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**Situation of young people in the European Union**

*Accompanying the document*

**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN  
PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN  
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE  
REGIONS**

**Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy**

{COM(2018) 269 final} - {SWD(2018) 168 final}

## 2. Education and Training

### EU youth indicators

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## 2.1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of education is unquestioned in today's world. Throughout the years spent in formal education and by means of the opportunities made available through non-formal and informal education and youth work, children and young people have the chance to develop their personal and social potential, acquire basic skills and qualifications, and become integrated into society at large. Indeed, high-quality and inclusive education for all is one of the most effective defences against the risks of social marginalisation, poverty and exclusion, especially at times of crisis <sup>(1)</sup>.

Moreover, education is not only a fundamental determinant of individual life chances and social participation, but also of economic development <sup>(2)</sup>. Accordingly, obtaining a high-quality education gives the opportunity for young people to succeed in the labour market and find meaningful employment, while spurring long-term economic growth.

This chapter discusses the provision of learning opportunities for young people in Europe in both formal and non-formal settings. Taking a brief look first at the average number of years young Europeans spend in formal education, the chapter goes on to examine attainment in terms of the educational level completed and student achievement in reading, mathematics and science. The chapter proceeds to give an insight into the participation of young people in non-formal learning, including youth work activities, and then turns to analysing how many young Europeans have had the opportunity to widen their learning experiences by going abroad during their studies.

## 2.2. FORMAL EDUCATION

Formal education refers to the structured system of education from pre-primary to tertiary level. This section considers some of the aspects most relevant to young people: the qualifications they attain – or fail to attain if they leave school prematurely – and the skills they acquire in the education system.

### 2.2.1. Participation and attainment

European children and young people on average spend 17 years in formal education <sup>(3)</sup>. Variations between countries are, however, quite significant, with the expected time spent in education ranging from 15 years in Luxembourg, to 21 years in Finland <sup>(4)</sup>. Such differences are partly due to countries setting different starting ages for compulsory education <sup>(5)</sup>; nevertheless, young people also stay longer in education beyond the compulsory school years to complete upper secondary and tertiary degrees.

Upper secondary educational attainment is considered the minimum desirable educational attainment level for EU citizens, as it is a prerequisite for better labour market integration and avoiding poverty and social exclusion <sup>(6)</sup>. In 2016, an average of 83.2 % of 20- to 24-year-olds in the EU had attained at least upper

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<sup>(1)</sup> Council of the European Union, 2017.

<sup>(2)</sup> EENEE, 2014.

<sup>(3)</sup> Source: Eurostat, 'Expected school years of pupils and students by education level', online data code: educ\_uoe\_enra07. Data extracted on 19/06/2017.

<sup>(4)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(5)</sup> European Commission, 2016a. For a detailed information on the duration of compulsory education/training in European countries, please see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017a.

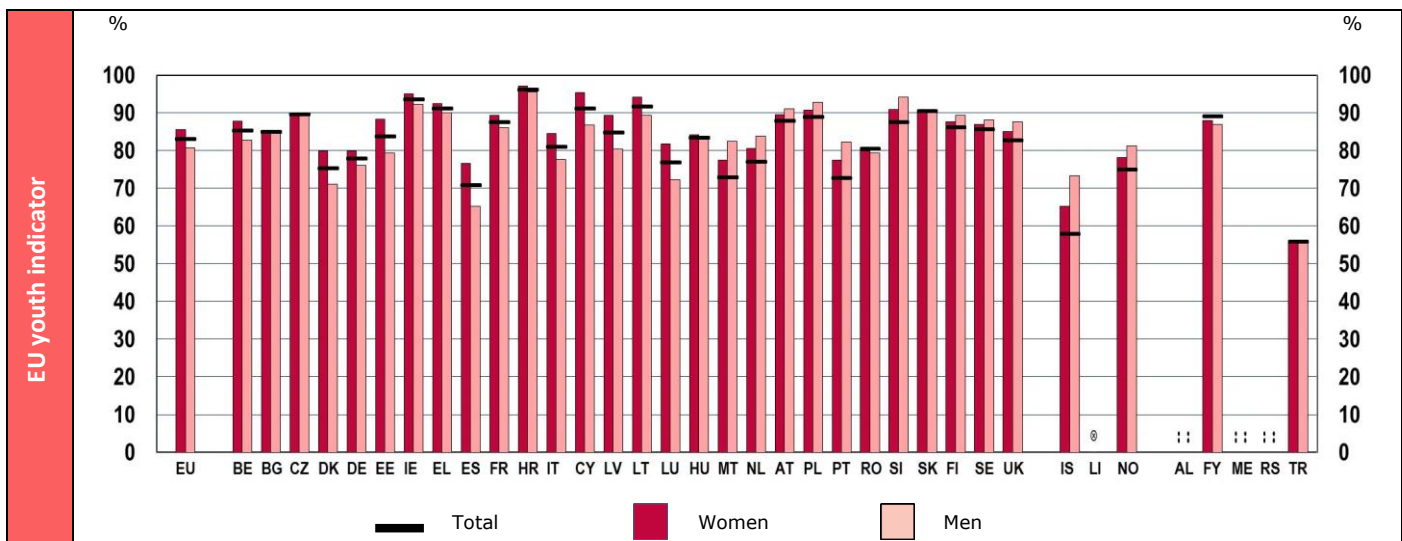
<sup>(6)</sup> European Commission, 2016a.

secondary education (Figure 2-A). Approximately one third of countries reported levels significantly higher, while in Spain, Iceland and Turkey the percentage is equal to or less than 70 %.

Women generally have higher educational attainment levels than men. As Figure 2-A shows, in the EU-28, on average 85.6 % of women completed at least upper secondary education, while the percentage of men with the same attainment level was 80.8 %. This pattern holds true for all countries, with the exception of Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey where women and men complete upper secondary education at similar rates. Men record the lowest rates of upper secondary attainment in comparison to women in Estonia, Spain, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal and Iceland, with gaps spanning from 9 to 15 percentage points.

Young people are increasingly highly educated. The proportion of young Europeans attaining upper secondary qualifications continues to increase.

**Figure 2-A:** Share of young people (aged 20-24) who have completed at least upper secondary education, by country and by sex, 2016



Source: Eurostat LFS [edat\_lfse\_03].

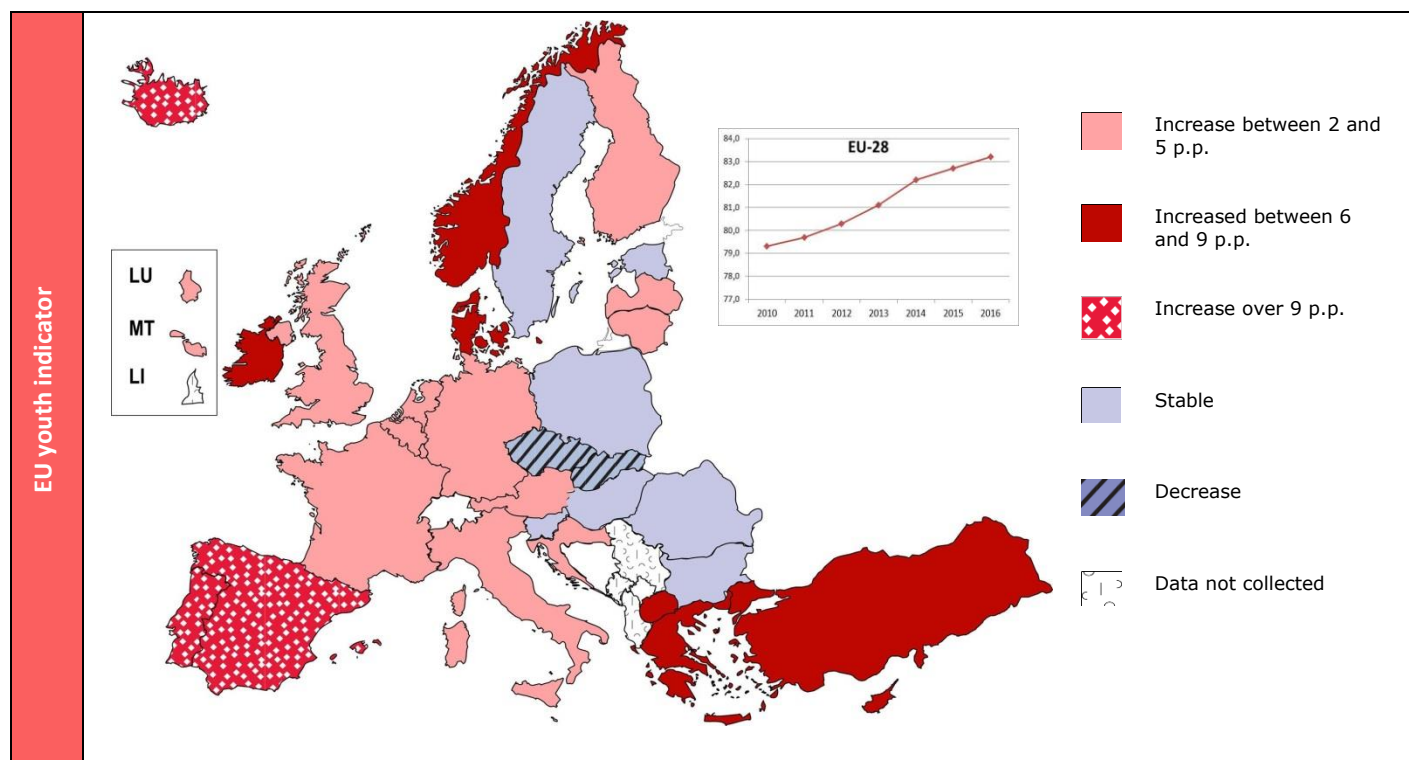
Notes: Data refer to upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education, corresponding to levels 3 and 4 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011).

Over time, young people have become increasingly qualified: in 2016, only 69 % of people aged 55 to 64 had attained upper secondary qualifications, in comparison with over 83 % of 20-24 year-olds<sup>(7)</sup>. Progress has continued in recent years. Indeed, the proportion of young people aged 20 to 24 with upper secondary or higher educational attainment has increased continuously since 2010 (Figure 2-B). On average, an increase of almost four percentage points was registered in the European Union. Two-thirds of countries have witnessed an increase in the rates of upper secondary attainment. Among them, a few have showed impressive improvements: Spain, Iceland and Portugal have respectively seen increases of 9.4, 11.8 and 18.4 percentage points since 2010.

A few countries have remained stable over the years, while only two – Czech Republic and Slovakia – have recorded slight decreases. They remain nonetheless amongst the countries with the highest proportion of young people between 20 and 24 having completed at least upper secondary education.

<sup>(7)</sup> Source: Eurostat, 'Population by educational attainment level, sex and age', online data code: edat\_lfse\_03. Data extracted on 19/06/2017.

**Figure 2-B:** Changes in the share of young people (aged 20-24) who have completed at least upper secondary education, EU-28 average and by country, 2010-2016



Notes: For data on educational attainment based on the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) the International Standard Classification of Education 2011 (ISCED 2011) is applied as from 2014. Up to 2013, ISCED 1997 is used. Nevertheless, data are comparable over time for all available countries.

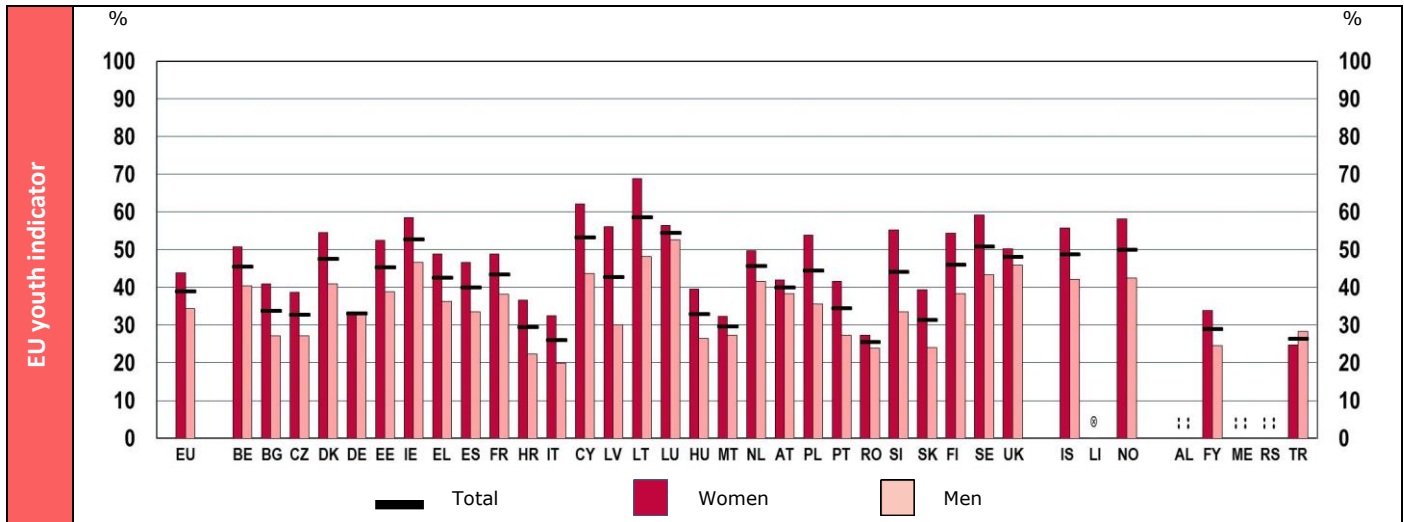
Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat LFS [edat\_lfse\_03].

Looking at higher qualifications than upper secondary level, a tertiary education degree helps young people the most in securing a job in a high-skilled labour market (as illustrated in the chapter on Employment and Entrepreneurship, Figure 3-I).

In 2016, an average of 4 out of 10 Europeans between 30 and 34 years of age had achieved a tertiary degree (Figure 2-C) indicating that the target set in the Europe 2020 strategy was reached earlier than expected<sup>(8)</sup>. A few countries are well above the average, with as many as half of 30- to 34-year-olds having attained a tertiary degree (Ireland, Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Sweden, Iceland and Norway). On the other hand, this percentage is significantly lower (equal to or below 30 %) in Croatia, Italy, Malta, Romania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey. The reasons behind the country variations are multiple and stem from the cultural, historical and social circumstances of each country. Yet, several characteristics of national education systems, such as the existence of multiple secondary education pathways leading to higher studies, the extent to which tertiary institutions select students, and the availability of guidance and information on higher education options (for both prospective and tertiary students) are recognised as important factors influencing tertiary attainment<sup>(9)</sup>.

<sup>(8)</sup> The Europe 2020 strategy's target aims at raising the level of tertiary attainment amongst 30-34 year-olds to 40 % by 2020.

<sup>(9)</sup> European Commission, 2017b.

**Figure 2-C:** Share of population aged 30-34 with tertiary education attainment, by country and by sex, 2016

Notes: Data for Luxembourg have low reliability.

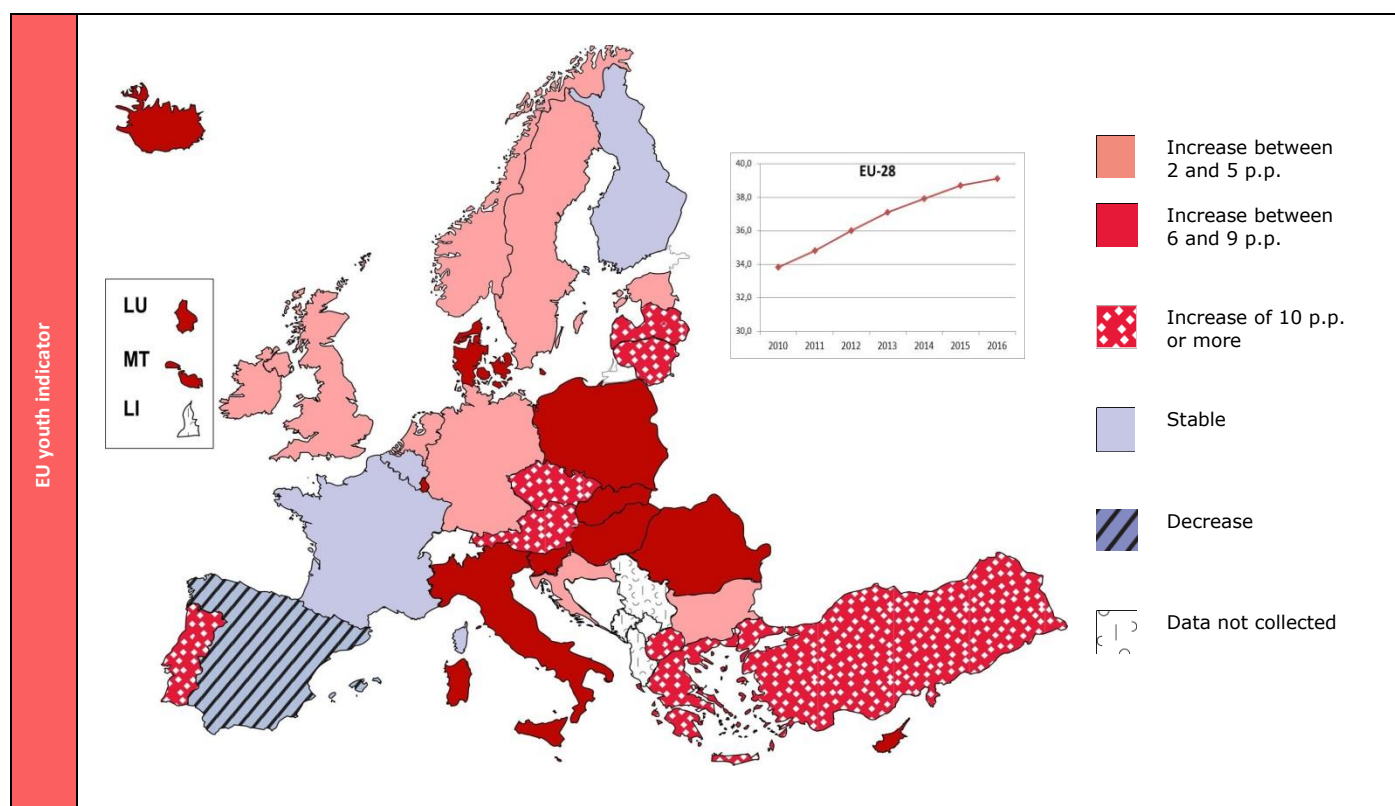
Source: Eurostat LFS [yth\_educ\_020].

In accordance with the general educational attainment trends described above, the proportion of women attaining tertiary education is higher than men. On average, the gender gap amounts to 10 percentage points in the European Union. Men are furthest behind in Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia (where the gap is twice the EU average). In Turkey the trend is the opposite as fewer women than men complete tertiary degrees.

Since 2010, tertiary attainment has increased across Europe (Figure 2-D). On average in the European Union, the proportion of people aged between 30 and 34 having a tertiary degree has augmented by five percentage points. Lithuania and Austria have seen the most significant growth, followed by Czech Republic, Greece, Latvia, Portugal, Turkey and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The only decrease – although quite limited, around two percentage points – has been registered in Spain.

Increasing proportions of young Europeans gain tertiary degrees. Women complete tertiary studies at higher rates than men.

**Figure 2-D:** Changes in the share of population aged 30-34 with tertiary education attainment, by country, 2010-2016



Notes: For data on educational attainment based on the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) the International Standard Classification of Education 2011 (ISCED 2011) is applied as from 2014. Up to 2013 ISCED 1997 is used. Nevertheless, data are comparable over time for all available countries except Austria due to the reclassification of higher technical and vocational colleges. Data for Luxembourg for 2016 have low reliability. A break in the time series for Denmark occurred in 2016.

Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat LFS [yth\_educ\_020].

Despite this positive trend in educational attainment, a significant share of young Europeans still face significant difficulties in the education system and feel compelled to leave prematurely without having gained relevant qualifications or a school certificate. This is the case with early leavers from education and training (also referred to as 'early school leavers') – people aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and who were not in further education or training during the four weeks preceding the survey. Of the factors contributing to young people leaving education early, socio-economic status proves to have significant weight<sup>(10)</sup>. Indeed, early school leavers are much more likely to come from families with a low socio-economic status (i.e. where parents are unemployed, have low incomes and low levels of education), or from vulnerable social groups such as migrants<sup>(11)</sup>. Early school leavers are exposed to a particularly high risk of deprivation and social exclusion. In addition, not only does leaving school and training early result in longer and more frequent spells of unemployment, but even when integrated into the labour market, early school leavers have fewer opportunities for personal development and to participate actively in society<sup>(12)</sup>.

<sup>(10)</sup> European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014.

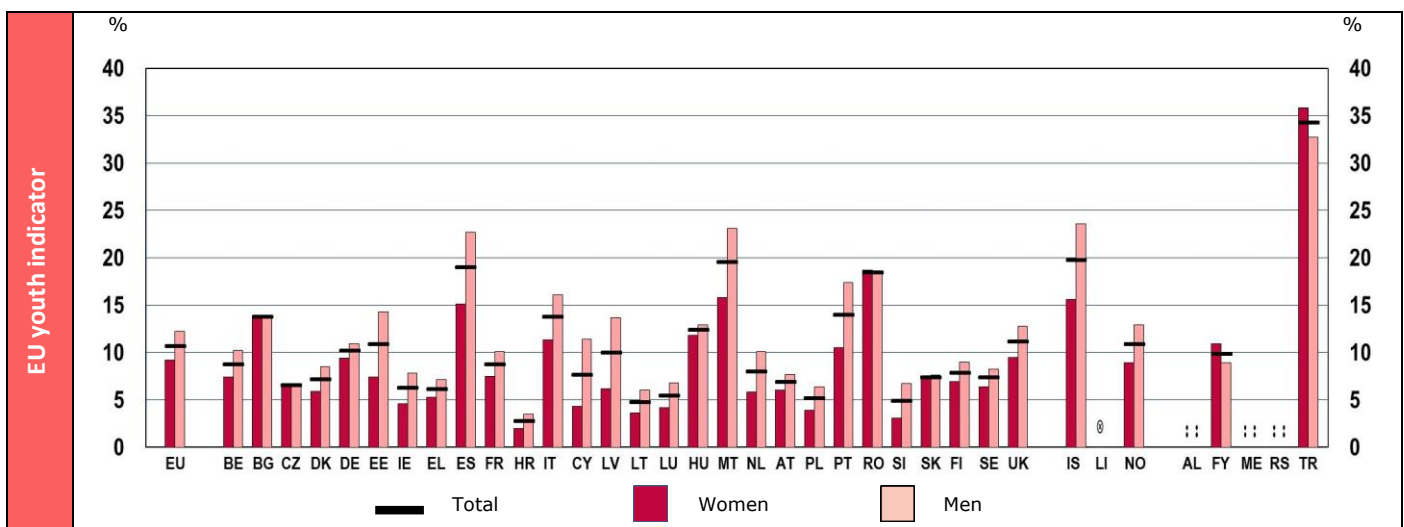
<sup>(11)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(12)</sup> European Commission, 2016a.

On average, 10.7 % of Europeans aged 18-24 in 2016 left school having completed lower secondary education at most (Figure 2-E) <sup>(13)</sup>. Several countries report much higher percentages (especially Spain, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Iceland and Turkey), while the lowest proportions are registered in Croatia, Lithuania and Slovenia, all with levels below 5 %.

The risk of leaving formal education prematurely and with low qualification levels is higher amongst men than women. This gender gap applies to most European countries, and is widest in Estonia, Spain, Cyprus, Latvia, Malta, Portugal and Iceland. Only in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and in Turkey are there more young women than men leaving formal education early.

**Figure 2-E:** Early leavers from education and training (population aged 18-24 with lower secondary education at most and not in further education or training), by country and by sex, 2016



Notes: Data for Croatia for 2016 have low reliability.  
Source: Eurostat LFS [edat\_lfse\_14].

Since 2010 – in conjunction with reforms in most countries to support young people at risk of dropping out of school and increase the flexibility and permeability of educational pathways <sup>(14)</sup> – there has been a general decline in the proportion of young people leaving school early in Europe (Figure 2-F). The most significant decrease has taken place in Portugal, where the proportion of early school leavers has fallen by about 14 percentage points. Ireland, Greece, Spain, Norway, Turkey and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have also experienced a sizeable reduction. Increases have taken place in Hungary, as well as in Czech Republic and Slovakia, which nonetheless remain below the EU benchmark of 10 %.

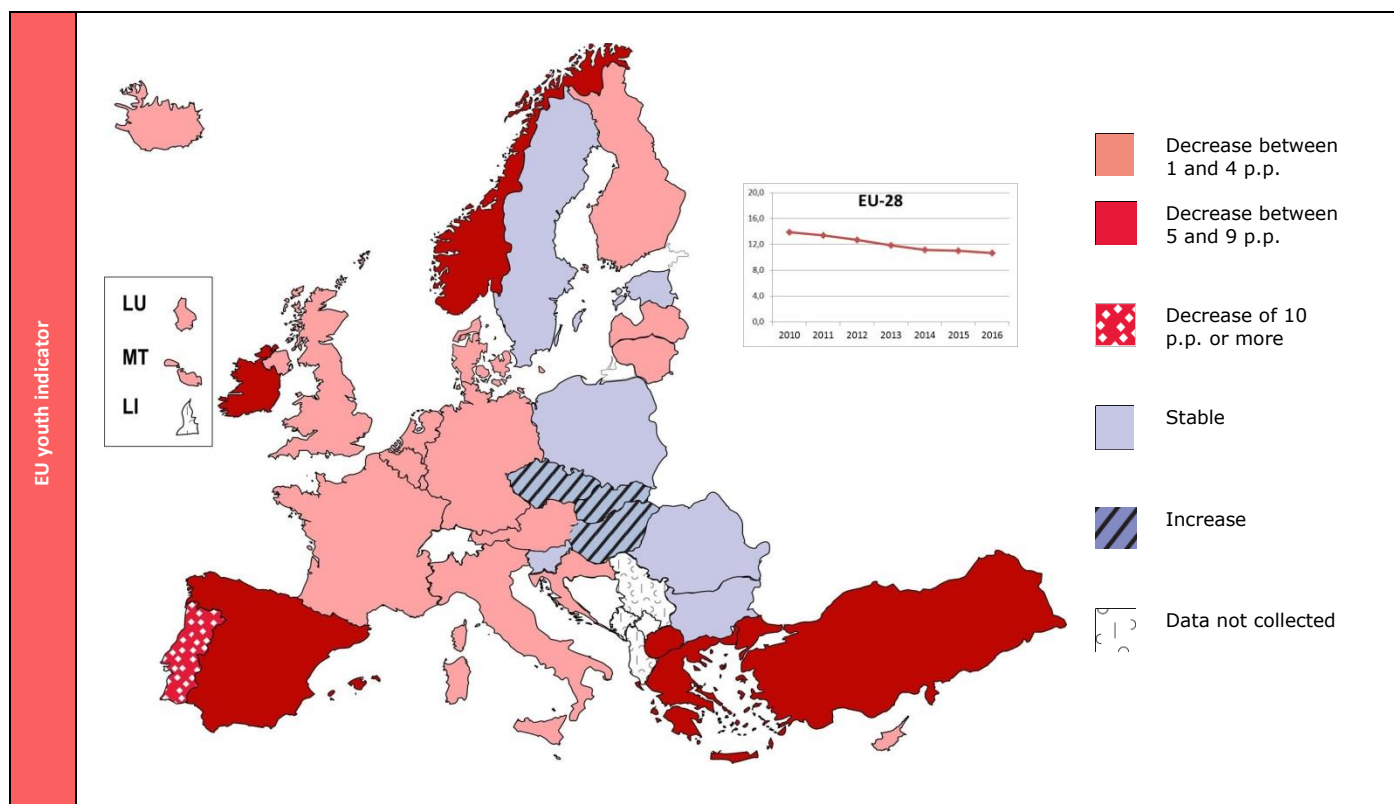
Across the EU, the proportion of early school leavers is declining.

<sup>(13)</sup> The ET 2020 Strategic framework includes a target of reducing the share of early school leavers to below 10 % by 2020.

<sup>(14)</sup> European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014; European Commission, 2017d.



**Figure 2-F:** Changes in the share of early school leavers (population aged 18-24 with lower secondary education at most and not in further education or training), by country, 2010-2016



Notes: For data on educational attainment based on the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), the International Standard Classification of Education 2011 (ISCED 2011) is applied as from 2014. Up to 2013, ISCED 1997 is used. Nevertheless, data are comparable over time for all available countries except Austria due to the reclassification of higher technical and vocational colleges. Data for Croatia for 2016 have low reliability. A break in the time series for Denmark occurred in 2016.

Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat LFS [edat\_lfse\_14].

Young people who have left school prematurely can be helped to re-enter education and subsequently to gain higher qualifications through second chance education <sup>(15)</sup> which combines learning with social and emotional support, or through the validation of learning outcomes achieved by means of non-formal and informal learning <sup>(16)</sup>.

### 2.2.2. Achievement of young people: key competences

During the years spent in formal education, young people are expected to acquire the key competences that are essential if they are to achieve their full potential and be successful in their personal and social lives as well as in their career <sup>(17)</sup>. Amongst these key competences, literacy, mathematics, science and foreign languages also figure as EU youth indicators.

<sup>(15)</sup> European Commission, 2013b.

<sup>(16)</sup> For the overview of validation mechanisms in place in European education systems, please see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015a.

<sup>(17)</sup> The Recommendation adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in 2006 defines key competences as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning - 2006/962/EC).

In 2015, on average, about one in five young people aged 15 demonstrated low levels of proficiency in literacy, numeracy and science (Figure 2-G).

Further effort to reduce the rate of under achievement in reading, mathematics and science is still needed.

**Figure 2-G:** Low-achieving 15 year-old students in reading, mathematics and science, by country, 2009-2015



Notes: For Malta, the change between PISA 2009 and PISA 2015 represents an effective change from 2010 because it only implemented the PISA 2009 assessment in 2010 as part of PISA 2009+.

Source: OECD, PISA.

The figures clearly indicate a similar pattern in pupil performance in all three skills: countries that show a certain level of performance in one of these basic skills tend to perform similarly in the others. Cross-country variations are noticeable. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Malta, Romania and Slovakia registered proportions of low achievers about twice as high as the EU average. Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Montenegro and Turkey showed much higher percentages – between 40 % and 70 %. Conversely, Estonia and Finland reported the lowest proportions of students with low levels of proficiency in all three competences.

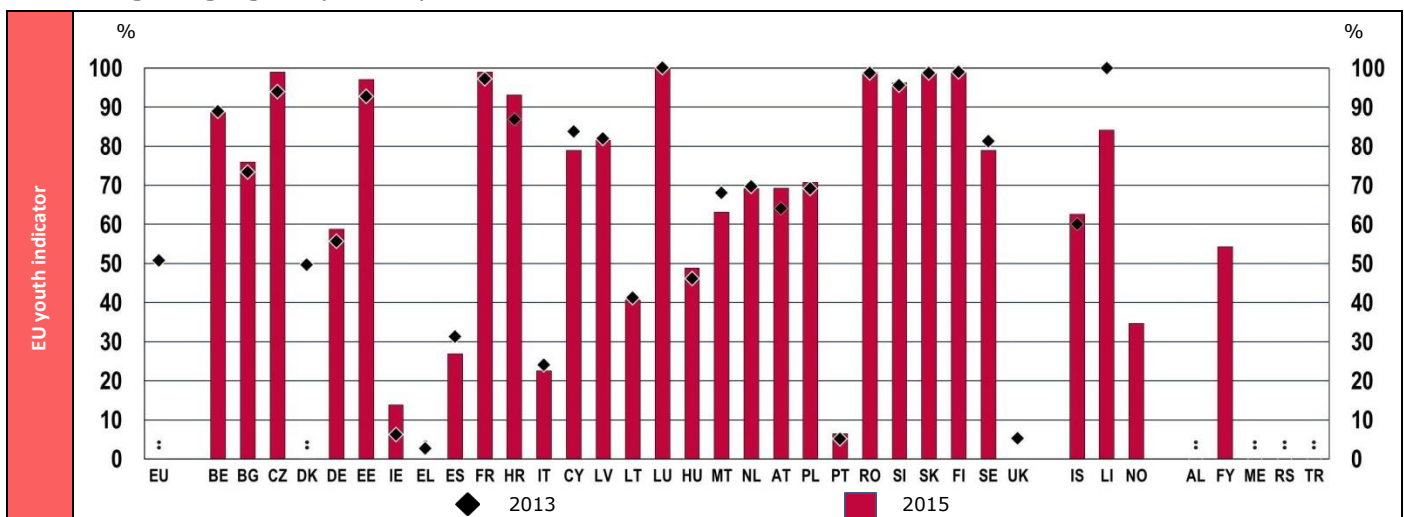
Gender differences (not shown in Figure 2-H), while negligible for mathematics and science, are pronounced in reading proficiency: on average, 10 % more boys than girls revealed low achievement, and the gap is even wider in Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia <sup>(18)</sup>.

Further effort to reduce the rate of underachievement in literacy, numeracy and science is still needed. Europe still counts a worrying number of pupils with very low basic skills and progress towards achieving the target of reducing this proportion to below 15 % has been slow <sup>(19)</sup>. Since 2009, the average proportions of low achievers have either stagnated – as in the case of reading and mathematics – or increased – as in science. In particular, Greece, Hungary, Slovakia, Iceland and Turkey have seen the proportion of pupils with poor performance in all three core competences surge upwards with percentage increases of between 6 and 15 points.

Knowledge of foreign languages is a significant advantage for young people. It enables them to discover and understand different cultures, and expand their educational and professional prospects by opening up opportunities to study and work abroad.

One in two students enrolled in general secondary education learns two or more foreign languages in the European Union (Figure 2-H). In about one third of countries, the proportion is much higher, approaching or reaching 100 %. Conversely, Ireland, the United Kingdom and some southern European Member States show particularly low proportions of young people learning at least two foreign languages.

**Figure 2-H:** Share of young people in upper general secondary education (ISCED 3gen) learning two or more foreign languages, by country, 2013 and 2015



Notes: EU-28 totals are calculated on the basis of the countries for which data are available. Where possible the previous/following year data have been used to compute the EU aggregates.

Source: Eurostat UOE [educ\_uae\_lang02].

<sup>(18)</sup> Data on gender differences are available at <https://data.oecd.org/pisa/reading-performance-pisa.htm> (last accessed on 19/06/2017).

<sup>(19)</sup> The Europe 2020 strategy includes a target to reduce the share of low achievers in reading, mathematics and science amongst 15 year-olds to below 15 % by 2020.

There has been a slightly positive trend across countries since 2013 in terms of the opportunity to learn more than one foreign language in upper secondary general education. A few countries have seen significant increases equal to or above six percentage points (Czech Republic, Ireland, Croatia and Austria). However, only a minority of the countries have introduced attainment level targets with the aim of ensuring that learners will reach the threshold of 'independent use' of the second foreign language <sup>(20)</sup>.

The level of proficiency in foreign languages acquired by young Europeans is not being systematically measured across EU countries, although most countries require students to reach level B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for their first foreign language (mostly English) by the end of upper secondary education <sup>(21)</sup>.

### 2.3. NON-FORMAL LEARNING AND YOUTH WORK

Non-formal education and training covers any organised and sustained learning activities that do not take place within the framework of the formal education system <sup>(22)</sup>. Non-formal learning is undertaken intentionally but participation in the courses or activities is voluntary <sup>(23)</sup>. As acknowledged by the Council of the European Union, non-formal learning can greatly contribute to increasing the motivation of young Europeans to undertake lifelong learning as well as improving their employability and job mobility, provided that mechanisms for recognising and validating the skills acquired are widely available <sup>(24)</sup>.

Indeed, non-formal learning can help release the potential of many young people by uncovering and developing their knowledge, skills and attitudes and by encouraging the acquisition of new kinds of capacities. While these opportunities are important for all young people, they can be particularly beneficial to those who are at an educational disadvantage <sup>(25)</sup>.

On average in the European Union, 1 in 10 young Europeans participate in non-formal learning (Figure 2-I). However, countries differ greatly in terms of the proportion of young people involved. While at least 1 in 5 young individuals participate in non-formal learning activities in Denmark, France and Sweden, other countries register much lower percentages, in particular Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Slovakia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

One in 10 young Europeans participates in non-formal learning but countries differ widely in the level of participation.

<sup>(20)</sup> Detailed analysis of national policies can be found in a recent study on language learning in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017b).

<sup>(21)</sup> Ibid. p. 14 and pp. 121-124.

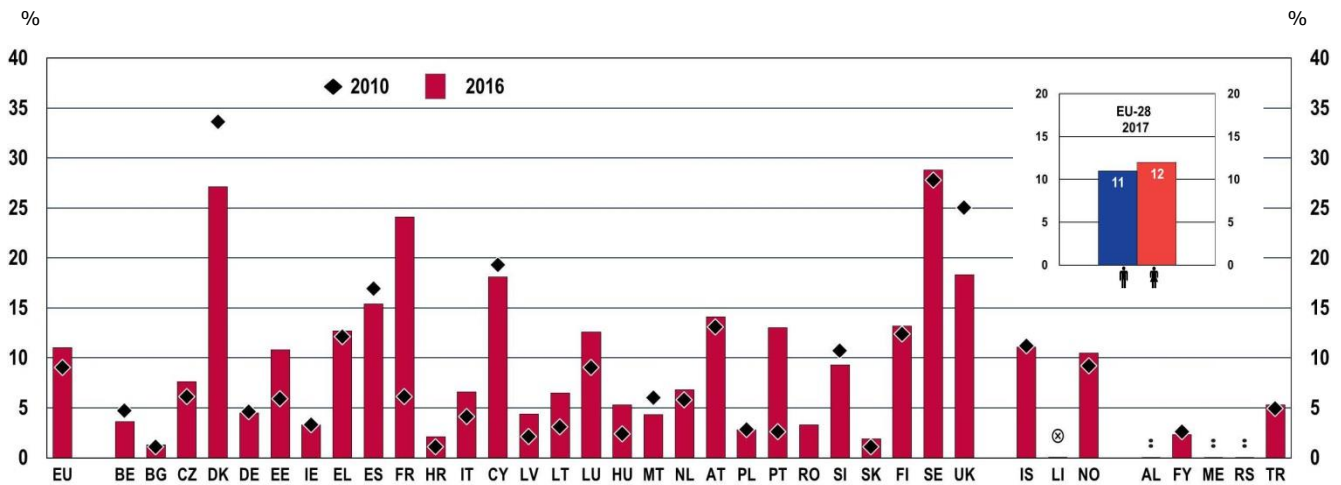
<sup>(22)</sup> This definition is provided by Eurostat in the context of its lifelong learning statistics and is also applied in the EU LFS which collects data on participation in non-formal education and training during the four weeks preceding the survey.

<sup>(23)</sup> In its online glossary, CEDEFOP defines non-formal learning as 'learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically does not lead to certification'. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory/european-inventory-glossary> (last accessed on 20/06/2017).

<sup>(24)</sup> European Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01).

<sup>(25)</sup> Council of Europe, 2005.

**Figure 2-I:** Share of young people (aged 15-29) participating in non-formal learning and training, by country, 2010 and 2016, and by sex, 2016



Notes: Data for Croatia and Romania for 2010 have low reliability. Break in time series for data for Denmark in 2016.  
Source: Eurostat LFS [trng\_ifs\_09].

As illustrated by Figure 2-I, in the EU-28 the average proportion of young women and young men engaging in non-formal learning are similar. Since 2011, the participation in non-formal learning has slightly increased in the EU. Some countries have witnessed impressive augmentations, in particular France and Portugal. In contrast, young people in Denmark and the United Kingdom have engaged to decreasing extents.

Non-formal learning may take place in the context of youth work. According to the Resolution of the Council of the European Union on youth work from 2010, youth work encompasses activities for and by young people, taking place in the extracurricular and leisure spheres, and based on voluntary participation. Such activities see the cooperation of professional and voluntary youth workers, youth leaders, and the active engagement and contribution of young participants<sup>(26)</sup>.

Youth work has been shown to exert positive influence on student achievements in education by fostering non-cognitive skills such as persistence, motivation, and self-efficacy<sup>(27)</sup>. In particular, young people at risk of dropping out prematurely from education and training may obtain support from youth workers, gaining access to learning resources and individualised assistance and becoming motivated to learn again through participation in the various activities organised for them<sup>(28)</sup>. Some youth work programmes have also proven effective in bringing young people who have left school early back into education by, for example, offering preparatory courses for re-insertion into mainstream education or second chance programmes<sup>(29)</sup>.

By providing opportunities for non-formal learning, youth work contributes to the acquisition and enhancement of key competences essential in promoting youth's education attainment.

<sup>(26)</sup> Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on youth work (2010/C 329/01).

<sup>(27)</sup> Shernoff and Lowe Vandell, 2007.

<sup>(28)</sup> European Commission, 2014c. The study offers a detailed and comprehensive assessment of the various traditions and developments of youth work in Europe. It presents both secondary analysis of previous literature and data on the topic, and first-hand evidence collected through interviews. Most of the information presented in this section draws from this study's findings.

<sup>(29)</sup> Ibid.

Providing information, advice and guidance to support young people in their decision making during their education and training is another important aspect of youth work <sup>(30)</sup>. Indeed, in some European countries, central authorities place guidance services for students under the auspices of youth work organisations, delivered by nation-wide networks independent from schools <sup>(31)</sup>.

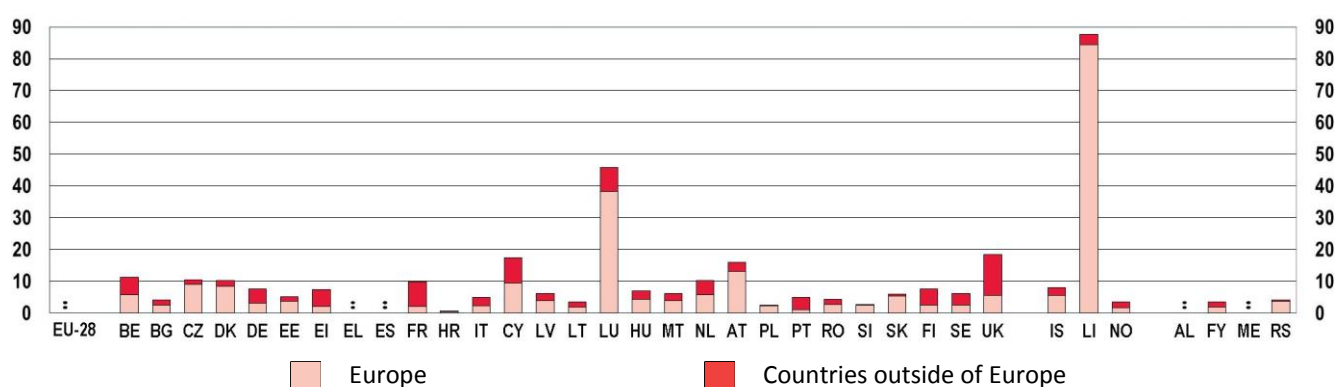
Because youth work is such a wide field encompassing voluntary leisure-time as well as extra-curricular activities, its contribution goes well beyond supporting young people in their educational experiences. Studies which have investigated the effects of young people's participation in youth work activities show that young people can acquire and reinforce personal skills such as conflict resolution, decision making, goal setting and interpersonal communication that can prove useful in all spheres of life <sup>(32)</sup>. Although data on young people's participation in activities organised by youth workers is limited, Chapter 6 of this report provides some insight into the level of participation in organised voluntary activities (Figure 6-A) while Chapter 9 examines their involvement in youth organisations, cultural organisations and sports clubs (Figure 9-C).

## 2.4. LEARNING MOBILITY

Learning mobility is generally seen as contributing to the development of a wide range of skills and competences among young people. Most importantly, transversal skills such as critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and intercultural understanding are found to be improved by study periods abroad <sup>(33)</sup>. According to the Erasmus Impact Study, students participating in the Erasmus mobility programme improve their employability skills more than non-participants <sup>(34)</sup>. In addition, student mobility programmes also have the potential to contribute to the overall quality of education <sup>(35)</sup>.

Data are available on the flows of internationally-mobile students in tertiary education. Figure 2-J shows the proportion of students enrolled in a tertiary institution who come from abroad (inward student mobility) in 2015.

**Figure 2-J:** Share of internationally-mobile tertiary education students coming from Europe and the rest of the world, by country, 2015



Source: Eurostat UOE [educ\_uae\_mobs03].

<sup>(30)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(31)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(32)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(33)</sup> European Commission, 2014b.

<sup>(34)</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>(35)</sup> Council of the European Union, 2011. European Commission, 2017d.

Disparities between countries are noticeable not only in terms of the total proportion of foreign students coming from abroad, but also their origin. While Luxembourg and Liechtenstein report the highest percentages of students from abroad, data show that they mainly come from other European countries rather than from areas outside of Europe. This pattern also applies to other countries with relatively high total proportions of incoming students, including Czech Republic, Denmark and Austria. Conversely, some EU Member States attract high proportions of tertiary students from areas outside of Europe – at least twice that from other European countries: this is the case of Ireland (mainly from Asia), France (in particular from African countries), Portugal (with a prevalence of central and southern American countries), Finland (with high a proportion of students from Asia including Russia) and the United Kingdom (also mostly from Asia) <sup>(36)</sup>.

Besides tertiary education programmes, spending time abroad, getting acquainted with foreign cultures and interacting with peers from other countries represents an important occasion for non-formal and informal learning for many young people in Europe <sup>(37)</sup>. Unfortunately, quantitative data collected at international level on learning mobility outside of formal education are scarce <sup>(38)</sup>. Qualitative research has nonetheless shed some light on the learning benefits for participants in international youth mobility projects in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme <sup>(39)</sup>. Participation in youth mobility projects is seen as contributing to the development of all the key competences for lifelong learning. Communication in a foreign language, sense of entrepreneurship, civic competences, cultural awareness and expression, and learning skills (learning to learn) are reportedly the areas in which students benefit the most. A positive impact has also been demonstrated on other competences such as communication in the first language (mother tongue), mathematical competences and a sense of initiative <sup>(40)</sup>. Youth workers engaged in mobility projects also report that their competences were boosted, in particular in the context of managing international youth projects <sup>(41)</sup>. In line with these general findings, a survey on young individuals taking part in mobility projects under Erasmus+ during 2015 shows that close to 94 % of the participants reported having improved their key competences and skills relevant to employability <sup>(42)</sup>.

Last but not least, international learning mobility in the context of non-formal learning can be of particular benefit for young people with fewer opportunities. Qualitative research shows that these experiences actually bring an added value to the participants in terms of increased self-esteem, social and communicative skills, as well as vocational skills <sup>(43)</sup>.

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<sup>(36)</sup> Source: Eurostat UOE [educ\_uae\_mobs03].

<sup>(37)</sup> Fennes, 2013.

<sup>(38)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(39)</sup> The aim of the Erasmus+ programme is to contribute to the Europe 2020 strategy for growth, jobs, social equity and inclusion, as well as the aims of ET2020, the EU's strategic framework for education and training. Erasmus+ also aims to promote the sustainable development of its partners in the field of higher education, and contribute to achieving the objectives of the EU Youth Strategy. Detailed information is available at [http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about_en) (accessed 14/09/2017).

<sup>(40)</sup> Fennes, 2013.

<sup>(41)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(42)</sup> European Commission, 2017e.

<sup>(43)</sup> Kristensen, 2012.

## CONCLUSION

Young people are increasingly highly educated. The proportion of young Europeans attaining upper secondary qualifications continues to increase. Increasing proportions of young Europeans gain tertiary degrees. The proportion of early school leavers is declining.

However, significant shares of young people face challenges in completing their educational path. Europe still counts a worrying number of pupils with very low basic skills. What is worse, since 2009, the average proportions of low achievers have either stagnated – as in the case of reading and mathematics – or increased – as in science. In addition, participation in non-formal learning – which can be particularly beneficial to those who are at an educational disadvantage – is still limited.