

CO9: Educational attainment by gender and average years spent in formal education

Definitions and methodology

This indicator measures educational attainment of the adult population in terms of their successful completion of formal education programmes. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is used to define levels of education (Annex 3 of *OECD Education at a Glance*).

Successful attainment of an upper secondary education (ISCED 3) refers to those programmes of at least two years duration post compulsory schooling (which are usually completed around age 16) and do not include short duration work-orientated programmes. The attainment level of at least tertiary education includes programmes leading to a graduate degree (ISCED 5) and an advanced research qualification (ISCED 6).

Educational attainment can also be expressed by average years in formal education (Table CO9.1) for those who have successfully attained a given education level (e.g. for those who do not complete lower secondary education, only the years in primary school are counted). In this case, educational attainment is calculated by summing the proportion of the population that have attained each education level as a percentage of the weighted typical duration of each ISCED level. For example, if 50% of the population receive a university degree and the weighted typical duration of this type of programme is 3 years, educational attainment (expressed in average years) would be 1.5 years. These average years are summed together for each different level of education (e.g. secondary school, university) to calculate the average number of years of successfully completed formal education.

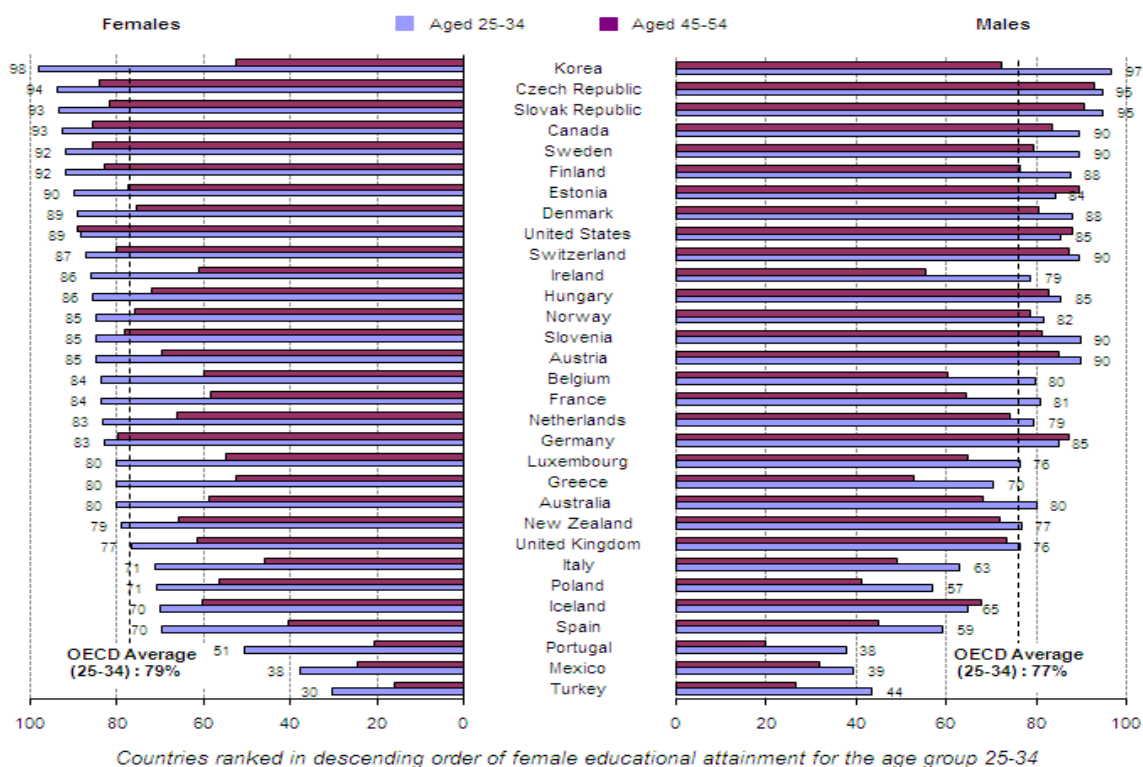
Key findings

Chart CO9.1 presents upper secondary attainment by gender and two age cohorts; recent graduates (25 to 34 years old) and those aged twenty years older (45 to 54 years old). In most countries there has been a large increase in the percentage of the population having attained upper secondary level qualifications and particularly among women. While among the youngest age group (24 to 34 years old) almost 80% of women attained at least upper secondary level, only 63% of women in the oldest age group (45 to 54 years old) had reached this level. The largest gains have been made in Korea, Portugal and Spain.

The proportion of young people, and women in particular, obtaining university (or tertiary) level qualifications has increased at an even faster rate (Chart CO9.2). By 2006, the proportion of women aged 25 to 34 with a university degree or more was higher than that of men in the same age group (37% and 30%, correspondingly), except for Mexico, Switzerland and Turkey.

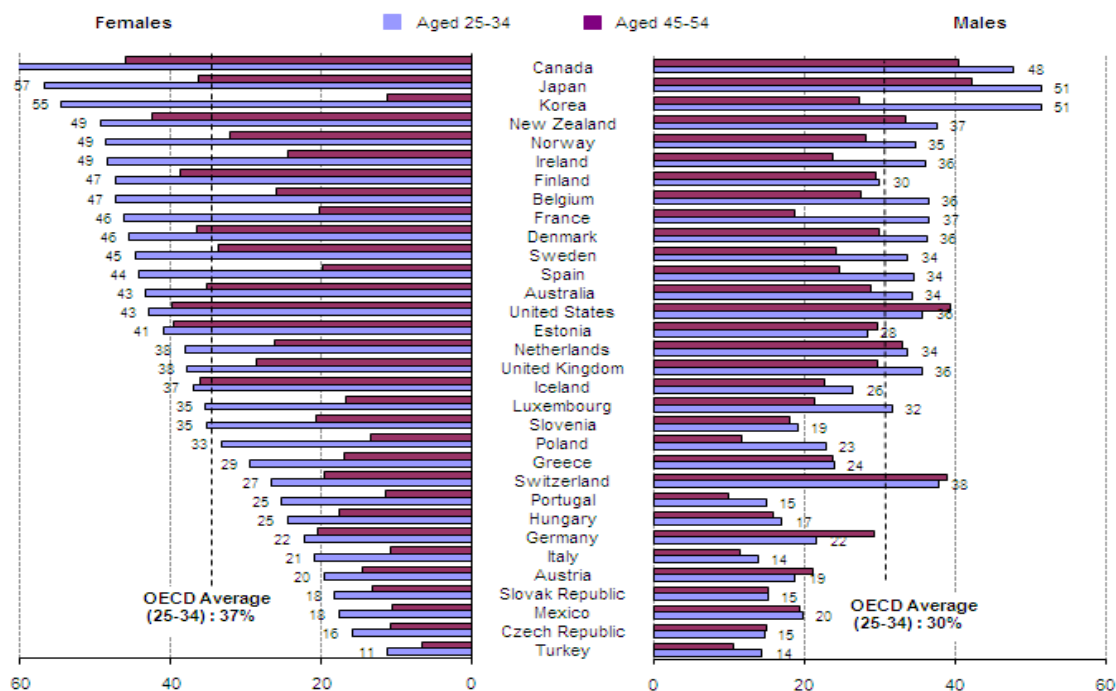
Other relevant indicators: LMF4: Employment profiles over the life course; LMF6: Male and female earnings in family income of couple families; PF4: Gender neutrality in tax/benefit systems; CO10: Gender choices in fields of study; CO13: Youths not in education or employment; and, CO12: Literacy scores by gender at age 15.

Chart CO9.1 Percentage of population that has attained at least upper secondary education, by gender and age group, 2006



Countries ranked in descending order of female educational attainment for the age group 25-34

Chart CO9.2 Percentage of population that has attained tertiary education, by gender and age group, 2006



Countries ranked in descending order of female educational attainment for the age group 25-34

Comparability and data issues

Data on population and educational attainment are taken from the OECD and EUROSTAT databases.

Although the guidelines on categorization of educational programmes (ISCED) are comprehensive, it is possible that a formal education programme in one country is classified differently than in another. Thus, a vocational education programme may be classified as upper secondary education whilst in others it might be classified as a tertiary education programme. For example, in Belgium, Canada, Finland, Japan and Sweden a high proportion of university graduates have obtained what some other countries would classify as vocational type qualifications.

Average years of successfully completed formal education, however, are not a perfect indicator of cross-country differences in educational attainment across the population. Broadly speaking this is because of two reasons. First, within an education level, there are cross- and within country differences in the time taken to successfully complete an educational programme. For example, a degree course in law or medicine may lead to a similar level of education attainment as a degree in computer sciences but may take considerably longer to complete. Also, there are cross-country differences in years of study required for similar degrees in similar fields of study.

Second, data for Australia, Austria, Japan, New Zealand and Poland assume that all children complete compulsory education. Data for other countries suggest, however, that a significant proportion of children drop out before completing the period of mandatory schooling; in 2006, this proportion ranged from 1% in Denmark, 7% in the Netherlands, to over 50% in Mexico and Turkey. Therefore, the data for Australia, Austria, Japan, New Zealand and Poland may overestimate the proportion of children who attain lower secondary education, and thus overestimate the average years of successfully completed formal education.

Table CO9.1: Educational attainment expressed as average number of years of successfully completed formal education (2004).

<i>Average years of schooling weighted by proportion of the population participating in different levels of educations</i>											
	25-to-64-year-old population										
	Total ¹	Males ¹	Females ¹	Males ²				Females ²			
				25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64
Australia	12.6	12.8	12.5	13.2	12.8	12.7	12.2	13.3	12.4	12.3	11.7
Austria	12.0	12.3	11.7	12.4	12.4	12.2	12.0	12.3	12.0	11.4	10.8
Belgium	11.3	11.4	11.4	12.4	11.7	11.1	10.3	12.8	11.9	10.7	9.5
Canada	13.2	13.2	13.3	13.6	13.3	13.0	12.2	14.1	13.6	13.0	11.8
Czech Republic	12.5	12.6	12.4	12.6	12.8	12.6	12.5	12.8	12.6	12.1	11.9
Denmark	13.4	13.5	13.3	13.6	13.6	13.4	13.6	13.6	13.3	13.3	13.0
Finland	11.2	10.9	11.4	12.5	12.3	10.5	8.5	13.5	13.0	11.2	8.5
France	11.6	11.7	11.4	12.8	12.1	11.3	10.3	13.1	12.0	10.7	9.6
Germany	13.4	13.7	13.2	13.6	13.8	13.8	13.7	13.5	13.4	13.2	12.5
Greece	10.9	11.0	10.7	11.9	11.7	10.9	9.4	12.6	11.7	10.0	8.2
Hungary	11.7	11.8	11.6	12.1	12.1	12.0	11.3	12.4	12.1	11.5	10.5
Iceland	10.5	9.7	11.4	10.1	10.4	9.2	9.0	12.6	11.9	10.5	9.7
Ireland	13.0	12.9	13.1	14.0	13.4	12.3	11.2	14.5	13.6	12.5	11.4
Italy	10.1	10.2	10.0	11.2	10.5	10.0	8.7	11.7	10.7	9.5	7.6
Japan ³	12.4	12.6	12.1	13.3	13.3	12.4	11.2	13.2	12.9	11.9	10.5
Korea	12.0	12.5	11.4	13.7	13.2	11.6	10.2	13.6	12.2	10.0	8.0
Luxembourg	13.3	13.6	13.0	14.2	13.5	13.5	13.1	14.1	13.3	12.6	11.6
Mexico	8.8	9.1	8.6	9.5	9.4	8.8	7.8	9.4	8.9	8.0	7.1
Netherlands	11.2	11.4	11.1	12.0	11.5	11.3	10.6	12.5	11.4	10.5	9.8
New Zealand	12.6	12.6	12.6	11.8	11.4	11.0	9.6	12.1	11.5	10.7	8.4
Norway	13.9	13.9	13.9	14.2	14.1	13.7	13.4	14.7	14.2	13.8	13.1
Poland	11.8	11.6	11.9	12.2	11.7	11.4	11.0	12.9	12.2	11.7	10.7
Portugal	8.5	8.3	8.7	9.3	8.4	7.8	7.3	10.3	8.8	7.9	7.2
Slovak Republic	12.5	12.5	12.4	12.8	12.7	12.6	12.1	13.0	12.7	12.4	11.3
Spain	10.6	10.6	10.6	11.9	11.2	10.1	8.9	12.5	11.4	9.7	8.0
Sweden	12.6	12.4	12.8	13.1	12.7	12.2	11.3	13.6	13.0	12.7	11.8
Switzerland	13.0	13.5	12.5	13.7	13.7	13.5	13.2	13.0	12.7	12.3	11.7
Turkey	9.6	9.9	9.2	10.3	9.8	9.6	9.2	9.6	9.1	8.9	8.6
United Kingdom	12.6	12.7	12.4	13.0	12.6	12.7	12.4	12.9	12.4	12.3	12.0
United States	13.3	13.2	13.4	13.1	13.2	13.4	13.2	13.4	13.4	13.5	13.1
OECD average	11.9	11.9	11.8	12.5	12.2	11.7	11.0	12.8	12.1	11.4	10.3
EU19 average	11.8	11.8	11.7	12.5	12.1	11.7	11.0	12.9	12.2	11.4	10.3

¹ data concern 2004

² data for age groups concern 2003

³ Year of reference is 2003

Sources and further reading: *OECD Education database* and *OECD Education at a Glance 2008* (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2008). For details on country's mapping of national programmes to ISCED please refer to Annex 3 of *OECD Education at a Glance 2008*.