



EUROPEAN SEMESTER THEMATIC FACTSHEET

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

1. INTRODUCTION

Early school leaving¹ is an obstacle to economic growth and employment. It hampers productivity and competitiveness, and fuels poverty and social exclusion. With its shrinking workforce, Europe has to make full use of its human resources. Young people who leave education and training prematurely are bound to lack skills and qualifications. They face a higher risk of unemployment, social exclusion and poverty.

The Europe 2020 strategy has set the **goal of reducing the proportion of 18- to 24-year-olds leaving education and training early to below 10%**. In 2016 there were still more than 4 million early school leavers across Europe. Only around 45% of them are employed.

Young people with a migrant background face a higher risk of leaving school early. The risk is especially high for Roma and other disadvantaged minorities. The recent steep rise in the inflow of refugees and migrants has heightened the challenge of integrating pupils from a migrant background and so helping them to acquire the necessary skills and competences.

The 2011 **Recommendation of the Council of the European Union on policies to reduce early school**

leaving² proposed that Member States implement cross-sectoral policy approaches. These should focus, at all levels of education, on prevention and intervention measures, as well as 'compensation' measures to re-engage students who drop out.

The 2013 **Youth Guarantee Council Recommendation** commits Member States to ensure that everyone under 25 years old receives a good-quality offer of employment, training, traineeship or apprenticeship within 4 months of leaving education or becoming unemployed³. It recommends that Member States offer education and training opportunities to young people with insufficient qualifications.

The European Commission launched the '**New skills agenda for Europe**' in June 2016. It provided the context for an initiative on '[Upskilling pathways](#)', adopted by the Council of the EU in December 2016. The latter recommends Member States to provide adults aged 25 or over with flexible 'pathways' giving them options to re-enter education and/or obtain qualifications equivalent to upper secondary education. This could involve recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning, for example skills acquired on the job.

This initiative may help to reduce the harmful effects of early school leaving

¹ The terms 'early school leavers' and 'early leavers from education and training' are used interchangeably in this document.

² OJ C 191, 1.7.2011, p. 1.

³ See thematic factsheet on youth employment.

throughout the lifetimes of those affected.

This thematic factsheet will first provide an overview of the performance of EU countries as for ESL rates in order to highlight the policy challenges to be addressed. It will then review the available policy options and recent policy initiatives in the Member States.

The thematic sheet *Skills for the labour market* provides a picture of the employability of graduates, within a broader analysis of skills' demand and supply.

2. POLICY CHALLENGES: AN OVERVIEW OF PERFORMANCE IN EU COUNTRIES

The EU average rate of early leavers from education and training⁴ in 2016 was 10.7%, down 0.3 (pps) from 2015 (see annex, table 1).

The rate has fallen by over 3 pps since 2010 and, if the trend continues, the Europe 2020 headline target of below 10% will be within reach. However, reaching the target is not a reason for complacency: there would still be several million early school leavers in the EU. Moreover, sustaining the current rate of progress could become more difficult the closer a country gets to the target. This is because tackling the most difficult situations is likely to need increasingly targeted policies.

Seventeen Member States have already achieved the Europe 2020 headline target of below 10%. Two more — Latvia (10.0%) and Germany (10.3%) — are very close to it. Among the 11 countries still above the EU target, only Italy has reached its national target of 16%.

⁴ Early school leavers are defined as people aged 18 to 24 fulfilling two conditions: (1) the highest level of education or training they have attained is ISCED 0, 1, or 2; (2) they did not receive any education or training in the 4 weeks before the survey. The reference group for calculating the early school leaving rate is the total population aged 18 to 24. All measurements come from the EU Labour Force Survey.

Among the Member States below 10%, five have not yet reached their more ambitious national targets: Finland, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland.

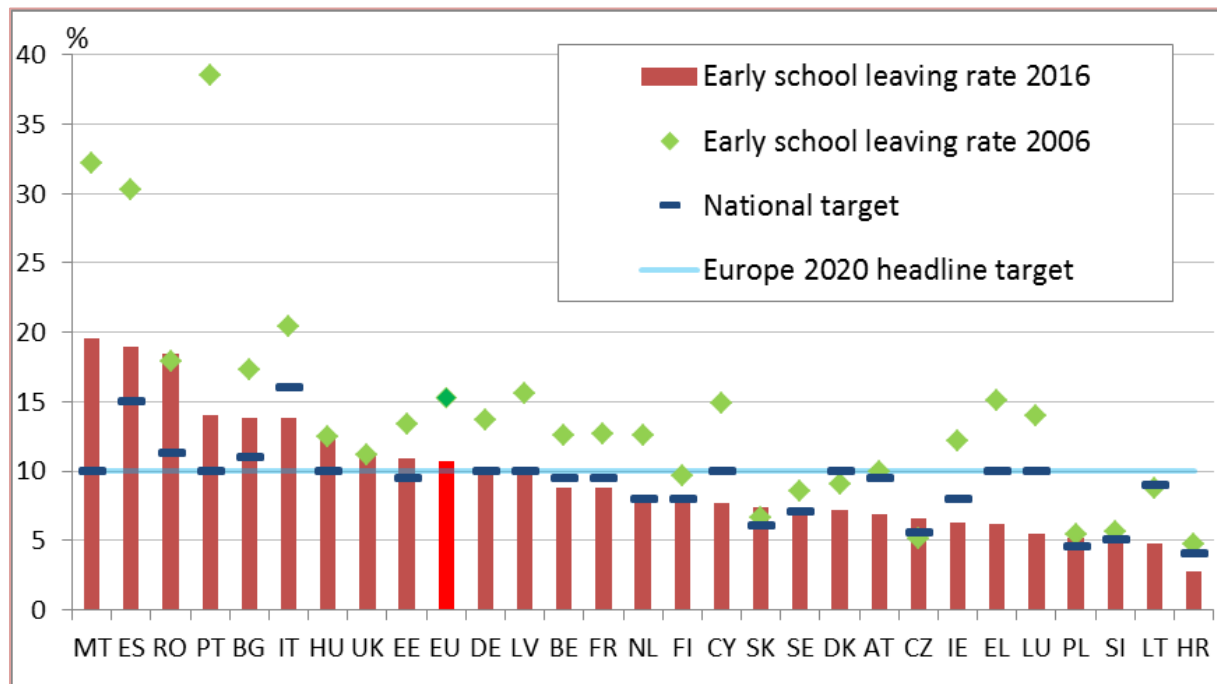
Figure 1 also shows the significant drop (by 4.6 pps) in early school leaving over the past 10 years. The progress was particularly marked in Portugal (-24.5 pps), Malta (-12.6) and Spain (-11.3). Only in three countries has the rate slightly increased. Slovakia (+0.8 pp.) and the Czech Republic (+1.5 pps) started from low levels and are only missing their own national targets. Romania (+0.6 pp.), on the other hand, started with one of the highest early school leaving rates and has not made any significant progress. It is missing both the EU target and its national target.

There are also marked differences by gender. As a group, girls already attained the EU target in 2014 with a rate of 9.6%. By contrast, boys were still at 12.2% in 2016, 3 pps higher than girls. The gender gap has narrowed since 2006 (by 4.2 pps) but it is still evident in nearly all countries. The exceptions are Bulgaria and Romania, where early school leaving rates for girls are slightly higher than for boys (by 0.2 and 0.3 pp., respectively).

Higher early school leaving rates for boys are most pronounced in Spain, Latvia, Malta and Cyprus (all more than 7 pps above girls). Between 2015 and 2016 the gender gap slightly increased on average (notably in Cyprus and Estonia).

Early school leaving rates also vary widely depending on where people were born (see annex, table 3). Among the **foreign-born population** in the EU, early school leaving is nearly twice as high as for the native population. The disparity between foreign-born people and the native population narrowed from 12.8 pps in 2010 to 10.0 pps in 2016 but is still substantial in a number of Member States. Unfortunately, the early school leaving rates for foreign-born people are not available for 10 Member States.

Figure 1 – Early school leaving, Europe 2020 headline target and national targets



Source: Eurostat (LFS, table [t2020_40]). National targets follow different definitions of the indicator in some countries. For further information on national targets and their definitions, see http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4411192/4411431/Europe_2020_Targets.pdf.

Nevertheless, calculations show that the EU as a whole would be 30% closer to reaching its Europe 2020 target of reducing the early school leaving rate to below 10% if the gap between the foreign-born and native populations were closed⁵. Identifying ways of tackling the problem, a 2013 study on newly arrived migrant children showed that inclusive education systems are better equipped to integrate migrant children successfully and to support them effectively in school education⁶.

While the specific factors leading to early school leaving vary from country to country, the root causes can be met by three typically interlinked policy measures:

1) **Comprehensive strategy**

Although there is a growing tendency to develop more comprehensive strategies, Member States have not yet broadly implemented strategic approaches to address early school

leaving. In addition, relevant stakeholders such as local services (social, health, employment, etc.), youth and community organisations, and guidance centres are often not involved in efforts to develop and implement measures. A 2013 peer review of policies to reduce early school leaving highlighted the need for certain specific measures. These include involving business to allow for more work-based learning, improving guidance for young people at risk of early school leaving, and easing their transition from school to work⁷.

2) **Evidence-based policy-making**

Accurate, reliable and valid information is an important tool to better shape policies on early school leaving. Most countries produce statistical data on early leavers and also have their own definitions and

⁵ European Commission-OECD (2015).

⁶ PPMI (2013).

⁷ 'Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support', November 2013, final report of the Thematic Working Group on early school leaving: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/esl-group-report_en.pdf.

data collections, in addition to the data gathered for the EU-Labour Force Survey. However, relatively few gather qualitative information that can help in understanding the reasons why students leave education and training early and what they do afterwards. France, Malta and the United Kingdom (Scotland) are amongst the few countries that routinely conduct surveys of students after they have left education and training prematurely.

3) **Prevention and early intervention**

A strong focus on preventive and early intervention measures both at system level and in individual education and training institutions have proved to be beneficial. Well working prevention measures at system level address in particular:

- problems of segregation by type of school;
- the negative effects of repeating grades;
- the lack of support for groups at risk of early school leaving; and
- the need to make vocational education and training more attractive.

3. POLICY LEVERS TO ADDRESS THE POLICY CHALLENGES

The 2011 Council Recommendation gives guidance to Member States on how to tackle early school leaving and sets out the way forward. Member States should implement coherent, comprehensive and evidence-based strategies comprising prevention, intervention and compensation measures.

Prevention focuses on processes leading to early school leaving. Successful prevention of early school leaving considers the preconditions for successful schooling and the design of education and training systems. This includes access to good quality early childhood education and care, flexible educational pathways and better integration of migrant children.

Intervention addresses emerging difficulties at an early stage and seeks to prevent them from leading to early

school leaving. They often apply to all pupils, but are especially beneficial and relevant to those at risk of early school leaving. They are student-focused and build on the early detection of support needed for learning and motivation.

Compensation measures offer education and training opportunities for those who have dropped out. They aim to re-engage people in education and training.

Providing more effective and work-based initial vocational education and training can help reduce early school leaving. In general education programmes, the combination of school education with work experience can also motivate disengaged learners and help to prepare them for further vocational education and training pathways that offer them wider options.

A thematic working group on early school leaving, composed of policy-makers, practitioners and experts from 27 Member States and key European stakeholder organisations, developed guidance on successful factors for developing comprehensive policies⁸. It stressed the importance of prevention and the need to strengthen cooperation across different sectors and to create partnerships between stakeholders at all levels.

A subsequent working group on schools policy identified key conditions for engaging the entire school community (school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, parents and families) in a cohesive, collective and collaborative action, with strong cooperation with external stakeholders and the community at large, i.e. a 'whole school' approach, to tackling early school leaving in its policy messages⁹ and implemented the online '[European](#)

⁸ Op. cit. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/esl-group-report_en.pdf.

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education/culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/expert-groups/documents/early-leaving-policy_en.pdf

[Toolkit for Schools](#)'. These offer policy-makers and practitioners guidance and resources to promote educational success and provide support to all learners.

The 2015 conclusions of the Council of the EU on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school¹⁰ build on the work of the working groups. They also reiterate the importance of implementing the 2011 Council Recommendation.

Under the Youth Guarantee Council Recommendation, Member States are encouraged to involve education and training providers in their Youth Guarantee schemes to ensure that early intervention is provided to students at risk of dropping out and becoming economically inactive.

The 'New Skills Agenda' with the Upskilling Pathways initiative will help low-skilled adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/ or progress towards an upper-secondary or equivalent qualification. Member States should put in place flexible pathways that offer options for upskilling in cooperation with social partners, education and training providers, and local and regional authorities. The Commission supports Member States in implementing and monitoring the initiative. Financial support could be provided through the European Structural and Investment Funds and programmes like [Erasmus+](#) and [EaSI](#).

On 30 May 2017, the European Commission presented its new strategy to support the modernisation of school and higher education. In the Communication 'School development and excellent teaching for a great start in life'¹¹, the Commission identifies three areas where action is urgently needed:

¹⁰ [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52_015XG12_15\(03\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52_015XG12_15(03))

¹¹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=COM:2017:248:FIN>

- 1) raising the quality and inclusiveness of schools;
- 2) supporting teachers and school leaders for excellent teaching;
- 3) improving the governance of school education systems.

An accompanying document¹² provides useful insights into research evidence and results of EU-level work on school education policies.

4. CROSS-EXAMINATION OF POLICY STATE OF PLAY

To ensure the **effectiveness** of the policies advocated by the 2011 Council Recommendation, it is important to identify the main factors leading to early school leaving and monitor national, regional and local developments¹³. Initial experience in countries applying more advanced data collection systems shows that continuous and systematic monitoring is very useful in reducing early school leaving to a minimum.

According to the latest country-specific analysis, the majority of Member States have implemented the Council Recommendation by adopting either targeted comprehensive strategies¹⁴ or other national policies¹⁵. The other countries have either done so only partly or have not yet taken action.

The latest issue of the European Commission's annual Education and Training Monitor¹⁶ provides some examples of recent national strategies to address early school leaving:

¹² <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1504250266779&uri=CELEX:52017SC0165>

¹³ See the joint report by Cedefop/Eurydice (2014).

¹⁴ Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Romania.

¹⁵ Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Finland, Sweden and the UK.

¹⁶ More details on country-specific progress in tackling early school leaving are available in Volume 2 of the [Education and Training Monitor 2017](#).

(i) In 2016, the Flemish community of Belgium approved a discussion paper on a policy related to study entitlement, truancy and school dropout that will replace the current action plans. In the francophone community of Belgium reducing early school leaving is a major element of the ongoing school reform which focuses on improving equity, effectiveness and efficiency.

(ii) Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary have introduced several measures or are about to do so. These consist of early

warning mechanisms and improved collection and exchange of information between institutions to better identify out-of-school children and students at risk of dropout, and to reach out to families.

(iii) A programme in Cyprus funded by the European Social Fund is helping disadvantaged students at all education levels to avoid failing at school. It provides psychosocial support, targeted teacher training and supportive and technical material in schools.

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5. REFERENCES

- Cedefop/Eurydice (2014), 'Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe'
<http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/tackling-early-leaving-from-education-and-training-in-europe-pbEC0414859/>
- European Commission-OECD (2015), EU Indicators of Immigrant Integration
<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/indicators-of-immigrant-integration-2015-settling-in>
- Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) (2013), Study on educational support for newly arrived migrant children, Report on behalf of the European Commission
<https://bookshop.europa.eu/en/study-on-educational-support-for-newly-arrived-migrant-children-pbNC3112385/>

6. USEFUL RESOURCES

- European Commission: Education and training policies on early school leaving
https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-school-leavers_en
- European Commission: Education and Training Monitor 2017
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/et-monitor_en
- European Expert Network on Economics of Education
<http://www.eenee.de>
- Network of Experts on Social Aspects of Education and Training
<http://nesetweb.eu/en/>

ANNEX

Table 1 – Early leavers from education and training (total)

	2000	2006	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Target
EU 28	17.6	15.3	13.9	12.7	11.9	11.2	11.0	10.7	10
EU 27									
Belgium	13.8	12.6	11.9	12.0	11.0	9.8	10.1	8.8	9.5
Bulgaria	:	17.3	12.6	12.5	12.5	12.9	13.4	13.8	11
Czech Republic	:	5.1	4.9	5.5	5.4	5.5	6.2	6.6	5.5
Denmark	11.7	9.1	11.0	9.1	8.0	7.8	7.8	7.2	10
Germany	14.6	13.7	11.8	10.5	9.8	9.5	10.1	10.3	10
Estonia	15.1	13.4	11.0	10.3	9.7	12.0	12.2	10.9	9.5
Ireland	:	12.2	11.5	9.7	8.4	6.9	6.9	6.3	8
Greece	18.2	15.1	13.5	11.3	10.1	9.0	7.9	6.2	10
Spain	29.1	30.3	28.2	24.7	23.6	21.9	20.0	19.0	15
France	13.3	12.7	12.7	11.8	9.7	9.0	9.2	8.8	9.5
Croatia	:	4.7	5.2	5.1	4.5	2.8	2.8	2.8	4
Italy	25.1	20.4	18.6	17.3	16.8	15.0	14.7	13.8	16
Cyprus	18.5	14.9	12.7	11.4	9.1	6.8	5.2	7.6	10
Latvia	:	15.6	12.9	10.6	9.8	8.5	9.9	10.0	10
Lithuania	16.5	8.8	7.9	6.5	6.3	5.9	5.5	4.8	9
Luxembourg	16.8	14.0	7.1	8.1	6.1	6.1	9.3	5.5	10
Hungary	13.9	12.5	10.8	11.8	11.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	10
Malta	54.2	32.2	23.8	21.1	20.5	20.3	19.8	19.7	10
Netherlands	15.4	12.6	10.0	8.9	9.3	8.7	8.2	8.0	8
Austria	10.2	10.0	8.3	7.8	7.5	7.0	7.3	6.9	9.5
Poland	:	5.4	5.4	5.7	5.6	5.4	5.3	5.2	4.5
Portugal	43.6	38.5	28.3	20.5	18.9	17.4	13.7	14.0	10
Romania	22.9	17.9	19.3	17.8	17.3	18.1	19.1	18.5	11.3
Slovenia	:	5.6	5.0	4.4	3.9	4.4	5.0	4.9	5
Slovakia	:	6.6	4.7	5.3	6.4	6.7	6.9	7.4	6
Finland	9.0	9.7	10.3	8.9	9.3	9.5	9.2	7.9	8
Sweden	7.3	8.6	6.5	7.5	7.1	6.7	7.0	7.4	7
United Kingdom	18.2	11.2	14.8	13.4	12.4	11.8	10.8	11.2	:

Source: Eurostat (LFS, data table [t2020_40]).

Table 2 — Early leavers from education and training by gender

	Males				Females				Gender gap 2016 (F-M)
	2010	2014	2015	2016	2010	2014	2015	2016	
EU 28	15.8	12.8	12.4	12.2	11.9	9.6	9.5	9.2	-3.0
Belgium	13.8	11.8	11.6	10.2	10.0	7.7	8.6	7.4	-2.8
Bulgaria	12.4	12.8	13.3	13.7	12.9	12.9	13.4	13.9	0.2
Czech Republic	4.9	5.8	6.4	6.6	4.8	5.2	6.0	6.6	0.0
Denmark	14.1	9.5	9.7	8.5	7.7	6.1	5.7	5.9	-2.6
Germany	12.5	10.0	10.4	11.0	11.0	8.9	9.8	9.5	-1.5
Estonia	14.4	16.0	14.2	14.3	7.6	7.9	10.0	7.4	-6.9
Ireland	13.4	8.0	8.4	7.8	9.6	5.7	5.4	4.6	-3.2
Greece	16.4	11.5	9.4	7.1	10.6	6.6	6.4	5.3	-1.8
Spain	33.6	25.6	24.0	22.7	22.6	18.1	15.8	15.1	-7.6
France	15.3	10.2	10.1	10.1	10.2	7.9	8.4	7.5	-2.6
Croatia	6.5	3.1	3.5	3.5	3.8	2.5	2.0	2.0	-1.5
Italy	21.8	17.7	17.5	16.1	15.3	12.2	11.8	11.3	-4.8
Cyprus	16.2	11.2	7.7	11.4	9.8	2.9	3.1	4.3	-7.1
Latvia	16.7	11.7	13.4	13.7	9.0	5.1	6.2	6.2	-7.5
Lithuania	9.8	7.0	6.9	6.0	6.0	4.6	4.0	3.6	-2.4
Luxembourg	8.0	8.3	10.5	6.8	6.0	3.7	8.1	4.2	-2.6
Hungary	11.5	12.5	12.0	12.9	10.1	10.3	11.2	11.8	-1.1
Malta	29.9	22.2	22.9	22.9	17.4	18.3	16.6	16.3	-6.6
Netherlands	12.1	10.6	9.9	10.1	7.8	6.8	6.4	5.8	-4.3
Austria	8.4	7.6	7.8	7.7	8.3	6.5	6.8	6.0	-1.7
Poland	7.2	7.3	7.2	6.4	3.5	3.3	3.2	3.9	-2.5
Portugal	32.4	20.7	16.4	17.4	24.0	14.1	11.0	10.5	-6.9
Romania	19.5	19.5	19.5	18.4	19.0	16.7	18.5	18.7	0.3
Slovenia	6.4	6.0	6.4	6.7	3.3	2.7	3.4	3.1	-3.6
Slovakia	4.6	6.9	6.9	7.6	4.9	6.6	6.8	7.2	-0.4
Finland	11.6	11.9	10.6	9.0	9.0	7.2	7.9	6.9	-2.1
Sweden	7.5	7.3	7.6	8.2	5.5	6.0	6.4	6.4	-1.8
United Kingdom	15.6	12.9	11.7	12.7	13.9	10.8	9.8	9.5	-3.2

Source: Eurostat (LFS, data table [edat_lfse_14]).

Table 3 — Early leavers from education and training by country of birth

	2010			2016			
	Total	Foreign-born	Native	Total	Foreign-born	Native	Native — Foreign Gap
EU 28	13.9	25.6	12.8	10.7	19.8	9.8	-10.0
Belgium	11.9	21.9	10.7	8.8	17.8	7.6	-10.2
Bulgaria	12.6	:	12.7	13.8	:	13.8	:
Czech Republic	4.9	13.2	4.7	6.6	10.8	6.6	-4.2
Denmark	11.0	16.7	10.6	7.2	7.9	7.2	-0.7
Germany	11.8	23.3	10.2	10.3	23.2	8.2	-15.0
Estonia	11.0	:	11.1	10.9	:	10.9	:
Ireland	11.5	16.3	10.7	6.3	5.2	6.5	1.3
Greece	13.5	43.1	9.2	6.2	18.1	5.5	-12.6
Spain	28.2	43.0	25.1	19.0	32.9	16.1	-16.8
France	12.7	24.7	11.9	8.8	16.3	8.2	-8.1
Croatia	5.2	4.6	5.3	2.8	:	2.7	:
Italy	18.6	40.7	16.3	13.8	30.0	11.8	-18.2
Cyprus	12.7	26.3	7.5	7.6	18.2	4.6	-13.6
Latvia	12.9	:	13.0	10.0	:	10.1	:
Lithuania	7.9	:	8.0	4.8	:	4.8	:
Luxembourg	7.1	10.2	6.0	5.5	8.5	4.1	-4.4
Hungary	10.8	:	10.7	12.4	:	12.4	:
Malta	23.8	:	24.0	19.7	:	19.6	:
Netherlands	10.0	11.3	10.0	8.0	8.3	7.9	-0.4
Austria	8.3	21.2	5.9	6.9	14.7	5.5	-9.2
Poland	5.4	:	5.4	5.2	:	5.2	:
Portugal	28.3	27.4	28.3	14.0	14.3	14.0	-0.3
Romania	19.3	:	19.3	18.5	:	18.6	:
Slovenia	5.0	20.0	4.5	4.9	15.6	4.4	-11.2
Slovakia	4.7	:	4.7	7.4	:	7.4	:
Finland	10.3	21.1	9.7	7.9	15.1	7.6	-7.5
Sweden	6.5	10.8	5.9	7.4	15.2	5.9	-9.3
United Kingdom	14.8	10.2	15.4	11.2	9.4	11.5	2.1

Source: Eurostat (LFS, data table [edat_lfse_02]).