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Education and Training Monitor 2020

Executive summary

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Additional contextual data can be found at ec.europa.eu/education/monitor*

Executive Summary

2020 has been an unprecedented year of challenge and disruption on education and training. The almost universal school closures due to the COVID-19 outbreak, starting from mid-March and lasting at least two months, affected more than 95 million of learners and 8 million teachers across the EU at all educational levels and sectors. Nevertheless, as a result of the tremendous efforts by the education sector, EU Member States managed to ensure education continuity by shifting rapidly to distance learning, often within a few days or weeks. As of autumn 2020, the overwhelming majority of Member States have relaunched in-situ teaching, in most cases under strict safety requirements and with contingency scenarios, which made the return difficult both from a pedagogical and organisational point of view.

Uneven access to distance learning, quality and well-being have been key concerns. The first reviews point to significant variation in terms of access to distance learning across and within countries. While in some Member States, coverage was almost universal (e.g. in Slovenia fewer than 2% of pupils could not be reached), in others a significant share of pupils were left without education (e.g. 48% of pupils in Italy). Reasons for exclusion included lack of devices, inadequate internet connections and/or difficult home situations, and many Member States distributed tablets and laptops to fill these gaps. Teaching practices also varied significantly among schools even within countries, leading to uneven quality. Initial research findings and surveys estimate that the physical closure of schools may affect learning outcomes due to the loss in instruction time and reduced pedagogical content. Vocational education and training was additionally hit by the closure of companies disrupting work-based learning. Finally, the lack of social interactions of pupils with their peers and teachers, as well as stress related to distance learning, are reported to have had a major negative impact on the well-being of students.

There is a risk that the crisis may affect vulnerable learners most, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those with special educational needs and in rural or remote areas. However, the crisis did not only challenge already known vulnerable groups, but also many other learners, who for various reasons, such as a less supportive home environment and motivational factors, had difficulties in coping under the new circumstances. As a response, some countries put in place special support measures, for example Ireland, Croatia and Malta set up special forms of psychological support to pupils at risk of becoming disengaged. Belgium (French Community) decided not to provide new learning content to avoid inequalities.

Education systems faced special challenges in terms of end of year exams and enrolment to universities. End of year exams and enrolment in higher education institutions have also been a major challenge and Member States approaches varied significantly from one country to another. Germany has decided that all final examinations would be conducted, whereas some other countries (e.g. Austria and Slovakia) preferred to postpone upper secondary school leaving exams, as well as the deadline of application to universities. In some Member States final exams have been cancelled (e.g. France and Sweden,) and replaced by continuous assessment.

Teaching and learning in a digital age

The COVID crisis demonstrated the importance of stepping up the readiness of digital solutions for teaching and learning in Europe and also pointed to where the weaknesses lie. Member States have invested heavily in digital education, in particular in digital infrastructure with the support of Structural Funds. As a result, the digital infrastructure of schools developed significantly in the past decade, yet large disparities persist in many countries. The share of students attending highly digitally equipped and connected schools differs widely across Europe, is highest in Nordic countries, and ranges from 35% (ISCED 1) to 52% (ISCED 2) to 72% (ISCED 3). However, only 8% of students attend schools located in a village or a small city which have access to a high-speed Internet above 100 Mbps.

However, teachers were not adequately prepared to use digital technologies in the classroom before the crisis. Investment in digital infrastructure and tools has not always been adequately accompanied by appropriate preparation of teachers. On average in the EU, fewer than

half of teachers (49.1%) report that ICT was included in their formal education or training. Moreover, while a growing number of teachers participate in continued professional development (CPD) programmes related to the use of digital technologies, this does not always translate into teaching practices.

Pupils' digital skills are improving, but they are not digitally native. Contrary to the common view of the young generation of today as a generation of 'digital natives', the ICILS results indicate that young people do not develop sophisticated digital skills just by growing up while using digital devices. Underachievement, in the sense of a failure to understand and perform even the most basic ICT operations, is widespread in the EU. In 2018, as many as 62.7% of Italian pupils¹ did not manage to pass the underachievement threshold. Neither did 50.6% of pupils in Luxembourg, 43.5% in France, 33.5% in Portugal, 33.2% in Germany, 27.3% in Finland and 16.2% in Denmark.

The adaptation to the crisis was easier for those Member States that were more advanced in digital education as a result of implementing comprehensive national strategies in recent years (e.g. Finland, Denmark and Estonia). This points to the importance of embedding investments in comprehensive digital education policies that cover a broad range of aspects, including digital equipment, skills development, pedagogical content, appropriate support mechanism etc. The effective use of EU funding has been essential in this regard. For example, Croatia was largely effective in the management of the crisis thanks to the preparation undertaken as part of the e-Schools supported by a European Social Fund (ESF) project and curricular reform project. In Estonia, between 2016–20, about 80% of teachers have attended CPD in digital skills, much of this has been funded under ESF.

The Education and Training 2020 targets

Participation in early childhood education and care is high thanks to sustained efforts by Member States, but uneven access and quality remain a challenge. On average in the EU, ECEC participation (4+) stood at 94.8% in 2018, just 0.2 percentage points (pps) below the target. However, some Member States have not made sufficient progress and stayed well below the 2020 benchmark, notably Greece (75.2%), Croatia (81.0%), Slovakia (82.2%), Bulgaria (82.4%) and Romania (86.3%). Moreover, participation tends to be lower for children from disadvantaged families including families with migrant background and vulnerable minorities such as Roma. There are also significant geographical disparities in terms of access (Spain, Portugal, Croatia and Italy) and uneven quality is an issue in several Member States (Austria, Sweden, Denmark, Malta and Romania). Member States have taken various measures to achieve progress, for instance the compulsory pre-school age is being lowered in Bulgaria (to four years), Belgium and Slovakia (to five years); and targeted financial support to families has been introduced in Germany and Italy. Moreover, an increasing policy focus is also placed on improving quality in several countries, e.g. Lithuania is developing a system of quality assessment, while Austria and Malta are reviewing qualification requirements of staff.

The target on early leavers from education and training stood at 10.2% in 2019, only 0.2 pps from the target. This represents a progress of 4 pps over the past decade. Fewer girls are early leavers (8.4%) than boys (11.9%). These figures hide sizable differences among countries varying between 3% in Croatia and 17.3% in Spain. Some countries have made considerable progress, particularly Portugal (20.3 pps), Spain (13.6 pps) and Greece (10.1).

However, basic skills have not improved during the past decade. Unfortunately, the EU has not met its target to reduce underachievement in basic skills to less than 15% and little progress has been achieved over the past decade. The underachievement rate stood at 21.7% in reading, 22.4% in mathematics, and 21.6% in science in 2018, the year of the latest PISA test. That means that Europe has to face a persisting challenge with more than one fifth of 15-year-olds

¹ Critics of the results of the ICILS survey have claimed that the Italian scores should not be directly compared with other countries because the pupils who sat the test were on average a year younger than in other countries.

demonstrating underperformance in basic skills that bodes ill for their chances in professional and private life. In reading, only four EU Member States met the 15% ET2020 benchmark: Estonia (10.2%), Denmark (14.6%), Poland (14.7%) and Finland (15.0%). On the other end, the underachievement rate exceeded 30% in Romania (46.6%), Bulgaria (44.4%), Cyprus (36.9%), Greece (35.8%) and Malta (30.2%). Several Member States have recently engaged in curricular reforms (Greece, Croatia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Latvia, Romania) to move to competence-based education, reviewed evaluation and assessment methods (Cyprus, Lithuania), and strengthened quality assurance, but the results of these reforms are yet to be seen.

Socio-economic background is still the most important determinant of educational outcomes in the EU, hindering a sizable share of young people in acquiring an adequate level of basic skills and preventing upward social mobility. Its impact is particularly strong in Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Slovakia and France. In the same vein, pupils with a migrant background seriously underperform in comparison with their peers in reading in Germany, Denmark, France and Portugal. Inequalities are partly driven by the concentration of pupils from similar backgrounds in certain schools and disparities in the quality of teaching across schools. To address inequalities, France has increased salaries of teachers working in disadvantaged schools and halved class size in the first two grades. Italy is taking steps to reduce regional gaps and plans to identify troubled schools in five southern regions. Support for language acquisition has been increased in Malta, Slovenia, Greece and Belgium (French Community) to support the integration of newly arrived migrants. Austria is piloting targeted funding for disadvantaged schools. Reforms have been recently launched to enhance inclusive education for learners with special educational needs in Poland, Ireland, Malta, Cyprus and Greece.

The performance of education systems largely depends on the quality of teaching, yet the teaching profession is faced with significant challenges across the EU. The teaching workforce is ageing in most Member States. In some countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Portugal and Italy) more than half of the teachers are above the age of 50. Shortages of qualified teachers are emerging in the majority of Member States, which is largely due to the low attractiveness of the profession. According to the TALIS survey, only 18% of teachers think that the teaching profession is valued by society. Therefore, strengthening the teaching profession has been an important priority of governments in recent years. Several countries have been raising teacher salaries (Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania and Slovakia) and increased budgets (Finland, Denmark) to address teacher shortages. Measures have also been taken to facilitate entry into the profession, for instance by easing requirements for initial teacher education or promoting alternative pathways to the profession (Belgium, Czechia, Estonia and Latvia), in particular from STEM fields. Latvia is introducing fast-track teacher training programmes for university graduates in the STEM fields, while municipalities offer bonuses for teachers who relocate from another region. Lithuania has developed a teacher forecasting tool, which will feed into initial teacher education. There are also efforts to better adapt the continuing professional development programmes to the needs of teachers.

In the period from 2015-2018, spending at the pre-primary and primary level has increased in almost all EU countries. Countries have also seen a slight increase in spending at the secondary and post-secondary (non-tertiary) level, while at the tertiary level spending has decreased slightly. Most EU countries have seen an increase in the number of students from 2013-2018. In the context of budgetary pressure and demographic trends, it is more important than ever to ensure that educational governance provides for efficient spending, while ensuring quality outcomes. Evidence shows that higher spending per pupil does not automatically translate into better educational outcomes. In this context, some Member States (Malta and Luxembourg) are improving external evaluation of schools and gathering evidence on the performance gaps to improve quality and reduce inequalities. To address the challenges linked to the shrinking student population and the low quality of education in some small, mostly rural schools, Latvia has engaged in the consolidation of the school network including through setting minimum requirements for school and class sizes. Croatia is developing plans with the assistance of World Bank to increase instruction time, optimise the school network and introduce modern management practices. In Sweden, authorities are working on national targets and indicators for monitoring school's activities to improve equity and to better understand schools' success factors. Austria is reforming education governance to give schools more autonomy.

Tertiary educational attainment (TEA) has seen its target value of 40% reached. In 2019, the EU-27 had 40.3% people aged 30-34 with a tertiary degree (at least ISCED 5). This means the EU-27 has raised the TEA rate by 9.2 pps in the past decade. Among countries with previously low TEA, that have now reached the target, Slovakia stands out as a success story with an increase from 17.6% up to 40.1% over 10 years. The progress has also been particularly significant in Austria (from 23.4% up to 42.4% and Greece (from 26.6% up to 43.1%). The Member States with the highest tertiary attainment levels among the 30-34 year olds are Cyprus (58.8%), Lithuania (57.8%), Luxembourg (56.2%), and Ireland (55.4). Countries scoring the lowest are: Romania (25.8%), Italy (27.6%), Bulgaria (32.5%) and Hungary (33.4%). Moreover, gender differences persist across the EU. In Estonia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Latvia, Cyprus, Poland and Finland the gap is at least 18 pps. Finally, disadvantaged students' expectations to complete tertiary education are much lower (43.4%) than their advantaged peers' (82.3%).

The target for the employment rate of recent secondary and tertiary graduates was also almost reached in 2019, when the EU-27 was 1 percentage point short of the target of 82%. Even if progress in recent years has been slow, the 2019 score is the highest value since the financial crisis of 2008. There is a visible employment and wage premium for graduates, particularly tertiary graduates. However, many countries are faced with significant mismatches between labour market demand and the profile of tertiary graduates. In particular the share of STEM graduates is lowest in Cyprus, Netherlands, Belgium, Malta and Denmark, leading to labour shortages. Several Member States (Latvia, Greece and Poland) have launched or are planning major reforms of higher education. Recent measures include strengthening quality assurance mechanisms (Slovakia, Netherlands, Greece), introducing performance based funding models (Greece, Latvia), expanding student support systems (Italy and Hungary), increasing participation of students with disabilities (Luxembourg), promoting internationalisation and attracting foreign students (Greece, Slovakia, Poland and France). Countries have also been working towards increasing the quality and labour market relevance of the (vocation education and training) VET systems, e.g. by setting up a national monitoring system for VET graduates (Cyprus), launching graduate tracking (Spain), developing a labour market barometer (Czechia), updating the National classification (repertory) of professional role profiles (Italy), preparing a VET quality strategy (Finland).

Progress in increasing participation in learning among adults has been slow over the past decade, and participation across Member States remains highly uneven. In 2019, the participation rate of adults in learning stood at 10.8% on average in the EU-27, a small increase from 7.8% in 2010 and still far from the 15% target, which is reached by only seven Member States. Participation rates are lowest in Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovakia, with less than 5% of adults participating in learning. This compares to participation rates above 25% in the best-performing countries Sweden, Finland and Denmark. The countries with the most remarkable improvements since 2010 in excess of 5 pps are Estonia, Finland and Sweden, two of which were already among the best performers in 2010. Some countries have taken concrete actions to support upskilling (Czechia, Denmark, Slovakia) or increase access to training, including through financial support (France, Netherlands and Germany). Several Member States focused on improving their adult learning systems (Austria, Finland and Estonia).

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