

CHAPTER 1

TO WHAT LEVEL HAVE ADULTS STUDIED?

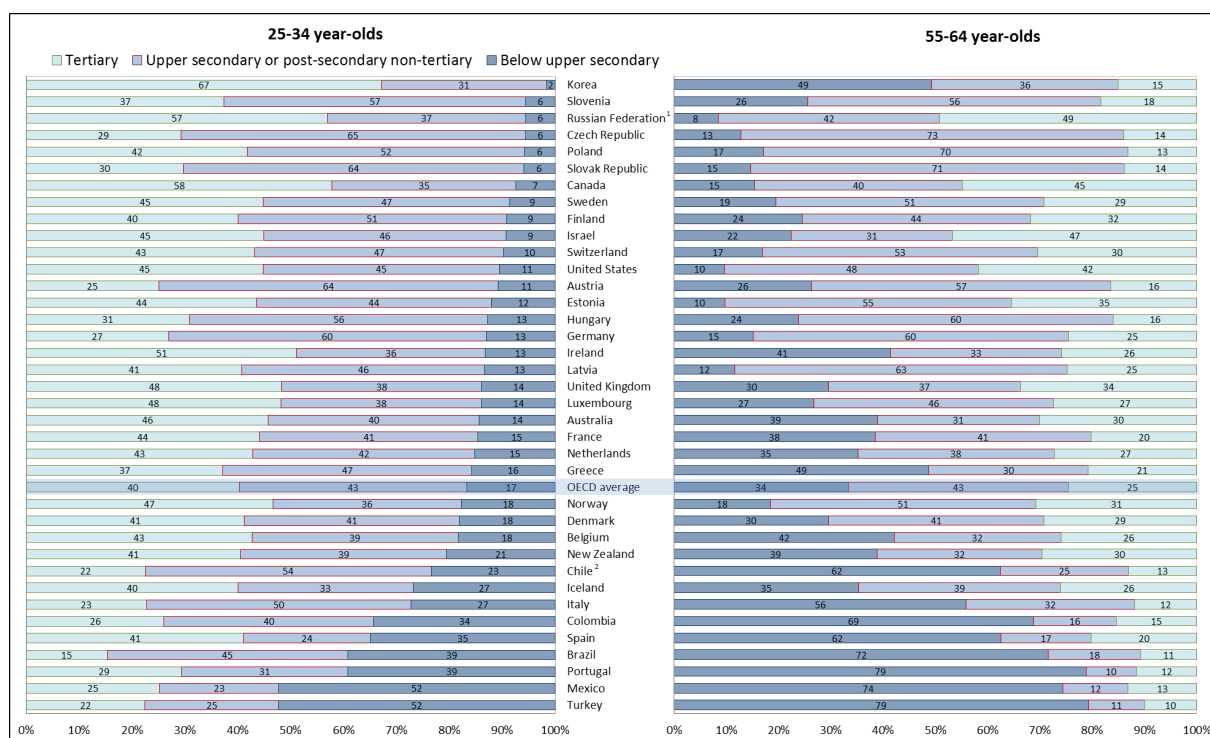
The level of educational attainment shows the percentage of a population that has reached a certain level of education and holds a qualification at that level. Educational attainment is frequently used as a measure of human capital and the level of an individual's skills – in other words, a measure of the skills associated with a given level of education and available in the population, and the labour force. In this sense, qualifications certify and offer information on the type of knowledge and skills that graduates have acquired in formal schooling.

Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with several positive individual and social outcomes. Data in previous editions of *Education at a Glance* have shown that individuals with high educational attainment generally have better health, are more socially engaged, have higher employment rates and have higher relative earnings. Higher proficiency on skills such as literacy and numeracy is also strongly associated with higher levels of formal education.

Individuals thus have strong incentives to pursue more education, and governments have incentives to provide appropriate infrastructure and organisation to support further progress in education of the population. Over the past decades, almost all OECD countries have seen significant increases in the educational attainment of their populations, especially among the younger generations.

Chart 1.1 shows the educational attainment of younger and older adults (25-34 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds) across OECD countries, distributed by three aggregated levels of education: below upper secondary, upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary and tertiary education. In most OECD countries more than four out of five younger adults have attained at least an upper secondary education, implying that less than 20% of them have low qualifications (below upper secondary education) (Table 1.4).

Chart 1.1. Educational attainment among younger and older adults (2013)
25-34 year-olds and 55-64 year-olds



Note: Data for Japan are not displayed because disaggregation between below upper secondary education and upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary level is not available.

1. Year of reference 2012.

2. Year of reference 2011.

Countries are ranked in ascending order of the proportion of 25-34 year-olds with attainment below upper secondary education.

Source: OECD. Table 1.4. See Annex for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).

At the other end of the education spectrum, on average across OECD countries, 40% of younger adults have attained a tertiary qualification. National differences are wide around this average: in Canada, Ireland, Japan and Korea, the majority of young adults hold a tertiary qualification, while it is the case for less than 30% in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Portugal and Turkey and the partner countries Brazil and Colombia. It should be noted that Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany and the Slovak Republic have extensive upper secondary vocational systems, resulting in 60% or more of their young adult populations attaining upper secondary education and low proportions with less than an upper secondary education (11%, 6%, 13% and 6% respectively). Therefore, these countries belong to the group with low proportions of young adults with low skills, while Italy, Mexico, Portugal and Turkey have some of the highest proportions of younger adults with low qualifications (Chart 1.1).

Trends in educational attainment: 2000-2013

Between 2000 and 2013, upper secondary (or post-secondary non-tertiary) and tertiary qualifications gained more and more terrain across OECD countries which means that the proportion of the population with only a below upper secondary education is shrinking. On average across the OECD, the proportion of adults aged 25 to 64 who have not attained an upper secondary education decreased by about 11 percentage points between 2000 and 2013.

During this period the proportion decreased from more than one third of all adults (34%) in 2000 to less than one fourth (23%) in 2013.

As the proportion of the population with only a below upper secondary education decreased between 2000 and 2013, the proportion of the population attaining tertiary education (including advanced research programmes) increased, growing by about 10 percentage points. In 2013, about one in three adults (33%) in OECD countries, on average, held a tertiary qualification (Table 1.4).

The expansion of tertiary education attainment is largely due to younger generations studying longer than older generations. Between 2000 and 2013, the proportion of younger adults (25-34 year-olds) with tertiary qualifications was consistently higher than older adults (55-64 year-olds) with tertiary qualifications. Moreover, on average across OECD countries the younger adults kept increasing their attainment levels throughout this period. In 2000, tertiary qualifications were held by 26% of those aged 25-34 years-old, while only 15% of 55-64 years-old held such qualifications. By 2013, the proportion of older adults with tertiary qualifications increased by about 9 percentage points since 2000 while it increased by 14 percentage points among younger adults, reaching on average 24% for older adults and 40% for younger adults. Among OECD and partner countries with data for all years, the proportion of the younger adults with tertiary qualifications increased from 2000 to 2013 (Table 1.4).

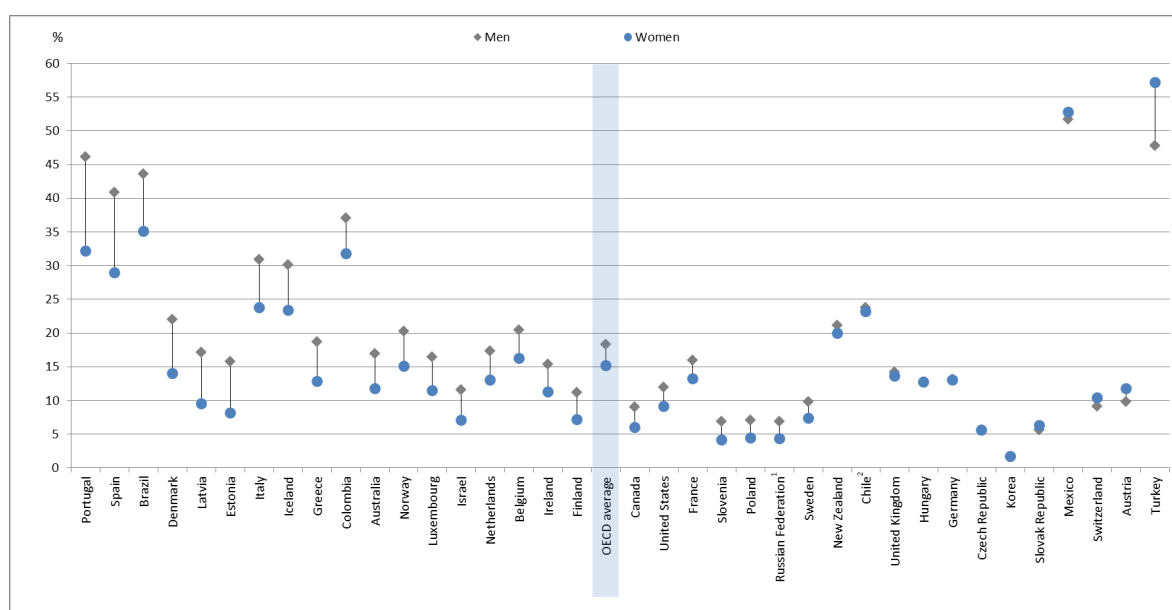
A generational change is also seen among adults with low levels of education: in 2013, on average across OECD countries, only 17% of younger adults (25-34 year-olds) have not attained upper secondary level, compared to 34% of older adults (55-64 year-olds). In 2000, many countries had over half of their older adults with below upper secondary education. By 2013 the gap for those with below upper secondary education between older and younger adults was over 20 percentage points in Australia, Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey. While progress has been made across all countries, even now, the five OECD countries (Italy, Mexico, Portugal, Spain and Turkey) with the highest proportion of older adults with low qualifications are also those with the highest share of younger adults with low qualifications. In Portugal and Spain, the proportion of young adults with low qualifications is more than 30%, and in Mexico and Turkey more than half of younger adults have not attained an upper secondary qualification. Among these five OECD countries, only in Italy is the proportion of younger adults without an upper secondary qualification below 30% (Table 1.4).

Overall, the decrease in the proportion of younger adults with low qualifications has been about 8 percentage points on average in OECD countries, from 25% in 2000 to 17% in 2013. Despite this dominant trend, in some OECD and partner countries, namely in Denmark, Estonia, Latvia and Norway, there was an increase in the share of younger adults with low qualifications in the same period (Table 1.4).

In 2013 adult men (25-64 year-olds) in most OECD countries are more likely not to have an upper secondary qualification than females, though the difference is not very large for certain countries. Nevertheless, in some countries the gender difference is above 4 percentage points for men: Brazil, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Portugal and Spain. In 2000, the picture was quite different as only Ireland had a gender difference for men above 4 percentage points, and six countries had a gender difference for women over 10 percentage points: Australia, Austria, the Czech Republic, Iceland, Korea and the United Kingdom (Table 1.4).

Chart 1.2 shows that, on average across countries, 18% of younger men (25-34 year-olds) have not attained an upper secondary education while the percentage among younger women is 15%. In Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Latvia and Norway the gender difference across younger adults is wider than 5 percentage points, and in Portugal and Spain it is larger than 10 percentage points. The opposite situation is found in Turkey where the proportion of women who have not attained upper secondary is about 10 percentage points higher than that of men (Table 1.4).

Chart 1.2. Percentage of younger adults with attainment below upper secondary education, by gender (2013)
25-34 year-olds



Note: Data for Japan are not displayed because disaggregation between below upper secondary education and upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary level is not available.

1. Year of reference 2012.

2. Year of reference 2011.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the difference in the proportion of 25-34 year-old men with attainment below upper secondary education and the proportion of 25-34 year-old women with attainment below upper secondary education.

Source: OECD. Table 1.4. See Annex for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).

Upper secondary attainment and the impact of vocational education and training (VET)

Despite the expansion of tertiary education attainment levels, upper secondary education is still the most commonly attained level of education in most OECD countries: more adults (25-64 year-olds) have attained upper secondary education or post-secondary non-tertiary education as their highest level of education than have attained any other level of education (on average, about 44%). In Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland and the Slovak Republic, more than 60% of adults have attained this level of education as their highest level of attainment (Table 1.2).

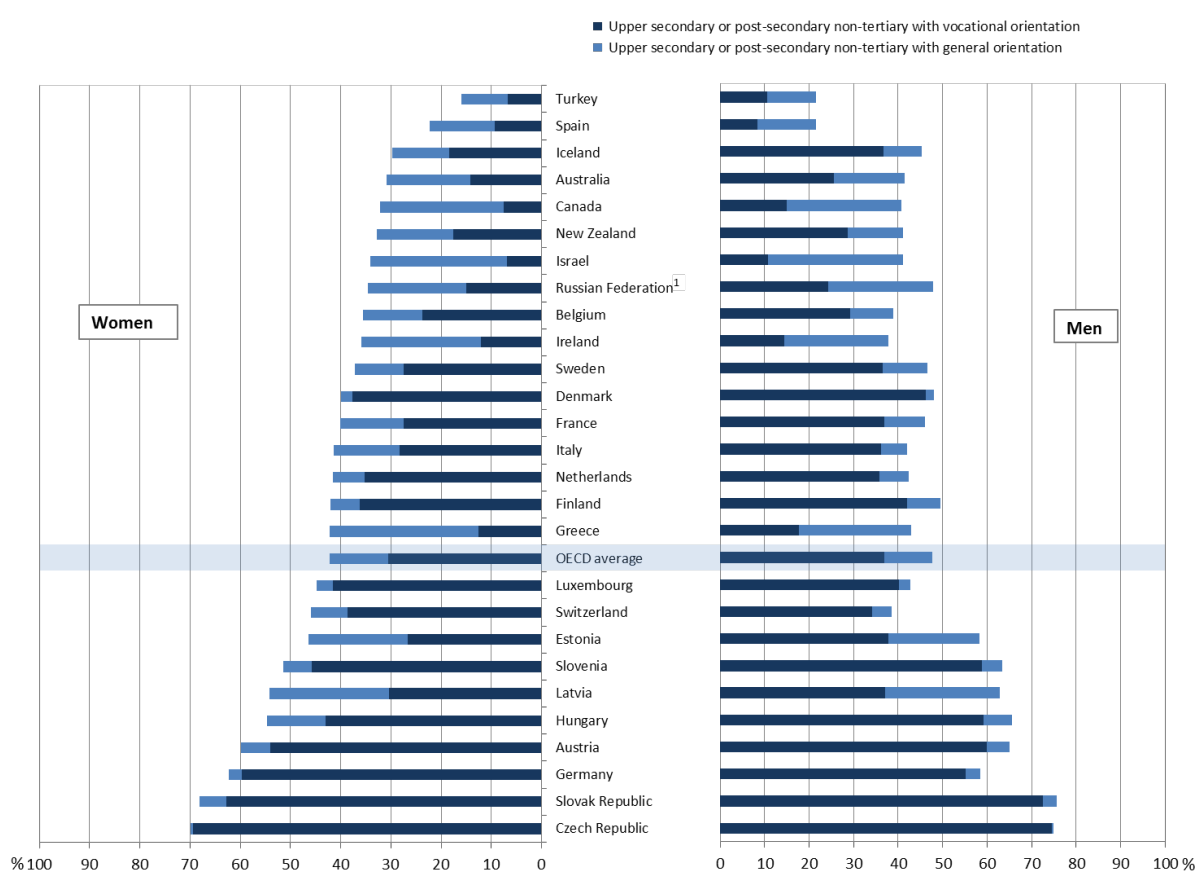
Upper secondary education across OECD countries is mainly divided into two types of programmes: *i*) programmes defined as “general” which are often designed for preparing students for further education, and *ii*) programmes geared towards vocational education and training (VET). The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-1997) defines

VET as “education which is mainly designed to lead participants to acquire the practical skills, know-how and understanding necessary for employment in a particular occupation or trade or class of occupations or trades. Successful completion of such programmes leads to a labour-market relevant vocational qualification recognised by the competent authorities in the country in which it is obtained” (UNESCO, 1997).

There are substantial differences across OECD countries in the attainment of vocational qualifications. Overall, while at least one in two adults in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia, have attained vocational upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualifications as the highest level of attainment, in Israel, Spain and Turkey, this proportion is less than one in ten (Table 1.2).

Chart 1.3. Percentage of the adult population whose highest level of education is upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary, by programme orientation and gender (2013)

25-64 year-olds



Note: Disaggregated information on vocational and general programmes is not available and it is therefore not displayed for the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, China, Chile, Colombia, Indonesia, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States.

1. Year of reference 2012.

Countries are ranked in ascending order of the proportion of adult women with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education as highest level of attainment.

Source: OECD. Table 1.2. See Annex for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).

Chart 1.3 shows that vocational qualifications at the upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary level are more commonly found among men than among women. On average across OECD countries, about 37% of men and 31% of women hold this type of qualification. It is also more likely that men have an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification (either general or vocational) as their highest level of attainment compared with

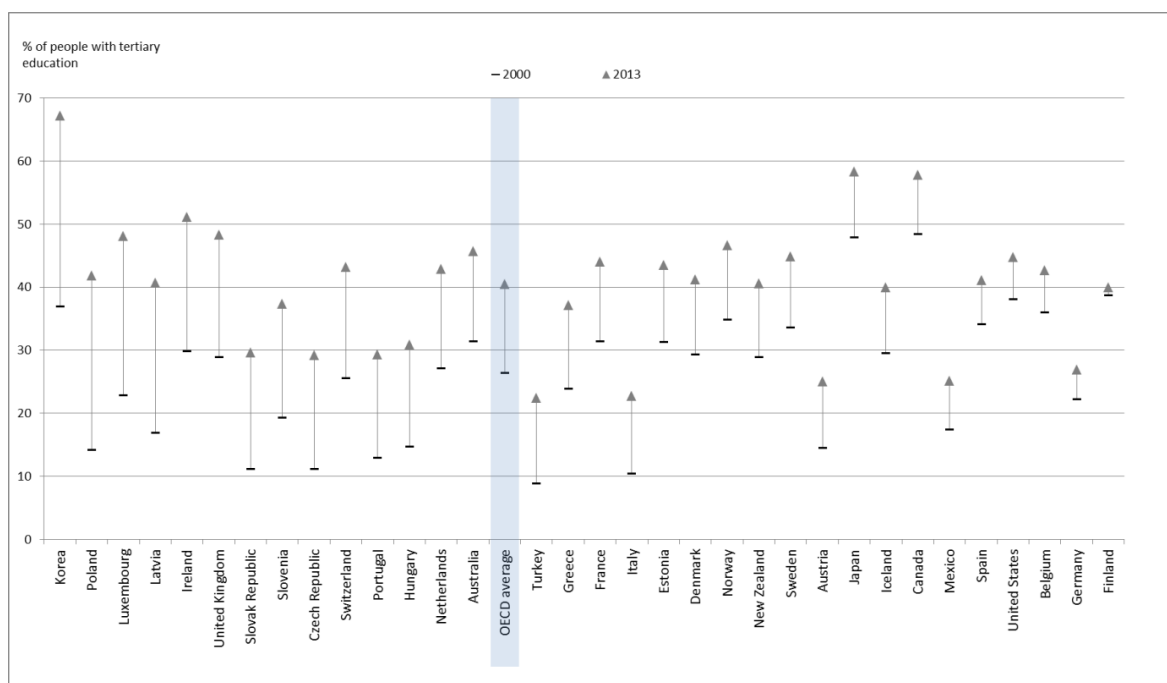
women: about 47% of men have this type of qualification whereas 42% of women do. In Australia, Estonia, Hungary, Iceland, Slovenia and the Russian Federation, the difference between the genders is much higher than the average – about 10 percentage points or more. Only in Germany and Switzerland is the tendency different, and more women than men have an upper secondary qualification as their highest level of education attained (Table 1.2).

The percentages of younger adults in Mexico (23%) and Spain (24%) with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education are lower than the percentages with below upper secondary or tertiary educations. In Spain, even the percentage of all adults with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (22%) is lower than for other attainment levels. In Mexico, the majority of the young adult population (52%) does not reach upper secondary education and therefore their percentages with higher qualifications are lower. In Spain, 41% of younger adults have attained tertiary education, while 35% have not attained an upper secondary qualification. It seems that young Spanish adults who finish upper secondary education are more likely to continue into tertiary education (Table 1.4).

Tertiary attainment

As mentioned above, at tertiary level the generational change between younger and older adults is significant. In OECD and partner countries, the share of younger adults with tertiary qualifications is higher than that of older adults with that type of qualification in all countries, with the sole exception of Israel. On average, the difference in attainment at this level is about 15 percentage points, and ranges from about two percentage points in Germany to more than 50 in Korea (Table 1.2).

Chart 1.4. Percentage of younger adults with tertiary education (2000 and 2013)
25-34 year-olds



Note: Data for Brazil, Colombia, Israel and the Russian Federation are not presented in this chart because data were not available for year 2000.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the difference in the proportion of tertiary educated 25-34 year-olds in the year 2013 and the proportion of tertiary educated 25-34 year-olds in the year 2000.

Source: OECD. Table 1.4. See Annex for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).

In addition, the gender gap in attainment rates is the opposite between the older and the younger generations. On average, a significantly higher proportion of 25-34 year-old women has attained tertiary education than is the case for men of the same age (46% and 35% respectively), while the opposite is true for 55-64 year-old women and men (24% and 26% respectively).

Chart 1.4 shows that from 2000 to 2013, on average, the percentage of younger adults with tertiary education increased by 14 percentage points. The increase was lowest in Finland and Germany (less than five percentage points) and 25 percentage points or more in Korea, Luxembourg and Poland (Table 1.4).

In Australia, Estonia, Ireland, Israel, Latvia, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom, at least one in two young women (25-34 year-olds) has a tertiary education, and in Canada, Japan, Korea and the Russian Federation more than 60% have a tertiary education. The picture is quite different among young men however: only in Japan and Korea have more than one in two men attained a tertiary education (Table 1.3).

Overall, the data in this section show that higher education opportunities have expanded across OECD education systems in recent years. More and more individuals have completed higher levels of education. The human capital stock in OECD countries has constantly been growing since 2000 and has reached new peaks every year. This growth is mainly driven by higher levels of education among the young cohorts.

Definitions

Age groups: adults refers to 25-64 year-olds; **younger adults** refers to 25-34 year-olds; **older adults** refers to 55-64 year-olds.

Levels of education: below upper secondary corresponds to ISCED levels 0, 1, 2 and 3C short programmes; **upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary** corresponds to ISCED levels 3A, 3B, 3C long programmes, and ISCED level 4; and **tertiary corresponds** to ISCED levels 5A, 5B and 6. See the Reader's Guide for a presentation of all ISCED levels.

Methodology

Data on population and educational attainment for most countries are taken from OECD and Eurostat databases, which are compiled from National Labour Force Surveys by the OECD LSO (Labour Market, Economic and Social Outcomes of Learning) Network. Data on educational attainment for Argentina, China, Colombia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and South Africa are taken from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) database on educational attainment of the population aged 25 and older.

Attainment profiles are based on the percentage of the population aged 25 to 64 that has successfully completed a specified level of education.

Most OECD countries include people without education (i.e. illiterate adults or people whose educational attainment does not fit national classifications) under the international classification ISCED 0 and therefore averages for ISCED 0/1 (i.e. pre-primary and primary education) are likely to be influenced.

Note regarding data from Israel

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and are under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

References

UNESCO (1997), “International Standard Classification of Education: ISCED 1997”, www.unesco.org/education/information/nfsunesco/doc/isced_1997.htm.

Tables of Chapter 1

Only an extract of Table 1.1 is shown in this chapter. The full set of tables listed below is available at <http://www.oecd.org/edu/Chapter1-TablesandCharts-IEAG2015web.xlsx>.

Table 1.1	Educational attainment of 25-64 year-olds, by gender (2013)
Table 1.2	Adults with upper secondary education, by programme orientation and gender (2013)
Table 1.3	Percentage of adults who have attained tertiary education, by type of programme, age group and gender (2013)
Table 1.4	Trends in educational attainment, by gender, age group, and average annual growth rate (2000, 2005-13)

Table 1.1. Educational attainment of 25-64 year-olds, by gender (2013)

	Total (men + women)								
	Pre-primary and primary education	Lower secondary education	ISCED 3C (short programme)	Upper secondary education		Post-secondary non-tertiary education	Tertiary education		
				ISCED 3C (long programme)/3B	ISCED 3A		Type B	Type A	Advanced research programmes
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	
OECD									
Australia	6	18	a	15	16	5	11	28	1
Austria	x(2)	16	1	46	5	11	7	14	x(8)
Belgium	11	16	a	10	24	3	16	19	1
Canada	3	8	a	x(5)	25	11	25	28	x(8)
Chile	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
Czech Republic	n	7	a	38	35	x(5)	x(8)	20	x(8)
Denmark	5	19	a	41	1	n	x(8)	33	1
Estonia	1	9	a	14	31	7	13	24	1
Finland	5	9	a	a	44	1	13	27	1
France	9	16	a	32	11	n	13	19	1
Germany	3	10	a	47	3	11	8	17	1
Greece	19	11	x(4)	7	27	8	9	18	n
Hungary	1	16	a	29	29	2	1	21	1
Iceland	16	11	1	20	10	6	4	31	1
Ireland	9	13	2	x(5)	22	14	15	25	1
Israel	10	5	a	7	30	a	14	32	1
Italy	9	32	n	8	33	1	n	16	n
Japan	x(5)	x(5)	x(5)	x(5)	53	a	20	27	x(8)
Korea	7	9	a	x(5)	41	a	14	30	x(8)
Luxembourg	7	8	4	15	21	3	13	26	2
Mexico	38	24	a	5	15	a	1	18	x(8)
Netherlands	7	17	x(4)	20	21	1	3	30	1
New Zealand	x(2)	21	8	7	14	16	8	26	1
Norway	n	17	a	27	12	4	2	37	1
Poland	x(2)	10	a	30	31	3	x(8)	26	x(8)
Portugal	39	21	x(5)	x(5)	20	1	x(8)	16	3
Slovak Republic	1	8	x(4)	33	39	x(5)	1	18	n
Slovenia	1	13	a	x(5)	58	a	12	13	3
Spain	15	29	a	9	13	n	10	23	1
Sweden	3	9	a	x(5)	44	7	9	26	1
Switzerland	3	9	2	38	5	6	12	25	3
Turkey	53	12	a	9	10	a	x(8)	16	x(8)
United Kingdom	n	9	12	30	8	a	10	31	1
United States	4	7	x(5)	x(5)	46	x(5)	11	32	2
	Below upper secondary			Upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary			Tertiary		
OECD average	23			44			33		
EU21 average	22			48			30		
Partners									
Argentina ¹	44	14	a	x(5)	28	a	x(8)	14	x(8)
Brazil	38	15	x(5)	x(5)	33	a	x(8)	14	x(8)
China ²	35	43	a	x(5)	14	5	x(8)	4	x(8)
Colombia ³	44	5	a	x(5)	29	a	10	11	x(8)
India	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
Indonesia ³	56	16	a	x(5)	21	a	x(8)	8	x(8)
Latvia	1	10	x(4)	3	47	8	2	29	n
Russian Federation ⁴	1	5	x(4)	19	21	x(4)	26	28	n
Saudi Arabia	33	18	a	x(5)	23	5	x(8)	21	x(8)
South Africa ⁴	26	14	a	x(5)	47	7	x(8)	6	x(8)
G20 average	m			m			m		

Note: Due to the lack of information for several programmes, OECD and EU21 averages have not been calculated for each column individually. Columns showing data by gender are available for consultation at: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/Chapter1-TablesandCharts-IEAG2015web.xlsx>.

1. Year of reference 2003.

2. Year of reference 2010.

3. Year of reference 2011.

4. Year of reference 2012.

Source: OECD, Argentina, China, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Latvia: Eurostat. See Annex for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eaq.htm).

Please refer to the Reader's Guide for information concerning the symbols replacing missing data.