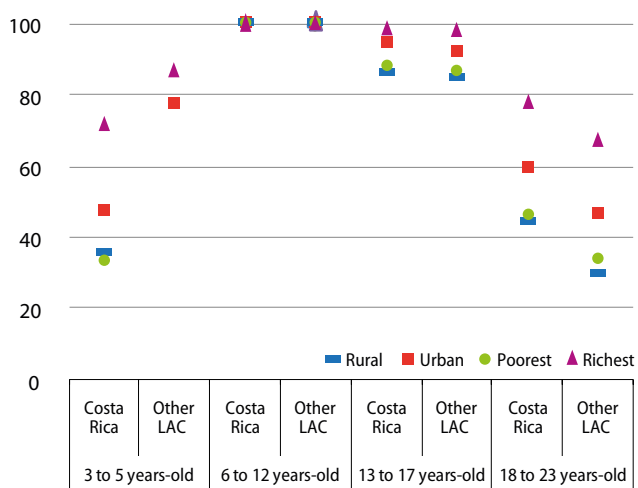
improved their prospects, the relative gaps in life-chances between different social groups have remained large, and larger than comparable countries in preschool. Inequality starts young, with very unequal access to early childhood services, and widens as students pass through the education system. A poor student in Costa Rica has less than a one in ten chance of making it to university– an opportunity gap far greater than in most OECD countries.

In the face of these challenges, Costa Rica is now giving increasing attention to the quality of teaching and learning, and most recently has launched a major initiative to combat dropout in the most disadvantaged secondary schools. But key drivers of improvement in the most rapidly improving education systems – a concerted push to expand early years’ education, high professional expectations for teachers, leadership for improvement by schools, and strong information and evaluation systems that can guide reform – have not yet gained the needed impetus in Costa Rica.

Net enrolment in Costa Rica and OECD



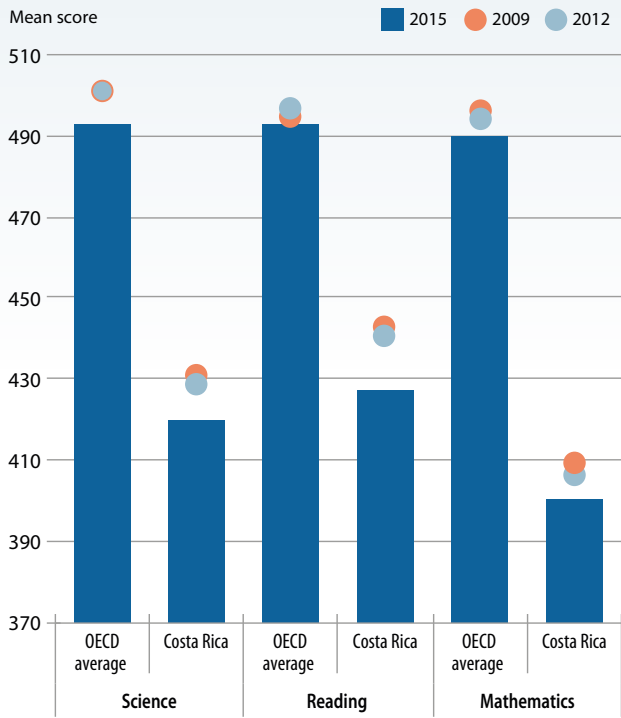
Differences in enrolment in rural and urban areas and by income



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

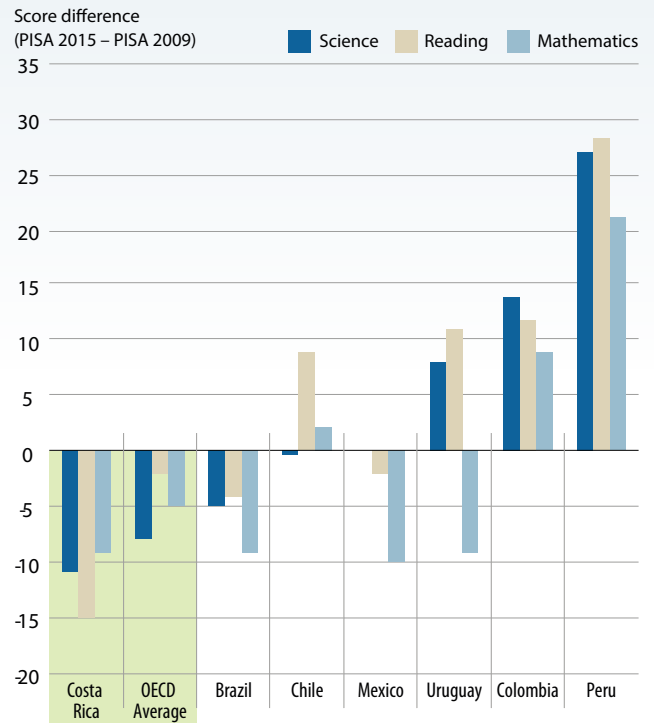
Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Mean score in PISA in Costa Rica and OECD (2015)



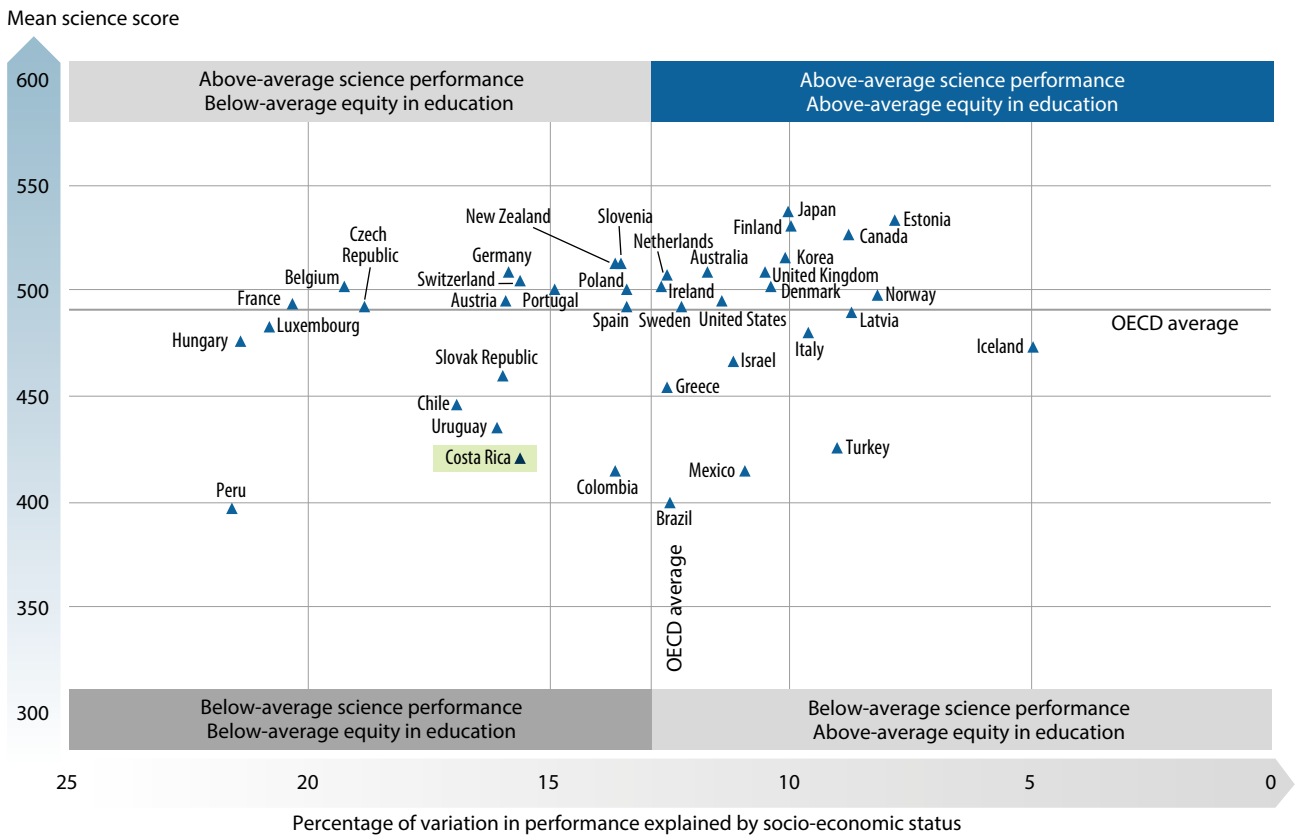
Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Trends in performance in PISA (2009-2015)

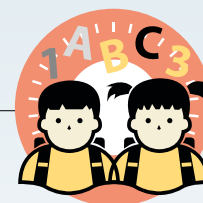


Source: OECD (2017, forthcoming), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Relationship between performance and socio-economic status in science in PISA (2015)



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.



Providing a strong start for learning and life

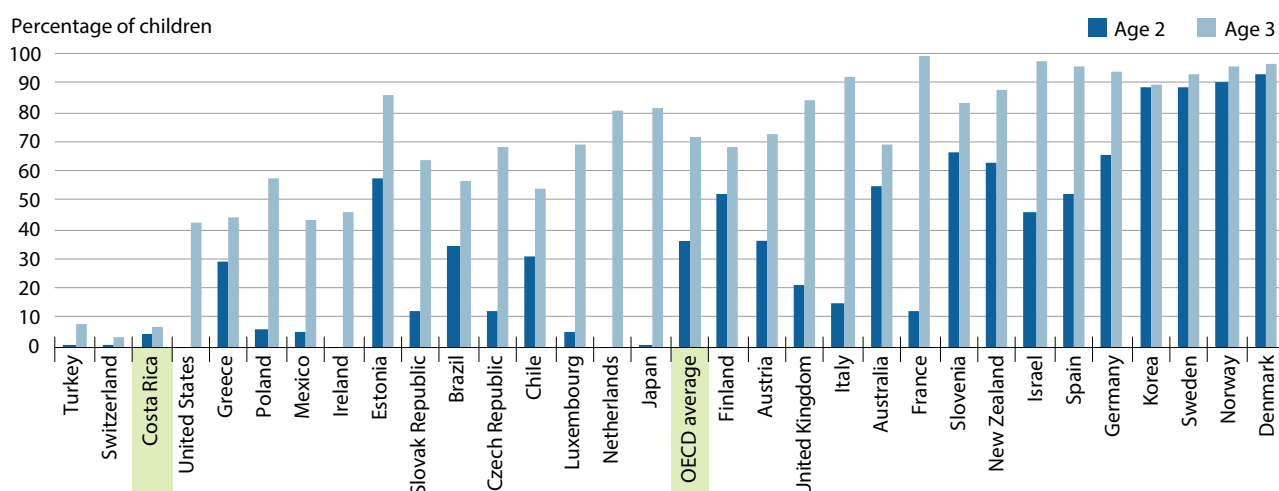
The importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has increasingly been recognised in Costa Rica, and around the world. Its role in levelling the playing field for children from the most disadvantaged families is particularly critical. While this recognition has led to important efforts to improve access and quality, ECEC remains the most underdeveloped sector of Costa Rica’s education system compared to OECD and other emerging Latin American countries. Over one third of children (37%) still do not benefit from two years of preschool, though this has been compulsory since 1997, and very few children under 4 have access to care centres or other forms of public assistance. Those services that are available focus primarily on health and nutrition, and give inadequate attention to fostering the essential cognitive, language, emotional and social skills that children need to develop in the early years. Children from poor families, who are most likely to face a weak home learning environment, are the least likely to access public services. This puts them at a disadvantage when they start school; it also prevents their mothers from working and helping their families out of poverty. The most effective measure that Costa Rica can take to halt rising inequality and give every child a fair chance to succeed in learning and life is to prioritise the expansion of quality ECEC, focusing on the most disadvantaged populations.

PROVIDING THE LEADERSHIP AND FUNDING TO DRIVE REFORM

Promising steps have been taken in recent years to strengthen ECEC governance and reduce the fragmentation of care services for children under 4 years old. In 2014, the government established the National Network for Child Welfare and Development (*Red Nacional de Cuido y Desarrollo Infantil, REDCUDI*) to improve co-ordination between different public and private providers. A new policy framework to guide the development of services for children aged 0 to 8 is also under discussion, representing the first attempt to provide a truly comprehensive, rights-based approach to ECEC in Costa Rica.

These steps, although important, fall short of the needed transformation of the sector. While Costa Rica is not unique in having several ministries and agencies involved in ECEC, it is unusual in having no institution with overall responsibility for delivering national policy. It is unlikely that the ECEC sector will see real improvements in access and quality without a clear champion for reform. Without strong leadership, it will also be difficult to raise the low spending levels in the sector and ensure that resources reach those children most in need. At 0.4% of GDP, public spending on ECEC is below the OECD average (0.6%) and especially low considering that children under 6 years old represent 10% of Costa Rica’s population. Well over half (60%) of these children are vulnerable or live in poverty, and the majority are from

Enrolment rates in early childhood and primary education, by age (2014)



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

families with low levels of parental education. Turning this situation around will require both better governance and a change of approach to ECEC financing.

IMPROVING ACCESS AND QUALITY OF CARE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN (AGED 0 – 3 YEARS) BY ENGAGING PARENTS AND ENCOURAGING A STRONGER FOCUS ON LEARNING

Costa Rica has made significant progress in improving child health and nutrition but still has a long way to go to ensure that all children receive adequate care and education in their early years. Under the impulse of REDCUDI, some promising measures have been introduced to redress gaps in public policy to guarantee basic child rights. Standards have been introduced for providers to ensure a minimum level of quality and a new curriculum will for the first time establish educational objectives for children under the age of 4 years. Important planning tools are also under development, such as a unique child identifier and a geo-referenced database for care centres, to better target services towards those most in need. However, Costa Rica is lagging far behind most OECD countries and many Latin American countries in terms of the access, quality and equity of early years provision.

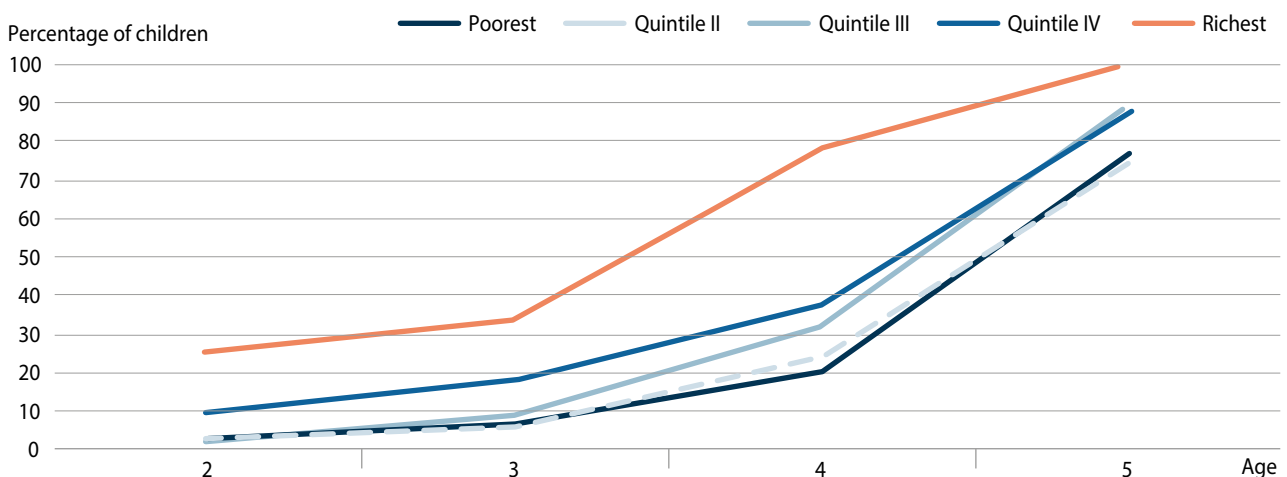
In Costa Rica, just 15% of 3-year-olds benefit from some form of centre-based care, compared to more than 40% in Mexico, Brazil and Chile and over 70% across most OECD countries. This percentage has remained relatively unchanged over the past decade. Despite new standards, operating requirements remain low and oversight very weak, and most staff lack training on how to stimulate children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. While poverty is concentrated in rural areas, Costa Rica has paid limited

attention to developing alternative, community and family-based services, which have helped to expand access in other Latin American countries, and policies to support parents in providing a positive home learning environment have not received the emphasis they demand. Enabling parents to better support their child's development, combined with more effective strategies for providing public assistance to children most at risk, will be central to improving outcomes for children and society as whole.



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Participation in early childhood education and care by age and income level (2014)



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

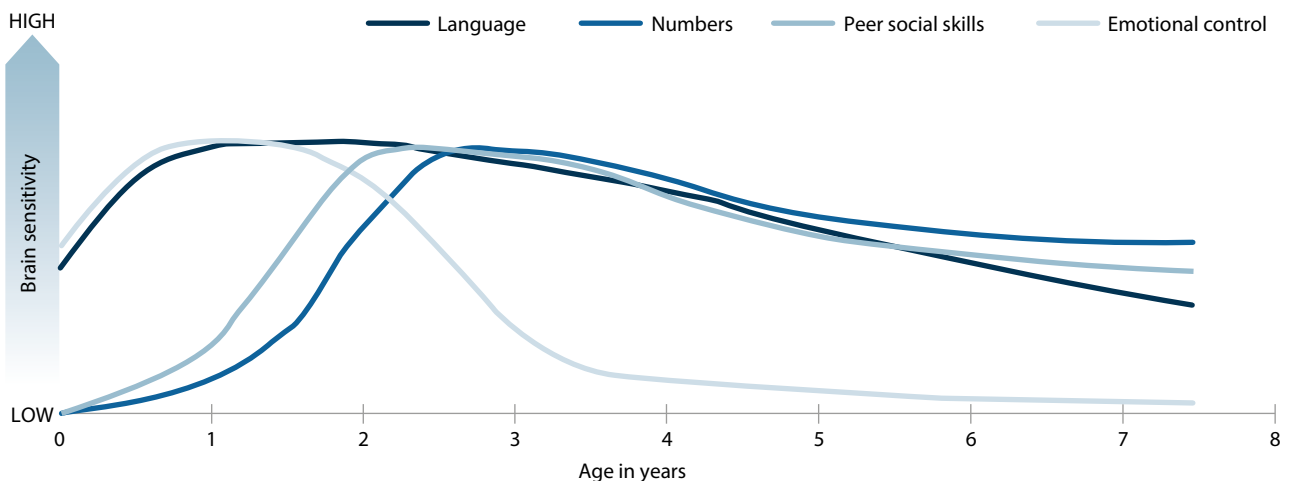


ENSURING ALL CHILDREN AGED 4-6 BENEFIT FROM QUALITY PRESCHOOL EDUCATION.

One of Costa Rica’s main achievements has been the expansion in access to preschool education. Between 2000 and 2015, participation in the first year of preschool (Interactive II, age 4) increased dramatically from 7% to 63%, and that of the second year from 83% to 90%. To improve the benefits of extended access, the MEP introduced a new curriculum in 2014 which aims to foster the holistic development of children and sets clear developmental goals. The new curriculum gives special emphasis to early literacy skills which are critical both to success in learning and for developing a child’s self-confidence and social interaction.

However, current plans to reach 69.5% coverage by 2018 fall short of the constitutional mandate of universal access and leave behind the most vulnerable. Just 20% of 4-year-olds from the poorest households have access to preschool provision, compared to 80% of their wealthier peers. Those who attend preschool have the potential to benefit from a promising new curriculum, but little support in the form of training or learning materials has been provided to teachers to ensure that they can enable all children to reach important development objectives. The lack of support for parental engagement is again a weak link, limiting the central role home support can play in encouraging early language skills and an interest and confidence in reading. Preschool in Costa Rica is not yet the strong stepping stone it should be into primary school and lifelong learning.

Sensitive periods in early brain development



Source: Council Early Child Development (2010), Investing in Young Children, an Early Childhood Development Guide for Policy Dialogue and Project Preparation, Washington, DC.

OECD RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Establish clear institutional leadership for the sector.**

Costa Rica should consider appointing one Ministry or agency with clear authority and responsibility for delivering national ECEC policy across the entire sector (care and preschool). As a priority, leadership for the delivery of care services for children under 4 years old must be clarified and concentrated in one body with the capacity to drive improvement. The early childhood policy under development should set clear objectives to guide the work of these agencies and other institutions involved in ECEC provision, and to support stronger monitoring and accountability.

- **Ensure that funding is adequate and equitable.** Public funding for ECEC should be increased as a central strategy to reduce poverty and improve education outcomes. Resources need to be targeted more effectively to reach the most disadvantaged children and regions of the country and more cost-effective delivery mechanisms explored to achieve wider coverage (e.g. community and family-based programmes). Partnerships with local governments and private providers should be encouraged as a means to improve access and quality; this requires measures to reduce administrative complexity and strengthen oversight. Consideration should be given to introducing income-based fees in public centres to expand provision in ways that are more equitable.

- **Support parents to build an enriching home environment.** Home visits and community-based services should be expanded and improved to provide parents of the most vulnerable children with more support. Public assistance should go beyond how to best nurture and take care of children and also guide parents on how to stimulate the development of early cognitive and socio-emotional skills. Care centres should also proactively engage and support parents. The curricular guidelines that the MEP is developing should include a parenting component, and staff of care centres should be trained in ways to promote effective parental engagement.

- **Establish and enforce minimum quality standards for care centres.** To ensure that children benefit developmentally from attending care centres, Costa Rica should establish and enforce minimum standards across providers. These should include quality requirements (e.g. group size, staff qualifications, process and programme

variables) and clear goals for the development of early cognitive and socio-emotional skills. To support this, more attention needs to be given to the quality of the workforce in care centres – including their training, level of qualification, pay and appraisal – and stronger mechanisms put in place to monitor the quality of services. All centres should be inspected on a regular basis according to established standards.

- **Accelerate the expansion of preschool provision.** More ambitious targets should be set to achieve universal preschool education and ensure all children start primary school on an equal footing to learn. Expansion efforts should do more to build on the existing capacity in primary schools as a means to expand access in under-served remote rural regions. The new child identifier should be used to ensure that care services provided for children over the age of 4 complement, but do not replace participation in preschool.

- **Support teachers and parents to develop children's early literacy skills.** More emphasis needs to be given to developing the capacity of teachers to implement the new preschool curriculum, particularly in the domain of early literacy. This will require both a review of initial teacher education programmes and more in-service training opportunities, together with measures to reduce child-teacher ratios where this is an issue and provide more reading resources. Teachers also need to be given more guidance on how to engage parents in the development of their children's literacy skills at home; programmes to provide parents with learning kits and tips on how to read aloud to their children would help.



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From access to basic education to learning for all

Costa Rica was among the first countries in Latin America to achieve universal enrolment in primary education and today most students make the transition to secondary school. The challenge ahead is to ensure that all students in school benefit from good teaching and a positive learning environment, that they complete at least the nine years of basic education, and they gain strong foundational skills. Nearly one third (30%) of 15-year-olds have already dropped out of school, while one third (33%) of those who remain lack core competencies in science, reading and mathematics. By the end of basic education, students from poor families have fallen two years behind their peers from wealthier backgrounds, and few will make the transition to tertiary education or a good job. The achievement of more inclusive economic growth and better life chances for all will require a much stronger emphasis in Costa Rica on the quality of basic schooling and learning outcomes, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged students and communities. This means setting higher standards for teachers and for schools, while also giving them the support they need to improve learning practices, backed by more strategic leadership from central government to set the direction of change. All actors in the system need to be accountable for improvement.

CONSOLIDATING A HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING PROFESSION

The single most important challenge for basic education in Costa Rica is the consolidation of a high-quality teaching profession. Recent years have seen important steps to raise the level of qualification required to enter teaching and bring remuneration into line with other professions. Virtually all teachers (95%) now hold a tertiary education degree and the competition for selecting candidates for posts has been improved to reduce the risks of politicisation and unfair appointment. The delivery of in-service teaching has also been overhauled, with the creation of a dedicated Teaching Training Institute and the introduction of a series of direct assessments of teachers' knowledge which have enabled training to better meet teacher needs. Currently, a very welcome proposal is being discussed by the Legislative Assembly to make accreditation mandatory for all teaching programmes in private universities, as part of an effort to raise the quality of initial teacher preparation and bring courses into line with the requirements of a new school curriculum.

The gap between current teaching practice and Costa Rica's learning goals is significant. Teacher assessments show that 40% of English teachers and 29% of Mathematics teachers do not master the content of the curriculum they are expected to teach. While national training courses have improved, teachers receive little regular support for and feedback on their teaching practice. The existing appraisal system is not used as a genuine development opportunity; over 98% of teachers receive an 'excellent' or 'very good' rating, despite clear evidence of knowledge gaps. The low level of teaching knowledge in core subjects points to serious weaknesses in the initial selection and preparation of teachers. Just 19 out of

259 initial teaching programmes are quality-assured through accreditation. The high degree of university autonomy also makes it difficult to ensure that programmes are adequately preparing teachers for the competency-based approaches required by the new curriculum. The competition for teaching posts, though fair and transparent, does not assess effectively what makes for a good teacher, and the probation system is very weak. But perhaps the biggest gap is a shared understanding of what effective teaching means, in terms of expected competences. Such a shared understanding would provide orientation to every aspect of policy aimed at enhancing teacher professionalism.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR IMPROVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

Costa Rica's centralised system has been successful in realising universal access to basic schooling, but it has also left schools with one of the lowest levels of responsibility for key decisions on teaching and learning among PISA participating countries. Recent years have seen growing awareness of the central role that schools can play in improving education outcomes, and of the need to change balance between central and school leadership. This is reflected in the 2008 declaration of *Quality Schools as the Axis of Costa Rican Education*, in measures to improve leadership skills in schools, and in the 2010 reform to refocus the role of school supervision from external control to support for internal leadership.

Several obstacles will need to be overcome to realise this new vision of school-led improvement. School leaders continue to play a limited role as instructional leaders (e.g. setting goals for improvement, classroom observation, mentoring and motivating teachers). This is in part because of the pressure

of other tasks, but also because they receive limited training in this role, lack a team within the school to support them on pedagogical matters, and receive little pressure from the school board and their supervisor to raise school quality. Supervisors, in particular, remain focused on procedural compliance, and lack the tools to evaluate school quality and identify schools that are underperforming and most in need of support. The capacity for improvement in Costa Rica's large number of small primary schools – 65% have less than five staff, and half of them a single teacher – is of concern given their poor student outcomes, and will need to be addressed as part of a more systematic approach to improve the quality of basic education in rural areas.

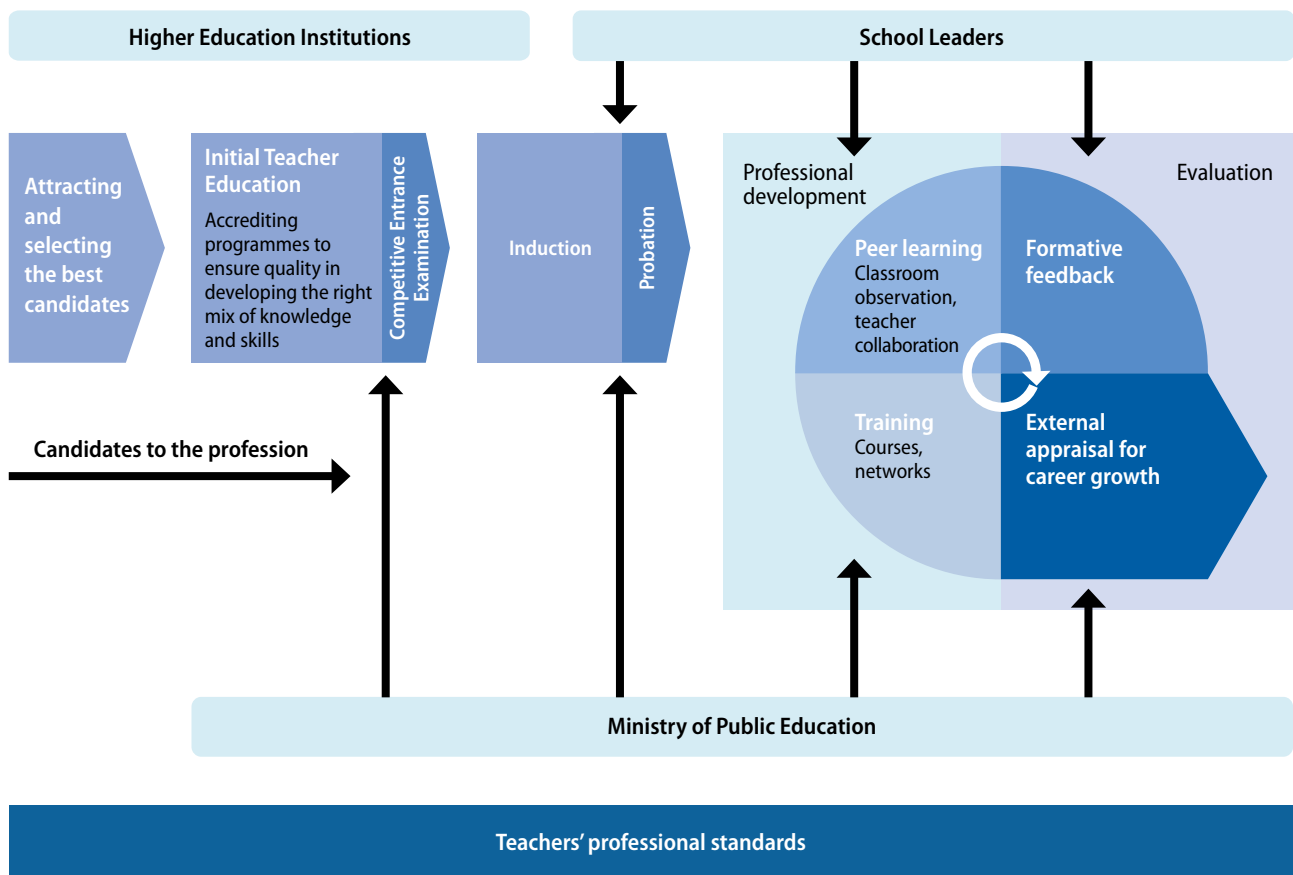
STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEM

It is only in recent years that evaluation has come to be seen as a key tool to improve student learning in Costa Rica. Steps have been taken to develop a national evaluation system by creating a sophisticated school information system, a framework for monitoring the quality of education processes (*Modelo de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación Costarricense*, MECEC), a dedicated unit for quality management and

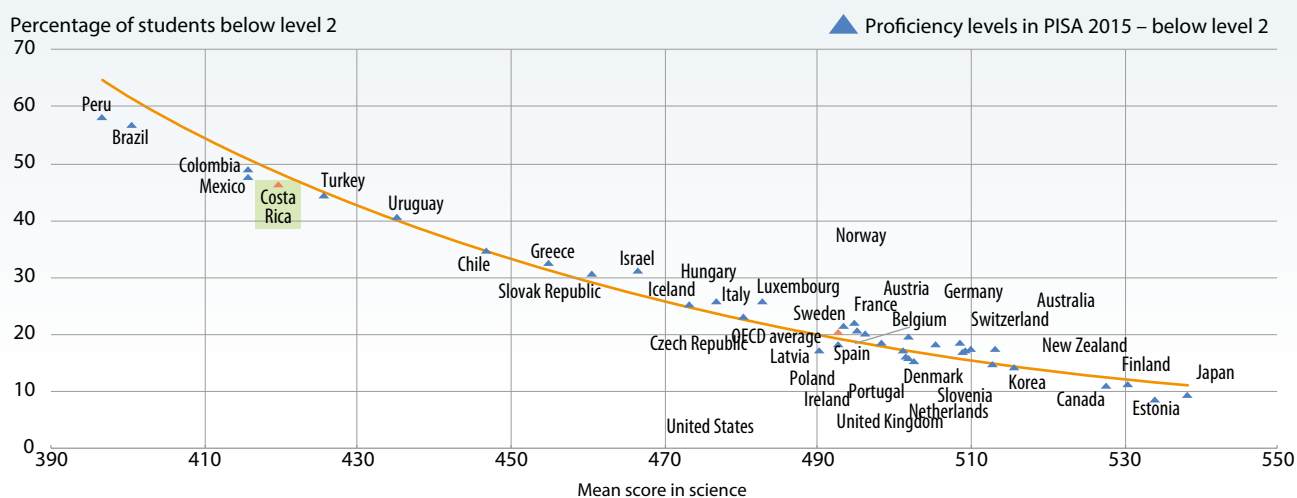
evaluation within the Ministry, and a large scale national assessment of student learning at the end of primary and lower secondary education.

But measures of education performance are still very limited compared to other Latin American and OECD countries. Costa Rica's national assessment of learning outcomes, now being redesigned to reflect the new curriculum, fails to provide adequate information where it is most needed (e.g. in the early years, and for those students who are at the lower end of the achievement scale), does not enable monitoring of socio-economic and geographical equity, and is implemented irregularly, every three or four years. It also provides no information about the performance of individual schools. These weaknesses make it difficult to design more effective policies to raise student achievement, and justify the sustained investment that the system needs. The capacity to use information from monitoring and evaluation for policy-making in the Ministry is also inadequate. Only 5% of staff are involved directly in the management and evaluation of the education system, and few of them have a statistical or research background. This is not an adequate foundation for leading sustained improvements in educational outcomes.

Consolidating the teaching profession

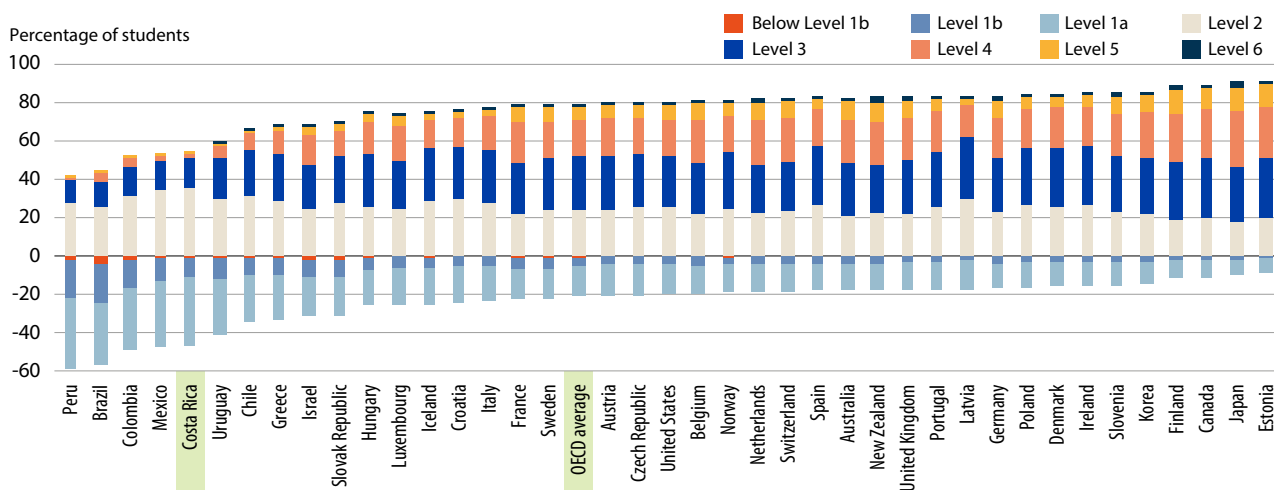


Average performance in science and proportion of 15-year-old students that lack basic skills, PISA (2015)



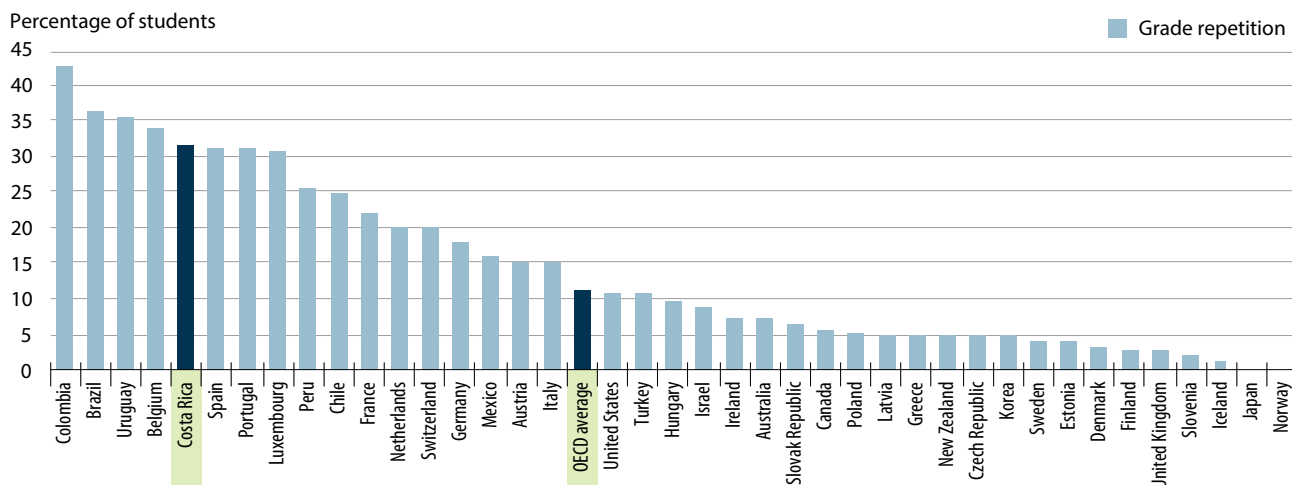
Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Science performance levels in PISA 2015 in OECD and Latin American countries (2015)



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

A large proportion of students have repeated at least one grade in primary, lower secondary or upper secondary school (2015)



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop teacher professional standards.** Standards are important to provide clear expectations of professional practice and ensure coherence across teaching policies. Engaging key stakeholders (e.g. teacher unions, universities, pedagogical advisors) in their development will be critical to build a shared understanding of “good teaching” and ensure that standards are accepted and used. Costa Rica should consider creating a professional body for teachers to support this work and provide input to teacher policy development more broadly.
- **Strengthen teachers’ initial training and recruitment.** Accreditation should be made mandatory for all initial teacher education programmes in public and private universities as a step towards ensuring new teachers are well-prepared and qualified. A national examination should be introduced to recruit candidates to the teaching profession on the basis of more direct measures of teaching aptitude. A formal induction and probation period would help to ensure that beginner teachers are supported and those with potential remain in the profession.
- **Establish a framework for teacher appraisal.** This framework should guide the annual appraisal of teachers by school leaders and the process for creating individual teacher professional development plans. The framework should indicate the tasks and evidence to be considered for a well-rounded assessment, and provide guidance on how to give teachers meaningful feedback and support to learn and develop. This needs to be accompanied by stronger instructional leadership and teacher collaboration in schools to provide teachers with more opportunities for professional growth. Once the capacity and culture for evaluation are established, Costa Rica should consider introducing an external appraisal to inform teacher career progression and develop more differentiated teaching roles.
- **Strengthen the skills and supports for school leaders.** Costa Rica should use the results of its school leader tests to improve the relevance of initial and in-service leadership development programmes and establish peer-learning schemes. The creation of instructional leadership positions within schools, with clear responsibility for individual and school-wide teachers’ professional development (e.g. classroom observation, mentoring, appraisals), is critical to improve the pedagogical knowledge and practice of in-service teachers. Further involving school boards in academic matters would also help raise school outcomes, especially if boards are successful in engaging parents and the local community.
- **Focus school supervision on quality improvement.** Costa Rica needs to establish standards and criteria to guide school evaluation practices so that they are consistent, draw on a wide evidence base, and support schools in developing their own internal evaluation and improvement practices. Given pronounced disparities in school quality, supervision should focus on the lowest performing schools where needs are greatest. Strengthening the school supervision profession and creating supervisory teams could enhance the quality of evaluations and build greater trust in the process.
- **Develop a strategy to raise education quality in small primary schools.** Steps should be taken to consolidate or close small schools when others nearby can provide better quality. The MEP should ensure that the remaining small remote schools receive adequate and appropriate educational materials as well as support in establishing links with other schools to share resources, break isolation, and exchange good practices.
- **Redesign the national standardised assessments.** National assessments should follow a regular timetable, be applied with greater frequency, and provide data where it is needed to address learning gaps (e.g. early grades of primary school) and evaluate the new curriculum (eg. introduction of innovative domains). Performance categories should be redefined to provide a more detailed picture of student performance at the lower proficiency levels. To track equity, sample-based assessments should be large enough to monitor outcomes across different population groups and regions. Costa Rica should consider applying the assessment to the school census so that individual schools can benchmark their performance against national standards and similar schools, and the MEP has better data to inform school policies and resource allocation. These changes should be reflected in a framework or policy document that details the purpose, design and responsibilities for national assessment in Costa Rica.
- **Build capacity for evaluation.** The MEP would benefit from stronger research, analytical and statistical capacity to support strategic planning. Establishing common indicators, shared data collection and a single information system will be important to improving the accessibility and use of data for improvement and accountability purposes. Costa Rica should consider creating a dedicated independent evaluation agency to promote more evidence-based and results-driven policies and support the development of a stronger culture of evaluation at all levels of the system.



Rethinking diversified education in Costa Rica

With more access to basic schooling, the numbers entering upper secondary education have increased, and in recent years many more young adults have also returned to education to seek qualifications at this level. This means that, in common with many countries, Costa Rica needs to transform an upper secondary system (known as *Educación Diversificada*) designed to prepare a small elite for university into one with a more varied role, catering also to those who enter the workplace or pursue other training options. This needs to reflect both fast-changing labour market requirements and the interests of students, preparing them as citizens, and opening up a range of career paths. Upper secondary education is quickly becoming the desired minimum level of attainment, and those who do not reach this standard – half of all young people at present – may be left behind as the economy develops in a way which will inevitably reduce its reliance on low-skilled jobs. Growing inequality in Costa Rica reflects this worrying skills divide, calling for measures to create a much more inclusive upper secondary education system that engages all students and retains them in education, and provides a better springboard for success in work and life.

RAISING PARTICIPATION AND TACKLING DROPOUT

Upper secondary education has been compulsory since 2011. Through growth in the school system and adult learning centres, Costa Rica has created the opportunities for more people to stay on at school and more young adults to return to education to gain upper secondary qualifications. While drop-out throughout secondary school narrows the pool of entrants to upper secondary education, and continues during the upper secondary years, new initiatives are seeking to tackle this problem and have already brought improvements. In 2009 Costa Rica adopted stricter rules against grade repetition, which almost halved repetition rates in primary school and has brought some reduction at secondary level. The launch of *Yo me apunto* (I'm in) in 2015 represents a new comprehensive approach to raising completion, targeted on those schools most in need of improvement in the 75 most vulnerable areas identified by the National Development Plan.

But despite increases in participation, Costa Rica still lags behind key comparator countries in terms of completion. Although 51% of 25-34 year olds in Costa Rica now have upper secondary qualifications, this is much less than the OECD average (84%) and below Chile, Colombia and Brazil in Latin America. While *Yo me Apunto* is a promising initiative, it is not backed by more systemic measures, across different policy areas, to tackle inequity in schools, including arrangements to ensure that the key resource – good teachers – work in the schools with the greatest needs. At present, teachers often have inadequate means of supporting students who are at risk and falling behind. Grade repetition – commonly the precursor of dropout – is still too often the default option, especially in the 'transition' entry years for

lower and upper secondary education, where rates of grade repetition and dropout are highest. Improving the quality of teaching in high-needs schools should be at the centre of a more sustained, co-ordinated approach to support student progression and learning in upper secondary school.

REFORMING CURRICULA AND ASSESSMENTS TO PROMOTE BETTER OUTCOMES FOR ALL

Costa Rica is implementing an ambitious curricular reform that emphasizes critical thinking instead of rote memorisation, as well as giving increased importance to domains such as citizenship and foreign languages. This initiative has great promise as a means of engaging students as more active learners and ensuring they gain skills that are more relevant to society and the labour market. The emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking is vital in a modern economy, and reflects the kind of higher level competences which should come to the fore in upper secondary education, at a stage in learning which goes beyond basic skills. The end-of-cycle certifying *Bachillerato* exam is being reformed to reflect these changed expectations and a national training programme has been rolled out to explain the new curriculum to teachers and provide resources to translate learning goals into classroom practice.

Research shows that the success of any curricular reform depends on extensive work with teachers over substantial periods of time. In Costa Rica there is evidence that despite training, many teachers do not understand the implications of the new reform – half of teachers surveyed in the San José region could not explain the difference between the new and the old maths curriculum – and weak pedagogical skills, limited learning time and a shortage of textbooks

create significant obstacles to classroom implementation. The potential of the new curriculum to enhance student engagement is also hindered by the final *Bachillerato* examination. The fact that all students must pass all subjects in the exam to be granted the secondary education diploma and be able to enter tertiary education is not an encouragement to those who are facing difficulties to stay on in school. It also obliges students to follow a heavily academic programme until the end of 12th grade, leaving little space for the development of quality technical programmes which are important to meet the needs of a more diverse student body and the labour market. Costa Rica will need to provide more support to teachers and greater diversity in programme provision and certification if secondary schools are to develop the skills and career opportunities of all students.

STRENGTHENING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

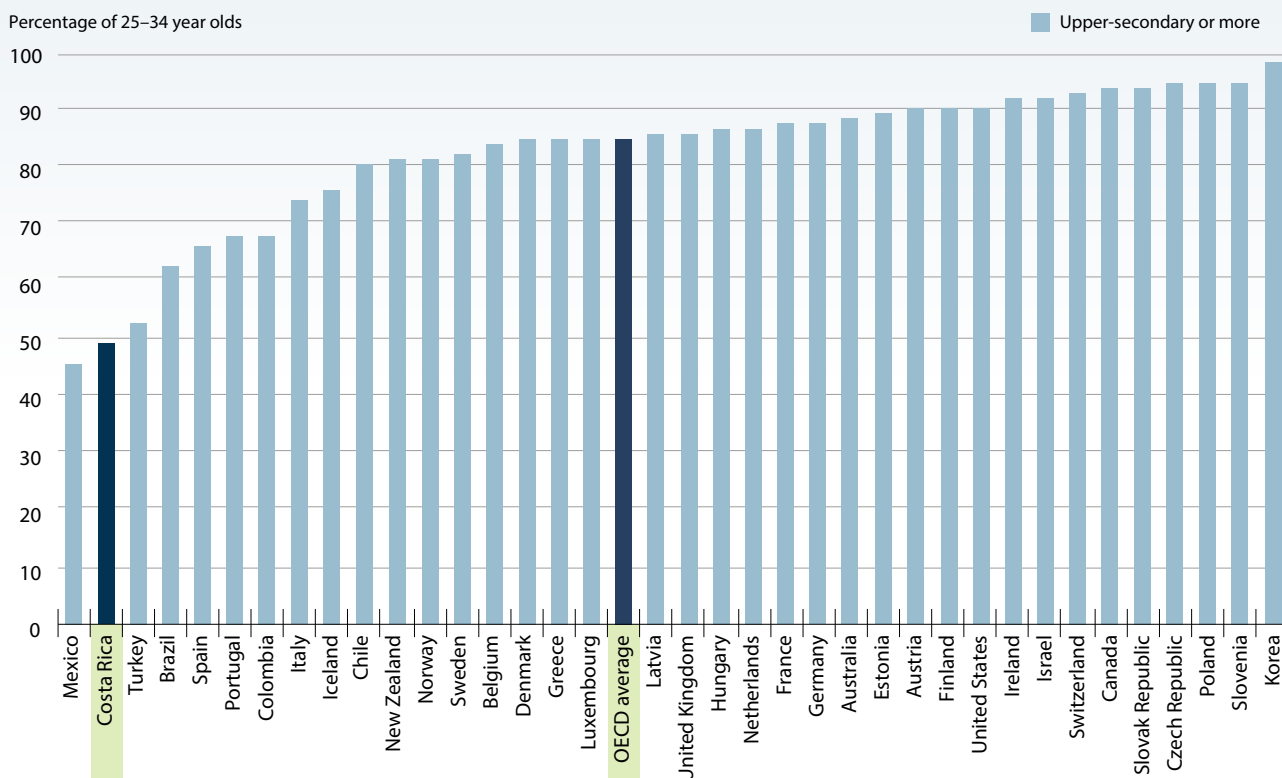
In planning the expansion of upper secondary education to include all young people, much attention is rightly being given to the technical school system, where it is envisaged that future growth will be concentrated. Technical schools still account for over a quarter of enrolment at this level of education, much less than many OECD countries, but perhaps not surprising given that the technical upper secondary pathway is a demanding track leading to the *Bachillerato*. Following a previous OECD review, partnerships

with employers are being developed, both Institute of National Training (Instituto Nacional del Aprendizaje, INA) and MEP are establishing programmes which include more hands-on experience of the workplace, while ongoing work on qualifications frameworks should, it is to be hoped, make it easier for students to receive credit for their INA qualifications within the 'formal' education system.

Despite these efforts, some institutional features continue to hold back the development of an effective and expanded system of vocational skills development. First, Costa Rica lacks the kind of dedicated vocational upper secondary colleges that are found in many OECD and other countries – colleges which can become a focus for technical specialism and excellence, employer engagement and workbased learning opportunities – while also postponing the choice of target career until the upper secondary level. Instead, in Costa Rica, most technical schools are, in reality, largely academic institutions since they include grades 6-9 as well as the upper secondary grades where all students pursue the *Bachillerato*. Second, Costa Rica has failed to develop and bring to scale the shorter postsecondary professional programmes – of between six months and two years – that provide a large portion of required professional training in many OECD, and indeed Latin American countries. Such programmes, by providing a natural path of further education for graduates of upper secondary vocational programmes, powerfully underpin the attractiveness of vocational training to young people.

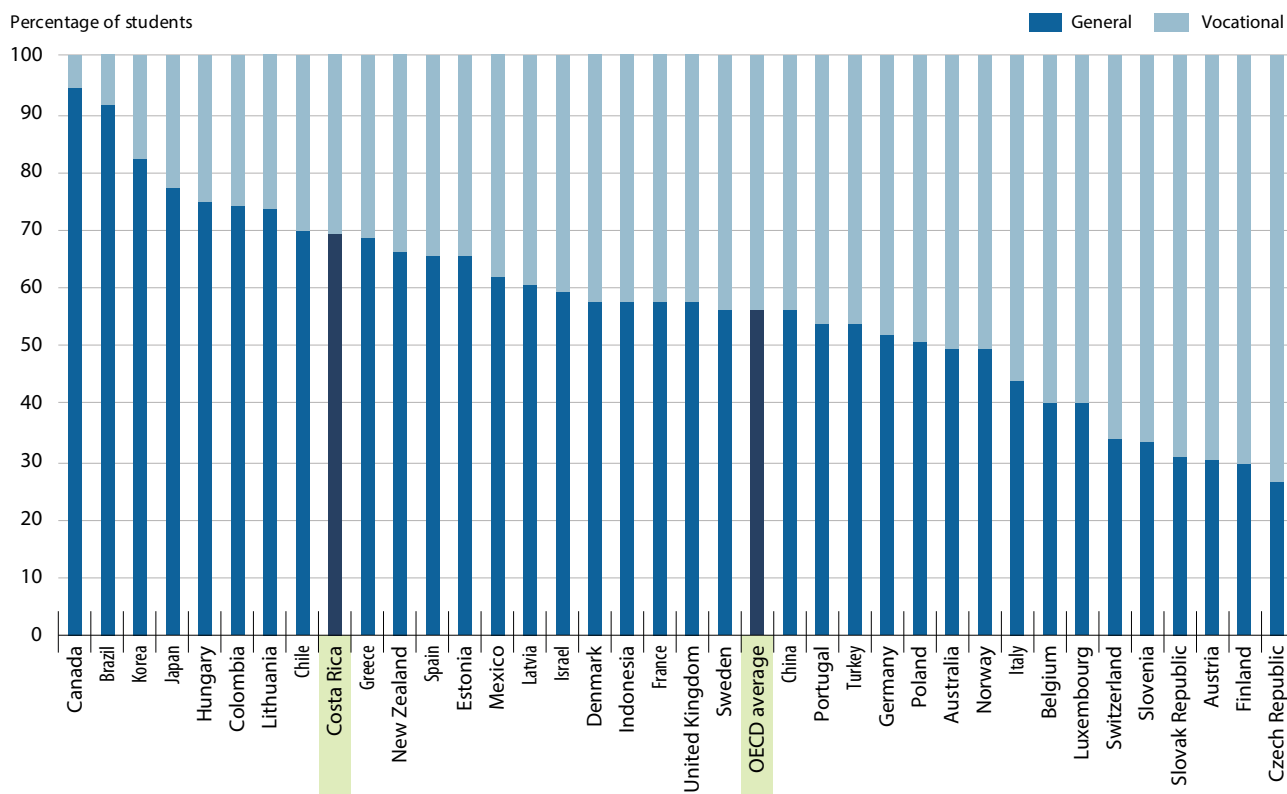


Percentage of 25-34-year-olds with at least upper-secondary qualifications (2015)



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Enrolment in secondary education by field (2013)



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD RECOMMENDATIONS

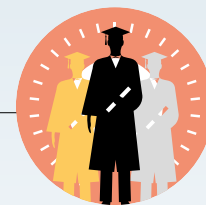
- **Target resources on schools most in need.** To reduce dropout, Costa Rica should target resources on the schools, and the grades where the dropout rates are highest. Following the approach of *Yo me Apunto*, this should apply across all relevant policies, including those which determine the distribution of resources for infrastructure, instructional materials and pedagogical advice. Equity targets should be established to assess how each policy contributes to reducing gaps in inputs and outcomes. As the most important educational resource, teachers should be offered financial and other career incentives to work in schools facing major dropout and performance challenges, along with context-specific professional development that would prepare them for their role and help them to advance in their career. Promising beginner teachers should be identified and supported to start their career in disadvantaged schools.
- **Strengthen teaching for students at risk.** Costa Rica needs to sustain efforts to reduce grade repetition – as a common precursor of dropout - throughout the school system, with particular attention to the transition years (7th and 10th grades). Extended study time, through extra classes and summer schools, should be provided to those who might otherwise have to repeat a grade. Initial training and professional development need to be strengthened to provide teachers with the pedagogical tools, including differentiated teaching skills and formative assessment, to support the students most at risk of grade repetition and dropout.
- **Prepare teachers for the new curriculum.** Professional development and initial training of teachers need to be reinforced to this end. Alongside central guidance, teachers should be given local, on-going support provided by an instructional leader, with special responsibility for the new curriculum, in every school. All initial teacher training should aim to develop the competences necessary to deliver the new curriculum.
- **Reform the Bachillerato exam.** To realise a more inclusive approach, the requirement that students must pass all subjects for a Bachiller certification should be abolished in favour of certification acknowledging achievements in individual subjects, so that those who have passed the

Bachillerato examination in some subjects receive recognition. This approach would also create more space for technical specialization in the curriculum of upper secondary vocation schools. An alternative qualification to the Bachiller might be considered for high-risk students.

- **Establish technical schools as specialized institutions.** Costa Rica should strengthen technical schools by, over time, re-establishing them as specialised vocational technical colleges and dropping grades 7 to 9. To improve effectiveness, MEP schools should be encouraged to share facilities and resources, including teaching personnel, with INA programmes.
- **Develop shorter professional programmes.** To fill a gap in provision that is notable by international standards, Costa Rica needs to promote and develop short professional programmes (six months to two years) as vocationally targeted alternatives to university level degrees. These programmes should be located in the strengthened technical colleges that would be best placed to champion them.



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Strengthening tertiary education in a growing economy

The tertiary education sector in Costa Rica includes some strong public universities with international reputations, participation rates are high and graduates earn good salaries. In recent decades, in common with many countries, there has been a very rapid growth in participation, mostly enabled through the expansion of the private university system. Such growth is needed as Costa Rica's economy and labour market evolve to give greater emphasis to higher level skills and more knowledge-intensive industries. But the private sector institutions are subject to weak quality assurance and avoid the more demanding science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects where skills shortages are most evident. The public expenditure costs of tertiary education are rising unsustainably, and expenditure within the public university system is not allocated equitably. Tertiary education will play a vital role in Costa Rica's future, but the accumulation of a set of very serious challenges mean that wholesale reform of the governance, funding and quality assurance arrangements of the entire sector is essential.

DEVELOPING QUALITY ASSURANCE AND IMPROVING TRANSPARENCY

Quality assurance has made great strides in recent years, with more robust standards for the establishment of private universities and the development of the respected National Accreditation System of Higher Education (*Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior*, SINAES). A further proposed, and very welcome reform will require the accreditation of private programmes in the national priority areas of teaching, architecture and civil engineering, and health. The reform also demands five-yearly programme reviews and promises a strengthened inspection role for the body which regulates private universities. There have been several positive initiatives to collect the kind of data on quality and outcomes which might support quality assurance, for example through an agreement for most universities to collect enrolment data, an employment and earnings survey of graduates, a proposal for a labour market observatory and a common information system for public universities linked to a World Bank loan project.

But, as evidenced by the high rates of failure by university graduates for bar and medical exams and the poor scores of teacher training graduates in teacher tests, standards in some university programmes are very low. Costa Rica therefore needs to take quality assurance further and faster. For Costa Rica, the most urgent priority is to secure minimum standards across the sector and particularly among private providers. The current legislative proposals do not go far enough as they provide no clear mechanism for tackling poor quality unaccredited programmes in existing private universities. Much better data is also a vital

element. Reliable performance data is largely unavailable because institutions have no obligation to report data, and key indicators of system and institutional performance (i.e. time to degree, retention, success graduating low-income or part-time students) are not available. The relative absence of tertiary education data in Costa Rica is striking and sets it apart not only from OECD countries but also from other countries in the region; Chile, Peru, and Colombia, have all established increasingly robust, public-facing information systems to help guide both policymakers and potential students and their parents.

REFORMING STUDENT FINANCE AND THE FUNDING OF TERTIARY EDUCATION

Currently, the vast majority of government support for tertiary education takes the form of a large National Fund of Higher Education (*Fondo Especial para el Financiamiento de la Educación Superior*, FEES), which is channelled to the country's five public universities, who have almost full discretion on how to share and allocate funds. Public universities use this funding to heavily subsidise tuition (so that students pay very low fees in the public universities) and to offer scholarships (received by nearly half of students at public universities). There is also a small-scale government-run loan scheme for students at public and private universities. The effect is that students who have good enough results to enter the public system face few financial barriers to education, enabling many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to be the first in their family to enter university. However, the 51% of Costa Rican students enrolled in private institutions are excluded from this system of generous public subsidy and have extremely limited access to scholarships or loans.

These funding arrangements are both unsustainable and inequitable. Public expenditure on tertiary education has roughly doubled as a proportion of (fast-growing) GDP since 2000 and at 1.5% is now well above that of the majority of OECD countries. Public subsidy will not be able to support the future anticipated growth in tertiary participation to the same degree. On equity, the majority of students who benefit from public universities are from wealthier backgrounds. Students who can afford to pay for private secondary schooling are twice as likely to succeed in the competitive entrance to public universities as those who attend a public secondary school. Conversely, students in private universities have almost no access to scholarships, although they face larger fees and many of them come from lower-income families.

These financial barriers, alongside other factors, mean that Costa Rica performs badly in terms of access to tertiary education by students from poor backgrounds – at just 7.5%, the net enrolment rate for the lowest income quintile is far below that of students from wealthy backgrounds (54%) and well below most OECD countries. Looking to the future, those who benefit from tertiary education are going to have to bear more of the costs, and public funds will need to be allocated in ways that are more equitable. This implies not only a significant reform in how the FEES budget is used, but also in how funds are prioritised within the overall education budget, with a reduction in tertiary spending in favour of investment in preschool and primary and secondary education.

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR SECTOR-WIDE IMPROVEMENT

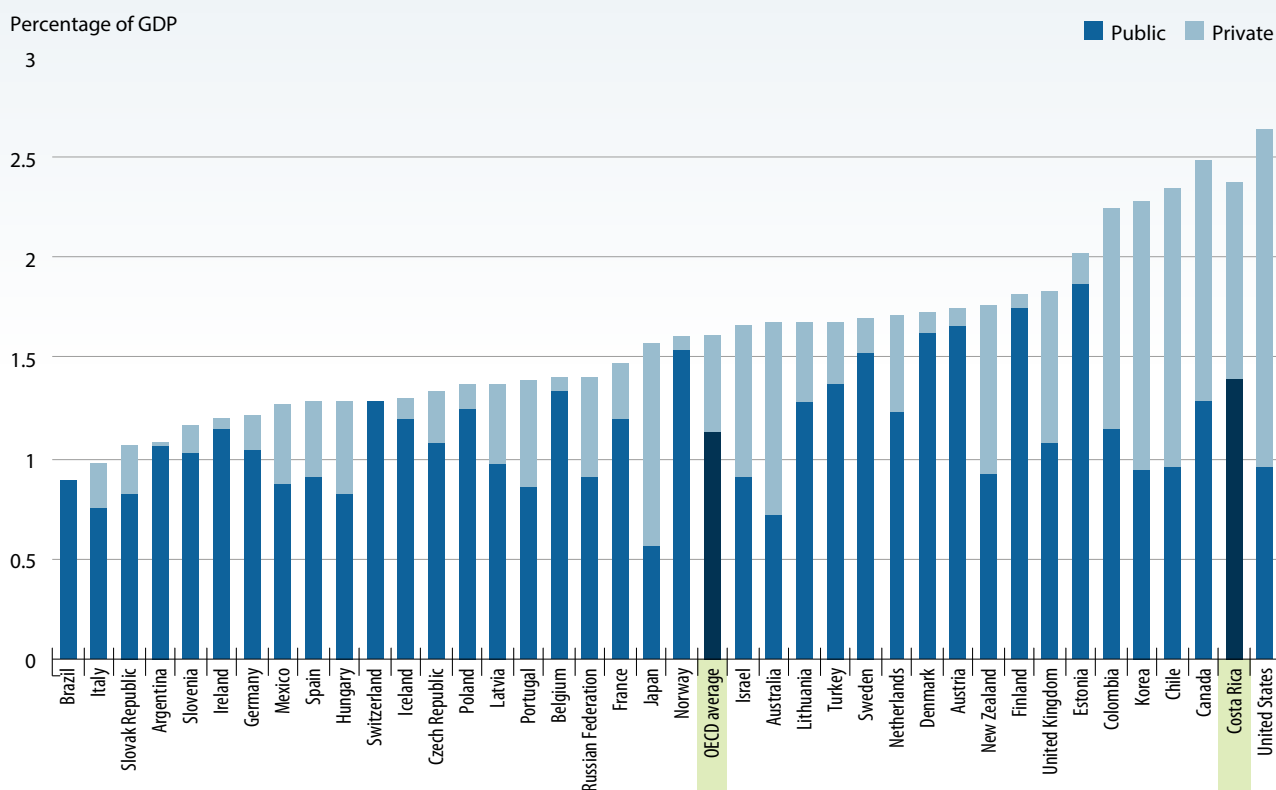
At present, planning arrangements for tertiary education are limited. The public universities have developed their own plan for 2016-2020, with 12 goals which focus on improving the quality, equity and relevance of public universities. While the plan refers to wider government policy objectives, it is prepared by the public universities without involvement of the MEP or other public agencies. Additionally, there are efforts underway as part of a World Bank loan programme to develop institutional improvement agreements to guide spending in individual public universities. However, none of these initiatives engage private institutions – which are responsible for the education of over 50% of tertiary students – nor do they connect explicitly with national development goals or the needs of the productive sector.

Indeed, Costa Rica, unlike its counterparts in OECD and other countries, lacks a lead public authority with clear responsibility for the tertiary education sector and the capacity to plan strategically. Of the agencies that do exist, the National Council of Deans (*Consejo Nacional de Rectores*, CONARE) operates solely as an instrument for the self-government of the public university sector, while CONESUP is almost exclusively concerned with private institutions. There is no body with responsibility for the sector as a whole, no platform where all stakeholders can come together to ensure coherence across programmes and institutions, and no basis – in terms of system-wide goals, information or monitoring requirements – on which to meaningfully allocate public funds. This means that there is no way of developing and implementing new policies on issues like student finance, tertiary quality, or meeting the needs of a fast-changing economy. This fails to provide a sound foundation for the development of a competitive, high quality tertiary sector.



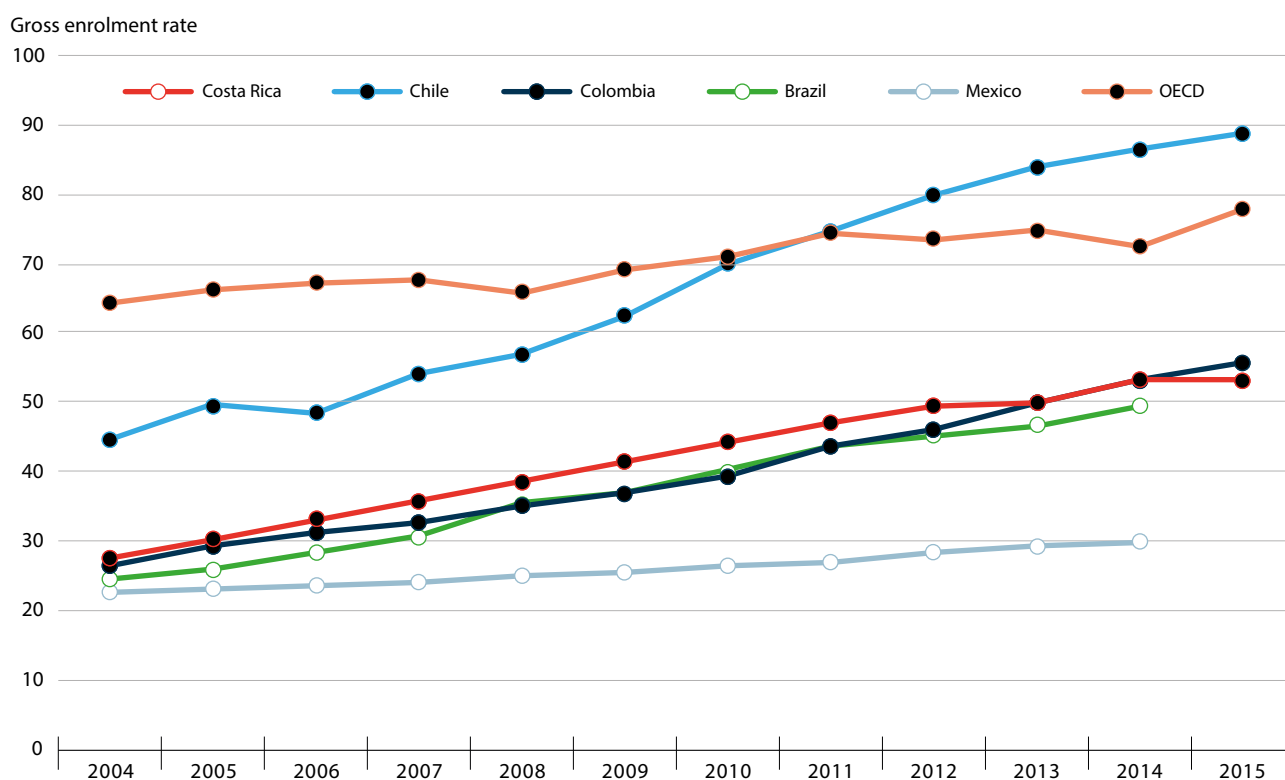
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Public and private expenditure on tertiary educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (2013)



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Evolution of gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education (2004-2015)



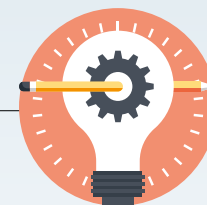
Source: UNESCO-UIS (2016), Browse by theme: Education, Data Centre, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, www.uis.unesco.org/DataCentre/Pages/BrowseEducation.aspx.

OECD RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen minimum standards.** New legislation to strengthen the oversight role of the National Council of Private Higher Education (Consejo Superior de Enseñanza Superior Universitaria Privada, CONESUP) should go further. It should grant CONESUP the powers and resources to ensure that all private university programmes, including existing programmes, are of minimum quality. To this end, CONESUP will need to encourage accreditation, ensure that the mandated five-yearly reviews involve a full quality review, are of adequate standard and are open to public scrutiny. CONESUP should underpin these measures with a programme of risk-based inspections and be given the powers to close programmes that do not meet minimum standards.
- **Extend the coverage and impact of accreditation.** Coverage of the SINAES accreditation system should be extended by progressively making public funding, including student finance, conditional on the accreditation of programmes in which students are enrolled. The accreditation process should be strengthened by involving a wider group of stakeholders, linking the process to performance indicators, and by publishing the accreditation reports.
- **Develop a national information system.** An independent body should be established with a dedicated budget to collect, analyse, and disseminate information about the performance of the tertiary education sector and its component institutions. Tertiary institutions should provide data to this body in a common format. A user-friendly information site should offer detailed information on the costs and estimated returns to programmes of study at all the country's public and private tertiary institutions.
- **Make equitable cost-sharing the key principle of reform.** The current arrangements for tertiary funding are unsustainable, inequitable and do not respond to labour market needs. A new tertiary funding and student support system therefore needs to be developed to allow for more effective and fair cost sharing between government and the students who benefit from tertiary education. This new financing arrangement should target financial support to students, on the basis of need and their ability to benefit and offer assistance to pay fees and help with maintenance. Eligibility requirements for scholarships should be revised and the CONAPE programme should be replaced by a national government-backed loan system. Scholarships and loans should be offered to students pursuing quality programmes (typically implying accreditation) in either public or private universities, replacing the current arrangements which primarily channel subsidy to students via public universities through subsidised tuition and scholarships. There should be a regulated but substantial increase in the fees in public universities.
- **Establish the policy infrastructure to steer reform.** Costa Rica needs to put in place stronger mechanisms to steer the development of tertiary education and ensure the sector contributes to national socio-economic goals. A first priority is to develop a long-term strategic vision for tertiary education and establish a body within government with responsibility for implementing its objectives. To move this forward, a steering group could be set up to manage a public consultation on the strategy; it should be chaired by the Minister of Education, and include broad representation from tertiary institutions and wider society. The strategy should aim to realise a tertiary education system which is equitable, high quality and meets the needs of both students and employers. A permanent body is needed within government to guide the implementation the strategy, charged with developing medium-term action plans and budgets, monitoring implementation and advising on further required policy development.



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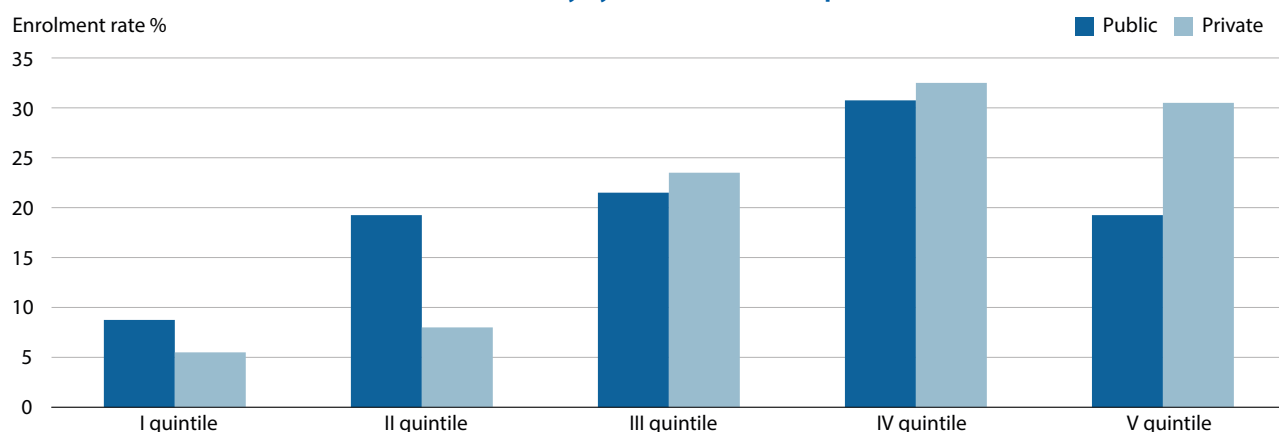
Steering the system to higher levels of performance

The sectoral issues need to be embedded within a strategic approach to the education sector as a whole. Education is a vital investment in Costa Rica's future, both to provide the skills for a modernising economy, and to ensure social inclusion. More public expenditure will be needed to extend the reach of early childhood education and care to the most vulnerable children, to provide the resources and teaching capacity to improve outcomes in basic schooling, and to tackle dropout and expand upper secondary education so as to educate all young people in Costa Rica up to this level. But this investment, although vital, needs to bring results. Costa Rica has not enough to show for the investments it has already made, in terms of school completion and student learning. Other indicators where one might expect to see the benefits of education investment are not encouraging: productivity has barely increased, skills shortages are apparent and inequality is growing. Education expenditure requires a sharpened focus on results, rather than inputs and processes, within a much more strategic systematic approach to education planning and policy development.

An effective strategic planning cycle, focused on using funding to deliver better education outcomes, may be seen as a cycle that links, in a transparent and structured manner, the three core elements of budgeting, planning and implementation, and evaluation:

- Given the constitutional requirement that government expenditure on education reach 8% of GDP, sectoral budgets within this total need to be established in relation to outcomes for which the different education sectors should be accountable. In the context of rising inequity overall and a taxation system with a minimally redistributive impact, there needs to be a substantial reprioritisation of expenditure in favour of compulsory schooling and early years education and care, since this will contribute to equity most effectively. This implies wholesale reform of tertiary education finance so that those who benefit from tertiary education make a much more substantial contribution to its costs. Resource
- allocation at the school level also needs to be reviewed and made more efficient, especially in light of demographic trends and growing pressures on the secondary school system.
- The MEP would greatly benefit from strengthening its capacity to set strategic goals, and establish longer term planning, involving all key stakeholders, including teachers, parents, employers and local actors. This means establishing clearer sectoral leads, to take ownership of budgets and accountability for delivery within the ministry.
- The capacity for monitoring and evaluation also needs to be reinforced, so that policies can be developed and implemented in light of the evidence. This means building up the human and institutional capacity to collect relevant data on education outcomes, and ensuring that there are systems in place to act on the results – for example when unexpected challenges emerge, or when policies appear to fail.

Enrolment in university by sector and income quintile (2014)



Source: PEN (2015), *Quinto Informe Estado de la educación 2015 (Fifth Report State of Education 2015)*, CONARE, Programa Estado de la Nación (PEN), San José.

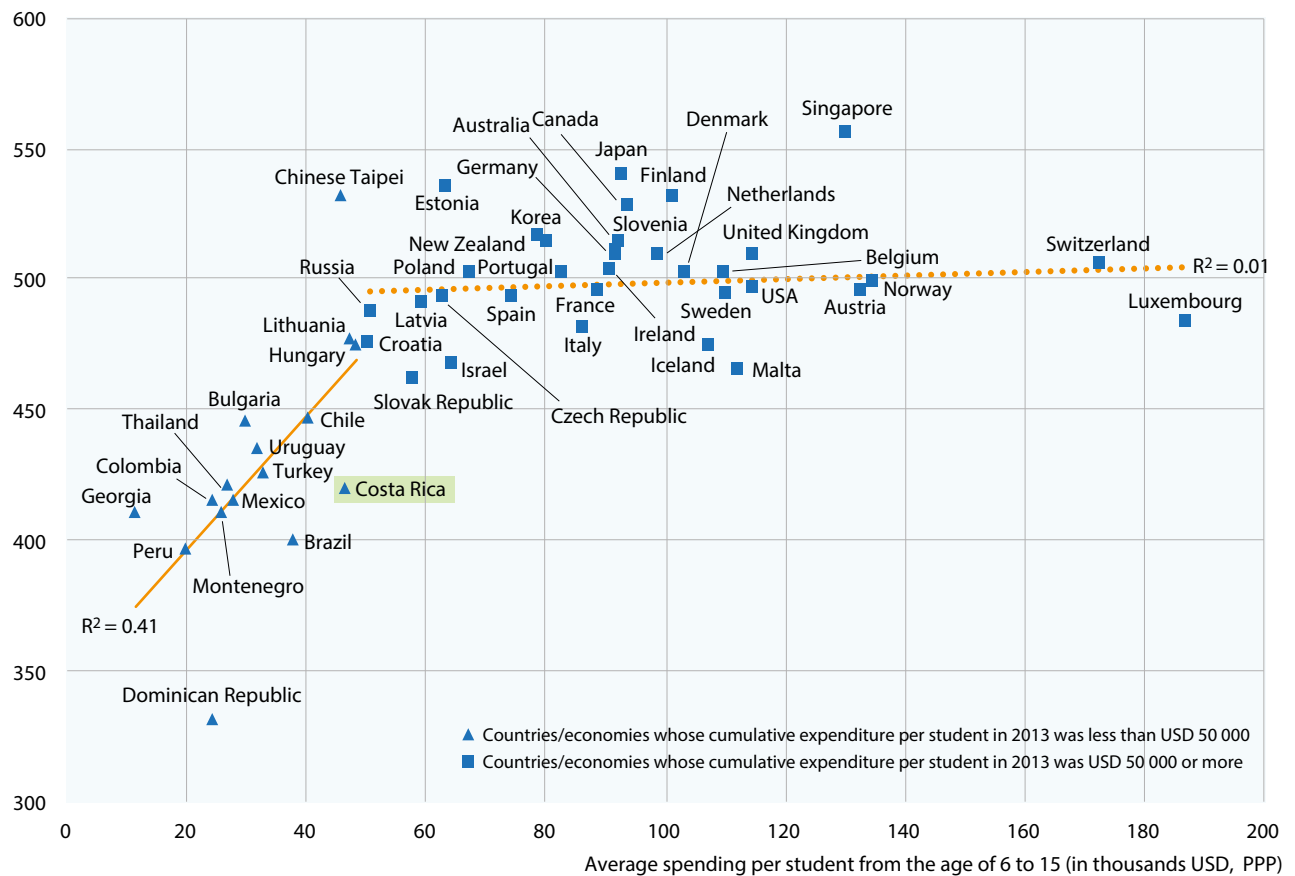


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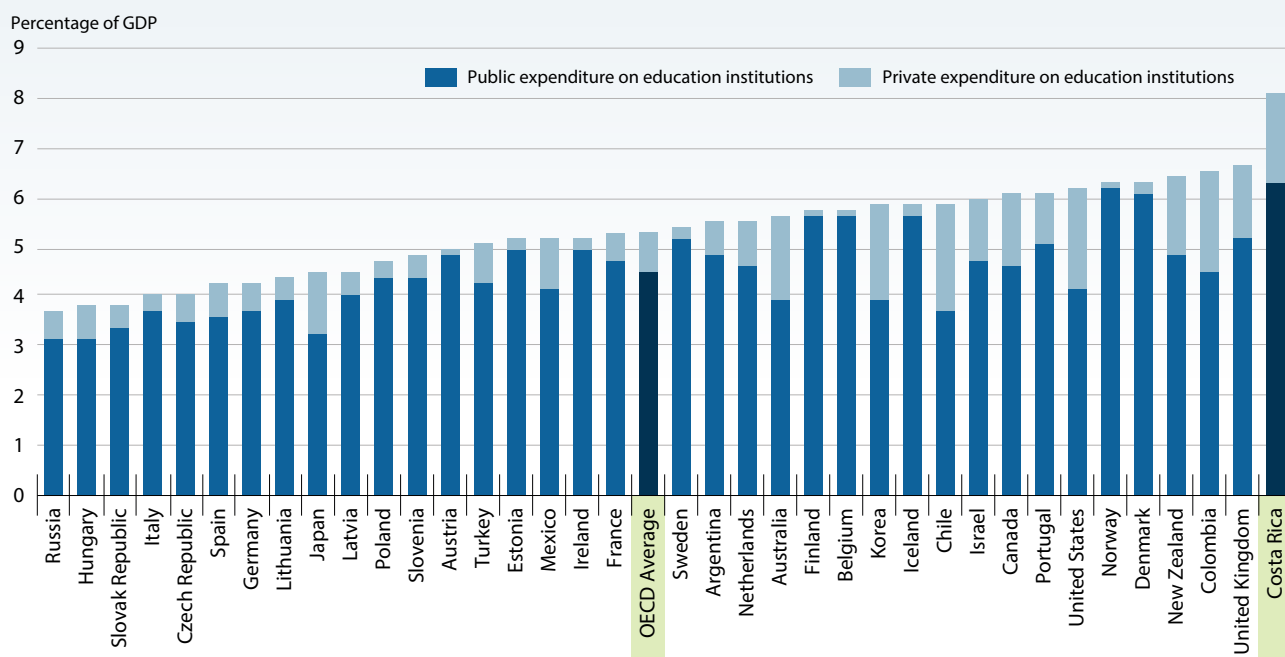
Relation between performance in science in PISA 2015 and spending per student (2015)

Science performance (score points)



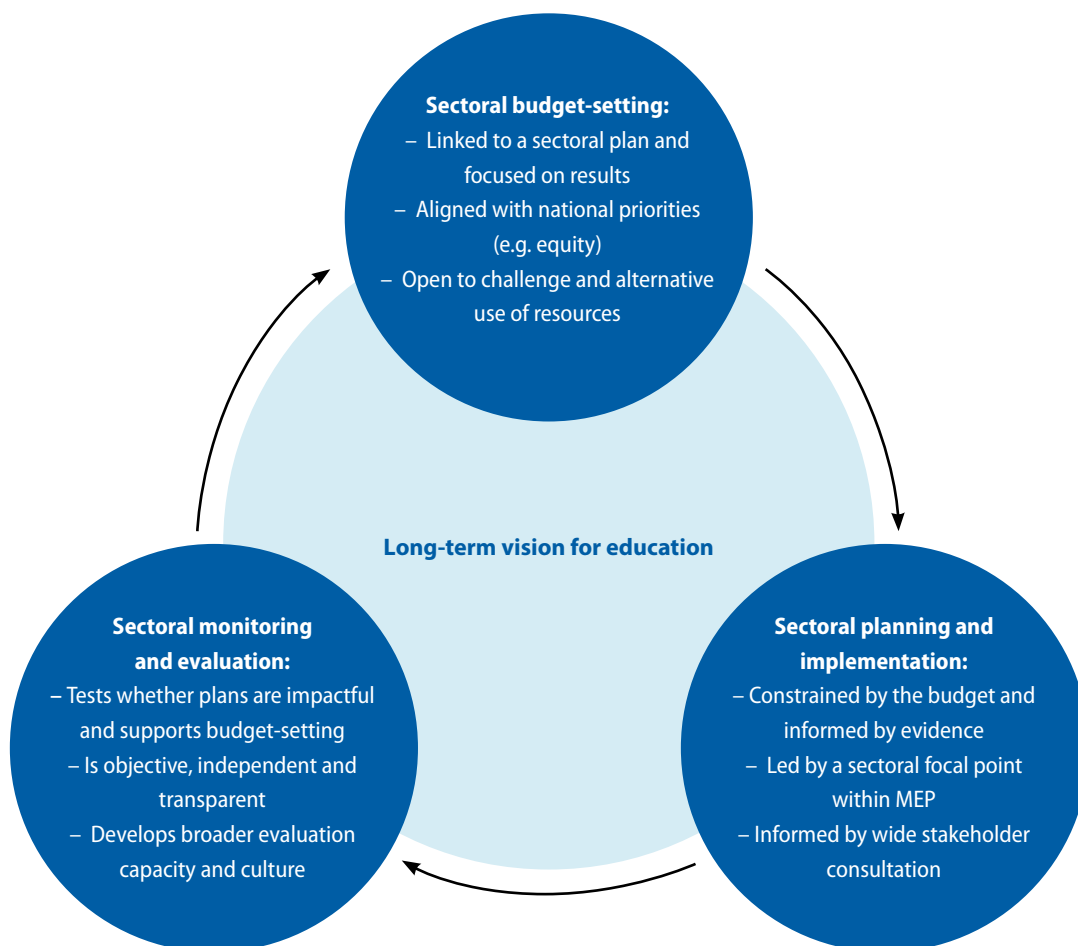
Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Public and private expenditure on primary to tertiary education institutions as a percentage of GDP (2013)



Source: OECD (2017), *Reviews of National Policies for Education – Education in Costa Rica*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Using funding to get results



OECD RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that investment in education yields the best possible results for students and society, Costa Rica should pursue a strategic planning cycle, focused on outcomes, and linking education budgeting, planning and evaluation. To this end, the MEP, together with the Ministry of Finance, should:

- Establish systematic arrangements for agreeing budgets for the different sectors of education, linking budgets to planned education outcomes, prioritised according to national development objectives and a long-term vision for the education sector.
- On grounds of equity, give priority in spending to the earlier phases of education, and explore reforms of tertiary education funding in line with the recommendations put forward in Chapter 5.
- Review resource allocation at the school level, with a focus on achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness in the primary school network and increasing funding for secondary education and disadvantaged schools.
- Establish a clear lead for each sector within the MEP, with responsibility for developing and implementing plans to spend agreed budgets. Education reform should be opened to consultation with a wide group of stakeholders, including those who work in the education system, local actors, parents, students and employers.
- Give higher priority to the monitoring and evaluation of education policies in relation to planned education outcomes and invest in building the capacity to do this. Use the results systematically to adjust policies and funding.



About the Directorate for Education and Skills

The OECD Directorate for Education and Skills helps countries to identify and develop the knowledge and skills that drive better jobs and better lives, generate prosperity and promote social inclusion. We encourage countries to compare their experiences and learn from each other, and we accompany them in the difficult process of policy implementation.

Our global metrics help policy-makers to see what is possible in education and to set meaningful aspirations in terms of measurable goals achieved by the world's education leaders. Our PISA surveys show how much school systems vary in their progress towards equipping learners with the critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills that are so crucial at a time when the kinds of things that are easy to teach and easy to test are also easiest to digitise, automate and outsource. Through TALIS, we seek to strengthen the teaching profession and to devise more innovative learning environments with the 21st-century pedagogies that will shape 21st-century learners.

Our in-depth policy analysis and advice helps countries understand how their national education system is faring in comparison to others; and learn what policies and practices have made a difference for strong performers and successful reformers in education. We also engage in national policy dialogues to help policymakers raise awareness for the need of reform and build agreement among stakeholders. Recognising that educational improvement is not just about new ideas and legislation, we support policy makers through the journey of change to improve teaching and learning outcomes for all.

Our aspiration is to help every learner, every parent, every teacher and every policy maker see that only the sky is the limit to improving education – and that improving education is the key to a better and fairer society.



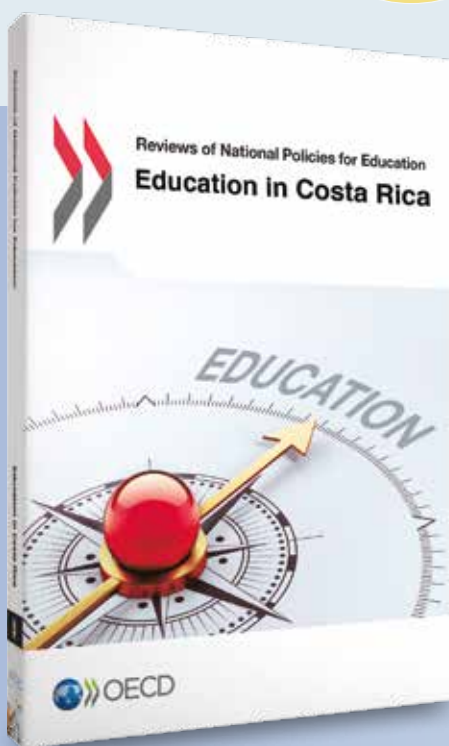
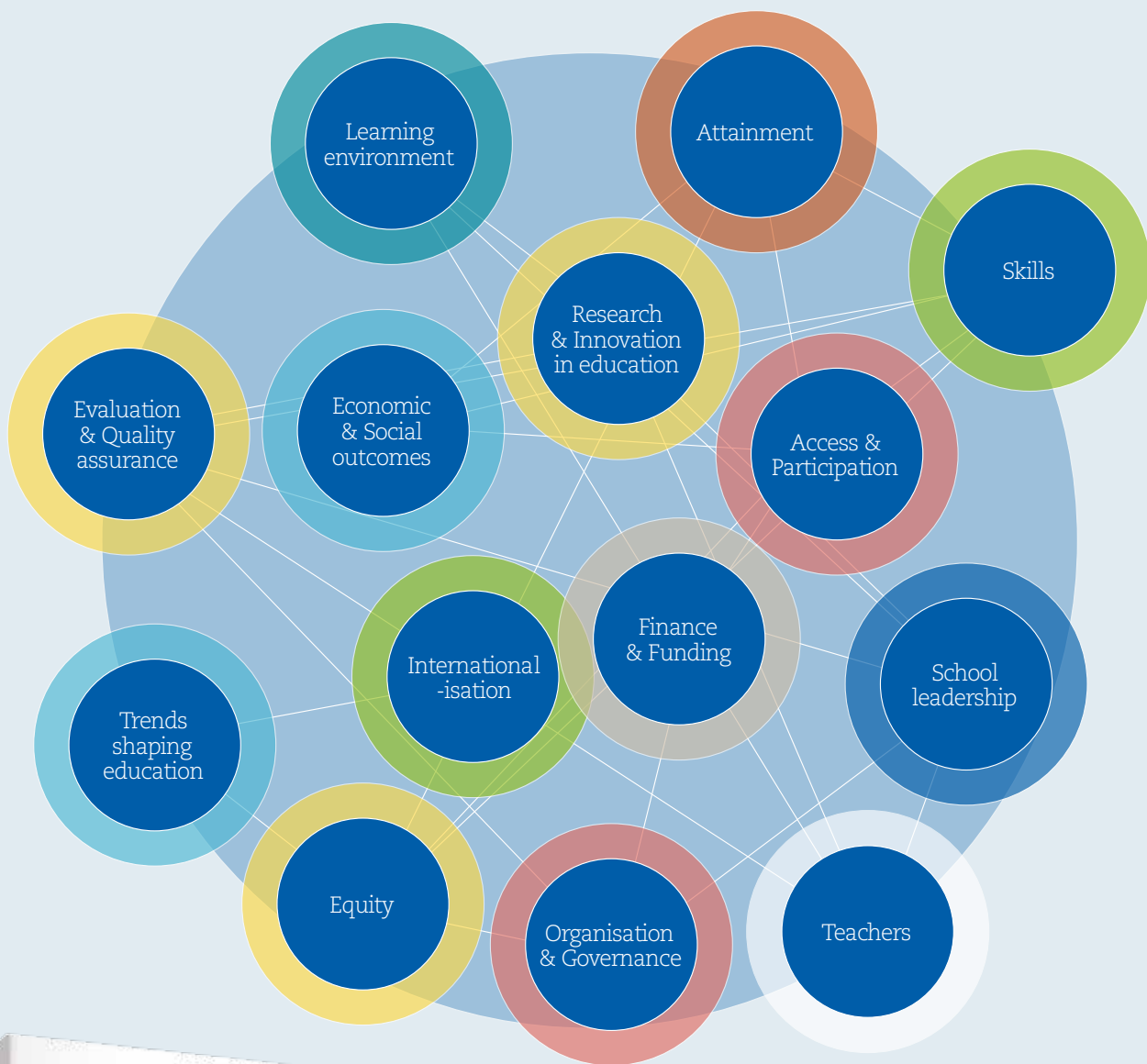
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