

Educational attainment levels in Europe in the 1990s - some key figures

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Statistics in focus

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POPULATION AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

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Education levels are continuing to rise in all the countries of the European Union, and have been for some thirty years. According to the results of the European Union Labour Force Survey, over 71% of 25- to 29-year-olds have obtained an upper secondary education qualification compared to 48% of 50- to 64-year-olds.

However, in the 18 to 24 age group, one young person in five has left education with only the level of compulsory full-time education; the proportion is over one in four in Spain and Italy, and near to one in two in Portugal.

Moreover, the number of higher education graduates continues to increase. At present, they represent over 20% of 25- to 64-year-olds in the European Union. This proportion varies from around 10% in Italy, Austria and Portugal to almost 30% in Sweden and Finland.

Explained in part by a desire to guard themselves against socio-economic conditions which until now have been less than favourable to the employment of young people, and especially young people with the lowest qualifications, higher education remains an attractive option for many in that the unemployment rate for low or unskilled workers is often double (or even triple) that for higher education graduates.

Young people: increasingly better qualified than the previous generation

It is now well established that the general trend throughout the European Union towards remaining in education is not a cyclical phenomenon. On the contrary, it is the result of a structural phenomenon which has led successive generations to attain higher levels of education and training than previous ones, as is shown by the percentage increase in people with upper secondary education qualifications calculated for various age groups (Table 1).

Thus in 1999, only 47.9% of European citizens aged 50- to 64-years had completed upper secondary education, whereas among 25- to 29-year-olds, 71.4% had attained the same level.

Although Greece, Spain, Italy, Ireland and Portugal had the lowest education levels (under 50% compared with a 60% average), these countries have seen the greatest increases, with over double the number of persons with upper secondary education qualifications among young people than in the older age groups.

It seems therefore that the differences in education levels of the various Member States are gradually being reduced.



Table 1: Percentage of persons with upper secondary education, by age group, 1999 in %

	EU15	B	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL ¹	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK ²
25-29 yrs	71.4	77.5	89.4	83.3	74.4	58.3	77.7	68.9	59.6	67.7	75.6	85.0	35.1	84.5	87.3	69.3
30-39 yrs	67.1	68.0	82.6	84.1	65.1	47.1	70.3	59.9	51.9	68.1	71.8	82.3	23.6	85.5	85.3	65.1
40-49 yrs	60.6	56.2	79.6	82.4	51.1	32.9	59.6	44.5	45.5	63.3	64.3	74.1	18.7	75.5	77.8	65.0
50-64 yrs	47.9	40.0	73.3	73.5	29.0	16.1	45.8	31.9	26.1	51.6	53.3	63.4	12.4	52.7	66.2	56.0
25-64 yrs	59.9	57.4	79.6	79.9	49.9	34.9	60.9	49.3	43.2	62.3	64.7	74.8	21.2	71.5	77.0	63.1

(1) 1997

(2) For this table, "O-levels" and "GCSEs" are regarded as lower secondary education qualifications

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, 1999

Educational attainment levels also continued to increase during the 1990s, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentage of 25- to 64-year-olds with upper secondary education, 1992-99

	B	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL	I	L ¹	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK ²
1992	49.8	74.1	79.9	36.6	23.2	-	42.3	33.0	34.7	-	-	19.9	-	-	49.3
1993	50.8	81.5	79.4	39.1	24.6	55.9	44.5	31.9	39.8	-	-	20.0	-	-	49.9
1994	52.8	76.4	81.9	41.4	26.5	57.5	45.2	33.9	47.4	-	-	20.9	-	-	51.7
1995	54.5	79.5	81.2	42.6	28.4	58.8	47.3	35.4	42.9	-	68.9	21.9	66.8	74.4	52.7
1996	56.6	77.6	78.5	44.3	31.0	58.8	50.0	36.9	45.4	63.1	70.5	21.8	67.9	73.9	52.5
1997	57.8	78.6	80.4	45.7	32.2	60.0	49.3	38.6	46.0	64.5	73.1	22.0	69.6	74.7	54.7
1998	56.7	78.5	-	47.5	33.1	59.9	-	41.5	-	64.4	74.1	19.9	70.1	75.5	-
1999	57.4	79.6	79.9	49.9	34.9	60.9	-	43.2	62.3	64.7	74.8	21.2	71.5	77.0	63.1

(1) Since 1999, new vocational qualifications at upper secondary level have been taken into account.

(2) For this table, "O-levels" and "GCSEs" are regarded as lower secondary education qualifications

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Surveys, 1992-99

However, over one fifth of young persons leave school on or before completion of compulsory education.

Despite the fact that young people are increasingly better qualified, almost one in five leaves the education system, at best, on completing lower secondary education, which in most cases is the end of compulsory education.

This proportion varies from 7% for all 18- to 24-year-olds in Sweden (the figure is around 10% in Finland, Denmark and Austria) to over 25% in Italy and Spain, and as much as 45% in Portugal.

In general, the proportion of low-skilled young persons is higher among males, except in Germany and slightly higher in Austria.

Table 3: Percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds not in education and low-skilled, 1999

	EU-15	B	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL ¹	I	L	NL	A ¹	P	FIN	S	UK ²
Total	20,5	15,2	11,5	15,1	17,8	28,9	14,7	19,8	27,2	19,1	16,3	11,5	45,5	10	7,3	19,7
Men	22,6	17,7	14,2	14,4	21,2	34,7	16	23,7	30,3	18,9	17,7	9,7	51,3	12,1	7,8	20,1
Women	18,5	12,7	9,1	15,8	14,8	23	13,5	15,7	24,2	19,4	14,9	13,1	39,6	7,9	6,9	19,3

(1) 1997

(2) For this graph, "O-levels" and "GCSEs" are regarded as lower secondary education qualifications

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, 1999

Higher education graduates

In the European Union, the proportion of higher education graduates is currently over 20% for 25- to 64-year-olds. The situation is far from uniform since the figures range from 10% in Italy, Portugal and Austria to almost 30% in Sweden and Finland.

Despite the fact that in terms of attainment level, women are catching up on men, (or even sometimes overtaking them) the proportion of male higher education graduates is still higher throughout the EU and in most Member States. However in Belgium, Denmark, France, Portugal, Finland and Sweden, the scale is tipping in favour of women.

Table 4: Percentage of 25- to 64-year-olds with higher education qualifications, 1996-1999

	EU15	B	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL ¹	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
1999																
Total	20.5	26.7	26.5	23.0	16.8	20.4	20.9	22.2	9.5	18.3	22.6	10.8	9.8	31.3	28.5	27.3
Men	22.1	26.3	25.9	28.1	18.7	21.5	20.6	22.5	9.8	21.7	25.4	11.6	8.3	28.2	27.1	29.0
Women	18.8	27.1	27.1	17.7	15.1	19.3	21.2	22.0	9.2	15.0	19.8	10.1	11.3	34.4	30.1	25.4
1996																
Total	18.2	24.5	28.1	21.9	15.1	17.6	17.5	22.4	8.2	16.8	21.8	8.2	11.0	20.9	26.5	22.4

(1) 1997

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Surveys, 1996-1999

In general, higher education graduates are better equipped to guard against unemployment. Throughout the 1990s, the unemployment rate for unskilled or low-skilled workers in the European Union has remained roughly double that for the higher education graduates (Table 5).

In reality, Greece is the only country where the unemployment rate is virtually identical for the two categories of education levels, and the situation in Italy and Spain approaches that of Greece. Moreover, in some countries such as Denmark, Portugal and Sweden, the disparities seem to be declining, whereas in Belgium, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Austria, the gap seems to be widening. With inadequate education and welfare systems or a labour market less suited to certain groups in society, the low or unskilled often have few chances when competing against graduates.

Table 5: Ratio between the unemployment rate of low-skilled workers (ISCED 0-2) and that of higher education graduates (ISCED 5-6) – 25-64 yrs, 1992-1999

	EU15	B	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK ²
1992	2.2	3.4	2.8	2.4	1.2	1.6	-	4.4	1.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	3.0
1993	2.1	3.2	2.8	2.7	1.0	1.5	2.1	3.8	1.7	-	-	-	2.6	-	-	2.5
1994	2.1	3.3	2.4	2.7	1.1	1.5	2.2	3.8	1.5	1.6	-	-	2.6	-	-	2.7
1995	2.1	3.6	2.1	2.8	1.1	1.4	2.1	3.8	1.3	-	-	2.6	1.9	2.4	2.6	2.5
1996	2.1	3.6	2.6	2.7	1.1	1.4	2.3	4.0	1.6	-	2.0	2.8	2.0	2.4	2.4	2.6
1997	2.1	3.7	2.3	2.9	1.1	1.4	2.3	4.1	1.5	-	2.2	2.7	2.7	2.9	3.0	2.6
1998	1.8	3.9	2.1	-	1.2	1.4	2.2	-	1.5	-	2.9	3.9	1.7	2.3	2.4	-
1999	2.2	3.9	2.3	3.1	1.2	1.3	2.5	-	1.5	-	2.9	4.3	1.7	2.8	2.5	2.6

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Surveys, 1992-1999

➤ ESSENTIAL INFORMATION – METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

Education level attained as calculated from the Community Labour Force Survey:

The data presented in this study are taken from the results of the Eurostat Labour Force Surveys. These surveys contain data collected annually in face-to-face interviews from a sample of households, and focus mainly on employment and other related issues.

The list of headings presented in this survey includes a variable, "highest attainment level in education and training", coded in accordance with the International Standard Classification of Education, 1997.

The expression "attainment level" implies the award of a certificate or qualification, where such practice exists. If there is no certification, the successful completion of education or training must correspond to the full participation in the particular programme.

To establish the highest level, both general education and also any vocational training which the individual may have followed should be taken into account.

People who have not completed certain studies must be registered in accordance with the highest level previously attained and may not be coded by a blank space.

See also the following publications:

Key data on education in Europe 1999-2000 – European Commission 2000

Labour Force Survey - Methods and definitions - Series 1998

Youth in the European Union: From education to working life - 1997

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