



Teenage career uncertainty: why it matters and how to reduce it

PISA 2022 finds that two in five students at 15 across OECD countries have no clear career plans. The proportion of students who can be described as career uncertain has grown by more than half since 2018. This is a matter of concern. Analysis of multiple longitudinal studies in different countries commonly shows that teenagers who have clear plans can typically expect to go on to better outcomes in employment than comparable classmates who are uncertain. It is young people who are the lowest academic performers who are most likely uncertain. The good news is that programmes of career development can often be expected to reduce levels of career uncertainty, but PISA 2022 shows too few students are engaging in the many effective interventions.

This Policy Brief draws on evidence from the OECD Career Readiness project to explore:

- What is career certainty and uncertainty?
- How does career certainty/uncertainty relate to employment outcomes?
- How common is career uncertainty among students and what does PISA tell us about the students who are most likely to express uncertain career plans?
- How can guidance systems respond to career uncertainty?

Over the last generation, a growing number of researchers have used longitudinal datasets to explore relationships between the career plans of teenagers in secondary education and their employment outcomes in adulthood. Controlling for a wide range of factors that commonly influence employment outcomes, such as gender, educational attainment, social background, migrant status and ethnicity, studies find strong evidence to show that employment outcomes are commonly linked to how students think about their possible futures in work. In particular, links can be seen between success in work and the earlier educational and occupational ambitions of students, the coherency of their plans and their confidence that their schools will help them to secure career goals (Covacevich et al., 2021^{[1]; [2]}). This short paper explores a further specific form of teenage career thinking: teenage career certainty and uncertainty.

What are career certainty and uncertainty?

In exploring career certainty, researchers make use of longitudinal studies that follow large cohorts of young people from childhood into adulthood. In questionnaires, students are often asked around the age of 15 to write in an answer about their career expectations or ambitions. If the no answer is given or the answer is too vague or broad for classification, students are classified as uncertain. Alternatively, in some surveys students are presented with a list of options for future employment, including “don’t know” or an equivalent option.

As set out in **Table 1**, the questions in surveys used to explore the career thinking of student vary. While some ask about the occupational expectations of students (*“Write in the name of the job or occupation that you expect or plan to have at age 30.”*), others prompt students to share their occupational aspirations, the jobs that would be most desirable to them in adulthood (*“What kind of career or work would you be interested in having when you are about 30 years old?”* *“What specific occupation do you want to pursue when you grow up?”*). Some surveys ask students to imagine being employed well into adulthood (*“What kind of job do you expect to have when you are about 30 years old?”* *“What job do you want to have in your early 30s?”*) and others focus on jobs to be undertaken soon after leaving education (*“Do you have any ideas of the kind of job you want to do after full-time education?”*) or are deliberately imprecise (*“What specific occupation do you want to pursue when you grow up?”*). One study asks students to share how certain they are about their career expectation (*“What occupation would you like to go into when you have completed your education? ...How certain are you about these plans?”*). Students are most commonly asked about their career thinking at age 15 or 16, but occasionally at a younger age. While questions about career plans vary, they all seek to understand how students imagine their futures in work at an age when the end of compulsory secondary education is typically in sight.

In the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), students aged 15-16 have been regularly asked since 2000 to respond to the following question: “What kind of job do you expect to have when you are about 30 years old?”. Students are classified as career certain if they write in an occupation that can be classified using the 2008 edition of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO). If no answer is written in or the response is too vague or broad to allow for classification, students are deemed to be uncertain about their occupational expectations. Checks are undertaken to see if students who failed to write in an answer to this question also failed to respond to other questions that required written answers, such as those related to parental occupation. In PISA 2022, more than three-quarters of students who did not enter a classifiable occupation did write in details for at least one parental occupation. This assessment provides some confidence that students who fail to state an occupational expectation are genuinely uncertain about their job plans.

How does career certainty/uncertainty relate to employment outcomes?

Looking at the results of 19 analyses of longitudinal cohort data collected from around 70 000 individuals in eight different countries, 15 studies find evidence that students who express a clear career plan as teenagers could expect to go on to enjoy better employment outcomes later. In confirming such relationships, statistical controls were applied to take account of factors such as academic attainment, social background, gender, ethnicity and migrant background which commonly influence economic outcomes. Effectively, studies seek to contrast the outcomes of career certain youth against comparable individuals who happen to be career uncertain. In this context, employment outcomes are primarily related to the likelihood of being not in education, employment or training (NEET), earnings and career satisfaction. In the four studies which do not find evidence of better outcomes, three find no evidence of any significant relationship at all and one (Korea) finds a negative relationship. Positive impacts are found in studies

collecting data in the years immediately following completion of education, when survey participants have reached their mid-twenties, and up to the age of 34.

Table 1. Longitudinal studies of labour market outcome in light of teenage career certainty/uncertainty

Country and study	Database, sample size and research question.	Statistical associations with employment outcomes in relation to comparable peers
Australia. (Sikora and Saha, 2011 ^[3])	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) 1998 (age 15) to 2008 (age 25). Sample, 3 859. “What occupation do you expect to have after the completion of your studies?”	Teenagers who express career certainty at age 15 enjoy higher levels of “occupational status” at age 25 (effects greater for young women than young men).
Australia. (Sikora, 2018 ^[4])	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth 2006 (age 15) to 2016 (age 25). Sample, 3 343. “What kind of job do you expect to have when you are about 30 years old?”	Teenagers who express career uncertainty at age 15 are more likely to still be uncertain at 23 which links with lower earnings (predicted at 6% less over the lifetime) with effects greatest for young people going into professional employment.
Australia. (Thomson and Hillman, 2010 ^[5])	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth 2003 (age 15) to 2007 (age 19). Sample, 1 636. “What do you plan to do in the year after you leave school?”	Low performing teenagers who express career certainty at age 15 are more likely to be in education, employment or training and happier with their lives at 19.
Australia. (Covacevich et al., 2021 ^[1])	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth 2003 (age 15) to 2013 (age 25). Sample, 3 741. “What kind of job do you expect to have when you are about 30 years old?”	No significant associations between teenage career certainty at age 15 and earnings at age 25 or NEET status.
Canada. (Covacevich et al., 2021 ^[2])	Youth in Transition Survey 2000 (age 15) to 2010 (age 25) and 2014 (age 29/30). Sample, 10 927. “What kind of career or work would you be interested in having when you are about 30 years old?”	Students who express career certainty at 15 are 6 percentage points less likely to be NEET at 25 and earn 6% more at 30.
People’s Republic of China. (Covacevich et al., 2021 ^[2])	China Family Panel Studies, 2010 (ages 10 to 14) to 2018 (ages 18 to 23). Sample, 2 078. “What specific occupation do you want to pursue when you grow up?”	No significant associations between teenage career certainty at age 15 and earnings, NEET status or career satisfaction at age 25.
Denmark. (Covacevich et al., 2021 ^[1])	Danish National Center for Social Research, PISA-PIAAC dataset, 2000 (age 15) to 2012 (age 27). Sample, 1 881. “What kind of job do you expect to have when you are about 30 years old?”	High performing students who express career uncertainty at 15 earn 20% less at age 27. (No impacts on low performing students). No significant associations between teenage career certainty at 15 and NEET status at age 25.
Korea. (Covacevich et al., 2021 ^[1])	Korean Education Longitudinal Study 2005, 2006 (age 14/15) to 2018 (age 25/26). Sample, 3 720. “What job do you want to have in your early 30s?” Response options include “Not sure.”	Students who express career certainty at 15/16 earned 4% less monthly at 25/26 compared to average earnings. No significant associations between teenage career certainty at 15 and NEET status or career satisfaction at 25.
Switzerland. (Covacevich et al., 2021 ^[1])	Transitions from Education to Employment (TREE1), 2000 (age 15) to 2010 (age 25). Sample, 3 423. “What kind of job do you expect to have when you are about 30 years old?”	High performing students who express career uncertainty at 15 earn 11% less at age 25. No impacts on low performing students. No significant associations between teenage career certainty at 15 and NEET status at age 25.
United Kingdom. (Covacevich et al., 2021 ^[2])	British Cohort Study 1970, 1986 (age 16) to 1996 (age 26). Sample, 4 547. “Is there an ACTUAL JOB you would like to do as opposed to the trade industry or profession in which you hope to work either now or when your education is complete?”	Students who express career certainty at 16 experience an increase of 0.12 points in the 0-10 life satisfaction scale at 26. No significant associations between career certainty at 15 and NEET status or earnings.
United Kingdom. (Yates, 2010 ^[6])	British Cohort Study (BCS) 1986 (age 16) to 1988 (age 18). Sample, 5 364.	Teenagers who express career uncertainty at age 16 are three times more likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET) for at

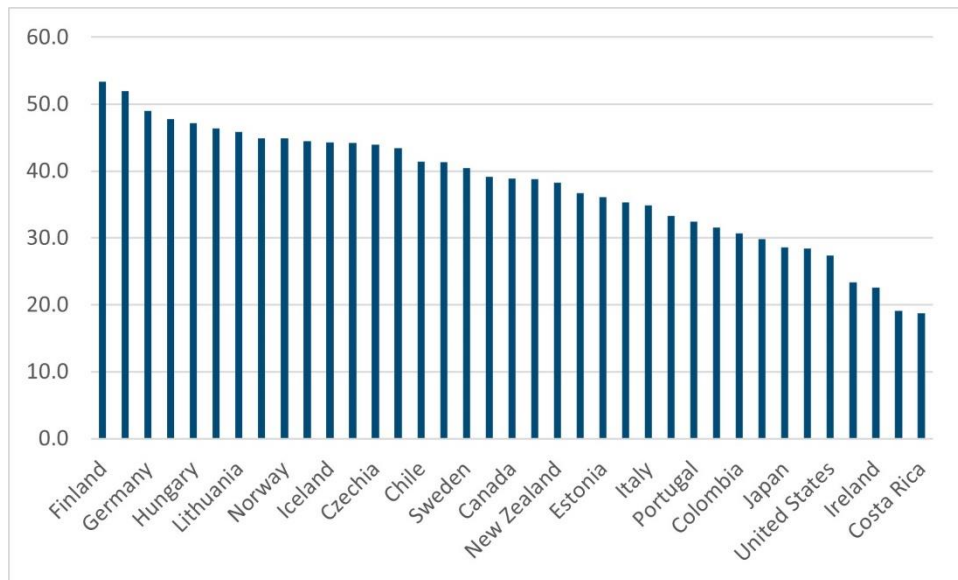
	<p>“Nearly everybody of your age has some sort of idea of what they will want to do in life. Here is a list of types of jobs/careers/professions for which various amounts of training are necessary. How about your choice? Please tick a box to indicate your first choice for the type of career and as many other choices for careers that you may do.” Response options include, “I cannot decide”.</p>	<p>least six months by the age of 18 (effect greatest for low-SES young men).</p>
<p>United Kingdom. (Sabates, Gutman and Schoon, 2017^[7])</p>	<p>British Cohort Study (BCS70) 1986 (age 16) to 2004 (age 34). Sample, 5 318</p> <p>“Nearly everybody of your age has some sort of idea of what they will want to do in life. Here is a list of types of jobs/careers/professions for which various amounts of training are necessary. How about your choice? Please tick a box to indicate your first choice for the type of career and as many other choices for careers that you may do.” Response options include, “I cannot decide”.</p>	<p>Teenagers who express career uncertainty at age 16 earn less than comparable peers at age 34 (effect significantly reduced among the highest academic achievers).</p>
<p>United Kingdom. (Sabates, 2011^[8])</p>	<p>British Cohort Study (BCS70) 1986 (age 16) to 2004 (age 34). Sample, 6 422</p> <p>“Nearly everybody of your age has some sort of idea of what they will want to do in life. Here is a list of types of jobs/careers/professions for which various amounts of training are necessary. How about your choice? Please tick a box to indicate your first choice for the type of career and as many other choices for careers that you may do.” Response options include, “I cannot decide”.</p>	<p>Teenagers who express career uncertainty at age 16 go on to earn less at age 34 (effect reduced among the highest academic achievers by age 34) than peers who had high occupational and educational ambitions. Young women also experience longer periods of unemployment.</p>
<p>United Kingdom. (Gutman, Sabates and Schoon, 2014^[9])</p>	<p>British Cohort Study 1986 (age 16) to 1988 (age 18). Sample, 1 975.</p> <p>“Nearly everybody of your age has some sort of idea of what they will want to do in life. Here is a list of types of jobs/careers/professions for which various amounts of training are necessary. How about your choice? Please tick a box to indicate your first choice for the type of career and as many other choices for careers that you may do.” Response options include, “I cannot decide”</p>	<p>Teenagers who can express career certainty plans at age 16 are three times more likely to be in education, employment or training (ie, not NEET) for at least six months between the ages of 16 and 18 (effects stronger for young men).</p>
	<p>Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) 2004 (age 13/14) to 2008 (age 17/18). Final sample, 3 979.</p> <p>“Do you have any ideas of the kind of job you want to do after full-time education?”</p>	<p>No significant associations between teenage career certainty at 13/14 and NEET status at ages 16/17 or 17/18.</p>
<p>United Kingdom. (Gutman and Schoon, 2018^[10])</p>	<p>Longitudinal Study of Young People in England 2004 (age 13/14) to 2010 (age 20). Sample, 9 966.</p> <p>“Do you have any ideas of the kind of job you want to do after full-time education?”</p>	<p>Teenagers requiring high levels of support due to learning difficulties, physical disabilities or behavioural problems who express career uncertainty at age 14 spend more time not in education, employment or training (NEET) by the age of 20.</p>
<p>United States. (Staff et al., 2010^[11])</p>	<p>National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) 1990 (age 16) to 2000 (age 26). Sample: 6 228.</p> <p>“Which of the categories below comes closest to describing the job or occupation that you expect or plan to have right ...when you are 30 year old? Even if you are not sure, mark your best guess.” Response options include, “Don’t know”.</p>	<p>Teenagers who express career uncertainty at age 16 earn less at age 26 than peers with professional ambitions.</p>
<p>United States. (Covacevich et al., 2021^[2])</p>	<p>Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) 2002 (age 15) to 2012 (age 25). Sample, 13 250.</p> <p>“Write in the name of the job or occupation that you expect or plan to have at age 30.” Responses include: “I don’t know.”</p>	<p>Students who express career certainty at 15 earn 11% more at age 25 compared to average earnings. No significant association found between career certainty at 15 and NEET status or career satisfaction at age 25.</p>
<p>United States.</p>	<p>Youth Development Study 1988 (age 14-15) to 2000 (age 26-27). Sample, 677.</p>	<p>Teenagers who express high levels of certainty about their career plans at 14-15 can expect greater success at age 26-27 (combining</p>

(Mortimer, Dominique and Zierman, 2017 ^[12])	“What occupation would you like to go into when you have completed your education? ...How certain are you about these plans?” Response options include, “Very certain, quite certain, not very certain, not at all certain.”	outcomes linked to employment, educational attainment, career progression, job satisfaction, economic self-sufficiency and physical and emotional well-being).
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How common is career uncertainty among students and what does PISA tell us about the students who most likely to express uncertain career plans?

PISA 2022 finds substantial variation in the levels of career uncertainty among young people. It is lowest in Costa Rica, Türkiye and Ireland at lower than 25%. In Finland and Denmark, levels of uncertainty are twice as high.

Figure 1. Student career uncertainty, PISA 2022

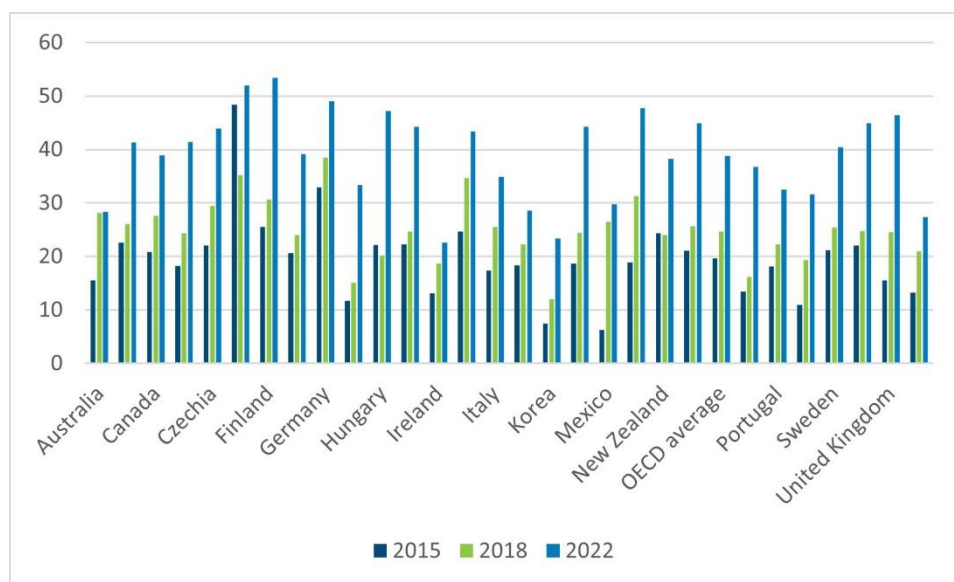


Source: PISA 2022 database.

In all OECD countries, levels of career uncertainty grew between 2018 and 2022 (**Figure 2**). On average, uncertainty grew by 14 percentage points between 2018 and 2022 with increases of more than 20 percentage points apparent in Hungary, Finland, United Kingdom, Poland and Switzerland. The reasons behind such increases are unclear. Certainly, as **Figure 2** also illustrates, career uncertainty among teenagers is a growing trend, in many countries doubling between 2015 and 2022. Over these seven years, there has been a notable increase in the proportion of students planning to go onto tertiary education (rising from an average of 61% to 69% for OECD countries taking part in both PISA rounds). As planned investments in education grow, it might be expected that students will defer career decision-making. The greatest leap in uncertainty is apparent between 2018 and 2022, a period which covers the COVID-19 pandemic which saw considerable economic disruption and hardship. This provides a further possible causal factor for consideration, as a number of studies have identified significant relationships between career uncertainty and both student anxiety and awareness of personal financial hardship (Citarella,

2018^[13]; Citarella et al., 2020^[14]; Şeker, 2020^[15]). Descriptive PISA 2022 data confirm that students who agree that 'school is a waste of time', who worry that they will not have enough money to do what they would like after the completion of secondary education and who agree that they often do not have enough money to buy food are all more likely to express career uncertainty.

Figure 2. Student career uncertainty in OECD countries, 2015, 2018 and 2022



Source: PISA 2022 database.

Career uncertainty in student career development

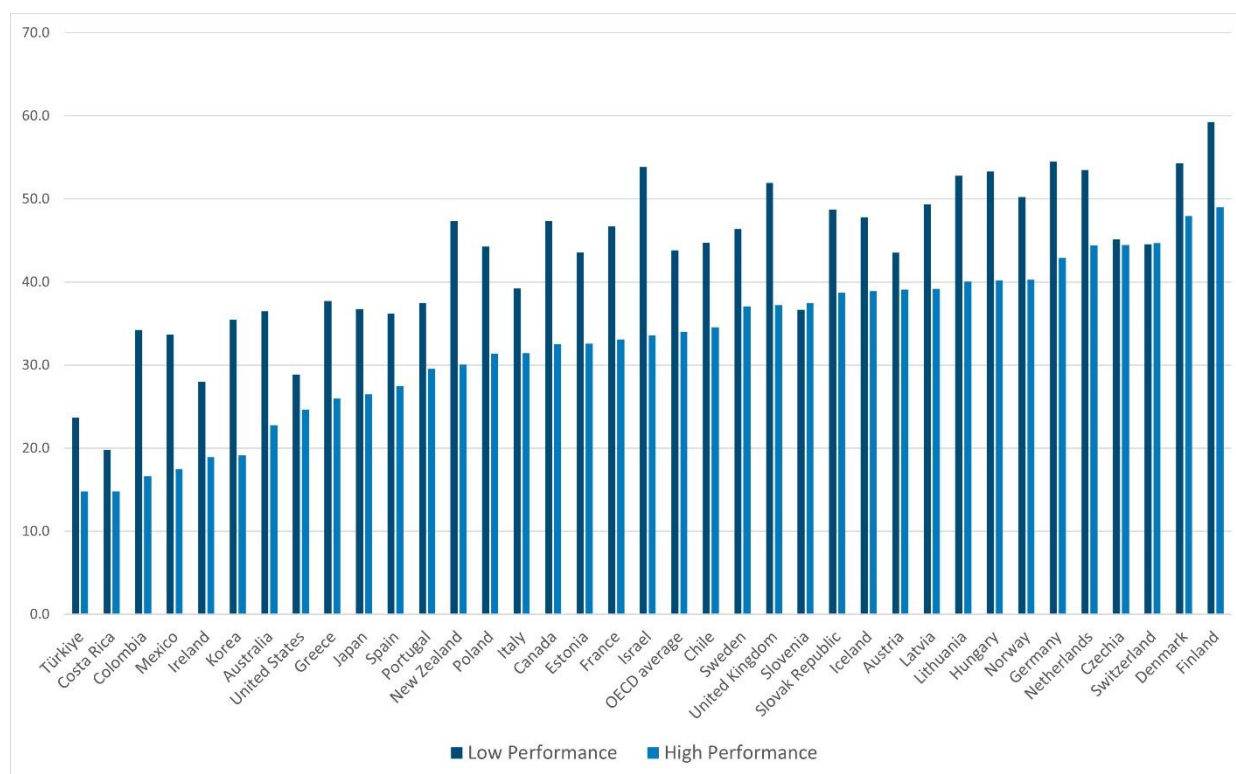
A common refrain within studies of career uncertainty is to question whether the indecision observed highlights student engagement in a period of active exploration or is better understood as an expression of aimlessness. Uncertainty might be understood as a flexibility and readiness to take advantage of unexpected opportunities (Staff et al., 2010^[11]). As Sikora (2018^[4]) highlights, some researchers have seen occupational uncertainty as a normal development stage common among adolescents which might potentially be desirable within a purposeful strategy to reflect on interests and abilities while accumulating valuable educational and work-related skills. Schoon (2012^[16]) provides an example of what might be called 'good uncertainty', finding from analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England that disadvantaged young people aged 13/14 whose parents had high educational expectations for them, who were motivated by their schooling, had high regard for their own academic ability and who felt they had received useful career advice were more likely than peers to be stronger academic achievers and to still be in education at age 18. However, as longitudinal cohort studies summarised in **Table 1** suggest, it is far more common for researchers to see uncertainty as undesirable, often being seen as a form of aimlessness. As Staff et al. (2010^[11]) explains from a US context:

If uncertain career ambitions reflect aimlessness, early uncertainty may lead to prolonged schooling without the completion of a post-secondary degree and non-standard work arrangements in low-quality and low-wage jobs. Thus, youth may gain a variety of work experiences or college credits that do not accumulate into a useful whole, which may serve to impede their long-term socio-economic attainment.

Uncertainty is strongly associated with low educational performance

PISA also shows that uncertainty is strongly associated with low academic performance. Across OECD countries, overwhelmingly it is low performers on the PISA 2022 academic assessments who are more likely to be uncertain (**Figure 3**). On average, 44% of low performers express career uncertainty, compared to 34% of high performers. In Colombia, Israel, Korea, Mexico and New Zealand, the gap between the two groups is more than 15 percentage points. Similar differences are found in research studies using national dataset (Gutman, Sabates and Schoon, 2014^[9]; Gutman and Schoon, 2018^[10]; Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[17]; Sikora, 2018^[4]; Sikora and Saha, 2011^[3]; Yates, 2010^[6]). Concern at the levels of career uncertainty of low performers is greater because such students might be expected to enter the labour market earlier (and lose easy access to career advice) than peers. Studies also suggest that young people who are uncertain about their career plans in secondary school are more likely to remain undecided in young adulthood with further negative implications for their occupational well-being (Sikora, 2018^[4]).

Figure 3. Uncertainty by high and low performance, PISA 2022



Source: PISA 2022 database.

Uncertainty is associated with poorer well-being and greater anxiety which is widespread among students

Studies find significant relationships exist between career uncertainty and lower levels of subjective well-being, including anxiety over the future (Creed, Prideaux and Patton, 2005^[18]; Şeker, 2020^[15]). In Australia, a 2018 survey of 2 800 students aged between 15 and 18 found that one-third agreed that they did not know what careers best suited them, and two-fifths often felt that they had no career direction. A similar proportion worried that their studies would not lead to a 'real' career, with one-third worried that they would not be employable when they had completed their studies. While only 29% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they often felt down or worried about selecting a career, this increased to 59% of all students when 'neutral' or 'not sure' responses were included (Gleeson and Walsh, 2023^[19]). The study showed that many students felt that their options for future employment were constrained by their personal characteristics and/or felt pressured by the expectations of others, including parents and teachers. A majority felt that they did not have enough information to make a career choice (Gleeson and Walsh, 2023^[19]).

In PISA 2022, students are asked a series of questions about their confidence in career progression and many also express concerns over their preparation for the future. On average across OECD countries:

- 47% agree that 'I worry that I am not prepared for life after [the final year of compulsory education]' (13% strongly agreeing)
- 49% agree that 'School has done little to prepare me for adult life when I leave school' (14% strongly agreeing)
- 34% disagree that 'I feel well-informed about possible paths for me after [the final year of compulsory education]' (8% disagreeing strongly)
- 42% disagree that 'I feel well-prepared for my future path after [the final year of compulsory education]' (10% disagreeing strongly)
- 42% disagree that 'School has helped give me confidence to make decisions' (11% disagreeing strongly).

Across the OECD, career uncertainty is more common among boys (41%) than girls (36%). A group with particularly high levels of career uncertainty is low performing boys from the most disadvantaged quartile in the OECD's Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS) assessment, 46% of whom expressed indecision in the PISA 2022 assessment.

How can guidance systems reduce career uncertainty among students?

There is a strong basis for believing that greater student engagement in career development interventions can be expected to reduce levels of career uncertainty among young people (Denault et al., 2019^[20]; Gutman, Sabates and Schoon, 2014^[9]; Priyahantha, Dahanayake and Maduwanthi, 2023^[21]; Schoon, 2012^[16]). PISA data, which draw on the experiences of over half a million teenagers around the world, provides an excellent tool for exploring more extensively the relationship between participation in career development activities and lower levels of under-alignment (Covacevich et al., 2021^[2]). Controlling for student gender, socio-economic background (ESCS), migrant status and academic proficiency, lower levels of uncertainty are found in PISA 2022 data (average for OECD countries) to be significantly related (p value less than 5%) to student participation across all but one (internships) of the career development activities assessed (Mann, Diaz and Zapata Posada, 2024^[22]) (**Table 2**). Higher levels of career uncertainty are also found among students attending schools where career guidance is not offered. However, as **Table 2** also shows on average across OECD countries, many students have not taken part in important career development activities by the age of 15.

Table 2. Relationship between participation in career development activities and likelihood of being career uncertain among all OECD students participating in PISA 2022.

Career development activity	Percentage change in odds of participants being <i>less likely to be uncertain in their occupational expectations than comparable students who did not participate in the activity</i>	Proportion of students engaging in the activity (OECD average)
Job shadowing or worksite visit	8%	45%
Job fair	10%	45%
Speaking with a guidance counsellor in school	19%	49%
Speaking with a guidance counsellor outside of school	24%	33%
Speaking with a guidance (at all)	25%	55%
Completing a questionnaire on career interests	18%	64%
Researching careers on the Internet	51%	79%
Touring a post-secondary institution	12%	40%
Research post-secondary programmes on the Internet	43%	72%
Research information on student financing	37%	46%

Note: Control variables applied in regression analyses: gender, ESCS, academic performance, and immigrant background. All relationships are significant at a P value of 5% or less.

Source: PISA 2022 database. Analysis available in (Mann, Diaz and Zapata Posada, 2024^[22]).

In the PISA 2018 study, students in 20 countries, including 14 OECD members, were asked whether they had “talked to someone about the job you would like to do when you finish your education.” Using multiple control variables, analysis found that participation in such career conversations had a strong and significant relationship with lower levels of career uncertainty. Overall, whereas 32% of students who had not engaged in a career conversation expressed occupational uncertainty, this applied to only 19% of their peers who had spoken to someone about a job of interest (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[17]). In turn, such career conversations are associated with more positive engagement with school and the belief that working hard in education will help get a good job (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[17]).

Box 1. Armenia’s independent career planning module

In Armenia, students undertake a 15-week module in the first semester of the penultimate year of upper secondary general education. For one hour a week students receive assistance in researching their post-secondary educational and career plans. The module culminates with a public presentation. The timing of the module provides students with opportunity to engage more deeply in their studies in light of emerging plans (ETF, 2022^[23])

Student engagement in career development can be seen to clarify career thinking. Students are both prompted to reflect on their future plans and gain access to resources which allow them to undertake assessments of the likely desirability and feasibility of different occupational possibilities (Sikora, 2018^[4]; Staff et al., 2010^[11]). Processes of career exploration are undertaken over periods of years and while the importance of engagement in upper secondary is clear (**Box 1**), it can be expected that students who are supported in their career thinking from an earlier age (including primary school) will gain considerable benefit. In this discussion, it is never assumed that the occupational expectation expressed as a teenager will be fixed. Rather, longitudinal surveys tend to provide a snapshot in time identifying those students who are actively thinking about their futures in work to the extent that they have identified a planned or desired job goal. Such thinking represents a critical dialogue between a student's current and potential future self, enabling more coherent and strategic career exploration and planning. While it cannot be assured that articulated ambitions are realisable or fully informed and indeed, many students demonstrate considerable confusion about what they need to do to achieve career goals that are increasingly concentrated around a small number of occupations (OECD, 2024^[24]), certainty about career objectives is likely to promote the mobilisation of energy and other resources to achieve them.

It is likely that the timing of teenage uncertainty is important. In many countries, compulsory secondary education ends around the age of 16 when data on career thinking are often collected from young people. At this age, students are often required to decide whether to continue in education and training, on what to focus their studies if they do so, and if they will change educational institution, potentially moving from general to vocational education. Consequently, uncertainty is likely to be a particular concern as students approach key decision-making points (Schoon, 2012^[16]). As political economist Hugh Lauder explains:

If we think of young people making investment decisions as they decide on the qualifications, training and experience (collectively, the human capital) they plan to accumulate prior to leaving education to optimise their ultimate earnings in the labour market, we need to recognise the importance of access to good information about what that labour market actually wants and demands in order for properly informed decision making to take place. In the absence of good labour market signalling, it can be no surprise that poor investment decisions will be made and ... widely evidenced skills mismatches ... become a predictable result (Mann and Huddleston, 2017^[25])

The articulation of an occupational expectation allows students to reflect on typical pathways into, and entry requirements demanded by, anticipated careers as they decide on their continuing investment in education and training. While any occupational plan or aspiration may (and often will) change over the duration of secondary education, the ability to express an ambition at any given point suggests that a young person is actively reflecting on their futures in work, facilitating a critical assessment of whether their plans for education and training will enable them to achieve their plans.

Career certainty and uncertainty as tests of career readiness

PISA shows that two-fifths of students across OECD countries are unable to name an occupational expectation. This proportion has risen substantially since 2015 and it raises concerns as longitudinal studies commonly find that such career uncertainty tends to be significantly associated with poorer ultimate employment outcomes than would otherwise be expected. The good news is that most career development interventions are significantly associated with lower levels of uncertainty, but unfortunately in many countries too few students are engaging in them. For guidance counsellors, there are benefits in asking students to articulate their career plans within processes that encourage and enable students to investigate potential occupations in detail, including understanding of their typical entry requirements. Assessments of career certainty can also be undertaken after student participation within guidance activities, particularly those that are designed to encourage and enable career exploration. By so doing, students are helped to maximise their engagement in schooling. It is possible for students to exhibit 'good' forms of career uncertainty where young people approach career exploration from a position of academic strength and personal confidence based in part upon access to career guidance that is perceived to be useful. However, uncertainty is much more likely to be a concern and attention should be focused on low performing students who can be expected to enter the labour market earlier than high performing peers and who are at particular risk of poor employment outcomes.

Career Readiness

This document was prepared by the Career Readiness team at the OECD.

The OECD Career Readiness team provides analysis and policy advice on how education systems can improve the effectiveness, efficiency and equity with which career guidance is delivered to young people in primary and secondary education.

For more information

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See: [OECD Career Readiness project](#)

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