

How many students fail to graduate?

- About 70% of students who enter a tertiary programme graduate with a first degree at this level on average across OECD countries with available data.
- Women enrolled in university-level programmes are more likely than men to earn a tertiary degree at the end of the programme: their completion rate is on average 10 percentage points higher than men's.
- Full-time students have a better chance of graduating than part-time students, but there is no clear relationship between the level of tuition fees and the number of students who complete their degree.

Significance

Tertiary completion rates can indicate the efficiency of tertiary education systems, as they show how many of the students who enter a tertiary programme ultimately graduate from it. However, low completion rates do not necessarily imply inefficiency, as students may leave a tertiary programme for a variety of reasons: they may realise that they have chosen a subject or programme that is not a good fit for them; they may fail to meet the standards set by their educational institution; or they may find attractive employment opportunities before completing the programme. Low completion rates (i.e. high drop-out rates) may indicate, on the other hand, that the education system is not meeting students' needs.

Findings

On average across the OECD, some 70% of students who enter a university programme complete a first degree, although there are differences between countries. In Hungary, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the United States, less than 60% of students who enter a tertiary programme graduate with a first degree at this level; while in Australia, Denmark, Finland, France, Japan and Spain, more than 75% do.

Average vocational programme completion rates (61%) are somewhat lower than average university-level completion rates, but range from 75% or higher in Germany, Japan and the Slovak Republic to 18% in the United States.

Full-time students have a better chance of graduating from their programmes than part-time students. The largest difference between full-time and part-time students is observed in New Zealand, where completion rates for full-time students who enter university-level programmes are 34 percentage points higher than those for students with part-time status.

Students may choose to leave the education system before graduating because, in some countries, they will be offered attractive job opportunities after just one year of study. Similarly, some mature students who enter tertiary education, such as those in New Zealand and Sweden, do not intend to graduate from a specific programme, but rather choose to study a few courses as part of lifelong learning or upskilling.

There is no clear relationship between the amount of tuition fees charged by university-level institutions and completion rates. Tuition fees in Australia, Japan, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom amount to more than USD 1 500 and completion rates score significantly higher than the OECD average of 70%. Denmark and Finland do not charge tuition fees and provide a high level of public subsidies for students, but they also have completion rates of more than 75%.

Definitions

Data on completion rates were collected through a special survey undertaken in 2012. Completion rates are the proportion of new entrants into a specified level of education who graduate with at least a first degree at this level. The completion rates are calculated as the proportion of graduates among a given entry cohort. Non-completion rates refer to the number of students who leave the specified level of education without graduating with a first qualification at that level.

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 2013* (indicator A4).

Areas covered include:

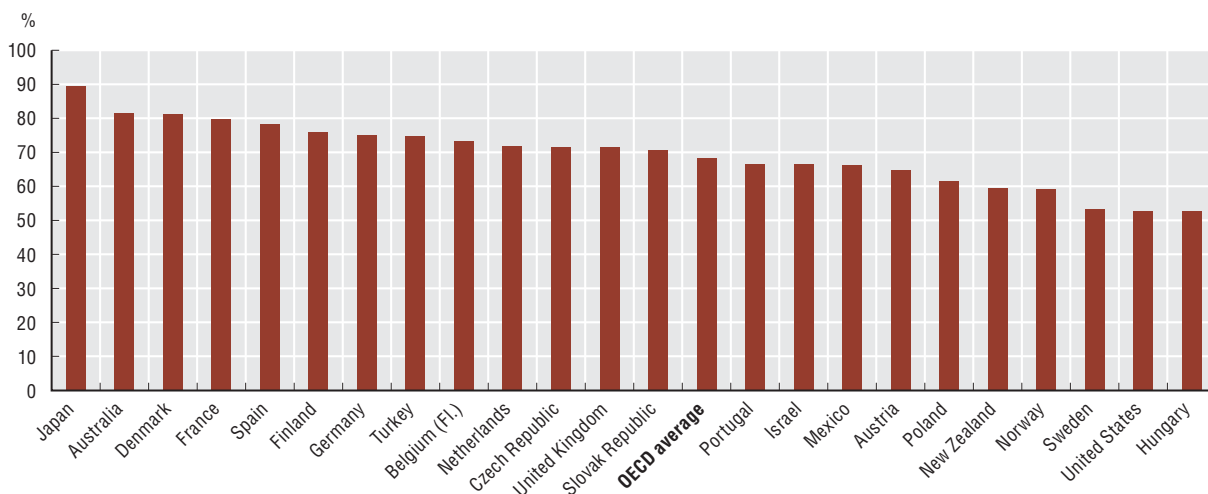
- Consequences of non-completion.
- Interaction between entry, graduation and completion rates.

Further reading from OECD

Higher Education Management and Policy (journal)
OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education (series of national reviews)

Figure 2.5. Successful completion of tertiary programmes, 2011

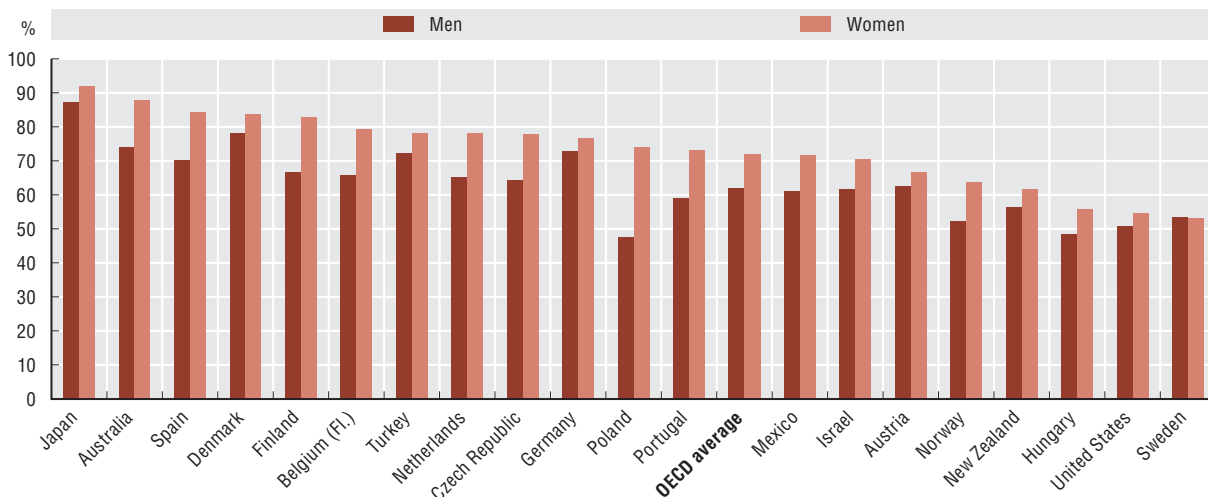
These figures show the percentage of students who enter tertiary education programmes and graduate with at least a first degree at this level, in the amount of time normally allocated for completing the programme.



Source: OECD (2013), Education at a Glance 2013, Chart A4.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932846424>.

Figure 2.6. Successful completion of tertiary programmes by gender, 2011

These figures show the percentage of students who enter and successfully complete a tertiary programme, by gender.



Source: OECD (2013), Education at a Glance 2013, Chart A4.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932846424>.



From:
Education at a Glance 2013
Highlights

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2013-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2013), “How many students fail to graduate?”, in *Education at a Glance 2013: Highlights*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2013-10-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.