



At what age do university students earn their first degree?

- Across OECD countries, the median¹ age students first graduated from university fell by 6 months between 2005 and 2011.
- The median age of first graduation ranges from around 22 in Belgium and the United Kingdom to over 27 in Iceland and Israel.
- The percentage of part-time students has increased from 19.8% in 2005 to 22.0% in 2011, suggesting that more flexible routes between study and work are slowly becoming more widespread.
- The percentage of older students (aged 30 and over) entering universities has remained constant at around 10%-11% on average between 2005 and 2011.

2008
625 36.5 138

For some years now, many OECD countries have been concerned about the time tertiary students take to complete their studies.² To get more workers to enter the labour market at an earlier age, they have developed policies to encourage students to graduate sooner. For example, the reforms following the Bologna Declaration in 1999 introducing a new degree structure in European countries were explicitly motivated by a policy objective to reduce the time students spend studying. Have these policies been successful?

Students are graduating sooner...

Certainly, compared with 2005 the median age of first graduation from university has decreased from 25.2 to 24.7 (Figure 1). Younger students, those at the 25th percentile of the age distribution, graduated at age 23.2 in 2011 (compared with 23.6 in 2005) while older students, at the 75th percentile, graduated aged 27.9 (compared with 28.7 in 2005). Students are thus graduating noticeably earlier across the age distribution, and the numbers of students graduating relatively late has fallen particularly significantly. These data also show that the age distribution of graduating students has narrowed.

Students are also entering universities a bit earlier: the median age of a student starting university has fallen by 1.3 months. Among older students, the decrease amounted to 4.9 months. The median age at graduation has dropped more than the median age for starting university, which means that the time students needed to acquire a first degree has fallen. Between 2005 and 2011, the time taken to acquire a first degree has fallen by almost half a year, from 4.6 years to 4.2 years.

2014
28.7 50 9.9 36.5 138
2010
23.2 25 1.6 25 138 36.5

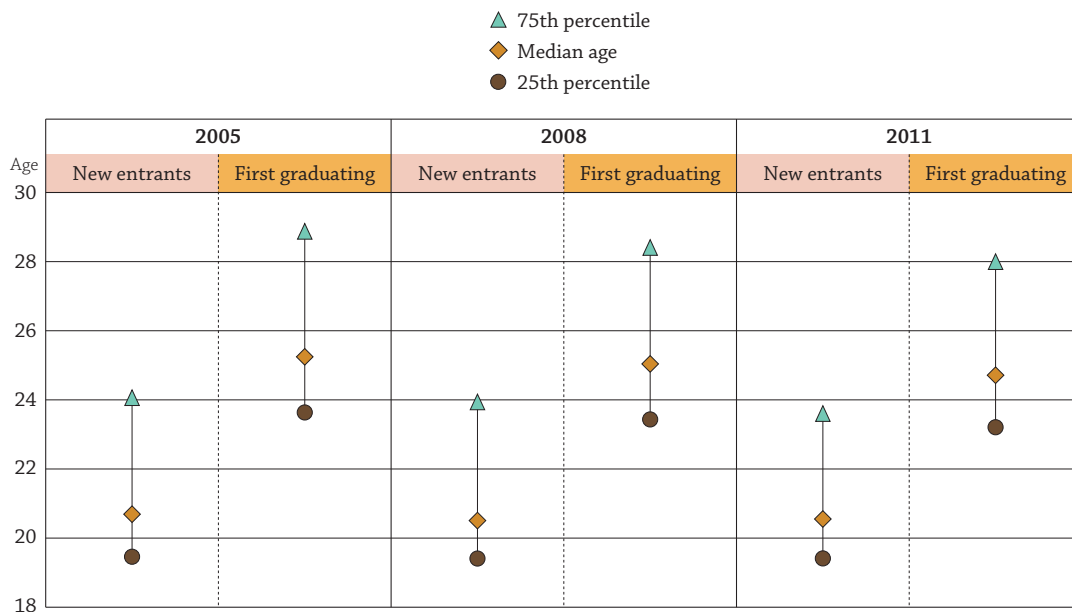
1. The average, or arithmetic mean, is the value obtained by dividing the sum of a set of quantities by the number of quantities in the set. The median is the middle value of the set when the quantities are ordered by rank – or the point in a series of numbers dividing it in exactly two halves. The median is identical to the 50th percentile. In this issue of “Education Indicators in Focus”, median ages are used instead of average ages because of the asymmetrical distribution.

2. Data on graduates and new entrants only concern tertiary-type A programmes (largely theory-based qualifications) whereas data on part-time or full-time students group together tertiary-type A and advanced research programmes.



Policies to increase throughput and efficiency in teaching and learning – for example through funding mechanisms favouring output indicators – have clearly had some impact. This decrease is also due to the increasing harmonisation of systems of higher education involved in the Bologna Process and a general shift away from longer programmes in favour of three-year ones.

Figure 1. **Age distribution of new entrants and students first graduating, tertiary-type A, 2005, 2008 and 2011**



Source: OECD Education Database and OECD (2013), *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators* (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).

...but differences between countries remain huge.

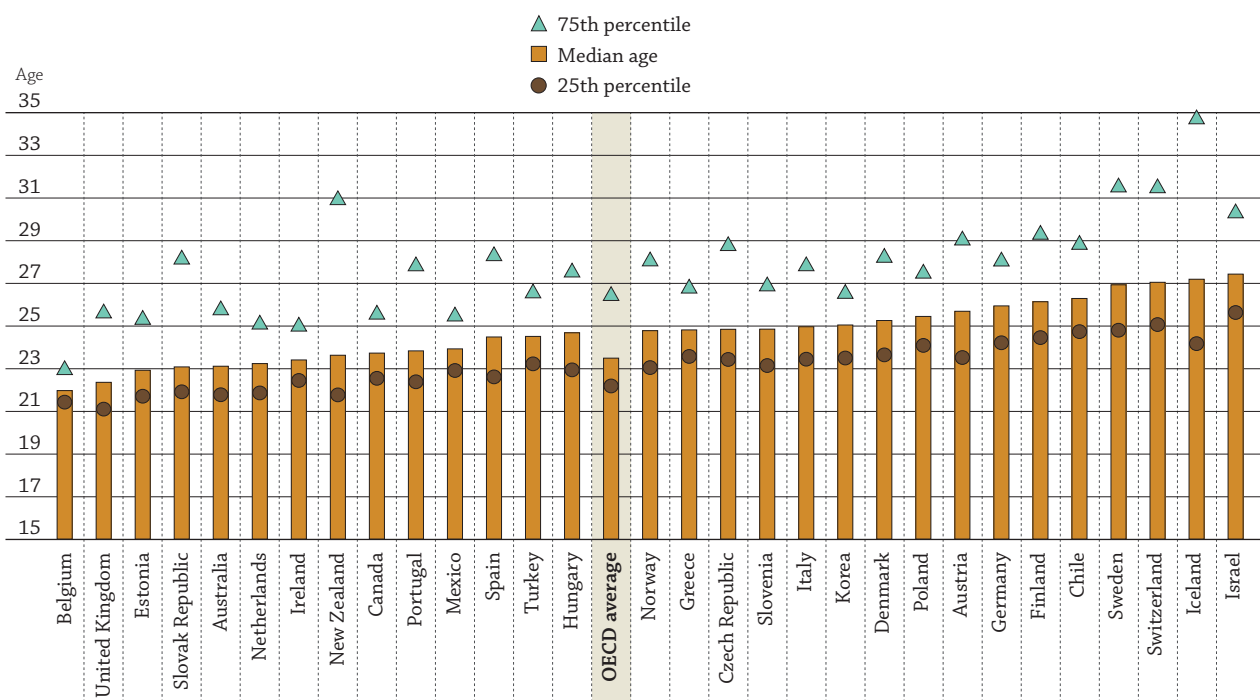
In all these measures, the differences between countries remain very high. In 2011, the median age of first graduation ranged from around 22 in Belgium and the United Kingdom to over 27 in Iceland and Israel (Figure 2). The variation is partly caused by the significant differences in the numbers of older graduates. At the 75th percentile the age of first graduation ranges from 23 in Belgium to 35 in Iceland.

In some countries the decrease in the median age of graduation between 2005 and 2011 is very marked. In Belgium, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Portugal and Slovenia, the median age fell by more than one year between 2005 and 2011. Despite the general trend, in some countries the median age of graduation increased, including Austria, Israel, Spain and Turkey.

These variations among countries could be due to structural factors, such as differences in the typical age at which students graduate from upper secondary education, the intake capacity of institutions and their admission procedures, the length of tertiary education programmes, the obligation to do military service, or the opportunity cost of entering the labour market before enrolling in tertiary education. Age differences may also be linked to economic factors, such as the lack of scholarships and flexibility to combine work and study, or the existence of policies to encourage those who have already gained experience in the workplace to enrol in tertiary education and improve or add to their skills.



Figure 2. Age distribution at first graduation, tertiary-type A, 2011



Countries are ranked in ascending order of the median age of first graduation in tertiary-type A programmes.

Source: OECD Education Database and OECD (2013), *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators* (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).

More flexible trajectories?

Of course, not all tertiary students follow the traditional path into full-time study immediately following graduation from upper secondary education. Transitions from study to work are slowly diversifying into a variety of alternative trajectories. This trend can be illustrated by the percentage of students entering university aged 30 years and older, and the percentage of part-time students.

Older students often pursue university studies after a period of work. Contrary to some expectations that lifelong learning would become more widespread, the share of students entering university at age 30 or older has not increased. The percentage of older students on average across the OECD remained around 10%-11% from 2005 to 2011. However, the variation between countries is very large, ranging in 2011 from 5% or less in Belgium, France, Germany, Mexico and Turkey to 20% or more in Norway and Portugal. Universities have not attracted significantly higher numbers of older students in regular study programmes in all countries.

The average percentage of part-time students in tertiary-type A and advanced research programmes across OECD countries also fell from 19.8% in 2005 to 19.6% in 2008 but then increased to 22.0% in 2011. Apparently, the crisis has started to motivate students to pursue part-time study, often combining work and study. But here also the variation between countries is huge, ranging from 2.9% in the Czech Republic to 52.7% in Poland.

As Figure 3 illustrates, both indicators are related, but not very strongly (correlation of 0.36). Countries such as Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands have both relatively low numbers of older entrants and low numbers of part-time students. Finland, New Zealand and Sweden score at the other end of the spectrum with around 40% to 50% part-time students and 15% to 20% older students.

