



Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe

2021

Overview of
major reforms since 2015

Eurydice Background Report

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CONTENTS

Introduction	7
1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)	9
Overview of reforms and policy developments since 2015	10
2. Achievement in basic skills	14
Overview of reforms and policy developments since 2015	14
3. Early leaving from education and training (ELET)	18
Overview of reforms and policy developments since 2015	18
4. Higher education	22
Overview of reforms and policy developments since 2015	22
5. Scope of indicators / Key definitions	24
1. Early childhood education and care	24
1.1. Guarantee of a place	24
1.2. Professionalisation of ECEC staff.....	24
1.3. Curriculum or educational guidelines	25
2. Achievement in basic skills	25
2.1. Nationally standardised tests in literacy, mathematics and science	25
2.2. Recent national reports on achievement in basic skills.....	26
2.3. Use of student performance data in external school evaluation	26
2.4. Central guidelines on addressing student underachievement in initial teacher education (ITE).....	26
2.5. Additional support for schools enrolling large numbers of disadvantaged students	26
3. Early leaving from education and training (ELET)	27
3.1. Collecting national data on ELET based on a student register	27
3.2. Increasing the flexibility and permeability of education pathways.....	27
3.3. Providing language support for students with a different mother tongue	27
3.4. Addressing ELET in initial teacher education and continuing professional development	27
3.5. Offering education and career guidance in schools.....	28
3.6. Providing support for early leavers to re-enter the education and training system	28
4. Higher education	28
4.1. Quantitative targets relating to the social dimension of higher education	28
4.2. Monitoring of the socio-economic characteristics of the student body.....	28
4.3. Recognition of informal and non-formal learning on entry to higher education.....	29
4.4. Completion rates as a requirement in external quality assurance	29
4.5. Performance-based funding mechanisms with a social dimension focus.....	29

INTRODUCTION

This report contains more than 20 key structural indicators on education policies in four areas: early childhood education and care (ECEC), achievement in basic skills, early leaving from education and training (ELET) and higher education.

Policy context

The indicators provide information on the national policies and structures that contribute to achieving the benchmarks set in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('[ET 2020](#)').

The performance of the EU and its Member States with regard to the ET 2020 benchmarks is analysed in detail in the European Commission's *Education and Training Monitor*. The Eurydice project on structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe contributes to the contextual information for this analysis. It provides yearly data, from 2015 onwards, which illustrate the main policy developments in education and training systems across Europe.

Selection of indicators

The structural indicators were selected by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) using information from several recent Eurydice reports that provide an extensive focus on specific policy areas.

The selection of the structural indicators was discussed with the Eurydice national units and country representatives of the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks (SGIB).

2021 update

This report contains the updated indicators for the 2020/21 school/academic year together with a short overview of the major reforms since the start of the 2014/15 school/academic year in four policy areas:

1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)
2. Achievement in basic skills
3. Early leaving from education and training (ELET)
4. Higher education

The 2021 update of the Structural indicators marks the transition to the new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (2021-2030) ⁽¹⁾. The next editions will contain a revised set of indicators in order to be aligned with the new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (2021-2030).

Information on the scope of each indicator, along with detailed definitions of the terms used, can be found in Section 5.

Further information on recent reforms in all countries in the Eurydice network can be found in the [Education system descriptions, chapter 14](#).

⁽¹⁾ Council Resolution of 19 February 2021 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030). 2021/C 66/1.

Part of the information in this report that concerns the EU Member States was published in the [*Education and Training Monitor 2021*](#).

Country coverage

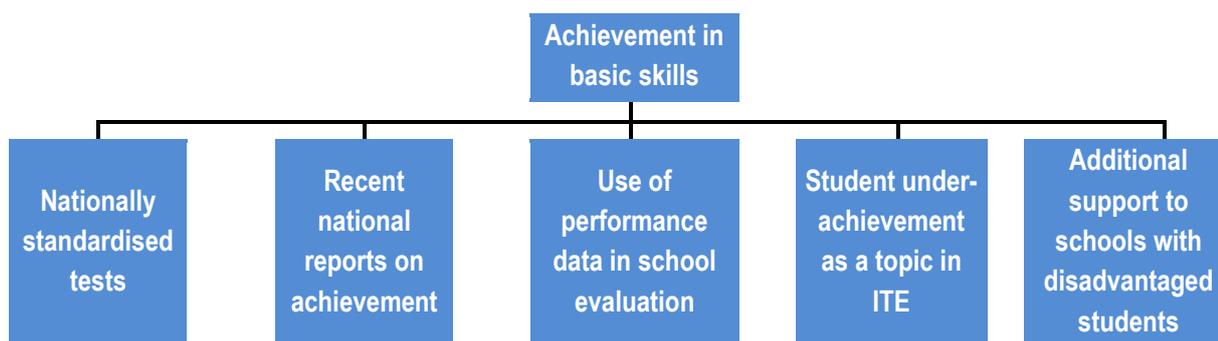
The 2021 update of the structural indicators covers the EU Member States, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey. The information was collected through a questionnaire completed by the national representatives of the Eurydice network.

2. ACHIEVEMENT IN BASIC SKILLS

Low student achievement in the basic skills of literacy/mother tongue, mathematics and science is a concern for many European countries. It is an issue associated not only with the effectiveness of teaching and learning, but also with providing an equitable system of education. Recognising the need for targeted action, the Council of the European Union adopted an EU-wide benchmark related to basic skills, which aims to reduce the proportion of 15-year-olds underachieving in reading, mathematics and science to less than 15 % by 2020 ⁽³⁾.

However, underachievement, defined as performing below level 2 in the PISA test, continues to be a serious challenge across Europe. The latest PISA results from 2018 show that 21.7 % of EU students had low achievement in reading, 22.4 % in mathematics, and 21.6 % in science. Over the past decade, across the EU as a whole, underachievement increased in science and reading and remained stable in mathematics over the past decade (*PISA 2018 and the EU: Striving for social fairness through education* ⁽⁴⁾).

The structural indicators below focus on a selection of policies and measures that could contribute to improving student achievement. All indicators concern compulsory education, which in the majority of European countries corresponds to ISCED levels 1 and 2.



The selected indicators relate to competences in three distinct areas, i.e. literacy, mathematics and science. These are often treated separately and given different emphasis in national policies. Evidence shows that there is usually more focus on literacy and numeracy, than on science.

Overview of reforms and policy developments since 2015

The national testing of students is a widespread practice in Europe but takes different forms, including compulsory and optional tests, as well as sample-based national tests. The results of national tests provide comparable and standardised information about the performance of students, schools and education systems.

In the school year 2019/20, which is the latest year with available data, all European education systems, except Belgium (German-speaking Community), Greece, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia planned to organise nationally standardised tests in compulsory education.

⁽³⁾ Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), OJ C 119, 28.5.2009.

⁽⁴⁾ European Commission, *PISA 2018 and the EU – Striving for social fairness through education*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019.

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, around a third of all education systems were forced to cancel at least some of the national tests that were scheduled to take place in spring 2020 ⁽⁵⁾.

National tests in some education systems, such as Belgium (Flemish Community) and Czechia, are based on the rotation of subjects. In the majority of European countries, standardised national assessments in compulsory education focus on the language of instruction and mathematics, and to a much lesser extent on science.

In the past six years, national authorities in some European countries have moved from pilot national tests to the establishment of regular testing systems (Czechia, Spain ⁽⁶⁾) and others have shifted some national tests from a summative to a formative approach (Portugal). Some countries have added new tests in specific years (Lithuania), while others have discontinued certain tests (Latvia), or all national testing for the time being (North Macedonia).

The majority of European countries publish **national reports on achievement** in each of the basic skills based on national performance data. In many cases, these reports are complemented by reports based on the country results from international surveys such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS. Moreover, in around a third of European countries, national reports are based solely on the results of international surveys. In terms of the subject areas covered by these reports, as with the previous indicator on national testing, it appears that performance in the language of instruction and mathematics is analysed much more often than performance in science.

Across Europe, the **evaluation of schools** has become increasingly important for monitoring the overall quality of education. In most cases, school evaluators examine a variety of data from different sources, which could include different types of **student performance data**.

In the vast majority of countries where the external evaluation of schools is practised, evaluators take student performance data into account in order to form their judgement on school quality. This is not the case in Greece, Cyprus, Slovenia, Slovakia and Norway, where external school evaluation is concerned with school processes and compliance with regulations. Moreover, several countries do not carry out any external school evaluation (Croatia ⁽⁷⁾, Finland and Bosnia and Herzegovina). In the past five years, a major reform in Bulgaria has led to the introduction of external school evaluation and the use of student performance data in it.

It is crucial for teachers to be able to deal with student underachievement and manage students with a range of different abilities and needs. A number of countries stipulate that **competences to tackle low student achievement** should be acquired during **initial teacher education (ITE)**.

The education authorities in 20 European systems provide central-level regulations, recommendations and/or guidelines for ITE programmes that specify that prospective teachers should learn how to address student difficulties during their training. Central-level involvement in determining the content of ITE programmes varies between countries. The diverse approaches are reflected in the differing degrees of detail in guidance documents and the variety of practices both at the national level and at the level of individual higher education institutions. In some cases, only general guidelines are

⁽⁵⁾ For more details on national testing, see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020. [Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe – 2020: Overview of major reforms since 2015](#), pp. 12-15.

⁽⁶⁾ The tests in Spain are either sample-based or census-based, depending on the grade. They have no academic consequences.

⁽⁷⁾ The pilot project 'External Evaluation of Primary and General Upper Secondary Schools' (*Vanjsko vrednovanje osnovnih škola i gimnazija*) started at the end of 2017 and represents the first phase in the preparation for the introduction of a comprehensive system of external evaluation of educational institutions. See <https://www.ncvvo.hr/vanjsko-vrednovanje/vanjsko-vrednovanje-odgojno-obrazovnih-ustanova/pilot-projekt-vanjskoga-vrednovanja-osnovnih-skola-gimnazija/>

provided without specifying particular subjects. Again, science is the area that is less likely to be mentioned explicitly. It is also significant that in 17 education systems there are no such guidelines, which is often due to the fact that, in these cases, higher education institutions are completely autonomous in determining the content of their teacher education programmes.

The central education authorities in around two thirds of all education systems allocate **additional resources to schools that enrol large numbers of disadvantaged students**. There are a variety of approaches in terms of the organisation of the support, the target groups and the actions funded.

In most countries, schools receive the additional funding directly from the central authorities, although in many cases local authorities are also involved. In some countries, financial flows are rather complex because several levels of authorities (central, regional and/or local) are involved in the allocation of funding. Moreover, in some cases, in addition to the centrally allocated funding, education providers/schools can apply for extra funds for specific purposes.

Central authorities **do not** allocate such additional resources in Denmark, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, North Macedonia and Norway. In Denmark and Norway this is done at the level of municipalities. In other countries, additional resources for these purposes are provided mainly through social programmes (Romania) or EU and other international projects (North Macedonia). In certain cases (Denmark and Hungary), central level support is not financial, but focuses on reinforcing the professional development of teachers, providing remedial classes and other educational support, as well as additional salary payments for teachers and support staff in less developed areas during the COVID-19 crisis (Hungary).

Across Europe, additional support is most commonly linked to socio-economic background, migrant status and disability. Criteria like geographical location and ethnic origin are used less often. Targeted funds are most often used to provide additional staff (education or other professionals), to create professional development opportunities to improve teachers' skills in delivering inclusive education and to fund career advice services. In the past six years, reforms in this area have led to the establishment of a scheme that gives additional support to disadvantaged students (Malta) or to the reinforcement of existing support mechanisms (e.g. Germany and Spain).

In conclusion, the review of the structural indicators on achievement in basic skills demonstrates that, while most countries organise national standardised tests and publish national reports on achievement, the three basic skills are not treated equally (science is given less attention). Moreover, many countries use student performance data in external school evaluation but only around half have issued national guidelines to include tackling student underachievement as a topic in initial teacher education. Finally, while the majority of countries provide some type of central support to schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students, there is a great variety of approaches in terms of the organisation of the support, the target groups and the actions funded.

Overall, there have been few policy changes and reforms across the indicators on achievement in basic skills in the past six years. This could be seen as an indication that these areas (except the organisation of national standardised tests) do not seem to be a priority for policy action, despite the fact that, in many countries, there have been no major improvements in student achievement as measured by the PISA survey.

Summary table on Achievement in basic skills, 2020/21 (*)

	2. Recent national reports on achievement			3. Use of performance data in school evaluation	4. Guidelines on underachievement as a topic in ITE			5. Additional resources provided by top-level authorities to schools with disadvantaged students
Belgium (BE fr)	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
Belgium (BE de)	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
Belgium (BE nl)	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
Bulgaria	R	M	S	●				●
Czechia	R	M	S	●				●
Denmark	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	
Germany	R	M	S	●	R			●
Estonia	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
Ireland	R	M	S	●	R	M		●
Greece	R	M	S					●
Spain	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
France	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
Croatia	R	M	S					
Italy	R	M		●				●
Cyprus	R	M	S		R	M	S	●
Latvia	R	M		●				●
Lithuania	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
Luxembourg	R	M		●	R	M	S	●
Hungary	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	
Malta	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
Netherlands	R	M	S	●				●
Austria	R	M		●	R	M	S	●
Poland	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
Portugal	R	M	S	●				●
Romania	R	M	S	●				
Slovenia	R	M	S					●
Slovakia	R	M			R	M	S	●
Finland	R	M						●
Sweden	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	●
Bosnia and Herzegovina	R	M	S					●
Iceland	R	M		●				●
Liechtenstein	R	M		●				●
Montenegro	R	M	S	●				●
North Macedonia	R	M	S	●	R	M	S	
Norway	R	M	S		R	M	S	
Serbia	R	M	S	●				●
Turkey	R	M	S	●				●

Notes: 'R' = reading; 'M' = mathematics; 'S' = science.

(*) No data collection on indicator 1. National tests in compulsory education for school year 2020/21.