

Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP)
of the
Pacific Community (SPC)

**PACIFIC HEADS OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS
(PHES)**

**Executive Summary on Cohort Study in specific
countries in the region**

March 2023

Executive summary

The study was designed to understand the issue of school dropouts in the selected countries in the Pacific region. The main aim of the study was to understand - from a system-level perspective – the factors that were leading to school dropouts. The study was guided by three main questions:

1. What are the out-of-school rates at the end of primary, end of lower secondary and end of upper secondary in each of the ten countries?
2. What factors contribute to school dropouts?
3. What are the types of second chance programs available in the countries?

A collaborative mixed-methods research design was used to collect and report data using surveys and interviews. Summary of the main findings are as follows:

Out-of- school rates. The latest comparable data shows that less than 3% of primary school-aged children are not enrolled in schools in the Pacific region. However, the situation for secondary school children is far more concerning as a third of Pacific Island adolescents and youth of secondary age children are not enrolled in schools in the region. In terms of student retention, the latest available data shows that on average 85% of students research the last grade of primary education in selected Pacific Island countries. With respect to student dropout rates, then data shows that 15% of students drop out from primary education in selected Pacific Island countries, while data at the secondary school level is not consistent to carry out the required analysis. Overall, the out-of-school is relatively low for smaller Pacific Island countries but for two larger countries in the region, a significant proportion of students are not enrolled in primary education.

Factors leading to dropout rates. A range of factors is perceived to lead to school dropouts. One of the main factors leading to student dropouts was the student’s loss of interest in schoolwork. Both teachers and system leaders thought that this was the leading factor. Other leading factors that are thought to be the cause of out-of-school children include factors such as:

- parents and guardians discouraging students from attending school
- bullying and violence in schools inflicted by fellow students
- physical difficulties
- teachers discouraging students from attending schools
- teenage pregnancies and childbirth
- curriculum not being relevant to the needs of the students
- frequent absenteeism by students
- family problems
- poor academic performance in schools

Identifying students at risk of dropping out. Overall, there are proactive measures taken from a system perspective to identify students who are at risk of dropping out and support them. However, it appears that there is also a lack of practice in terms of methods used from a system perspective to assess students who are at risk of falling out. During the interviews, it was established that data on such practices were neither captured nor reported at the school and

ministry level, so based on this, the prevalence of such practices remains to be known. Interviews also suggested that there are currently no policies in place in any of the countries involved in this project that requires teachers and schools to report data on identifying students who are at risk of dropping out. The potential impact of having policies guiding the practice of identification of students at risk of falling out of school cannot be understated.

Measures used to reduce student dropouts from school. Measures used to mitigate school dropouts largely focused on the use of school-based policies aimed at reducing instances of bullying, discrimination, and violence along with absenteeism. Additionally, the availability of trained and qualified teachers and engagement with parents and guardians to discuss student progress, strengths and opportunities were also considered as ways using which instances of dropout rates could be reduced. A significant hindrance in getting a complete snapshot in terms of support strategies used from a system perspective again deals with empirical quantitative data. While qualitative data by way of surveys and interviews does indicate intervention measures are in place, there is no systematic way to capture the data on support provided at school levels to students. For example, there is no data on the effectiveness of school-based policies in addressing student dropouts, or the effectiveness of it, i.e., the number of students who were supported through such measures.

Second Chance Opportunities. The value of second chance programmes is realised by both school and system leaders, yet there are limited opportunities in the countries involved in the project. Where available, these second-chance opportunity programmes are largely conceptualised at TEVT programmes and often centralised, i.e., often offered in urban centres thus, indirectly disadvantaging rural and remote students who might be looking for opportunities to engage in second-chance programmes. A small number of system leaders also reflected that when students do get a chance to enrol in second chance programmes, then they try their best to complete their studies and gain a qualification. Examples were given of students who have completed their high school through second chance opportunities and have gone on to gain admission to tertiary institutions and graduate with degrees.

Core recommendations of this study include a recommendation for countries to collect, report and analyse student drop out data, especially in terms of documenting reasons why students leave school without completing their education. This recommendation is in line with one of the major reasons for dropouts identified in this study; students dropping out due to a loss of interest in schoolwork. The second recommendation is for a need for genuine regional dialogue in terms of how students with special needs can be supported to attain full educational qualifications because ensuring equal and equitable opportunities for students with special needs is an important aspect of creating an inclusive and accessible educational system. The third recommendation of this study is to increase the number of second chance programmes offered in countries in the region. Efforts should also be made to decentralise second-chance programmes so that students in rural areas can have improved access to it. Additionally, it is also recommended that there should be a shift in thinking of second-chance options as only TVET options. Consideration should also be given to providing second-chance opportunities within high schools so that students can complete their education and progress to tertiary institutions. Overall, the region is making slight progress in reducing the number of out-of-school students. However, more work at a regional level is required to address this issue, especially from a policy perspective. Lastly, due consideration should also be given to the possibility of conducting regional research on out-of-school children from an out-of-school student perspective. It is envisaged that it will complement the findings of this research and provide a holistic picture of the issue of school dropouts in the region.