

# 1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

## To what level have adults studied?

- About 75% of adults on average in OECD countries have attained at least upper secondary education.
- In some OECD countries, younger adults have higher tertiary attainment rates than older adults, leading by more than 20 percentage points on average.
- Women aged 25-34 have higher attainment rates in both upper secondary and tertiary education than men of the same age.

### Significance

Education is important both for the present and for the future. The level to which adults have studied is often used as a measure of human capital and the level of an individual's skills – in other words the skills available in the population and labour force. Higher levels of educational attainment are strongly associated with better health, more social engagement and higher employment rates, and are seen as a gateway to better jobs and higher relative earnings. Individuals have strong incentives to pursue more education, and governments have incentives to build on the skills of the population through education.

### Findings

Almost all OECD countries have seen significant increases in educational attainment in recent decades, with upper secondary attainment becoming the norm and tertiary education on the rise. About 80% of younger adults have attained at least upper secondary education compared with 75% of all adults. On average, about 45% of the adult population across OECD countries have attained an upper secondary education as their highest qualification; this figure reaches more than 60% in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and the Slovak Republic. Gender differences in educational attainment have also evolved over the years. On average, 84% of younger women today have attained at least an upper secondary education compared with 81% of younger men.

Even if tertiary attainment rates have increased by 10 percentage points, among OECD countries since 2000, only about 34% of adult women and 31% of adult men attain tertiary education. In some OECD countries, younger adults have higher rates of tertiary education than older adults, especially among younger women who lead older women by an average of more than 20 percentage points in all countries. In some countries, the difference between generations is significant. In Korea, for example, there is a 52 percentage-point gap between these two age groups in tertiary attainment levels. By contrast, in Germany, Israel and the United States, difference between age groups is less than 3 percentage points.

In 2000, more men had university-level education than women. In 2012, the situation was reversed: 34% of women

had attained a tertiary education compared with 31% of men. Tertiary attainment rates among young women are highest in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United Kingdom, where at least one in two young women have attained tertiary education.

### Trends

Efforts to raise people's level of education have led to significant changes in attainment rates, particularly at the top and bottom ends of the education spectrum. Between 2000 and 2012, the proportion of people without upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education shrank at an average annual rate of about 3% while tertiary attainment increased by more than 3% each year. For the first time, in 2012, about one in three adults in OECD countries held a tertiary qualification. Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary attainment levels have remained stable.

### Definitions

"Adults" refers to the 25-64 year-old population; "younger adults" refers to 25-34 year-olds; "older adults" refers to 55-64 year-olds.

Data on population and education attainment for most countries 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 2014* (Indicator A1).

Areas covered include:

- Educational attainment of adults, by age and by gender.
- Adult skills and educational attainment (see Special chapter: Skills for life, p. 71).

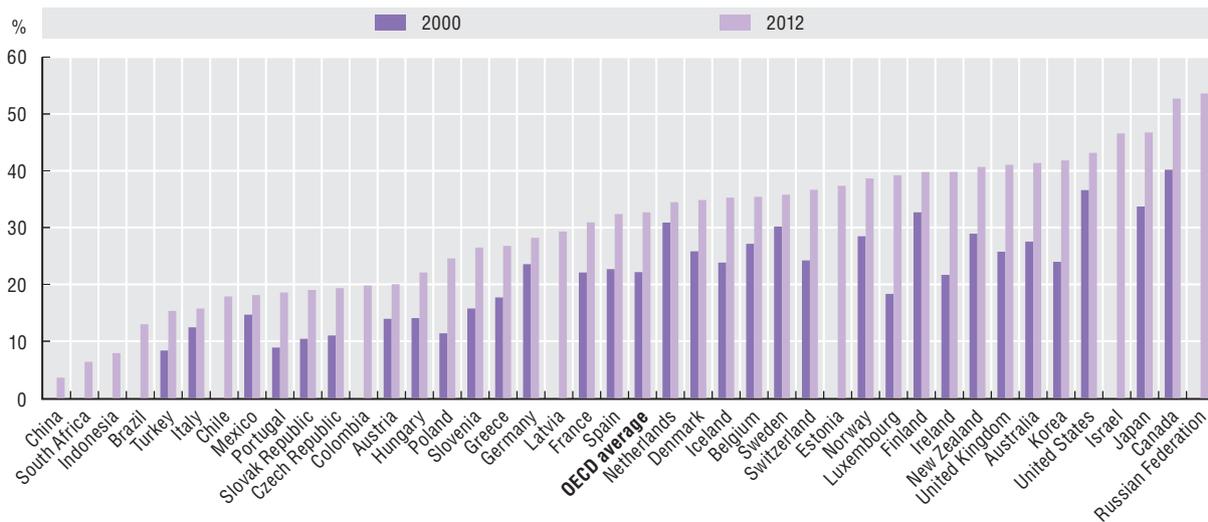
### Further reading from OECD

*Reviews of National Policies for Education* (series).

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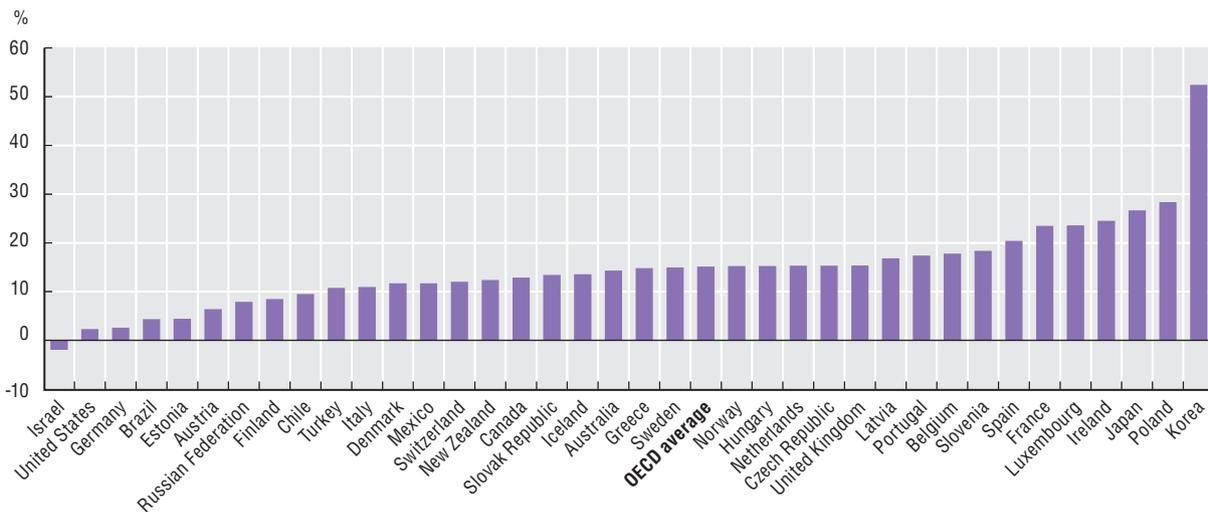
**Figure 1.1. Population that has attained tertiary education, 2012**  
 This figure shows the percentage of 25-64 year-olds who have been through tertiary education.



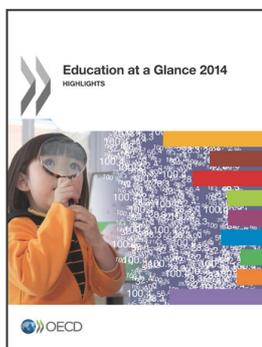
Source: OECD (2014), Education at a Glance 2014, Chart A1.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933114951>.

**Figure 1.2. Percentage-point difference between younger and older tertiary-educated adults, 2012**

This figure shows the percentage-point difference between the proportion of 25-34 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds who have attained tertiary education. The rapid expansion of education in recent decades means younger people tend to have higher levels of education.



Source: OECD (2014), Education at a Glance 2014, Chart A1.3, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933114989>.



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