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# How are university students changing?

- **More than 23 million students across the OECD and G20 countries will start their first university-level course in 2013.**
- **The new generation of students will be particularly diverse, with more adults and international students than ever.**
- **Entry rates have increased over the last decades but unequal access to university still persists, with entry rates reflecting the background of the students.**

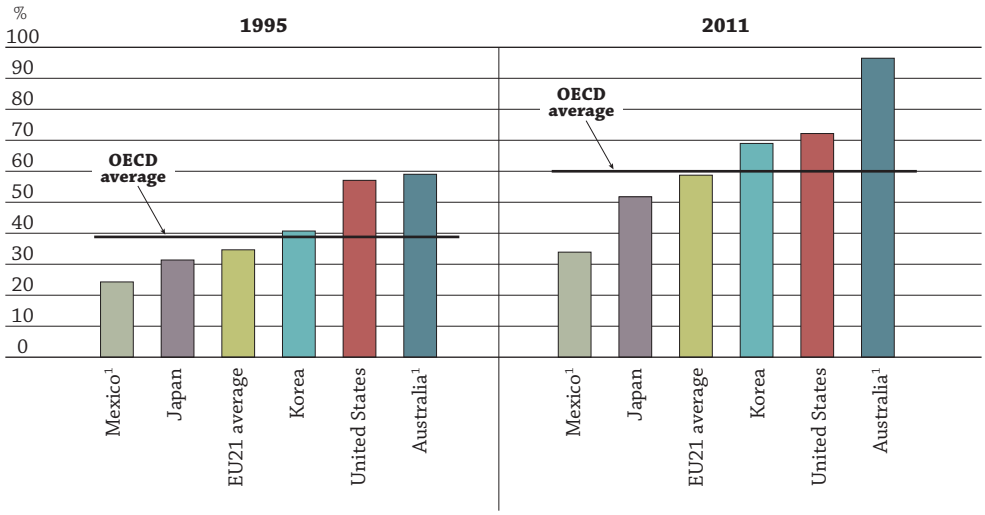
## *Access to university studies is more and more widespread...*

This year, more than 23 million people across the OECD and other G20 countries will start university for the first time. They are about to commit themselves to years of study, expecting to gain not just a diploma but also the specific knowledge and skills required to fulfil the needs of their profession and their everyday life. How they do will have a tremendous impact, not just on their lives but also on the future of societies at large.

Access to university has increased widely in recent decades. Between 1995 and 2011, university entry rates rose by more than 20 percentage points on average across OECD countries, from 39% to 60%. In many countries, the increase was a result of growing demand, while in others it may be due to structural changes in educational systems (such as the implementation of the Bologna Process). At the same time, new programmes have been created to meet changes in the professions. The pool of applicants has also widened to include many more international and older students, further increasing entry rates.

### University entry rates (1995 - 2011)

***In 2011, it is estimated than 60% of young people will enter into a university level programme in their lifetime***




1. Year of reference: 2000.
**Source:** OECD, *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators*, Indicator C3 (*www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm*).

## *…and the profile of the typical student is evolving.*

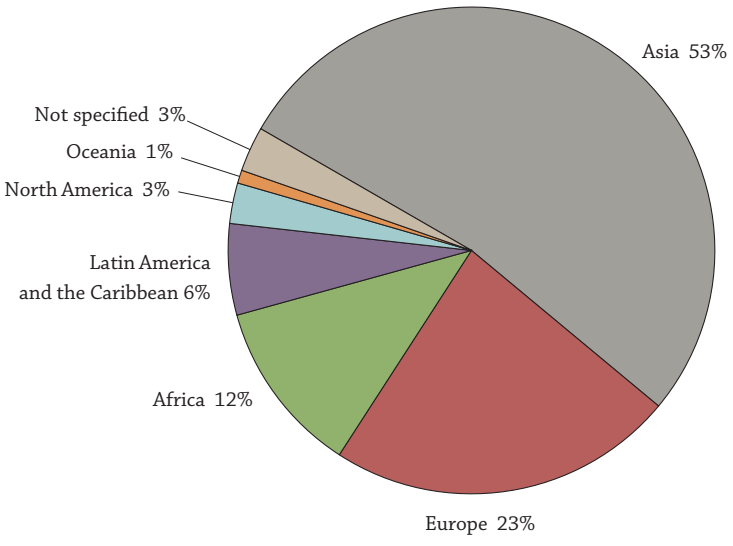
Traditionally, students entered university programmes immediately after completing upper secondary education, and this remains true in many countries. For example, in Belgium, Japan and Indonesia, the average age of entrants to the university is 19 or below. However, the average age of new entrants varies across countries because of differences in the typical age at which students graduate from upper secondary education, the intake capacity of institutions and the opportunity cost of entering the labour market before enrolling in tertiary education. This is the case for countries like Iceland, New Zealand and Sweden, where the average age of entrants is 25 or over. On average, students across the OECD and other G20 countries will be 22 years old by the time they attend their first lecture and will spend 4.4 years studying full time in university.

When it comes to gender differences, the traditional gender gap has reversed, now favouring women. In 2011, 52% new entrants into university degrees were women compared with 48% of men. Only in Indonesia, Japan, Mexico and Saudi Arabia are women outnumbered by their male counterparts. However, the higher the level of education, the narrower the gender gap: in advanced research programmes, the gap almost disappears.

Furthermore, the rapid expansion of higher education in fast-growing G20 economies has caused a significant shift in the distribution of the global talent pool among countries. Today, China has the largest proportion of new entrants, followed by India and the United States.

The new generation of students is also internationally mobile. The number of international students has more than doubled during the last decade. Today it is expected that some 4% of new students will leave their country of citizenship to study. In 2011, the largest numbers of foreign students came from China, India and Korea.

**Percentage of foreign university students enrolled worldwide, by region of origin (2011)**




**Source:** OECD, *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators*, Indicator C4 (*www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm*).

Asian students made up 53% of foreign students enrolled in tertiary education across OECD and G20 countries, with three out of four of them enrolled in an OECD country. Language – as a barrier or a bridge – is one of the key considerations for international students choosing their destination. English-speaking countries are more attractive but an increasing number of non-English-speaking ones have started to offer courses in English in order to overcome their linguistic disadvantage (see OECD, 2013).

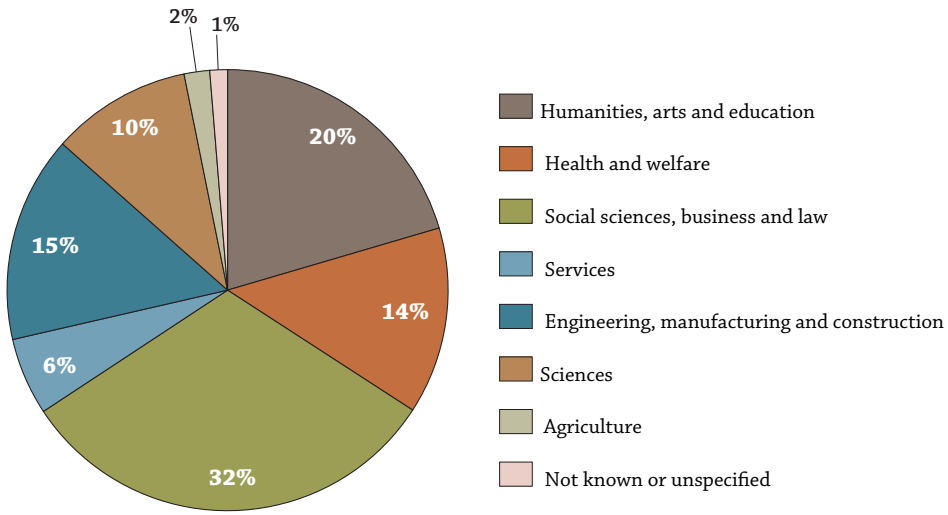
## *Equal chances?*

In general, the more educated their parents, the more likely young people are to enter tertiary education. On average, 20-34 year-olds from a highly educated family are almost twice (1.9) as likely to be in higher education than their peers in general. This effect is strongest in Portugal and Turkey, where young people from highly educated families are more than three times as likely to enter university (see OECD, 2012).

## *Science-related fields are not as popular as they used to be.*

In almost all countries, the most popular fields are social sciences, business and law. In 2011, these fields received the largest share of new entrants in all countries except Finland, where engineering, manufacturing and construction took the largest share, and Korea and Saudi Arabia, where it was humanities, arts and education.

**Distribution of tertiary new entrants, by field of education (2011)**




**Source:** OECD, *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators*, Indicator C3 (*www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm*).

Science-related fields – which include science and engineering, manufacturing and construction – are less popular. On average, only a quarter of all students enter these fields, and women are particularly under-represented: in 2011, only 14% of female new entrants into tertiary education chose science-related fields, compared with 39% of the men. Among new entrants, the proportion of women choosing science-related fields ranged from 5% in Belgium and Japan to 19% in Greece, Indonesia, Italy and Mexico. Among men, the proportion in these fields ranged from 18% in Argentina to 58% in Finland.

## *Most tertiary students will complete their studies…*

On average, among OECD countries, around 70% of students who enter a tertiary first degree programme this year will graduate at this level. However, completion rates differ widely among OECD countries. In Hungary, Norway and Sweden less than 60% of those who enter university will graduate, in contrast with their counterparts in Australia, Denmark, Japan and Turkey where the completion rates are 80% or more.

Women are more likely than men to earn a degree at the end of their programme. Completion rates average 74% among women and 65% among men. Only in Austria, Germany, Sweden and the United States is the difference between women's and men's completion rates below five percentage points.

## *…but some of them won't.*

Not completing a degree does not mean that the skills and knowledge acquired are lost or not valued by the labour market. Being in the labour market for a time could also help individuals in their studies later. In Sweden and the United States, for example, it is more common than in other countries for students to leave college before completing, go into employment for some time, and continue their studies at a later date. In countries with modular systems, like Sweden, students receive credit points for each course they have completed and they do not lose the benefit of the modules completed prior to employment.

Students may also choose to leave education before graduating because they are offered attractive job opportunities after just one year of study. Similarly, some mature students who enter tertiary education may not intend to graduate from a specific programme at all. Rather, they may have chosen to study a few courses as part of their lifelong learning, or to improve their skills.

## *References*

OECD (2013), "How is international student mobility shaping up?", *Education Indicators in Focus, No. 14,* OECD Publishing.

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

**The bottom line** **Tertiary institutions not only have to meet the growing demand for university education by expanding the number of places they offer, they also have to adapt programmes and teaching methods to match the changing needs of a more diverse generation of students.**

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

**See:**
OECD (2013), *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing.

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