

# A backward and forward glance at education and training in the EU

## Introduction

This chapter on cooperation in education and training in Europe is a new entry in the Benchmarking series. It is of particular relevance insofar as this year's edition of *Benchmarking Working Europe* deals with the new European strategy Europe 2020 in which education and training have been listed as an important tool for the achievement of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

As presented in other contributions to this publication (cf. especially, Chapter 3), youth unemployment is currently soaring and low-skilled workers are particularly hit hard by the economic downturn. This is thus one of the main problems, alongside social exclusion and poor health conditions, to which education and training can make a decisive contribution. Their pivotal role is further enhanced by the fact that healthy economic conditions are still far from having been achieved. The importance of education is thus such that governments should think twice before reducing its share of their national budgets, for its potentially anti-cyclical economic and social impact cannot be allowed to rest exclusively on the investment efforts made in this sphere by individuals. Quite apart from this aspect, it is obvious that education and training represent an important long-term investment in children and their future, both as citizens and as workers.

The chapter is structured as follows: firstly, an introductory part presents a brief backward glance at the European cooperation in education on which the Europe 2020 education targets are based; the second part focuses on the Europe 2020 strategy and its 'youth on the move' flagship initiative; while the third part deals with some critical missing points; the concluding remarks put forward some general considerations.

## Topics

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## Setting the path for Europe 2020: education and training 2010-2020 strategic frameworks

Figure 6.1 Education and training 2010-2020 strategic frameworks benchmarks

ET2010 for the Lisbon Strategy	ET2020 for Europe2020
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To reduce the percentage of early school leavers to no more than 10%.</li> <li>2. To ensure that at least 85% of young (20-24 year old) people complete upper secondary education.</li> <li>3. To cut the percentage of low-achieving pupils in reading by at least 20%.</li> <li>4. To increase the number of university graduates in mathematics, science and technology (MST) by at least 15%, and to decrease the gender imbalance in these subjects.</li> <li>5. To have 12.5% of adults (25-64) participate in lifelong learning.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%.</li> <li>2. The share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%.</li> <li>3. At least 95% of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education.</li> <li>4. The share of low-achieving 15-year olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%.</li> <li>5. An average of at least 15 % of adults (25-64) should participate in lifelong learning.</li> </ol>

Data source: European Commission (2009b).

### Setting benchmarks for renewed cooperation in education and training

Before discussing the Europe 2020 strategy, it is useful to understand the history and background of the educational targets and to consider what can be learned from past experience in this field.

In the history of European cooperation in education and training, the Lisbon Council in 2000 represents a particular watershed. The frequently quoted Council conclusions (Council of the EU 2000) stated that education and training systems had to adapt both to the requirements of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. The economic focus of cooperation in education and training was not a novelty, as cooperation in this field was mainly intended to boost growth and employment, and a few sporadic attempts to imbue European education and training policies

with social goals have, in the course of time, succumbed to a pervasively economic guiding principle (Ertl 2006). In line with other European initiatives of that time (e.g. the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion and the European Employment Strategy), the open method of coordination was the approach adopted to tackle education and training policy (Education and Training 2010 - ET2010). By this means, closer cooperation was implemented in this field by setting up, for the first time, an umbrella strategy framework with five benchmarks to be reached (Figure 6.1), while also incorporating two already existing intergovernmental processes (namely the Copenhagen Process for vocational education and training and the Bologna Process on higher education). ET2010 was supposed to deliver its first results by 2010. The cooperation was renewed in 2009 – when the stocktaking of ET2010 revealed major shortcomings – and it was renamed ‘Education and Training 2020’ (ET2020).

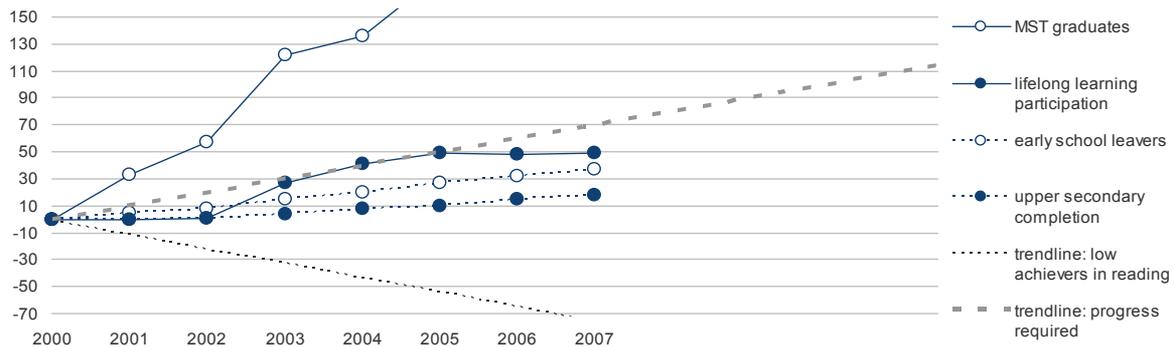
While an initial examination of the new benchmarks set for 2020 in the renewed cooperation programme in 2009 appears to reveal no dramatic change, there are some significant new elements (Figure 6.1).

Firstly, new ET2020 benchmarks have certainly raised the bar, despite the fact that only one of the former ET2010 benchmarks has been achieved. Such an

approach may well engender frustration and decrease commitment in countries which continue to lag far behind. Secondly, the focus on early childhood education is the main novelty in ET2020: early and quality intervention in education gaps has been shown to be an effective measure in the prevention of low educational attainment and, in general, social exclusion of young people (EACEA 2009). Besides, the focus on medium-level educational attainment (at least 85% of the population having completed the upper-secondary level) has been discarded in favour of an objective focussed on high skills. Since Cedefop forecasts (2010a) indicate that this 2010 benchmark on medium-level educational attainment will not be met even by 2020, the question to be asked is whether this benchmark has disappeared because it is no longer relevant or because it would still not have been achieved a decade after the initial deadline.

## Setting the path for Europe 2020: education and training 2010-2020 strategic frameworks

Figure 6.2 Progress on reaching ET2010 benchmarks



Data source: European Commission (2009b).

### Slow progress towards former targets

Figure 6.2 shows the progress made towards the benchmarks set and the dotted line indicates the effort still required to meet them. As can be seen, the progress made by ET2010 is not what was expected: the only objective to have been clearly achieved is the share of university graduates in mathematics, science and technology. Lifelong learning participation did not attain the expected results and its share has been increasing on average only rather slowly, rising from 7.1% in 2000 to 9.3% in 2009. As for the share of school-leavers – i.e. young people aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training – on average no major improvement compared to the level of year 2000 was observed, with the figure having decreased from 17.6% to the current 14.4%. The most striking figure, however, is the negative trend of the share of low-achieving pupils in reading, which has been worsening over time. Some large countries such as Italy, France and Spain have shown a negative trend, while very few countries have registered

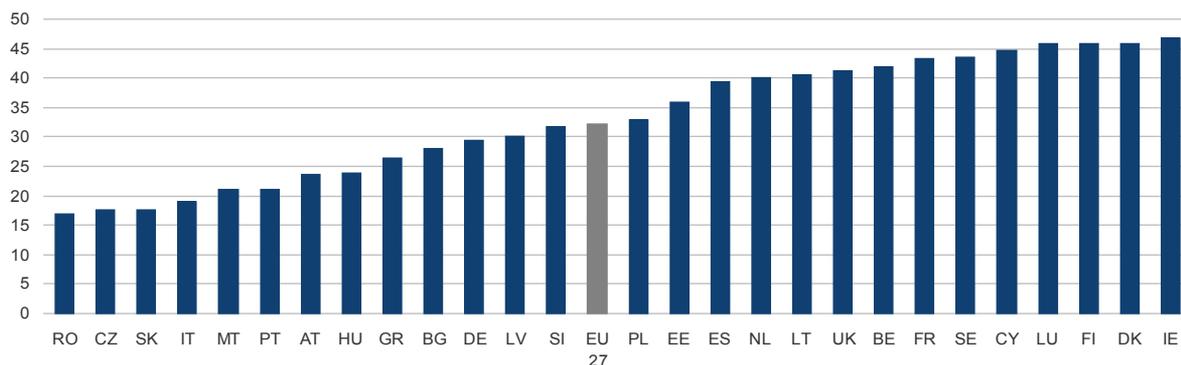
a positive trend, among them Portugal and Germany, and even these are still far from the target. The best performing countries are the Nordic countries, together with Ireland, the Netherlands and Poland. These are the only member states which have succeeded in reaching the 2010 target; all other members remain below the target line (European Commission 2009b). The same applies to the share of young people completing upper secondary education. This figure has been increasing very slowly, having risen by 2009 to 78.6%, still a considerable distance from the 85% target set by the benchmark.

It would seem, to judge from these results, that member state policies have on average failed to tackle the shortcomings in basic competences. At the same time, it was decided to boost just one part of the student population (graduates in mathematics, science and technology represent 24.7% of all university students), and the introduction of the new focus of ET2020 on achieving a higher rate of tertiary education graduates seems to confirm these intentions. The worsening of the share of low-achieving pupils in reading, as well the slow increase in the share of young people having completed upper secondary education, are definitely negative signs and might indeed undermine the overall quality supply of medium-skilled workers – who will continue to be much needed in the future – as well as

representing a significant obstacle to the social and labour market integration of low performers in basic skills.

## Setting the path for Europe 2020: education and training 2010-2020 strategic frameworks

Figure 6.3 Share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment, 2009



Data source: Eurostat (2010b) *European Labour Force Survey (ELFS)*.

### A European recipe for smart and inclusive growth

If the benchmarks of ET2010 were meant to contribute to creating the ‘most competitive knowledge-based society in the world’, the benchmarks of ET2020 are now intended to serve as a yardstick for ‘smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’. Their task, accordingly, is to contribute to and support Europe2020, its guidelines and flagship initiatives. Two out of the five ET2020 benchmarks presented above have been picked up by the Europe 2020 strategy as headline targets: the share of early leavers from education and training to be less than 10%; and the share of 30-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment to be at least 40%.

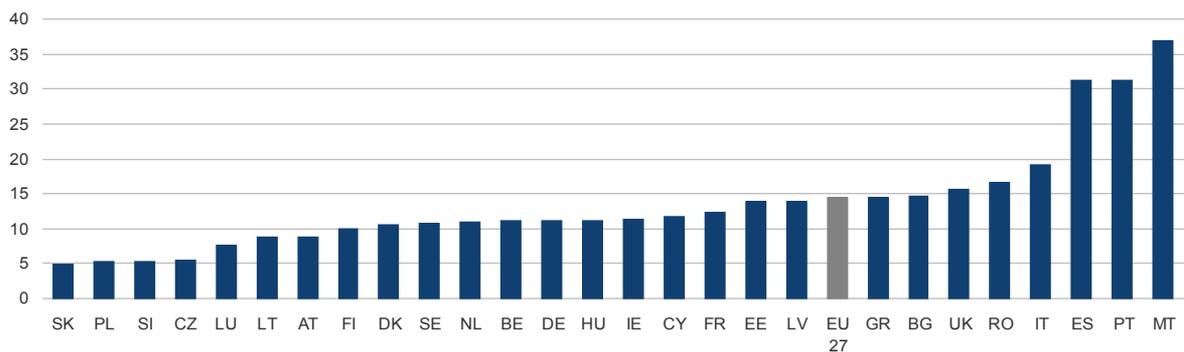
Figure 6.3 shows that while some countries have already attained and in some cases exceeded the target for 30-34 year-olds with a tertiary degree, others are lagging significantly behind, e.g. Romania, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Malta, and Portugal. All these countries are still below or slightly above the 20% mark, i.e. only about half way to reaching the target. Meanwhile, Ireland, France, Cyprus,

Luxembourg, and the Nordic countries record very high rates of students in tertiary education and most of them have also seen this rate improve significantly in the last seven years. Cedefop (2010a) forecasts quite positive progress towards this headline and argues that the crisis may push students to stay longer in education due to the scarcity of job opportunities. Despite the fact that this may represent an opportunity for personal development, it is far from obvious that more education will better meet labour market needs and lead to the expected higher economic returns. In addition, although this strong emphasis on higher education (headline target, emphasis on the guideline about education and on the ‘youth on the move’ Flagship Initiative) seems to be necessary for knowledge-intensive production (Cedefop 2010a) and, more generally, knowledge-driven growth, it may be argued that the link is not a straightforward one. Some calculations have indeed shown that the correlation between the share of graduates aged 30-34 and the total value-added of the knowledge-intensive sectors is weak (Theodoropoulou 2010). While this finding does not suggest that there is no correlation whatsoever between these two indicators, it is apparent that several factors are entailed, and that important considerations include the quality – and not just the quantity – of graduates, together with adequate levels of public investment (ibid.).

Finally the achievement of the target calls for immediate commitment: the cohort of people who will be aged between 30 and 34 in 2020 is represented by young people currently aged between 20 and 24. This means that at least the 40% – with the need to allow for some inevitable drop-out rate – of this cohort should be able to enrol in higher education now.

## Setting the path for Europe 2020: education and training 2010-2020 strategic frameworks

Figure 6.4 Early school leavers: percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training, 2009



Data source: Eurostat (2010b) *European Labour Force Survey (ELFS)*.

### Europe 2020: headline targets on education

Figure 6.4 shows the percentage of the population aged 18-24 having attained at most lower secondary education and not involved in further education or training (i.e. early school-leavers). Early school-leavers tend to be male rather than female, to come from socially disadvantaged families or vulnerable groups (enrolled in schools for special needs, or with physical and mental problems), or to have a minority or migrant background (NESSE 2009b).

Statistics from the Labour Force Survey highlight three main underperformers, i.e. Spain, Portugal and Malta, but also indicate that some other countries still have rates far in excess of the limit set by the European Union.

Even if the EU27 average seems to be reasonably close to the target, it should be noted that the downward trend of the indicator is hardly very significant, since it decreased by no more than 2.6% over seven years (from 17% in 2002 to 14.4% in 2009, figure not shown). As for the situation of individual member states, some of the new ones have already attained the

target, while old member states, like Italy and the United Kingdom, will find it more difficult to tackle the problem of early school-leavers. This problem seems to be not exclusively attributable to particular institutional settings or features of the educational systems or to the number of years of compulsory schooling: Belgium and Germany, for example, have different educational systems and yet have exactly the same percentage of early school-leavers. Nonetheless, the lack of short, but high-quality, vocational paths which can ensure an access either to the labour market or to further education and vocational training at a higher level is likely to play a role in the rate of early school-leavers. The attractiveness and accessibility of shorter vocational paths are additional important features of educational systems which may limit drop-outs, together with quality and the ability to match labour market opportunities.

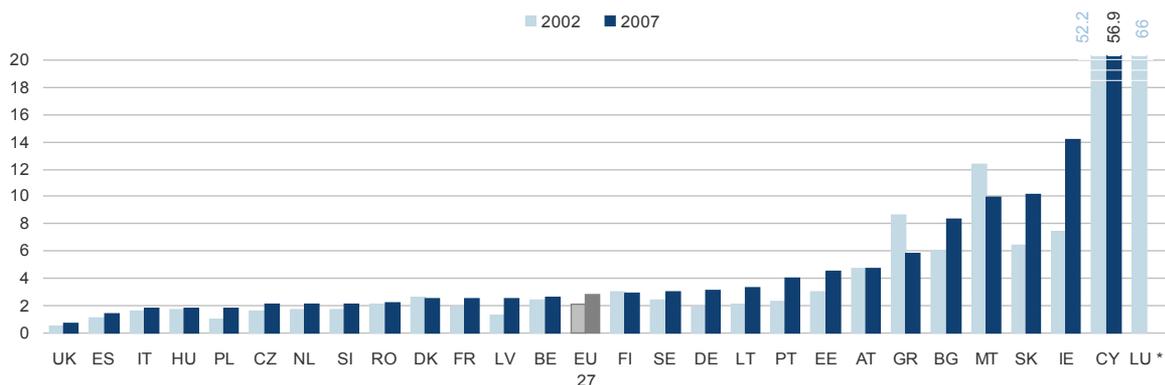
Not only is the phenomenon of early school-leaving problematic because of the 'waste' of potentially valuable human capital which ought to contribute to the achievement of full employment; it constitutes a present and future priority also because the young people who drop out of school are victims of social situations which cause them to run higher risks of falling, as adults, into the trap of poverty and social exclusion (see Chapter 3). This link seems to be confirmed by Marlier *et al.* (2011) who argue that,

if the three outliers (Malta, Portugal and Spain) are disregarded, there is a tendency for countries with higher at-risk-of-poverty rates to have also higher levels of early school-leaving (the correlation is  $R\ 0.45$ ). Recently, experts have also argued (NESSE 2009b) that the tendency to describe early school-leavers as youth 'at risk' rather than 'marginalised youth' is a means of shifting attention to the individual's responsibility, thereby failing to grasp the element of community and institutional responsibility for this social phenomenon.

Policymakers need to be aware that early school-leaving is a cumulative process entailing a wide range of factors. Identification of the interactions between these factors is paramount to the implementation of sound and effective solutions which do not stigmatise individuals but seek to combine family and individual measures (e.g. mentoring and financial aid) with school and community interventions (e.g. curricula reforms, second-chance schools, and promotion of early childhood participation) (NESSE 2009b).

## The flagship initiative: youth on the move

Figure 6.5 Student mobility (enrolled in tertiary education) within EU and EEA countries



Data source: Eurostat (2010b).  
(\*) data from 2006

### Youth ready to move?

The implementation of Europe2020 is supported by 10 'integrated guidelines' which aim to ensure a coherent framework for national strategies. Guideline 9 'Improving the performance of education and training systems at all levels and increasing participation in tertiary education' (Council of the EU 2010c: 46) deals with education and training. Together with the integrated guidelines, the flagship initiatives function as a broad thematic approach for member states as they address a particular topic. The 'youth on the move' initiative on education is linked with, principally, three other flagship initiatives ('New Skills for Jobs', 'Innovation Union', 'European Platform against Poverty') already presented in some of the previous contributions in this volume.

The 'youth on the move' initiative has four main lines of action and for each of them it suggests some intermediate objectives which member states are expected to pick up in their national strategy plans and national targets to be published in the spring of 2011.

Promoting mobility of young people at any stage of the educational and

professional career is one of the four important focuses of the initiative. Mobility plays an important role during both education and working life. On the one hand, it represents an important opportunity for personal and professional growth; on the other hand, it is an aspect of increased labour market mobility. Another potential effect of increased mobility on European educational systems is a rise of competitiveness among educational establishments. If free choice of school and substantial freedom of movement – in particular for universities – were actually to be implemented, the educational sector would come increasingly close to the definition of 'a quasi market', with competition being based on reputation, but also with the likelihood of stronger inequalities of access and outcome. Even if this scenario might seem not yet feasible at European level because of existing administrative and language barriers, competitiveness among educational establishments in the future is a prospect not to be underestimated. The increasing relevance of international rankings, the European project of creating a European 'multi-dimensional global university ranking system' (European Commission 2010s), as well as the increasing international trade in education services, represent another step towards a more competitive international educational environment.

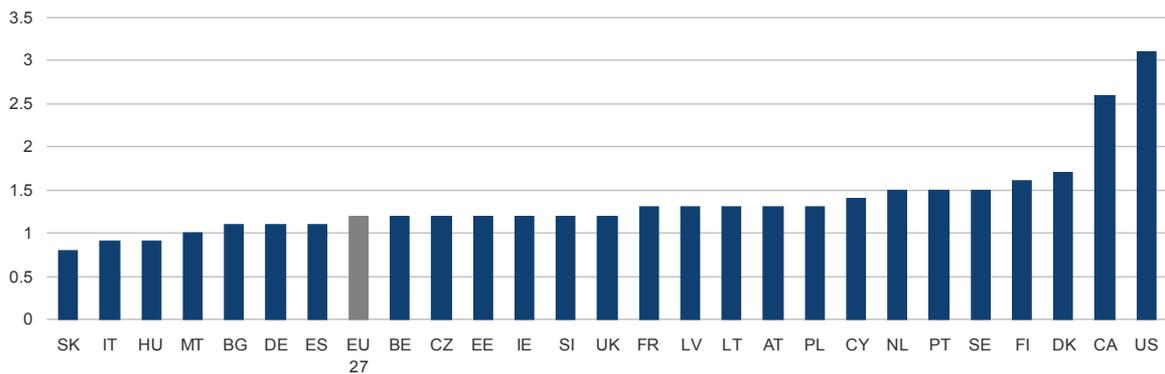
Due to the economic origin of cooperation in education and training and the

importance of young people and young workers, mobility programmes benefit from very considerable resources: 60% of the budget of the EU for education (€6,970 million, or 0.7 % of the total EU budget between 2007-2013) is spent on mobility actions for the Lifelong Learning Programme as a whole (and nearly 90% of this sum for higher education through Erasmus).

Figure 6.5 focuses on the rates of students in higher education studying abroad, showing that, despite considerable investment by the EU, these have not dramatically increased since 2002. Some European countries show higher student mobility because of their geographical position or specific features of their higher education system (Cyprus, or Luxembourg – which did not have a university until 2003). However, not all countries which entered the European Union in 2004 (NMS) seem to have already benefited from European mobility programmes for students. Neither the Baltic countries, for example, nor Romania and Slovenia have experienced any significant increase in this respect. While other Eastern countries, like Slovakia or Bulgaria, have recorded a significantly high post-2004 score, this is in all probability partially attributable to a pre-existing flow of students between old and new member states before enlargement.

## The flagship initiative: youth on the move

Figure 6.6 Annual expenditure on all educational institutions as percentage of GDP, at tertiary level of education, 2007



Data source: Eurostat (2010b).

### Make young people run faster to catch a job...

Despite an increasing absolute number of young people in higher education (i.e. the most 'mobile' group of students) in the Erasmus programme and national actions, the Commission aim of extending the opportunity for learning mobility to all students at all levels does not seem to represent a target likely to be achieved at any time in the near future.

Some of the obstacles raised during the public consultation on student mobility in view of the 'Green Book on Mobility' (European Commission 2009c) include not only the lack of guidance, portability and recognition of educational experience and records obtained abroad, but also the financial constraints for disadvantaged groups of learners.

Increasing the proportion of higher education graduates is the second line of action. This is a crucial aspect insofar as it can promote innovation and links with the world of research. The European Commission reiterates that investment in higher education should attain the level of 2% of GDP from private and public funding. This level of investment is

considered – in conjunction with sound governance and modernisation and internationalisation of higher education systems – a prerequisite for ensuring quality. The Commission's call arrives, however, at a difficult moment for many higher education systems in Europe. Last December, at the height of the recent crisis and despite intense and prolonged student protests, Italy and the UK approved major cuts in higher education spending and increases in student tuition fees. It is feared that these measures will seriously undermine both access to and the quality of education. In the United Kingdom universities will be allowed to raise their fees to £9000 from 2012 and, while the plans did contain some proposals to avoid discrimination against the poor in terms of access to higher education, doubts have been cast upon the viability of these measures. The Italian reform involves many aspects of university organisation, ranging from academic personnel to accounting methods and quality assessment, but without ensuring – indeed gradually cutting – public funding over the coming years.

Figure 6.6 shows the share of public and private funding as a percentage of GDP in tertiary education in the European countries and in the US and Canada.

Total expenditure of public and private resources invested in all types of tertiary education in almost all European countries present in the graph does not

meet the required commitment of 2% of GDP set by the Commission back in 2005. In this respect, too many countries still fall short of the level of 1.5%, and only the Nordic countries have attained this threshold. Other OECD countries, particularly the United States – often considered the benchmark – and Canada, show stronger investments in tertiary education of 3.1 and 2.6% respectively (OECD 2010a).

## **The flagship initiative: youth on the move**

### **...or better equip them for the search?**

A point that it is important to stress, however, is that the European Commission, when referring to ‘private investments’, considers private sources to include all forms of non-public financing, covering, for example, households and enterprise foundations, etc. Thus, in order to reach the 2% GDP target, governments may seek to call for an increase in financial support from households. Moreover, the data shown in Figure 6.5 refers to 2007 and thus does not include some important cuts – or subsequently discarded previous commitments to increase funding – resulting from the 2008 economic downturn. Austerity packages have already had a significant impact in Latvia, Greece, the United Kingdom, Italy, Ireland and Hungary (EUA 2011).

Two arguments have often been used to justify increasing private investments, particularly by households, in higher education. It is claimed, on the one hand, that fees may work as an incentive to reduce the dropout rate in higher education (OECD 2010a) and, on the other, that higher education has a higher rate of return that can be later partially repaid by students (OECD 2010a). However, these relationships have proven not to be as straightforward as might seem: dropout rates in Denmark, for example, are very low, even though university studies are free, while in many European countries a university degree is still not a passport to financial and professional stability (OECD 2010a).

The other priority is employment of the young people who have been so particularly hard hit by the crisis. The focus on youth unemployment is clearly the main issue and all other lines of action converge on this topic: mobility, higher education, starting a new career, developing creativity and innovation, etc. Some initiatives, e.g. the ‘European skills Passport’ or ‘youth on the move

card’, aimed at fostering mobility of apprentices and the recognition of skills acquired, seem to be just a different way of presenting already existing instruments (e.g. European credit accumulation systems for higher education and training, Europass) that have not delivered the expected results. In addition, the need to couple social benefits (often denied to young jobseekers without previous working experience) with active labour market policies, and to reduce the inappropriate use of temporary contracts, is also stressed (see Chapter 2). Disappointingly, the emphasis is placed solely on the economic implications, such as loss of growth, competitiveness and productivity, without any reference to the social handicaps suffered by young people subject to precariousness, in terms of the difficulty in making plans for their immediate or more distant future.

The fourth priority which is directly linked to employment and employability of young, but also older, workers is ‘lifelong learning’. Lifelong learning is a comprehensive term which includes recognition of both formal and non-formal education. Formal recognition of alternative forms of learning can open up new and better employment opportunities for youth who have skills acquired via alternative learning patterns. The initiative sets the goal of having at least 5 million young people in Europe enrolled in apprenticeships by 2012; at present the figure is estimated to be around 4.2 million (for more details see Chapter 2).

The flagship initiative on education clearly follows the path set by Europe 2020 and its focus limited to young people who are entering the labour market, or who are not succeeding in doing so. It accordingly fails to give more emphasis to, among other things, early childhood education and reading deficiencies – which represent, simultaneously, a strong preventive measure and basic skills – to which attention was drawn in the ET2020. Similar criticism can be levelled at the guideline which does not explicitly recognise any social value in education. Though a policy document issued by the Council (Council 2010a) did point out that education can definitely contribute to ‘overall inclusive growth’,

the role of education and training as a feature of social inclusion seems here to be disconnected from a ‘smart’ and even ‘inclusive’ growth perspective.

## **The flagship initiative: youth on the move**

### **Social partners and teachers: important players in education and training**

The ‘youth on the move’ initiative recognises the role of social partners, mentioning them as a strategic actor in supporting transitions from school to work and from unemployment to employment and in guaranteeing young people rights as well as quality of work in close relationship with the private and public sector. This call for social partner commitment was also reiterated and made explicit in the Bruges Communiqué (Council of the EU 2010d), which aims at giving new impetus to vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. The Communiqué belongs within the international initiative known as the Copenhagen process for VET, first devised in 2002, which is also part of the overall strategy ET2020 (see first part of this chapter). This communiqué, announced in the ‘Youth in the Move’ initiative, set eleven objectives for which active involvement of all relevant stakeholders has to be a priority.

As far as social partners are concerned, a study by Cedefop (2010b) confirms that social dialogue in vocational education and training needs to be strengthened and that much remains to be done since there is no consensus of views on lifelong learning or VET, while employers’ and trade unions’ ideas on training issues differ in numerous respects. Furthermore, Winterton (2007) argues that, even though unions at national level are actively seeking new roles in promoting lifelong learning through collective agreements (especially on practical issues such as time accounts, as mediators between individuals and learning opportunities, or in relation to quality assurance), these initiatives are still not well coordinated at the European level. Although the ‘Framework of Actions for the Development of

Competencies and Qualifications’ was agreed in 2002, further elaboration of the strategy, more detailed monitoring, and analysis of actions at the national level, are still needed (Winterton 2007).

Another challenge for trade unions at the European level is the weakness of sectoral dialogue in the central and eastern European member states. These countries need specific training for trade union members as well as more involvement in the pan-European trade union activities. Problems in the implementation of effective social dialogue practices in the member states that joined the EU in 2004 are often linked to a weak interest in developing human capital compared to a stronger interest in adopting a foreign-investment-attracting economy (Woolfson 2008). In the case of Latvia, for instance, the interest and ownership of social partners in Lifelong learning is undermined by the non-institutionalisation of social dialogue in this sensitive area of social policies (Woolfson 2008). Moreover, Latvian national coordination appears to be still weak and is not supported by regional and local activities which are patchy and limited by bureaucratic obstacles. Some best practices introduced in large companies remain isolated examples of commitment to the development of workers’ skills. Other new Eastern countries are very likely to experience similar kinds of problem, i.e. insufficient room for trade unions to make European policy goals into ground-level sustainable initiatives.

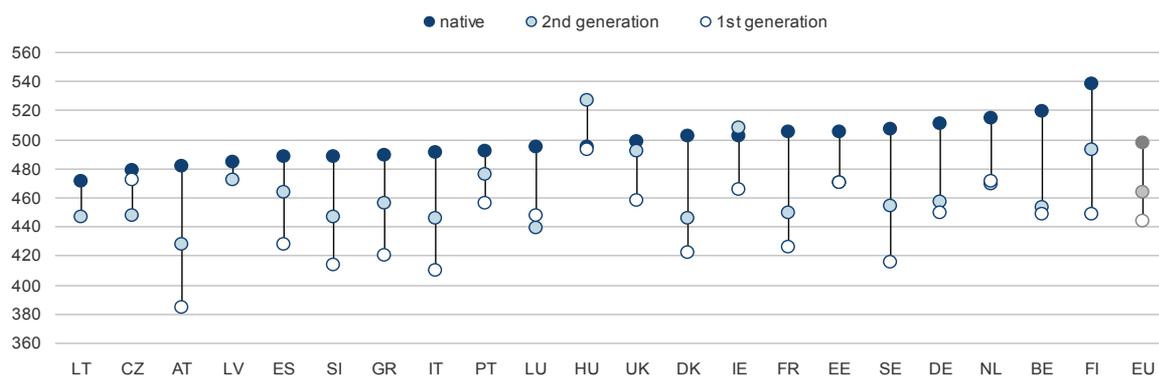
The social partners’ role is not limited to vocational training and negotiation with firms and employers. Teachers’ trade unions also play a crucial role in the effective implementation of national education reforms and European actions. As such, the frequent lack of involvement of teachers’ unions in European and national actions is likely to engender a lack of reform ownership and commitment by practitioners (ETUCE 2009).

Moreover, greater commitment and engagement of teachers and trainers in education and training activities could also be achieved through strengthening teacher training, improving learning environments, while also ensuring that wages are adequate and guaranteeing job security (e.g. promotion of continuing training

for teachers to improve and update their skills, improve education infrastructure and learning facilities). Such measures may be expected to lead also to greater personal satisfaction and growth on the part of teachers and trainers and to have a positive impact on improving the quality of the education provided.

## Anything missing?

Figure 6.7 Percentage of students and reading performance, by immigrant status



Data source: OECD (2010d).  
(\*) data from 2006

## No child left behind?

As will be reiterated in the concluding remarks, the educational targets chosen for the Europe2020 strategy are prompted by the need to reduce unemployment in the short and medium term. What has not been made sufficiently clear is how it might be possible to tackle educational inequalities in terms of results and access. Inequalities in education are not mirrored in outcomes alone, but also in aspects of treatment (teachers' behaviour towards pupils, lack of communication between parents and schools, impact of social backgrounds and students' need for special education). While these inequalities are more difficult to grasp and infer from statistics, inequalities of outcome are more easily described by data. For instance, evidence of the influence of social and cultural background on students' educational results is provided both by data from the Bologna process and from the PISA 2009 (OECD 2010d). Data shows that the educational level of parents has a clear influence on the tertiary education enrolment of their children (Eurostat 2010b).

Differences are evident: for the EU25 there is a difference of 47% between

the percentage of tertiary graduates with parents with a lower educational level and those with parents with the highest educational attainment. Gaps between the three columns showing the percentage of graduates by parents' education are striking in all countries and, even in the case of the UK, which has the highest percentage of children of parents with a low educational attainment completing tertiary education, this percentage nonetheless remains below 30%. This amounts to a clear statement that, alongside a lack of options on offer, family background plays an important role in students' educational choices. In other words, family background does not count in terms of financial support alone, but also in relation to social, cultural and geographical aspects, such as access to cultural resources or the quality of educational provision in the area where a family lives. In this way, education simultaneously becomes one element of the equation in the debate on social exclusion, in which close attention must be paid to students originating from socially excluded families living in poverty (for statistics on poverty see Chapter 3).

The latest 2009 Pisa results (OECD 2010d) show that in Luxembourg 40% of 15 year-old students have an immigrant background; in other European countries this share is lower, but still significant: in Germany and Austria immigrants represent between 15% and 20% of the student population; in Belgium, France,

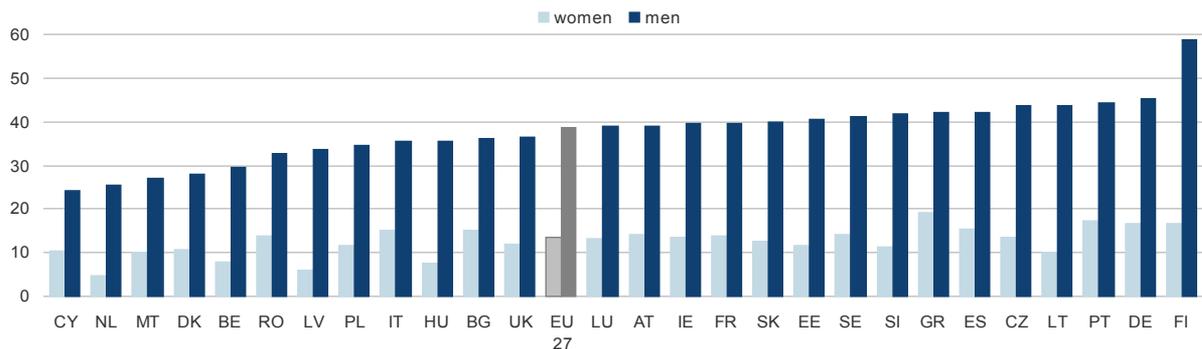
the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom between 10% and 15%. Serious immigration and education policies need to be coordinated, as education and training are key to integrating immigrants into labour markets and society.

The Pisa report explains that in Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Italy, Belgium, Spain, France, Greece and Slovenia, first-generation immigrant students are at least twice as likely to perform among the bottom quarter of students when compared to native students (OECD 2010d). In general, migrant students experience disadvantaged socio-economic conditions and their weaker performance is partially attributable to this handicap.

As the graph (Figure 6.7) shows, differences in performance in reading between first-generation migrant students (foreign-born students with both parents foreign-born) and their native counterparts are, in Austria, as high as 97 points (Pisa scale: e.g. 73 is a 'large difference', 39 points are equivalent to a school-year (OECD 2010d) and this difference is still very high in Sweden (91), Italy (81), France (79), Finland (89).

## Anything missing?

Figure 6.8 Students enrolled at tertiary level in science, mathematics and computing, engineering, manufacturing and construction (% of all female and male students)



Data source: Eurostat (2010b).  
(\* data from 2006)

## The impact of immigrant background and gender on educational outcomes

Second-generation students with an immigrant background (born in the country and with both parents foreign-born) generally outperform the first generation (two exceptions being Luxembourg and the Netherlands). Significant improvements (up to 30-40 points) between first and second generation are recorded in Spain, Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Greece, Finland and Austria. These large gaps may highlight the different backgrounds across immigrant cohorts, but may also be a positive sign of educational mobility across generations. No significant improvement is shown in Belgium, however, where the second generation of migrants still lags 66 points behind native students.

The gap between native students and those with an immigrant background suggests that schools and societies face major challenges in realising the human capital

potential of immigrants (especially of the first generation) who gained their first educational experience in a foreign country.

The problem of access to education and inequality of outcomes of migrant students was already recognised by the European Commission in 2008 (European Commission 2008c) when it stated that there is clear and consistent evidence that many children of migrants have lower levels of educational attainment than their peers.

Moreover, the pattern of underperformance in educational attainment is echoed in the comparative patterns of enrolment of migrant pupils. Although there has been some improvement over the years, in most countries it is less common for migrant pupils to enrol in pre-primary education and they tend to do so later than their peers. Migrant pupils tend to be overrepresented in vocational education, which usually limits their access to higher education and is considered qualitatively inferior to general education. Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain, among other countries, have recently experienced a sharp growth in migration inflows. In Spain, for example, the pace of immigration increased more than tenfold between 1998 and 2004. Moreover, demographic projections point out that between 2004 and 2050 net migration inflow will amount to 40 million people (European Commission 2008d). Since international migration is expected to offset – albeit

only partially – the process of population ageing in Europe, migrants' education becomes a crucial factor to be addressed in the future insofar as the socio-economic status of immigrants and minority groups is a significant aspect of the degree of social polarisation within countries.

The gender dimension, i.e. the difference in educational attainments between male and female students, has not received much attention either in 'youth on the move' or in the integrated guideline (European Commission 2010s, Council of the EU 2010c). While it was present in ET2010 (see Figure 6.1), the gender dimension of the graduate rate in mathematics, science and technology (MST) was dropped in the new ET2020 benchmark and not mentioned in 'youth on the move'. Even if higher education as a whole has seen an increased participation of young women who, in many cases, are more numerous than males, the share of female students in MST as a percentage of all female students in higher education is still very low compared to that of males, the EU percentage of male graduates in MST being 38.5 compared to 13.5 for women (Figure 6.8). Differences are even higher in Finland, Latvia, and Hungary where the share of males is five times higher than the share of females. This significant gap should also be viewed in relation to sectors that are still male-dominated, as well as to the lower participation and wage level of women in the labour market, despite their higher formal qualifications.

## Conclusions

### Matching economic issues and social concerns in education and training

Education and training seem finally to have been accorded a prominent position in the overall European strategy for the next ten years, with higher education and skill enhancement apparently regarded by the authors of the strategy as the most urgent issues. In this context, five main points are here proposed in order to stimulate further reflection on the role of education and training.

Firstly, more attention should be paid to the risk of a decreasing interest, on the part of individuals, in investing in their education. Cedefop forecasts indicate an upward trend in the supply of highly skilled workers in the workforce. Many of these people are already in training and their numbers are likely to increase still further because of the recession and difficulties in finding jobs. More highly qualified new labour market entrants will thus be recruited to perform lower-skilled jobs that, insofar as they do not accord with their level of training and knowledge, are likely to fall short of their expectations. The longer this situation of skill mismatch lasts, the more these workers will come to feel frustrated and lose interest in investing in education and training (Cedefop 2010a).

Secondly, despite the positive social impact of pro-active policies aimed at boosting education, these measures do not guarantee any reduction in earnings volatility (Korpi 2010). Earnings fluctuations may, in the long run, have an adverse impact on earnings and cause increasing inequalities within and between social groups. Even if people with tertiary education diplomas are less at risk of unemployment and more likely

to obtain higher earnings in the long run, they are not immune to drops in earnings as a result of labour market instability (e.g. temporary contracts and skills mismatch). Measures to alleviate this risk should thus be sought and implemented, though there may indeed be no straight-forward solution.

Thirdly, 'smart growth' is not exclusively dependent on a higher share of tertiary graduates, especially since projections confirm that labour markets will continue to require large numbers of workers with medium-level skills (especially in distribution, transportation, hotel and catering) (Cedefop 2010a) at a time when early school-leavers still account for 14.4% of the working population and adults who have completed secondary education do not yet amount to 85%. In this regard, Nicaise (2010) argues that, while strong investment in knowledge is very likely to bring economic growth, the sequence 'increased economic growth → increased employment rate → more affluent populations → less poverty and more social cohesion' is not so clear-cut. On the contrary, in the last decades individual inequalities in earned income have risen significantly, indicating that more attention should be paid to balanced policy mixes. The latter should aim to reduce pressure on low-skilled wages by means of an increasingly knowledge-intensive production, while simultaneously promoting knowledge-extensive policies. Such policies might gradually reduce the supply of low-skilled workers through the dissemination of knowledge (e.g. access and new media). Together with a decreasing demand for low-skilled jobs, this should maintain employment and the pay level of low-skilled workers at a decent level (Nicaise 2010), reducing the risk of strong inequalities in the future.

Fourthly, discrimination is most likely when inequalities stem from specific treatment or attitudes towards certain groups of students (e.g. Roma), unequal treatment (e.g. different curricula for different groups of students), or social and ethnic segregation between schools. Accordingly, the setting of aggregated objectives at the European level in order to measure the performance

of education systems raises questions about the ability of indicators to grasp more subtle inequalities, and about their capacity to trigger sufficient attention for such inequalities to be tackled efficiently.

Fifthly, and as an overall conclusion, it is important and surely highly desirable to avoid a stance in which education and training are considered solely from the standpoint of the need to meet economic and employment targets, and in which policies designed to achieve the social integration of young people look no further than their integration into the labour market.