

# Is it Time to Rethink Our Model of Post-Secondary Education? Progressing a Tertiary Education Eco-System

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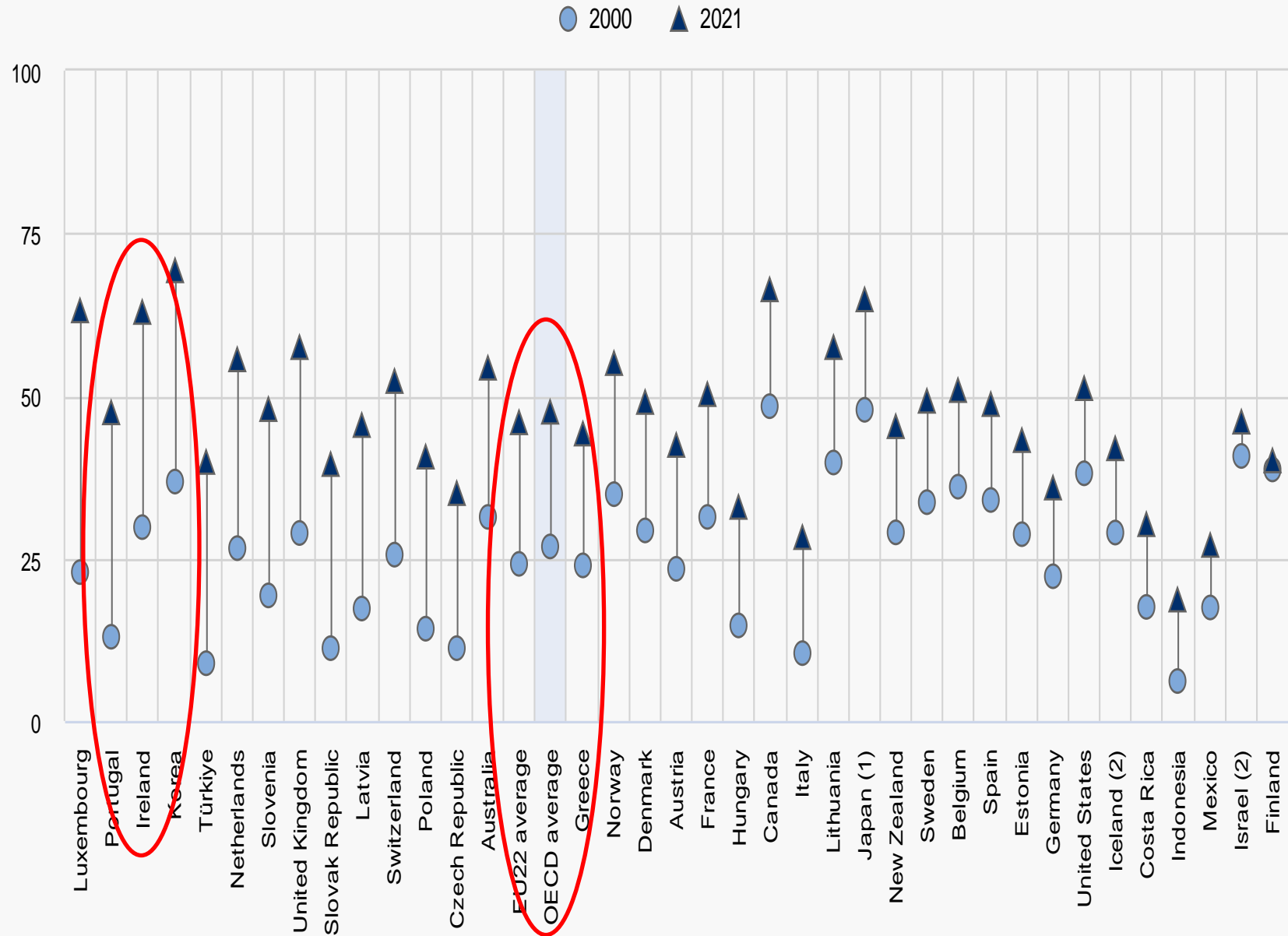
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Near universal participation in higher education has been a huge achievement for OECD countries.



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BUT - as we look towards the future, globalisation and geopolitical shifts, an ageing population, the technological and digital revolutions, and strategies for a sustainable green and blue economy will continue to reshape our societies, how and where we live and the world of work?

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS for our model of higher educational provision which has remained relatively unchanged as if it was still a system catering to a small elite?

WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER 50% – learners gradually being “left behind” by the current system and/or unable to access the system in any meaningful or sustained way?



# Themes

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1. Towards Tertiary Eco-systems
2. Changing Context and Landscape
3. Why Tertiary
4. Propositions for a Tertiary Eco-system







# Towards Tertiary Eco-systems



# California Master Plan (1960)

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California Master Plan – attempt to design the public system to address twin issues of massification and diversification – and arguably resources.

Aim was to create and preserve three distinct subsectors – or, more accurately, tiers – based on the principle of division of labour, talent and knowledge-production – while providing a route “upwards” to opportunity.

Master Plan has come to personify system thinking – proffering the idea that the system is more than a collection of individual institutions

By the 1990s, discussion switched to Europe, and elsewhere, as massification took off in these countries and regions.



# Three (brief) Observations

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1. **Focus on Higher Education** – post-secondary space became defined by HE/research universities and affirmed by policymakers and scholars alike as **the** post-secondary system – and resources directed accordingly.
2. **Rest of Post-secondary Sector** effectively air-brushed out of consideration. Open-access colleges rightly praised as entry route for widening participation, but regressively more likely to be less-funded/learners less-resourced despite the populations they serve.
3. **Diversity/Differentiation Key Concepts** – Master Plan/binary arrangements appeared to be settled arrangements, but they have proven to be inflexible/unresponsive to changes, reinforcing social stratification according to labour market requirements and simplistic assumptions about knowledge-production.

# Systemness

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The concept of systemness credited to Neil Smelser who described the modern research university as a “multi-campus network” of inter-related parts and relationships.

Nancy Zimpher operationalised the concept during her tenure as Chancellor of SUNY.

*Systemness is the ability of a system to coordinate the activities of its constituent campus so that, on the whole, the system behaves in a way that is more powerful and impactful than what can be achieved by individual campuses acting alone.*

I refer to this as maximising capacity beyond individual capability.





# Tertiary Eco-system

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Widening our lens to embrace the entire post-secondary landscape

Different types of education, training, and R&I actors interact with each other in formal, informal, and non-formal arrangements which are mutually and societally beneficial and interdependent (open/hidden).

The ecosystem is a dynamic space wherein the number, type, role, and responsibilities of providers, individually and collectively, evolves and modifies over time in response to the changing environment.

Whilst recognising distinct missions, notably there is no implicit hierarchy.



# Five Underpinning Sets of Ideas

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1. Civic-Engaged University
2. Regional R&I Networks and Clusters
3. Geography of Place
4. Governance
5. Biodiversity

Together, these concepts embody the four Cs of coherence, collaboration, coordination and co-production – without which a dynamic and sustainable tertiary education eco-system is not possible or achievable.





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# Changing Context and Landscape

# Some Trends

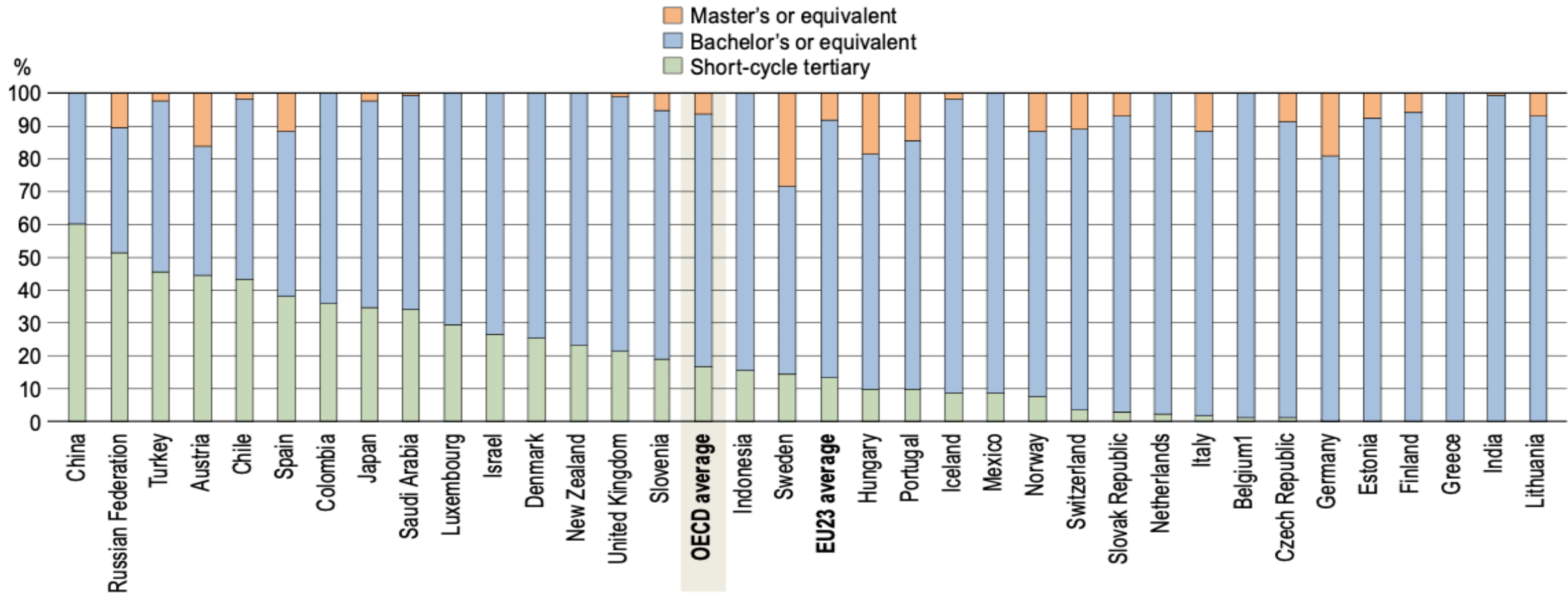
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Share of 25–34-year-olds with tertiary qualification in OECD member countries exceeded 50%.

On average, 78% of first-time tertiary graduates completed a BA degree, and 18% completing a short cycle tertiary diploma cf. EU = 9%



# Distribution of first-time entrants into tertiary education by level of education (2018) OECD



1. Short-cycle tertiary: data refer to the Flemish Community of Belgium only.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of first-time entrants going into short-cycle tertiary programmes.

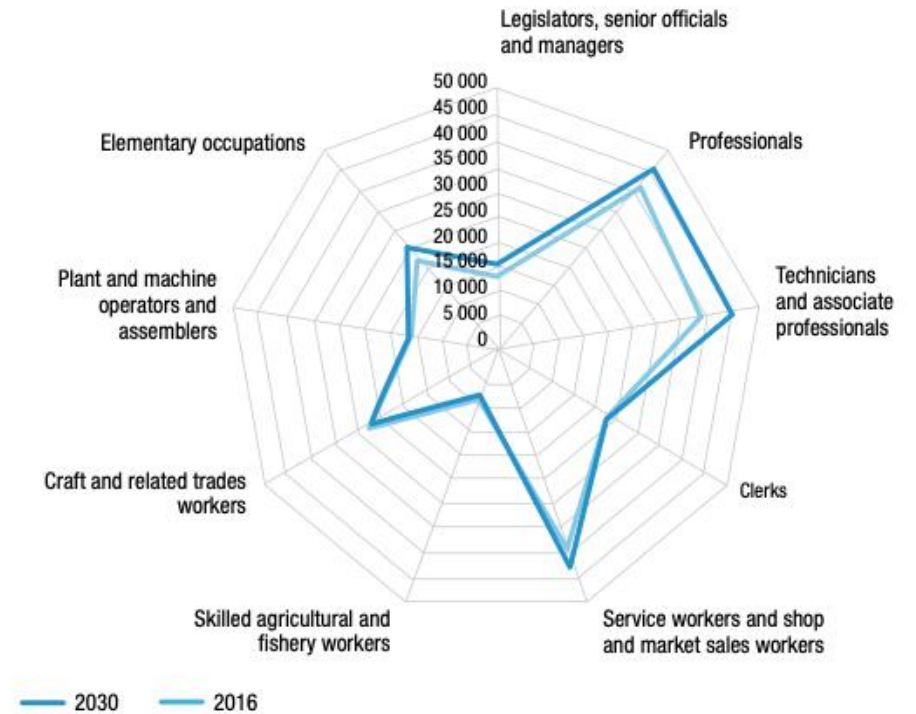
Source: OECD/UIS/Eurostat (2020), Table B4.1. See Source section for more information and Annex 3 for notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>).



# Some Trends

Economic/technological requirements have pushed skill demand beyond secondary education, but pursuit of status/social advantage have driven demand for degree-level qualifications.

Focus primarily on higher skills ignores that ~45% of jobs will require medium level skills.



NB: Based on numbers in employment (estimates based on national accounts).  
Source: Cedefop (2018 skills forecast).



# Some issues/concerns 1

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Boundaries between vocational, professional and academic have become porous but system structures/policy have become fossilised.

– Nomenclature re. universities & “non-universities” illustrates extent to which academic and public discourse and policy has framed institutions, and their learners, as “the other”.

As higher education participation has risen, TVET/FET has declined – seen as alternative access route to HE or provider “of last resort”.

As demographics play havoc with university enrolment, predatory behaviour and cannibalisation of courses, egged on by funding systems, is common.



## Some issues/concerns 2

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Skills/skills mismatch too readily dismissed – but there are genuine issues.

Demographic changes leading to decline in traditional college-ready post-secondary education cohort as older people grow as a percentage of population.

As social, cultural and economic life concentrates disproportionately in urban centres ⇒ rising regional disparities.

Emphasis primarily on research-intensive R&I strategies ignores fact that its people who catalyse knowledge & lead innovation not institutions.

Educational responses poor in response to new landscape.

Funding systems are regressive – focusing on full-time learners and HE.





# Why Tertiary

# What is Tertiary?

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Describes educational landscape post-secondary schooling, what the Bologna Framework refers to as Third Cycle.

ISCED = everything from short-cycle Level 5 to doctoral/equivalent Level 8

OECD: “the more common term was higher education, but tertiary education was adopted...to reflect the growing diversity of institutions and programmes.”

Context depending = TVET/FET, polytechnics/UaS, university colleges and universities, adult and community education, foundation (literacy and numeracy), second-chance education, skills development, and continuing education and LLL.





# Policy Developments

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New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), following extensive policy discussion beginning ~2000

Scottish Funding Council – established 2005 overseeing tertiary education, research and innovation

Welsh Tertiary Education & Research Commission (CTER), following review in 2015, officially to start in 2024

Irish Government (2022) to create a *Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge*

Reviews taking place in Australia, Portugal, Norway, Netherlands





# Propositions for a Tertiary Ecosystem

# 6 Propositions...

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1. ***Whole-of-Tertiary Vision and Strategy from School to Adults – and arguably From Cradle To Grave*** – rather than cherry-picking populist initiatives.
2. **Single Integrated Agency For Tertiary Education** as the over-arching governance, regulatory and performance structure for the tertiary system.
3. **Significantly Strengthened TVET/FET System** facilitates skill development as well as innovation diffusion with same supports/resources given to universities over decades now applied to TVET/FET.



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**4. *Mandatory National Credit Accumulation and Transfer System*** could create opportunities for learners of all ages and ability to make choices and progress according to their own pace and circumstances

**5. *Regional Research and Innovation Eco-Systems*** identifying/building on strategic areas of strengths and potential of individual regions with wide stakeholder involvement.

**6. *Revamped Funding Model*** is required if we want to seriously reflect these broader objectives and changed circumstances.



# No Room For Complacency

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What are we trying to achieve? What kind of society/economy are we aiming to build? What kind of people and skills are needed – across the range from pre-school to university? How can the current tertiary system help meet these objectives? What needs to change?



Policy matters and coherence is essential. Alignment of vision, policy, leadership, instruments, resources.



Unlikely governments can afford to fund all tertiary education society/people want and need. BUT it is also clear societies can't afford to leave people behind.



Signs that citizens have far greater expectations of the state and its role, *and* states themselves are more willing to engage directly in actions of strategic importance. Big state is back.