The 2018 report published by the OECD delves into 43 education systems to offer insights on policy priorities and actions between 2008 and 2017.

Current trends in education policy are telling us that focusing on rapidly evolving skills’ needs, demographic change, and increasing system complexity is a must. Starting from this premise, the Education Policy Outlook 2018 explores how to develop adequate policies to better prepare students, so that they are able to respond to these challenges while navigating constantly changing contexts.

Access to high quality education is key to address these issues, while also helping to achieve economic and social well-being for all. According to the OECD “highly skilled individuals will contribute to building more participative and trusting societies, report better health, and are, in general, more satisfied with life” (OECD, 2018:26). The approach put forward in the latest Education Policy Outlook analyses potential solutions that encompass three levels of action – students, institutions, and education systems.

Using an analytical framework based on the three-pronged approach (students, institutions, and systems) the report looks into country-based and comparative studies of education policies, spanning from early childhood education and care to higher education and lifelong learning. Forty-three education systems (including non-OECD member countries) are featured using data from a variety of sources, such as the Education Policy Outlook National Survey for Comparative Policy Analysis 2016-17 (with 26 participating countries) and the Education Policy Outlook Country Profiles. The OECD also analysed around 150 in-house publications from the 2008 – 2017 period, as well as national and international data for all participant countries.

One of the key goals of this report is to provide a comparative overview of policy continuity and policy changes within the educational systems, as well as offer some insights on the outcomes of the implementation processes. In terms of the evolution of education policy priorities and policy actions across participating
countries in 2008 – 2017, the publication highlights two main trends: 1) bridging gaps from early on to increase equity and quality; and 2) equipping students with essential skills for today and the future (pp. 21-22).

**Opportunities for learning: persisting and emerging policy priorities**

The Education Policy Outlook examines education systems through their context, key actors, and the systemic measures needed to achieve successful and effective policies. The analysis is organised around trends in policies that have been put in place to improve students’ outcomes. In terms of improvement of equity and quality for students, the report highlights the continuity in measures implemented at the school level, although some changes related to the approach have been observed. There has been a move away from strategies to improve the quality of education for all students (in the older policies) to policies addressing specific population groups such as immigrant and indigenous students, and learners with special education needs (p.56).

Also related to equity and quality, the OECD offers some recommendations to education systems regarding persisting policy priorities across participant education systems, based on five principles for action:

1. Targeting educational funding support to students with low socio-economic status;
2. Encouraging students from minority backgrounds to go into mainstream education and providing extra support as needed;
3. Developing measures to channel resources to the most disadvantaged regions;
4. Promoting assessment of the impact of actions in educational institutions on both men and women;
5. Increasing access to and quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) by creating an integrated system to monitor ECEC (p. 40).

Conversely, in terms of emerging policy priorities – such as integration of immigrant students into the education system, preventing repetition and delaying tracking, and enhancing student achievement, among others – the report presents the following principles for action:

1. Intervening as early as possible through language courses for immigrant students;
2. Developing specific teacher training and employing better qualified teachers;
3. Establishing educational outcomes as a main target, rather than focusing solely on increasing spending (p.40).

Finally, the report illustrates how policy implementation and evaluation interact within education systems across different contexts. In doing so, it identifies examples of capacity building to support policy improvement. Taking into account the increasing demands on the public sector, the OECD proposes four main areas of action to promote successful policies:

1. Involve all stakeholders, including students, and ensure their continued engagement;
2. Elevate evidence and use data strategically in the policy implementation and evaluation process;
3. Develop a common understanding of concepts and shared goals and standards;
4. Ensure a fair distribution of resources and equal capacity to use them on the ground (p.162).

The latest edition of the Education Policy Outlook seeks to reflect on “what works” in education, aware of the challenges of policymaking – including the invisible part encompassing the interests, beliefs, and fears of the stakeholders involved. Hence, the report focuses on offering an evidence-based analysis for further policy development, pointing to the persisting and emerging priorities and providing examples from different contexts. Since the 2018 version of the report focused on the students’ perspective, a follow-up report will be published in 2019 to cover the two remaining areas of the analytical framework (institutions and systems).