

# 1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

## How many students graduate outside the normal age?

- In Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway, students older than 25 account for 10% or more of first-time graduation rates from upper secondary education.
- Graduation rates for mature students account for a quarter of the total tertiary graduation rate in Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden and Israel.
- Finland, Iceland and Norway offer the greatest range of possibilities for later graduation at both the upper secondary and tertiary levels.

### Significance

Students typically graduate from upper secondary education in their late teens and from tertiary education by their mid-20s. However, in a number of countries some students study well beyond these age ranges. While some governments are taking measures to encourage students to make the most of their capacities by moving more rapidly into and through tertiary education, there is also value in ensuring that opportunities exist for people to complete their studies later in life so that they can equip themselves to compete in the labour market.

### Findings

Completing upper secondary education is now considered the norm in most developed countries. In 22 of 26 OECD countries and all partner countries with comparable data, first-time upper secondary graduation rates exceed 70%. However, not all students graduate at the typical age, i.e. between the ages of 17 and 20. The reasons vary: Some countries, for example, offer a range of second chance or adult education programmes. In the Nordic countries, students can leave the education system relatively easily and re-enter at a later date: in Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway, first-time graduation rates for students older than 25 account for 10 percentage points or more.

Adults who can enter tertiary education after a period of work can raise their own human capital, improve the adaptability of the workforce to ongoing changes and help meet the demand for higher skills in the labour market. At tertiary level, where data are available for 21 countries, mature students have a high impact in Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden and Israel, where graduation rates for students aged over 30 account for a quarter or more of the total graduation rate.

However, staying longer in the school system also implies some additional costs, for example higher expenditure per student, foregone tax revenue and later launch of career trajectory. Government authorities in some countries take this situation seriously. In Finland, many upper secondary graduates have to wait for an extended period before they obtain a place in university or polytechnic education and furthermore, the average duration of studies is long. As a result, the median age of students graduating from tertiary education, nearly 27, is the third highest in the OECD area, after Iceland and Sweden. The Finnish government is taking measures to lower the age of graduation from tertiary education in order to increase the number of working years of the population and to finance the pensions of the large age group that is soon to retire.

For Israel, the high proportion of later graduations corresponds to the time spent in mandatory military service before embarking on tertiary studies. As a result, the median age of graduation from a university-level (tertiary-type A) programme is 27, or two years above the OECD average.

Finland, Iceland and Norway are the three countries with the most extensive possibilities for later graduation for adults at both the upper secondary and tertiary levels.

### Definitions

Data refer to the academic year 2007-08 and are based on the UOE data collection on education statistics administered by the OECD in 2008. Where data are available, upper secondary and tertiary graduation rates are calculated as net graduation rates, which represent the estimated percentage of the age cohort that will complete education at those levels. Tertiary graduates in this section refer only to those who obtain university degrees.

Information on data for Israel:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

### Going further

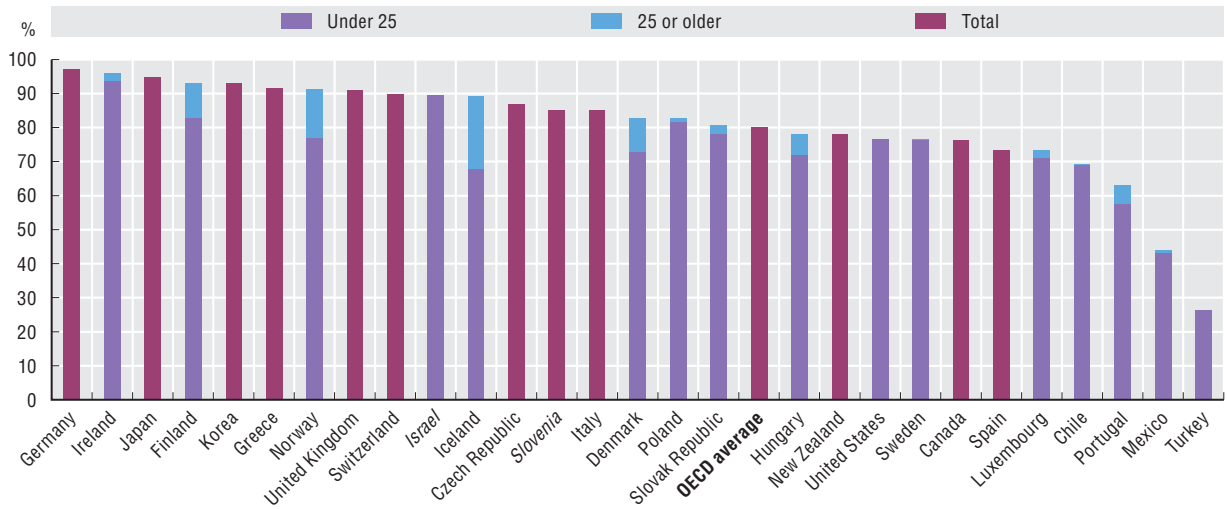
For additional material, notes and a full explanation of sourcing and methodologies, see *Education at a Glance 2010* (Indicators A2 and A3).

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## How many students graduate outside the normal age?

Figure 1.9. **Upper secondary graduation rates beyond the usual age, 2008**

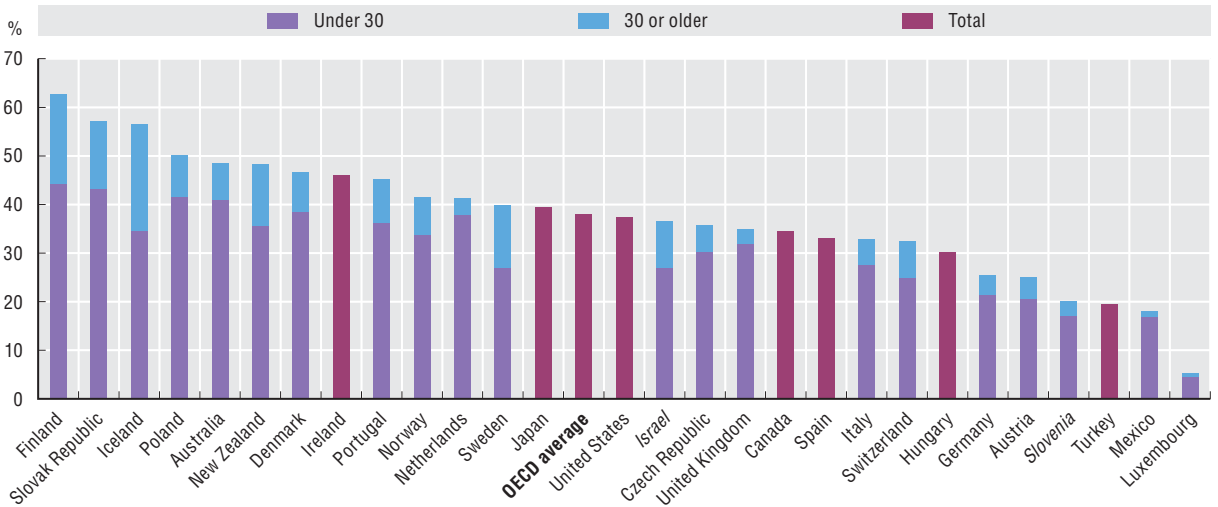
This figure shows the proportion of students graduating at age 25 or older from upper secondary education.



Source: OECD (2010), Education at a Glance 2010, Table A2.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310111>.

Figure 1.10. **University-level graduation rates beyond the usual age, 2008**

This figure shows the number of students graduating at age 30 or older from university-level education.



Source: OECD (2010), Education at a Glance 2010, Table A3.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310130>.



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