

Successful lifelong learners

This fact sheet describes the key findings in the *Educational Opportunity in Australia 2020* report in relation to how Australia's education system is supporting children and young people to be successful lifelong learners.

The Educational Opportunity report is the first major study to assess performance against the goals in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, a commitment by all Australian governments to build an education system that supports all students to be successful lifelong learners, creative and confident individuals and active and informed citizens. The report looks at which children and young people are developing these attributes at four key educational milestones: school entry, the middle school years, the senior school years and early adulthood.

What is a successful lifelong learner?

Through the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, Australian governments committed to supporting all young people, regardless of their background or location, to be successful lifelong learners. This means developing the skills, knowledge and attributes needed to continue to learn over the life course and thrive in adulthood.

Young people entering the workforce will likely have multiple careers over the course of their lives. They need the skills and dispositions to navigate those changes and succeed in a labour market characterised by significant uncertainty and a reliance on technology. Additionally, the jobs in today's economy more frequently require interpersonal contact, collaboration, and higher levels of education (Foundation for Young Australians, 2018; OECD, 2018a).

To succeed in this environment, young people need to be adaptable and be able to seek out and successfully navigate new learning opportunities over the course of their lives (Foundation for Young Australians, 2015). They need strong literacy and numeracy skills, to be capable users of technology and be able to access tertiary education and training.

Key findings

Despite pockets of excellence, education systems are marred by inequity, with differences in achievement and attainment strongly linked to students' background, family circumstances, and where they live. Indigenous Australians, young people from families with fewer resources, and those in rural and remote communities are less likely to participate in critical learning opportunities and experiences. These young people have lower rates of pre-school participation, school completion and post-school qualification attainment.

Differences in learning appear early and generally widen across stages of learning, with patterns most stark in relation to socioeconomic status (SES). Around 85% of children from highest SES backgrounds arrive at school developmentally on track compared to just under 68% of children from lowest SES backgrounds. Additionally, tracking the achievement of a cohort of children over time showed that the gap between the proportion of low-SES and high-SES students meeting the literacy and numeracy standard increased from 22.4 percentage points in Year 3 to over 30 points in Year 9.

Many students struggle to navigate transition to post-school study and work. Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, Indigenous students and students from regional and remote communities are less likely than their peers to have gained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification by 19 or to have completed a post-school qualification by their mid-twenties. This can substantially limit choices available to students at this critical juncture between school and the next stage of their lives, and make it harder to gain a solid foothold in the labour market.

All students can succeed given the right support and the early years are key. While many children who start school behind their peers struggle to catch up, many are able to overcome early academic difficulties. Just over 44% of children from the lowest SES backgrounds who start school behind in literacy and numeracy are above the national minimum standard by Year 5. Additionally, analysis in the report showed that preschool attendance is key to supporting a strong start to school, raising the chance of children being on track with their general knowledge, communication, language and cognitive skills by 12.3 percentage points.

Proportion (%) and estimated number of children and young people succeeding and missing out on indicators of successful lifelong learners from school entry to early adulthood

		Successful	Missing out	Comments
Entry to school (Age 0-8)	Developmentally on track on all domains	78.3% 253,693	21.7% 70,308	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major gaps in school readiness, with low-SES children, Indigenous children, and those in very remote areas two times more likely than their peers to be developmentally vulnerable. • Pre-school improves development, raising the chance of being on track in language and cognitive skills and communication skills and general knowledge domains by 12.3 percentage points.
	Developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy	84.5% 273,781	15.5% 50,220	
		Successful	Missing out	Comments
Middle school years (Age 9-14)	Above the national minimum standard in both literacy and numeracy	75.2% 219,593	24.8% 72,419	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inequity in literacy, numeracy and scientific skills, with low-SES students, Indigenous students, and students in remote areas most likely to miss out. • Gaps widen across later stages of learning; matched cohort analysis shows proportion above minimum standard in both literacy and numeracy drops from 79% in Year 3 to 71.8% in Year 9.
	At or above international benchmark in science	69.0% 201,488	31.0% 90,524	
		Successful	Missing out	Comments
Senior school years (Age 15-19)	Attains Year 12 or equivalent qualification	81.6% 259,224	18.4% 58,452	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large gaps in achievement and attainment linked to student socioeconomic background, Indigeneity and location. • Year 12 attainment improves employment outcomes; analysis shows 66.6% of students who attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification were employed full-time at age 29 compared to 48.3% of those who didn't.
	At or above international benchmark in maths, science and reading	72.2% 229,362	27.8% 88,314	
		Successful	Missing out	Comments
Early Adulthood (Age 20-24)	Engaged fully in education, training or work	70.3% 268,030	29.7% 112,695	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large gaps in engagement and post-school qualification attainment, most evident based on SES, Indigenous status and location. • Large numbers of young people falling through the cracks during critical transition from school to work. If left unchecked this can cost government and broader community billions.
	Gains post-school qualification	73.1% 278,310	26.9% 102,415	

Source: based on analysis in Lamb et al, Educational Opportunity in Australia in 2020

What does this mean?

The results in the Educational Opportunity report show that Australian education systems have a long way to go to achieve the aspiration of delivering both excellence and equity and supporting all young people to develop the skill and attributes of successful lifelong learners. Young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and young people in regional and remote communities are too often missing out on critical learning opportunities and experiences. Differences in educational opportunity and attainment have short term consequences as well as longer term implications for young people's wellbeing, their engagement in the labour force, and costs to communities and governments. For example, a person who is not engaged in any education or employment for the majority of their life has been estimated to cost communities and government around \$1.5 million (Lamb & Huo, 2017).

There is evidence that suggests uneven quality of education services may be exacerbating inequality. Australian early learning services in the most disadvantaged communities are lower quality than in affluent areas (Torii et al, 2017). Additionally, compared to high SES schools, low SES schools in Australia face greater teacher shortages, have access to fewer instructional resources and often offer fewer subjects, particularly in regional areas (Cobbold, 2020; Perry, 2018). Moreover, Australia has one of the most socially segregated education systems in the OECD (OECD, 2018b; Perry, 2018). Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are therefore concentrated in educational services that, despite the best efforts of principals, teachers and other staff, are not well equipped to meet their needs. This inequality in the quality of educational services compounds and reinforces existing disadvantage, with both short term negative ramifications for learning and attainment as well as longer term implications for health and opportunities in adulthood.

Addressing gaps in educational opportunity and improving the quality of services is critical to enabling all students to develop into successful lifelong learners. There is evidence that high quality provision, effective school services and positive learning environments can enable all students to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances (Perry, 2018; Sammons et al, 2013; Lamb et al, 2020b; Frempong et al 2012). Improving access to and engagement in high quality educational services from the early childhood through to early adulthood, particularly when combined with effective supports for families, can enable students to succeed in their learning, regardless of their background or circumstances.

What we measured

Milestone 1 – Early years looked at which children were developmentally ready at the point of entry to school, across all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census as well as their skills in the basic literacy and numeracy subdomain. To understand early creativity and confidence the report uses the AEDC to assess development in social competence and emotional maturity. AEDC data on responsibility and respect as well as prosocial and helping behaviour is used to explore early indications of skills needed to be active and informed citizens.

Milestone 2 – Middle school years used a range of data sources to look at Year 7 students' reading and numeracy, Year 8 students' achievement in science; and Year 6 students' proficiency in Information Communication Technology (NAPLAN, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, NAP-ICT). It examined the proportion of 10 to 11 year old students reporting high levels of confidence and displaying various creative behaviours using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). It also looked at civic knowledge, attitudes and skills in Year 6, using data from the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC).

Milestone 3 – Senior school years used the Census to examine what proportion of young people had attained a Year 12 or an equivalent qualification by the age of 19 and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data to look at achievement in reading, maths and science. It also examined proficiency in creative problem-solving, and confidence using data from PISA. Keeping informed about current events and belief in the importance of civic activities was explored using data from NAP-CC.

Milestone 4 – Early adulthood used the Census to look at engagement in full time work, training or study at age 24 and 29 as well as who had gained a post-school qualification. It also examined levels of self-reported creativity and confidence using the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). The LSAY was also used to explore the extent to which young adults report being socially and politically active in their community and remaining informed about the world around them.

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More information

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