

Poor maths skills pose risk to economy

Description

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That was the headline following the publication in December of a 'Joint Employment Report (JER)' by the European Commission (EC) that provides an annual overview of key employment and social developments in the EU.

Attention to these problems was drawn in the Draghi Report on 'the future of European competitiveness' that warned that there is an undersupply of skills in Europe due to declines in education and training systems that are failing to prepare the workforce for technological change. Draghi's stark message was that educational attainment in the EU is falling.

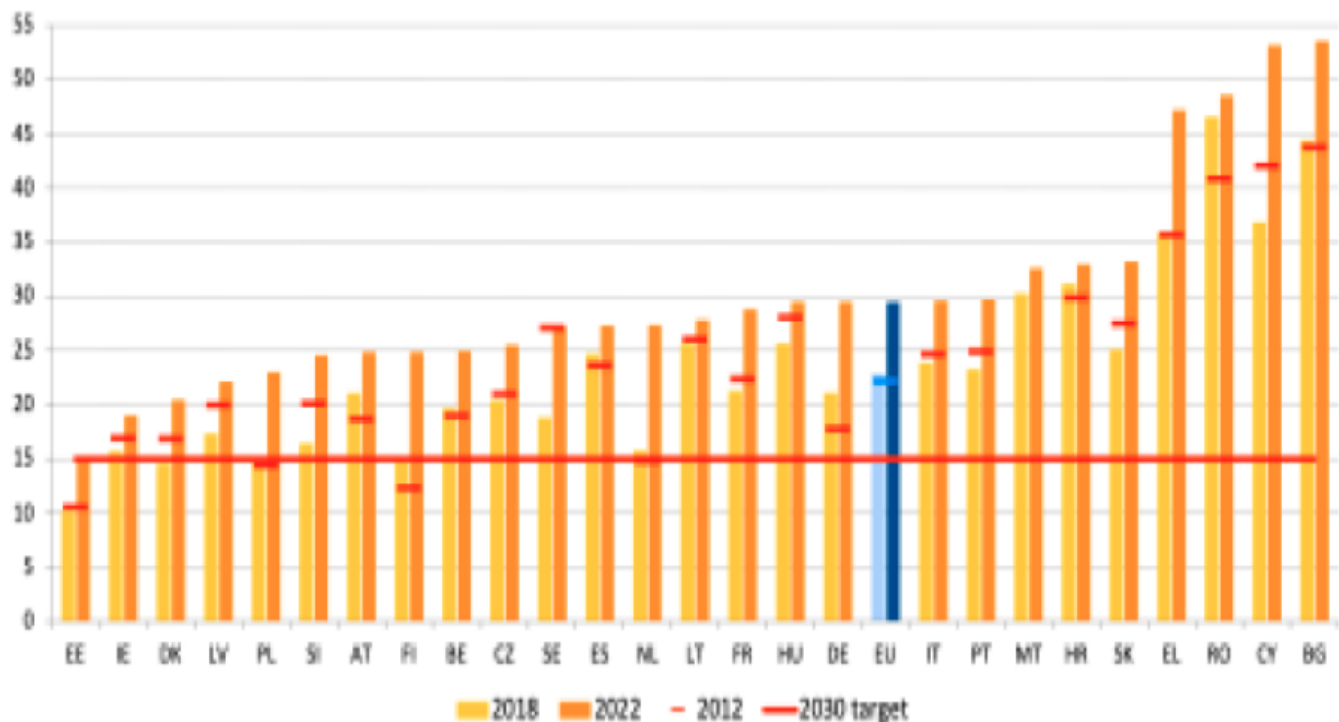
JER examined these education failings and concluded that "children's maths and reading skills have 'significantly worsened' across most EU countries, posing a huge risk to how well the bloc's future workforce can power its economy." These poor results pose a threat to future productivity and competitiveness.

To address this, EU's 'Competitiveness Compass' published end of January, includes an Education Strategic Plan and a Basic Skills Action Plan. These are pushing for action to address school education failings.

JER relied on the results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022. These revealed that almost one in three 15-year-olds lack basic skills and fail

to reach the minimum competence level in mathematics, and one in four in reading and science. In other words, they cannot do basic maths or read. Today, the EU is further away from its European Education Area target of at most 15% of 15-year-olds underachieving by 2030.

Underachievement rates in maths in the EU have increased strongly (Share of students who are not able to reach the minimum competence benchmark PISA Level 2 (%))



Source: OECD

Since 2012, underachievement rates have been increasing consistently at EU level, with the PISA 2022 results documenting the most dramatic decline in basic skills performance in reading, maths and science.

In maths, the situation is especially concerning in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece, that exhibit by far the worst underachievement rates in the EU.

Cyprus ranked second last, marginally above Bulgaria, with a very high maths underachievement score. More than half, 53.2%, of all students lack basic skills in maths and over 60% in reading.

Disadvantaged students experienced a disproportionate rise in severe underachievement across Europe, with the sharpest increase recorded in Cyprus, at 16.2%.

Clearly, the EU target, that underachievement rates in reading, mathematics and science should be below 15% by 2030, is far off. Evidently Cyprus will have a hard task achieving that.

Delivering high-quality digital education and training, including by ensuring that education systems keep pace with technological advancements, is key to support a fair digital transition. In Cyprus digital literacy has declined and is particularly low, with only 49.5% of adults having at least basic digital skills in 2023.

JER has warned that these poor results as a threat to labor productivity and competitiveness in the medium term. It said: 'Well-functioning and effective education and training systems are thus crucial for equipping young people and adults with labour market-relevant skills for quality jobs, also in view of the big transformations that the EU is facing.' There is increasing danger that the green and digital transition could 'leave EU citizens behind.'

JER states that major reforms and investments to boost basic skills, including comprehensive curricular revisions, have been undertaken, including in Cyprus, but further efforts are needed across the EU to reverse declining trends. Let's hope that this acts as a wake-up call before it is too late.

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