



Report of the State Comptroller of Israel | July 2024

Ministry of Education

English Studies in the Education System



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Background

English is widely regarded as the most prominent language in the world, and proficiency in it is essential for effective functioning in many fields. It is a vital tool for integration into modern life, both in Israel and internationally. A wealth of important knowledge is conveyed in English today, and its use is widespread in daily life: in communication, culture, electronic media, the internet, education, science, and international trade. Proficiency in English is a prerequisite for admission to academic institutions in Israel and other countries. Additionally, knowledge of English facilitates social mobility and integration into the evolving job market, enabling individuals to find better employment opportunities, pursue entrepreneurship, establish businesses domestically and internationally, and transition seamlessly between jobs. Therefore, English is one of the core subjects in the education system.

The teaching of English in Israel is based on the principle that every graduate of the education system should master all four language skills: listening and comprehension of spoken language, speaking, reading, and writing. Additionally, students should be able to use the language for various purposes: academic, occupational, personal, and public. English is taught in schools across all age groups and sectors and is a compulsory subject from 3rd grade through the end of 12th grade.

In the mid-2010s, the Ministry of Education reached the conclusion that the issues associated with teaching English in schools needed to be addressed. These included students' poor proficiency in English, particularly in spoken English, and a shortage of properly trained English teachers. In an attempt to resolve these issues, the Ministry launched a multi-year program in September 2017: the National Program for Advancing English Education (the National English Program), to strengthen students' spoken English, increase the students rate taking advanced levels of matriculation (Bagrut) exams, and improve the quality of English instruction. It was intended for elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. Initially planned to last five years, the program was significantly scaled back in 2020 and, in effect, unofficially discontinued.



Key Figures

66%
compared to
only **26%**

the students rate taking the English Bagrut exam at the advanced 5-unit level was significantly higher in socioeconomically advantaged municipalities (clusters 710) at 66%, compared to only 26% in municipalities in the lowest socioeconomic clusters (1–3)

54%
compared
to only **27%**

in the Jewish sector, 54% of students took the English Bagrut exam at the 5-unit level, compared to 27% in the non-Jewish sector

**55% and
23%**

among specific populations, 55% of Haredi students and 23% of Bedouin students did not take the English Bagrut exam at any level

30%
compared
to **36%**

the rate of 5-unit English graduates exempted from supplementary English courses in higher education institutions decreased from 36% in 2015 to 30% in 2022. Meanwhile, 4% of graduates in both years were required to take four supplementary English courses

**711, 26%,
and 3,300**

before the 2022–2023 school year (which began in September 2022), the education system faced a significant shortage of English teachers. As of June 2023, 31% of English teachers in the Jewish sector and 11% in the Arab sector lacked the required qualifications to teach the subject

**3 out of 5
years**

the National English Program, initially planned for five years, operated as a cohesive framework for only three years. It was discontinued with neither an official decision nor an evaluation of its contribution

**75% and
88%**

a decline was observed in the allocation of dedicated hours for the "Sulamot"¹ program, aimed at 4 and 5-unit English students, during the 2020–2021 school year


only 53%

only 327 schools out of a target of 620 implemented the Let's Talk spoken English program for 7th-grade students during the 2022–2023 school year

1 The "Sulamot" program operated as part of the National English Program and was aimed to increase the number of students enrolled in advanced tracks for Bagrut exams. Under this program, high schools received additional weekly hours to support students with potential, in order to increase their number of study units (from 3 units to 4 units, from 4 units to 5 units) and integrate into the 3-unit track students who were not initially planning to take the English Bagrut exam but have the potential to do so.





Audit Actions

 From February to September 2023, the State Comptroller's office examined the policies and actions of the Ministry of Education and its regional departments in 2017–2023, to enhance students' proficiency in the English language across all educational stages. The audit reviewed the following areas: implementation of the National English Program; the shortage of English teachers and strategies to address it; changes in English curricula; disparities in the quality of English studies and academic achievements among students and graduates of the education system; and the measurement and evaluation of English education. The audit was conducted in the following entities and units within the Ministry of Education: the National English Inspectorate (Head English Supervisor); the Pedagogical Secretariat, responsible for curriculum development and instructional and assessment patterns in English; the Senior Division for Teaching Personnel, overseeing employment conditions for teachers and the recruitment of new teaching staff; the Teaching Personnel Administration, responsible for professional development and learning of teaching staff within the Ministry of Education; the English supervisors in the ministry's regional departments; and the National Institute for Testing and Evaluation (NITE), which assists in selection processes for candidates applying to higher education institutions in Israel through examinations.

Key Findings



-  **Students' Achievements in English Studies Across Socioeconomic Clusters** – data from 2022 raise significant disparities in English proficiency levels among students from different population groups, as reflected in their Bagrut exam results upon completing their education in the school system. The English proficiency of students from higher socioeconomic strata, predominantly residing in municipalities classified in higher socioeconomic clusters, as reflected in their Bagrut exams in English, is significantly higher than that of students from lower socioeconomic strata, predominantly residing in municipalities classified in lower clusters: the students rate taking the Bagrut exam at the highest level (5 study units) was 66% among students from socioeconomic clusters 7–10, compared to only 26% among students from clusters 1–3. Similarly, the rate of high achievers among 5-unit examinees was 74% in clusters 7–10, compared to 64% in clusters 1–3 (as well as clusters 4–6).
-  **Students' Achievements in English Studies: a Comparison Between the Jewish and non-Jewish Sectors** – according to 2022 data, the level of English proficiency






among students in the Jewish sector, as reflected in Bagrut exams, was significantly higher than that of students in the non-Jewish sector. The students rate taking the Bagrut exams at the highest level (5 study units) was 54% among Jewish students compared to 27% among non-Jewish students. Additionally, the rate of high-achievers at the 5-unit level was 71% in the Jewish sector compared to 59% in the non-Jewish sector. Within the Jewish sector, students in the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) education system displayed significant weaknesses in English studies: over half (55%) did not take Bagrut exams in English at all, and only a small rate took the exams at advanced levels (11% at 5 units and 12% at 4 units). In the non-Jewish sector, Bedouin students exhibited significant weaknesses in English proficiency. Nearly a quarter (23%) did not take Bagrut exams in English, about one-third (33%) took the exams at the 3-unit level, and among those tested at the 5-unit level, the rate of high-achievers was significantly lower than in other non-Jewish groups (30% in the Bedouin sector compared to 66% in the Arab sector and 49% in the Druze sector).

📌 English Proficiency Among Graduates of the Education System – according to English placement exam data from candidates for higher education institutions in 2022, the level of English proficiency among graduates of the education system remains low, even five years after implementing the national English program. Most examinees failed to achieve "exemption" level from supplementary English courses in these institutions: only about 30% of those with the highest-level Bagrut in English (5 study units) and 4% of those with a 4-unit Bagrut reached exemption level. While there has been some improvement compared to 2015 in the performance of examinees with a 4-unit Bagrut, evidenced by a decline in the rate scoring at the lowest levels (pre-basic) in the placement exams (from 51% in 2015 to 38% in 2022) and an increase in those reaching advanced levels (from 23% in 2015 to 32% in 2022), a deterioration was noted among 5-unit graduates. The rate of 5-unit examinees failing to reach exemption level rose from 64% in 2015 to 70% in 2022. The low rate of examinees in English placement tests who achieved exemption from remedial English courses raise concerns about potential "grade inflation" in English matriculation scores². This concern, although highlighted in studies conducted by NITE and the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2013 and 2021, has been examined by the Ministry of Education neither prior to nor following the implementation of the National English Program.

📌 Duration of the National English Program – although the program was intended to run for five years, it operated as a cohesive and structured framework for only three academic years, from 2017 to 2020. The last status report on the National English Program was prepared in May 2020, toward the end of the 2019–2020 school year. Some of the program's components were not budgeted for the 2020–2021 school year, leading to their discontinuation or significant reductions in funding and scope (as described later,

2 An artificial increase in English Bagrut scores that does not reflect a corresponding improvement in the knowledge and skills of examinees.

for instance, regarding the "Sulamot" program). The Ministry of Education never made a formal decision to terminate the program and, therefore, failed to draw lessons from it to ensure its objectives would be achieved. No systematic monitoring was conducted for the Program components that continued in subsequent years, and the Ministry no longer treated them as part of a national program but rather as part of routine education. Additionally, the Ministry did not formulate a new strategic plan for English instruction.

-  **Funding for the National English Program** – no dedicated budget plan was prepared for the annual and multi-year implementation of the National English Program, reflecting its primary goals. In practice, funding for the Program was included within the budget of the Department for National Programs at the Ministry of Education. Its components were allocated budgets on an ad hoc basis, according to need and in response to ongoing requests made by the English subject inspector (Mafmarit) to the department's director. As a result, the National English Program operated without a stable financial foundation, precluding prior planning for its full implementation and causing persistent uncertainty. Consequently, the National English Program was unable to meet its quantitative targets.
-  **Increasing the Number of Students Pursuing Advanced Bagrut as Part of the National English Program** – the primary means to achieve the goal of increasing the number of students pursuing advanced-level Bagrut was the "Sulamot" program. As part of this program, high schools received additional weekly hours to strengthen students with potential, to increase the number of study units they complete (from 3 study units to 4, from 4 to 5, and, for students not initially planning to take an English Bagrut exam, to integrate them into the 3-unit track). Despite results indicating the program's positive impact and the initial intent to expand it starting in the 2020–2021 school year, the Ministry of Education decided instead to significantly reduce its scope. In the 2020–2021 school year, the hours allocated to the "Sulamot" program were reduced by about 75% for the 5-unit track and about 88% for the 3- and 4-unit tracks. In the 2021–2022 school year, further budget cuts led to the program being implemented in only 200 schools, compared to 533 in the 2019–2020 school year (out of roughly 1,100 high schools – a decrease from about 48% implementation in high schools in 2019–2020 to about 18% in 2021–2022). The decisions to cut back the program were made without a supporting framework to justify them. The program's outcomes were not evaluated, nor was the expected impact of the reductions on the rates of students taking Bagrut exams at various levels examined. Furthermore, the Ministry failed to formulate any alternative plan to achieve the set goals or preserve the achievements already attained.
-  **Implementation of Programs to Promote Spoken English as Part of the National English Program** – to achieve the primary goal of the National English Program promoting spoken English, the Ministry of Education developed a continuum of programs for all educational stages: elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. However, after two to three years of operation, the Ministry ceased implementing some of these programs: the Classroom Libraries Program was discontinued at the end of the 2019–2020 school year, after the establishment of 692





libraries (compared to a target of 1,350 libraries, which was to be achieved by the 2024–2025 school year). The Keep Talking Program was discontinued at the end of the 2019–2020 school year, after being implemented in 580 high schools (only 51% of the target for that year). It was relaunched in the 2022–2023 school year in about 300 high schools (only 44% of the target for that year). The Virtual Mentoring Program was discontinued even earlier, at the end of the 2018–2019 school year, despite a target of reaching 1,500 students through 250 student mentors in the 2019–2020 school year. The Ministry's decisions to discontinue these programs were neither accompanied by internal assessments justifying the need for such action nor supported by data providing a rationale for them. Furthermore, these decisions contradict the results of studies and evaluations, which were positive and indicated high levels of satisfaction among both students and teachers with the spoken English programs. This raises concerns that the decision to terminate these programs was driven by budgetary considerations rather than the programs' inability to achieve their goals or their lack of contribution to students.

Addressing the Shortage of English Teachers Within the National English Program – one of the primary objectives of the National English Program was to enhance teaching quality, specifically by addressing the ongoing shortage of English teachers. This shortage encompasses both quantitative aspects – unfilled English teaching positions in schools; and qualitative aspects – teachers lacking the necessary qualifications to teach the subject. The Ministry of Education set a goal to recruit 1,000 new English teachers annually during the 2017–2020 school years. It successfully met or even exceeded this target. Despite these efforts, the quantitative shortage persisted, with hundreds of English teaching positions remaining vacant each year as the academic year commenced. This ongoing deficit suggests that the initial recruitment goals did not fully account for the increasing future demand for English teachers, raising concerns about the factual basis upon which these targets were set. As of the 2022–2023 school year, which began in September 2022, there was a shortfall of 711 English teachers, with over half (375 teachers) needed in the Tel Aviv and Central districts. The qualitative shortage remained significant as well. As of June 2023, about 26% of English teachers (around 3,300 individuals) failed to meet the required qualifications for teaching the subject.

Evaluation of the National English Program – in the 2016–2017 academic year, the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (RAMA) conducted an assessment of the National English Program, focusing on the state of the education system before the program's implementation. RAMA carried out another evaluation in the 2017–2018 academic year, examining certain components of the program. This evaluation did not include the Debate Program, the Keep Talking Program, or the Virtual Mentoring Program. The findings from RAMA's evaluation for the 2017–2018 academic year indicated positive signs justifying the continued operation of the National English Program and the expansion of accompanying evaluations to its other components. Despite this, the Ministry did not conduct any further evaluations of the program, neither

through RAMA nor any other entity. Consequently, after the 2017–2018 academic year, the Ministry of Education lacked a central monitoring tool to assess the program's implementation, which would provide information and insights at both the overall program level and its components to improve and refine its execution. Additionally, no comprehensive evaluation of the National English Program was conducted to study its outcomes and impacts, although its operation effectively ceased after the 2019–2020 academic year.

 **Teacher Training in English Instruction in Schools** – the Ministry of Education employs educational staff as instructors within the education system, who assist teachers with professional and pedagogical matters. According to data from the end of the 2022–2023 school year, about 28% of all schools (1,346 out of 4,870) received guidance in English instruction. About 10% of schools required guidance but neither requested nor received it (506 schools), with the majority located in the Northern District (349 schools, accounting for 69% of this group). Additionally, 78 schools (2% of all schools) requested guidance from the Ministry of Education but did not receive it.

 **Program for Teaching English at an Early Age (pilot in the 2022–2023 school year)** – the Ministry of Education decided to implement a program for teaching English in kindergartens and grades 1–2 as a pilot in the 2022–2023 school year across several hundred kindergartens and elementary schools, with plans to expand it later. In the 2022–2023 school year, the program was implemented in 689 kindergartens and 420 schools across 110 local authorities. A continuation plan for the pilot was prepared for the 2023–2024 to 2025–2026 school years, to expand English instruction to 6,500 kindergartens and 2,010 elementary schools. The estimated average annual budget required is about NIS 27.3 million. An accompanying evaluation conducted by RAMA indicated initial positive results from the program's implementation. However, in May 2023 (during the 2022–2023 school year), before the evaluation results were presented, the then-Director General of the Ministry of Education decided to continue the program only within its existing pilot framework, rather than expanding it as planned. Additionally, the then-Director General instructed an examination of the possibility of expanding English instruction to grade 2 and subsequently to grade 1, following an evaluation of the program's effectiveness, which he directed to begin in March 2024. The decisions made by the then-Director General, including the choice not to wait for RAMA's evaluation results, were not substantiated with explanations or data-based evidence.



Meeting the National English Program's Goal of Increasing the Rate of English Matriculation Examinees Among all 12th-Grade Students, Particularly in Advanced Levels (4–5 study units) – in 2017–2022, the rate of students taking the English matriculation exam at the 5-unit level increased from 37% to 48%, representing an 11-percentage-point rise. At the same time, there was a decrease in the rate of examinees at the other two levels (3 and 4 study units) and in the rate of students not



taking the exam at all, a total decline of 11 percentage points. Specifically, the rate of examinees at the 4-unit level dropped from 26% to 22%, at the 3-unit level from 20% to 17%, and the rate of non-examinees from 17% to 13%. Additionally, following the program's implementation, in 2022, the rate of students taking the advanced English matriculation exam (4–5 study units) reached 70%, meeting the program's target.

Updating English Curricula in Alignment with the CEFR Principles – in September 2019, the Ministry of Education published a new English curriculum for elementary education, followed by a new curriculum for middle school in February 2020. Both curricula are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), an international framework of standards and concepts for teaching and assessing foreign languages, including English. The new principles adopted by the Ministry aim to impart language knowledge that facilitates communication and skills for active engagement, ensuring that the acquired language is practical and functional.

Key Recommendations



Formulating a Multi-Year Plan to Advance English Studies Following the 2017 National English Program – it is recommended that the Ministry of Education, led by the English Language Supervisor and in collaboration with other relevant units, formulate a multi-year follow-up plan for the 2017 National English Program. This plan should be based on a comprehensive review of lessons learned from the National English Program's implementation and other key initiatives promoting English in schools. The plan should be accompanied by evaluation processes conducted by RAMA. The objectives of the follow-up plan should take a holistic view of their contribution to addressing the system-wide challenges in improving English instruction in the coming years and enhancing students' language proficiency. This includes goals that advance the integration of CEFR principles, already embedded in the curricula, into the methods used for assessing student achievements and in the professional development of teachers. This is to ensure that graduates of the education system are well-equipped to integrate successfully into higher education institutions and the job market.



Reducing Achievement Gaps in English Studies – in light of significant disparities in student achievements in matriculation exams among different population groups five years after the launch of the National Program for Advancing English Education, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education analyze the underlying causes of these gaps. This analysis should assess the impact of the Program's components on narrowing the gaps, whether due to difficulties in implementing the Program among various student groups or other barriers, such as the scope and quality of English instruction. Accordingly, it is recommended that the Ministry develop a plan focused on reducing achievement gaps between students from lower socioeconomic clusters and those from higher clusters,



between non-Jewish and Jewish students, as well as among different non-Jewish sectors. To ensure the reduction of these gaps, the plan should include measurable goals that reflect resource allocation priorities and enable continuous monitoring of changes in student achievements across sectors. Regarding the ultra-Orthodox sector, where participation rates in the English matriculation exam are particularly low, it is recommended that the Ministry consider developing an English curriculum adapted to the cultural characteristics of this sector. The curriculum could include partial instruction in English, incorporate individualized training sessions for English teachers, and apply systematic oversight of its implementation and outcomes through English supervisors.



Alignment and Continuity in English Teaching Principles from the Education System to Higher Education –

it is recommended that the Ministry of Education examine the reasons why most high school graduates who were tested at the 4 and 5-unit levels in the English matriculation exams do not achieve exemption-level scores in English entrance exams for academic institutions, with many requiring extensive remedial English courses spanning three or four semesters. The Ministry should distinguish between the quantitative increase in graduates from higher levels of study, a target that has been achieved in principle, and the qualitative improvement in English language instruction and proficiency among graduates. It is further recommended that this issue be addressed in coordination with the Council for Higher Education (CHE) to establish alignment and continuity in English teaching principles and emphases, from school education to academic studies. Additionally, the Ministry should address the unusual phenomenon where 5-unit English graduates, expected to have a strong command of English, score at a pre-basic level on the psychometric exam and require four remedial courses to reach the exemption level. The Ministry should also monitor the entrance exam results of graduates from advanced levels in the matriculation exams, identify schools with significant gaps between matriculation exam performance and psychometric test results, and develop tailored programs for these schools in collaboration with English supervisors.



Developing and Implementing Assessment Tools for English Proficiency Across all Educational Stages –

it is recommended that the Ministry of Education headquarters develop professional assessment tools based on uniform standards. These tools should enable the evaluation of students' English proficiency at different educational stages and facilitate the identification of barriers in teaching and learning to address them. The Ministry should also implement these tools effectively. In terms of external assessments, it is recommended that RAMA, in collaboration with the English Language Supervisor, promptly roll out the new assessment and measurement system nationwide and at the school level (developed by several teams since the 2018–2019 school year). Simultaneously, it is recommended that the English Language Supervisor, in collaboration with RAMA and regional supervisors, evaluate the contribution of internal English assessment tools developed by RAMA. Using these tools, they should collect feedback from schools to gather data on internal evaluations and analyze the difficulties, challenges, and benefits they raise. It is recommended to evaluate potential changes in the implementation of internal



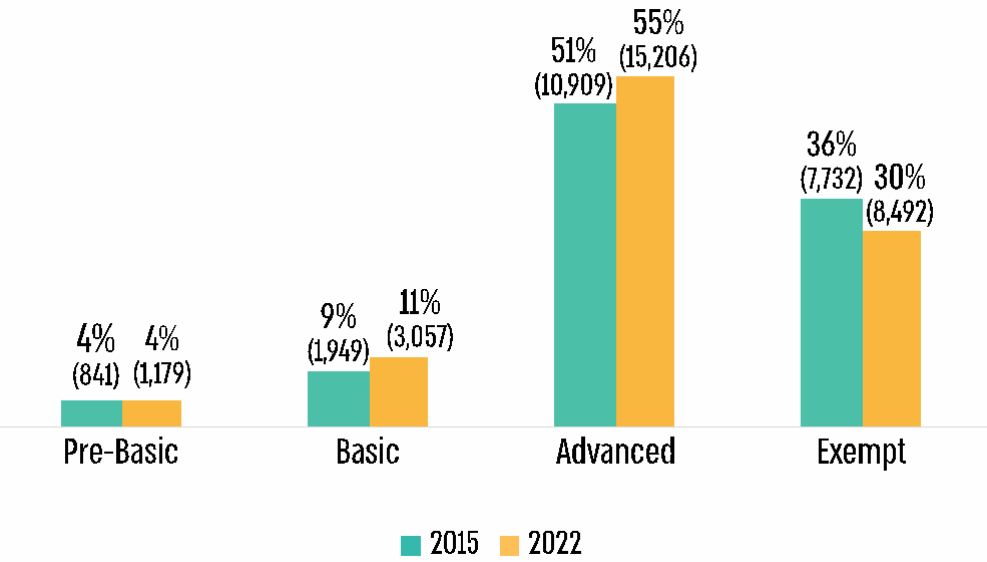
assessments as needed and to conduct awareness campaigns among teachers and principals to increase their use and maximize their benefits.



Addressing the Quantitative and Qualitative Shortage of English Teachers – it is recommended that the Ministry of Education utilize the teacher supply and demand forecasting model it began developing nearly a decade ago, to estimate the future demand for and supply of English teachers. This will ensure a reliable understanding of the current situation, and serve as a well-informed basis for long-term planning of the teaching workforce and the development of programs to address the shortage of English teachers. Additionally, it is recommended that the Ministry set a strategic goal to strengthen the status of teachers in Israel and achieve it by addressing all aspects related to the teaching profession. These include employment conditions, work environments, teaching quality, and the relationships between teachers and school principals, students, and parents. To meet this challenge, the Ministry should collaborate with various stakeholders: academic institutions, teacher training colleges, teachers' organizations, parents' and students' organizations, other government ministries, and representatives from the business sector and civil society. Such a coalition of partners will help achieving this goal. It is also recommended to examine how this issue has been addressed in relevant countries around the world.



Results of English Placement Tests for Higher Education Institutions Among 5-Unit English Graduates, Categorized by Levels, 2015 and 2022



According to data from the National Institute for Testing and Evaluation (NITE), processed by the State Comptroller's Office.



Summary

Although the primary goal of the National English Program, to increase the number of students taking the matriculation exam in advanced English tracks (4 and 5 study units) – was achieved, significant gaps were found in students' English proficiency upon completing their studies in the education system. Among higher socioeconomic groups, the rate of 12th-grade students taking the 5-unit English matriculation exam was significantly higher than that among lower socioeconomic groups. Similar disparities were observed between Jewish students and students from non-Jewish sectors. Audit findings further indicate that about five years after the launch of the National English Program, in 2022, the English proficiency of graduates who took the 4 and 5-unit matriculation exams remained low. According to English placement test results for candidates applying to higher education institutions, the vast majority failed to achieve the level of "exemption" from remedial English courses. Another key goal of the program remained unachieved: the quantitative and qualitative shortage of English teachers remains significant.

Despite the partial achievements of the National English Program, the Ministry of Education significantly scaled it down in 2020. This was done without a formal decision, without drawing lessons from its implementation, and without evaluating the impact of its various actions on achieving its goals.

It is recommended that the Minister of Education, in collaboration with professional staff at the Ministry's headquarters, led by the English Language Supervisor, develop a follow-up plan for the National English Program. This plan should be based on a comprehensive review of lessons learned from the program's implementation, set annual and multi-year goals (including objectives for reducing achievement gaps among different student populations), allocate the necessary resources for its implementation, and monitor its progress. These goals should include advancing the integration of CEFR principles, which have been incorporated into the curricula, into the methods for assessing student achievements as well as into the professional development of teachers. It is particularly recommended that the Ministry focus on this effort as preparation for the 2025 PISA international assessment, which will evaluate the application of these principles in English teaching. Additionally, it is recommended that the Minister, in collaboration with professional staff (led by the Teaching Personnel Administration), other government ministries, representatives from the business and civil sectors, and teachers' organizations, recruit qualified English teachers. The Ministry should assess future demand forecasts for English teachers and set multi-year recruitment targets accordingly, to address the teacher shortage or at least mitigate it.