

Interpretation of Educational Attainment Levels in the EU (2024)

1. EU Average (Benchmark)

At the EU level, around one-third of adults hold tertiary qualifications (33.5%), one-third have medium-level vocational education (34.7%), and about one-fifth have low education levels (22.2%). This balance highlights the key role of vocational and tertiary education in building Europe's skills base.

2. Countries with Strong VET Orientation

Czechia, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, Germany, Hungary, and Austria show particularly high shares of vocational education (45–65%). These are VET-driven systems often based on dual education models combining school and work-based learning. They ensure strong alignment with labour market needs and low youth unemployment but typically have lower tertiary participation.

3. Countries with High Tertiary Education

Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden, Cyprus, Finland, Denmark, Netherlands, Estonia, and Lithuania lead in tertiary attainment (40–53%). These knowledge-based economies focus on higher education but may face shortages in mid-level technical skills due to declining VET participation.

4. Countries with Balanced or Mixed Structures

Estonia, France, Austria, Belgium, Latvia, and the Netherlands combine moderate vocational and tertiary shares with low proportions of low-educated adults. Their systems often allow flexible transitions between VET and tertiary pathways.

5. Countries with High Shares of Low Education

Portugal, Spain, Italy, Malta, and Greece have high proportions of low-educated adults (30–45%), well above the EU average. Limited VET participation and early school leaving remain major challenges, affecting labour market inclusion and competitiveness.

6. Regional Patterns and Policy Implications

- Central/Eastern Europe: Strong VET systems — need for better permeability to higher education.
- Nordic/Baltic: Balanced, high tertiary attainment — maintain VET relevance in digital transition.
- Western Europe: Dual vs academic systems — sustain parity of esteem between pathways.
- Southern Europe: High low-education rates — invest in VET attractiveness and lifelong learning.

7. Overall Insight

Educational structures reveal distinct skills models across Europe. VET-oriented systems ensure employability, while tertiary-oriented systems drive innovation. Countries with low VET participation and high low-education levels face deeper skills shortages. Strengthening VET attractiveness, quality, and permeability is key to improving skills resilience and competitiveness across the EU.