

# 1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

## To what level have adults studied?

- On average across OECD countries, 26% of all adults have below upper secondary education, 44% upper secondary education and 30% tertiary education.
- Upper secondary education is the norm among younger adults in OECD countries, to a far greater extent than for older adults. In 2010, 25 OECD countries had upper secondary attainment rates of 80% or more among 25-34 year-olds.
- The rate of tertiary attainment is also higher among younger adults, reaching 38% of 25-34 year-olds.

### Significance

Education is important for both the present, giving individuals the knowledge and skills to participate fully and effectively in society, and for the future, as it helps expand scientific and cultural knowledge. The level to which adults have studied is often used as a proxy for the level of human capital – the skills available in the population and labour force. The global economic crisis has provided an additional incentive for people to build their skills, in difficult economic circumstances.

### Findings

Across almost all OECD countries, upper secondary attainment is the norm. On average, 74% of 25-64 year-olds have achieved this level, compared with 82% for 25-34 year-olds. However, levels vary between countries. For instance in Brazil, China, Mexico, Portugal and Turkey roughly half of this age group have not completed secondary school.

Some countries have seen dramatic increases in upper secondary attainment rates from generation to generation. In Chile, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Portugal and Spain upper secondary attainment rates for 25-34 year-olds are at least 30 percentage points higher than for older adults (55-64 year-olds).

Differences between age groups are less pronounced in countries with traditionally high levels of upper secondary attainment. For instance, in Estonia, Germany and Norway, the upper secondary attainment rate is less than 5 percentage points higher for 55-64 year-olds than for 25-34 year-olds. In the United States, it has decreased slightly. Among non-OECD G20 countries, Brazil, China and the Russian Federation all have made notable progress in increasing upper secondary attainment rates between generations.

Tertiary attainment levels have increased considerably over the past 30 years and nearly 210 million people in OECD countries have completed tertiary education. Canada, Japan, Korea and the Russian Federation have the highest proportion of young adults with tertiary education, with

55% or more of adults aged 25-34 having reached this level of education.

In almost all countries younger adults have higher rates of tertiary education than the generation about to leave the labour market. On average across OECD countries, 38% of 25-34 year-olds have completed tertiary education, compared with 23% of 55-64 year-olds.

### 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. On average among OECD countries, between 1997 and 2010, the proportion of adults who had not attained an upper secondary education fell from 36% to 26%, while the proportion completing tertiary education rose about 10 percentage points from 21%. The proportion completing upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education was almost unchanged, rising from 43% to 44%.

### Definitions

Data on population and education attainment 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 2012* (Indicator A1).

Areas covered include:

- Educational attainment of adults, by gender.
- Potential growth in population with tertiary attainment.

Additional data on gender gaps in vocational and tertiary education is available online in Indicator A1 at [www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012).

### Further reading from OECD

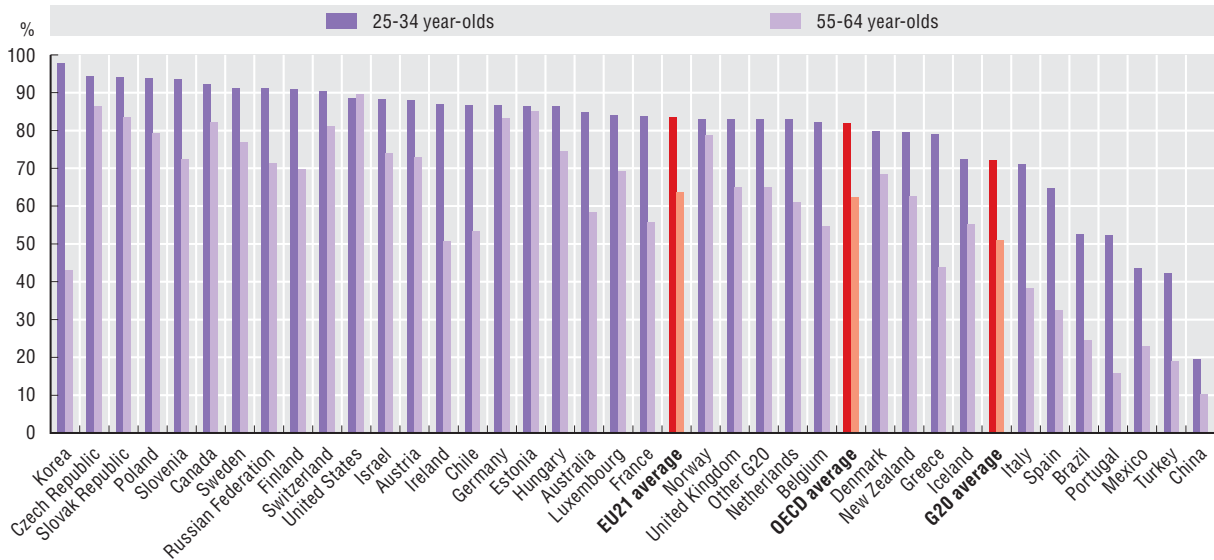
*Reviews of National Policies for Education* (series).

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Figure 1.1. **Population that has attained at least upper secondary education, 2010**

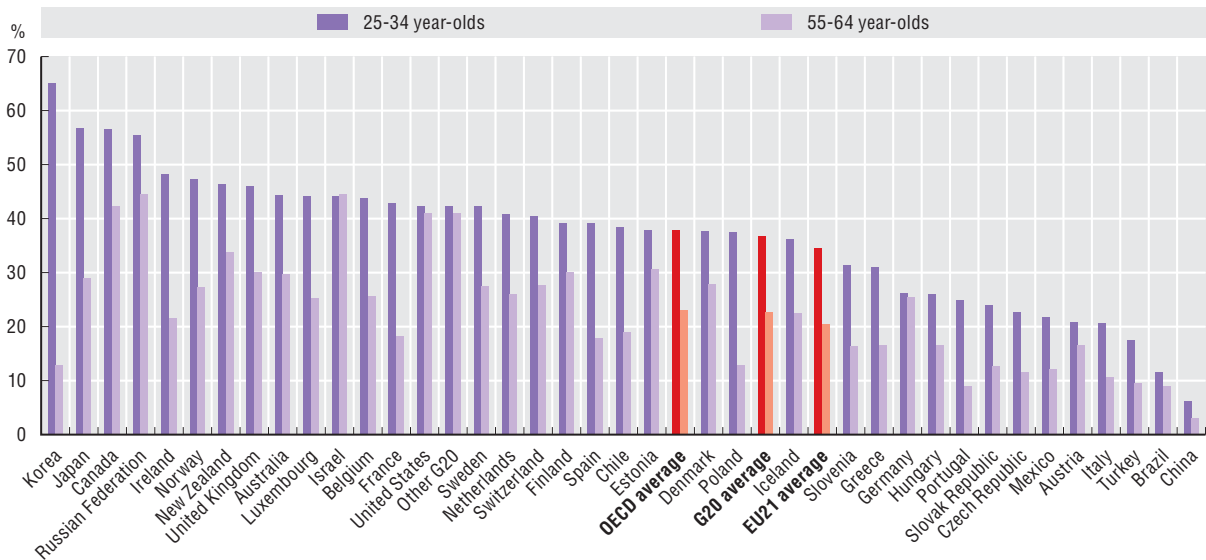
This figure shows the percentage of 25-34 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds who have been through at least upper secondary education. The rapid expansion of education in recent decades means younger people tend to have higher levels of education.



Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012*, Table A1.2a, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932664176>.

Figure 1.2. **Population that has attained tertiary education, 2010**

This figure shows the percentage of 25-34 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds who have been through tertiary education.



Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012*, Table A1.3a, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932664233>.



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