

# 1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

## What subjects did adults study in tertiary education?

- Social sciences, business, and law forms the main field of study in most countries.
- On average, three-and-a-half times more younger adults (25-34 year-olds) have studied social sciences, business and law than among older adults (55-64 year-olds).
- The number of people who have studied education has remained largely stable across generations and among OECD countries.

### Significance

This indicator examines the distribution of skills in the population, particularly the skills that young people are bringing with them as they enter the labour market and the skills the labour market is losing as older workers retire.

### Findings

As Figure 1.1 showed, younger adults (25-34 year-olds) are more likely than older adults (55-64 year-olds) to have attended university or other forms of tertiary education. In addition, the fields of study often differ between the age groups, which is helping to shift the balance of skills in the workforce (see “Trends” below).

Among all adults (25-64 year-olds) who have attained tertiary or postgraduate education in the OECD area, social sciences, business and law is the main field of study, accounting for 28% of the total. This is followed by engineering, 15%; education, 14%; health and welfare, 13%; arts and humanities, 12%; and science 10%. The remaining 7% is accounted for by services, agriculture and other fields.

Although social sciences, business and law are dominant in most OECD countries, there are some exceptions. In Ireland, science is the leading field of study (23%); in Norway, it is education (20%); in Finland and the Slovak Republic, engineering (27% and 26% respectively); and in Denmark, health and welfare (34%).

### Trends

The predominance of social sciences, business, and law is largely driven by increases in the numbers of

younger adults who have studied in these fields – three-and-a-half-times more than among older adults. This change reflects increases in attainment levels in general as well as the fact that many younger individuals have been attracted to this area of study.

In most OECD countries the numbers of people studying education has remained largely stable. But in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom, the number of young adults with qualifications in this area is too low to replace those older adults who are coming up to retirement, which could pose problems when it comes to finding replacements.

There are also large variations in the extent to which younger adults have chosen science or engineering compared with older adults. Supply levels in science have risen more than in engineering in all OECD countries, except Finland, Italy and Sweden.

### Definitions

Data on population and educational attainment are taken from OECD and EUROSTAT databases, which are compiled from National Labour Force Surveys. Data on fields of study originate from a special data collection by the Supply of Skills working group of INES Network B.

### 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:

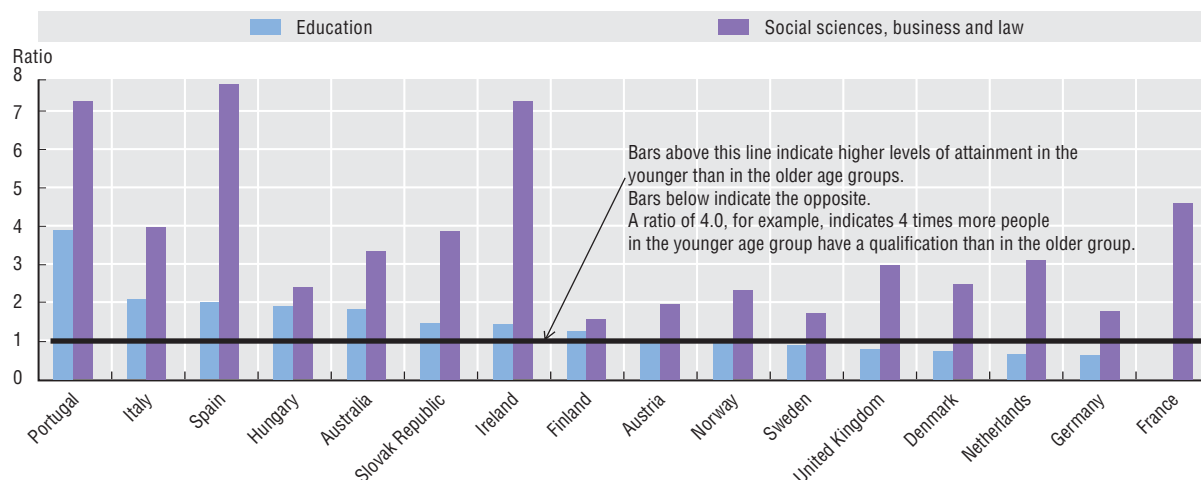
- Ratios for age groups by levels and areas of education.
- Relation between matching of higher educated to high skilled jobs.

# 1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

## What subjects did adults study in tertiary education?

Figure 1.3. **Generational differences in social sciences and in education, 2004**

This figure shows whether more young people have qualifications in certain areas than older people – or, specifically, the ratio of 25-39 year-olds to 55-64 year-olds with tertiary qualifications in education and social sciences, business and law.



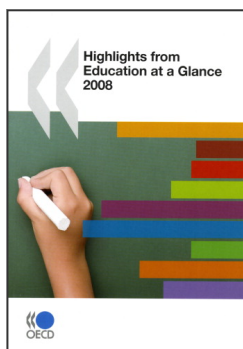
Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance 2008*, Table A1.4, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/401474646362>.

Table 1.1. **Fields of education, 2004**

This table shows the percentage of 25-64 year-olds with tertiary attainment (university-level education and advanced research programmes) in each field of education.

	Education	Arts and humanities	Social sciences, business and law	Science	Engineering	Agriculture	Health and welfare	Services	Other fields	Total
Australia	15	11	32	11	10	1	17	2	1	100
Austria	10	15	34	9	15	2	13	2	n	100
Belgium	4	15	30	13	19	2	12	2	3	100
Canada	16	12	34	12	11	2	12	2	n	100
Denmark	16	11	19	4	13	1	34	1	n	100
Finland	12	12	22	7	27	4	12	4	n	100
France	9	19	35	15	10	1	7	3	1	100
Germany	22	9	22	8	22	2	12	2	n	100
Hungary	27	5	23	4	21	6	9	5	n	100
Iceland	13	13	32	8	13	c	16	5	n	100
Ireland	12	13	22	23	11	2	10	3	5	100
Italy	4	19	33	12	14	2	15	1	n	100
Luxembourg	2	17	36	12	19	c	10	c	3	100
Mexico	5	17	31	11	13	3	11	7	1	100
Netherlands	20	8	30	6	12	2	17	3	2	100
Norway	20	7	18	4	6	1	12	3	29	100
Portugal	16	12	27	13	14	2	12	3	1	100
Slovak Republic	20	6	22	8	26	6	7	4	n	100
Spain	15	11	32	10	12	2	12	4	n	100
Sweden	22	7	24	7	15	1	19	3	1	100
United Kingdom	14	18	28	18	11	1	8	1	n	100
<b>OECD average</b>	14	12	28	10	15	2	13	3	2	100

Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance 2008*, Table A1.4, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/401474646362>.



**From:**  
**Highlights from Education at a Glance 2008**

**Access the complete publication at:**  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264040625-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

OECD (2009), "What subjects did adults study in tertiary education?", in *Highlights from Education at a Glance 2008*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1787/eag\\_highlights-2008-4-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2008-4-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](mailto: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](mailto:info@copyright.com) or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at [contact@cfcopies.com](mailto:contact@cfcopies.com).