

Danube Region Monitor “People and Skills”

Report 2025

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**Interreg
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Danube Region Monitor 2025

Key results and policy recommendations

Employment and Labour Participation (Objective I): Results

- Employment and participation rose across the region - fastest in EU candidate countries.
- Unemployment and long-term unemployment declined, yet remain high in the Western Balkans.
- Female employment grew strongly; gender gaps narrowed but care duties still constrain women.
- Older workers more active thanks to pension reforms, yet youth transitions into stable jobs remain difficult.
- NEET rates dropped but stay nearly double in candidate countries.

Source: Danube Region Monitor 2025; based on Eurostat and national LFS data.

Employment and Labour Participation (Objective I): Policy Priorities

Activate, Include, Modernise

- **Boost participation:** Personalised upskilling and activation for long-term unemployed, older workers, and persons with disabilities.
- **Support work-family balance:** Expand affordable childcare and eldercare to raise female employment.
- **Modernise employment services:** Strengthen PES capacity through digital tools, mobile outreach, and better coordination.
- **Enable flexible work models:** Promote telework, part-time, and phased retirement with inclusive employer incentives.
- **Foster regional learning:** Share good practices on active labour market policies within the Danube Region.

Education and Skills Outcomes (Objectives II + IV): Results

- Educational attainment rose at all levels, especially in tertiary and vocational tracks.
- Digital competences improving among younger cohorts, but older adults and women lag behind.
- Early childhood participation expanded, yet access and affordability remain limited in candidate countries.
- School-to-work transitions remain weak, especially where employer links are underdeveloped.
- Gender balance in education improved, though STEM and ICT fields remain male-dominated.
- Dropout rates and basic skills inequalities persist, particularly among disadvantaged and migrant students.

Source: Danube Region Monitor 2025; based on Eurostat, PISA, and national data.

Education and Skills Outcomes (Objectives II + IV): Policy Priorities

Modernise Learning and Strengthen Transitions

- **Update curricula** to integrate digital, green, and civic competences across all levels.
- **Expand high-quality VET and dual learning** through closer employer partnerships.
- **Support inclusive access** to early childhood, tertiary, and adult learning, with targeted funding.
- **Bridge school-to-work gaps** via internships, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurial learning.
- **Promote gender balance in STEM and ICT** through mentoring and awareness initiatives.
- **Enhance quality assurance and accountability** in education outcomes.

System Investment and Quality (Objective III): Results

- Education and labour-market spending stabilised in EU Member States, but remains low and volatile in candidate countries.
- Underinvestment in early education, digitalisation, and teacher pay slows progress.
- Teacher shortages and ageing staff widespread, especially in rural and vocational schools.
- Some countries sustain funding and oversight (e.g. Austria, Czechia), while others rely on short-term or crisis-driven budgets.
- Weak monitoring and fragmented reforms limit efficiency and impact.

Source: Danube Region Monitor 2025; based on Eurostat and national budget data.

System Investment and Quality (Objective III): Policy Priorities

Invest Smartly and Strengthen Quality Governance

- **Raise investment in underfunded systems** – prioritise early education, digital tools, and teacher salaries.
- **Modernise financing frameworks** – link resources to outcomes through performance-based funding.
- **Ensure predictable budgets** for labour-market policies and up-/reskilling programmes.
- **Address teacher shortages** via better allocation, incentives, and continuous professional development.
- **Build robust monitoring and evaluation systems** to improve accountability and trust.
- **Encourage regional knowledge exchange** on efficient funding and governance models.

Inclusion, Equity and Lifelong Learning (Objective IV): Results

- Poverty and inequality declined modestly in EU Member States, but remain high in candidate countries.
- Socio-economic background remains the strongest driver of learning outcomes.
- Basic competences in reading, maths, and science declined across the region.
- Adult learning participation expanding in EU countries, yet remains low among older and low-qualified adults.
- Digital access improved widely, but rural and older populations still lag behind.
- Gender pay and participation gaps persist, tied to care and occupational segregation.

Source: Danube Region Monitor 2025; based on Eurostat, PISA, and national surveys.

Inclusion, Equity and Lifelong Learning (Objective IV): Policy Priorities

Empower Everyone to Learn and Participate

- **Close gender gaps** – enforce equal pay, expand childcare, and support balanced caregiving.
- **Reduce poverty and inequality** through stronger social protection and inclusive labour-market measures.
- **Raise basic competences and equity** by improving school quality and targeting disadvantaged learners.
- **Promote lifelong learning** – build flexible adult education systems reaching women, older workers, and rural areas.
- **Bridge the digital divide** with universal access and targeted digital upskilling.
- **Foster civic and citizenship skills** that strengthen belonging, creativity, and adaptability.

Thematic Chapter:
Basic Skills and Skill Shortages
Key results and policy recommendations

Basic and Citizenship Skills: Results and Drivers

- EU Member States cluster around EU average in reading, maths, and science, but candidate countries perform substantially lower.
- Basic competences declined overall, with strong socio-economic and absenteeism effects.
- Citizenship competences (belonging, creativity) stronger in some candidate countries, while growth mindset remains weak across the region.
- Gender gaps persist – girls outperform in reading; boys lead in maths and confidence.
- Resource gaps and teacher shortages in rural schools limit learning quality.
- Supportive school climate and teacher engagement linked to better outcomes and stronger sense of belonging.

Source: PISA 2022 microdata; analysis of student-level and contextual factors across the Danube Region.

Basic and Citizenship Skills: Policy Priorities

Build Strong Foundations and Future-Ready Mindsets

- **Strengthen core competences** – invest in curricula, teacher training, and digital infrastructure to raise maths, science, and ICT skills.
- **Reduce socio-economic and territorial inequalities** – expand early childhood access, fair funding, and targeted family support.
- **Combat absenteeism and disengagement** – use early-warning systems, mentoring, and interactive learning.
- **Address gender divides** – encourage girls in STEM and support boys in reading and creativity.
- **Foster citizenship skills** – integrate belonging, growth mindset, and creative thinking into teaching and extracurriculars.
- **Leverage regional cooperation** – share effective school innovation models and teacher professional networks.

Wrap-Up:

Towards Inclusive and Future-Ready Skills Systems

Danube-wide Policy Directions

- ➊ **Activate and include the workforce** – support all people to participate through skills and care infrastructure.
- ➋ **Modernise learning systems** – align education with green, digital and civic competences.
- ➌ **Invest in quality and teachers** – make learning systems resilient and attractive.
- ➍ **Empower lifelong and citizenship learning** – foster belonging, creativity and growth mindset.
- ➎ **Strengthen regional cooperation** – share data, good practices, and align funding under PA9.

Skills are the backbone of resilience, cohesion, and competitiveness in the Danube Region.

Thank you!


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