

# 1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

## How many students drop out of tertiary education?

- In the 19 OECD countries for which there is comparable data, an average of 31% of students drop out of tertiary education.
- Completion rates in university-level education (tertiary-type A) are higher than for vocationally oriented tertiary education (tertiary-type B).
- There is no clear relationship between completion rates and levels of tuition fees.

### Significance

Dropping out is not necessarily an indication of an individual student's failure: in some countries, even a year of tertiary-level education may significantly improve a student's job-market prospects, while in others students may be able to retain credits from an initial period of study and then complete their studies after entering the workforce. However, high dropout rates may be an important indicator of problems in educational systems: courses may not be meeting students' educational expectations or their labour market needs, and may run for longer than students can justify being outside the labour market.

### Findings

In the 19 OECD countries for which data are available, 31% of students fail to complete their course in tertiary education (making for a completion rate of 69%). Dropout rates range from more than 40% in Hungary, New Zealand and the United States to below 24% in Belgium (Fl.), Denmark, France, Germany and Japan.

At 69%, the average completion rate in university-level education (tertiary-type A) is higher than for vocationally oriented tertiary programmes (tertiary-type B), where it is around 62%.

Does the imposition of tuition fees make it more likely that students will complete their courses? The issue is much debated in OECD countries, but the data show no strong relationship between fee levels and completion rates. Tuition fees charged by university-level institutions exceed USD 1 500 in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. But at 58% in New Zealand and 56% in the United States, completion rates in two of these countries are well below the OECD average of 69%, while in the others they are above. In Denmark, where tuition fees are not imposed, completion rates stand at 81%.

Dropout rates can, of course, be a sign of problems in education systems, but it can be misleading to regard a student's decision not to finish a programme as a failure. As noted above, even limited exposure to tertiary-level education can improve job-market prospects in some countries, while students may also postpone completing their studies to work for a time. In addition, students may also be successfully re-oriented from one branch of education to another: in France, about 15% of tertiary-level students shift from university-level programmes to vocationally oriented tertiary education. Finally, some students may undertake tertiary studies with no intention of finishing a degree but simply to take particular courses for their own professional development.

### Definitions

Data on completion rates were collected through a special survey undertaken in 2007. In simplified terms, the completion rate is calculated as the ratio of the number of students who graduate from a degree programme against the number of students who entered the programme. Dropouts are defined as students who leave the specified level of education without graduating from a first qualification at that level.

### Going further

For additional material, notes and a full explanation of sourcing and methodologies, see *Education at a Glance 2008* (Indicator A4).

Areas covered include:

- Completion rates in tertiary education.
- Completion rates in tertiary education by mode of study.

### Further reading from OECD

*Higher Education Management and Policy* (journal).

*OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education* (series of national reviews).

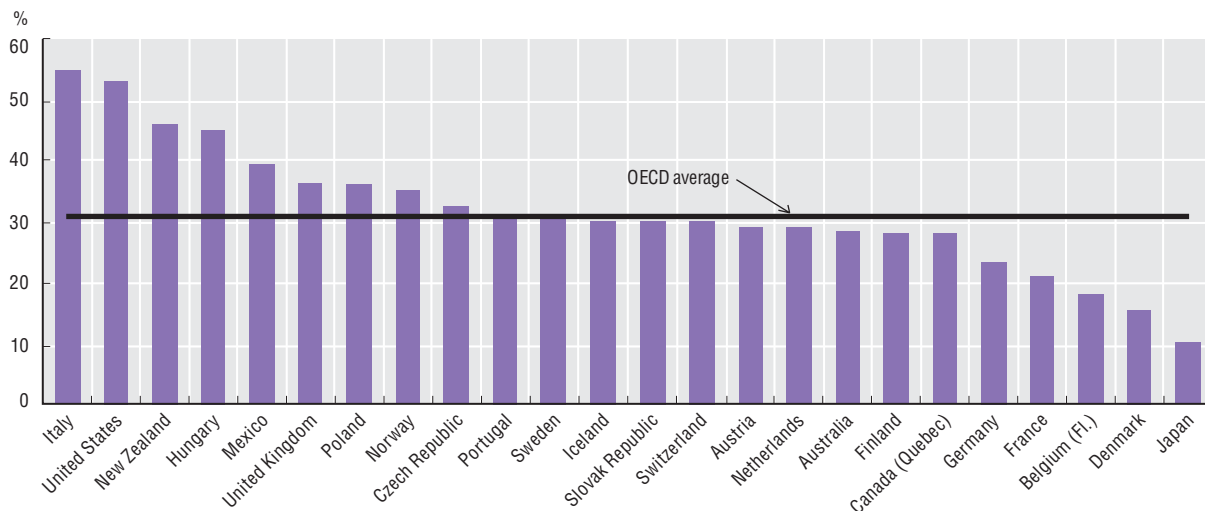
*Higher Education and Regions: Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged* (2007).

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## How many students drop out of tertiary education?

Figure 1.9. **Dropout rates in tertiary education, 2005**

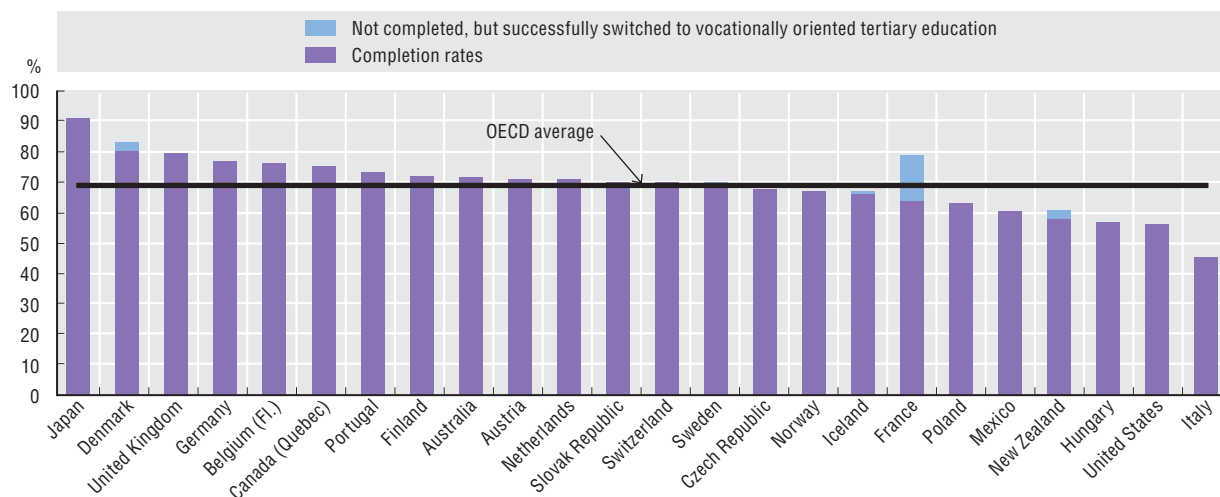
This figure shows the proportion of students who enter a tertiary programme but leave before completing a degree. On average, OECD countries have a dropout rate of about 31%.



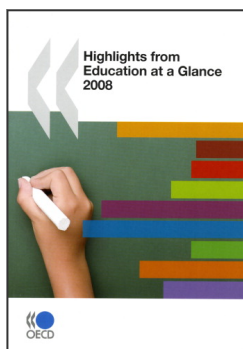
Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance 2008*, Table A4.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/401536355051>.

Figure 1.10. **Completion rates in university-level education, 2005**

This figure shows the proportion of students who complete a first degree in university-level education (tertiary-type A), or who successfully move over to a vocationally oriented tertiary programme (tertiary-type B).



Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance 2008*, Table A4.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/401536355051>.



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