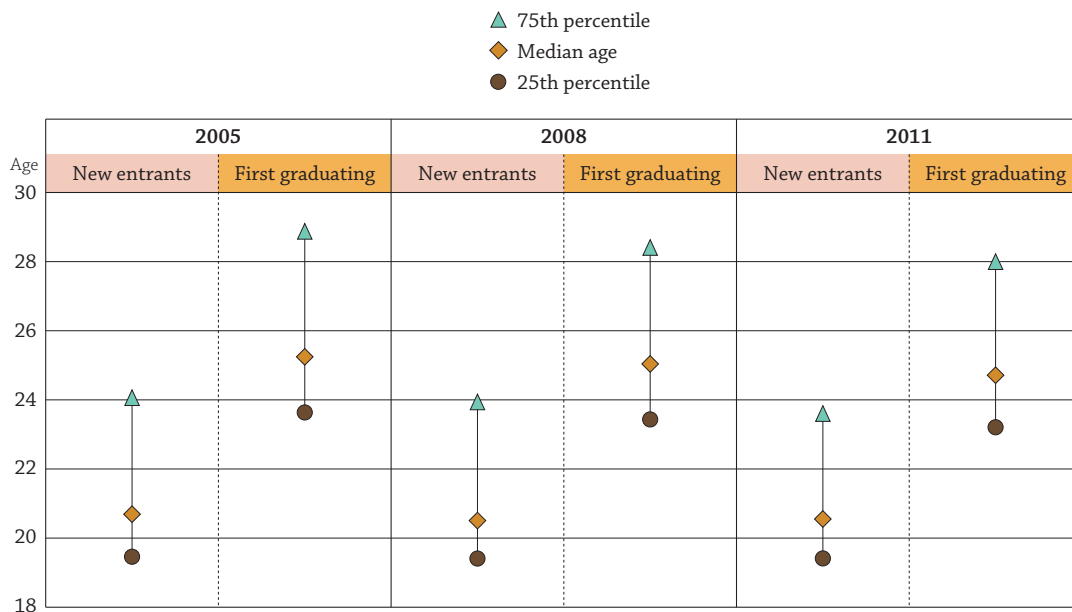




Policies to increase throughput and efficiency in teaching and learning – for example through funding mechanisms favouring output indicators – have clearly had some impact. This decrease is also due to the increasing harmonisation of systems of higher education involved in the Bologna Process and a general shift away from longer programmes in favour of three-year ones.

Figure 1. **Age distribution of new entrants and students first graduating, tertiary-type A, 2005, 2008 and 2011**



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

...but differences between countries remain huge.

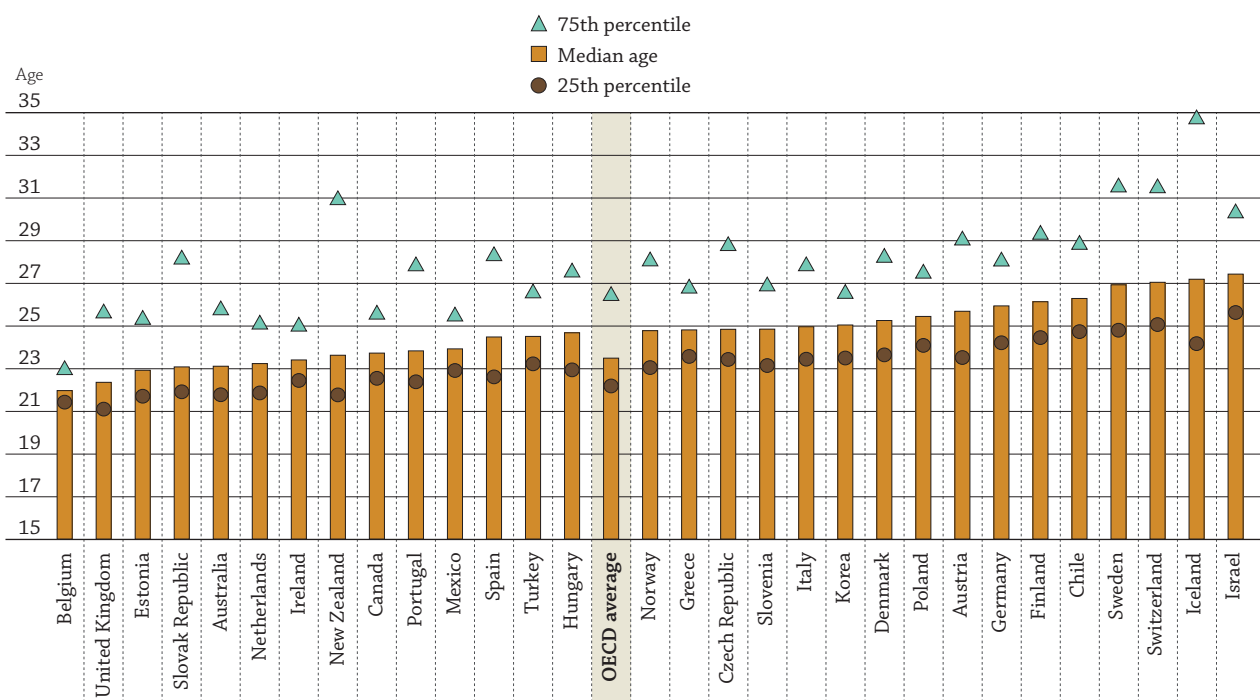
In all these measures, the differences between countries remain very high. In 2011, the median age of first graduation ranged from around 22 in Belgium and the United Kingdom to over 27 in Iceland and Israel (Figure 2). The variation is partly caused by the significant differences in the numbers of older graduates. At the 75th percentile the age of first graduation ranges from 23 in Belgium to 35 in Iceland.

In some countries the decrease in the median age of graduation between 2005 and 2011 is very marked. In Belgium, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Portugal and Slovenia, the median age fell by more than one year between 2005 and 2011. Despite the general trend, in some countries the median age of graduation increased, including Austria, Israel, Spain and Turkey.

These variations among countries could be due to structural factors, such as differences in the typical age at which students graduate from upper secondary education, the intake capacity of institutions and their admission procedures, the length of tertiary education programmes, the obligation to do military service, or the opportunity cost of entering the labour market before enrolling in tertiary education. Age differences may also be linked to economic factors, such as the lack of scholarships and flexibility to combine work and study, or the existence of policies to encourage those who have already gained experience in the workplace to enrol in tertiary education and improve or add to their skills.



Figure 2. Age distribution at first graduation, tertiary-type A, 2011



Countries are ranked in ascending order of the median age of first graduation in tertiary-type A programmes.

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

More flexible trajectories?

Of course, not all tertiary students follow the traditional path into full-time study immediately following graduation from upper secondary education. Transitions from study to work are slowly diversifying into a variety of alternative trajectories. This trend can be illustrated by the percentage of students entering university aged 30 years and older, and the percentage of part-time students.

Older students often pursue university studies after a period of work. Contrary to some expectations that lifelong learning would become more widespread, the share of students entering university at age 30 or older has not increased. The percentage of older students on average across the OECD remained around 10%-11% from 2005 to 2011. However, the variation between countries is very large, ranging in 2011 from 5% or less in Belgium, France, Germany, Mexico and Turkey to 20% or more in Norway and Portugal. Universities have not attracted significantly higher numbers of older students in regular study programmes in all countries.

The average percentage of part-time students in tertiary-type A and advanced research programmes across OECD countries also fell from 19.8% in 2005 to 19.6% in 2008 but then increased to 22.0% in 2011. Apparently, the crisis has started to motivate students to pursue part-time study, often combining work and study. But here also the variation between countries is huge, ranging from 2.9% in the Czech Republic to 52.7% in Poland.

As Figure 3 illustrates, both indicators are related, but not very strongly (correlation of 0.36). Countries such as Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands have both relatively low numbers of older entrants and low numbers of part-time students. Finland, New Zealand and Sweden score at the other end of the spectrum with around 40% to 50% part-time students and 15% to 20% older students.

