10 EDUCATION INDICATORS IN FOCUS

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2013/01 (January)

# What are the social benefits of education?

- **On average across 15 OECD countries, a 30-year-old male tertiary graduate can expect to live another 51 years, while a 30 year-old man who has not completed upper secondary education can expect to live an additional 43 years. A similar comparison between women in the two educational groups reveals less of a difference than that among men.**
- **In 27 OECD countries, on average, 80% of young tertiary graduates say they vote, while only 54% of young adults who have not completed upper secondary education do so. The difference in voting rates by level of education is much smaller among older age groups.**
- **Education can bring significant benefits to society, not only through higher employment opportunities and income but also via enhanced skills, improved social status and access to networks. By fully recognising the power of education, policy makers could better address diverse societal challenges.**

## *Education brings wide-ranging benefits to the society.*

What is the ultimate purpose of education? Early philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato pointed out that education was central to the moral fulfilment of individuals and the well-being of the society in which they live. In the past few decades, research has supported this conventional wisdom, revealing that education not only enables individuals to perform better in the labour market, but also helps to improve their overall health, promote active citizenship and contain violence. The analysis below presents evidence on the relationship between education and social outcomes including health, civic engagement and subjective well-being across many OECD countries.

## *For instance, more educated people tend to live longer...*

Life expectancy reflects a long trajectory of individuals' socio-economic circumstances that affect their health conditions and other mortality risks. In OECD countries, life expectancy at birth, on average, reached 80 years in 2010. Women live almost six years longer than men, averaging 83 years vs. 77 for men.

Data show that life expectancy is strongly associated with education. On average, among 15 OECD countries with available data, a 30-year-old tertiary-educated man can expect to live eight years longer than a 30-year-old man who has not completed upper secondary education. Among men in Central European countries there are particularly large differences in life expectancy by level of education. A 30-year-old tertiary-educated man in the Czech Republic can expect to live 17 years longer than a 30-year-old man who has not completed upper secondary education. In the 15 OECD countries analysed, differences in life expectancy by level of education are generally much smaller among women. On average, a tertiary-educated woman can expect to live four years longer than a woman without an upper secondary education.

Whether these observed associations also reflect causal effects is a matter of debate. The associations may, for instance, reflect the fact that healthier children not only achieve more education but also become healthier adults.

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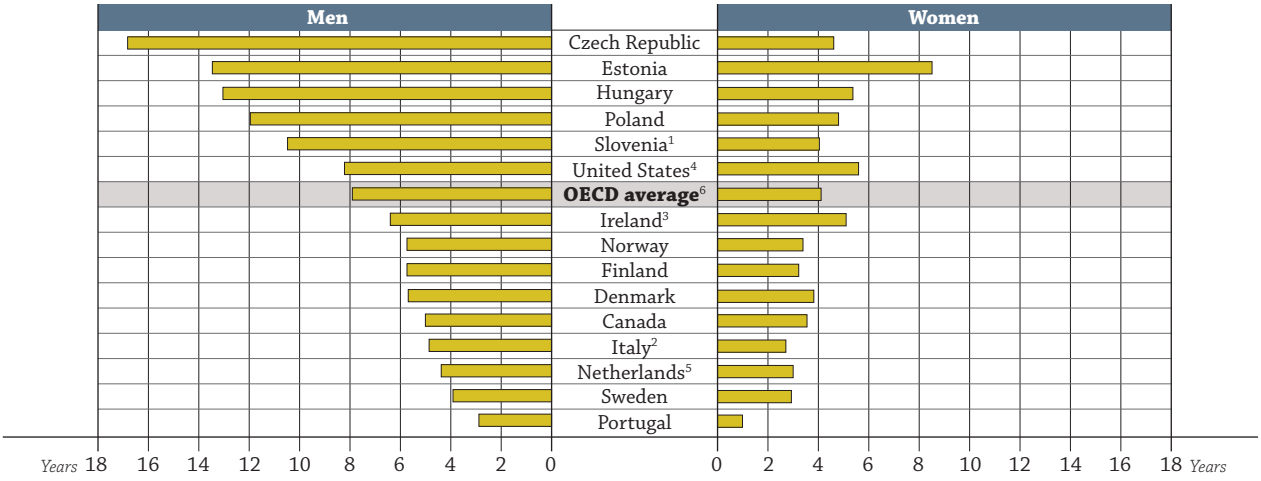
## Difference in life expectancy by educational attainment at age 30 (2010)

*Differences in life expectancy by gender*

*Life expectancy differences between adults with "tertiary education" and "below upper secondary education"*




**Note:** The figures describe the differences in the expected years of life remaining at age 30 across education levels.
1. Year of reference 2009.
2. Year of reference 2005.
3. Year of reference 2006.
4. Year of reference 2008.
5. Year of reference 2007-10.
6. The OECD average is the average for those countries shown in the chart.
*Countries are ranked in descending order of the difference in life expectancy among men at age 30.*
**Source:** OECD, *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, Indicator A11 (*www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012*).

### *...tend to engage more in civic activities...*

A cohesive society can be found in countries where citizens actively engage in civic activities, trust others and have faith in the functioning of public institutions.

Data show that adults who have attained higher levels of education are generally more likely than those with lower levels of educational attainment to report stronger civic engagement, in terms of voting, volunteering, political interest, and interpersonal trust. For example, among 25 OECD countries with available data, the gap in the self-reported voting rate between adults with high and low levels of education is on average 15 percentage points. This gap widens considerably to 27 percentage points among younger adults (25-34 year-olds). For younger adults in Germany, the corresponding figure is as high as 50 percentage points. *Education at a Glance 2011* and *2012* show that similar associations also exist for the relationship between education and volunteering, political interest, interpersonal trust, institutional trust and engagement in social activities.

### *... and tend to feel happier.*

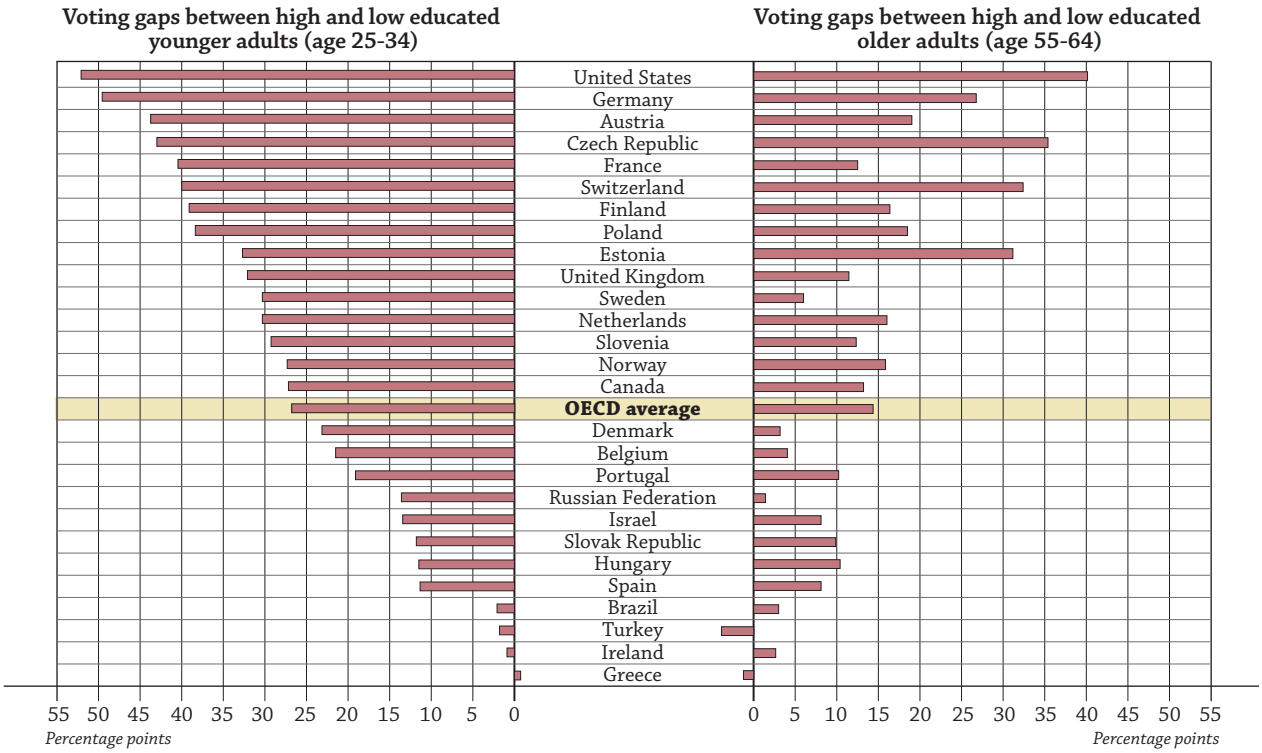
Indicators such as life satisfaction and happiness have also become important benchmarks to assess the extent to which government policies address people's well-being beyond what can be captured using purely economic measures (see also OECD, 2011).

Adults who have attained higher levels of education are generally more likely to portray greater satisfaction in life than those with lower levels of educational attainment. On average, the gap in self-reported life

satisfaction between adults with high and low levels of education is 18 percentage points. Nordic countries tend to show smaller gaps by education compared to Central European countries. This may reflect the cross-regional differences in the welfare regimes which could affect the well-being of the disadvantaged population.

**Voting gaps between adults with high and low levels of education (2008, 2010)**

***Differences in voting rates between those with "tertiary education" and "below upper secondary education" among younger adults (25-34 year-olds) and older adults (55-64 year-olds)***




*Countries are ranked in descending order of the voting gaps between high and low educated 25-34 year-olds.*
**Source:** OECD, *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, Indicator A11 (*www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012*).

Indicators of civic engagement and subjective well-being are based on self-reported survey data. There may be certain discrepancies between self-reported and actual civic engagement (e.g. voting). Measures of subjective well-being based on self-reports may be subject to cross-cultural or social desirability biases. Also these associations do not necessarily signify causal relationships.

It is important to note that education and skills do not necessarily improve societal outcomes. Some studies have shown that the higher the level of education, the more likely an adult is to engage in potentially self-abusive behaviour such as binge drinking.

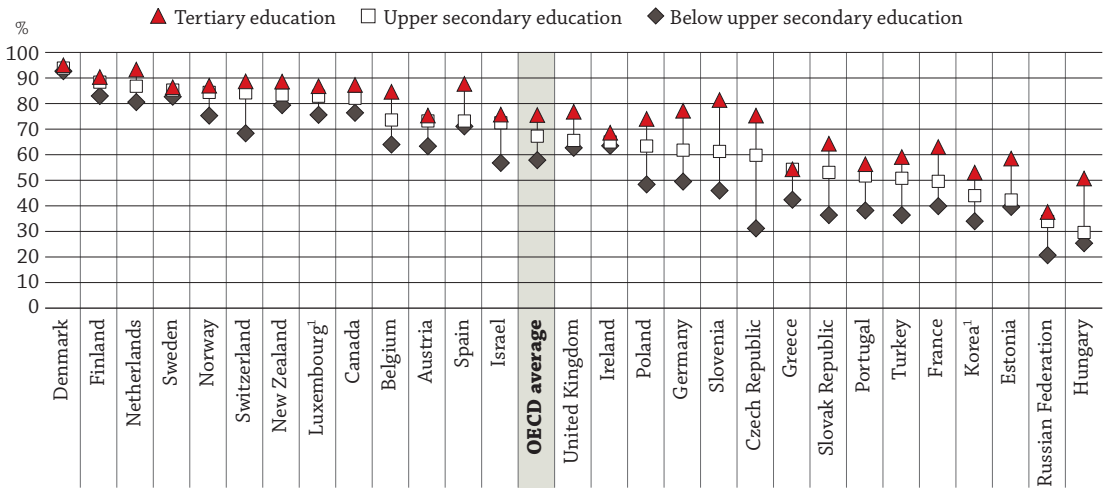
## *Why does education matter?*

Income is one way in which education helps individuals improve their social outcomes. Evidence generally supports the income effects of education on social outcomes. However, education's effects on social outcomes generally remain after accounting for income. Hence, education may help individuals to develop skills, improve their social status and gain access to networks that could lead to enhanced social

outcomes, independently from the effect of education on income. Emerging research suggests the significant role cognitive, social and emotional skills play in explaining the effects of education on economic and social outcomes (OECD, 2010).

Longitudinal and experimental studies can help clarify the causal status of the associations between education and social outcomes as well as the pathways in which education impacts on such outcomes. Yet, the evidence makes already the case for education policies to complement social policies aimed at tackling health, crime and social cohesion. It would be important to take into account educational approaches to social challenges when evaluating cost-effective policy levers.

**Proportion of adults satisfied with life, by level of education (2008)**




1. Year of reference 2009.

*Countries are ranked in descending order of the proportion of adults aged 25-64 reporting satisfaction in life, among adults who have attained upper secondary education.*

**Source:** OECD, *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, Annex 3 (*www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012*).

## *References*

OECD (2010), *Improving Health and Social Cohesion through Education,* OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2011), *How's Life,* OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2011), *Education at a Glance 2011: OECD Indicators,* OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators,* OECD Publishing, Paris.

**The bottom line** **Education has the potential to bring significant benefits to individuals and society, which go well beyond its contribution to individuals' employability or income. Skills are important channels through which the power of education is manifested in a variety of social settings. Policy makers should take into account the wider social benefits of education when allocating resources across public policies.**

**Visit:**
*www.oecd.org/edu*

**See:**
OECD (2010), *Improving Health and Social Cohesion through Education*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

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**Coming next month:**
*How do early childhood education systems differ around the world?*

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