Teaching careers in the EU
Why boys do not want to be teachers

SUMMARY
Teaching – a profession that dates back through the generations – seems to have lost some of its attractiveness at present. An ageing teacher population, severe teacher shortages, difficulties with retaining younger teachers and a significant gender imbalance in staffing at different levels of education are just some of the serious challenges facing the profession. In the EU, only 7% of all teachers are under 30 years old, while around 36% are 50 or older. Also, 72% of the nearly 6 million people working as school teachers are women, thus confirming the perception that teaching is a ‘woman’s world’. An extensive 2014 survey revealed that over a third of teachers in the EU work in schools with a shortage of qualified staff, and nearly half of school directors report a shortage of teachers for special needs pupils. Perhaps more worryingly, 81% of teachers in the EU feel teaching is not valued in society. For most EU countries, raising the status and attractiveness of the teaching profession is therefore an urgent necessity. Despite the seriousness of the challenge, only 11 EU countries have taken some policy measures to make teaching more attractive.

EU education systems offer teachers various arrangements in terms of recruitment, career structure, professional development and support, and remuneration. The average starting salary in lower secondary education in the 2016-2017 period was €27,000, with top salaries peaking at €45,000. However, a strong geographical divide is noticeable, with salaries of school teachers in eastern Europe being substantially lower than those in western Europe.

Teachers have access to various mobility schemes through Erasmus, the EU’s flagship programme in the area of education. From 2014 to 2020, the programme has offered mobility opportunities to 800,000 education staff, thus confirming its growing impact and popularity. In March 2019, the European Parliament supported the tripling of the programme’s budget for 2021-2027, to make it more accessible and inclusive and enable more teachers and students to take part in it. Members of the European Parliament also proposed re-allocating the budget to different parts of the programme, as a way to offer pre-school and early education staff more possibilities to participate in mobility schemes.

In this Briefing
- The (changing) status of teachers
- The social ranking of the teaching profession
- Making teaching careers more attractive
- Access and recruitment
- Professional development and support
- Career structure and remuneration
- Teacher mobility
- Why boys do not want to be teachers
- European Parliament views on teaching
The (changing) status of teachers

Teaching is a profession which has been around for centuries. The earliest educators – whether scribes of the court or members of the clergy – enjoyed widespread respect and a high social status. Tasked with imparting to the children of the wealthy and the nobility the skills necessary for their future integration in society, private tutors, such as the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, laid the foundations of modern teaching. The centuries that followed saw the gradual opening of education to others than just the privileged. The possibility to offer free education to a vast majority of people also led to a dramatic rise in the number of teachers and educational institutions.

However, the teaching profession seems to have lost some of its attractiveness at present. Although European leaders and national policy-makers have committed themselves to identifying the challenges and exploring the best ways for providing effective support for teachers, enhancing their professional knowledge and raising their status, becoming a teacher is increasingly less appealing as a career choice. Higher expectations in terms of student outcomes and greater pressures due to a more diverse student population combined with rapid technological innovation are having a profound impact on the teaching profession.

The 2012 European Commission communication on ‘Rethinking education’ pointed to a number of challenges that national policy-makers need to take into consideration. These include an ageing teacher population, severe teacher shortages, difficulties with retaining younger teachers in the profession, as well as significant gender imbalances in staffing at different levels of education.

The most pressing of those challenges, the shortage of teachers – encountered in over half of European education systems – appears to be linked to the more general issue of the profession’s attractiveness. Yet, the use of incentives to attract students to the teaching profession in general or to specific subjects in particular is rare. Besides the challenge of convincing a sufficient number of students to enrol in initial teacher education, there is also the issue of ensuring that they would complete the course and actually enter the teaching profession rather than migrating to other careers. An extensive 2014 survey revealed that over a third of teachers in the EU work in schools with a shortage of qualified staff, and nearly half of school directors report a shortage of teachers for special needs pupils. Perhaps more worryingly, 81 % of teachers in the EU feel teaching is not valued in society.

The social ranking of the teaching profession

Measuring teacher status is important, since it allows to better understand how it relates to pupil performance (as measured by PISA, the programme for international student assessment) and teacher pay. In order to determine the social standing of the teaching profession, researchers asked participants in 35 countries around the world to rank 14 professions according to the respect their societies have for them (see Table 1). On average, teachers came out 7th of 14 professions (with head teachers being more highly respected than secondary and primary teachers). When asked to name the profession that seemed most similar to teaching in their country, 50 % of respondents pointed to that of social workers. Interestingly, in Malaysia, China, and Russia, teachers were compared to doctors, which was indicative of the respect their profession commands in these countries.
By contrast, in Spain, France, and Hungary a teacher’s job was perceived as most similar to that of a librarian, and in Portugal, New Zealand and Japan – to that of a nurse.

Countries also differed widely in the extent to which parents would encourage their children to become teachers. The higher the respect for teachers, the more likely people are to encourage their children to enter the profession, independently of pay levels. The results of the report show that teachers are more respected in Asia, Africa and the Middle East than in Europe. In most European countries surveyed, a majority of respondents declared that pupils disrespect teachers. In China, 80% of respondents believed that pupils are respectful of teachers, compared to an overall average of 36%.

Even though researchers argue that higher teacher status mirrors better pupil performance as measured by PISA scores, the reality is much more complex. The data visualised in Figure 1 shows, for example, no correlation between higher teacher status and higher pay, thus suggesting that the status of teachers is rather linked to national cultural perceptions. Also, the variations between PISA scores, status and pay levels are too disparate to allow drawing any clear-cut conclusions in this regard.

Making teaching careers more attractive

The world of education is undergoing a massive transformation as a result of the digital revolution. New technologies are creating learning opportunities that displace traditional education systems, enabling people of all ages to pursue learning at their own pace. This, however, places renewed pressure on education systems, affecting directly the work of teachers who are expected to reconcile quality with equity, deliver measurable results, offer attractive curricula, and prepare young people for jobs that do not exist as yet. With all this in mind, education seems in need of new impetus; yet, the teaching profession fails to attract young professionals.
Many European Union (EU) countries are already facing – or are set to face – shortages of qualified teachers, while the recruitment of highly qualified candidates is likely to be adversely affected by the diminished prestige of the profession.

At present, only a few EU countries are managing to attract the best graduates to the teaching profession. One of them is Finland, where interest in teaching is high and applicants usually outnumber the places available. In other countries, the number of candidates is so low that policies rely on mechanisms to exclude the worst rather than select the best.

For most countries, raising the status and the attractiveness of the teaching profession has a dual purpose: drawing a wider range of suitable candidates and retaining high-quality professionals. Despite the seriousness of the challenge, only 11 EU countries have taken some policy measures to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession. And only a handful – Estonia, Ireland, Lithuania and the UK (Scotland) – are deemed to have broad and systemic strategies in this field.

The ageing teacher population is yet another serious challenge. Only 7% of all teachers in primary, lower and upper secondary level in the EU are under 30 years old, while around 36% are 50 or older (see Figure 2). The situation seems particularly alarming in Italy, where more than half of all teachers (53%) are over 50, and nearly 17% are over 60. High shares of ageing teachers have also been registered in Lithuania (50%), Estonia (49%), Bulgaria (48%), Greece (47%) and Latvia (46%). Difficulties in retaining younger teachers in the profession are experienced by some countries, such as in Belgium, in both the French and Flemish communities, as well as Bulgaria, Romania, Sweden and the UK. This is arguably linked to factors determining the attractiveness of the profession, such as career and pay prospects, stress factors and prestige.

The shortage of teachers, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics – STEM subjects – is another serious concern and has been evidenced in half of the EU education systems. The issue has already been flagged up in a 2017 Commission communication on school development and excellent teaching, revealing that ‘a decline in the prestige of the profession and staff shortages’ are ‘holding back the quality of school education’.
Even though teacher shortages are a problem across the EU, they seem more severe in some geographical areas than in others. This is, for instance, the case in some remote areas in Greece, Lithuania and the UK (Scotland). However, other factors such as economic opportunities and the school environment can also affect career choices. In Belgium for example, it is more difficult to attract teachers to Brussels due to its high cost of living and larger share of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the eastern Länder of Germany, there is a shortage of around 1 600 teachers per year, corresponding to a deficit of 27%.

To tackle teacher shortages, some education systems provide incentives aimed at drawing more students to the teaching profession. Those include offering training bursaries and scholarships to attract graduates from ‘priority subjects’ (UK-England), adopting measures to ease and open up recruitment to professionals with qualifications other than a teacher’s, and increasing the budget for teaching staff salaries (Czechia). Yet, in many countries the growing shortage is addressed mainly by means of longer working hours for teachers, higher pupil-teacher ratios and an increase in the retirement age.

**Access and recruitment**

The traditional way to become a teacher in the EU involves obtaining a teaching qualification. Some EU countries such as Finland, France, Portugal, and Spain require a four- to five-year master's curriculum. Others – among which Belgium, Romania, and the UK – accept a three-to four-year bachelor's degree. In half of EU countries, successfully completing initial teacher education (ITE) is the only condition for entering the recruitment process. In others, the transition from ITE to professional life includes additional steps (see Figure 3).

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**Figure 3 – Official requirements for becoming a fully qualified teacher in primary and general secondary education, 2016-2017**

- **Successful graduation from ITE**: is the only requirement
- **Success in a competitive examination**: is required in addition to completion of ITE
- **Confirmation of professional competency**: is required after completion of ITE


Note: ISCED 2-3 corresponds to lower and upper secondary education level.
In France, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain, prospective teachers have to pass an examination to obtain the full qualification. This can be in one of various forms, including written tests, interviews, assessment of portfolios, observation of teaching practice or any combination of these methods. In addition to providing the full qualification, success in an examination usually gives access to a permanent teaching position. In some countries, such as Croatia, Germany, Romania and Slovenia, once completing the induction programme (see next section), teachers have to pass a state or a national professional examination.

In Ireland, Sweden and the UK, ITE graduates are required to undergo a formal registration or accreditation process. While Ireland and the UK assess the professional skills of new teachers against professional standards, in Sweden, once a teacher is registered with the National Agency for Education – Skolverket – they obtain official recognition of their qualification and degree. In Austria, Hungary, Malta and Slovakia, positive evaluation at the end of the induction period is necessary for full certification. In some education systems, before becoming fully qualified, candidate teachers have to satisfy other requirements, such as demonstrating a certain level of language skills (in Lithuania and some autonomous communities in Spain), or obtaining relevant certificates such as in swimming and first aid (for primary teachers in France).

Alongside the main ITE models, some education systems have introduced alternative pathways to obtaining a teacher’s qualification as a way to tackle teacher shortages and diversify the profession by attracting both high-quality graduates and skilled professionals from other fields. In Denmark, Germany, Slovakia and Sweden, it is possible for graduates from other higher education fields and individuals with professional experience in other areas to gain a teaching qualification through short professional-oriented programmes. In Lithuania, Latvia, the Netherlands and the UK (England), the system relies on employment-based training allowing trainees to work in a school while also going through an individual training programme, on graduating from which they become qualified teachers.

Importantly, the way in which teachers are recruited may have an impact not only on teaching quality but may also address the challenges in teacher supply and demand. For instance, centralised teacher selection mechanisms allow a high degree of control over teacher supply, while decentralised open recruitment provides a more flexible response to teacher demand.

In the vast majority of EU countries, vacancies are filled through open recruitment. This decentralised process, usually managed by schools, is highly regulated in some cases, while in others only the main aspects are coordinated. In Spain, France and Romania, recruitment is carried out through competitions for a limited number of teaching positions in the public education system. Typically, the selected candidates can express their preference regarding the location/schools in which they wish to work, but the final decision is taken by the education authority. Finally, the ‘candidate list’ recruitment method is used in Cyprus, Germany, Luxembourg and Malta. Candidate teachers thus submit applications for employment to a top- or intermediate-level authority which, in most cases, ranks candidates according to predefined criteria.

Last but not least, targeting under-represented groups and career changers can help increase the pool of candidates. More diverse backgrounds and a broad range of previous experience benefit student learning. While societies in the EU are increasingly diverse in terms of cultures and languages, the teaching profession remains relatively homogeneous in most places. For instance, teachers with an immigrant or minority background are still largely under-represented in most EU countries. However, a more diverse teaching force can provide young people with a range of role models and help fight stereotypes.

**Professional development and support**

Even the best programmes cannot fully prepare teachers for all aspects of their profession. For all those intangible teaching skills that can make a difference, a high degree of school practice is instrumental. Experts argue that a structured support phase for newly qualified teachers, referred to
as induction, is considered crucial. It usually includes additional training as well as personalised advice and lasts a year. Its aim is to reduce the costly drop-out rate while also helping young teachers overcome possible ‘praxis shock’ and develop resilience in a critical phase of their careers.

Nearly two thirds of EU countries provide structured induction training for newly qualified teachers. Although the design of the induction process may vary between countries, some elements such as mentoring, professional development and support from the school head are common. The overarching aim of the scheme is to offer personal, social and professional support.

Generally, mentoring is the centrepiece of induction programmes and encompasses all three kinds of support. As a rule, a mentor is a senior teacher who introduces a young colleague to the school community, supporting them and providing coaching and advice when necessary. Mentoring for newly appointed teachers is mandatory in 20 EU countries and recommended in another four. The induction period is followed by an appraisal exercise that may feed into a more comprehensive and formal process of certifying the ability to teach.

Only Belgium, Denmark, Lithuania and the Netherlands do not have such schemes. However, except for Estonia and Finland, where mentoring is recommended for any teacher in need of support, the scheme is only available to first-time teachers.

Figure 4 – Continued professional development in primary and general secondary education, 2016-2017

Knowledge, methods and skills acquired during initial teacher education need to be constantly improved and updated, so that teachers can adapt to the use of new technologies and focus more on the needs of individual learners. In the EU, half of the education systems require continued

Note: ISCED 1 corresponds to primary education level.
Professional development (CPD) on a mandatory basis. In other countries, such as Bulgaria, Germany, Finland and Italy, it is part of teachers’ statutory duties. Interestingly, CPD in France is optional but is required for promotion or salary progression (see Figure 4).

Research from 2017 shows that there is often a mismatch between the professional development needs expressed by teachers, and the actual content proposed by schools. For example, while 58% of teachers wished to be trained in teaching special needs students, only around 33% received such training. Conversely, whenever teachers had a low level of interest in a certain topic (for instance, for knowledge and understanding of their subject field(s)), there was a surplus of training opportunities (61%). ICT skills for teaching was among the few topics where needs (57%) and training provision (51%) seem to have matched.

One way of improving the relevance of CPD on offer would be to involve schools and teachers in agreeing on priority topics. Learning among peers and other school-based formats can also help increase the impact of CPD among staff and support the school as a learning organisation. Digital technologies, open education sources, and massive open online courses are yet another option for CPD and attract a high share of education professionals (between 10% and 25%).

Career structure and remuneration

Offering clear career prospects and attractive pay is essential for the teaching profession which, as highlighted, has difficulty attracting the best. Moreover, good career prospects help teachers remain motivated throughout their career and encourage them to continue providing high quality teaching to pupils.

Nearly half of the EU education systems offer a single-level (flat) career structure, which tends to be horizontal rather than vertical, but still allows teachers to gain more experience or take on additional tasks or responsibilities. This is the case in Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain. In the rest of the EU, advancement is based on a multi-level career structure where career grades mirror ascending levels of job complexity and responsibility. With the notable exception of Estonia, all EU countries with a multi-level career structure link promotion to a salary increase.

Quite alarmingly, a 2017 Commission communication reveals that teachers often earn significantly less than the average university degree holder, with salaries ranging from 74% in pre-primary education to 92% at upper secondary level. Countries offering low salaries and/or poor job security prospects struggle to attract first-time teachers and qualified candidates for vacant positions.

In Europe, the average starting salary in pre-primary education in 2016-2017 was €24 000, with top salaries peaking at €38 000. The equivalent rates for the other levels of education were respectively €26 000 and €42 000 in primary education, €27 000 and €45 000 in lower secondary education (see Figure 5), and €28 000 and €47 000 in upper secondary education. As shown in Figure 5, in Bulgaria, Denmark, Lithuania, Malta and Romania, the statutory salary at lower secondary level after 10 years in service was almost identical to the top salary. Also, there was a strong geographical divide, with salaries in eastern Europe being substantially lower than those in western Europe. In Bulgaria and Romania, starting salaries at all levels were some 30% lower than the EU average.

Quite unsurprisingly, primary and especially pre-primary teachers earn much less than secondary level teachers. Within secondary education, upper secondary education teachers tend to receive higher pay compared to those in lower secondary education. Salary progression exists, but it varies widely among countries. For example, in lower secondary education in Denmark and Lithuania, the starting and the top salary differ by less than 20%. However, in Austria, Greece, Hungary, Ireland and Portugal, the top salary is almost twice the starting salary and in Romania the difference is even greater.

Quite logically, the longer the teaching career, the greater the percentage difference between the starting and the top salary. On average, it takes about 28 years to reach the highest salary range,
which offers an average increase of 64%. However, in some countries, this can take as little as 10 years. Even though in the majority of EU countries salary progression is dependent on the length of service, there are some exceptions. In Sweden and in the UK (England and Wales) the key element is performance.

Teachers’ salaries in most EU countries were raised in the 2016-2017 period. An increase of over 4% (compared to salaries in the 2015-2016 period) was brought forward through policy reform in Ireland and eight other countries from central and eastern Europe (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania and Slovakia). Similarly, collective bargaining helped raise salaries by more than 3% in Denmark, Malta, and Sweden. However, teachers’ salaries remained practically unchanged year-to-year in Italy, Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

To minimise budget deficits during the economic crisis, some national governments implemented pay cuts or freezes for public employees. In most cases, austerity measures have been lifted since then and salaries have been progressively restored to pre-crisis levels. However, and despite the general increase in teachers’ salaries in the 2016-2017 period, net of inflation salaries for first-time teachers in 2016-2017 were still lower than in 2009-2010 in nine EU countries. Teachers in Greece experienced the greatest drop in purchasing power, with beginner teachers losing 20% of their pay.

**Teacher mobility**

Experts assert that teacher exchanges can provide valuable experience, motivation and continuing professional development. In the EU, 27% of teachers have been abroad at least once for professional purposes (see Figure 6). Teachers coming from the Nordic and Baltic countries, and those teaching modern foreign languages are among the most mobile.

The main funding scheme for teacher mobility is Erasmus+, the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport. It provides both graduating and practising teachers with mobility grants to engage in studies or professional development abroad. Nearly 3 000 such projects were funded in 2017, with the average funding per participant amounting to some €1 600.

**Figure 5 – Annual basic gross salaries for full-time teachers in lower secondary public schools in purchasing power standard, 2016-2017**

Source: [Teachers’ and school heads’ salaries and allowances in Europe](report), Eurydice, 2016-2017.

Note: In Estonia and Latvia only starting salaries are set by official regulations.
Asked to evaluate the impact of their Erasmus mobility experience on their careers, 52 % among west European teachers and 82 % among central and east European teachers reported a positive impact that resulted in a broader range of tasks (38 %), an increase in scientific cooperation (49 %) and in international research cooperation (38 %).

Why boys do not want to be teachers

A report on gender segregation by the European Institute for Gender Equality shows that men dominate specific fields, such as engineering and technology, but are much less present in others, such as teaching and care work, in all EU countries. A number of jobs are still commonly considered ‘women’s only’. Among those are pre-primary education, nursing or midwifery, secretarial and personal care work, domestic and related help.

Education is in general a woman’s world. Indeed, in 2017, 72 % of the nearly 6 million people working as school teachers in the EU were women. Quite strikingly, more than eight out of 10 teachers are women in Latvia (87 %), Lithuania (85 %), Bulgaria and Estonia (83 % each) (see Figure 7).

This gender imbalance is of concern to policy-makers, and the current age distribution of teachers suggests that in the short term the number of men will decrease further. Even in the rare examples of countries where the proportion of men and women teachers is similar, fewer men are now entering the profession than previously.

Some authors argue that patterns of career choice are strongly influenced by the social construct of masculinity and femininity, a cumulative historical and social process. The argument has been elaborated further to show that the existence in western societies of a link between women’s domestic roles and their ‘natural’ disposition towards nurturing has gradually led to the feminisation of teaching.

The reasons for the low level of men choosing teaching careers in primary education were explored in an extensive study carried out in Ireland. The results suggest that men usually stay away from teaching on the assumption that women have a natural affinity for children and make better primary teachers.

The most frequently offered explanation by both students (42 %) and teachers (45 %) for the low proportion of men in primary teaching was linked to the perception that it is a woman’s job or that it relates to the mother’s role. Attraction to other careers came second, followed by the perception of primary teaching as unattractive, stressful or requiring too much patience. Low pay, which is often put forward as the prime reason for the low number of men in teaching, came fourth.
Worryingly, research suggests that the more feminised an occupation is, the more likely it is to be badly paid. For example, it has been suggested that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in England and France, the high levels of feminisation of the teaching profession were due to the low value placed on women teachers, which in turn reflected on the profession in general. Scholars claim that in the Soviet era, both the prestige and the pay of medical doctors in eastern Europe decreased as the profession became increasingly feminised.

**European Parliament views on teaching**

Parliament has expressed continuous support for teachers and the challenges facing them.

In 2017, the European Parliament stated its belief that teachers and trainers play a key role in learners’ performance and therefore national governments need to invest more in supporting their continuous professional development. Stressing that improving the status of teachers, trainers, and educators would be a prerequisite for the delivery of the New Skills Agenda – aiming to make the right training, skills and support available in the EU – MEPs insisted that further efforts have to be made to attract young people into the education system and to motivate teachers to stay in the profession. This could be achieved among other things through better recognition by society of teachers and the provision of attractive pay and working conditions, better access to further training, as well as measures to protect teachers against violence and harassment in educational institutions.

Convinced that the impact and popularity of Erasmus+ have been fully proven over the years (see textbox), in March 2019 Parliament suggested tripling the programme’s budget for 2021-2027, in order to make it more accessible and inclusive and enable it to reach out to more teachers and students. Members also re-allocated the budget to different parts of the programme, thus offering pre-school and early education staff more possibilities to participate in mobility schemes.

Recalling that in some EU countries education has been significantly affected by the economic and financial crises, Parliament has repeatedly underlined the importance of investing in teachers, trainers and educators and equipping them with ICT skills, entrepreneurial skills and inclusive education techniques in line with technological and societal developments.
Members have also stressed in this regard the promotion of flexible recruitment practices, for instance, of teachers with a background in industry.

In 2018, Members considered that teachers should be at the core of the digital transformation of schools and therefore require adequate initial preparation and continuous update of their knowledge and skills through high-quality professional development that corresponds to their needs.

Highlighting the importance of teacher mobility for the increased quality of teaching, again in 2018 Parliament called on the EU countries to provide adequate public funding for such exchanges.

**MAIN REFERENCES**

- *Study on policy measures to improve the attractiveness of the teaching profession in Europe*, European Commission, 2014.

**ENDNOTES**

1 Unless otherwise indicated, statistical data in the following sections is from the 2019 'Eurydice report on 'Teaching careers in Europe: access, progression and support'.'

2 The calculation of this Europe-wide average includes data for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, North Macedonia and Turkey.

3 All salary figures have been rounded.

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