

Annual report on education systems in the EU confirms slow but steady progress

The European Commission today presented the latest data on Member States' progress towards the 2010 goals they have set themselves for their education systems under the Lisbon strategy. This annual "indicators and benchmarks" report looks at individual country's performances in key areas such as completion of secondary education, early school leavers, low achievers in reading literacy, graduates in maths, science and technology and the participation of adults in lifelong learning activities. The key finding of the 2008 report is that overall Europe is making progress in all five areas - with the exception of low achievers in reading. However, although education and training has been improving slowly but steadily in EU Member States since 2000, progress needs to be faster in almost all areas in order to reach the 2010 targets.

At the presentation of the report, Ján Figel', European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, said "Almost one-third of the European workforce has the equivalent of lower secondary schooling, and around a quarter of Europe's 15-year-olds have low reading skills. As we develop as a knowledge-based society in an intensely competitive globalising world environment, these millions of Europeans will find it increasingly hard to fully flourish, let alone find employment. That is why I welcome the fact that the Member States have acknowledged the crucial role that education and training play in the future of our societies, both economically and socially. The Member States have launched long-term processes of reforms, and although progress towards their targets is slow, it is mostly going in the right direction. Much work still needs to be done, and the Commission is happy to continue facilitating cooperation and collaboration in this field."

The 2008 report is based on a coherent framework of **sixteen core indicators and five benchmarks** in education, which were adopted by the Council (Education) in 2007. The results are meant to provide strategic guidance for "**Education and Training 2010**" **work programme**, the mechanism through which the Member States are working to achieve the broad common objectives they have set for their education and training systems under the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs.

Key findings of the Report

Education and training in the EU Member States has been improving slowly but steadily since 2000. The good news is that overall performance in the European Union is on a par with the best in the world.

However, while progress has been made in four of the five benchmarks, in the benchmark for low achievers in reading, there was actually deterioration over recent years.

All countries have relative strengths and weaknesses across the benchmark areas and there are significant divergences between Member States and fields. Full details are in the text of the [2008 Report](#), and an executive summary is presented in the Appendix to this press release.

Background of the report:

"Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training. Indicators and Benchmarks" is the fifth in a series of annual reports examining performance and progress in education and training systems in the EU.

The progress reports are prepared by the Directorate-General for Education and Culture in close cooperation with Eurostat, CRELL Research Centre (JRC) and the Eurydice European Unit.

To find out more:

Full text of the [2008 Report](#)

DG Education and Culture: Lifelong learning policy: [Monitoring progress](#)

APPENDIX

Executive Summary of the Key findings of the 2008 Report:

Education and training in the EU Member States has been improving slowly but steadily since 2000. Overall performance in the European Union is on a par with the best in the world.

- Compared to the year 2000, there are now about 3 million more students in higher education and 1 million more graduates per year.
- There are 13 million more higher education graduates in the EU's working age population than in 2000.
- 60% of 5-29 year-olds participate in schools and higher education. This is comparable to the US and 18% higher than in Japan.
- Almost 108 million people still have low educational attainment – about one third of the labour force.

There are still important inequities in European education systems.

- Six million young people, one in seven of 18-24 year-olds, achieve only compulsory education or less.
- 25-64 year-olds are three times more likely to participate in lifelong learning if they have completed at least upper secondary education.
- One in seven of the four-year-olds are not enrolled in education. Most of these are in high need categories, such as children with migrant background or from families with low socio-economic status.
- Gender inequalities remain. Boys do less well in reading and have more special education needs. Girls do less well in mathematics and are underrepresented among MST (maths, science, technology) students and graduates.

Progress is made in all of the five benchmark areas for 2010 – apart from one, low achievers in reading.

- The EU has made good progress in increasing the number of **maths, science and technology (MST) graduates** – and has already exceeded the benchmark of 15% growth.
- The EU has made **some progress in reducing the number of early school leavers; increasing upper secondary attainment of young people; and in increasing adult participation in lifelong learning.** Progress in all these areas, however, **has to be faster in order to reach the benchmarks for 2010.**
- The EU has **not managed to bring down the share of low achievers in reading.** Instead of a 20% decrease, the benchmark set for 2010, results have deteriorated since 2000 and the share of low achievers in the EU has increased by more than 10%.

The report highlights **individual Member States' performances** and their progress in relation to each of the five benchmark indicators, identifying which countries are catching up or falling behind, losing momentum or moving further ahead compared to the others. All countries have relative strengths and weaknesses across the benchmark areas and there are **significant divergences between Member States and fields**.

- Nine countries exceed the five benchmarks on average and are still progressing: Finland, Denmark, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Poland, Slovenia, Norway and Iceland.
- Three countries, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, have average performance below the benchmarks and have stopped progressing in this respect.
- Lifelong learning is becoming a reality in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway and Iceland, countries which have developed comprehensive and coherent lifelong learning strategies.

1. Low achievers in reading

Benchmark: By 2010 the percentage of low achieving 15-year olds in reading literacy in the EU should decrease by at least 20% from 2000 levels.

Trends: In the EU (comparable data available for 18 countries) performance deteriorated from 21.3 % low performers in reading in 2000 to 24.1 % (girls: 17.6%, boys: 30.4%) in 2006.

Top performers: the top EU performer is Finland (4.8%), followed by Ireland (12.1%) and Estonia (13.6%). Cyprus and Malta have not yet participated in the survey.

Low performers: Romania (53.5%), Bulgaria (51.1%)

2. Early school leavers

Benchmark: By 2010 a share of early school leavers of no more than 10% should be reached.

Trends: In EU 27 the share of early school leavers (population 18-24) declined from 17.6% in 2000 to 14.8% (females: 12.7%, males: 16.9%) in 2007.

Top performers: the best performers in the EU are the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia (plus probably Slovenia for which recent data are considered unreliable or uncertain).

Low performers: Malta, Portugal.

3. Upper secondary attainment

Benchmark: By 2010 at least 85% of 22 year-olds in the EU should have completed upper secondary education.

Trends: Since 2000 upper secondary attainment in the EU increased slightly, from 76.6% of people aged 20-24 to 78.1% (females: 80.8%, males: 75.4%) in 2007.

Top performers: the top performers in the EU are the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Low performers: Malta, Portugal

4. Maths, science & technology graduates

Benchmark: The total number of MST graduates in the EU should increase by at least 15%, gender imbalance should decrease.

Trends: The number of MST graduates increased by 29% since 2000 and the female share from 30.7% to 31.6% in 2006.

Top performers: Growth since 2000: Poland; Gender balance: Estonia; MST graduates per 1,000 population 20-29: Ireland.

Low performers: Growth since 2000: Belgium, Slovenia; Gender balance: Austria, Netherlands; MST graduates per 1,000 population 20-29: Cyprus, Malta

5. Participation of adults in lifelong learning

Benchmark: The EU average level of participation in lifelong learning should at least reach 12.5% of the working age population (25-64 age group).

Trends: On an EU level participation increased from 7.1% in 2000 to 9.7% (females: 10.6%, males: 8.8%) in 2007 (partly a result of breaks in time series around 2003).

Top performers: the best performer in the EU is Sweden (2006 data), followed by Denmark and the UK.

Low performers: Bulgaria, Romania