

## Creating opportunities: The EU and students

### SUMMARY

Over one third of the European Union (EU) population – some 170 million citizens – are aged under 30, with half that number under the age of 15 years. Although education policies in the EU are essentially decided and implemented by the individual EU countries, the EU provides sound evidence and analysis to help national governments make informed policy decisions and drive reforms to improve educational outcomes and the employability of young people. For this purpose, in 2009, the EU set a series of common objectives to address the most pressing concerns in EU education systems by 2020.

In several areas, the EU scores well. In 2015, 39 % of the EU workforce held a higher education degree. Between 2005 and 2015, the percentage of early school leavers decreased by some 30 %, even though during 2016, progress towards meeting the EU target slowed and currently stands at an average of 11 % – one percentage point away from achieving the target.

However, the EU faces the major challenge of further upskilling its population and reducing under-achievement in basic skills. In specific terms, the results show that over 22 % of EU students have low achievement levels in mathematics, nearly 18 % in reading, and some 17 % in science. Moreover, by 2020, the EU aims for at least 15 % participation in learning among the population aged 25-64 years. Nevertheless, progress towards this target has been very limited. The EU average in adult learning stood at some 11 % in 2014 (the target was 15 %), and did not increase in 2015. Only urgent and substantive action will enable the EU to reach the benchmark.

On a more optimistic note, the Erasmus student mobility programme that has allowed more than 9 million Europeans to study abroad, turns 30 in 2017. Widely recognised as one of the most successful EU programmes, Erasmus provides a concrete example of the positive impact of European integration.



### In this briefing:

- What the EU can do
- Why education matters
- Overcoming hurdles
- Erasmus: a fast lane to the labour market
- Main references

## What the EU can do

Over one third of the European Union (EU) [population](#) – some 170 million citizens – are under the age of 30, with half that number under the age of 15 years. At a time when nearly 20 % of young Europeans are [unemployed](#), finding the most efficient transition from education to employment remains a pressing EU priority. Faced with recurring issues such as slow economic growth, unemployment, and pressure on public finances, EU countries also need to find urgent responses to rising populism and the refugee crisis. Education can be instrumental in tackling these issues, both by enabling young people to become active citizens and by equipping them with the right skills to find employment, which ultimately offers the best protection against poverty.

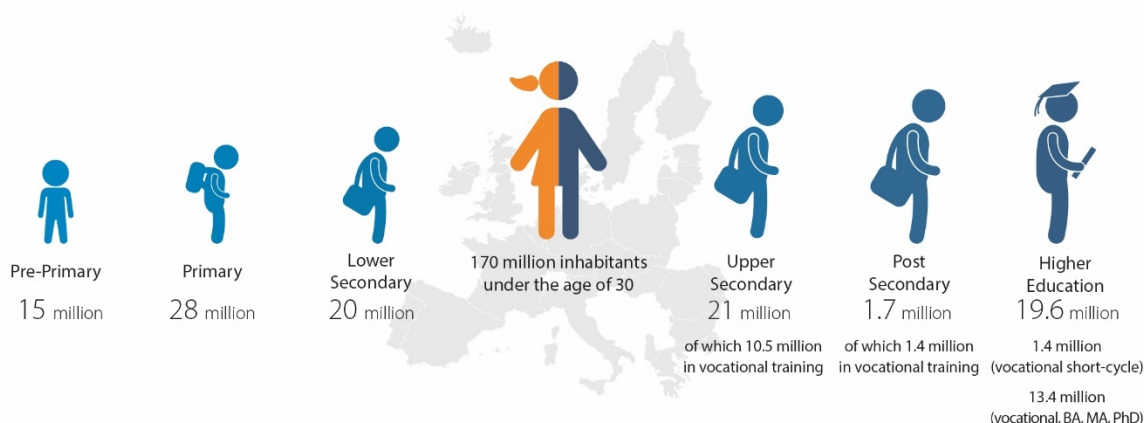
Nevertheless, education can live up to these expectations only if it delivers good basic skills (in literacy, numeracy and science), and carries out a broader reflection on how to develop and maintain transversal skills such as critical thinking, a sense of initiative, and problem-solving. International assessment programmes show that there is still room for improvement. This is one of the reasons why education and training remain a high priority in the EU.

That being said, tackling education and training is not an easy task. Education policies in the EU are essentially decided and implemented by the individual EU countries. Member States notably have full responsibility for the content of teaching and the organisation of educational systems, while the EU plays a support and coordination role. This, however, is not a minor responsibility. Sound evidence and analysis can help in making informed policy decisions and driving reforms to improve educational outcomes and the employability of young people. For this purpose, in 2009, the EU set a series of [common objectives](#) to address the most pressing concerns in EU education systems by 2020.

## Why education matters

The technological revolution has brought about various social and economic transformations, which, in turn, have changed the demand for skills and the labour market more generally. With low-skilled tasks increasingly becoming automated, the

**Figure 1 – Number of students by level of education**



Sources: [Eurostat](#), 2015 (Pre-primary and Primary), [Eurostat](#), 2013 (Secondary), [Eurostat](#), 2015 (Demographic trends), [Eurostat](#), 2015 (Higher education).

need for basic craft skills is declining, while the demand for more complex skills is growing. Nevertheless, acquiring a good level of basic skills is essential to access higher levels of education.

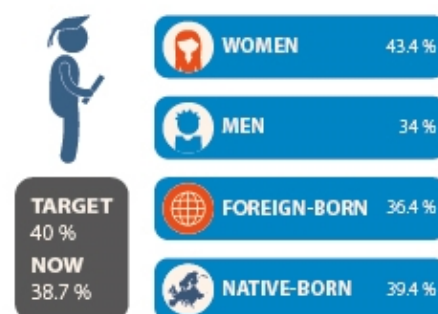
Skills [forecasts](#) indicate that 35 % of jobs in the EU are likely to require a higher education qualification by 2020. The good news is that in 2015, almost 39 % of the EU workforce aged 25-54 years held a [degree](#) (see figure 2).

As shown in figure 3, good educational qualifications remain the best job guarantee in times of crisis, since unemployment rates clearly decrease as the level of educational attainment rises. This is observed in all EU countries, as the average unemployment rate in the EU-28 in 2014 was three times higher for those having lower secondary education (18 %), compared to those having obtained higher education degrees (6 %).

Furthermore, the employability of graduates increased for the second consecutive year, by nearly 1 % compared to 2014, and 1.5 % from 2013, reaching almost 77 % in 2015. However, the EU has not yet regained pre-crisis employment rates for recent graduates, which peaked in 2008 at 82 %.

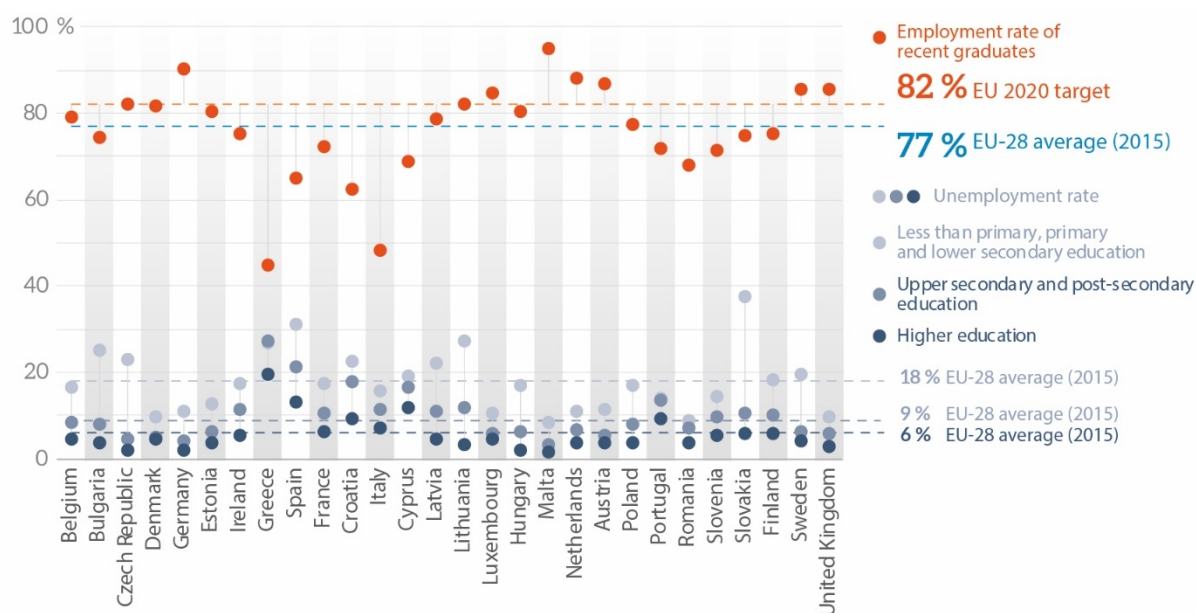
For those who complete their initial education at secondary level, vocational training systematically results in a better transition to the labour market than for those who hold a qualification from a general pathway who do not continue into higher education. The combination of practical experience and theoretical learning is now well recognised as an efficient way to facilitate the application of theoretical knowledge and smooth students' transition into the labour market.

**Figure 2 – Higher educational attainment in the EU, 2015**



Source: [Eurostat](#), 2016.

**Figure 3 – Unemployment rate by level of education, 2015 (%) and employment rate of recent graduates 2015 (%)**



Sources: [Eurostat](#), Employment rates, 2015 [Eurostat](#), Unemployment rates, 2015.

## Overcoming hurdles: how education can make a difference

Skills have become the global currency of 21st century economies. In 2009, the EU set a target for basic skills according to which, by 2020, the share of 15 year olds with a low achievement in reading, maths and science should be less than 15 %. However, the latest results from the Programme for International Student Assessment ([PISA 2012](#)) introduced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggest that the EU faces a major challenge to further upskill its population and reduce underachievement in basic skills.

In specific terms, the results show that over 22 % of EU students have low achievement levels in mathematics, nearly 18 % in reading, and some 17 % in science. Moreover, the individual results clearly indicate that EU countries displaying certain levels of basic skills in one of the areas tend to perform similarly in the other areas. This demonstrates that policies designed to tackle low achievement in one field often converge with similar policies in another.

Young people who fail to reach a sufficient level of educational qualifications and leave education and training before completing upper secondary school are at risk of being insufficiently equipped for the increasingly demanding EU labour market.

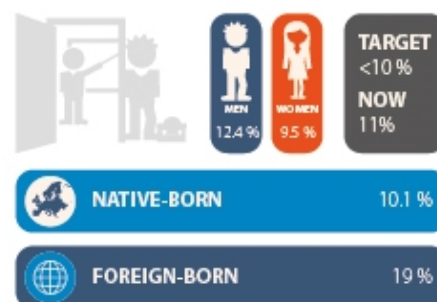
Between 2005 and 2015, the percentage of early school leavers in the EU decreased by some 30 %. However, during 2016, progress towards meeting the EU target has slowed and currently stands at an average of 11 % (figure 4), although this figure is much higher in the case of foreign-born students (19 %).

In many cases, early school leaving is the end of a long process of disengagement from education linked to underachievement, whose roots may lie in the early years. A recent OECD [report](#) comes to the same conclusion, and highlights the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for later development of basic skills. The authors also suggest that low performance is more prevalent among students who have not attended pre-primary education.

Interestingly, the return on investment in quality ECEC can lead to future public savings [13 times greater](#) than the initial investment. The EU target for participation in ECEC requires that at least 95 % of children from the age of four to compulsory school age participate in ECEC. Currently, the EU average is less than 1 percentage point below target.

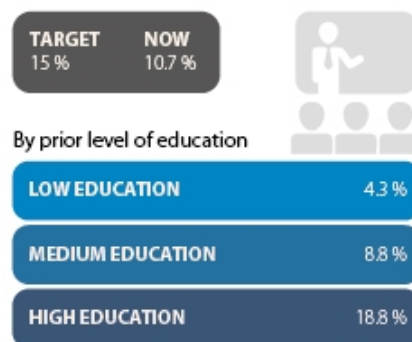
To ensure that adults' skills remain up to date over their lifetime, individuals should have access to the learning opportunities they need, and be encouraged to use them. By 2020, the EU aims to have at least 15 % of the population aged 25-64 participating in learning. However, progress towards this target has been very limited. The EU average stood at some 11 % in 2014, and did not increase in

**Figure 4 – Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)**



Source: [Eurostat](#), 2015.

**Figure 5 – Access to adult learning**

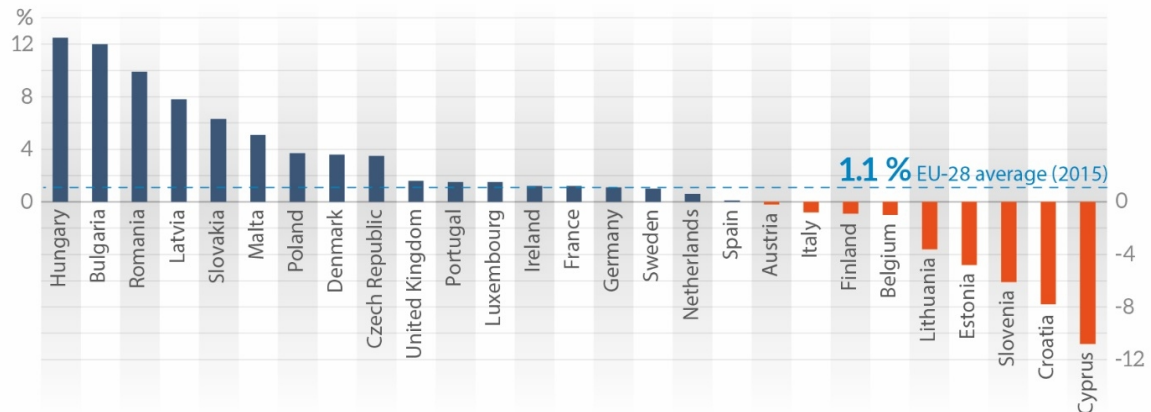


Source: [Eurostat](#), 2015.

2015 (see figure 5). Only urgent and substantive action will enable the EU to reach the benchmark.

Finally, effective education requires adequate investment. For the first time in the past three years, [public expenditure](#) on education increased in 2014, by over 1 % in real terms. As shown in figure 6, about two thirds of EU countries raised spending, and the increase was greater than 5 % in five of them (Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Romania and Slovakia). More than ever, the challenge of financing education lies in investing both sufficiently and effectively.

**Figure 6 – Public expenditure on education, year-on-year real change 2013-2014 (%)**



Source: [European Commission](#), Education and training monitor 2016.

### Erasmus: a fast lane to the labour market

The [Erasmus](#) student mobility programme, which has enriched the lives of more than 9 million Europeans, turns 30 in 2017. Widely recognised as one of the most successful EU programmes, Erasmus provides a concrete example of the positive impact of European integration.

A recent [study](#) shows that young graduates who have obtained skills and experience abroad through the Erasmus programme have much better opportunities, and improved skills, than students who have not gone abroad. The probability of them becoming long-term unemployed is reduced by half when compared to non-mobile students, and their unemployment rate five years after obtaining their degrees is 23 % less than for their contemporaries who chose to study only in their home countries.

The study also indicates that the period spent abroad provides students with job-finding skills that are 70 % higher than those of students overall, and improves their employability compared to the latter by 42 %.

A spin-off from the programme, [Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs](#), gives aspiring entrepreneurs the chance to learn from experienced counterparts running small businesses in other participating countries. [Statistical data](#) show that companies who took part in the programme are more resilient, grow more, and create more jobs, with more than a third (36.5 %) of the aspiring entrepreneurs going on to create their own business after the exchange.

Some 87 % of the start-ups founded by the entrepreneurs who have participated in the programme are still running, while the average survival rate of start-ups in the EU after

three years is only 57 %. Likewise, 73 % of the new entrepreneurs have developed new products or services, compared to an average of 35 % of SMEs in the EU. Since the programme's beginning in 2009 until mid-2015, over 3 000 exchanges have taken place, involving some 6 600 new or experienced entrepreneurs.

### Main references

European Commission, [Education and training monitor](#), Brussels, 2016.

European Commission, [PISA 2012](#): EU performance and first inferences regarding education and training policies in Europe, Brussels, 2013.

Eurostat, Statistics explained, [Europe 2020 indicators - education](#), 2016.

OECD, [Low-Performing Students](#): Why They Fall Behind and How to Help Them Succeed, Paris, 2016.

### Disclaimer and Copyright

The content of this document is the sole responsibility of the author and any opinions expressed therein do not necessarily represent the official position of the European Parliament. It is addressed to the Members and staff of the EP for their parliamentary work. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2017.

Photo credits: © Luis Louro / Fotolia.

[eprs@ep.europa.eu](mailto:eprs@ep.europa.eu)

<http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu> (intranet)

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank> (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

