

1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

How many students drop out of tertiary education?

- Among the 18 OECD countries for which data are available, some 31% of students who enter tertiary education leave without a tertiary qualification.
- Non-completion rates vary between countries – ranging from more than 40% of students in Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States to less than 25% in Belgium (Fl), Denmark, France, Japan, Korea, Spain and the Russian Federation.
- There is no clear link between non-completion and levels of tuition fees charged.

Significance

This spread looks at the proportion of students who begin tertiary education but do not complete a first degree. Non-completion is not necessarily an indication of failure: in some countries, even a year of tertiary-level education may significantly improve a student's job-market prospects, while in others students may be able to retain credits from an initial period of study and then complete their studies later. However, high dropout rates may indicate problems in educational systems: courses may not be meeting students' educational expectations or their labour market needs, and may run for longer than students can justify being outside the labour market.

Findings

On average among the 18 OECD countries for which data are available, some 31% of students who enter tertiary education fail to graduate, making for a completion rate of 69%. Completion rates differ widely: In Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States, more than 40% of tertiary students do not graduate with at least a first degree at this level; by contrast, in Belgium (Fl), Denmark, France, Japan, Korea, Spain and the Russian Federation, the proportion is less than 25%. For countries for which only data on university-level education (tertiary-type A) is available, non-completion rates vary from 38% in Israel to 20% in Australia.

Completion rates tend to be higher for university-level education than for vocationally oriented tertiary education (tertiary-type B). On average among the 23 OECD countries for which data are available, some 30% of students in university-level education do not graduate from the programme they enter. However rates differ widely – in Japan the completion rate is 93% while in Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States it is below 60%. The completion rate in vocationally oriented tertiary education is 62% on average, ranging from 80% or above in Belgium (Fl), Germany, Japan and Korea to below 40% in

New Zealand, Portugal and the United States (see Table A4.1 in *Education at a Glance 2010*).

In some countries, students may enter university-level education but graduate with a qualification from vocationally oriented tertiary education. This is the case for 15% of students in France: In other words, in France, out of 100 students who start university-level education, 64 will receive a qualification at that level, 15 will be re-oriented to a programme in vocationally oriented tertiary education, and only 21 will leave without a tertiary qualification. The reverse is also true – students who enter a programme in vocationally oriented tertiary education but graduate with a university-level qualification: This is the case for 21% of students who enrol in vocationally oriented tertiary education in Iceland, 9% in Sweden and 7% in New Zealand.

There appears to be no clear link between completion rates and the level of tuition fees charged to students (see page 62). In Australia, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, tuition fees charged by university-level institutions exceed USD 1 500. In New Zealand and the United States completion rates are significantly below the OECD average of 70%, but in the other countries they are above it. By contrast, Denmark, which does not charge tuition fees and provides high levels of public subsidies for students, has a completion rate of 82%, well above the OECD average.

Definitions

Data were collected through a special survey undertaken in 2009-10. Completion rates are defined as the proportion of new entrants entering tertiary education who graduate with at least a first degree. This includes students who successfully graduate after re-orientating from university-level education to vocationally oriented tertiary education, and vice versa. The different methods used to calculate completion rates (i.e. true cohort or cross-section methods) are explained in Annex 3 of *Education at a Glance 2010*.

Information on data for Israel:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

Going further

For additional material, notes and a full explanation of sourcing and methodologies, see *Education at a Glance 2010* (Indicator A4).

Areas covered include:

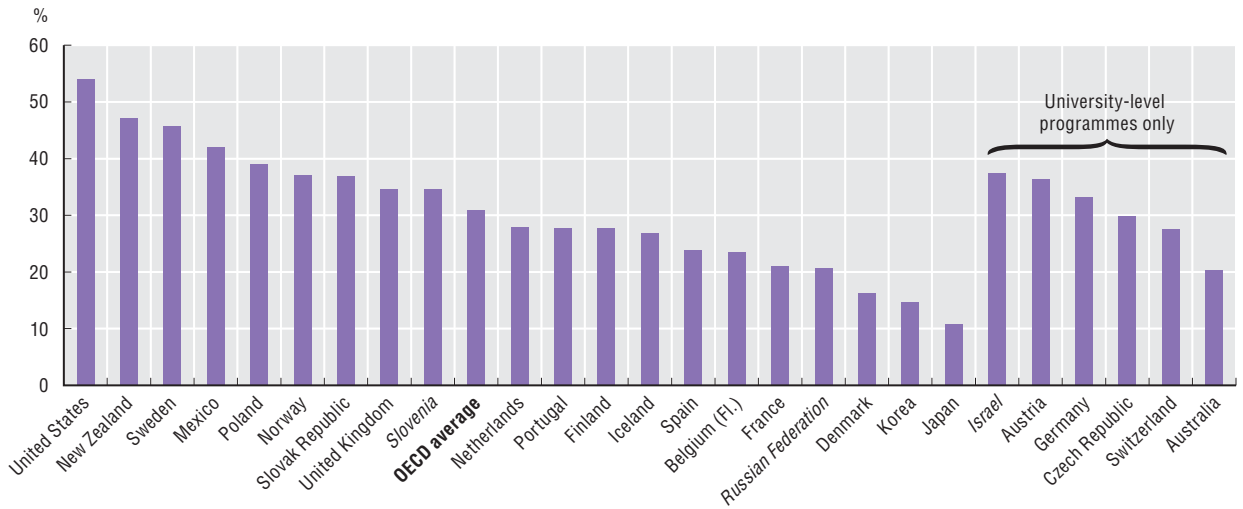
- Estimated graduation rates for a 90% level of completion rates.

1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

How many students drop out of tertiary education?

Figure 1.11. **Proportion of students who enter tertiary education without graduating, 2008**

This figure shows the proportion of students who enter tertiary education and do not subsequently graduate with at least a first degree at this level. Some students who are shown as not graduating may still be enrolled, or – especially in the United States – may finish their education at a different institution from the one they start at.



Source: OECD (2010), *Education at a Glance 2010*, Table A4.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310149>.



From:
Highlights from Education at a Glance 2010

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2010-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2010), "How many students drop out of tertiary education?", in *Highlights from Education at a Glance 2010*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2010-8-en

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to rights@oecd.org. Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at info@copyright.com or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at contact@cfcopies.com.