

1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

To what level have adults studied?

- On average across OECD countries, 27% of all adults have attained only primary or lower secondary levels of education, 44% upper secondary education and 30% tertiary level education.
- Upper secondary education is now the norm among younger adults in OECD countries, with substantially higher rates of attainment than among older adults.
- Among younger adults, the rate of tertiary attainment is also higher, reaching 37% 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. This spread shows the level to which adults have studied, a measure that is often used as a proxy to illustrate human capital, or the skills available in a population and labour force.

Findings

In 28 out of 33 OECD countries, 60% or more of all adults (25-64 year-olds) have completed at least upper secondary education, however levels vary between countries. For instance, in Brazil, Mexico, Portugal and Turkey, less than half of all adults have achieved this level of education.

Comparing younger adults (25-34 year-olds) with older adults (55-64 year-olds) shows marked progress with regard to attainment of upper secondary education. Across OECD countries, the proportion of younger adults who have attained at least upper secondary education is on average 20 percentage points higher than among older adults (81% versus 61%). This increase has been particularly dramatic in Chile, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Portugal and Spain, all of which have seen an increase in upper secondary attainment of at least 30 percentage points.

Differences between age groups are less pronounced in countries with generally high levels of educational attainment. In the 15 OECD countries where more than 80% of all adults have at least upper secondary attainment, the difference in the proportions of younger adults and older adults is, on average, 11 percentage points. In Germany and the United States, there is no significant difference between the two age groups. For countries with more room for growth, the average gain in attainment between the age groups is typically large, but situations differ widely. In Norway, the difference is 5 percentage points; in Korea it is 55 percentage points.

In almost all countries, younger adults have higher rates of tertiary attainment than the generation about to leave the labour market. On average across OECD countries, 30% of

all adults have completed tertiary education, but among younger adults this level rises to 37% while among the older age group it falls to 22%. The expansion of tertiary education differs greatly among countries. In France, Ireland, Japan and Korea there is a difference of 25 percentage points or more in the tertiary attainment of the oldest and youngest age groups.

Trends

Over the past decade, the major changes in educational attainment have been at either end of the skills distribution, with a fall in the number of people failing to complete upper secondary education and a rise in the number completing tertiary education (see Table A1.4 in *Education at a Glance 2011*). Between 1998 and 2009, the proportion of adults who had not completed upper secondary education fell from 37% to 27%, while the proportion completing tertiary education rose from 21% to 30%. The proportion completing upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education was almost unchanged, rising from 42% 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 2011* (Indicator A1).

Areas covered include:

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

Additional data on gender gaps in secondary and tertiary education is available online in Indicator A1 at www.oecd.org/edu/eag2011.

Further reading from the OECD

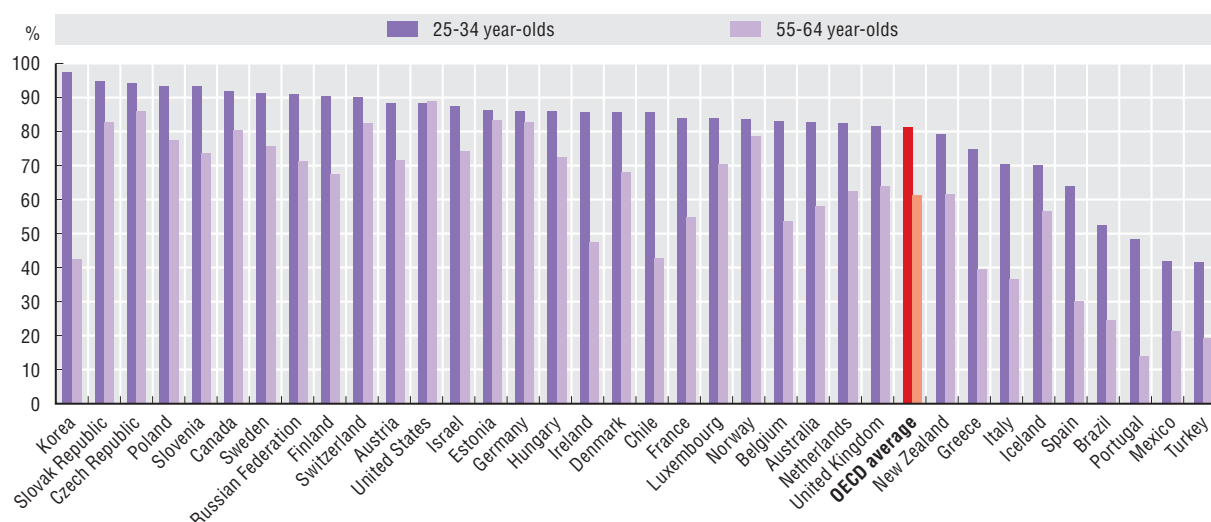
Reviews of National Policies for Education (series).

1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

To what level have adults studied?

Figure 1.1. **Population that has attained at least upper secondary education, 2009**

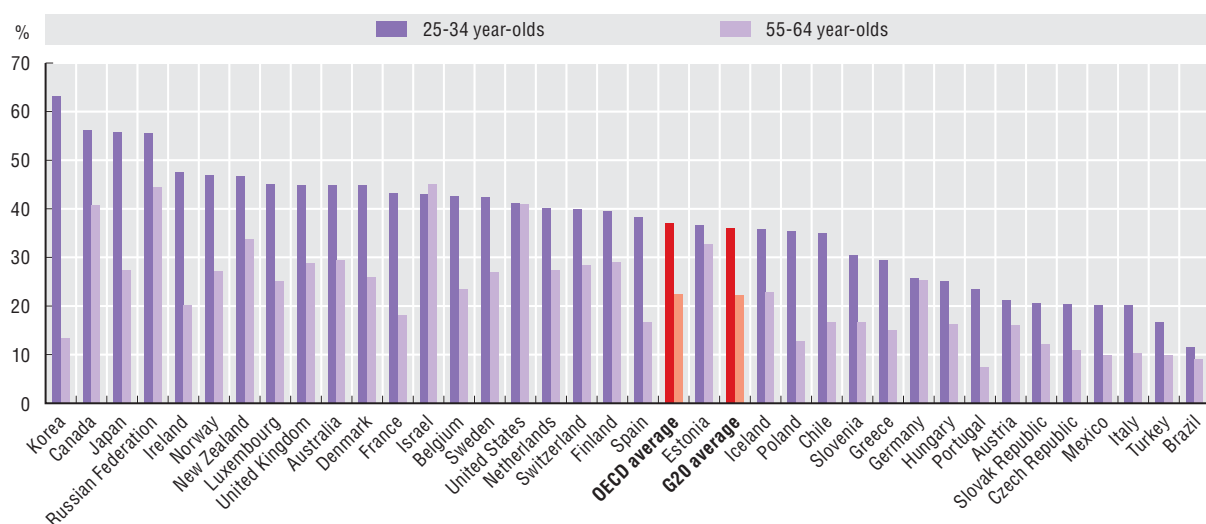
This figure shows the percentage of 25-34 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds who have been through at least upper secondary education. The rapid expansion of education in recent decades means younger people tend to have higher levels of education.



Source: OECD (2011), Education at a Glance 2011, Table A1.2a, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932462225>.

Figure 1.2. **Population that has attained tertiary education, 2009**

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



Source: OECD (2011), Education at a Glance 2011, Table A1.3a, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932462282>.



From:

Education at a Glance 2011 Highlights

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2011-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2011), "To what level have adults studied?", in *Education at a Glance 2011: Highlights*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2011-3-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.