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

Source: DG EAC calculations.

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 reskill, 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.
Therefore, back in 2009 – in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy on promoting economic growth and employment – EU countries agreed to raise the share of people with an academic degree and set a headline target of bringing the number of 30-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment to at least 40% by 2020. Today, 40.3% of people aged 30-34 hold a tertiary degree, so the EU has reached the 40% target.

2.2.1 Gaps between and within countries

The overall achievement, however, hides substantial differences between countries and between regions within countries, for historical, structural, accessibility or other reasons. Among the countries with a low proportion of tertiary graduates, 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\textsuperscript{62} show a clear qualification gap between cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas in all Member States. While urban labour markets evidently attract more people with a tertiary degree in any country, the urban-rural TEA gap is remarkably country-specific.

In the EU, the average tertiary education gap between rural areas and cities today is more than 20 pps. Moreover, this urban-rural divide is larger than 30 pps in eight Member States (Luxembourg, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Denmark, Lithuania and Poland), while in only two countries (Belgium and Slovenia) is it smaller than 15 pps. Unfortunately, the gap is growing as, in most countries, TEA levels are increasing faster in cities than in rural areas. For example, in 2009, there was no country with an urban-rural TEA gap over 30 pps and the largest difference was only 19 pps.

\textbf{Figure 20 – Urban-rural divide in tertiary educational attainment (30-34) by country, 2019 [%]}

Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey. Online data code: [edat_lfs_9913].
Note: The TEA level for rural areas in Malta are considered 'low reliability' due to small sample size. This data can be shown in the chart but is not discussed in the analysis.

\textsuperscript{62} The degree of urbanisation classifies local administrative units (at LAU2 level) as cities, towns and suburbs, or rural areas, based on a combination of geographical contiguity and minimum population thresholds applied to 1 km\textsuperscript{2} population grid cells. More details on the methodology can be found at Eurostat, \textit{Statistics Explained}. 
Sex and migrant status also seem to be important factors in the EU when it comes to higher educational attainment. Today, women’s tertiary educational attainment among 30-34 year-olds (45.6%) is on average more than 10 pps higher than men’s (35.1%). This gender difference has built up in the EU over the last two decades by continuously faster increasing female TEA levels. Interestingly, in 2019, for the first time in 20 years, the annual TEA level increase for males (1 percentage point) outperformed the annual increase for females (0.8 pps). It remains to be seen if the widening of the gender gap has indeed been halted, and whether it could even be reversed.

**Figure 21 – TEA rate (30-34 year-olds) by country and sex, 2019 [%]**

![Graph showing TEA rates by country and sex, 2019.]

Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey. Online data code: [edat_lfse_03].

Regarding migrant status, EU citizens whether from the reporting country or not, have a higher percentage of tertiary level education than migrants (non-EU citizens). This currently stands at 41.1% for EU citizens from the reporting country, 37.3% for EU citizens who are not from the reporting country, and 34.4% for non-EU citizens. The tertiary education gaps between national citizens, foreign EU citizens and non-EU citizens have persisted at EU level over the last decade, given that the increase in TEA levels was of a similar order of magnitude for all three groups (around 8-10 pps).

### 2.2.2 Progress towards the EU target

Targets that measure and compare progress in the field of education are perceived in Europe as one of the most powerful tools for motivating national governments to drive their reform agendas and improve education systems. Looking back, the ET2020 target of 40% for tertiary educational attainment was a realistic objective 10 years ago and the target has been successfully met. This achievement gives reason to review the course of progress since the setting of the target in 2009.

Tertiary educational attainment has grown in each Member State since 2009, on average by 9.2 pps. However, the increase varied significantly, from only 1.4 pps in Finland to an impressive 22.5 pps in Slovakia.

Although countries also set national targets back in 2009, some more ambitious than others, those countries that started with a TEA rate below the EU target in 2009 generally 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. Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Spain, France, Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Finland and Sweden.
The comparison of the progress of TEA rates between 1999 and 2009 and between 2009 and 2019 shows that the annual increase slowed down across the EU in the last decade to 0.9 pps from 1 percentage point in the decade before. The main factor is that, in the group of countries that already had a TEA rate in 2009 above the EU target, the average annual increase measured by the indicator slowed down significantly from 1.3 pps in 1999-2009 to 0.5 pps in 2009-2019. In contrast, in the 18 countries with a TEA rate below 40% in 2009, the annual increase was, on average, 0.3 pps higher in the 10 years after 2009 compared to the 10 years before (1999-2009).

**Box 12 – Measures to improve quality of higher education in Slovakia**

A new legal framework for quality assurance in higher education (Act no 269/2018) and the amendment to the act on higher education institutions (Act no 270/2018) came into force in November 2018 to improve the quality of the Slovakian higher education system. The main challenges result from factors such as fragmentation, the high outflow of secondary school graduates from the country, limited teaching quality, and a lack of internationalisation and job market orientation. The recent changes concern the new system of accreditation and the increased importance of quality assurance processes. The amendment simplifies the process of creating study programmes and introduces interdisciplinary studies.

On May 13, 2019 an amendment to the act on higher education (Act No 131/2002 Coll.) was adopted which provides a platform for rationalising the network of higher education institutions. Based on the 2018 legal framework, a new Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE) has been created, acting as an advisory body to the government. An international list of external assessors is being compiled and the Agency will develop:

- internal quality assurance system standards;
- study programme standards for accreditation;
- standards for accreditation to award the titles of ‘docent’ and ‘professor’;
- relevant assessment methodologies.

The Student Council for Higher Education presented four pillars to improve higher education: social support, education, infrastructure, and science and research. It also advocates bringing quality assurance in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.


**Figure 22 – TEA rate (30-34 year-olds) by country, 2009, 2019 and national targets [%]**
Moreover, the group of countries that were challenged by the EU-wide TEA target in 2009 have since made much better progress in fighting the gender gap than the nine countries that already had a TEA rate over 40% at that time. The comparison shows that, in countries with a TEA rate below the EU target in 2009, the share of male graduates has grown annually by 0.9 pps since then. This was more than twice the annual increase of the male TEA rate in the group of countries that were already performing above the TEA target when it was set.

The opposite was the case in the preceding 10 years (1999-2009), when male TEA rates grew half as fast in the group of 18 countries which were performing below the EU target of 0.5 pps a year that was set in 2009. The group of nine countries that had a TEA rate above 40% in 2009 reported an annual growth rate of 1 percentage point for male graduates in the same period.

**Figure 23 – Average annual increase of TEA rate in 1999-2009 and 2009-2019 in groups of countries above and below the EU-target in 2009 (pps)**

While the evolutions of rising male TEA rates were almost completely reversed in the two groups of countries – those with overall TEA rates above 40% and those with overall TEA rates below 40% in 2009 – the same comparison for female TEA rates does not show such a clear pattern. The slowdown in the increase of female graduates from the decade before 2009 to the decade after was much more pronounced in the group with overall TEA rates above 40% in 2009 (1 percentage point) than the speed of increase of female graduates in the group with TEA rates below 40% in 2009 (0.2 pps) for the same period.

Despite these promising trends, the widening of the gender gap from 0.4 pps in 1999 to up to 10.7 pps in 2018 has only stopped recently. The reason is that the increase of female TEA rates has continuously outperformed the increase of male TEA rates in the course of the last 20 years, no matter what the overall national TEA rate was. In 2019, the EU finally reported a slight narrowing of the gender gap, with an overall distance between male and female TEA rates of 10.5 pps.

The outcomes of the analysis could give reason to speculate that the share of people with an academic degree will reach around 50%, a saturation point in today’s developed societies. In particular, the evolution of female TEA rates would suggest so. The consequence would be that the closer education systems get to a population where every second person has a university degree, the lower would be the increase of TEA rates, which would eventually stagnate around 50%.

The ET2020 target of 40% for TEA may have played a role in supporting national efforts to succeed and make visible and measurable progress in increasing the number of graduates from tertiary education.