

1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

How many students graduate outside the normal age?

- In Denmark, Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway and Portugal, students over 25 years account for at least 10% of first-time graduation rates from upper secondary education.
- Graduation rates for mature students account for a quarter of the university graduation rate in Iceland, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden and Switzerland.
- Iceland and New Zealand offer the greatest range of possibilities for later graduation at both the upper secondary and tertiary levels.

Significance

Students typically graduate from upper secondary education in their late teens and from tertiary education by their mid-20s. However, in a number of countries some students study well beyond these age ranges. While some governments are taking measures to encourage students to make the most of their capacities by moving more rapidly into and through tertiary education, there is also value in ensuring that opportunities exist for people to complete their studies later in life so that they can equip themselves to compete in the labour market.

Findings

Completing upper secondary education is now considered the norm in most developed countries. In 21 of 28 countries with comparable data, first-time upper secondary graduation rates exceed 75%. However, not all students do so at the typical age of graduation, i.e. between the ages of 17 and 20. The reasons vary: Some countries, for example, offer a range of second chance or adult education programmes. In the Nordic countries, students can leave the education system relatively easily and re-enter at a later date: in Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway, first-time graduation rates for students older than 25 account for 10 percentage points or more. In Portugal, graduation rates in 2009 averaged 96% (34 percentage points higher than in 2008). More than one-third of these students were older than 25 thanks to *New Opportunities*, a programme introduced in 2005 to provide a second opportunity to individuals who left school early or are at risk of doing so, and to assist those who want to acquire further qualifications.

Adults who enter tertiary education after a period of work can raise their own human capital, improve the adaptability of the workforce to ongoing changes and help meet the demand for higher skills in the labour market. At tertiary level, where data are available for 23 countries, mature students have a high impact in Iceland, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden and Switzerland, where graduation rates for students aged over 30 account for a quarter or more of the total graduation rate.

Finland and Iceland are two countries with the most extensive possibilities for later graduation for adults at both the upper secondary and tertiary levels. However, staying longer in the school system also implies some additional costs, for example higher expenditure per student, foregone tax revenue and the delayed launch of one's career trajectory. Government authorities in some countries take this situation seriously.

For Israel, the high proportion of later graduations corresponds to the time spent in mandatory military service before embarking on tertiary studies.

Definitions

Data refer to the academic year 2008/09 and are based on the UOE data collection on education statistics administered by the OECD in 2010. Where data is available, upper secondary and tertiary graduation rates are calculated as net graduation rates, which represent the estimated percentage of the age cohort that will complete education at those levels. Tertiary graduates in this section refer only to those who obtain university degrees.

Information on data for Israel:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

Going further

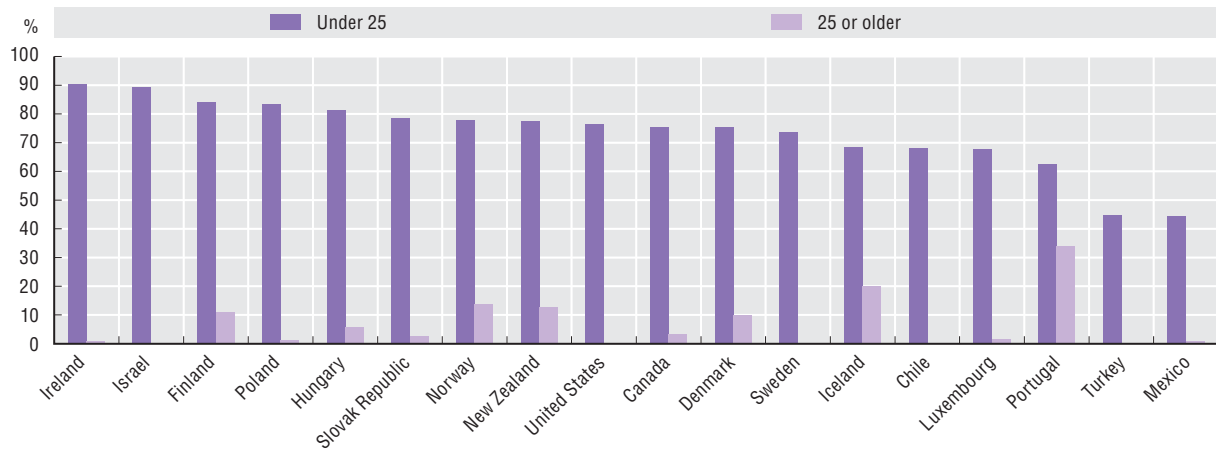
For additional material, notes and a full explanation of sourcing and methodologies, see *Education at a Glance 2011* (Indicators A2 and A3).

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How many students graduate outside the normal age?

Figure 1.11. **Upper secondary graduation rates beyond the usual age, 2009**

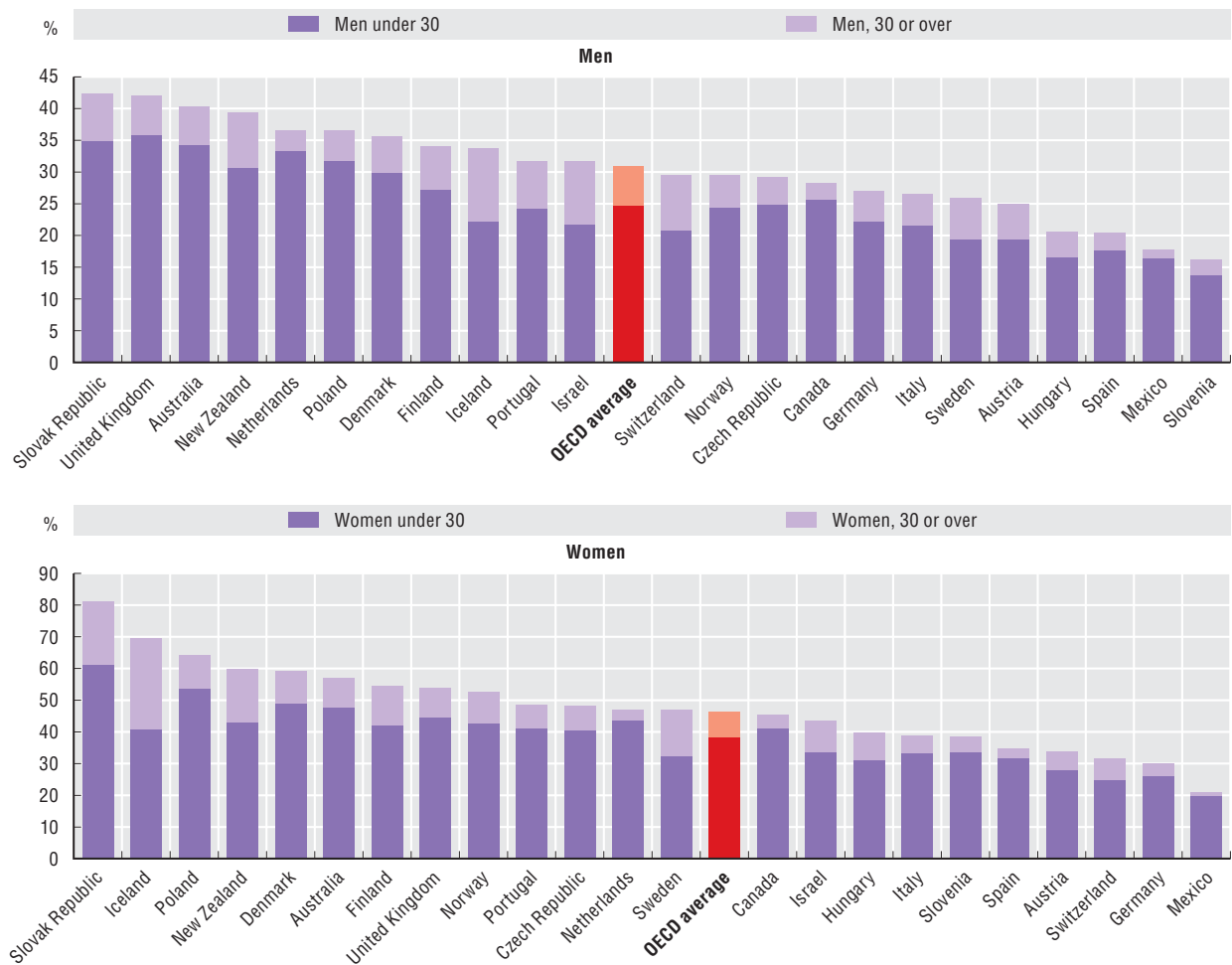
This figure shows the proportion of students graduating at age 25 or older from upper secondary education.



Source: OECD (2011), Education at a Glance 2011, Table A2.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932462358>.

Figure 1.12. **University-level graduation rates beyond the usual age, 2009**

This figure shows the proportion of students, by gender, graduating at age 30 or older from university-level education.



Source: OECD (2011), Education at a Glance 2011, Table A3.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932462434>.



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), "How many students graduate outside the normal age?", in *Education at a Glance 2011: Highlights*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2011-8-en

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