

The 2030 Digital Compass points to digital skills as essential to reinforce our collective resilience as a society, noting that access to education allowing the acquisition of basic digital skills should be a right for all EU citizens¹²⁹. The European Pillar of Social Rights action plan sets out that at least 80% of those aged 16-74 should have at least basic digital skills by the end of the decade¹³⁰. In 2019, this number stood at 56% according to the Digital Economy and Society Index¹³¹.

In the area of education, COVID-19 brought on a rapid and widespread shift to distance, online and blended learning and teaching. This shows the importance of providing teachers, students with adequate digital infrastructure and skills. Evidence suggests that the pandemic aggravated pre-existing inequalities in the school system, in particular affecting students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Going forward, it will be important to enrich data collections and develop policy responses to reach those at risk of being left behind.

2.3 Participation in early childhood education and care

In a nutshell

Member States have agreed on a new EU-level target for participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) at EU level: 96% of children between 3 years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education to participate in ECEC. The latest available data from 2019 puts that share at 92.8%, for the EU as a whole, with increases during the preceding five years observed in most countries. The EU-level target should be seen in conjunction with policy guidance on the quality of ECEC provision. Member States are working both on increasing the accessibility of ECEC and improving the quality of staff and curricula. At EU level, a Working Group on ECEC supports the development of high quality ECEC through peer learning, monitoring and evaluation.

2.3.1 Progress towards the EU-level target

During the last decade, considerable steps have been taken to improve the participation of children in early childhood education and care all over Europe¹³². To keep the momentum, Member States have agreed on a new, ambitious EU-level target for this, ensuring that the early years in a child's education are kept in the spotlight.

The EU-level target states that, by 2030, at least 96% of children between 3 years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in ECEC¹³³. Setting the target high should also help vulnerable children to benefit from the policy measures taken.

The latest (2019) EU average for the new ECEC target stands at 92.8%¹³⁴ (Figure 52). This is an increase of 2.1 pps over the preceding 5 years. In 2019, five Member States (Belgium, Denmark,

¹²⁹ [2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade.](#)

¹³⁰ [The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#) COM (2021) 102. Adopted on 3 March 2021.

¹³¹ Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2020.

¹³² The now superseded ET2020 benchmark aimed for at least 95% of children between age of four and the age for starting compulsory primary education to participate in ECEC. This was reached in 2019, with an EU average of 95.3%.

¹³³ The source data come from the joint UOE data collection (online data code: [educ_uoe_enra21]). The EEA target should not be confused with the Barcelona target (online data code: [ilc_caindformal]), which focuses on formal childcare. The share of participation in early childhood education and care as used for the EEA target captures attendance of ECEC programmes that fall under the ISCED 0 category.

¹³⁴ As can be expected at this young age, the sex distribution of children participating in ECEC is very balanced, with never more than a percentage point difference between boys and girls.

Ireland, Spain and France) reached the target level and Sweden came very close to reaching 96% participation. Ireland¹³⁵ and France have reached 100% participation rates.

The universal legal entitlement to ECEC is from the age of 2.5 years in Belgium, 6 months in Denmark, 3 years in Spain and Poland, and 1 year in Sweden. The Irish Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme provides 15 hours per week free of charge for 38 weeks of the year, from the age of 2 years and 8 months. In France, the starting age of compulsory education has been lowered to 3 since September 2019¹³⁶.

To support further upward convergence among Member States of participation in early childhood education and care up to the age of 3, the Commission will propose in 2022 the revision of the Barcelona targets.¹³⁷

Box 14: Increasing participation in early childhood education and care in Lithuania

The low participation rate in early childhood education and care and imbalances in its provision have prompted Lithuania to take action. The aim is to increase access and encourage participation addressing inequalities and improving student outcomes. Currently, primary education starts at the age of 7 and the last year of ECEC has been compulsory since 2016. From September 2023, the compulsory entry age to pre-primary education will be lowered from 6 to 5 years. An update of the pre-primary education curriculum is also being planned to better match the learning needs of younger children. As of September 2021, children from families at risk of poverty should be guaranteed access to pre-school education.

The legal entitlement to pre-school education will gradually be extended. Municipalities should ensure provision of ECEC for all children of 4-year-olds whose parents require a place in 2023, for all 3 year-olds in 2024 and for all 2-year-olds in 2025. Municipalities will be financially supported in this by central government, through announced increases in education spending. The Recovery and Resilience Facility will fund a feasibility study in 2021 on how to adapt existing ECEC infrastructure and develop transport services and whether a further expansion of capacities is needed to meet the increasing needs and tackle imbalances in ECEC provision.

In the last five years of available data, most countries have seen the ECEC participation of children between the age of 3 years and the mandatory school age increase, with Cyprus, Ireland, Croatia, Poland and Luxembourg recording the fastest improvements¹³⁸. Seven countries saw participation in this age group fall between 2014 and 2019; in decreasing order of the size of the drop these are Bulgaria, Romania, Malta, Greece¹³⁹, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands¹⁴⁰. It is worth noting that out of these countries only Germany guarantees a place in ECEC for the youngest children¹⁴¹.

¹³⁵ For Ireland, the ECE rate includes participation in ECEC centres, and also in primary schools, which are attended by many 4-5 year olds.

¹³⁶ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2020). Structural indicators; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019). Key indicators. Data on ECEC.

¹³⁷ A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, EU strategy on the rights of the child.

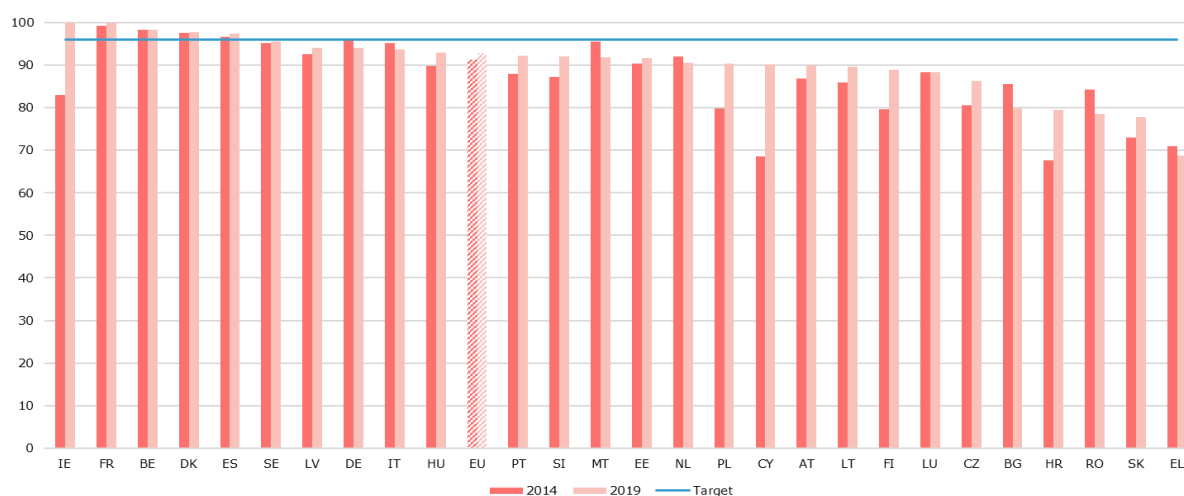
¹³⁸ In CY, the starting age of compulsory ECEC is 4 years and 8 months. Legal entitlement in PL and LU starts at the age of 3.

¹³⁹ For EL there are breaks in the time series between 2014 and 2019.

¹⁴⁰ For NL, the content of the data of 2018 and later is different than before due to a change in the childcare system in 2018, especially for children younger than 4 year of age.

¹⁴¹ In DE, a place is guaranteed from the age of 1 year.

Figure 52: Participation in ECE of children between 3 and the age of starting compulsory primary education, 2019 [% of the population of the corresponding age, target 96%]



Source: Eurostat (UOE). Online data code: [educ_UOE_enra21].

Notes: 2014: FR break in time series; RO estimated; ES, EU definition differs. 2019: IE estimated; FR provisional; PT definition differs; PL estimated.

The age bracket of children from 4 years old to the mandatory primary school age¹⁴² shows a similar pattern to the 3+ group (Figure 53). The six top-performing countries mentioned above all have a participation rate above 96% for this age group and they are joined by eight further countries, meaning that more than half of the Member States have a participation rate above 96% for the 4+ age bracket, with an EU average of 95.1%. Greece, Luxembourg, Austria, Cyprus and the Netherlands have much higher participation rates for the 4+ age bracket than for the 3+ age bracket¹⁴³.

Box 15: The “Gute-KiTa-Gesetz” (Act on Good Early Childhood Education and Care) – Germany

The German federal level supports efforts at regional and local level to improve access, provision and quality of ECEC. The most important instrument is the so called “Gute KiTa Gesetz” (Act on Good Early Childhood Education and Care), which provides financial support worth €5.5 bn to upgrade the quality of ECEC places and lower the fees. The Gute KiTa Report 2020¹⁴⁴ observed the baseline and first progresses in different fields of quality by regions. Beginning in 2021, two additional programmes “Kita-Einstieg: Brücken bauen in frühe Bildung” (Stepping into Childcare: Building bridges into early childhood education) and “Sprach-Kitas: Weil Sprache der Schlüssel zur Welt ist” (Language day care centres) have been extended, making an additional €520 m available for quality improvement up to 2022.

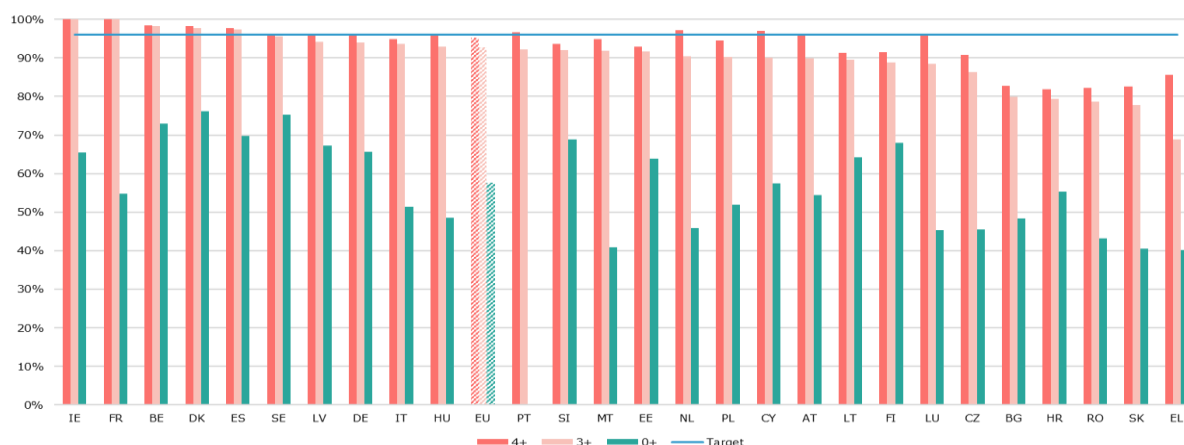
¹⁴² Note that this age bracket was used for the now superseded ET2020 benchmark, with a target value of at least 95% by 2020.

¹⁴³ In EL and NL, the organisation of pre-primary education is split between the age groups above and below 4. In LU, children are legally entitled from the age of 3 to pre-primary education, but the first year of *éducation précoce* is optional, while the following two years of *éducation préscolaire* are compulsory. In CY, ECEC is compulsory from the age of 4 years and 8 months.

¹⁴⁴ [Gute KiTa Bericht 2020](#).

The much broader age bracket from 0 to the start of mandatory primary education, for which the EU average is 57.7%, shows a comparable distribution, with Denmark, Sweden and Belgium having participation rates over 70%, and Spain close behind. The largest differences between the 3+ and the 0+ age ranges can be seen in Malta, the Netherlands¹⁴⁵, France¹⁴⁶, and Hungary.

Figure 53: Participation in ECE by children between 0, 3 and 4-years-old, and the starting age of compulsory education, 2019 [% of the population of the corresponding age]



Source: Eurostat (UOE). Online data code: [educ_uoe_enra10] and [educ_uoe_enra21] and [educ_uoe_enra23].

Flags: 3+: IE estimated; FR provisional, PL estimated, PT definition differs. 4+: IE estimated, France provisional, PL estimated; 0+: BE definition differs, FR provisional, MT definition differs, PL estimated, PT not available.

2.3.2 Policy takeaways

The first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that “everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.” Moreover, the 11th principle explicitly acknowledges the importance of high-quality ECEC, stating that “children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.”

Box 16: Child Group Act in Czechia

In Czechia, an amendment to the Child Group Act entered into force in July 2021. It is expected to provide stable public funding for child groups which, to date, are often EU-funded. These groups, turned into nurseries, will welcome children up to the age of 3. New requirements in terms of infrastructure and staff profiles are designed to improve childcare quality. The transition from rather informal child groups to more institutional nurseries is underpinned by funding from the EU’s Recovery and Resilience Facility. The government plans to increase the number of childcare facilities by 40% until the end of December 2025. It will also run a study to investigate barriers to participation in early childcare. Due to a shortage of places as well as socio-economic factors, participation of under 3-year-olds in early childhood education and care is currently the lowest in the EU. This leads not only to gender imbalances on the labour market, but also to learning gaps and socio-economic inequality.

¹⁴⁵ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019). Key indicators. Cf. figure B7, which shows that in MT and NL the demand for ECEC was met for the earliest age of children.

¹⁴⁶ Provisional data.

Evidence shows that participation in high-quality ECEC correlates with better social and emotional well-being, lowering risks of school dropout and even contributing to higher learning and employment outcomes later in life¹⁴⁷. Its positive contribution proves particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. An equitable ECEC system with high coverage rates increases equal opportunities and social mobility. Providing every child with an equally strong starting position is an effective and efficient way to set children on a trajectory to achieve their maximum learning potential¹⁴⁸.

Of course, the benefits of ECEC are dependent on the quality of its provision. ECEC quality has emerged over the last few years as an important policy focus in many Member States. However, the quality of ECEC services still often differs by children's age. More than half of the EU27 countries do not require a bachelor's degree for staff working with children under age 3 (Figure 82). Educational guidelines were available in all countries at least for children from the age of 3, and in many cases for the entire ECEC phase¹⁴⁹.

At EU level, the EU-level target is accompanied by comprehensive policy guidance in the field of ECEC quality¹⁵⁰. In 2021, a new Working Group on ECEC has been set up as part of the governance structure to achieve and further develop the EEA. The Working Group will help Member States implement the 2019 Council Recommendation for high-quality ECEC systems¹⁵¹ and the EU Quality framework for ECEC¹⁵². It will mainly support peer learning, monitoring and evaluation of quality.

2.4 Early leavers from education and training

In a nutshell

As part of the seven EU-level targets, Member States have agreed that the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9% by 2030¹⁵³. In 2020, this share was 9.9% across the EU on average, with pronounced differences between and within countries. The average share of early leavers from education and training is 3.8 pps higher among young men (11.8%) than it is among young women (8%) and there are striking disadvantages for foreign-born young people. Regional discrepancies are wide in many Member States.

Reducing the proportion of young people who leave education and training before they have completed upper secondary attainment remains a priority of the EU in the field of education and training¹⁵⁴. Member States have also acknowledged the overall aim to decouple academic

¹⁴⁷ OECD (2020). [Early Childhood Education: Equity, Quality and Transitions Report for the G20 Education Working Group](#); OECD (2017). [Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong](#); UNICEF (2019). [A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education](#).

¹⁴⁸ UNICEF (2019). [A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education](#).

¹⁴⁹ Cf. part 4 below (annex).

¹⁵⁰ Under ET2020, an ECEC Working Group delivered a toolkit for inclusive ECEC as well as guidelines on how to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified ECEC staff. Its final report summarised the conclusions of the inclusion toolkit and the guidelines.

¹⁵¹ European Union (2019). [Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems](#).

¹⁵² European Commission/DG EAC (2014). [Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care](#). A report of the working group on ECEC.

¹⁵³ The share of early leavers of education and training refers to the proportion of young people aged between 18 and 24 years-old with, at most, lower secondary educational attainment (ISCED level 0-2) and who were not enrolled in any (formal or non-formal) education or training activity in the 4 weeks preceding the EU labour force survey. This means that those with an ISCED 0-2 qualification who participate in short, non-formal trainings, are not considered early leavers. The indicator is based on the EU Labour Force Survey, Eurostat online data code: [edat_lfse_14].

¹⁵⁴ The 2021 Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) highlights that "efforts must continue to bring down the rate of early leaving from education and training and aiming for more young people to obtain an upper secondary education qualification".