

2.5.4 Policy takeaways

Higher education has a unique role to play in building successful, inclusive societies. Moreover, higher levels of education attainment are associated with benefits at the individual, social and economic levels. Demand for highly skilled, socially engaged people is both increasing and changing, as labour markets are transforming rapidly, due to technological development, digital and green transitions. The higher education sector must respond to these needs to adequately skill the talents of tomorrow. The COVID-19 pandemic is another factor that has highlighted existing challenges, and presented new ones, while at the same time created opportunities for further synergies between higher education, research and innovation to provide solutions within the planned higher education transformation agenda¹⁹⁶. One avenue for approaching these challenges is the European Universities Initiative¹⁹⁷, which encourages deeper cooperation between higher education institutions across borders.

The attainment rates in higher education have been increasing steadily over the past decade, but there is still considerable variation between countries and sub-groups within countries (e.g. gender gap, urban-rural divide). Notably, there is a persisting under-representation of students with disadvantaged background in higher education. Moreover, evidence suggests that disadvantaged communities in both inner city and isolated rural regions were among the most severely affected during the pandemic¹⁹⁸. Those with high-level qualifications face better labour market perspectives, and insights from the European skills forecast suggests that people employed in highly skilled occupations are less likely to be replaced by technology in the future¹⁹⁹.

2.6 Work-based learning

In a nutshell

Work-based learning helps young people and adults make smoother transitions from school or from unemployment to the labour market. Member States agreed on an EU-level target to ensure that, by 2025, at least 60% of recent graduates from vocational education and training (VET) will have been exposed to work-based learning during their formal education. Data underpinning the EU-level target will be available as of 2022. In the field of VET, other important indicator domains concern the employability of recent graduates and number studying abroad during their formal education. 76.1% of recent VET graduates were employed in 2020, outperforming their peers from medium-level general education. Statistics on numbers studying abroad are also awaiting underlying data, to be sourced from a combination of administrative Erasmus+ and the UNESCO, OECD and Eurostat (UOE) data.

The 2020 Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience²⁰⁰ further developed the European policy framework for VET in light of the social, economic, technological and environmental developments, but also the COVID-19 crisis²⁰¹.

¹⁹⁶ [Commission Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025](#) COM/2020/625 final; [Commission Communication on a new ERA for research and innovation](#) COM/2020/628 final; [Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond \(2021-2030\)](#) 2021/C 66/01; [Council conclusions on the New European Research Area](#).

¹⁹⁷ [Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education](#). 2021/C 221/03

¹⁹⁸ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2020). [The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report](#).

¹⁹⁹ Cedefop (2021). [Digital, greener and more resilient. Insights from Cedefop's European skills forecast](#).

²⁰⁰ Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience 2020/C 417/01.

The Recommendation set three targets to be achieved at European level by 2025: 1) 60% of recent graduates from VET have been exposed to work-based learning; 2) the share of employed recent graduates from VET should be at least 82%; 3) 8% of VET learners benefit from a learning mobility abroad. Although only the first was incorporated into the EEA strategic framework, this section briefly looks at all three VET target domains.

2.6.1 New data for the EU-level target

The target for work-based learning is the one VET target included among the seven adopted by Member States as part of the 2021 Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030). Unlike the five EU-level targets discussed in this chapter so far, the target on work-based learning is still awaiting its underlying data to monitor country performance and progress.

This is the very first year that new data on work-based learning is collected in the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS), with results available in the course of 2022. More specifically, a new variable will refer to work experiences at a workplace²⁰² that were part of the curriculum leading to the highest level of education successfully completed. The EU-level target based on this new data will cover the age group 20 to 34 who graduated from a medium-level (ISCED 3-4) programme with a vocational orientation between 1 and 3 years before the year of the survey.

Box 24: The PRÕM-project in Estonia

The project brings vocational education and training (VET) and higher education closer to the needs of the labour market. One of its main aims is to improve the image of the vocational stream and develop a comprehensive work-based learning system. PRÕM has already helped improve the quality of work-based learning and expand apprenticeship programmes. During its implementation, which runs from 2015 to 2022, the share of graduates in work-based learning in VET has already increased from 2% to 15%. Employers are now more aware of work-based learning. By 2020, 6 700 students had participated in the project and apprenticeships were being offered by 1 300 companies. More than 6 000 apprenticeship supervisors had been trained in schools and companies. This approach was successfully extended to higher education as well: certain learning outcomes, as defined in the curricula, can be fulfilled by carrying out practical work. The universities remain responsible for the study part, but companies are involved in developing and evaluating the curriculum. PRÕM receives close to €27 m from the European Social Fund.

The new variable will allow for regular collection of information on work-based learning, enabling the annual monitoring of progress towards the 60% EU-level target. The new variable avoids terms such as apprenticeships or traineeships, distinguishing instead between five main categories of work-based learning, based on duration and payment criteria²⁰³. These categories will provide an

²⁰¹ The Recommendation outlines reforms needed in VET systems so they can cater for the skills needs of both young and adult population, facilitate swift responses to changing labour market needs and equip people with the skills for the recovery, the green and digital transitions and active participation in society. It also places a strong focus on the need to integrate VET into economic, industrial and innovation strategies and embed social and environmental sustainability into VET programmes. A monitoring framework was also included to support the assessment of progress towards European level targets.

²⁰² In a market or non-market unit (i.e. in a company, government institution or non-profit organisation).

²⁰³ As for duration, it will identify work experience(s) at a workplace from 1 to 6 months, 7 months or over and less than 1 month (or no experience). If a respondent had several work experiences, the cumulative duration of all work experiences will be considered. As far as the payment component is concerned, the new variable will distinguish between the above work experiences where at least one work experience was paid and those where all work experiences were unpaid.

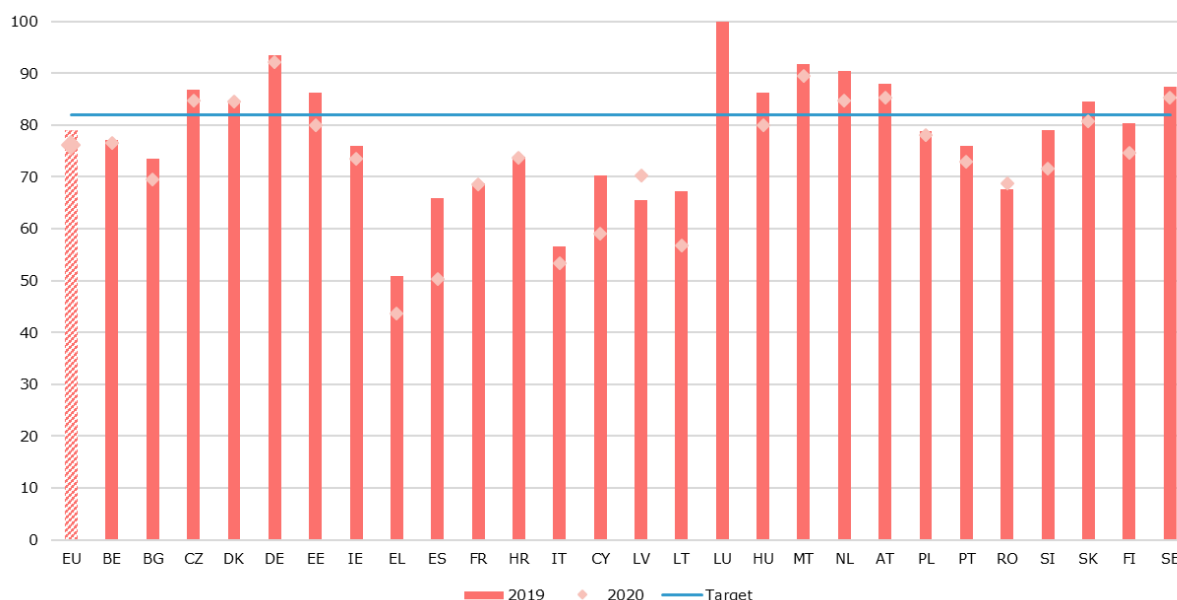
insight into which type of work-based learning is most relevant for transition rates and for staying in employment.

2.6.2 Spotlight on VET employability and learning mobility

The other two targets from the 2020 VET Recommendation are not part of the 2021 Council Resolution, but nevertheless warrant analysis. The indicator on the employment rate of recent graduates from medium-level VET, measured as the share of employed graduates from VET at upper-secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary levels having left education and training no more than three years before the reference year, builds on a well-established indicator from the now superseded ET2020 strategic framework.

In 2020, the disruption of workplaces due to the pandemic led to a drop in employment rates for this group of three pps in all Member States, from 79.1% in 2019 to 76.1% in 2020, except for Latvia and Romania (Figure 65). Nine countries saw a drop of more than five pps, including three countries with over ten pps (Spain, Cyprus and Lithuania)²⁰⁴.

Figure 65: Employment rate of recent graduates (20-34) with medium-level vocational qualification 2019 and 2020 [%]



Source: EU LFS. Online data code: [EDAT_LFSE_24].

Note: DE (break in time series and provisional data, 2020), CY (low reliability, 2019 and 2020), LU (low reliability, 2019, data not available, 2020) . The ISCED level in question is 3-4 VET.

Finally, the VET learning mobility target also has its roots in the now superseded ET2020 strategic framework²⁰⁵. However, underlying data were always missing, and in its 2017 progress report on a

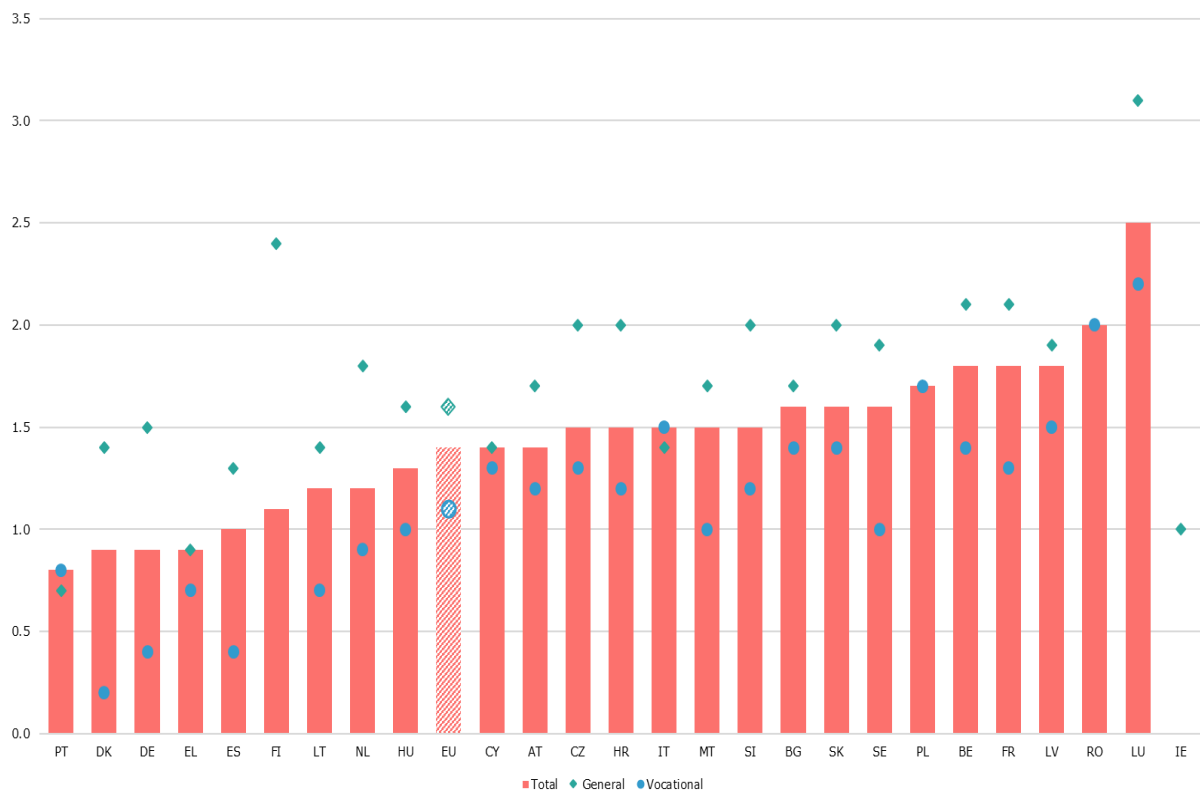
²⁰⁴ Interestingly, VET graduates were more successful in entering the labour market when compared to general education graduates. They were also more resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic than their peers from medium level programmes with general orientation, whose employment level dropped more steeply from an already low level of 62.8% in 2019 to 58.3% in 2020.

²⁰⁵ In ET2020 it was stated that "by 2020, an EU average of at least 6% of 18-34-year-olds with an initial vocational education and training (IVET) qualification should have had an initial VET-related study or training period (including work placements) abroad lasting a minimum of 2 weeks (10 working days), or less if documented by Europass."

learning mobility target²⁰⁶, the Commission proposed to shift the focus from household surveys to administrative data. As for the third target in the Council Resolution on VET, the methodological basis was a 2020 feasibility study²⁰⁷ that found 8% of VET learners in Europe should benefit from studying abroad by 2025.

One of the obstacles to learning abroad among VET learners is insufficient language skills. In some countries, students in vocational upper secondary education barely reach one additional foreign language (0.2 in Denmark, 0.4 in Germany and Spain). This discrepancy becomes even more alarming when we consider the percentages of learners in these types of upper secondary schools that are left behind linguistically. On average, in the EU, nearly one in five students in vocational upper secondary schools learns no modern foreign language, whatsoever. By contrast, the same is only true for some 2.1% of students enrolled in general upper secondary schools.

Figure 66: Average number of foreign languages studied per pupil in upper secondary education, by track (2019)



Source: Eurostat. UOE data base. Online data code: [educ_uoe_lang03].

As Figure 66 shows, while this school level is supposed to prepare learners for the labour market, the linguistic necessities of an interconnected Europe are seemingly falling by the wayside. Therefore, when designing policy solutions to promote language learning and increased proficiency, particular attention should be paid to vocational upper secondary education. To be able to draw

²⁰⁶ European Commission (2017). [Progress report on a Learning Mobility Benchmark](#). A Report from the Commission to the Council. COM/2017/ 148 final.

²⁰⁷ Hefler G., Steinheimer, E. (2020). [Measuring Learning Mobility in Vocational Education and Training](#) – A review of data sources and approaches to measurement across European Union Member States. A report for DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

more concrete conclusions, more holistic strategies on testing language skills across the EU are needed.

The VET target for learning abroad will be measured as the share of all learners studying abroad in a calendar year, as a proportion of a cohort of VET graduates in the same year. The indicator will be based on the mobility data sourced from Erasmus+ data²⁰⁸ alongside VET graduate data sourced from the joint UNESCO, OECD and Eurostat (UOE) data collection²⁰⁹. Section 2.4.3 above sheds further light on learning abroad data and the disrupting effects of the pandemic.

2.6.3 Policy takeaways

Work-based learning helps young people and adults make smoother transitions from school or from unemployment to the labour market. It is a policy priority for the EU and an important part of the reinforced Youth Guarantee, where apprenticeships and traineeships make up two out of four possible offers to young people across the EU²¹⁰.

Apprenticeships bring benefits both for the apprentices as well as their employers. Apprentices have the opportunity to gain valuable skills in a real working environment and further develop their talents and knowledge. Employers can benefit from fresh perspectives, as well have the opportunity to prepare specific profiles meeting the changing skills needs, enhancing the competitiveness and productivity of companies and workplaces, while also increasing employability and social participation. Most Member States have been pursuing significant apprenticeship reforms, and there is a strong push to boost apprenticeship supply. The EU has been supporting work-based learning, notably the provision of more and better apprenticeships, as well as the mobility of apprentices through the European Alliance for Apprenticeships and the Apprenticeship Support Services²¹¹, and through the European Apprentices Network²¹² and the Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships²¹³.

²⁰⁸ Since 1987, Erasmus has supported more than 1.3 million VET learners. Around 170 000 VET learners and staff go abroad every year. The new Erasmus+ 2021-2027 provides a strengthened support to mobility of learners and teachers, trainers and staff, and provides for several novelties in the area of VET mobility: (1) a new accreditation process to provide an easy access to mobility activities; (2) a financial incentive to VET providers willing to implement long-term mobility (i.e. 3-12 months duration) as well as an additional specific linguistic support for learners; (3) the extension of the Digital Opportunity Traineeship initiative (DOT) to traineeships for learners and apprentices from the VET sector; (4) the support to the participation of VET learners in skills competitions abroad; and (5) the support to international mobility activities outside Erasmus+ Programme countries for VET staff and learners.

²⁰⁹ Where available and only if the data provided is comparable to Erasmus+ data, including the duration of mobility, data from national authorities mobility programmes could also be used to complement the data from Erasmus+. In case data from national authorities are included, this should be displayed in a transparent manner. Due to the fact that close to one third of the mobility activities was disrupted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, data cannot be published for the school year 2019-2020.

²¹⁰ Cf. European Commission's [Reinforced Youth Guarantee](#).

²¹¹ The European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EaFA) aims to strengthen the supply, quality, image and mobility of apprenticeships. Since its launch in 2013, 36 countries have made national commitments under the alliance, and more than 350 companies, employers and intermediaries have pledged to provide over one million apprenticeship and other training opportunities to young people. EaFA members can benefit from the Apprenticeship Support Services. The Services contribute to strengthening the European apprenticeship community and support EU Member States in improving their apprenticeship schemes by providing support through three pillars: Knowledge-sharing, Networking and Benchlearning. In order to give a renewed boost to apprenticeships across the EU, the Commission's Youth Employment Support package of 1 July 2020 announced a renewed EaFA. The renewed EaFA will in particular (i) promote national coalitions, (ii) support SMEs, (iii) reinforce the involvement of social partners including at sectoral level, (iv) mobilise local and regional authorities and (v) support the representation of apprentices in the Member States.

²¹² The European Apprentices Network (EAN) established in 2017 is a network of apprentices, youth organisations and other bodies related to apprenticeships at the European level. Its objective is to ensure that young apprentices both in secondary and third-level education are shaping the discussion and policymaking related to VET, in particular for apprenticeships. EAN calls for apprenticeships to be considered more than a quick fix to youth unemployment, but rather learning opportunities to be tailored to the needs and rights of apprentices themselves. In 2020 EAN set up a new structure expanding its membership as to be a representative voice at all levels on issues concerning apprenticeships.

²¹³ On 15 March 2018, EU Member States agreed on a Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA) with the aim to ensure that apprenticeships respond to the needs of both apprentices

Apprenticeships also played a central role in the Commission's 2020 Communication on Youth Employment Support²¹⁴ which announced a renewed European Alliance for Apprenticeships. The vital role of apprenticeships was also highlighted in the tripartite Osnabrück Declaration (2020) on vocational education and training as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies. Through the renewed Alliance, a wider range of actors will be mobilised, which will help increase work-based learning offers in the medium term.

2.7 Adult learning

In a nutshell

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the already slow progress on adult learning across the EU. Increasing remote adult learning in 2020 may have prevented an even steeper decline in participation rates, but does not change the low average participation rates or the uneven picture across Member States. The pandemic did, however, add momentum to adult learning as a policy objective. Member States agreed on a target of at least 47% adult learning by 2025. A further target of 60% by 2030 was set at the 2021 Porto Summit when the action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights was endorsed.

There have been adult learning targets in previous EU strategic frameworks for cooperation in education and training, but always focused on the narrow window of 4 weeks preceding the survey²¹⁵. Both new targets are based on the participation in learning activities during 12 months preceding the survey that will first be applied in 2022.

The 12-month reference period makes it possible to cover all learning experiences, providing an overview of adult participation in learning closer to today's reality. It has become increasingly common for adults to attend (very) short courses, seminars and other learning experiences, provided in-company, on the market or by authorities at several levels and a wide range of providers, from specialised centres to social partners and civil society organisations. Attendance of such courses may not be accounted for when applying the 4-week window, but the shift to a 12-month window allows for a comprehensive measurement and is likely to capture this type of learning.

As with the EU-level target for work-based learning, the preferred underlying data for the EU-level target on adult learning are not yet available. The EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) will collect adult learning data based on the 12-month window from 2022 onwards, with data available as of 2023²¹⁶. Until then, the EU Adult Education Survey (AES), which uses the 12-month window, can be used – with some caveats²¹⁷ – for provisional indications of country performance and trends.

AES results show a substantial increase in the EU adult learning figure from 2007 (32.8%) to 2011 (40.2%) and more modest progress in 2016 (43.7%). But they also show huge variations between Member States and some major changes over time. For instance, in 2016, nine countries were

and employers throughout the European Union. It recommends that a substantial part of an apprenticeship, meaning at least half of it, should be carried out in the workplace. As the Commission monitoring report of August 2021 (tbc) shows, the seven criteria for learning and working conditions are in place in the majority of Member States. However, as for the seven criteria on framework conditions, further progress in implementation is needed.

²¹⁴ European Commission's [youth employment strategy](#).

²¹⁵ The EU average in 2019, at 10.8%, remained far below the now superseded 2020 target of 15%. Only seven countries had reached the 15% target in 2019 (SE, FI, DK, NL, EE, LU and FR), with AT coming very close at 14.7%. The overall picture is one of big differences between the 27 national situations, in participation rates in any given year and in trends.

²¹⁶ This also means that the LFS methodology, or the EEA target itself, is still up for discussion on the basis of first results in 2023.

²¹⁷ The AES uses a wider definition of adult learning (including guided on-the-job training) than the LFS. Moreover, trend analysis is complicated by numerous statistical breaks in the data series.