

1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

To what level have adults studied?

- The numbers of people completing upper secondary and tertiary education have grown in almost all OECD countries.
- Among all adults (25-64 year-olds) in the OECD area, on average 42% have completed upper secondary education (including post-secondary non-tertiary education), and 27% tertiary education. Under a third – 31% – have gone no further than lower secondary education.
- Education levels tend to be higher among younger adults (25-34 year-olds), of whom 39% now have a tertiary qualification.

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 indicator 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 22 OECD countries, 60% or more of all adults (25-64 year-olds) have completed at least upper secondary education (the numbers are higher for younger adults, see “Trends” below). However, these levels are not matched in all countries. In Mexico, Portugal and Turkey, more than half of adults have not completed upper secondary education.

At higher levels of education, more than a quarter of all adults (27%), have on average completed tertiary education in the OECD area. Tertiary attainment rates range from 47% of adults in Canada to 10% in Turkey (see Table A1.3a in *Education at a Glance 2008*).

Trends

Education has expanded rapidly in recent decades, meaning that in many countries younger people tend to have spent longer in education than their older counterparts. On average across OECD countries, the proportion of younger adults (25-34 year-olds) who have attained upper secondary education is 23 percentage points higher than among older adults (55-64 year-olds).

In countries where all adults generally have high levels of educational attainment, this gap between older and younger age groups is less pronounced. In Germany and the United States, upper secondary attainment is almost the same across all age groups. In other countries, the gaps are wider, although they vary greatly. In Norway and Switzerland, the difference in upper secondary attainment between younger and older adults is below 10 percentage points. In Belgium, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain, it is at least 30 percentage points, while in Korea, which has seen a huge expansion in education provision in recent decades, the difference reaches 60 percentage points.

In almost all countries, younger adults are more likely to have attended university or other forms of tertiary education. On average across OECD countries, 33% of younger adults have attained tertiary education compared with 19% of older adults. In France, Ireland, Japan and Korea, the gap in tertiary attainment between the youngest and oldest groups of adults is at least 25 percentage points.

Definitions

Data on population and education attainment are taken from OECD and EUROSTAT databases, which are compiled from National Labour Force Surveys. Definitions of levels of education are based on the ISCED classification.

Going further

For additional material, notes and a full explanation of sourcing and methodologies, see *Education at a Glance 2008* (Indicator A1).

Areas covered include:

- Educational attainment of adults (aged 25 to 64).
- Educational attainment, by gender.

Further reading from OECD

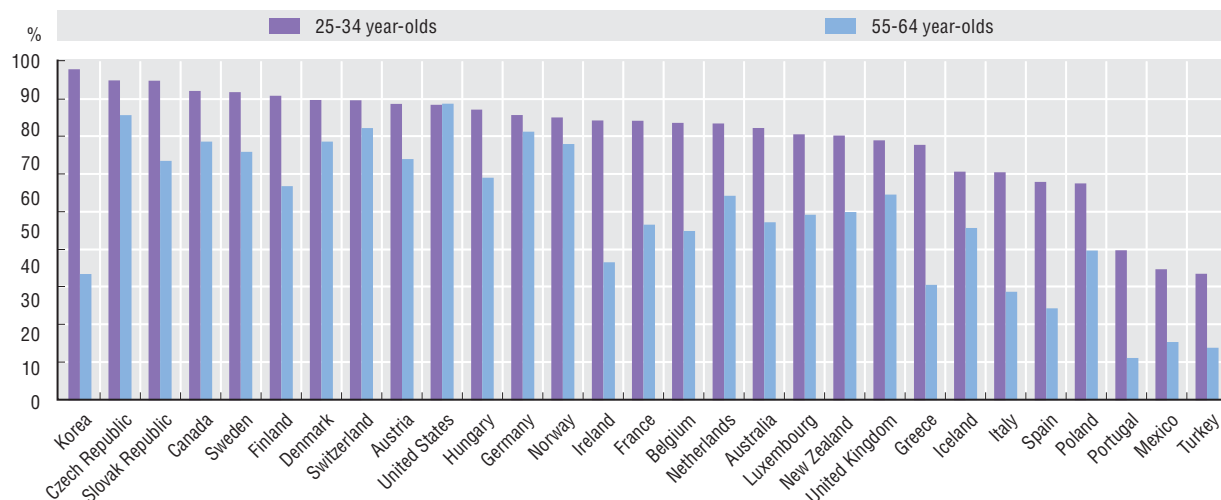
Reviews of National Policies for Education (series).

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Figure 1.1. Population that has attained upper secondary education, 2006

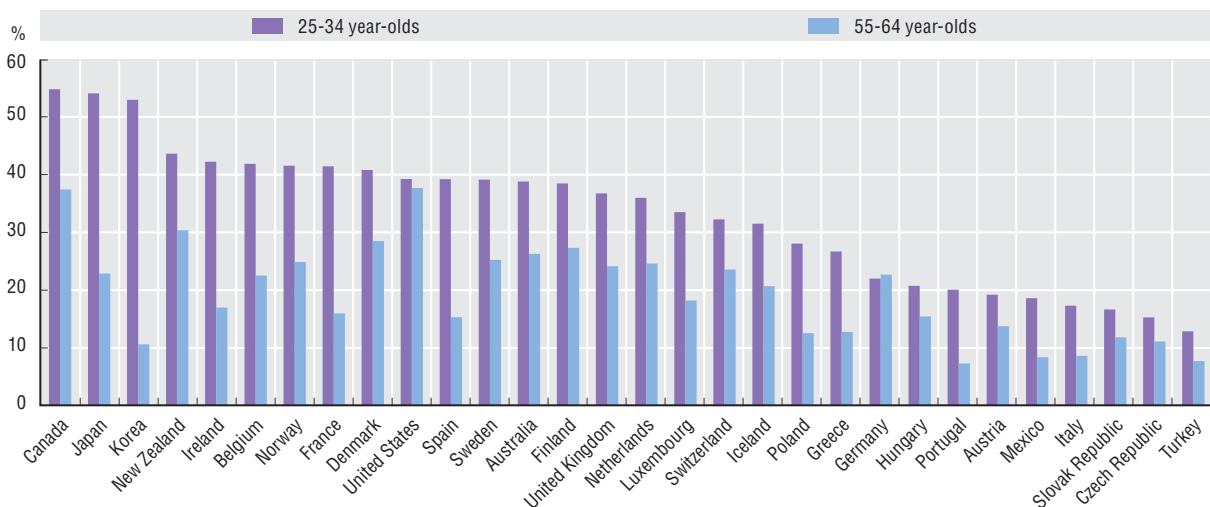
This figure shows the percentage of 25-34 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds who have been through at least upper secondary education. The rapid expansion of education in recent decades means younger people tend to have higher education levels.



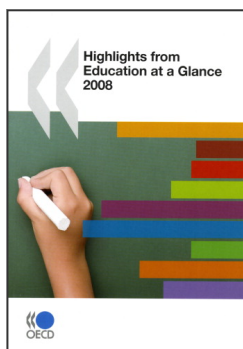
Source: OECD (2008), Education at a Glance 2008, Table A1.2a, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/401474646362>.

Figure 1.2. Population that has attained tertiary education, 2006

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



Source: OECD (2008), Education at a Glance 2008, Table A1.3a, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/401474646362>.



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