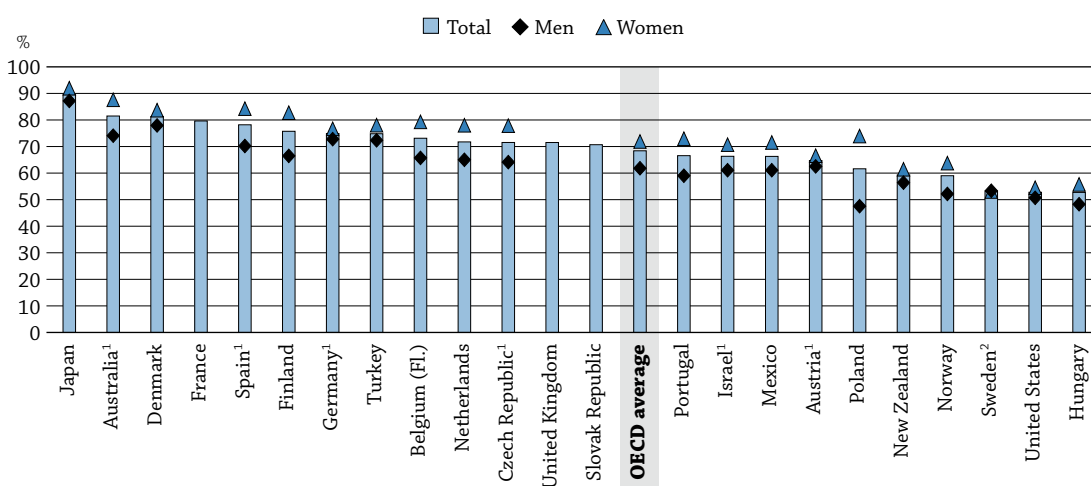


## HOW MANY STUDENTS COMPLETE TERTIARY EDUCATION?

- On average across OECD countries with available data, around 70% of students who enter a tertiary programme graduate with a first degree at this level.
- Women enrolled in tertiary-type A programmes are more likely than men to earn a tertiary degree at the end of the programme: their completion rate is an average of 10 percentage points higher than men's.

**Chart A4.1. Proportion of students who enter tertiary education and graduate with at least a first degree/qualification at this level, by gender (2011)**



**Note:** Some of the students who have not graduated may be still enrolled, or may have finished their education at a different institution than the one they originally attended, as occurs frequently in the United States. Please refer to Table A4.1 for details concerning methods used to calculate the completion rates.

1. Tertiary-type A only.

2. Includes students entering single courses who may never intend to study all courses needed for a degree.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the proportion of students who graduate from tertiary education with at least a first degree.

**Source:** OECD, Table A4.1. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm)).

**StatLink** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932846424>

### Context

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 educational programme that is not a good fit for them; they may fail to meet the standards set by their educational institution, particularly in tertiary systems that provide relatively broad access; or they may find attractive employment opportunities before completing the programme. Students may find that the educational programmes offered do not meet their expectations or labour-market needs, or that the programmes last longer than the student wishes to remain outside the labour market. Low completion rates (i.e. high drop-out rates) may indicate, on the other hand, that the education system is not meeting students' needs.

**■ Other findings**

- 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 tertiary-type B completion rates (61%) are somewhat lower than average tertiary-type A completion rates**, ranging 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 tertiary-type A 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 tertiary-type A educational institutions and completion rates.**

## Analysis

### Completion rates in tertiary education

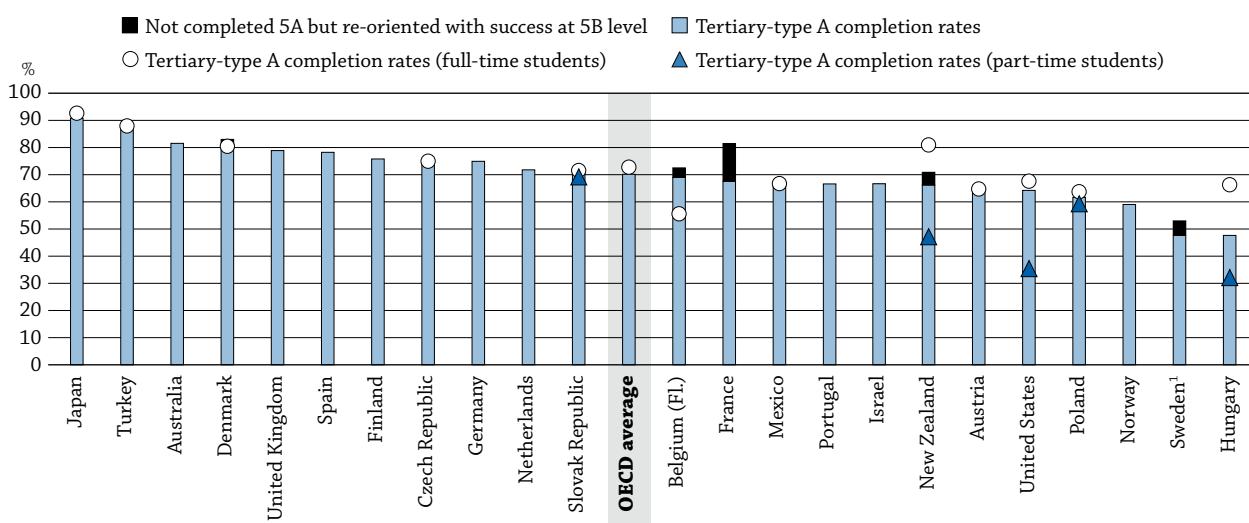
A student who “completes” a tertiary education is one who enters a tertiary-type A programme and graduates with either a tertiary-type A or a tertiary-type B qualification, or one who enters a tertiary-type B programme and graduates with either a tertiary-type A or a tertiary-type B qualification. On average across the 18 OECD countries for which data are available, some 32% of tertiary students did not graduate from a programme at this level of education.

In Hungary, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the United States, more than 40% of those who enter a tertiary programme do not graduate at the tertiary level of education (either tertiary-type A or tertiary-type B) in contrast to their counterparts in Denmark, Finland, France and Japan, where less than 25% do not graduate. Among the countries for which only tertiary-type A data are available, non-completion rates vary from 18% in Australia to 35% in Austria (Chart A4.1).

The difference between the proportion of skilled jobs in the labour market and the proportion of people with tertiary education (see Indicator A1) suggests that most countries may benefit if more of their students graduate with a tertiary qualification. Increasing that number requires different strategies for different countries.

In most countries, full-time students are more likely to complete their studies than part-time students are. However, in certain countries, older students who enter tertiary education do not intend to graduate from a specific programme; rather, they study a few courses as part of lifelong learning. Still, these students are included in the category of new entrants in tertiary education, alongside more traditional full-time students. In New Zealand, where part-time study is common (completion rates for full-time students who enter tertiary-type A education are 34 percentage points higher than for part-time students), around one in five students completes all modules in which they are enrolled, yet never enroll in enough modules to graduate with a qualification. This pattern tends to obscure the completion rate of more traditional full-time students in tertiary-type A programmes, which was 81% in 2011 (Tables A4.1 and A4.2).

**Chart A4.2. Proportion of students who enter tertiary-type A education and graduate with at least a first degree at this level, by status of enrolment (2011)**



**Note:** Some of the students who have not graduated may be still enrolled, or may have finished their education at a different institution than the one they originally attended, as occurs frequently in the United States. Please refer to Table A4.1 for details concerning methods used to calculate the completion rates.

1. Includes students entering single courses who may never intend to study all courses needed for a degree.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the proportion of students who graduate from tertiary-type A education with at least a first degree.

**Source:** OECD. Tables A4.1 and A4.2. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm)).

**StatLink** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932846443>

Women enrolled in tertiary-type A programmes are more likely than men to earn a tertiary degree at the end of the programme: their completion rate is 10 percentage points higher than men's. Only in Austria, Germany, Sweden and the United States is the difference between women's and men's completion rates below five percentage points. In the Czech Republic, Finland and Poland, the gender gap in favour of women is more than 15 percentage points wide (Chart A4.1).

### Completion rates in tertiary-type A and tertiary-type B education

On average across the 23 OECD countries for which data are available, some 30% of tertiary-type A students do not graduate from the programme they enter. However, completion rates differ widely among OECD countries. In Hungary, Norway and Sweden, less than 60% of those who enter tertiary-type A programmes graduate from the programme, in contrast to their counterparts in Australia, Denmark, Japan and Turkey where the completion rates are 80% or more. Tertiary-type B completion rates are, at 61% on average, somewhat lower than those for tertiary-type A programmes, and again there is wide variation among countries. Tertiary-type B completion rates range from 75% or higher in Germany, Japan and the Slovak Republic, to 18% in the United States (Table A4.1).

Policy makers in OECD countries with low tuition fees for tertiary-type A education often debate whether they should increase those fees in order to improve completion rates. The outcomes of these discussions have led to different decisions across countries. For example, in Italy, a recent law allows universities to increase tuition fees for students who have been enrolled for longer than the normal duration of their programme in an effort to reduce the average duration of tertiary studies. Some other OECD countries have already increased tuition fees, although some students are exempt based on their performance, with the idea that higher fees will increase students' incentives to finish their studies quickly. By contrast, tuition fees remain low in some countries because policy makers in these countries estimate that high tuition fees could lengthen the duration of study if students have to work to pay the tuition fees.

This lack of consensus on tuition-fee policy may explain why it is difficult to find a strong relationship between completion rates in tertiary-type A institutions and the level of tuition fees charged by those institutions. Thus, Australia, Japan, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom charge tuition fees in excess of USD 1 500 (see Indicator B5) and have completion rates significantly above the OECD average of 70%. By contrast, 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%.

These results are not surprising since all indicators on tertiary education, and especially on rates of return, show that, compared to individuals with an upper secondary education, adults with a tertiary-type A education benefit significantly in terms of earnings (see Indicator A6) and employment (see Indicator A5). This can create a sufficiently large incentive, independent of the level of tuition fees, for students to finish their studies (see Indicator A7).

### Consequences of non-completion of tertiary-type A programmes

Beginning a tertiary-type A programme but not graduating is not necessarily linked to failure if students can be successfully re-oriented towards tertiary-type B education and *vice versa*. In France, a significant proportion of students (14%) does not complete tertiary-type A level education, but these students are successfully re-oriented into tertiary-type B programmes. In other words, in France, out of 100 students who start a tertiary-type A programme, 68 will receive at least a first degree at that level, 14 will be re-oriented into a tertiary-type B programme, 4 are still in education, and only 14 will leave the programme without a tertiary qualification. In Belgium (Flemish Community), Denmark, New Zealand and Sweden, between 3% and 5% of students who do not complete a tertiary-type A programme are successfully re-oriented into a tertiary-type B programme. Re-orientation also exists among students initially enrolled in tertiary-type B programmes. In Denmark, New Zealand and Sweden, respectively, 6%, 7% and 6% of students who do not complete tertiary-type B programmes are re-oriented into a tertiary-type A programme. Among these countries, only New Zealand has a large proportion of students in tertiary-type B programmes (see Indicators A3 and C3).

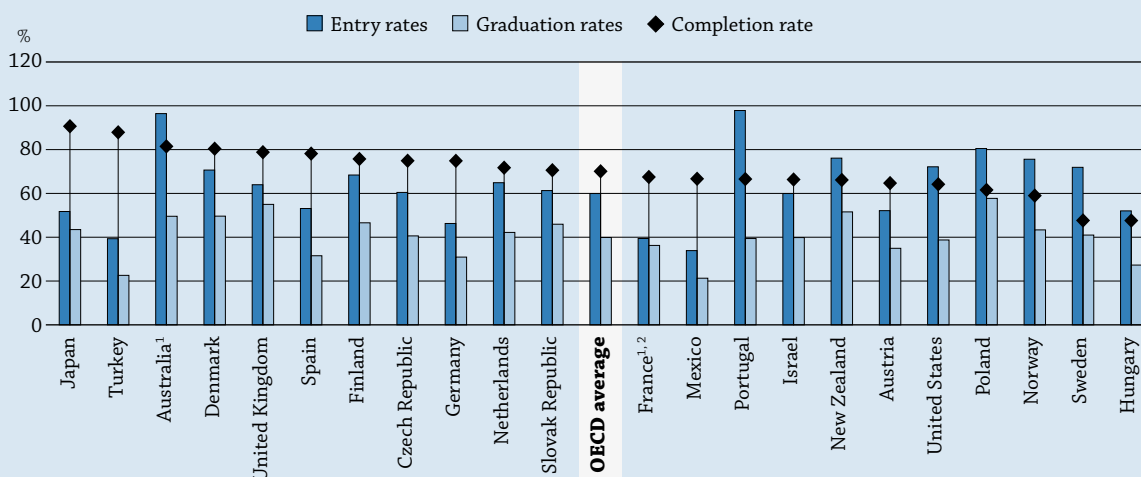
Non-completion of a degree does not mean that the skills and competences acquired are lost or not valued by the labour market; being in the labour market for a time could also help individuals in their studies later. In Sweden and the United States, students can leave a tertiary-type A programme before completing it, be employed for some time, and decide to continue their studies at a later date. They do not lose the benefit of the modules completed prior to employment. In countries with modular systems, like Sweden, students receive credit points for each course they have completed. Even if they have studied enough to graduate, they might not apply for a diploma as the credit points for the individual courses in many programmes are recognised as equivalent by the labour market.

The extent to which non-completion of tertiary education is a policy problem varies among countries, thus completion rates should be interpreted with caution. It will be interesting to see if future changes in the labour market will have an effect on the incentives for individuals to graduate from tertiary studies.

### Box A4.1. Interaction between entry rates, graduation rates and completion rates

These three indicators are highly correlated and explain the main differences between tertiary education systems across countries. A change in one of these factors can affect the others. Entry and graduation rates are based on the total population, unlike completion rates, which are calculated from an entry cohort at a certain level of education.

Chart a. Entry, graduation and completion rates at tertiary-type A level (2011)




1. Year of reference 2010.

2. First-degree graduation rates instead of first-time graduation rates.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the completion rates in 2011.

Source: OECD, Tables A3.1a, A4.1 and C3.1a. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm)).

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The definitions of entry rates, graduation rates and completion rates (see *Definitions* section) shed light on the relationships among them. In reality, completion rates do not correspond to the simple division of graduation rates by entry rates; but a significant change in entry rates or in completion rates will definitely influence the indicator on graduation rates.

...

A significant increase/decrease in tertiary completion rates should have a direct impact on tertiary graduation rates if tertiary entry rates remain stable over the same period. Similarly, a significant increase/decrease in entry rates into tertiary education can have a direct impact on tertiary graduation rates if the tertiary completion rates remain stable.

As mentioned in the text, completion rates differ widely among OECD countries. Japan is at the top end, with over 90% of students completing tertiary-type A studies, while in Hungary and Sweden, about one out of two students leaves tertiary education without at least a first degree.

For countries with low completion rates (and there may be many reasons why students do not complete a degree), high entry rates (such as those observed in New Zealand, Norway, Poland and Sweden) counterbalance this effect and serve to increase the number of graduates, compared to the OECD average, and meet labour-force needs. These countries have chosen to facilitate access to tertiary education for all types of students, including international students and mature students, which explain their ranking in both indicators.

Similarly, in countries such as Japan and Turkey, where there is limited access to tertiary programmes, higher-than-average completion rates counterbalance the lower entry rates and raise graduation rates, compared to the OECD average (Chart a).

Many countries have considerable room for improvement in increasing their graduation rates. In 11 of the 23 countries for which data on tertiary-type A education are available, more than 3 students out of 10 did not graduate from the level of studies in which they were enrolled. If entry rates in these countries were maintained and/or completion rates were increased to, for example, the same level as that of Japan (around 90%), graduation rates would rise sharply (Chart a).

## Definitions

**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 from true cohort methods are calculated as the proportion of graduates (within  $N$  years) among a given entry cohort (prospectively). The completion rates from cross cohort methods are calculated as the ratio of the number of students who graduate with an initial degree during the reference year to the number of new entrants in this degree  $n$  years before,  $n$  being the number of years of full-time study required to complete the degree.

**Net entry rates** are the estimated percentage of an age cohort that will enter tertiary education for the first time during its lifetime. Net entry rates are the sum of all net entry rates for a single age group. The total net entry rate is therefore the sum of the proportion of new entrants into tertiary-type A and tertiary-type B programmes, aged  $i$ , to the total population aged  $i$ , at all ages. Since data by single year are only available for people aged 15 to 29, net entry rates for older students are estimated from data concerning five-year age bands. Entry rates therefore indicate the accessibility of tertiary education and the perceived value of attending tertiary programmes (see Indicator C3).

**Net graduation rates** correspond to the estimated percentage of an age cohort that will complete tertiary education, based on current patterns of graduation (see Annex 1). Net graduation rates are calculated in the same way as entry rates. Graduation rates indicate the extent to which a country's education system is producing highly skilled adults (see Indicator A3).

**Non completion** is defined as students who leave the specified level of education without graduating with a first qualification at that level. The first qualification refers to any degree, regardless of the duration of study, obtained at the end of a programme that does not require a previous degree at the same level. For some countries, it is difficult to distinguish interruptions of studies from non completion.

## A4

**Methodology**


Data on completion rates were collected through a special survey undertaken in 2012. The completion rate is calculated from a cohort analysis in half of the countries listed in Table A4.1 (true cohort method), which is based on panel data that follow the individual student from entrance to graduation in the programme. Estimates for the other countries assume constant student flows at the tertiary level, owing to the need for consistency between the graduate cohort in the reference year and the entrant cohort  $n$  years before (cross-section method). This assumption may be an oversimplification (see Annex 3 at [www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm)).

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

**Indicator A4 Tables**


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**Table A4.1** Completion rates in tertiary education (2011)

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**Table A4.2** Completion rates in tertiary-type A education, by status of enrolment (2011)

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Table A4.1. Completion rates in tertiary education (2011)

	Method	Year for new entrants		Tertiary education				Tertiary-type A education				Tertiary-type B education				
				Completion rates (completed at least first 5B or 5A programme) <sup>1</sup>			Not graduated from tertiary education (4) = 100-(1)	5A completion rates (completed at least first 5A programme) <sup>2</sup>			Not graduated from 5A level but re-oriented with success at 5B level	5B completion rates (completed at least first 5B programme) <sup>3</sup>			Not graduated from 5B level but re-oriented with success at 5A level	
				M+W	Men	Women		M+W	Men	Women		M+W	Men	Women		
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4) = 100-(1)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)					
OECD	Australia	Cross-section	2005-07	m	m	m	m	82	74	88	m	m	m	m		
	Austria	Cross-section	2006-08	m	m	m	m	65	63	67	m	m	m	m		
	Belgium (Fl.)	True cohort	2007-08	2007-08	73	66	79	27	69	62	76	4	73	65	79	1
	Canada	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Chile	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Czech Republic	True cohort (ISCED 5A), cross-section (ISCED 5B)	2001	2001	72	64	78	28	75	67	83	m	59	49	64	m
	Denmark	True cohort	2000-01	2000-01	81	78	84	19	80	77	83	3	68	68	69	6
	Estonia	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Finland	True cohort	2000	a	76	66	83	24	76	66	83	a	a	a	a	a
	France	Longitudinal survey	2002-09	2002-09	80	m	m	20	68	m	m	14	76	m	m	2
	Germany	True cohort (ISCED 5A), cross-section (ISCED 5B)	1999-2002	2008-09	m	m	m	m	75	73	77	a	75	71	77	a
	Greece	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Hungary	Cross-section	2006-07 / 2009-10	2009-10	53	48	56	47	48	45	50	m	42	33	47	m
	Iceland	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Ireland	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Israel	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	66	62	70	m	m	m	m	
	Italy	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Japan	Cross-section	2004-06	2008	90	87	92	10	91	88	95	m	87	86	89	m
	Korea	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Luxembourg	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Mexico	Cross-section	2007-08	2009-10	66	61	72	34	67	61	72	m	62	58	67	a
	Netherlands	True cohort	2003-04	a	72	65	78	28	72	65	78	m	m	m	m	a
	New Zealand	True cohort	2004	2004	59	56	61	41	66	65	67	5	45	41	48	7
	Norway	True cohort	1999-2000	1999-2000	59	52	64	41	59	52	64	m	59	55	64	m
	Poland	Cross-section	2006-09	2008-09	62	48	74	38	62	48	74	m	64	46	68	m
	Portugal	Cross-section	2006-10	2009	67	59	73	33	67	59	73	m	m	m	m	n
	Slovak Republic	Cross-section	2006-09	2008-10	71	m	m	29	71	m	m	m	76	68	80	m
	Slovenia	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
Spain	Cross-section	2008-09	2007-10	m	m	m	m	78	70	84	m	73	71	74	m	
Sweden <sup>4</sup>	True cohort	2002-03	2002-03	53	53	53	47	48	48	48	5	50	49	50	6	
Switzerland	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m		
Turkey	Cross-section	2007-08	2009-10	75	72	78	25	88	86	90	m	62	60	66	m	
United Kingdom	Cross-section	2007-08	2007-08	72	m	m	28	79	m	m	m	53	57	51	m	
United States <sup>5</sup>	Longitudinal survey	2003-04	2003-04	53	51	54	47	64	61	67	m	18	18	18	m	
OECD average				68	62	72	32	70	65	74	m	61	53	60	m	
EU21 average				69	61	73	31	69	62	73	m	59	52	60	m	
Other G20	Argentina	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Brazil	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	China	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	India	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Indonesia	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Russian Federation	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	Saudi Arabia	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	South Africa	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
	G20 average				m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	

Note: The cross-section method refers to the number of graduates from these programmes divided by the number of new entrants into these programmes in the year of entrance. The cross-section method refers to the number of graduates in the calendar year 2011 and is calculated according to the traditional OECD approach, taking into account different durations. True-cohort method is defined from a cohort analysis and based on panel data. Data refers to full-time and part-time when available (please see Table A4.2 for the availability of part-time data).

1. Completion rates in tertiary education represent the proportion of those who enter a tertiary-type A or a tertiary-type B programme, who go on to graduate from either a first tertiary-type A or a first tertiary-type B programme.

2. Completion rates in tertiary-type A education represent the proportion of those who enter a tertiary-type A programme and who go on to graduate from at least a first tertiary-type A programme.

3. Completion rates in tertiary-type B education represent the proportion of those who enter a tertiary-type B programme and who go on to graduate from at least a first tertiary-type B programme.

4. Including students entering single courses who may never intend to study all courses needed for a degree.

5. ISCED 5A completion rates include students enrolled in 4-year programmes who graduated from their entry institution within 6 years and ISCED 5B completion rates include students enrolled in all 2-year programmes who graduated from their entry institution within 3 years.

Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm)).

Please refer to the Reader's Guide for information concerning the symbols replacing missing data.


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Table A4.2. Completion rates in tertiary-type A education, by status of enrolment (2011)

	Method	Year for new entrants	Proportion of new entrants enrolled <sup>1</sup>		5A completion rates (completed at least first 5A programme)		
		5A	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	
			(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
OECD	Australia	Cross-section	2005-07	m	m	m	m
	Austria	Cross-section	2006-08	100	m	65	m
	Belgium (Fl.)	True cohort	2007-08	89	11	56	m
	Canada	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Chile	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Czech Republic	True cohort	2001	100	m	75	m
	Denmark	True cohort	2000-01	100	m	80	m
	Estonia	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Finland	True cohort	2000	m	m	m	m
	France	Longitudinal survey	2002-09	m	m	m	m
	Germany	True cohort	1999-2002	m	m	m	m
	Greece	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Hungary	Cross-section	2006-07 / 2009-10	63	37	66	32
	Iceland	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Ireland	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Israel	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Italy	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Japan	Cross-section	2004-06	98	2	93	m
	Korea	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Luxembourg	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Mexico	Cross-section	2007-08	100	m	67	m
	Netherlands	True cohort	2003-04	m	m	m	m
	New Zealand	True cohort	2004	56	44	81	47
	Norway	True cohort	1999-2000	m	m	m	m
	Poland	Cross-section	2006-09	53	47	64	59
	Portugal	Cross-section	2006-10	m	m	m	m
	Slovak Republic	Cross-section	2006-09	62	38	72	69
	Slovenia	m	m	m	m	m	m
	Spain	Cross-section	2008-09	m	m	m	m
	Sweden	True cohort	2002-03	m	m	m	m
Switzerland	m	m	m	m	m	m	
Turkey	Cross-section	2007-08	100	a	88	a	
United Kingdom	Cross-section	2007-08	m	m	m	m	
United States <sup>2</sup>	Longitudinal survey	2003-04	81	19	68	35	
	OECD average		83	25	73	m	
	EU21 average		81	33	68	m	
Other G20	Argentina	m	m	m	m	m	
	Brazil	m	m	m	m	m	
	China	m	m	m	m	m	
	India	m	m	m	m	m	
	Indonesia	m	m	m	m	m	
	Russian Federation	m	m	m	m	m	
	Saudi Arabia	m	m	m	m	m	
	South Africa	m	m	m	m	m	
		G20 average		m	m	m	m


Note: The cross-section method refers to the number of graduates in the calendar year 2011 and is calculated according to the traditional OECD approach, taking into account different durations. True-cohort method is defined from a cohort analysis and based on panel data.

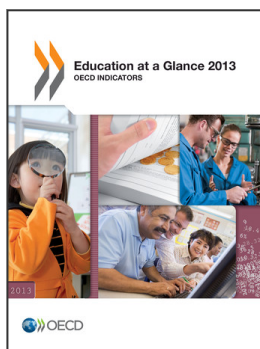
1. Based on the data collected in the 2012 OECD survey.

2. Includes students enrolled in 4-year programmes who graduated from their entry institution within 6 years.

Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm)).

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