

1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

To what level have adults studied?

- The number of adults with a tertiary education in OECD countries has increased by almost 10 percentage points since 2000.
- In most OECD countries, 25-34 year-olds have the highest rate of tertiary attainment among adults, leading other age groups by an average of 7 percentage points.
- Gender gaps in educational attainment are not only narrowing; in some cases, they are reversing to put women ahead of men.

Significance

Education is important both for the present and for the future. The level to which adults have studied is often used as a measure of human capital and the level of an individual's skills – in other words the skills available in the population and labour force. Higher levels of educational attainment are strongly associated with higher employment rates and are seen as a gateway to better jobs and higher earnings. Individuals have strong incentives to pursue more education, and governments have incentives to build on the skills of the population through education, particularly as national economies continue to shift from mass production to knowledge economies.

Findings

The proportion of adults without upper secondary education shrank by about 10 percentage points over the past decade and across almost all OECD countries, upper secondary attainment is now the norm. On average, 82% of younger adults have attained at least upper secondary education compared to 64% of older adults. Italy, Mexico, Portugal, Turkey and Spain are the only countries in which the proportion of people without upper secondary education is larger than the proportion of adults with upper secondary or tertiary education. Gender differences in educational attainment have also evolved over the years. On average, 84% of younger women today have attained at least an upper secondary education compared with 81% of younger men.

Even if tertiary attainment rates have increased by at least 10 percentage points across OECD countries in recent years, less than 35% of men and women attain tertiary education. In most OECD countries, younger adults have higher rates of tertiary education than older adults by about 15 percentage points. In some countries, the difference between generations is significant. In Korea, for example, there is a 51 percentage-point gap between these two age groups in tertiary attainment levels. By contrast, in Germany and the United States, differences between age groups are very small; and in Israel, the proportion of younger adults with a tertiary education is slightly smaller than that for older adults.

In 2000, more adult men had university-level education than adult women. In 2011, the situation was reversed: 33% of women had attained tertiary education compared with 30% of men. In addition, among 30-34 year-olds, more than 40% of women have a tertiary education – about 8 percentage points higher than the rate for men. Tertiary attainment rates among young women have grown strongly in Australia, Canada, Ireland, Israel, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden, where at least 50% of younger women have attained tertiary education, compared with less than 50% of younger men.

Trends

Efforts to raise people's level of education have led to significant changes in attainment rates, particularly at the top and bottom ends of the education spectrum. Between 2000 and 2011 the proportion of adults with below upper secondary education shrank by almost 10 percentage points while tertiary attainment increased by about the same amount. Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary attainment levels have remained stable.

Definitions

“Adults” refers to the 25-64 year-old population; “younger adults” refers to 25-34 year-olds; “older adults” refers to 55-64 year-olds.

Data on population and education attainment for most countries are taken from OECD and Eurostat databases, which are compiled from National Labour Force Surveys.

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 A1).

Areas covered include:

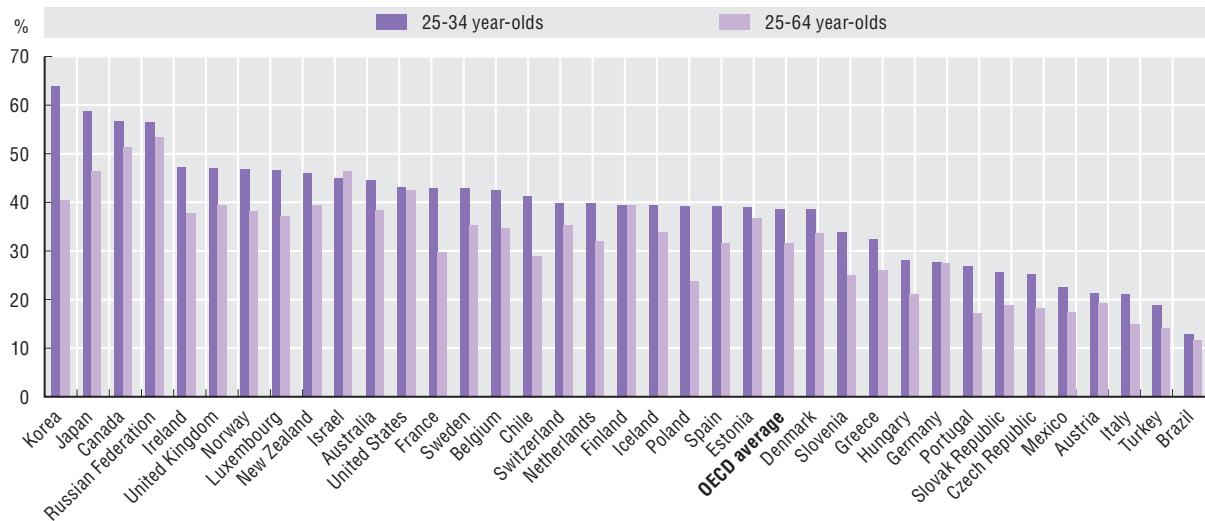
- Educational attainment of adults, by age group and by gender.

Further reading from OECD

Reviews of National Policies for Education (series)

Figure 1.1. **Population that has attained tertiary education, 2011**

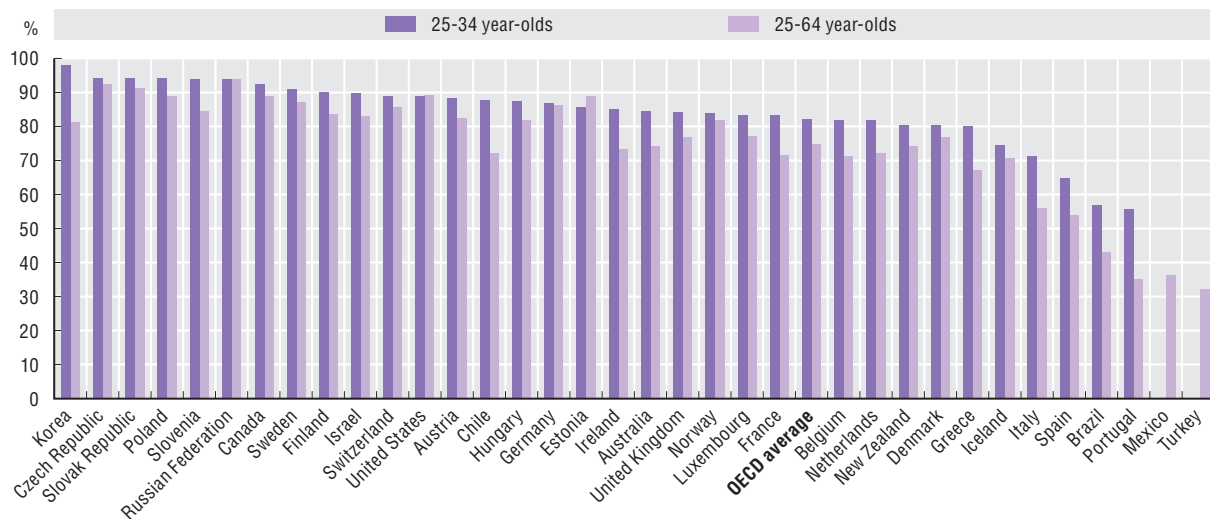
This figure shows the percentage of 25-34 year-olds and 25-64 year-olds who have been through tertiary education.



Source: OECD (2013), Education at a Glance 2013, Chart A1.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932846215>.

Figure 1.2. **Population that has attained at least upper secondary education, 2011**

This figure shows the percentage of 25-34 year-olds and 25-64 year-olds who have been through at least upper secondary education. The rapid expansion of education in recent decades means younger people tend to have higher levels of education.



Source: OECD (2013), Education at a Glance 2013, Table A1.2a, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932848039>.



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