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QUALITY OF BASIC, TERTIARY EDUCATION AND ADULT LEARNING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE KEY TRENDS

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ABSTRACT

The quality of education and training is considered in the European Union (EU) as a subject of the highest political priority. In all member states high levels of professional skills, social competencies and knowledge are considered to be the very basic conditions for active citizenship, social cohesion and employment. High quality of education and lifelong learning are the most important means of shaping one's future on a professional and personal level — they are essential in the light of labour market strategies, and the free movement of workers within the European Union. The EU has already achieved one of its six 2019/2020 benchmarks for education and training and is close to meeting three others. The target of raising the share of the population aged 30 to 34 that has completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40 % was met in 2019. In addition, the EU is well on track to meeting its 2019/2020 benchmarks for early leavers from education and training and for early childhood education and care. The share of employed recent graduates has also increased over the past five years. However, the situation is less favourable as regards the remaining two others benchmarks: education outcomes — as measured by pupil's performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study for reading, maths and science — are moving away from the respective EU target. Moreover,

due to the stagnation in the proportion of adults participating in the learning process, the benchmark of raising this share to 15 % in the years to come will likely be missed.

Key words: *education; competences; participation; sustainable development; training*

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INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, have given a new impetus to global efforts to achieve sustainable development. The EU has fully committed itself to delivering on the 2030 Agenda, as outlined in the reflection paper: *Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030* (European Commission, 2019a).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) seeks to ensure access to equitable and quality education through all stages of life. In addition to formal qualifications, SDG 4 aims to increase the number of youths and adults having relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, SDG 4 envisions the elimination of gender and income inequalities in access to full education. The achievement of universal literacy and numeracy, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development are also considered crucial for empowering people to live independent, healthy, and sustainable lives. To accelerate progress with all these objectives, SDG 4 calls for building and upgrading educational facilities, expanding the number of higher education scholarships available to developing countries and increasing the supply of the most qualified teachers.

Monitoring SDG 4 in an European Union context focuses on basic education, tertiary education and adult learning. The collected data suggests that the EU has made significant progress in increasing participation in basic and tertiary education. However, over the past few years, progress in adult learning has been much slower, and the percentage of underachievers in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests has further deteriorated.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Taking into account methodological point of view let us say that sustainable development — and a quality education, training and learning as its core elements — are firmly anchored in the European Treaties and are at the heart of European policy for a long time. The EU is fully committed to playing an active role to maximise progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. That's why this publication is based on Eurostat's regular reports

monitoring progress towards the SDGs in a quality of education and learning contexts. The analysis in this publication builds on the EU SDG indicator set, developed in cooperation with a large number of stakeholders and summarized in Eurostat's regular reports. The indicator set — including the quality of education and learning processes understood as SDG 4 — comprises around 20 different indicators focused on aspects that are especially relevant from an EU perspective. The monitoring regular reports provide a statistical presentation of key trends relating to the quality of basic, tertiary education and adult learning in the European Union over the past five years (short — term) and sometimes, when sufficient data are available, even over the past fifteen years (long — term). The indicator trends are described on the basis of a set of specific quantitative rules.

BASIC EDUCATION

Basic education covers the earliest stages in a child's educational pathway, ranging from early childhood education to primary and secondary education. An inclusive and quality education for all that eliminates school segregation is an essential element of sustainable development. Because leaving school early has a big impact on a personal life SDG 4 calls not only for all girls and boys to have full access to primary and secondary education, but also to be able to complete their schooling. People with low levels of education may face greater difficulties in the labour market and are more likely to live in poverty and social exclusion (European Commission, 2018, p. 18).

Furthermore, SDG 4 mainly focuses on granting greater and more equitable access to education and training and ensuring its high quality. An important objective of this goal is that education systems deliver high levels of numeracy and literacy and enable other basic skills to be successfully acquired. The indicators selected for monitoring these topics show that while participation rates in basic education have improved across the EU over the past few years but learning outcomes have developed less favourably.

The European Pillar of Social Rights is about delivering new and more effective rights for citizens in the field of education, particularly via its principles on education, training and life-long learning and on childcare and support to children.

Education and training 2020 (European Commission, 2019, p. 12) is the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. It is a forum for exchanging best practices, reciprocal learning, gathering and disseminating information and evidence of what works, as well as advice and support for policy reforms. The framework takes into consideration the whole spectrum of education and training systems from a lifelong perspective, covering all levels and contexts (including non-formal and informal learning). Education and training 2020 defines several benchmarks that guide the analysis of this chapter.

Early childhood education and care is usually the first step in a child's educational pathway. Quality early childhood education and care provides an essential foundation for future educational achievements and effective adult learning. It also lays the foundations for later success in life in terms well-being, employability and social integration, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Investment in pre-primary education also has a beneficial medium to long-term impact, as it is more likely to help children from low socio-economic backgrounds than investment at later educational stages (European Commission, 2014, p. 19).

As a consequence, the education and training 2020 framework has set a benchmark at EU level (there are no national targets) to ensure that 95 % of children aged between four and the starting age of compulsory education participate in early childhood education and care programs. In the EU, the degree of participation in early childhood education has steadily increased since 2003, and the education and training 2020 benchmark of 95 % had already been reached in 2017, with a rate of 95.4 %, although cross-country differences still persist.

Early leaving from education and training has reduced significantly since 2002, but progress has stagnated over the past few years.

In modern society, upper secondary education is considered the necessary minimum for full participation in society, and a condition for lifelong learning and for finding a job with sufficient income (European Commission, 2017, p. 56). The education and training 2020 framework has consequently set a benchmark for the EU to reduce the share of early leavers from education and training programs — referring to persons aged 18 to 24 who have completed at most lower secondary education and who are not involved in any further education or training projects — to below 10 % by 2020. Since 2002, the early leavers from education and training rate has fallen almost continuously in the EU, albeit more slowly in recent years. The stagnation from 2017 to 2018, however, has put the European Union slightly off its path to meeting the education and training 2020 benchmark.

Across the EU, The European Social Fund is financing initiatives to improve education and training and ensure young people complete their education and gain the skills to make them more competitive in the job market. Reducing early school leaving is a major priority here, along with improving vocational training and tertiary education opportunities.

Despite improved participation rates, education outcomes in reading, maths and science have deteriorated.

Besides educational attainment in general, achieving a certain level of proficiency in basic skills is a key objective of all educational systems. Basic skills, such as reading a simple text or performing simple calculations, provide the foundations for learning, gaining specialized skills and personal development. People need these skills to complete basic tasks and to participate fully in and contribute to society. The consequences of underachievement,

if it is not tackled successfully, will be costly in the long run, both for individuals and for society as a whole (European Commission, 2016, p. 3). Various factors contribute to underachievement, such as an unfavorable school climate, violence in schools, insufficient learning support or poor teacher-pupil relationship.

The indicator on underachievement in reading, maths and science provides key insights into the performance of school systems and pupil's basic skill attainment. The education and training 2020 framework acknowledges the increasing importance of these individual skills and has set a target to reduce the share of 15-year olds achieving low levels of reading, maths and science to less than 15 %. In 2015, for each of these skills, about every fifth 15-year old pupil showed insufficient abilities. Test results were best for reading, with a 19.7 % share of low achievers, followed by science with 20.6 % and maths with 22.2 %. Compared with 2012, this is a step backward, indicating that the EU is facing significant challenges in all three domains when it comes to reaching the 2020/2021 benchmark.

Generally speaking, young women stay longer in education and training and show better reading skills — the aggregated figures presented in above mention materials mask considerable gender differences in some of these areas. While there are no differences between boys and girls in early childhood education and care, there is significant disparity when it comes to early leavers from education and training. With a rate of 12.2 % in 2018, more young men had left education and training early than young women, whose rate was 8.9 %. Although this gap narrowed between 2004 and 2016, it widened again in the last three years and remained substantial, at 3.3 percentage points in 2018. Gender differences can also be observed for reading skills, with girls clearly outperforming boys. While 15.9 % of 15-year-old girls scored low in this domain in 2015, the share of low-achieving boys was 23.5 %. In contrast, gender gaps in maths and science remained negligible.

The New Skills Agenda for Europe (European Commission, 2020) adopted by the European Commission on 10 June 2016, launched ten actions to make the right training, skills and support available to people in the EU. The goals and actions on the Agenda are set out in the Commission Communication: A New Skills Agenda for Europe (European Commission, 2016).

All EU countries have committed to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee (The European Commission, 2020) in a Council Recommendation of April 2013 (European Commission, 2013). The Youth Guarantee aims to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship and traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.

Young people with disabilities or from a migrant background show significantly lower educational attainment. People with disabilities — those who are limited in work activity because of a long-standing health problem or a basic activity difficulty (such as sight, hearing, walking or communicating difficulties) — appear extremely disadvantaged as far as early leavers

from education and training is concerned. In 2016, 23.6 % of people with disabilities had left education and training early, compared with 11.0 % of young people without disabilities (Grammenos, 2018). Also, young people from a migrant background — those either born outside the country or with foreign-born parents — face difficulties in their schooling. As far as early leavers from education and training is concerned, there is a clear evidence that young people from a migrant background tend to find it more difficult to complete their education than the native population.

In 2018, the share of early school leavers was twice as high for people born outside the EU than for people studying in their country of birth. Most at risk are foreign-born men, with early leavers from education and training rate of 22.8 % (European Commission, 2019, p. 99). Young people from a migrant background also have a higher risk of underperforming at school. In almost all EU Member States, the difference in the share of low achievers between first-generation immigrant students and their non-immigrant counterparts was substantial in 2015, in some countries amounting to as much as 25 to 33 percentage points (European Commission, 2016, p.20).

Early leavers and low-educated young people face particularly severe problems in the labour market. In general — young people (aged 15-29 years) are among the most vulnerable groups, facing low employment rates and being generally less well attached to the labour market (for example, due to temporary contracts). Yet, jobs for young people are not only important for social, economic and political inclusion. A person's lifelong earnings are influenced by his or her first job, and people with poor job prospects risk falling into "low-pay traps". Young people who are neither in employment nor in education and training might lack skills and suffer from erosion of competences.

Therefore, they are at an even higher risk of labour market and social exclusion and are more likely to depend on social benefits. In the EU, the neither in employment nor in education and training rate for 15 to 29-year-olds improved between 2002 and 2008, falling from 15.6 % to 13.1 %. It went back up due to the economic crisis, to 15.9 % in 2012 and 2013, but has been falling again since 2014, reaching 12.9 % in 2018.

Early leavers and low-educated young people face particularly severe problems in the labour market. About 52.8 % of 18 to 24-year-olds with at most lower secondary education and who were not in any education or training were either unemployed or inactive in 2018. Moreover, the situation for early leavers has worsened over time. Between 2008 and 2018, the share of 18 to 24-year-olds early leavers who were not employed but wanted to work grew rapidly from 30.6 % to 33.0 % (European Commission, 2019, p. 100).

TERTIARY EDUCATION

Continuing education after the basic level is important because people with higher qualifications are more likely to be employed and less likely to face

poverty in a knowledge — based economy. Therefore, investing efficiently in education and training systems that deliver high-quality and up-to-date services lays the foundations for a country's prosperity. Moreover, employment rates are generally higher for highly educated people. Conversely, low levels of tertiary educational attainment can hinder competitiveness, innovation and productivity, and undermine growth potential. The two indicators selected for this sub-theme show that EU has already met its target for tertiary education and is well on track to meet its target for placing recent graduates in the labour market.

The share of the population with tertiary education has reached the education and training 2020 benchmark.

The Europe 2020 strategy and the education and training 2020 framework aim to raise the share of the population aged 30 to 34 that has completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40 %. In the European Union as a whole, this share has increased considerably since 2002, by 17.1 percentage points. With a rate of 40.7 % in 2018, the EU has already met the target two years in advance. The share of 30 to 34 year-olds with tertiary education has been growing steadily since 2002 in all Member States, which — to some extent — reflects their investment in higher education to meet demand for a more skilled labour force. Moreover, some countries shifted to shorter degree programs following the implementation of the Bologna process reforms¹.

The Europe 2020 strategy was adopted as a strategy for jobs and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Both benchmarks on early school leaving and tertiary educational attainment are included as two of its headline targets (European Commission, 2010).

In addition to increasing tertiary education, the education and training 2020 framework acknowledges the important role of education and training in raising employability. It has set a benchmark that at least 82 % of recent graduates aged 20 to 34 years should have found employment within three years of leaving education and training. In the EU, the employment rate of recent graduates from at least upper secondary education and not in any education or training has increased steadily since 2013, reaching 81.6 % in 2018. Although the rate has not yet regained the pre-economic crisis peak of 82 % in 2008, the EU was well on track to meeting the 2020 target of 82 % even taking in consideration the outbreak of COVID-19.

Overall, employment rates rise with educational level, indicating that a person with higher educational attainment has a comparative advantage on the labour market. In 2018, the employment rate of recent graduates with tertiary education (International standard classification of education — ISCED 2011, levels 5-8) was 8.7 percentage points higher than for people from the same

¹ The Bologna process put in motion a series reforms to make European higher education more compatible, comparable, competitive and attractive for students. Its main objectives were: the introduction of a three-cycle degree system (bachelor, master and doctorate); quality assurance and recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

age group with only medium educational attainment (ISCED 2011, levels 3 and 4). This gap has narrowed since 2011, when it amounted to 11.3 percentage points.

There is also a clear difference between the program orientation of ISCED level 3 and 4. While the employment rate of recent graduates for the general orientation stood at 66.3 % in 2018, it was at 79.5 % for the vocational orientation in the same year. Some of the difference between the lower educated cohort and the tertiary graduates may be linked to the latter deciding to take jobs for which they were over-qualified in order to get into the labour market. Thereby, they are boosting the employment rate for tertiary graduates while at the same time lowering the rate for other graduates. This may be especially important in those cases where labour market demand is still subdued due to the economic crises caused by the actual outbreak of COVID-19 (Eurostat, 2021).

Generally speaking, women achieve higher tertiary education attainment rates, but male graduates are more likely to find employment.

Despite the overall positive trend in tertiary educational attainment, the gender gap had unsurprisingly widened significantly across the EU. While in 2002 the share of 30-to-34- year-olds who had completed tertiary education was similar for women (24.5 %) and men (22.6 %), the increase up to 2018 almost doubled for women. In 2018, women had already clearly exceeded the education and training 2020 benchmark, with a rate of 45.8 %. In contrast, the share among 30-to34-year-old men was 10.1 percentage points lower at 35.7 %.

On the other hand, men were likely to find employment within three years after their graduation than their female counterparts. In 2018, the employment rate for recent male graduates (83.3 %) was higher than the rate recorded among women (80.0 %). The pattern has been apparent since 2006, but its intensity has changed over time. The largest gender gap was recorded in 2007. This gap shrank significantly with the onset of the economic crisis, but widened in 2010 and remained within the 3.3 to 4.7 percentage point range in favour of male graduates between 2010 and 2018. Some of these gender differences may be explained by the nature of the different fields typically studied by women and men (for example, a higher proportion of science and technology students tend to be male) and by differences in labour market demand for graduates with different skills (Eurostat, 2021).

People with disabilities find it harder to complete tertiary education. According to a study using the EU statistics in income and living conditions survey (EU-SILC), 29.7 % of people aged 30 to 34 with disabilities had completed tertiary or equivalent education in 2016. This is more than 10 percentage points lower than the rate for people without disabilities (Grammenos, 2018).

Foreign-born residents achieve lower tertiary attainment rates and lower recent graduate employment rates. For tertiary educational attainment there is not only a significant gender gap what was already mentioned, but also

a difference related to migrant status. In 2018, the attainment rate was 5.5 percentage points higher for native-born residents than for the foreign-born population. Within the foreign-born group, the rate was considerably lower for people from outside the EU than for those from another Member States. No clear patterns can be observed at individual country level, however. While some Member States showed gaps of more than 30 percentage points between native and foreign-born residents, others showed a reverse pattern, with the foreign-born population having higher attainment rates (European Commission, 2019, p.102).

This may reflect differences in migration patterns across Europe (both-out and in-flows), with some Member States attracting and retaining people with high skill levels and others attracting a lower-skilled population (European Commission, 2018). The foreign-born population is also disadvantaged as far as the employment status of recent graduates is concerned. In 2018, the proportion of employed recent graduates varied between the native-born and the foreign-born population by 2.6 percentage points (European Commission, 2019, p.102).

ADULT EDUCATION

Underpinning the ongoing quest for a high-quality labour force with up-to-date skills is one of the goals of adult learning. Adult education and training covers the longest time span in the process of learning throughout a person's life (data refer to people aged 25 to 64). It is crucial for maintaining good health, remaining active in the community and being fully included in all aspects of society. Moreover, it helps to improve and develop skills, adapt to technological developments, advance a career or return to the labour market (upskilling and reskilling).

Adult participation in learning remains far from the target set for 2020. The education and training 2020 framework includes a target to increase the share of 25-to-64-year-old adults participating in learning to 15 %. In 2018, this rate stood at the level of 11.1 %, having increased only slowly over the preceding five years. Pronounced increases were only observable between 2002 and 2005 and from 2012 to 2013. However, this most recent growth can mainly be attributed to a methodological change in the French Labour Force Survey in 2013². Due to the slow increase in the share of 25-to-64-year-olds participating in learning over the past five years, the EU appears unlikely to meet the 15 % benchmark by 2020. This is particularly worrisome in light of the results of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which show that a significant number of EU adults struggle with

² INSEE, the French Statistical Office, carried out an extensive revision of the questionnaire of the Labour Force Survey. The new questionnaire was used from 1 January 2013 onwards. It has a significant effect on the level of various French LFS-indicators.

literacy, numeracy and digital skills (OECD, 2017). Available data on people's digital skills support the importance of adult learning by showing a clear relation between age and the level of digital skills. While 82 % of 16-to-24-year-olds had basic or above-basic overall digital skills in 2017, this was only the case for 65 % of 25-to-54-year-olds. In particular older people struggle with the use of digital media, with only 34 % of people aged 55 to 74 having basic or above-basic digital skills (Eurostat cit. per: European Commission, 2019c: p. 102).

Adult learning is the key subject of The Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (Council of The European Union, 2011). The Recommendation *Upskilling Pathways: new opportunities for adults* aims to improve adult learning provision specifically to address the needs of low-skilled/low-qualified adults (Council of The European Union, 2016). Moreover, the renewed Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, adopted in May 2018, explicitly recommends that Member States should mainstream the ambitions of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), in particular SDG 4.7, into education, training and learning, including by fostering the acquisition of knowledge about limiting the multifaceted nature of climate change and using natural resources in a sustainable way.

Women are more likely to participate in adult learning. In 2018, the share of 25-to-64-year-old women engaged in adult learning was two percentage points higher than of men (12.1 % compared with 10.1 %). The rate for women was not only clearly above the men's rate, it had also been improving faster, gaining 4 gradient.4 % percentage points since 2002, compared with 3.5 % percentage points for men. Younger people are more likely to participate in adult learning. While the participation rate of 25-to-34-year-olds stood at 17.8 % in 2018, it was much lower for 55-to-64-year-olds, at 6.4 % (European Commission, 2019 p. 103).

CONCLUSIONS

There is also a difference in terms of labour status, although this is less pronounced. In 2018, 11.8 % of employed people aged 25 to 64 participated in adult learning, whereas this was only the case for 10.7 % of those who were unemployed (European Commission, 2019, p. 103). This is especially worrisome as older and the unemployed are the two groups who would need adult learning the most in order to upskill/reskill and reintegrate into the labour market.

There is a clear gradient of adult participation in learning in terms of the different educational attainment levels. In 2018, adults aged 25 to 64 with at most lower secondary education were less engaged in learning (4.3 %) than those with upper secondary (8.8 %) or tertiary education (19.0 %) (European Commission, 2019, p. 103).

To sum up abovementioned considerations, we can say that the EU has already achieved one of its six 2019/2020 benchmarks for education

and training and is close to meeting three others. The target of raising the share of the population aged 30 to 34 that has completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40 % was met in 2019. In addition, the EU is well on track to meeting its 2019/2020 benchmarks for early leavers from education and training and for early childhood education and care. The share of employed recent graduates has also increased over the past five years. However, the situation is less favourable as regards the remaining two others benchmarks: education outcomes — as measured by pupil's performance in the PISA study for reading, maths and science — are moving away from the respective EU target. Moreover, due to the stagnation in the proportion of adults participating in the learning process, the benchmark of raising this share to 15 % in the years to come will likely be missed.

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ЯКІСТЬ БАЗОВОЇ, ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ ТА НАВЧАННЯ ДОРΟΣЛИХ В ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКОМУ СОЮЗІ: КЛЮЧОВІ ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ

Міхал Ціхорацький, кандидат соціології, викладач кафедри суспільних наук Університету економіки, вул. Гарбари, 2, 85-229, м. Бидгощ, Республіка Польща. michal.cichoracki@byd.pl

Якість освіти та навчання розглядається в Європейському Союзі (ЄС) як предмет найвищого політичного пріоритету. У всіх державах-членах Європейського Союзу високий рівень професійних навичок, соціальних компетенцій та знань вважаються основними умовами активної громадянської позиції, соціальної згуртованості та зайнятості. Висока якість освіти та навчання протягом усього життя є найважливішим засобом формування майбутнього на професійному та особистому рівні — вони є важливими для стратегій ринку праці та вільного пересування працівників у межах Європейського Союзу.

ЄС уже досяг одного з шести контрольних показників на 2019/2020 роки для освіти та навчання та близький до виконання трьох інших. За останні п'ять років також зросла частка працевлаштованих випускників. Однак ситуація стала менш сприятливою щодо інших двох контрольних показників: результати освіти, виміряні результатами навчання учнів у програмі міжнародного оцінювання учнів (PISA) з читання, математики та природничих наук, віддаляються від відповідної цілі ЄС. Більше того, через стагнацію частки дорослих, які беруть участь у процесі навчання, орієнтир підвищення цієї частки до 15% у найближчі роки буде пропущений.

Ключові слова: освіта; навчання; компетенції; сталий розвиток; участь.

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