

EDUCATION AS A COMMON GOOD: NOTEWORTHY SUCCESS OF THIRTY YEARS OF EDUCATION POLICY

More than thirty years have passed since an education crisis was identified in most industrial countries. One of the main criticisms of the education system at the time was that it was largely only the privileged classes that were able to send their children to schools of higher learning. Another deficit was that girls often did not receive as good an education as boys. A consensus was formed that in the interest of equal starting opportunities for all, access to institutions of higher learning should be made available to all young people of sufficient ability.

The demands for a better education for broad segments of the population coincided with the interests of industry, whose need for highly skilled workers had increased. Moreover, the great importance of human capital for economic growth had become increasingly evident. Correspondingly, the expansion of the education system met with broad public support.

The success of this “educational revolution” can be adequately measured, thanks to the efforts of the OECD and EUROSTAT. With the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-97), a system has been developed with which the various levels of education in the OECD countries can be compared and equivalencies can be determined. Surveys are also available that indicate the percentage of the population with various educational attainment. These surveys are broken down by age group. By comparing the educational attainment of the 25–34 age group with that of the 55–64 age group, we can draw

conclusions on changes in the educational level over the past thirty years.

The most recent survey, for 1999, shows that the educational attainment of the adult population has clearly risen in all OECD countries over the past thirty years. Three fourths of the 25–34 age group have at least an upper secondary education. In the 55–64 age group, it is less than half. Countries with a low level of education in an international comparison have caught up with countries with a traditionally higher level. In Greece, Hungary and Spain, in particular, the percentage of the 25–34 age group with secondary education has risen considerably. Of those countries with a traditionally higher level of education, Finland succeeded in increasing its educational attainment considerably (see Figure 1).

A clear increase in completed tertiary education was also registered. On average of the observed

Figure 1

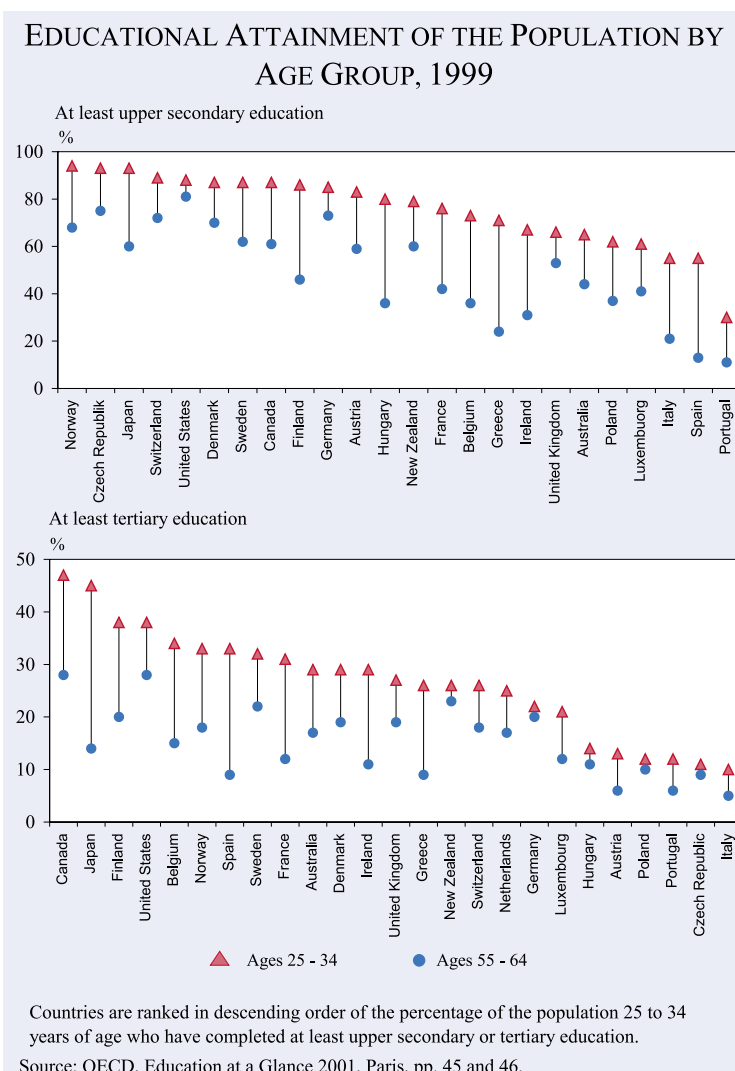
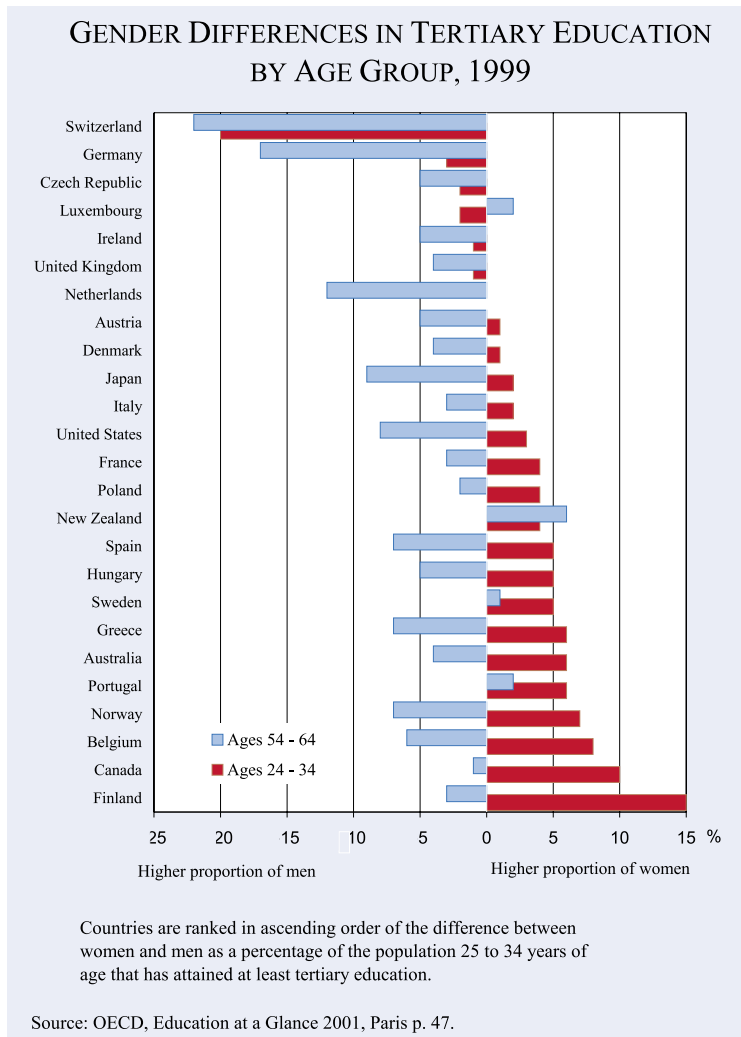


Figure 2



education in the OECD average, the picture has reversed for the 25-34 age group. In Finland, Canada, Belgium, Norway, Australia, Greece and Portugal more women than men now complete a tertiary education. Looking at developments over the past 30 years, institutions of higher learning have most noticeably opened up to women in Finland, Belgium, Germany, Norway and Greece. In Switzerland, tertiary education remains a male domain, with the younger age group of women having made little advances over the older age group (see Figure 2).

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OECD countries, in 1999 about 27% of the 25-34 age group and 15% of the 55-64 age group had attained a tertiary education. Countries that expanded participation in institutions of higher education were Japan, Spain, Belgium, France, Canada, Finland, Ireland and Greece. With the exception of Ireland and Greece, in these countries more than 30% of the 25-34 age group had a tertiary educational attainment. Other countries in this category were the United States, Norway and Sweden. In Germany, 22% of the 25-34 age group have completed studies at an institution of higher learning. Compared to the 55-65 age group in Germany, this was only an increase of two percentage points. In contrast to most other OECD countries, the contribution of institutions of tertiary education in Germany has stagnated (see Figure 1).

Women in particular have benefited from the expansion of tertiary education. Whereas in the 55-64 age group far fewer women than men have a college