

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 life<sup>147</sup>. 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 potential<sup>148</sup>.

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 phase<sup>149</sup>.

At EU level, the EU-level target is accompanied by comprehensive policy guidance in the field of ECEC quality<sup>150</sup>. 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 systems<sup>151</sup> and the EU Quality framework for ECEC<sup>152</sup>. 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 2030<sup>153</sup>. 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 training<sup>154</sup>. Member States have also acknowledged the overall aim to decouple academic

<sup>147</sup> 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](#).

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

<sup>149</sup> Cf. part 4 below (annex).

<sup>150</sup> 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.

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

<sup>152</sup> 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.

<sup>153</sup> 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].

<sup>154</sup> 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".

attainment and achievement from social, economic and cultural status, or from other personal circumstances<sup>155</sup>.

The below 9% early leaver EU-level target is accompanied by an upper secondary completion indicator<sup>156</sup>. The European Pillar of Social Rights action plan also calls for early school leaving to be further reduced and participation in upper secondary education increased, and the share of early leavers from education and training is a headline indicator in its revised social scoreboard<sup>157</sup>.

### 2.4.1 Progress towards the EU-level target

Across the EU on average, the share of early leavers from education and training was 9.9% in 2020. The share has decreased by 3.9 pps since 2010. A decrease of 2.7 pps over the period 2010 to 2014 was followed by a smaller reduction of 1.1 percentage point since 2015, to reach the now superseded ET2020 benchmark of 10% in 2020.

**Figure 54: Early leavers from education and training, 2010-20 [%]**



Source: Eurostat (edat\_lfse\_14).

Note: 2020 data for HR have low reliability and 2020 data for DE are provisional (the reliability of the 2020 LFS in DE has strongly impacted by COVID-19).

Differences between countries remain pronounced, even if they have narrowed in recent years. In some countries, more than 15% of the young population are early leavers from education and training. This is the case in Spain (16.0%) and Romania (15.6%). The share of early leavers is also well above the 9% target in Italy (13.1%), Bulgaria (12.8%), Malta (12.6%), Hungary (12.1%) and Cyprus (11.5%). In 18 Member States, the share of early leavers from education and training is currently less than 9% and Denmark is close to reaching the 9% target. Croatia has the smallest proportion of early leavers (2.2%).

<sup>155</sup> The 2021 [Council Conclusions on equity and inclusion in education and training in order to promote educational success for all](#) call for “promoting comprehensive educational success strategies at national and regional level (...), in order to foster the successful completion of upper secondary (or equivalent) education and training pathways and to reduce early leaving from education and training and low achievement”.

<sup>156</sup> The upper secondary completion indicator measures the share of the young population aged between 20 and 24 years with, at least, an upper secondary qualification, thus successful completion of formal education (ISCED level 3-8). Participation in non-formal education or training is not taken into account in the calculation of the upper secondary qualification indicator. The indicator is based on the EU Labour Force Survey, Eurostat. Online data code: [edat\_lfse\_03].

<sup>157</sup> Cf. [The European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan](#).

### **Box 17: A new data warehouse to tackle early school leaving in Malta**

The Data Warehouse Project was launched by the Maltese Ministry for Education to be implemented by 2022, according to the Maltese National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

Its primary objective is to identify gaps in tackling early school leaving by collecting data on students from the beginning to the end of their schooling. Collecting data and information about school attendance, student assessment, socio-economic status, etc. will allow more targeted, evidence-based interventions and more effective monitoring and evaluation of the measures that are implemented.

The project will start by processing all the data from state schools, from grade 1 to 11, followed by state post-secondary schools and tertiary institutions. Independent and church schools should also be part of the monitoring in the coming years.

Several countries where the share of early leavers from education and training is well above 9%, such as Spain, Romania, Italy and Malta, have seen very marked reductions over time, though these have levelled off in more recent years. In other countries where the share of early leavers exceeds the 9% target, a reversal in the recent trend will be needed. This is the case especially in Cyprus and Hungary, where the share of early leavers has increased since 2015<sup>158</sup>.

### **Box 18: Action plan to tackle early school leaving – The French Community of Belgium**

The French Community of Belgium is preparing a comprehensive action plan to tackle early school leaving and is funding personalised support to students to fight lower educational outcomes as a result of COVID-19.

The French Community, in its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) has committed to adopt an action plan against school dropout by December 2022. It will review decrees in four key areas: the work of the CPMS (Centres for Psychological, Medical and Social Support) to prevent school dropout will be strengthened; the reasons for excluding students from schools will be limited and a single board of appeal will be established; the prevention and intervention mechanisms for students showing signs of alienation or dropout from schools will be strengthened; and compensation mechanisms will be promoted for students who dropped out by providing transitional support (from the *système d'accrochage scolaire*) or through internships and citizen projects. This plan comes under the Pact for excellence in education, a systemic reform aiming at improving the quality of education. In 2021-2022 the NRRP will also fund personalised support for 30 000 students in compulsory education through multi-disciplinary teams to address mental, educational and pedagogical difficulties, lower educational outcomes and potential school dropout as a result of COVID-19 (€26.9 m). This project is a follow-up to similar projects that were run in school year 2020/2021.

Portugal and Greece are among the countries that have made most progress, with the share of early leavers reduced to one third of the level in 2010, as well as Latvia, Spain, Croatia and Ireland, where it was halved, or nearly so.

The proportion of early leavers from education and training in the EU is 3.8 pps higher among young men (11.8%) than young women (8%). Young men are more likely to be early leavers from education and training in all countries, except Romania (where young women are at a 1.9 pps disadvantage) and Czechia (with women at a 0.1 percentage point disadvantage). The gender gaps are particularly large — 5.0 pps or above — in Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Italy and Luxembourg.

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<sup>158</sup> In recent years, it has also increased in LU, AT, CZ and LT, though here figures remain below 9%.

The EU-level target is complemented by an indicator measuring the share of people aged between 20 and 24 years with at least an upper secondary qualification (ISCED 3 level)<sup>159</sup>. Across the EU on average, 84.3% of 20 to 24 year-olds had at least an upper secondary qualification in 2020. Young women (87.1%) have a clear advantage over young men (81.5%). The young population is increasingly likely to have completed upper secondary education, with only few countries seeing a decrease or limited change in the proportion.

**Figure 55: Percentage of people aged 20-24 who have successfully completed at least upper secondary education [%]**

	2018			2019			2020		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
<b>EU</b>	<b>83.2</b>	<b>80.7</b>	<b>85.8</b>	<b>83.5</b>	<b>81.0</b>	<b>86.2</b>	<b>84.3</b>	<b>81.5</b>	<b>87.1</b>
BE	84.8	81.7	87.9	85.6	82.4	88.8	85.7	82.3	89.1
BG	86.0	85.6	86.3	84.4	83.6	85.4	85.4	84.7	86.1
CZ	89.5	88.5	90.5	88.3	88.1	88.6	87.4	87.8	87.0
DK	75.0	69.9	80.4	75.8	70.9	80.9	76.1	71.2	81.1
DE	77.4	74.9	80.3	77.5	75.0	80.2	79.2	75.6	82.9
EE	82.6	77.3	87.9	84.8	80.1	89.5	87.7	86.2	89.2
IE	94.4	93.7	95.2	94.1	93.6	94.7	94.9	94.8	94.9
EL	93.9	92.2	95.5	94.5	93.4	95.7	94.9	94.3	95.6
ES	72.7	67.7	77.9	74.0	68.5	79.7	75.9	70.2	81.9
FR	88.3	85.7	90.8	88.5	86.4	90.7	89.7	87.4	92.0
HR	96.2	96.6	95.9	97.3	97.5	97.1	97.2	96.7	97.8
IT	81.1	78.5	84.1	82.0	79.7	84.5	83.3	80.6	86.3
CY	91.5	90.1	92.8	92.3	91.4	93.0	88.4	85.3	91.1
LV	88.3	83.8	93.1	87.1	85.5	88.9	88.0	85.1	91.0
LT	92.1	90.0	94.4	92.5	91.0	94.1	90.1	88.1	92.2
LU	76.8	73.0	80.4	77.5	78.4	76.7	75.4	70.8	80.0
HU	85.0	84.6	85.4	86.6	85.7	87.5	85.7	84.4	87.0
MT	77.4	76.5	78.5	78.1	76.2	80.3	81.1	77.8	85.0
NL	82.5	79.4	85.6	82.2	78.9	85.6	83.1	80.1	86.2
AT	88.0	85.7	90.3	87.3	84.4	90.3	86.1	82.6	89.7
PL	91.2	89.6	92.8	90.8	88.4	93.2	89.9	87.9	92.1
PT	80.8	76.6	85.2	82.9	78.6	87.2	85.3	80.1	90.6
RO	81.7	81.6	81.7	83.4	83.8	83.0	83.0	84.3	81.7
SI	91.5	89.5	93.7	92.4	91.5	93.5	92.8	91.7	94.0
SK	89.4	89.7	89.1	89.9	89.9	89.9	89.7	90.1	89.2
FI	87.4	86.5	88.2	88.2	87.9	88.6	89.1	88.0	90.2
SE	85.3	83.3	87.4	84.6	81.4	88.1	83.1	80.1	86.4

Source: Eurostat (edat\_lfse\_03)

Note. Educational attainment refers to ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) 2011 level 3-8 for data from 2014 onwards and to ISCED 1997 level 3-6 for data up to 2013. DE: break in time series in 2020. The indicator is based on the EU Labour Force Survey.

## 2.4.2 Spotlight on vulnerable groups

Looking at specific groups of young people and their circumstances<sup>160</sup> can help identify where additional policy attention may be needed, especially given the impact the COVID-19 pandemic can have on students who were already disadvantaged before the crisis.

<sup>159</sup> The aim of the complementary indicator is to measure the proportion of the young population that is likely to have the minimum necessary qualifications for their active participation in society.

<sup>160</sup> Not all vulnerable groups are easily captured by cross-EU survey data. For instance, the EU academic literature on the relationship between early school leaving, (learning) disability and special education needs is scarce. Nonetheless, there is a consensus that students with such disadvantages are at much greater risk of dropping out of education than their

Young people who were born in another country (foreign-born) are generally at greater risk of leaving education without having completed more than a lower secondary level of education, compared to young people born in the reporting country (Figure 56). This is the case whether they were born in another EU country or in a country outside the EU.

The evidence about the exact underlying reasons is still lacking. Analysis by the Commission's Joint Research Centre<sup>161</sup> shows that determinants are the same for immigrant students and natives: socio-economic background, epistemological beliefs<sup>162</sup>, pupils repeating a year and the average rate of early leavers from education and training<sup>163</sup>.

### Box 19: Tutoring and career counselling in Italy

Tutoring and career counselling is an educational intervention that could support immigrant pupils, as they may lack relevant networks and access to information.

In Italy, a randomised evaluation of the educational choices of children without Italian citizenship estimated the impact of a tutoring and career counselling programme called "Equality of Opportunity for Immigrant Students", which targeted immigrant and second generation seventh-grade students displaying high academic potential.

Results showed that the programme encouraged students to enrol in more demanding academic and technical schools and improved boys' academic performance, as measured by test scores, students repeating a year, and dropout rates. The intervention had no impact on girls, possibly because many did already enrol in the more demanding school tracks. The programme also had positive spill over effects on immigrant classmates who did not participate.

More research is needed to shed light on migrants' specific educational needs and the effectiveness of action that attempts to address them.

Source: Behaghel, L., Gurgand, M., Kuzmova, V. and Marshalian, M. (2018). [European Social Inclusion Initiative](#), A Review Paper.

In 2020, among the 17 Member States for which data are available, the highest shares of foreign-born early leavers from education and training were in Italy (32.1%), Spain (29.0%), Malta (28.5%), Greece (27.0%), Cyprus (26.8%) and Germany (25.5%). The proportion of early leavers from education and training among the foreign-born young people was below 9% in two countries: Luxembourg (8.7%) and Slovenia (7.4%).

peers. See: Early School Leaving and Learners with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs: A Review of the Research Evidence Focusing on Europe.

<sup>161</sup> Hippe, R. and Jakubowski, M. (2018). [Immigrant background and expected early school leaving in Europe: evidence from PISA](#), A JRC Technical Report. The report differentiates among first generation immigrants and second generation and, where possible, among EU and non-EU students.

<sup>162</sup> The PISA index of epistemological beliefs reflects how students see science and scientific enquiry. Students who score higher in the PISA index argue that "scientific knowledge is tentative" (to the extent that students recognise that scientific theories are not absolute truths, but evolve over time) and adhere "to beliefs about the validity and limitations of empirical methods of enquiry as a source of knowing" (OECD, 2016c, pp. 99–100).

<sup>163</sup> Focusing on the specific situation of newcomers, young people who arrive to a new country past the start of primary education face a higher risk of falling behind at school compared to their native-born peers and compared to those who arrive at a younger age. This is partly because they need to adapt immediately to a new language of schooling. They are more likely to need support to gain proficiency in the language of schooling, as well as information and orientation on the education system. Those who arrive at an age towards the end of the compulsory schooling age are at high risk of not completing upper secondary education in the limited time that is available to them, and even more so if their previous education was interrupted. For more information, Cf. OECD (2015) [Immigrant Students at School: Easing the Journey towards Integration](#); and OECD (2021) [Making Integration Work Young People with Migrant Parents](#).

Young people who were born outside the EU are at the highest risk of being early leavers of education and training in all countries, with gaps exceeding 20 pps in Greece, Italy or Cyprus compared to native-born early leavers. The lowest gaps are in Czechia (0.6 pps) and Denmark (2.2 pps).

In all countries for which data for foreign-born young people disaggregated by sex is available, young men who are foreign-born are more likely to be early leavers than young women, and gender gaps are often wider than among the young population born in the reporting country.

**Figure 56: Early leavers from education and training by sex, country of birth and degree of urbanisation, 2020 [%]**

	Total	Sex		Country of birth			
		Men	Women	Native-born	Born in another EU country	Born outside the EU	Total foreign-born
<b>EU</b>	<b>9.9</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>19.9</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>22.4</b>
BE	8.1	10.2	5.9	7.5	7.2	15.6	12.1
BG	12.8	13.4	12.1	12.8	:	:	:
CZ	7.6	7.5	7.6	7.4	19.0	8.0	13.2
DK	9.3	11.7	6.8	9.2	:	11.4	10.4
DE	10.1	11.8	8.3	7.8	24.0	26.0	25.5
EE	7.5	9.2	5.8	7.6	:	:	:
IE	5.0	5.4	4.7	5.2	:	:	:
EL	3.8	4.4	3.1	2.9	:	28.0	27.0
ES	16.0	20.2	11.6	13.2	31.2	28.5	29.0
FR	8.0	9.7	6.3	7.5	16.3	13.8	14.2
HR	2.2	2.4	2.0	2.2	:	:	:
IT	13.1	15.6	10.4	11.0	22.1	35.2	32.1
CY	11.5	15.0	8.4	4.9	25.7	27.3	26.8
LV	7.2	9.5	4.7	7.2	:	:	:
LT	5.6	7.7	3.4	5.6	:	:	:
LU	8.2	10.7	5.7	7.8	8.7	:	8.7
HU	12.1	12.9	11.3	12.1	:	:	:
MT	12.6	14.7	10.2	:	:	:	20.1
NL	7.0	8.7	5.3	6.6	9.8	11.5	11.1
AT	8.1	10.0	6.3	5.7	16.2	24.0	20.4
PL	5.4	7.0	3.7	5.4	:	:	:
PT	8.9	12.6	5.1	8.8	:	:	10.8
RO	15.6	14.7	16.6	15.6	:	:	:
SI	4.1	4.6	3.4	3.8	:	7.4	7.4
SK	7.6	7.7	7.4	7.6	:	:	:
FI	8.2	9.4	7.0	7.7	:	20.3	17.4
SE	7.7	9.0	6.3	5.3	:	16.2	15.6

Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey 2020. Online data code: [edat\_lfse\_02] and [edat\_lfse\_30].

Note: Early Leavers from Education and Training (ELET) data has low reliability for HR. ELET data by country of birth have low reliability for BE, CZ, DK, HR, MT, SI and FI. ELET data by degree of urbanisation have low reliability for HR, EE, CY, LV, LT, LU, MT and SI. Data are not available for the three degrees of urbanisation in LU, LV and SK.

Evidence on Roma children (outside the official European Statistical System – Eurostat) suggests that as many as 10% of those at compulsory schooling age were not attending education across the EU in 2016<sup>164</sup>. This share was as high as 31% in EL and 23% in RO. In the nine surveyed Member States, the share of Roma early leavers from education and training was extremely high, ranging between 57% and 92%. Box 20 offers some additional findings on Roma children and their further setbacks during the COVID-19 induced lockdowns.

<sup>164</sup> [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council "Midterm review of the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies", COM \(2017\) 458 final.](#)

### Box 20: Roma students

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Roma children from remote and marginalised communities were lacking the internet access and IT equipment necessary to participate in distance learning. This has increased their risk of dropping out of school or falling behind in education.

Evidence for Bulgaria suggests that Roma children were less prepared for the transition to distance learning, with significantly lower levels of access to the internet and digital devices among students speaking Romani at home, compared to students speaking Bulgarian at home. Romani-speaking children also experienced difficulties using electronic devices (56%, compared to 24% of Bulgarian-speaking children). Similarly, evidence for Slovakia highlights that almost 50 000 children – mainly from poor localities, many of them inhabited by Roma – did not participate in distance learning at all during the first wave of the pandemic.

The Educative Promotion Programme in Extremadura (Spain) supported 1 053 young Roma children with special needs to benefit from individualised mentorship aimed at helping prevent and reduce early-school leaving. Mentors, usually from the Roma community, help create links between the Roma community and the education system.

Source: European Commission (2021). A European Commission Staff Working Document Accompanying the Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee; European Commission (2017). Commission Communication on the midterm review of the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020) Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – impact on Roma and Travellers – Bulletin 5; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020). Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – Fundamental rights implications: focus on social rights.

The available data suggest that location where young people live is also decisive. The last three columns in Figure 56 show the proportion of early leavers from education and training according to the degree of urbanisation, with regions classified as cities, towns and suburbs, or rural areas. The lowest share of early leavers in the EU is reported in cities (8.7%). The proportion of early leavers is the highest in towns and suburbs (11.2%), while it is somewhat lower in rural areas (10.5%). The picture is, however, quite uneven across Member States<sup>165</sup>.

Importantly, where the young population is more concentrated in cities, the number of early leavers may be largest in absolute terms. Data from 2019 Eurobarometer poll suggest that the proportion of young people reporting that they live in rural area or village is 26%, while 74% report living in a town (40% in small or middle-sized towns and 34% in a large town)<sup>166</sup>.

The EU average share of early school leavers among young men is higher than among young women across all degrees of urbanisation<sup>167</sup>. In 2020, the EU average gender gap was widest in towns and suburbs (4.8 pps), followed by cities (3.7) and rural areas (2.5)<sup>168</sup>.

<sup>165</sup> Rural areas report the highest proportion of early leavers in their young population in a majority of countries, namely BG, DK, EE, EL, HR HU, NL, RO, PL, LT, FI and CY. In CZ, ES, FR, PT SI and SE, towns and suburbs reported the highest proportion of early leavers. Cities reported the highest proportion of early leavers in their young population in BE, IT, MT and AT, and the second highest in DE, IE, CY, NL and SI.

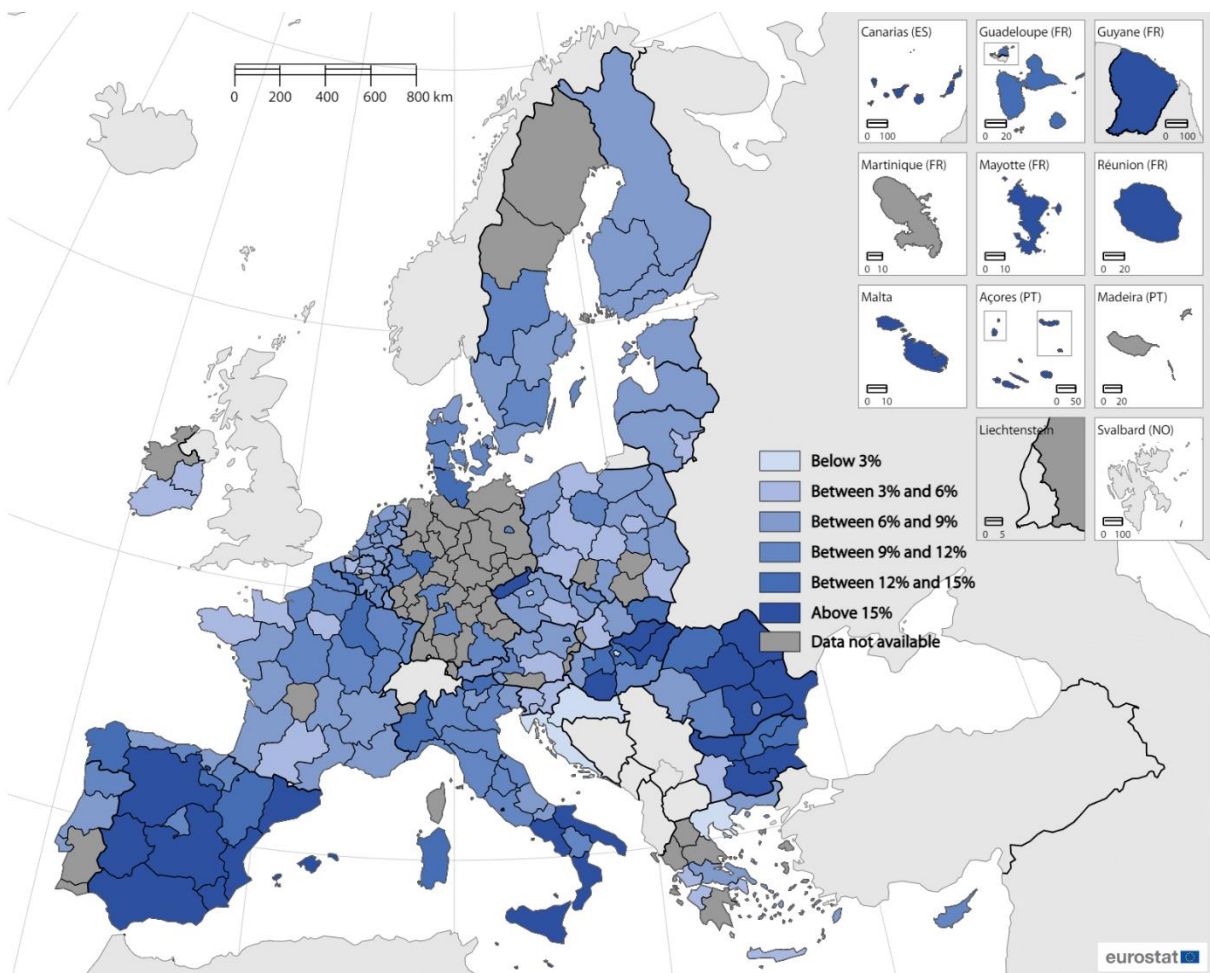
<sup>166</sup> See the Flash Youth Eurobarometer 478 of 2019 for further information. The sample refers to young people aged between 15 and 30 years. The urbanisation level is defined differently from Eurostat's LFS breakdowns, with the categories being as follows: rural area or village, small or medium-sized town, large town.

<sup>167</sup> Progress towards closing the gender gap has been faster in rural areas in the last 10 years, with reductions in the proportion of early leavers from education and training of 5.0 pps among young men versus 3.1 among young women. In cities, the reductions have been very similar among young women (3.2 pps) and young men (3.6). In towns and suburbs, the gender gap has widened with larger improvements among young women (a decrease of 2.9 percentage points) than young men (2.0).

<sup>168</sup> The data by sex and degree of urbanisation is partly not available for EE, IE, HR, CY, LV, LT, LU, MT, RO, SI and SK. The share of early leavers among young men is larger in towns and suburbs (13.5%) than in rural areas (11.7%) and cities (10.5%). Similarly, the proportion of early leavers among young women living in rural areas (9.2%) is larger than in towns and suburbs (8.7%) and cities (6.8%).

Figure 57 shows the wide disparities across regions at NUTS 2 level in 2020. Some of the lowest shares of early leavers from education and training are concentrated in Eastern Europe and in capital regions. The share of early leavers from education and training is also relatively high in most regions of southern Europe and across most regions of Bulgaria and Romania. Although the share of early leavers from education and training is comparatively low in western Member States such as Belgium or France, some regions<sup>169</sup> also record relatively high shares.

**Figure 57: Early leavers from education and training by NUTS 2 regions, 2020 [%]**



Administrative boundaries: © EuroGeographics © UN-FAO © Turkstat  
Cartography: Eurostat – IMAGE, 10/2021

Source: Eurostat. Online data code: [edat\_lfse\_16].

<sup>169</sup> Eurostat (2020) [Early leavers from education and training across EU regions](#).

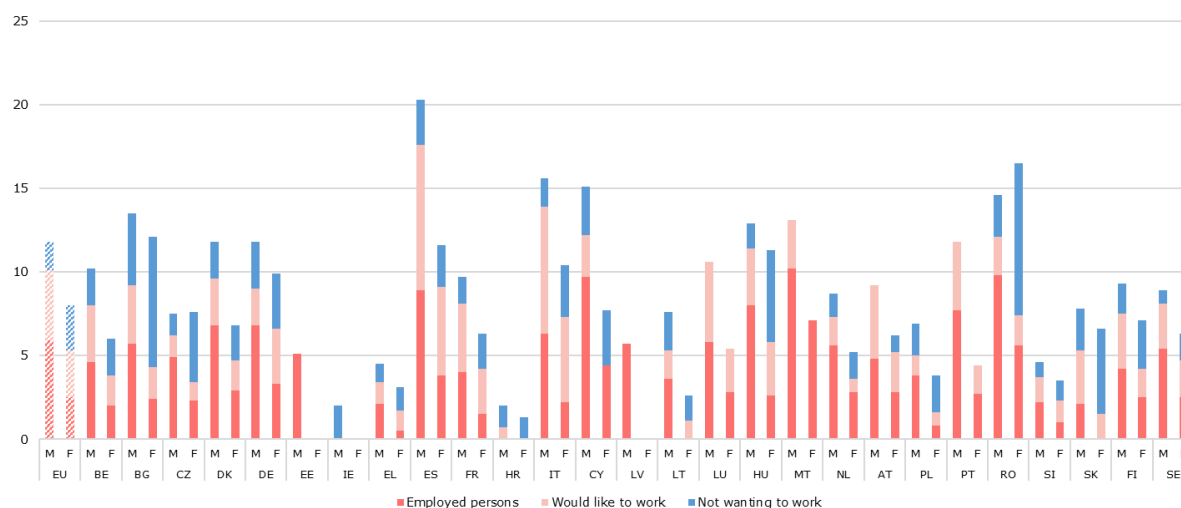


### 2.4.3 Spotlight on the transition from school to work

Unemployment and inactivity are widespread among young people who have not completed upper secondary education and who are lacking the credentials deemed crucial for the labour market or pursuing further education. In 2020, only 42.4% of the early leavers in the EU were in employment, whereas 35.4% were not employed but wanting to work. The remaining early leavers (22.2%) were not employed and did not want to work (Figure 58).

The share of early leavers who are employed is highest in Malta, Romania, and Cyprus, suggesting that these labour markets offer opportunities for young people, especially young men, who have relatively low education attainment. By contrast, five Member States reported more early leavers not employed but wanting to work than early leavers who were employed (Croatia, Italy, Ireland, Spain, France and Slovakia). The biggest gap – 2.1 percentage point – is reported in Italy, where the share of early leavers who were employed stood at 4.3%, compared with a 6.4% share of early leavers who were not employed but wanted to work.

**Figure 58: Early leavers from education and training by sex and employment status, 2020 [%]**



Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey 2020. Online data code: [edat\_lfse\_14].

The share of young men who are early leavers in employment (5.9%) or not employed but who would like to work (4.2%) is much higher than the respective shares among young women, as among women, 2.5% are employed early leavers and 2.8% are not employed early leavers who would like to work. Young women who are early leavers from education and training are also more likely to not want to work (2.7% of them report they do not want to work) when compared to young men (1.7% of male early leavers report that they do not want to work)<sup>170</sup>.

Early leavers from education and training are at greater risk of becoming NEETs (young people not in employment, employment education or training) and socially excluded, often detached from the labour market and further education and learning opportunities. Indeed, the policy focus on

<sup>170</sup> The gender gaps in the share of early leavers from education and training are also related to gender gaps in young peoples' prospects, opportunities and aspirations on the labour market, and not only to education and training systems. Young men are more likely to be early leavers from education and training, and also more likely to be in employment, or wanting to work after leaving education and training prematurely. The relatively higher rates of early leaving among young men do not necessarily translate into worse employment outcomes. Young women are more likely to stay on in education and training. Among young women who are early leavers, it is more frequent to not want to work, or to want to work, but to be unemployed.

prevention and early intervention should not distract from the equally daunting challenge of helping young people who have nevertheless become early leavers find their way back to education or training. Without such compensatory measures, an 18 year-old early leaver may still be recorded as an early leaver six years from now. But the road back to education and training is not always an easy one.

### **Box 21: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

It will take time to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the share of early leavers from education and training. A number of studies suggest that physical school closures, which were prolonged in some countries, tended to increase the likelihood for students who were at risk of disconnecting from school to actually drop out<sup>171</sup>.

As presented in sections 1.4 and 1.5, teachers help students in their learning of academic as well as social and emotional skills. Despite efforts to maintain learning continuity during the period of physical school closures through online education and various forms of support, students had to rely much more on their own resources to continue learning remotely. Insufficient financial resources, supervision and emotional support at home is a persistent source of structural disadvantage for children and adolescents, predating the pandemic.

There are wide inequalities in the availability of home environments conducive to learning, for example having access to a quiet space or study desk at home, as well as in access to the broadband and computers needed for online education<sup>172</sup>. Socio-economically disadvantaged students may lack the necessary engagement or ability to learn on their own, and the emotional support for developing educational aspirations and perseverance. In households where parents have lost their jobs, teenagers may try to enter the labour market to contribute to the family income.

The period of physical school closures has tended to exacerbate inequalities. Students may have found it more difficult to connect and participate in online lessons, and may have found it hard to go back to schools once it became possible, especially in groups that were already at higher risk of falling behind before the pandemic, who relied on the school to help them maintain a predictable day-to-day routine, those with less access to the broadband and equipment needed, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students with a migrant background, or pupils living in remote areas.

On the other hand, reduced employment prospects may erode the incentives to leave education and training before completing upper secondary attainment, as could be observed in earlier crises. Further evidence is needed to study all these different scenarios.

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<sup>171</sup> For more details, cf. reports by the DG JRC of the European Commission: Blaskó, Z. and Schnepf, S.V. (2020). [Educational inequalities in Europe and physical school closures during COVID-19. Fairness Policy Brief 04/2020](#); Di Pietro, G., Biagi, F., Costa P., Karpiński Z., Mazza, J. (2020). [The likely impact of COVID-19 on education: Reflections based on the existing literature and recent international datasets. A JRC Technical Report](#); Carretero Gomez, S., Napierala, J., Bessios, A., Mägi, E., Pugacewicz, A., Ranieri, M., Triquet, K., Lombaerts, K., Robledo Bottcher, N., Montanari, M. and Gonzalez Vazquez, I (2021). [How families handled emergency remote schooling during the COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020; what did we learn from schooling practices during the COVID 19 lockdown?. JRC Science for Policy Report](#). As a complementary indication, the European Statistical Recovery Dashboard shows that the proportion of young people neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) increased from 12.5% in Q4 2019 to 14.7% in Q2 2020. During Q3-Q4 2020, the NEET rate decreased to 13.3%, a considerably higher level than one year earlier.

<sup>172</sup> In some countries, 10% of 15-year-old students do not have a quiet place to study in their homes. In all countries, the percentage is higher among students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, cf. [Coronavirus policy-responses: learning remotely when schools close – how well are students and schools prepared?](#)

### 2.4.4 Policy takeaways

Higher levels of education attainment are associated with benefits at the individual, social and economic levels. The expected benefits from completing upper secondary education include better health and well-being, better social networks, improved labour market outcomes, increased participation in democratic institutions and other civil society initiatives, organisations and higher lifetime satisfaction<sup>173</sup>.

Young people who did not complete upper secondary education and who are not receiving any further education or training are less likely to fulfil their potential. They were at a higher risk of low achievement when they were in education and are less likely to have reached a baseline level of proficiency in basic skills. They can face difficulties in finding employment that matches their preferences and expectations, especially where labour markets are more high-skilled<sup>174</sup>.

Individuals with lower levels of education attainment have been more severely affected by the economic downturn following the pandemic than their more highly educated peers, as was also the case in previous downturns<sup>175</sup>. In this context, prevention and early intervention are especially important.

For those young people who did leave education and training prematurely, compensatory support is needed to help them in their difficult labour market integration, or on their way back to education or training. The Commission's reinforced Youth Guarantee<sup>176</sup> plays an important role here, reaching out to vulnerable groups and activating them with tailored support so that they can take up an offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship.

Mastering multiple languages is key to enhancing the life and work of all individuals. In addition to improving people's general ability to move around the EU to work, study, etc., especially lifelong and innovative learning, and removing barriers to social inclusion, language learning was identified by the EU as a key enabler to achieving the EU's vision for a European Education Area by 2025 in which "learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders"<sup>177</sup>.

The Council's 2019 Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages<sup>178</sup> supports this vision and sets the ambitious goal of ensuring that, by the time young people leave upper secondary education, they can speak at least three languages. In addition to this, by introducing the concepts of "literacy" and "language awareness", the Recommendation aims to change the attitudes among policymakers and teachers, inspiring them to adopt comprehensive language education policies, as well as innovative and inclusive language teaching methods.

<sup>173</sup> There is abundant empirical evidence of the association of early school leaving with negative effects to individuals and society. Typically, a higher incidence and duration of unemployment, more precarious work conditions, and lower job satisfaction are found among early school leavers, while higher productivity and earnings are associated with higher educational attainment. See e.g.: Psacharopoulos, G. (2019). [Developments in the Rates of Early Leavers from Education and Training \(ELET\)](#), An EENEE Ad hoc report 3/2019, and Cedefop (2016). [Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage](#). Volume I: investigating causes and extent. A Cedefop research paper; No 57.

<sup>174</sup> Van der Graaf, A., Vroonhof, P., Roullis, G., and Velli, F. (2019). Research for CULT Committee – How to tackle early school leaving in the EU, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels. Forthcoming study from Ecorys looked at the gender gap in attainment and achievements and the potential impact, including "direct" and more "indirect implications" where a causal link with poor education outcomes is difficult to prove conclusively on the basis of existing research, but some evidence was found showing that men with incomplete studies are at higher risk of ill-health and suicide.

<sup>175</sup> Christopher Jepsen (2021). [The labour market returns to classroom-based vocational education](#). An EENEE network report for the European Commission.

<sup>176</sup> Cf. European Commission's [Reinforced Youth Guarantee](#).

<sup>177</sup> European Commission (2017). [Strengthening European identity through education and culture](#), p. 11.

<sup>178</sup> Council of the European Union (2019). [Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages \(2019/C 189/03\)](#)

Moreover, drawing on the lessons from implementing policies in the last decade<sup>179</sup>, the Commission announced two new initiatives to promote the inclusive dimension of school education: the *Pathways to School Success* initiative and the establishment of an expert group to develop proposals for creating supportive learning environments for groups of students at risk of low achievement and for supporting well-being at school<sup>180</sup>.

The “Pathways to School Success” initiative is expected to focus on (1) helping all learners reach a baseline level of proficiency in basic skills; (2) promoting educational success strategies at national level, including language sensitive teaching; and (3) stimulating a safe and supportive school environment. In the context of early leavers from education and training, this will create new momentum for the triple objective of prevention, intervention and compensation.

## 2.5 Tertiary level attainment

### *In a nutshell*

Member States have agreed on an EU-level target stating that the share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 45% by 2030<sup>181</sup>. This supersedes the ET2020 40% benchmark, which was achieved in 2019<sup>182</sup>. In 2020, this share stood at 40.5% in the EU, but with substantial differences between and within countries. Eleven countries have tertiary educational attainment rates above the EU-level target. The average share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment is 10.8 pps higher among women (46.0%) than it is among men (35.2%). Moreover, there are clear discrepancies between urban and rural areas; the average rate in cities (50.9%) being substantially higher than it is in rural areas (28.9%).

### 2.5.1 Progress towards the EU-level target

On average, the share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment was 40.5% in the EU in 2020 (Figure 59). The share has increased steadily across the EU since 2010, with an overall increase of 8.3 pps. The difference between countries is pronounced, spanning from 24.9% in Romania to 60.6% in Luxembourg. Eleven countries have tertiary educational attainment rates above the EU-level target and a further nine are within five pps of the target value. In contrast, only three countries had attainment rates higher than the present target in 2010, underlining the development over the past decade.

#### **Box 22: Expanding the tertiary vocational system in Italy**

The Italian government is taking steps to expand the existing network of Istituti Tecnici Superiori (ITS), tertiary-level vocational institutions that offer graduates excellent employment prospects, but have so far remained limited in scope. A reform is under way with the aim of strengthening the ITS organisational and educational model. It provides for a stronger role for business within the ITS foundations and simplifies the recruitment of trainers from the business world. The

<sup>179</sup> Since 2011, the Commission and Member States developed a policy framework to reduce early school leaving, with the adoption and implementation of a Council Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving. The policy framework is based on a combination of prevention measures to reduce the overall risk for young people to leave education and training before they have completed upper secondary education, intervention measures at the level of the educational institutions, and compensation measures to support young early leavers and offer them routes to re-enter education and training and gain qualifications.

<sup>180</sup> Cf. European Commission Communication on achieving a European Education Area by 2025.

<sup>181</sup> The share of 25-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment refers to the share of this age bracket who have successfully completed tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-8).

<sup>182</sup> The reference population for the ET2020 benchmark was the age cohort 30-34 years. In comparison, the tertiary educational attainment rate for the 25-34 years cohort stood at 39.5% in 2019.