

Decline and Fall – how the UK is being left behind in education

A new study from the University and College Union has revealed that the UK is one of the least educated nations in the developed world and that its position has worsened considerably since 1995. Analysis of the most recent data on young people in education from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that the UK has been overtaken by countries such as Portugal, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Greece in recent years.

The study shows that the UK has plummeted down international league tables ranking the percentage of young people in education and warns that unless the UK acts decisively now it risks propping up the table and becoming the poor man of the developed world. Universities and colleges are worth £87bn a year to the UK economy, yet the UK is seeing a decline in the percentage of people benefiting from them.

Analysis of the percentage of people aged 15-19 and 20-29 in education has revealed that the UK has slipped from comfortable mid-table into the relegation zone for developed countries. The countries with lowest percentage of young people in education in the developed world are Turkey, Mexico, the UK and Luxembourg (figures for Japan and Canada were unavailable). Twenty-four countries have a higher percentage of young people in education than the UK.

15-19 year-olds

In 1995 the UK was ranked 19th out of the 30 OECD countries with 72% of 15-19 year-olds in education – the same proportion as America – and just 2% below average.

However by 2007 the UK only had 71% of 15-19 year-olds in education and was down to 26th out of 30, ahead of only Mexico and Turkey as data was unavailable for Japan and Canada.

There is a real risk of both Mexico and Turkey overtaking the UK and leaving it bottom of the table. In the 12 years that has seen the UK's participation drop by 1%, both Mexico and Turkey have seen considerable rises.

France was the only other nation to see a fall in the percentage of 15-19 year-olds in education during that time. However, despite its fall, France still has a healthy 86% of 15-19 year-olds in education, above the OECD 2007 average of 82%. The UK, by contrast, is now 11% off the average and Portugal, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Greece, who all had a lower percentage of 15-19 year-olds in education than the UK in 1995 have now all overtaken the UK.

15-19 year-olds: tables

Percentage of full-time and part-time students aged 15-19 in public and private institutions in OECD countries 1995		
1	Belgium	94
2	Netherlands	89
3	France	89
4	Germany	88
5	Norway	83
6	Sweden	82
7	Finland	81
8	Australia	81
9	Switzerland	80
10	Canada	80
11	Ireland	79
12	Denmark	79
13	Iceland	79
14	Poland	78
15	Korea	75
16	Austria	75
17	Luxembourg	73
18	Spain	73
19	United Kingdom	72
20	United States	72
21	Portugal	68
22	New Zealand	68
23	Czech Republic	66
24	Hungary	64
25	Greece	62
26	Mexico	36
27	Turkey	30
28	Italy	Date not available
29	Japan	Data not available
30	Slovak Republic	Data not available
OECD Average		74

Percentage of full-time and part-time students aged 15-19 in public and private institutions in OECD countries 2007		
1	Belgium	94
2	Poland	93
3	Czech Republic	90
4	Ireland	90
5	Netherlands	89
6	Hungary	89
7	Germany	88
8	Finland	88
9	Norway	87
10	Sweden	87
11	Korea	87
12	France	86
13	Slovak Republic	86
14	Switzerland	84
15	Iceland	84
16	Denmark	83
17	Australia	82
18	Spain	80
19	Italy	80
20	United States	80
21	Greece	80
22	Austria	79
23	Portugal	77
24	New Zealand	75
25	Luxembourg	74
26	United Kingdom	71
27	Mexico	50
28	Turkey	47
29	Japan	Data not available
30	Canada	Data not available
OECD Average		82

20-29 year-olds

The story is not any more encouraging when figures for people aged 20-29 are analysed. Once again the UK has plummeted down the international league table for people in education. In 1995 18% of 20-29 year-olds in the UK were in education, 12 years later (2007) the figure had, like for the 15-19 year-olds, dropped by 1% (down to 17% for 20-29 year-olds). The drop, coupled with other countries' improved participation rates meant that the UK has dropped from a mid-ranking 15th out of 30 in 1995 down to 25th out of 30 in 2007.

As data was unavailable for Japan and Canada again, this means only three countries are below the UK. Two of them are again Turkey and Mexico, with Luxembourg propping up the table. Luxembourg also scored badly at 15-19 year-olds – it was just one place above the UK. This means that in 2007 the countries with lowest percentage of young people in education in the developed world were Turkey, Mexico, the UK and Luxembourg (with figures for Japan and Canada unavailable). Twenty-four countries have a higher percentage of young people in education than the UK.

Between 1995 and 2007 Poland, New Zealand, Austria, Switzerland, Korea, Ireland, Greece, Hungary and the Czech Republic went from having a lower percentage of 20-29 year-olds in education than the UK to a higher percentage.

20-29 year-olds: tables

Percentage of full-time and part-time students aged 20-29 in public and private institutions in OECD countries 1995		
1	Denmark	30
2	Finland	28
3	Norway	25
4	Belgium	24
5	Iceland	24
6	Australia	23
7	Canada	22
8	Sweden	22
9	Portugal	22
10	Netherlands	21
11	Spain	21
12	Germany	20
13	France	19
14	United States	19
15	United Kingdom	18
16	New Zealand	17
17	Poland	16
18	Austria	16
19	Switzerland	15
20	Korea	15
21	Ireland	14
22	Greece	13
23	Hungary	10
24	Czech Republic	10
25	Mexico	8
26	Turkey	7
27	Luxembourg	Data not available
28	Japan	Data not available
29	Italy	Data not available
30	Slovak Republic	Data not available
OECD Average		18

Percentage of full-time and part-time students aged 20-29 in public and private institutions in OECD countries 2007		
1	Finland	43
2	Denmark	38
3	Iceland	36
4	Sweden	35
5	Australia	33
6	Poland	31
7	New Zealand	30
8	Norway	30
9	Germany	29
10	Belgium	28
11	Netherlands	28
12	Korea	28
13	Greece	27
14	Hungary	25
15	United States	23
16	Switzerland	23
17	Czech Republic	22
18	Austria	22
19	Spain	22
20	Italy	21
21	Ireland	21
22	Portugal	21
23	France	20
24	Slovak Republic	18
25	United Kingdom	17
26	Turkey	12
27	Mexico	11
28	Luxembourg	6
29	Japan	Data not available
30	Canada	Data not available
OECD Average		25

Conclusions and recommendations

UCU's analysis shows a shocking decline in the UK's standing in the world of education. It has gone from a mid-ranking nation to one at the bottom of the pile and risks being overtaken by the few countries still below it and being left behind the countries that have overtaken it in the past 12 years. Unless urgent and decisive action is taken the UK risks being the poor man of the developed world and ill-prepared for life in the new knowledge economy.

Of equal concern is the fact the countries in the 'second tier' (OECD partner countries Israel, Russia, Brazil, Chile, Estonia and Slovenia) also enjoy a higher percentage of young people in education than the UK and, like the rest of the developed world, are seeing those percentages increase.

UCU believes a real cross-party consensus is needed if the UK is to avoid the indignity of becoming a country with first-world aspirations but third-world levels of participation in education. The old order of education for the elite is no longer a model for success and this study shows how urgently education needs to be put at the top of the agenda.

UCU is starting that debate with the formation of the Make Education Count Westminster network that will bring together key players from across the political divide including MPs, peers, local politicians, unions and other key stakeholders.