



4 QUALITY EDUCATION



Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

I. SUMMARY

Access to and participation in education continue to increase in the Asia-Pacific region. Challenges remain, however, in the delivery of quality education at every level. The COVID-19 pandemic has threatened to reverse progress achieved in the last decade, exacerbating the pre-existing learning crisis and further deepening inequities in the region. COVID-19-related school closures, as well as the inadequate reach and quality of remote learning, have caused learning loss at unprecedented levels, requiring significant attention and mitigation efforts in the short and medium term.

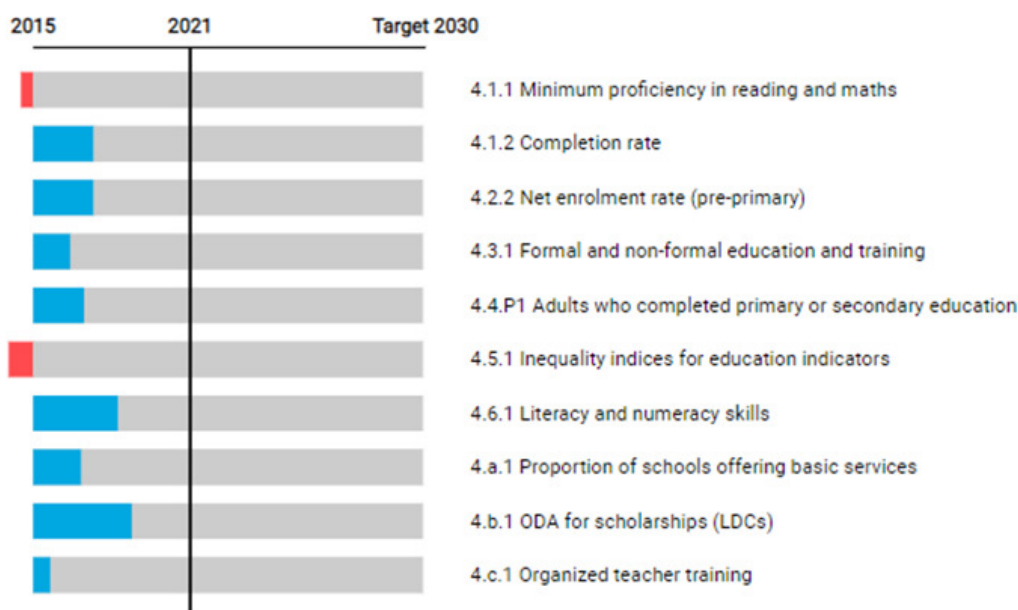
Teachers play a key role in improving learning outcomes; this reality accentuates the need for greater pedagogical, administrative, and psychosocial training, as well as professional development and support for them to teach in digital and blended learning ecosystems. To reach the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children, as well as the growing number of children out of school, will require multi-sectoral strategies, for example related to school health, nutrition, and well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant fiscal policy challenges and gaps especially for low-income and lower-middle-income countries. To achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 by 2030, countries in Asia and the Pacific must ensure that education expenditure is sufficient to meet the commitments of their Governments. To get back on track to achieve SDG 4, education expenditures must be increased from 4 to 6 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) and 15 to 20 per cent of their total public expenditure. Countries in the region lack comprehensive, good-quality education data systems, which are or could be linked to other sectors such as health, child protection, nutrition, labour, industry, and agriculture, as well as to climate change projections.

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Figure 1: The Status of Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Asia and the Pacific



Source: Asia-Pacific SDG Gateway

Note of acronyms: ODA: Official Development Assistance, LDC: least developed countries, P: Proxy

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented global crisis, impacting the entire Asia-Pacific region, causing tremendous shocks to health, the economy, and many other sectors, including education. Its detrimental effects on progress toward SDG 4 include long-term costs to human capital accumulation, development prospects, and welfare, with a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society.

Pre-COVID-19, poverty levels, measured against the \$1.90 per day poverty line, were in decline, and education enrolment levels had been increasing throughout the region. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant preventive policy responses, however, an estimated 10.71 million learners from Asia and the Pacific were at risk of not returning to care centres, schools, or universities once they reopened.¹ School closures lasted for different durations across the region, ranging from approximately one month in Japan to 18 months in Bangladesh and the Philippines.

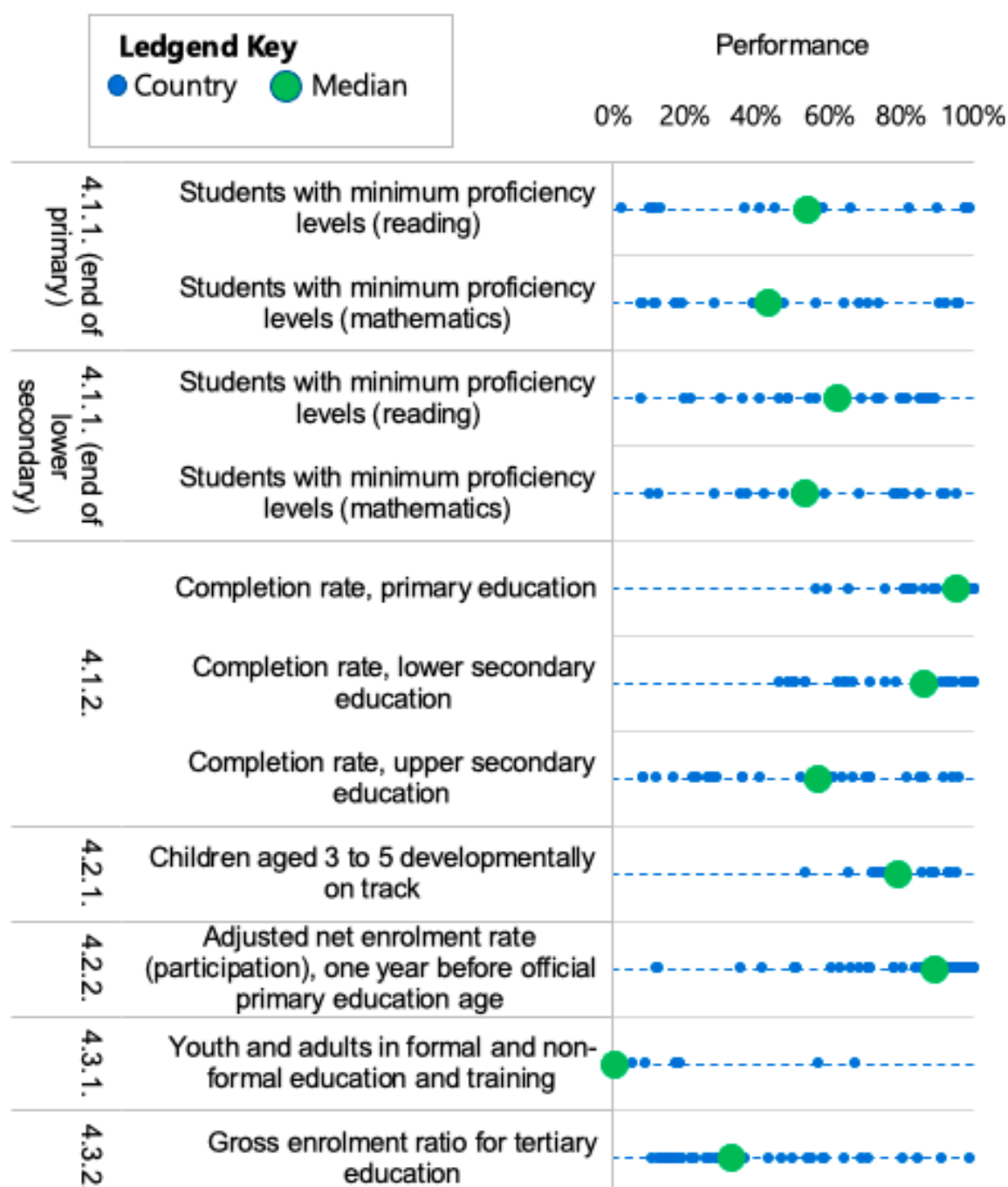
Although all countries in the Asia-Pacific region developed plans to support children to continue learning from home, the provision of technology-supported remote learning approaches and of take-home food packages at schools with in-school feeding programmes did not reach all children, and in many cases the most marginalized were left behind. Even for the children these measures did reach, the switch to remote learning was challenging, and learning hours were vastly reduced.

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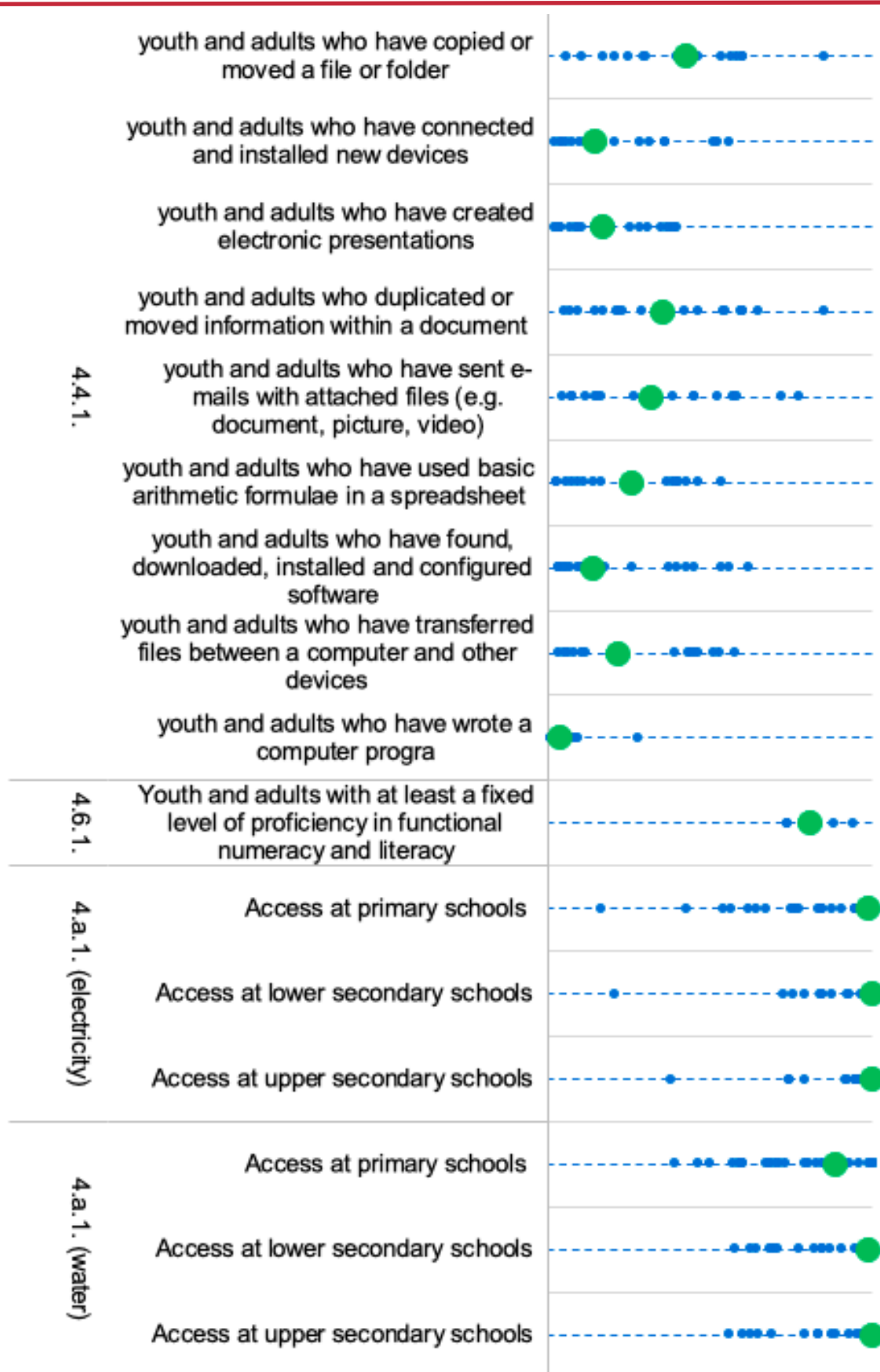
A. Progress prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

With each country in Asia and the Pacific facing different social and economic conditions, progress on the various SDG 4 targets differs by country and region. The overview of SDG 4 performance below is based on global indicators and latest available data (Figure 2).

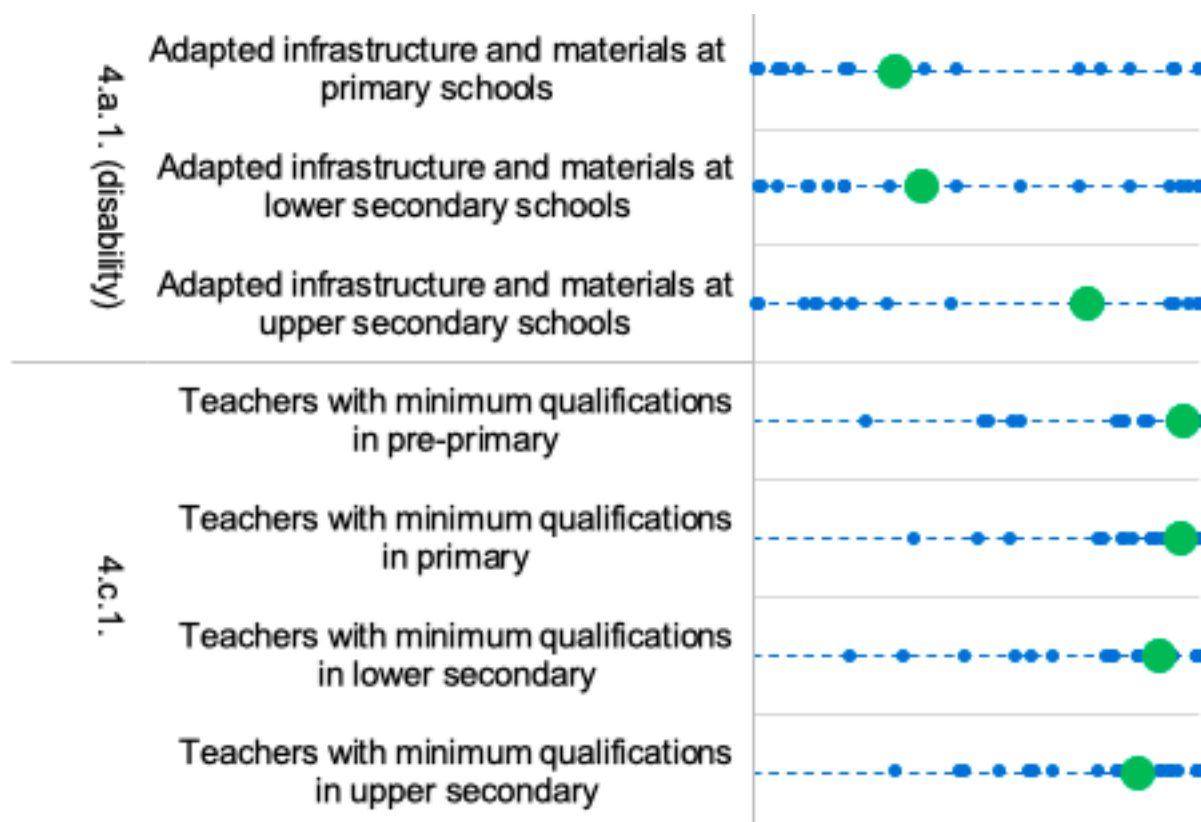
Figure 2: Country and Asia-Pacific median performance on selected Sustainable Development Goal 4 indicators, 2021 or latest available data



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Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, UIS.Stat. Available at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>.

Target 4.1: Most children in Asia and the Pacific complete primary education; lower secondary education completion is showing signs of improvement. Progress in acquiring minimum reading and calculating competencies remains uneven across countries. Where data is available, the median indicates that universal primary education completion is achieved by most countries in the region at 96 per cent. Countries with large percentages of poor households, such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Papua New Guinea, continue to struggle to get children through primary education. Meanwhile, 87 per cent of children in the region achieve lower secondary education completion. Many countries with low-income or lower-middle-income economies, such as Sri Lanka, still face challenges with secondary education completion. In terms of learning outcomes, between half and two thirds of students achieve minimum proficiency levels by the time they complete lower secondary education—54 per cent in mathematics and 62 per cent in reading.

Target 4.2: Enrolment in early childhood education programmes at least one year prior to entering primary education reflects increasing levels of demand across most countries in Asia and the Pacific. Although doing so is not compulsory in most Asia-Pacific countries, nine out of

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ten children in the region, or 89 per cent, enrol in education programmes at least one year before they enter primary education. The countries falling below the regional median include the Pacific Island Countries and other low-income and lower-middle-income countries. Data, where available, shows that eight in ten children between the ages of three and five, or 79 per cent, are developmentally on track in physical, cognitive, and psychosocial well-being, suggesting that they will grow up healthy. In Timor-Leste, on the other hand, only every second child is on track, and in Nepal just two thirds of children are.

Target 4.3: The region made significant progress in tertiary education with some disparities, but technical and vocational education and training have largely been neglected. Inequity with regard to female participation in the labour market, lower transition rates between the secondary and tertiary education levels, and the neglect of Governments towards technical and vocational education and training all suggest that disparities within the region remain. In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka only 3 to 4 per cent of youths are enrolled in vocational education. In Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal, technical and vocational education and training enrolment is below 1 per cent. At the same time, the regional median of 33 per cent suggests that in half of Asia-Pacific countries, only one in three young people is enrolled in a university, whereas some countries are moving towards 100 per cent participation in tertiary education, which indicates stark regional differences. For example, in the Republic of Korea virtually all youth—98 per cent—go to a university, and in New Zealand and Singapore, between eight and nine of every 10 young people enrol in a university.

Target 4.4: The proportion of youths and adults with relevant information and communications technology (ICT) skills for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship is overall low in the region. Data on ICT skills is only available for 30 per cent of the countries in Asia and the Pacific. In Brunei, Singapore, and Malaysia, 35 per cent to 55 per cent of youths and adults have basic ICT skills—whereas in other countries, including Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, the proportion of the population with ICT skills that meet the criteria for SDG target 4.4 remains below 30 per cent.

Target 4.5: Progress towards eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations, differs by country and is overall significantly behind track. With very limited disaggregated data points available in Asia and the Pacific, measuring progress on target 4.5 is a considerable challenge. Looking at available data points, a few countries have not yet reached gender parity in primary school intake, including Afghanistan, Maldives, and Pakistan. In terms of enrolment, Pakistan and Nepal have the lowest Gender Parity Index for early childhood education, while Sri Lanka has more girls enrolled at this level. The region has a higher proportion of males than females in higher education as well as more females in the gross intake to lower secondary education. The completion rates for primary and secondary education are generally in favour of urban² populations. Since the onset of COVID-19, young women and girls often have to juggle unpaid care³ and domestic work with home-schooling, which impacts educational performance.

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Target 4.6: Literacy and numeracy skills are likely to be highest among younger populations.

Available data on literacy rates indicates that younger populations have generally higher if not universal literacy abilities, while older generations continue have lower abilities.⁴ The youth literacy rate in Afghanistan is double the rate of the general population and the elderly. Bangladesh and Pakistan have literacy rates around 80 per cent among youths, while in India, this rate rises slightly higher to 92 per cent. In South-East Asia, only Timor and Myanmar have literacy rates below 85 per cent.

Target 4.7: Countries and policymakers in the Asia-Pacific region recognize the pivotal role of Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development.

With very limited disaggregated data points available in Asia and the Pacific, measuring progress on target 4.7 is a significant challenge. Only nine countries in the region can systematically demonstrate the mainstreaming of Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development.⁵ With the COVID-19 pandemic showing growing inequalities, the recognition of the increasing importance of social and emotional learning and environmental awareness can enable social cohesion and resilience in response to such challenges.

Target 4.a: Schools with upgraded facilities that are disability-friendly and gender-sensitive, and that provide safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all, are widely available in some countries but not yet a common standard.

Fewer than 25 per cent of countries have complete data sets on the percentage of schools adapted for students with disabilities. Among countries with available data, Maldives reported that all schools are adapted for students with disabilities, while in Bangladesh this is the case for 20 per cent of schools. In terms of the availability of computers and an internet connection, the Asia-Pacific region shows a heterogeneous picture, varying from the Maldives with all primary schools being connected, to 73 per cent being equipped with computers in Sri Lanka, and 5 per cent in India. Data indicates that across the region, secondary and upper secondary schools almost always provide access to potable water and electricity.

Target 4.c: A high proportion of teachers in Asia and the Pacific possess at least minimum qualifications to teach at their respective education levels.

Most teachers have minimum qualifications across education levels: 96 per cent in pre-primary and primary education, 91 per cent in lower secondary education, and 86 per cent at the upper secondary level. Pacific Island Countries show the lowest proportions of teachers with minimum qualifications. Formal qualifications may not necessarily imply that teachers have the content knowledge or pedagogical competences required to teach effectively, however.

B. Areas requiring attention and key challenges

Equity and inclusion: During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote digital learning was the first response to school closures in many countries in Asia and the Pacific. Children from vulnerable

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and marginalized communities, however, struggled to access remote learning platforms. These issues have a bearing on children with disabilities; girls; children from low-income households; children affected by conflict, climate-related crises, and/or migration; children living in remote areas and ethno-linguistic minority communities; and other vulnerable groups. Pre-existing discriminatory norms and exclusion in learning, including intra-household inequalities, exacerbated inequalities and placed affected learners at even greater risk of learning loss. Challenges to ensuring the continuity of learning during school closures have included suboptimal or non-existent technology infrastructure and connectivity, inadequate remote learning skills among teachers and students, a lack of adaptations for children with disabilities, insufficient adaptation of distance education content and materials for ethno-linguistic minority children and pre-primary children, as well as multiple demands on under-prepared teachers, varying levels of support from home, and low or unequal access to appropriate devices for learning.

Quality: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asia-Pacific region was facing a learning crisis with millions of children completing primary education without mastering the foundational skills of basic numeracy and literacy, let alone the twenty-first-century skills required for meaningful employment, personal well-being, and active participation in society. In South Asia, more than 50 per cent of children live in learning poverty and are unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10. This situation has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Moving forward, relevant and flexible curricula accompanied by learner-centred pedagogies and strengthened formative assessment can improve learning outcomes. It is widely acknowledged that the quality of teachers directly and significantly affects the quality of education. Many countries in the region, however, continue to face a shortage of teachers with adequate qualifications and competences, a challenge further heightened by the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has revealed the fundamental importance of the well-being and working conditions teachers experience, the urgent need to strengthen their ICT skills and overall preparedness for hybrid education, and their involvement in educational and school decision-making.

Skills for work and lifelong learning: The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted skills development opportunities for young people, and youth unemployment has significantly increased.⁶ Not only has the crisis revealed the weaknesses of existing education and training systems, but it has created demand for training to increase employability as young people face difficulties entering disrupted labour markets and laid-off workers need reskilling for new jobs or sectors. This situation calls for the establishment of multiple, flexible learning pathways and lifelong learning and training opportunities, both for general education and for technical and vocational education and training. Individualized and adaptive pedagogies are beneficial, with pathways across various types of education and training and different sectors, coupled with recognition of prior learning and validation of skills, career guidance, and counselling. In addition, robust alternative and flexible education and training policies and opportunities need to be put in place for marginalized youth and adults. The Asia-Pacific region remains home to more than 37 per cent of the world's illiterate youth and almost 60 per cent of the world's illiterate adults.⁷

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Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development: The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed growing social inequality and fragmentation. A silver lining resulting from the pandemic is the recognition of the increasing importance of social and emotional learning, as well as skills, values, and behaviours that enable social cohesion and resilience. More countries and policymakers in Asia and the Pacific are affirming the pivotal role of Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development for living together peacefully and sustainably.

Figure 3: Availability of selected Sustainable Development Goal 4 indicators by frequency from 2013-2021



Source: Based on available data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, UIS.Stat. Available at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

Digital learning: The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed stark inequalities in household access to electricity, devices, connectivity, digital skills, and opportunities to learn during school closures, as well as in the capabilities of education systems and schools to provide effective distance learning.⁸ Across the Asia-Pacific region and globally, there is an urgent need to address multiple digital divides, including the geographical and gender digital divides and the inclusion of vulnerable

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and marginalized groups. Further, studies found that 40 per cent of poorer countries failed to provide specific support to disadvantaged learners, such as learners with disabilities, in their technology responses to COVID-19.⁹

Quality data and systematic monitoring: More than six years into the SDG 4 and Education 2030 Agenda, relevant and regularly collected data about many of the SDG 4 indicators is still unavailable in many countries in Asia and the Pacific (Figure II). Often data has only been collected once over the past six years. Indicators 4.1.1., 4.2.1, 4.4.1, and 4.6.1, which measure systematic and comparable skills and learning outcomes at different stages in life, have the least available data. Current national data production in many Asia-Pacific countries is limited to certain levels of disaggregation, such as by sex and location, while data about disabilities, economic status, and ethnicity—which is important for developing inclusive education policies—is lacking.¹⁰

Learning outcome assessments: Most countries in Asia and the Pacific lack internationally comparable large-scale learning assessment data because national assessments are conducted irregularly.¹¹ As a result, policies and strategies which intend to improve learning outcomes and address equity gaps are often not informed by learning outcome assessment data. The Network on Education Quality Monitoring in Asia-Pacific and All Children Learning Assessment Platform were established by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), respectively, to address these issues through capacity building in collaboration with partners and ministries. Two regional comparative learning assessments exist in East Asia and the Pacific, providing countries with quality data about student learning outcomes and supporting national assessment authorities to improve learning. In 2020, the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics, co-chaired by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) and UNICEF Regional Office for East Asia and the Pacific, published its first regional report about Grade 5 students' learning in reading, mathematics, writing, and global citizenship in six countries in South-East Asia. The Pacific Island Literacy and Numeracy Assessment focuses on the numeracy and literacy proficiency of Year 4 and Year 6 students and is a key strategy of the Pacific Community.

School health and nutrition programmes: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, close to 129 million children in the Asia-Pacific region received school meals, primarily through government-led, national school feeding programmes. Due to COVID-19-related school closures, many children stopped receiving on-site school meals and essential health and nutrition services. School health and nutrition programmes provide an incentive for families to send children back to school and to help them stay in school. Examples include access to water and sanitation; healthy and safe school meals; healthy food environments; micronutrient supplementation; vaccinations; and life-skills based health, literacy, and sexual and reproductive health education and services. This situation calls for urgent investments in school health and nutrition programmes.¹²

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C. Integration of human rights and gender equality considerations

Parity, access, and achievement: Overall, considerable progress has been made across Asia and the Pacific in achieving gender parity at all levels of education. The data shows a general positive trend in the Gender Parity Index in Central Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and Oceania for girls' enrolment at all levels. Regional averages can mask disparities in some countries, however. In South Asia, girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan are significantly more disadvantaged in terms of enrolment at both the primary and secondary levels, while boys are comparatively more disadvantaged in other countries in the region. The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics 2020 regional report found that girls outperformed boys in reading and writing in all six participating countries.¹³ Girls also outperformed boys in Cambodia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in mathematics. While only estimates exist of the impact of COVID-19 on girls' return to school, 1.2 million girls are projected to be at risk of dropping out in East Asia and the Pacific alone. Reductions in girls' return to school are expected to have devastating impacts not only on girls' learning but also in terms of early and forced marriage, early and unintended pregnancy, child health and nutrition, and economic growth, among other outcomes.

Gender-transformative teaching and learning: While countries have made progress in shifting education systems to become more gender-sensitive and responsive, there is a need to move toward gender-transformative education that changes stereotypes, attitudes, and practices and rethinks gender norms and binaries that cause oppression and inequality. National policies and curricula reflect concepts related to sustainable development and global citizenship; however, topics such as gender equality and a culture of peace and non-violence are often not addressed. In Asia and the Pacific, 23 million adolescents aged 15–19 years are currently married or in a union. Child marriage and early union before the age of 18 years, whether formal or informal, is common throughout much of the region, with the highest prevalence in South Asia and some Pacific countries.¹⁴ In many countries, child marriage and early pregnancy lead to girls dropping out of school. In Thailand, for example, 88 per cent of female dropouts in upper secondary schools are pregnant or have given birth. At the same time, a lack of educational opportunities or access to schools can exacerbate situations of early marriage and teen pregnancy. In South Asia, the probable risks and impacts resulting from 4.5 million girls dropping out of school due to COVID-19 include approximately 400,000 adolescent pregnancies, which can hinder girls' return to school. Comprehensive Sexuality Education can address the risks and consequences of early marriage and early pregnancy. In school curricula, 57 per cent of Asia-Pacific countries teach sexuality education in some form; however, it is often integrated into other subjects, not a mandatory and standalone subject, with limited monitoring data available on its reach and quality.

Education in emergencies: Education is a human right that should be guaranteed and protected for all people at all times. In crisis-affected countries, school-age children are more than twice as likely to be out of school as their peers in other countries. Refugee children are twice as likely to be out of school as other children, and their access to education can be further constricted by natural disasters and other emergencies. Out of 13 countries in Asia and the Pacific with available

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data, only 32 per cent of refugee children of primary school age have access to formal primary education. The COVID-19 pandemic has undone some small gains especially for adolescent refugee girls. In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, only 1 per cent of girls aged 6–14 and 4 per cent of adolescent girls aged 15–18 attend education and learning centres, compared to 9 per cent and 14 per cent of boys, respectively. Over the reporting period, attacks on education, which include violence against educational facilities, students, and personnel, have violated the right to education for children in Afghanistan, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, and the Philippines. In Asia and the Pacific, positive steps to protect education from attack have been taken by 11 countries, which endorsed the Safe School Declaration, expressing political commitment to safeguard students, teachers, schools, and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict.¹⁵

III. PROMISING INNOVATIONS AND PRACTICES

1. Asia-Pacific regional benchmarking of Sustainable Development Goal 4: The Education 2030 Framework for Action calls on countries to establish appropriate intermediate benchmarks for SDG indicators, seeing them as indispensable to addressing the accountability deficit associated with long-term targets. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics, UNESCO, UNICEF, and other partners have established a regional benchmarking process in Asia and the Pacific which set appropriate sub-regional and national benchmark values under the auspices of the Learning and Education 2030+ Networking Group.

As a result, regional minimum benchmark values for an agreed-upon set of SDG 4 indicators have been determined for all the subregions in Asia and the Pacific. In addition to the globally agreed-upon regional benchmark indicators, four additional regional indicators relevant to the Asia-Pacific context were developed. Following the establishment of these regional benchmarks, as of January 2022, more than 30 Member States in Asia and the Pacific have established national benchmark values. Regional and national benchmark values for 2025 and 2030 will help countries to develop appropriate policies and strategies to achieve SDG 4 by 2030.

2. Strengthening the resilience of ASEAN Member States to address current and future learning disruptions: The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat and UNICEF worked together to develop an ASEAN Policy Brief on Safe School Reopening, Learning Recovery and Continuity, which provides ministries of education in the Asia-Pacific region with strategies to safely reopen schools as an urgent priority. The brief includes long-term policy objectives on building the resilience of education systems and ensuring that inclusion and equity principles are always at the core of the national planning, policymaking, advocacy, and programming efforts. A detailed regional guideline specifying evidence-based measures to implement and monitor progress towards the policy objectives is under preparation with the leadership of Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

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3. The Learning Passport—a digital platform for learning continuity during COVID-19 and beyond: The Learning Passport is a collaboration between UNICEF and Microsoft to address the challenges faced by children and youths in accessing continued, quality education due to disruptions caused by crises and displacement. Timor-Leste was the first country that leveraged the e-learning platform in 2020, providing 25,000 children and teachers with remote access to a child-friendly platform with textbooks, storybooks, songs, videos, and supplementary learning materials with built-in assessments.

In 2021, the Learning Passport reached more than 60,000 users from ethnic groups in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. In Kiribati, the platform provides access to video-recorded lessons, quizzes, and teacher guides. In 2022, the Learning Passport will be launched in three more countries in Asia and the Pacific. The success of the Learning Passport initiative helped to establish a regional hub for digital teaching materials and advanced the goals of the ASEAN digital transformation framework.

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The slow progress in reaching SDG 4 targets and the generational shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic call for (a) prioritizing actions that accelerate learning with equity and (b) system-level transformation to improve resilience and efficiency. Based on available evidence and trends in Asia and the Pacific, the following seven key priorities and policy recommendations are put forward towards the necessary transformation of the education system and to accelerate the achievement of the SDG 4–Education 2030 Agenda in the region, under three main themes:

I. Learning Recovery and Addressing the Learning Crisis

Priority 1: Continue safe school reopening and prioritize learning recovery strategies with targeted policies and a strong equity focus. The most important and urgent action is for countries to continue reopening schools safely, to keep schools open and operating safely where possible, and to enable all children to continue or restart learning with their teachers and peers. In view of the diverse consequences of school closures on learning and health for students, national Governments need to prioritize the safe reopening of schools and ensure that schools remain open. Education systems must offer various remedial learning programmes depending on identified learning loss or gaps, such as extended instructional time, remedial education, catch-up programmes, and accelerated education. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene infrastructure and skills-based health literacy can be prioritized, and health and nutrition programs can be integrated into school policies and curricula.

Priority 2: Strengthen teaching and teacher support to address existing low levels of learning and narrow the learning divide. To leverage blended learning environments effectively and

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inclusively, it is important to ensure that continuing professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders are in place and fully supported, particularly in priority areas such as literacy assessment, inquiry-based learning, differentiated instruction, support for students with special needs, e-pedagogy, and character and citizenship education. Increasing student agency and making learning more relevant can prepare for emergencies when remote learning must be implemented. Teachers need support to play a greater counselling and commitment role in detecting mental health issues, providing psychosocial support, and communicating with learners and their parents about safety and risk mitigation.

II. Transforming Education Systems

Priority 3: Make early childhood education and learning flexible and universal. Across all strategies for recovering lost learning and for strengthening and rebuilding the subsector in the medium-to-long term, Governments need to prioritize pre-primary education because of its crucial role in children's development and learning. In many countries, remedial measures are less likely to be implemented at the pre-primary level. Early learning must be foregrounded based on the evidence that the early years of life form the foundation for cognitive and socioemotional development, thus yielding high returns on investments. Efforts to recover lost learning and developmental milestones are key to preventing students from dropping out throughout the school trajectory, including children who will be entering the system later due to COVID-19. In this respect, education systems must be prepared to provide flexible opportunities for alternative education services and modalities for younger children during future shocks, leveraging innovative and effective early learning programmes that extend beyond the school walls and include home engagement and cross-sectoral caregiver well-being components, thereby ensuring learning continuity and smooth transitions to primary school. These services and modalities include in-person and remote options that can be administered individually and in small groups.

Priority 4: Build on the experience gained during COVID-19-related school closures, and embrace and strengthen equitable flexible learning modalities and learners' pathways, including skills development for adolescents. Education systems must develop specific strategies to prevent students from dropping out and to re-engage male and female learners who cannot return to formal school due to the diverse consequences of the pandemic. Furthermore, secondary education should evolve into a more diverse and effective set of education pathways that respond to the needs of all adolescents, providing relevant and inclusive alternative pathways according to the gender and ages of students and prioritizing marginalized populations. All learners must be able to fulfil their right to develop core foundational, socioemotional, and job-specific skills. Barriers to education faced by marginalized groups such as women, persons with disabilities, those of low socioeconomic status, and linguistic and ethnic minorities must be removed. Establishing or updating equivalency standards and official recognition for alternative learning pathways can facilitate the achievement of this objective. Particularly for adolescents, stronger education and skilling systems that equip the most vulnerable with an entrepreneurial mindset, technical skills, life skills, and twenty-first-century employability skills, such as digital literacy and mental health support, can address the impacts of COVID-19.

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Priority 5: Build stronger school links with families, communities, and cross-sectoral policies and programmes to create effective and protective learning environments in and around schools. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic include the increasingly important role communities and families play in children's learning and development, as well as the urgency for social sectors to work better together. It is vital for communities, schools and health and social services to provide comprehensive cross-sectoral support for the well-being of children, adolescents, families, and education staff, focusing on the most vulnerable. Ministries of education need an identification, assessment, and referral process to support students and families at risk by ensuring that all schools, including pre-primary, are prepared to provide relevant services for both teachers and learners: for example, financial support such as cash transfers; nutrition support; age-specific psychosocial support; protection services, including from school-related and gender-based violence; and health services. Referral services are also needed for orphaned and separated children.

III. Increased and better Investment in Education and Enablers for Transformation

Priority 6: Protect public financial investments and efficiency in education and encourage equitable funding mechanisms. Governments can guarantee and protect access to education for all people and at all times, including in emergencies. Despite weak economic growth, resources to increase funding of the education sector from internal and external sources must be pursued. Larger investments in education require efficient and equitable resource allocation, as well as accountability in expenditures. Using available modelling tools, Governments must estimate the financial resources required to ensure better-quality education and learning for all children and adolescents, particularly the most marginalized during and beyond the pandemic. Aside from protecting investment in education, it is key to prioritize the investments that are expected to have the largest impact, such as implementing hygiene standards, and the services that are part of current obligations including remediation, accommodating students shifting from private to public schools, and re-enrolling students who have dropped-out due to COVID-19. The use of equity-based funding mechanisms to target the most vulnerable and marginalized can combat exclusion with tailored investments and actions. Strengthening joint ministerial work can ensure the continuation of essential health, nutrition, well-being, and protection services, if this work is underpinned by cross-sectoral planning and data sharing to identify, target, and track children's needs.

Priority 7: Strengthen inclusive and robust monitoring data mechanisms, and work towards more resilient governance structures that allow education systems to respond to future shocks, including related to climate change. Governments must define or redefine how to monitor the implementation of distance learning programmes and the resumption of in-person learning, including collecting relevant information periodically, processing and using data to enhance programmes, and ensuring students' privacy and safety on different platforms, especially digital platforms. This disaggregated information should be available in current Educational Management Information Systems and build on existing surveys, rather than creating separate

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monitoring systems. Assessment systems must be fit-for-purpose, meaning that they provide planners and decision-makers with regular, real-time information to target schools and teachers for support. As countries improve monitoring systems, actions can be taken to strengthen the resilience of the education system to prepare for, plan, and respond to future shocks, including those related to climate change. Ministries of education must develop and implement a long-term emergency preparedness, risk-informed planning, and response policy framework in coordination with the disaster management authorities, ministries of finance, and other ministries, so that all stakeholders understand their roles and responsibilities during an emergency.

| Indicator | Region | Minimum regional value at baseline | Regional average at baseline (±2015) | Minimum regional benchmark | | Average of national feasible values | |
|--|---------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|------|-------------------------------------|-------|
| | | | | 2025 | 2030 | 2025 | 2030 |
| 1.a.2 Proportion of total government spending on essential services (education) | Central and South | 11.0 | n/a | 15.0 | 15.0 | 20.0 | 20.0 |
| | East and South-East | 8.4 | n/a | 15.0 | 15.0 | 20.0 | 20.0 |
| | Oceania | 10.7 | n/a | 15.0 | 15.0 | 20.0 | 20.0 |
| | ESCAP | 7.6 | n/a | 15.0 | 15.0 | 20.0 | 20.0 |
| 1.a.GDP Government expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP | Central and South | 1.5 | n/a | 4.0 | 4.0 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| | East and South-East | 1.9 | n/a | 4.0 | 4.0 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| | Oceania | 2.0 | n/a | 4.0 | 4.0 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| | ESCAP | 1.5 | n/a | 4.0 | 4.0 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| 4.1.1.a Proportion of students in Grade 2 or 3 achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in mathematics | Central and South | 14.5 | 46.1 | 49.9 | 61.9 | 72.0 | 87.9 |
| | East and South-East | 83.4 | 84.6 | 77.4 | 89.4 | 99.8 | 100.0 |
| | Oceania | 70.2 | 70.5 | 53.1 | 65.2 | 88.8 | 99.4 |
| | ESCAP | 14.5 | 60.4 | 59.3 | 71.3 | 82.3 | 92.4 |
| 4.1.1.b Proportion of students at the end of primary education achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in mathematics | Central and South | 11.0 | 42.5 | 33.4 | 39.9 | 52.8 | 61.4 |
| | East and South-East | 17.5 | 74.6 | 26.5 | 33.1 | 49.8 | 56.7 |
| | Oceania | 58.6 | 64.3 | 33.6 | 40.1 | 77.0 | 85.3 |
| | ESCAP | 11.0 | 42.3 | 31.2 | 37.7 | 55.9 | 63.5 |
| 4.1.1.b Proportion of students at the end of primary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading | Central and South | 13.0 | 47.9 | 39.7 | 43.3 | 64.5 | 74.4 |
| | East and South-East | 97.3 | 85.1 | 25.5 | 29.1 | 79.8 | 86.2 |
| | Oceania | 57.8 | 84.8 | 26.3 | 29.9 | 96.5 | 98.1 |
| | ESCAP | 13.0 | 52.9 | 29.3 | 32.9 | 72.9 | 80.7 |
| 4.1.1.c Proportion of students at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in mathematics | Central and South | 34.1 | 40.9 | 28.0 | 32.7 | 50.0 | 54.4 |
| | East and South-East | 9.9 | 62.5 | 30.3 | 34.8 | 67.3 | 70.9 |
| | Oceania | 78.0 | 78.1 | 19.2 | 24.4 | 82.0 | 84.8 |
| | ESCAP | 9.9 | 53.7 | 24.1 | 29.0 | 60.7 | 64.6 |

| | | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 4.1.1.c Proportion of students at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading | Central and South | 21.3 | 40.6 | 35.3 | 40.0 | 52.9 | 58.9 |
| | East and South-East | 7.5 | 67.4 | 36.1 | 40.8 | 68.6 | 72.4 |
| | Oceania | 81.9 | 82.1 | 31.0 | 36.0 | 83.1 | 84.6 |
| | ESCAP | 7.5 | 56.9 | 33.6 | 38.4 | 63.0 | 67.6 |
| 4.1.2.i Completion rate of primary | Central and South | 57.3 | 90.6 | 87.6 | 90.5 | 95.8 | 98.2 |
| | East and South-East | 79.3 | 96.6 | 97.4 | 98.1 | 99.2 | 99.5 |
| | Oceania | 63.0 | 65.6 | 78.6 | 83.1 | 76.5 | 83.6 |
| | ESCAP | 57.3 | 93.7 | 86.1 | 89.3 | 97.5 | 98.8 |
| 4.1.2.ii Completion rate of lower secondary | Central and South | 40.6 | 78.6 | 73.3 | 78.1 | 87.8 | 91.1 |
| | East and South-East | 44.4 | 84.3 | 74.0 | 78.6 | 91.1 | 93.7 |
| | Oceania | 24.8 | 29.2 | 50.0 | 56.3 | 38.5 | 46.3 |
| | ESCAP | 24.8 | 81.7 | 64.4 | 69.9 | 89.6 | 92.5 |
| 4.1.2.iii Completion rate of upper secondary | Central and South | 22.4 | 48.8 | 36.5 | 41.4 | 63.2 | 69.8 |
| | East and South-East | 22.1 | 41.9 | 45.9 | 50.7 | 52.6 | 59.8 |
| | Oceania | 5.6 | 10.2 | 19.8 | 23.0 | 12.4 | 14.8 |
| | ESCAP | 5.6 | 45.8 | 32.7 | 37.1 | 58.3 | 65.2 |
| 4.1.4.i Out-of-school rate, primary | Central and South | 37.2 | 5.1 | 15.2 | 11.7 | 1.9 | 1.2 |
| | East and South-East | 9.5 | 1.7 | 4.4 | 2.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| | Oceania | n/a | n/a | 9.6 | 6.8 | 18.3 | 13.0 |
| | ESCAP | 37.2 | 3.9 | 9.6 | 6.7 | 1.3 | 0.8 |
| 4.1.4.ii Out-of-school rate, lower secondary | Central and South | 39.1 | 9.8 | 17.1 | 13.9 | 5.1 | 2.0 |
| | East and South-East | 26.2 | 5.2 | 12.3 | 9.6 | 1.6 | 1.1 |
| | Oceania | n/a | n/a | 15.1 | 12.2 | 14.5 | 10.5 |
| | ESCAP | 39.1 | 7.9 | 12.6 | 9.8 | 3.7 | 1.7 |
| 4.1.4.iii Out-of-school rate, upper secondary | Central and South | 56.7 | 31.0 | 36.5 | 32.5 | 21.1 | 15.9 |
| | East and South-East | 61.2 | 15.6 | 33.2 | 29.4 | 9.4 | 7.1 |
| | Oceania | n/a | n/a | 40.1 | 36.0 | 29.5 | 23.7 |
| | ESCAP | 61.2 | 25.1 | 35.7 | 31.8 | 16.7 | 12.5 |
| 4.2.2 Participation rate in organized learning, one year before the official primary entry age | Central and South | 11.7 | 77.2 | 46.7 | 52.7 | 82.7 | 88.0 |
| | East and South-East | 13.5 | 87.4 | 65.5 | 70.3 | 92.9 | 94.8 |
| | Oceania | 29.3 | 80.4 | 64.4 | 69.3 | 91.9 | 96.8 |
| | ESCAP | 11.7 | 83.5 | 56.6 | 62.0 | 90.1 | 93.2 |

| | | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| 4.2.2 Participation rate in organized learning, one year before the official primary entry age | Central and South | 11.7 | 77.2 | 46.7 | 52.7 | 82.7 | 88.0 |
| | East and South-East | 13.5 | 87.4 | 65.5 | 70.3 | 92.9 | 94.8 |
| | Oceania | 29.3 | 80.4 | 64.4 | 69.3 | 91.9 | 96.8 |
| | ESCAP | 11.7 | 83.5 | 56.6 | 62.0 | 90.1 | 93.2 |
| 4.c.1.a Proportion of teachers with the minimum required qualifications, pre-primary | Central and South | 79.9 | 96.6 | 81.4 | 88.4 | 98.4 | 99.8 |
| | East and South-East | 61.0 | 98.1 | 96.0 | 98.2 | 99.3 | 100.0 |
| | Oceania | 41.7 | 60.4 | 80.1 | 87.5 | 88.6 | 96.6 |
| | ESCAP | 46.0 | 97.1 | 94.0 | 96.8 | 99.0 | 99.9 |
| 4.c.1.b Proportion of teachers with the minimum required qualifications, primary | Central and South | 49.5 | 72.1 | 79.6 | 84.3 | 86.6 | 94.4 |
| | East and South-East | 85.0 | 99.6 | 98.5 | 99.6 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| | Oceania | 65.4 | 71.8 | 83.3 | 87.9 | 96.8 | 100.0 |
| | ESCAP | 49.5 | 79.1 | 95.6 | 97.2 | 90.0 | 95.9 |
| 4.c.1.c Proportion of teachers with the minimum required qualifications, lower secondary | Central and South | 57.9 | 74.2 | 76.5 | 83.2 | 88.0 | 97.7 |
| | East and South-East | 84.3 | 98.1 | 97.6 | 99.5 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| | Oceania | 21.5 | 74.1 | 72.4 | 78.9 | 99.1 | 99.4 |
| | ESCAP | 21.5 | 78.9 | 79.9 | 86.1 | 90.4 | 98.2 |
| 4.c.1.d Proportion of teachers with the minimum required qualifications, upper secondary | Central and South | 57.4 | 75.4 | 79.4 | 84.2 | 88.2 | 96.2 |
| | East and South-East | 85.9 | 98.0 | 88.8 | 92.6 | 99.9 | 100.0 |
| | Oceania | n/a | 67.2 | 72.1 | 77.6 | 98.9 | 99.5 |
| | ESCAP | n/a | 78.1 | 78.5 | 83.3 | 89.9 | 96.8 |

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). (2022). Retrieved 21 January 2022, from <https://geo.uis.unesco.org/sdg-benchmark/education-proficiency?viewBy=region®ionDefinitions=asia-central-and-southern®ionDefinitions=asia-eastern-and-south-eastern®ionDefinitions=oceania>

Note: ESCAP stands for “the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.”

* n/a represents areas where data is not available

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15. These 11 countries are Afghanistan, East Timor, Fiji, Malaysia, Maldives, the Marshall Islands, New Zealand, Palau, Samoa, Vanuatu, and Viet Nam.

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