

1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

To what level have adults studied?

- On average across OECD countries, 29% of all adults have attained only primary or lower secondary levels of education, 44% upper secondary education and 28% 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, tertiary attainment is also higher, reaching 35% 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 25 OECD countries, as well as Estonia, Israel, the Russian Federation and Slovenia, 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 Mexico, Portugal, Turkey and Brazil, this proportion falls to a third or less.

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. On average across OECD countries, the proportion of younger adults who have attained at least upper secondary education is 22 percentage points higher than among older adults, 80% versus 58%. This increase has been particularly dramatic in Belgium, 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 12 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, 12 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 6 percentage points; in Korea it is 57 percentage points.

In almost all countries, younger adults have higher levels of tertiary attainment than the generation about to leave the labour market. On average across OECD countries, 28% of all adults have completed tertiary education, but among younger adults this level rises to 35% while among the older age group it falls to 20%. The expansion of tertiary education differs substantially among countries. In 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 2010*). Between 1998 and 2008, the proportion of adults who had not completed upper secondary education fell from 37 to 29%, while the proportion completing tertiary education rose from 21 to 28%. 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 2010* (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 are available online in Indicator A1 at www.oecd.org/edu/eag2010.

Further reading from OECD

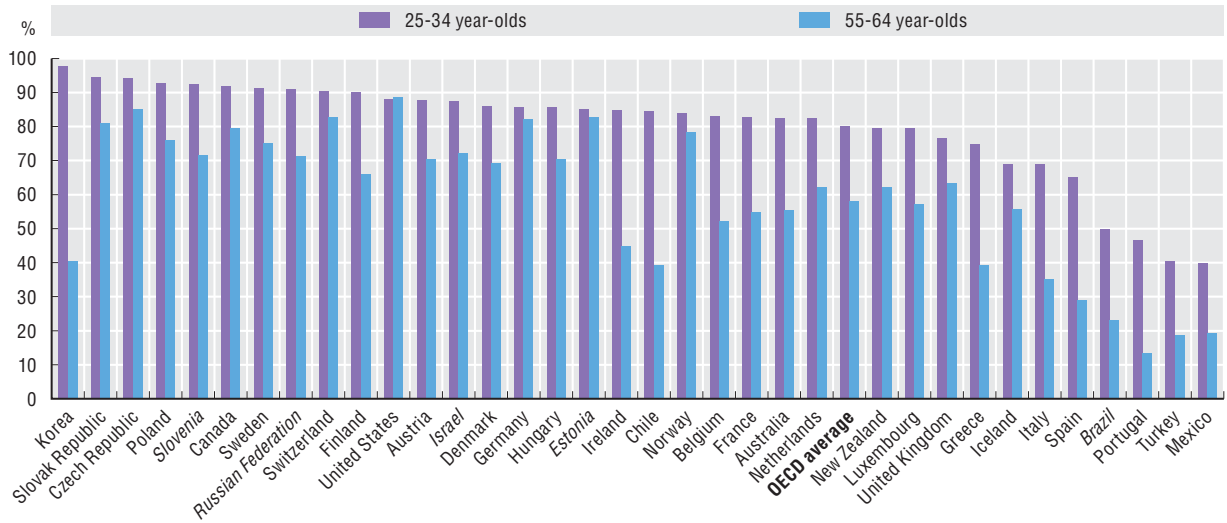
Reviews of National Policies for Education (series).

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Figure 1.1. **Population that has attained at least upper secondary education, 2008**

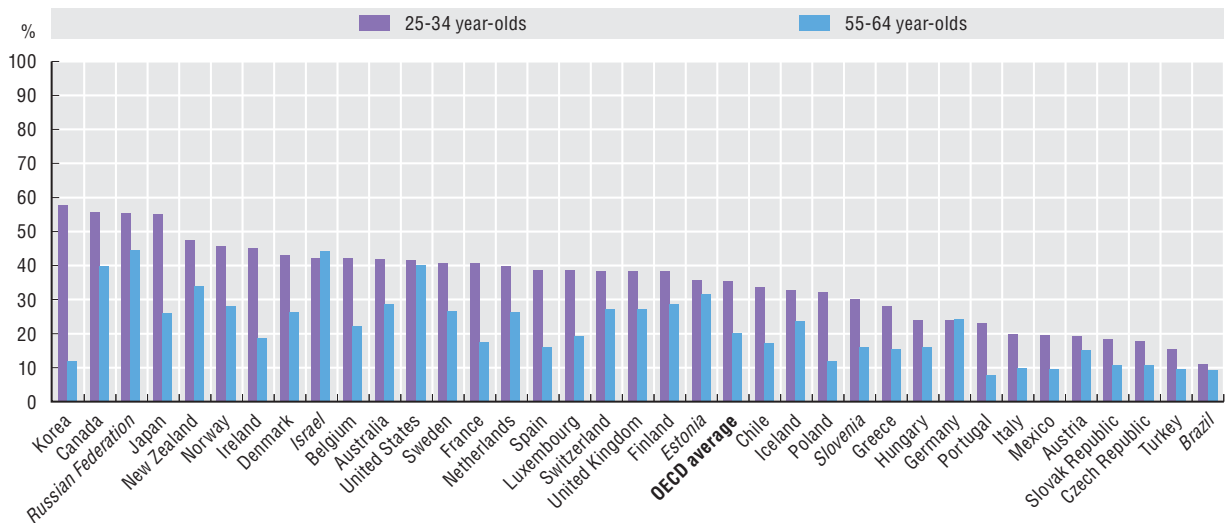
This figure shows the percentage of 25-34 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds who have been through at least upper secondary education. The rapid expansion of education in recent decades means younger people tend to have higher levels of education.



Source: OECD (2010), *Education at a Glance 2010*, Table A1.2a, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310092>.

Figure 1.2. **Population that has attained tertiary education, 2008**

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



Source: OECD (2010), *Education at a Glance 2010*, Table A1.3a, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310092>.



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