

Chart of the month (May 2022)

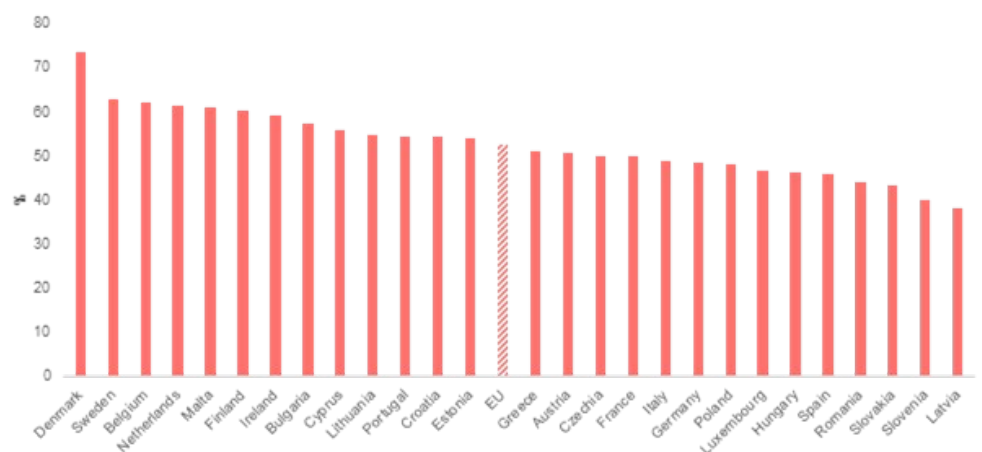
Preserving democratic values through education: fostering students' abilities to navigate a world of fake news

Digital technologies have enabled the spread of all kinds of information, including “fake news”, disinformation^[1] and misinformation^[2], which, in turn, keep challenging democratic cultures in all their diversity at European level and beyond ([European Commission, 2020](#)). These challenges have been augmented by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, thus bringing into the spotlight the need to design effective measures aiming at preserving and safeguarding democratic values. Hence, preserving democratic values and reinforcing trust in public institutions relies on having autonomous and well-informed citizens ([OECD, 2021](#)).

In this context, the role of education in shaping young citizens with strong democratic values and equipping them with literacy and critical thinking skills becomes crucial. To achieve this, students need to develop advanced reading skills and learn how to think critically, assess the accuracy of information on the Internet, and solve problems on their own more than ever. The findings of the PISA 2018 reading skills assessment suggest that European education systems and teachers can do more to foster reading proficiency in a digital world by enhancing digital literacy skills.

The chart below shows that on average in EU Member States, approximately 53% 15-year-old students reported being trained at school on how to recognise whether information is biased or not. Among the EU Member States, over 60% of students reported receiving this training in Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Malta and Finland. However, less than 45% of students indicated having been taught this in Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Learning how to discern between subjective and biased information



Source: OECD, PISA 2018 database, [Table B.2.6](#).

Note: Share of students reporting that “during their entire school experience they were taught how to detect whether the information is subjective or biased” in PISA 2018.

Unweighted EU average. For further notes, see PISA source tables.

[1] False or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm.

[2] False or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can still be harmful, e.g. when people share false information with friends and family in good faith.

The [OECD PISA 2018 results](#) also reveal significant variations between students in the top and the bottom quarter of socio-economic status (SES) in terms of how much they are trained to discern between facts and opinions^[3]. Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg and Sweden displayed the largest SES gaps (above 15 percentage points), while Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, France and Slovenia registered smaller, but still statistically significant, SES gaps (below 8 percentage points).

Interestingly, for 9 EU Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) the SES differences are statistically insignificant, thus suggesting that students, irrespective of their socio-economic background, receive limited training on how to detect biased information. Empirical studies have shown that classroom interventions aimed at fostering critical evaluation of information reliability are effective in improving students' critical thinking when reading complex texts ([Perez et al, 2018](#)).

Background

By the end of 2020, the European Commission adopted a [Communication on the European Democracy Action Plan](#) aiming at strengthening the resilience of EU democracies in the face of challenges, which is centred around individual rights and freedoms, transparency and accountability. The Plan also includes actions to counter disinformation, especially in the online environment. This is complemented by the [Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027](#) representing a renewed policy initiative to support sustainable and effective adaptation of EU's education and training systems to the digital age. Its focus is on enhancing their capacity to develop basic digital skills and competences from an early age, and promote digital literacy, including tackling disinformation at all levels of education.

Disclaimer: The Chart of the Month does not constitute a policy position of the European Commission. Neither the European Commission nor any person acting on behalf of the Commission is responsible for any use made of the Chart of the Month.

[3] Socio-economic status as measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS).