

2 The Education and Training 2020 targets

2.1 Early leavers from education and training (ELET)

Key findings

In 2019, the ELET rate stood at 10.2% in the EU-27, down from 14.0% in 2009. Nineteen EU countries have met the 2020 target of having an ELET rate below 10%. Countries that had low proportions of early school leavers in 2009 mostly continue to do so in 2019. Young women are less likely than young men to leave education early as are native-born students compared to foreign-born students. At EU level, the ELET rate is lower in cities than in rural areas and towns. Overall, the socio-economic background of students has a strong impact on early school leaving, with parental education playing a key role.

Evidence shows that the completion rate of upper secondary education and the ELET rate are strongly negatively correlated in most countries. In 2019, 83.5% of people aged 20-24 in the EU-27 had at least upper secondary education, an increase of 4.8 pps since 2009.

The policy framework to reduce early school leaving, adopted by the Commission and Member States, is composed of three pillars: (1) *prevention measures* aiming to reduce the risk of early school leaving before problems start; (2) *intervention measures* aiming to avoid early school leaving by improving the quality of education and training; and (3) *compensation measures* aiming to help those who left school prematurely to re-engage in education. Whereas compensation measures appear to be relatively well-established across Europe, there is more variation between countries when it comes to prevention and intervention.

2.1.1 Progress towards the EU target

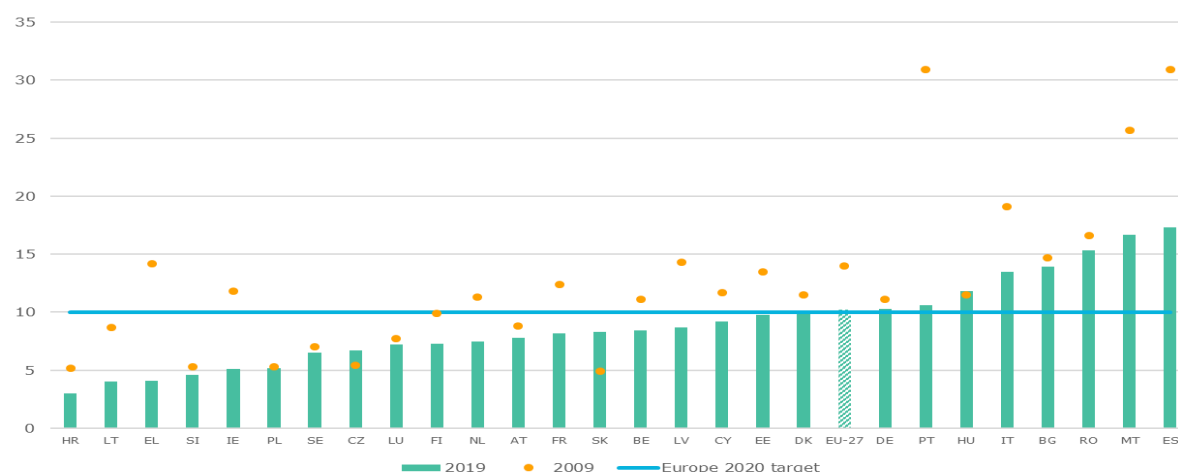
The 'early leavers from education and training' (ELET) indicator (also named 'early school leavers') measures the proportion of 18-24 year-olds with, at most, lower secondary educational attainment (i.e. ISCED 0-2 levels) and who are no longer in formal or non-formal education and training. According to the Europe 2020 target⁴⁹, the ELET rate should be lower than 10% by 2020.

In 2019, the ELET rate stood at 10.2% in the EU-27, down from 14.0% in 2009 and very close to the 2020 target. The three countries with the highest rates are Spain (17.3%), Malta (16.7%) and Romania (15.3%). High ELET rates – more than 3 pps higher than the EU average – can also be observed in Bulgaria (13.9%) and Italy (13.5%). In 19 countries, the ELET rate is below 10% and is below 5% in Croatia (3.0%), Lithuania (4.0%), Greece (4.1%) and Slovenia (4.6%).

Countries that had low proportions of early school leavers in 2009 mostly continued to do so in 2019, with the exception of Slovakia, where the ELET rate grew from 4.9% to 8.3%. Spain improved the ELET rate by 13.6 pps while Greece improved the rate by 10.1 pps. Greece has now reached and even surpassed the target (standing at 4.1% in 2019). Despite their substantial progress, Portugal and Spain have still not attained the 10% target (recording rates of 10.6% and 17.3% in 2019, respectively), as shown in Figure 15.

⁴⁹ This is both a headline target of the Europe 2020 strategy – the EU agenda for growth and jobs from 2010 to 2020 – and a target of the ET2020 strategic cooperation framework.

Figure 15 – Change in the rate of early school leavers from education and training, 2009-2019



Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey. Online data code: [edat_lfse_14].

A closer look at the percentages of early leavers by sex, country of birth and degree of urbanisation provides further insights. In the EU-27, fewer young women than young men leave education early (8.4% v 11.9% respectively), and this gap has remained broadly constant over the last decade. Also, on average in Europe, native-born people have lower ELET rates than foreign-born people (8.9% v 22.2% respectively). As regards the urban/rural divide, the pattern is more nuanced. At EU level, the ELET rate is lower in cities (9.1%) than in rural areas (10.7%) or towns (11.2%). The rural disadvantage is very strong in Romania and Bulgaria, where the difference between the ELET rate in rural areas and in cities is 18.1 pps and 16.0 pps, respectively. By contrast, in Austria (+7.3 pps), Belgium (+4.8 pps), Cyprus (+2.9 pps) and Germany (+1.3 pps), more young people leave education prematurely in cities than in rural areas (see Figure 16), although this could also be an effect of demographic ageing.

Figure 16 – Early leavers from education and training by sex, country of birth and degree of urbanisation, 2019 [%]

	Total	Men	Women	Native-born	Foreign-born	Cities	Towns and suburbs	Rural areas
EU-27	10.2	11.9	8.4	8.9	22.2	9.1	11.2	10.7
BE	8.4	10.5	6.2	7.3	15.7	11.1	7.2	6.3
BG	13.9	14.5	13.3	14.0	:	8.5	13.8	24.5
CZ	6.7	6.6	6.8	6.7	8.3	5.8	7.9	6.4
DK	9.9	12.1	7.6	9.7	13.1	7.2	11.4	12.3
DE	10.3	11.8	8.8	8.1	24.2	10.3	11.1	9.0
EE	9.8	12.7	6.9	9.6	:	6.6	14.3	12.3
IE	5.1	5.9	4.3	5.3	4.2	3.7	6.9	5.4
EL	4.1	4.9	3.2	2.9	26.9	3.2	3.7	7.3
ES	17.3	21.4	13.0	14.4	31.1	15.3	19.5	19.6
FR	8.2	9.6	6.9	7.8	13.4	8.0	9.2	8.0
HR	3.0	3.1	3.0	3.1	:	1.9	1.8	4.9
IT	13.5	15.4	11.5	11.3	32.3	13.5	12.9	14.6
CY	9.2	11.1	7.5	4.8	23.3	9.9	9.3	7.0
LV	8.7	10.5	6.8	8.8	:	3.9	13.1	11.1
LT	4.0	5.1	2.8	4.0	:	2.3	6.9	4.9
LU	7.2	8.9	5.5	6.8	8.1	:	10.0	4.6
HU	11.8	12.7	10.9	11.9	:	3.8	12.2	18.1
MT	16.7	18.3	14.8	15.4	27.0	20.7	12.6	:
NL	7.5	9.5	5.5	7.2	11.6	7	8.3	8.9
AT	7.8	9.5	6.1	5.7	19.2	11.7	7.6	4.4
PL	5.2	6.7	3.6	5.2	:	4.0	6.3	5.6
PT	10.6	13.7	7.4	10.3	14.4	9.1	11.8	11.7
RO	15.3	14.9	15.8	15.4	:	4.3	15.7	22.4
SI	4.6	5.2	3.8	4.0	11.6	3.4	5.1	4.7
SK	8.3	8.8	7.9	8.3	:	:	11.7	7.9
FI	7.3	8.5	6.0	7.0	11.5	5.2	9.7	8.7
SE	6.5	7.4	5.5	4.6	13.6	4.6	7.3	8.4

Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey 2019. Online data code: [edat_lfse_14], [edat_lfse_02] and [edat_lfse_30].

Note: The ELET data by sex and labour market status has low reliability in 2019 for HR. The ELET data by sex and country of birth has low reliability in 2019 for CZ, DK, EE, HR, LV, HU, PL, SL, SK and FI. The ELET data by sex and degree of urbanisation has low reliability in 2019 for HR.

2.1.2 How many young people complete upper secondary education?

Having an upper secondary qualification is the minimum requirement for a satisfactory employment prospects in today's economy, and a passport to full participation in society.

Eurostat publishes data on the share of people aged 20-24 with at least upper secondary education (ISCED 3 level), which corresponds to completion of upper secondary education (the 'completion rate'). People aged 20-24 (instead of 18-24, as in the ET2020 ELET indicator) is the most appropriate age group, as the statutory age for completing most ISCED 3 education programmes is between 18 and 19 years old⁵⁰.

The main difference compared to the ET2020 ELET indicator is that the focus here is on completion of formal education. Therefore, a person with an ISCED 0-2 qualification and still in (either formal or non-formal) education/training would be treated as an early leaver according to a completion indicator, while they would not be considered as an early leaver in the ET 2020 ELET indicator. Besides, the completion rate measures how many (young) people in a cohort get an education at a certain level (relevant for a country's economy and economic growth) whereas the focus of ELET is on the ability of the education system, or education institutions, to keep people that are already in education from dropping out. Even if both measures are a reverse of each other, due to the limitations of surveys, they do not lead to the same results yet the youth enrolled even in informal training course would not be counted in the ELET indicator which may distort the picture of 'educational poverty'. In the new, post-2020 strategy, there will be a change of focus away from ELET, over to the 'completion rate'.

Box 10 – Tackling early school leaving in Romania

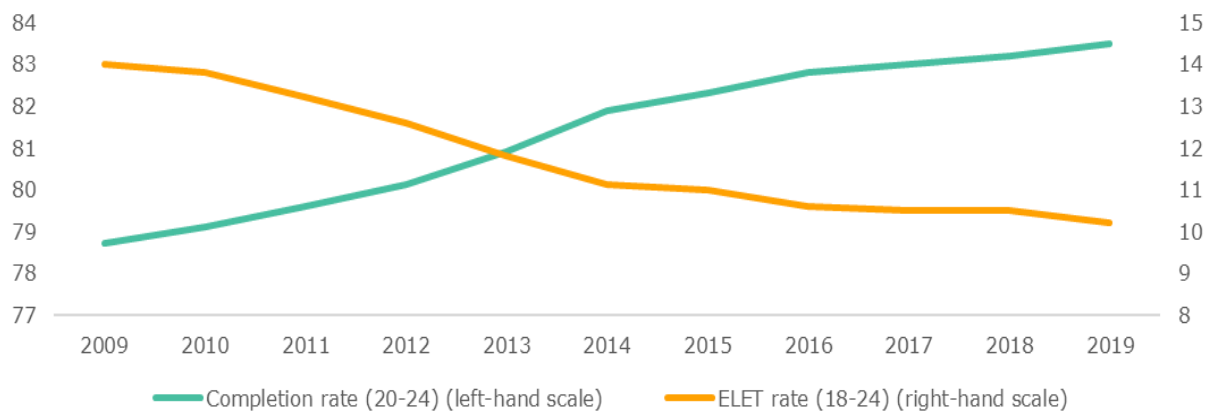
To prevent early school leaving, the Ministry of Education and Research is working together with the European Commission to fully implement and deploy an early warning mechanism (EWM). The project will develop a dedicated EWM module in the existing integrated IT system for education and pilot the module in 10 selected counties. It offers hands-on support to 10 schools to develop and carry out their early warning action plan, and provides training to key stakeholders at central, regional and local level. The project, implemented by the World Bank, started in June 2020 and will run for 2 years. It aims to equip education authorities with all the necessary tools and capacity to scale-up the EWM at national level.

The EWM has been developed as part of a previous call under the structural support reform programme. It includes a comprehensive package of measures focusing on prevention, intervention and compensation, and a set of practical instruments for schools, county inspectorates and central authorities.

In 2019, 83.5% of people aged 20-24 in the EU-27 had at least upper secondary education, with an increase of 4.8 pps since 2009. In most countries, when the completion rate is higher (lower) than the EU average, the ELET rate is lower (higher) than the EU average. There are, however, a few exceptions to this pattern. In Luxembourg and the Netherlands, both the ELET rate and the completion rate are lower than the EU average, while the opposite is the case in Bulgaria and Hungary.

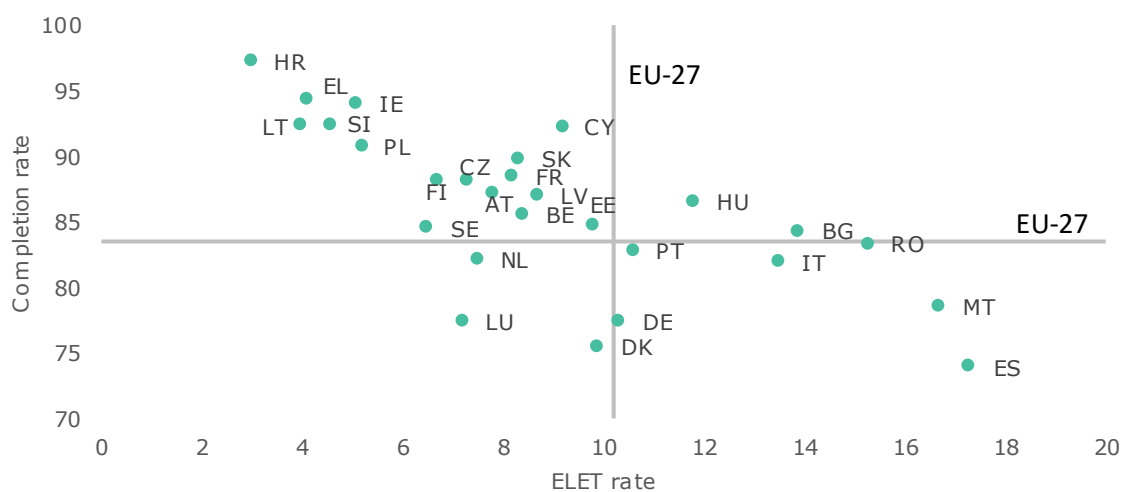
⁵⁰ It would probably be worthwhile exploring slightly older age groups (25-34 or 30-34) as some young people leave formal education temporarily and finish secondary education in schools for adults (often up to the age of 30).

Figure 17 – Evolution of the ELET and completion rates in the EU-27 (2009-19)



Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey. Online data code: [edat_lfse_14] and [edat_lfse_03]
Note: Mind the different age groups for both indicators.

Figure 18 – ELET rate versus completion rate (2019)



Source: European Commission, DG EAC.

2.1.3 A policy framework to tackle early school leaving

In 2011, the Commission and Member States developed a comprehensive policy framework to reduce early school leaving⁵¹. Its three pillars are prevention, intervention and compensation.

Prevention measures aim to reduce the risk of early school leaving before problems start. They may include – in addition to high-quality early childhood education and care – an early screening of language competence, development problems and special education needs that allows action to be taken at an early stage.

Intervention measures aim to avoid early school leaving by improving the quality of education and training at the level of the educational institutions, by reacting to early warning signs and by providing targeted support to pupils or groups of pupils at risk of early school leaving. They may

⁵¹ Council of the European Union (2011). Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving.

include staff support, involvement of parents and local communities, and extra-curricular activities in the youth field. In addition, career guidance can play an important role in easing transitions between different education levels and between education and the labour market.

Compensation measures aim to help those who have left school prematurely to re-engage in education, offering routes to re-enter education and training and gain the qualifications they missed. They may include second chance education programmes, and various routes back into mainstream education and training, as well as recognising and validating prior learning.

Box 11 – Tackling the early school leaving rate in Spain

Although declining, the ELET rate in Spain is still above the EU average. Within the country, some regions face more challenges than others in reducing their ELET rates. At the end of 2019, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training commissioned an analysis report on the different programmes aimed at reducing early school leaving, including both the Territorial Cooperation Programmes (PCT) carried out since, and other initiatives developed by the educational administrations of the regions.

This analysis is the basis for the recommendations for a renewed program, named the programme for territorial cooperation for educational guidance, progress and enrichment, '#PROA+' (2020-21), whose basic lines were approved last May by the regions.

The main objective of this Programme is to reinforce those schools that present greater complexity and higher rates of educational poverty (significant educational lag, disconnection from school, low attainment rates, high rates of repetition and early school leaving or risk of school failure). Such schools will have to comply with the EC recommendations on educational inclusion. They will need additional support to respond to the demand for organizational, curricular, methodological readjustments and teacher reinforcement necessary to compensate for the impact of the lockdown and the closure of schools during the pandemic.

The schools taking part in '#PROA+ 20-21' will be able to choose, in accordance to their current needs, among the following actions:

1. Adjustment of the education project to the needs of the school: attention to reception, reinforcement of school ties and the transitions between educational stages; adaptation of the curriculum and promotion of inclusive pedagogical innovation.
2. Promotion of essential teaching and guidance competencies, in coordination with the training services or regional networks.
3. Plans that provide mentoring, motivation, and personalized school reinforcement for those students with specific educational needs (support given by instructors and student-mentors).
4. Enhancement of the involvement and collaboration of families and the community environment with the school project in the comprehensive support of vulnerable students.

Another reached agreement was to reinforce technical cooperation and the evaluation of the Programme based on agreed indicators, with a view to the accountability of the regional educational administrations, future improvements and, where appropriate, their subsequent expansion and adaptation in the next school years.

Source: Spanish Ministry of Education

A recent study⁵² shows that compensation measures are comparatively well-established across Europe. Most EU countries offer 'second chance' education schemes of some description, often combined with career guidance and financial, childcare and/or psychological support.

Intervention policies are also relatively widespread within countries, although with more variation. Coverage is highest for intervention measures focused on in-school support, including targeted support for learners experiencing personal, social or academic difficulties, as well as continuing professional development for teachers and school leaders to manage diversity. Implementation of infrastructural measures shows the weakest overall coverage, including measures relating to school networks, early warning systems, and extra-curricular provision.

Although coverage of prevention policies within countries is also fair overall, most countries have some gaps, and around a quarter have more marked gaps. As for intervention measures, there seems to be less emphasis on implementing systemic policies (e.g. anti-segregation policies) appears less prevalent than measures implemented within schools or other institutions (e.g. improving accessibility of early childhood education and care to all, developing curriculum flexibility and choice).

Educational attainment is a major factor in determining employment prospects for young people. Early leavers from education and training and those lacking basic skills have particular barriers to employability. Therefore, early leavers from education and training should be brought to the scope of the Youth Guarantee where they can be helped to return to education or training, or referred to other relevant services.

The Youth Guarantee can have a role in prevention, intervention and compensation of early leaving. This aspect is strengthened in the Commission's recent proposal for a Reinforced Youth Guarantee⁵³, which recommends that Member States strengthen their early warning systems and tracking capabilities to identify those at risk of early leaving from education and training. This requires close cooperation with e.g. the education sector, parents and local communities, and the involvement of youth policy as well as social and employment services.

Success factors in tackling early school leaving include the existence of:

- a comprehensive strategy;
- a national coordinating mechanism or structure;
- a corresponding set of policy measures – prevention, intervention and compensation;
- an implementation plan, with clear targets and milestones;
- proportionate resources for implementation;
- synergies with other EU and national funding opportunities;
- clear lines of accountability;
- systematic monitoring, evaluation and feedback.

Some important challenges have been insufficiently addressed so far. For example: (i) integrating measures to tackle early school leaving within broader educational policies; (ii) specific targeting of measures at disadvantaged groups (e.g. migrants, ethnic minorities, or people living in remote areas); and (iii) monitoring and evaluation.

2.1.4 What socioeconomic factors influence early school leaving?

Besides specific policy measures, a number of contextual socio-economic factors can influence early school leaving. A study of EU-28 data from 2006 to 2017 provides some evidence on how strong those factors are in the EU.

⁵² European Commission (2019). [Assessment of the Implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving](#).

⁵³ Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on A Bridge to Jobs - Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee, COM/2020/277 final.

The following variables were selected based on the literature on early school leaving⁵⁴ and data availability. The proportion of low-educated⁵⁵ women aged 45-54 is a proxy for low parental education. Research has consistently found low parental education to be a good predictor of poor educational attainment and suggests that mothers' education has a stronger impact than that of fathers⁵⁶. The unemployment rate for low-educated 15-24 year-olds (the 'youth unemployment rate') captures the cyclical labour market conditions and indicates how difficult it is to find a job for potential early school leavers. The higher the rate, the higher the incentive to stay in education or training, which should translate into a lower ELET rate⁵⁷. Expenditure per student in secondary education as a percentage of GDP per capita⁵⁸ measures the amount of financial resources that a country spends on each student compared to its level of economic development. In principle, one could expect that more spending helps to prevent early school leaving, but in practice there is no guarantee that additional resources are used to support measures against early school leaving. Therefore, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusion about the impact of this variable.

Being born abroad increases the risk of becoming an early school leaver, as shown in Section 2.1.1 above. The model accounts for this by including the proportion of foreign-born people aged 15-24. However, this variable is available for the sub-period 2009-2017 only. The 'at risk of poverty or social exclusion' (AROPE) rate for 15-24 year-olds may capture other family disadvantages that go beyond low parental education or a migrant background. It can also be a useful additional indicator of the impact of socio-economic background on early school leaving.

The strongest impact comes from low parental education (Figure 19), where a 1 percentage point increase is associated with a 0.4 percentage point increase in the ELET rate. In the sub-period 2009-2017, an increase of 1 percentage point in the proportion of foreign-born young people is associated with a 0.3 percentage point increase in the ELET rate. The other variables are not statistically significant.

These results provide suggestive evidence of the key role of parental background in shaping educational outcomes. As a policy message, they suggest that finding ways to compensate for adverse background may help education systems prevent early school leaving. One possible measure is to involve low-educated parents in the activities of their children's school. This is consistent with the recent literature focusing on parental engagement and student outcomes⁵⁹. For instance, results from a large-scale randomised experiment in France show that a series of meetings targeted at parents of low-achieving students towards the end of lower secondary education helped families choose a better-suited upper secondary educational programme. One year after this exercise, dropout rates fell from 9% to 5% and the probability of repeating a grade decreased from 13% to 9%⁶⁰. Such programmes must of course ensure to avoid unduly reducing students' aspirations (e.g. as a result of unconscious bias) as this would risk reinforcing existing inequalities⁶¹.

⁵⁴ See Flisi, S., Goglio, V. and Meroni, E. (2014). [Monitoring the Evolution of Education and Training Systems: A Guide to the Joint Assessment Framework](#) for a literature review.

⁵⁵ With at most lower secondary education (i.e. ISCED 0-2 levels).

⁵⁶ Black, S.E., Devereux, P.J. and Salvanes, K.G. (2005). Why the Apple Doesn't Fall Far: Understanding Intergenerational Transmission of Human Capital, *American Economic Review*, Vol. 95, No 1, 2005, pp. 437-49.

⁵⁷ The ELET rate includes people who may have left education in previous years and their decision would have been influenced by the labour market conditions at that time, not by the current ones. To account for this, we use the unemployment rate of the previous year (technically speaking, the unemployment rate with a lag of one period) as a variable.

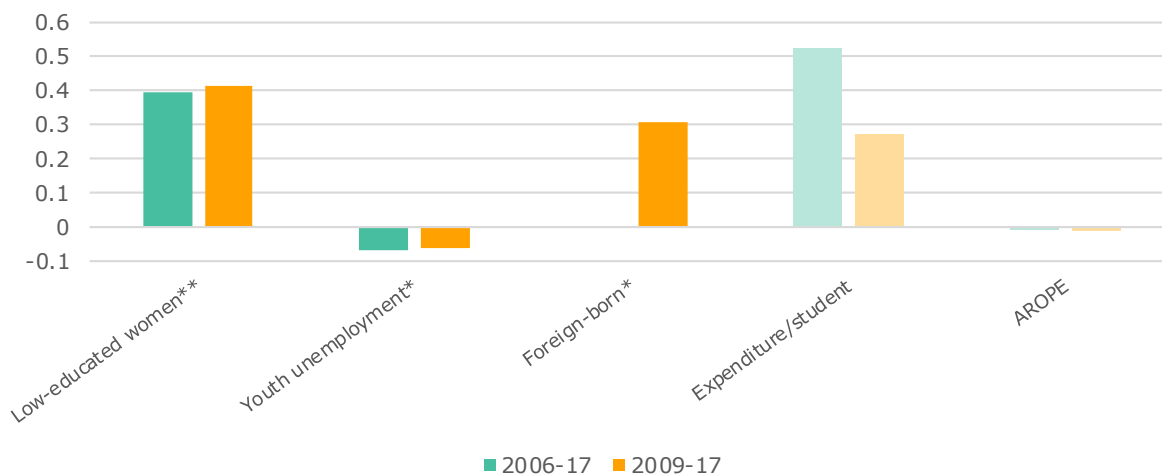
⁵⁸ Expressed in purchasing power standards.

⁵⁹ Behaghel, L., Gurgand, M., Kuzmova, V. and Marshalian, M. (2018). [European Social Inclusion Initiative review paper](#), Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab J-PAL.

⁶⁰ Goux, D., Gurgand, M. and Maurin, E. (2017). Adjusting Your Dreams? High School Plans and Dropout Behaviour. *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 127, No. 602, pp. 1025-1046.

⁶¹ Weinberg, D et al. (2019). [The pathways from parental and neighbourhood socioeconomic status to adolescent educational attainment: An examination of the role of cognitive ability, teacher assessment, and educational expectations](#), PLOS ONE.

Figure 19 – Contextual factors influencing ELET: value of the regression coefficients



Source: DG EAC calculations.

Dependent variable: ELET rate. Estimation method: fixed effect panel model with robust Arellano heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation-consistent standard errors.

Statistically significant values are in darker tone. * denotes significance at 5% level. ** denotes significance at 1% level. Number of observations = 325 for 2006-2017 and 231 for 2009-2017.

2.2 Tertiary educational attainment (TEA)

Key findings

The EU has met its target of raising the rate of tertiary educational attainment to at least 40% of the population aged 30-34. In 2019, 40.3% of people aged 30-34 held a tertiary degree. On average, women's (45.6%) TEA is higher than men's (35.1%). Interestingly, in 2019 the annual increase in the male TEA level (1 percentage point) outperformed, for the first time in 20 years, the annual increase in the female TEA level (0.8 pps).

Among the countries with a low proportion of people with tertiary degree, only Romania and Italy have not reached 30%. In 2019, 12 EU Member States showed TEA rates of 40% to 50%. In the Netherlands, Sweden, Ireland, Luxembourg, Lithuania and Cyprus, more than 50% of the population aged 30-34 holds a tertiary degree.

Sub-national TEA levels according to the degree of urbanisation show a clear qualification gap between cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas in all Member States. In the EU, the average tertiary education gap between rural areas and cities today is bigger than 20 pps. Moreover, this urban-rural divide is above 30 pps in eight Member States (Luxembourg, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Denmark, Lithuania and Poland), and in only two countries (Belgium and Slovenia) is it below 15 pps.

Tertiary educational attainment has grown in each Member State since 2009, on average by 9.2 pps in the last 10 years. However, the increase has varied significantly, from only 1.4 pps in Finland to an impressive 22.5 pps in Slovakia. Overall, those countries that started with a TEA rate below the EU target in 2009 seem to have substantially boosted their performance since then. The opposite seems to be true for the group of countries with a TEA rate above the EU target back in 2009, i.e. for Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Spain, France, Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Finland and Sweden.

Graduating from tertiary education has become increasingly important as an ever-changing European labour market needs more people with academic degrees who can easily upskill and re-skill, and thereby better contribute to economic and societal innovation. In addition, higher educational attainment is associated with higher earnings, lower unemployment risk, better health and more active participation in society.