

Early school leaving in Europe – Questions and answers

What is meant by 'early school leaving'?

The European Union defines early school leavers as people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training.¹

Early school leavers are therefore those who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years².

The data on early school leavers are collected annually via the [European Labour Force Survey](#).

Early school leaving can take several forms. It includes young people who have dropped out of school before the end of compulsory education, those who have completed compulsory schooling, but have not gained an upper secondary qualification, and those who have followed pre-vocational or vocational courses which did not lead to a qualification equivalent to upper secondary level.

Who is not considered to be an early school leaver?

The definition of early school leavers excludes anyone who participated in some form of education or training in the four weeks prior to the date of the survey. Likewise, young people who initially drop out of school but then return to finish upper secondary education before the age of 25 are not regarded as early school leavers.

What is the EU's objective?

The Europe 2020 strategy contains five headline targets. One is to reduce the EU average early school leaving rate to less than 10% by 2020.

The early school leaving target is strongly related to smart and inclusive growth. It impacts directly on the employability of young people and contributes to breaking the cycle of deprivation, social exclusion and poverty.

What are the economic and social costs of early school leaving?

Early school leaving creates high individual, social and economic costs. Young people with only lower secondary education or less are more often affected by unemployment, are more likely to depend on social benefits and have a higher risk of social exclusion. It affects their lifetime earnings, well-being and health. They tend to participate less in democratic processes.

Early school leaving has long-term negative effects on social development and economic growth. Innovation and growth rely on a skilled labour force: Reducing the average European rate of early school leaving by just 1 percentage point would provide the European economy each year with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees.

¹ This definition was agreed by EU Education Ministers in the Council in 2003 (Council conclusions on "Reference levels of European Average Performance in Education and Training (Benchmarks)", May 2003).

² Levels 0, 1, 2 or 3c short in the United Nations' International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)

Why do young people abandon education early?

There are many reasons why some young people give up education and training prematurely. Although the situation varies in different countries, early school leaving in Europe is strongly linked to social disadvantage and low education backgrounds. Vulnerable groups are especially affected such as young people who have been in care and those with special educational needs.

Early school leaving is influenced by educational factors, individual circumstances and socio-economic conditions. It is a process which often starts in primary education with first experiences of failure and alienation from school.

When do the young people concerned typically leave education?

While over 70% of early school leavers in the EU complete lower secondary education, around 17% have completed only primary education. This latter group is especially large in Bulgaria (38%) and Portugal (40%).

What do early school leavers do?

In 2009, only 48% of early school leavers in the EU were in employment, while 52% were either unemployed or outside the labour market. The percentage of young people who had abandoned education but were in employment was highest in Malta (74%), Cyprus (74%), Portugal (71%), and the Netherlands (71%).

Especially large numbers of early school leavers were either unemployed or inactive in Slovakia (80%), in Bulgaria (73%) and in Hungary (71%).

Is there a link between migration and early school leaving?

On average across the EU, twice as many young people from the first generation of migrants abandon school early compared to their native peers (26% versus 13%).

But again, we see substantial differences between Member States: In Greece, Spain and Italy more than 40% of young migrants are early school leavers. A few countries such as Portugal, the UK and Norway show lower rates of early school leavers among migrants compared to natives.

In several Member States early school leaving is especially high among disadvantaged minorities such as the Roma population.

Where does the data come from?

Data are taken from the European Labour Force Survey (LFS), which is conducted in the 27 Member States, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey.

It is a large household sample survey providing quarterly results on labour participation of people aged 15 and over as well as on people who are not in employment.

The national statistical institutes are responsible for selecting the sample, preparing the questionnaires, conducting interviews among households, and providing the results to the statistical office of the European Union (Eurostat). In 2010, around 1.5 million people across the EU were part of the survey.

To find out more:

[IP/11/109](#), 31 January 2011

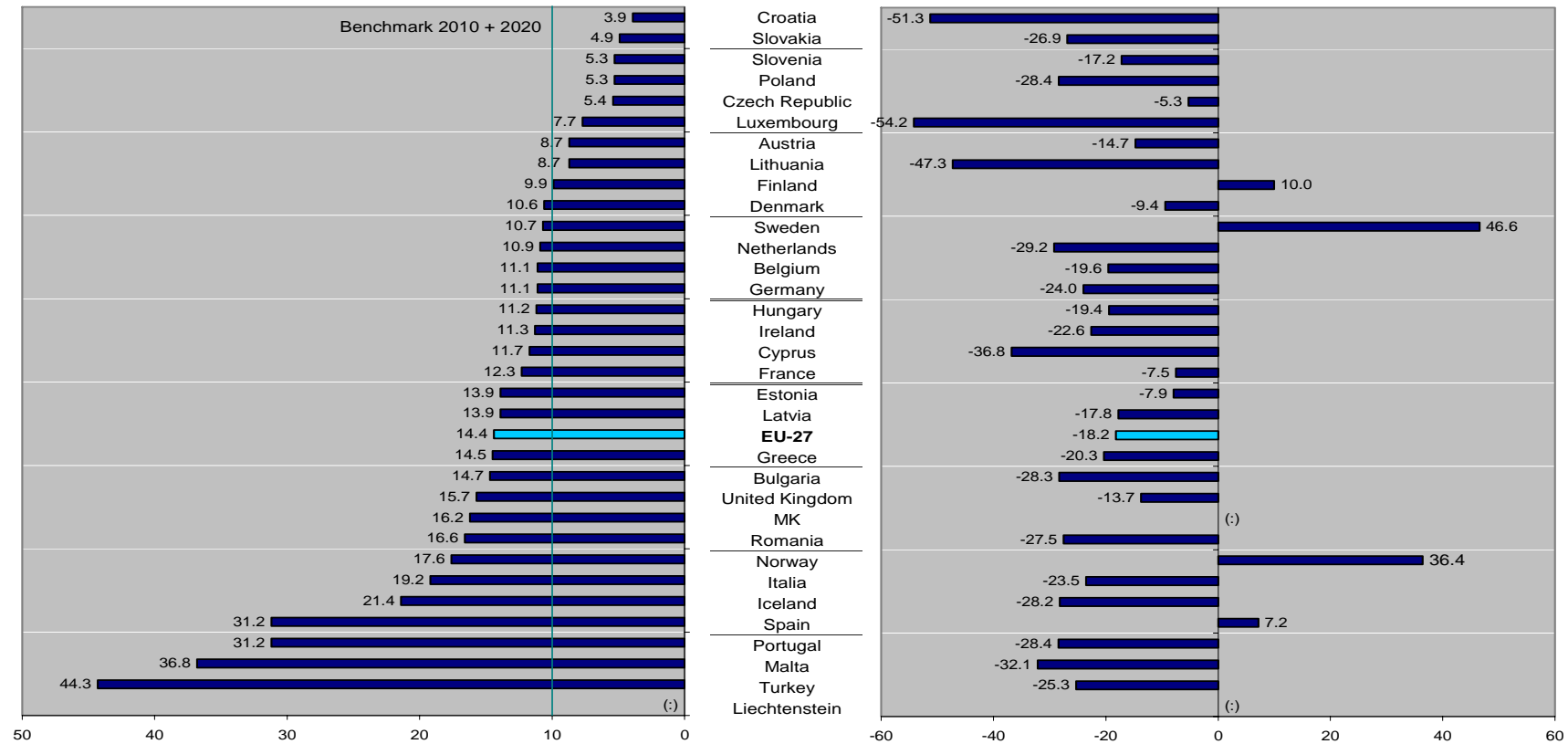
European Commission: Communication [COM(2011)18] "Tackling early school leaving. A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda", 31 January 2011

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving [COM(2011)19], 31 January 2011

Staff working paper "Reducing early school leaving" [SEC(2011)96], 31 January 2011

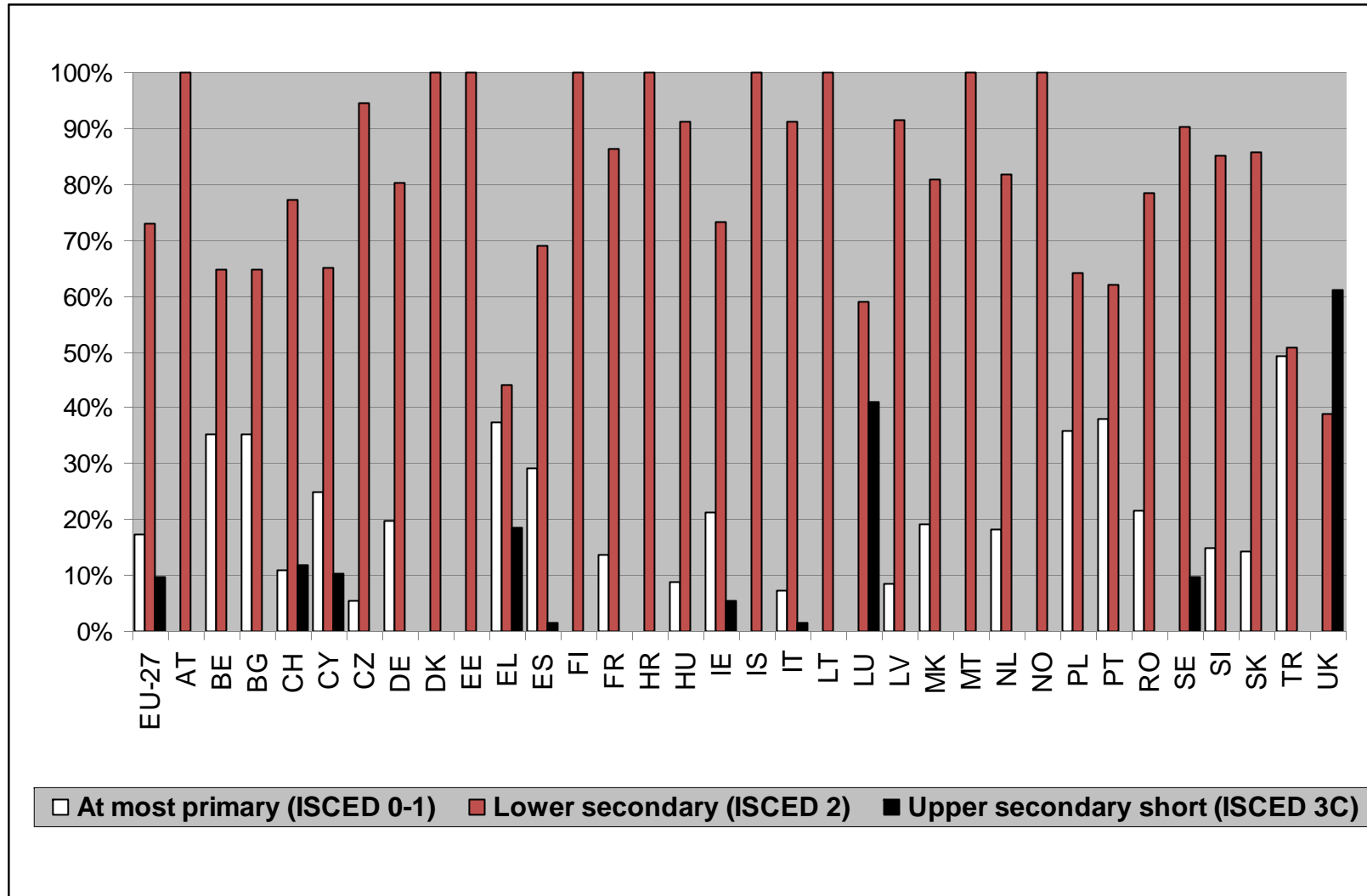
European Commission: [Early school leaving](#)

Chart 1: Percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in education or training (2009) and evolution 2000-2009 (% relative change)³



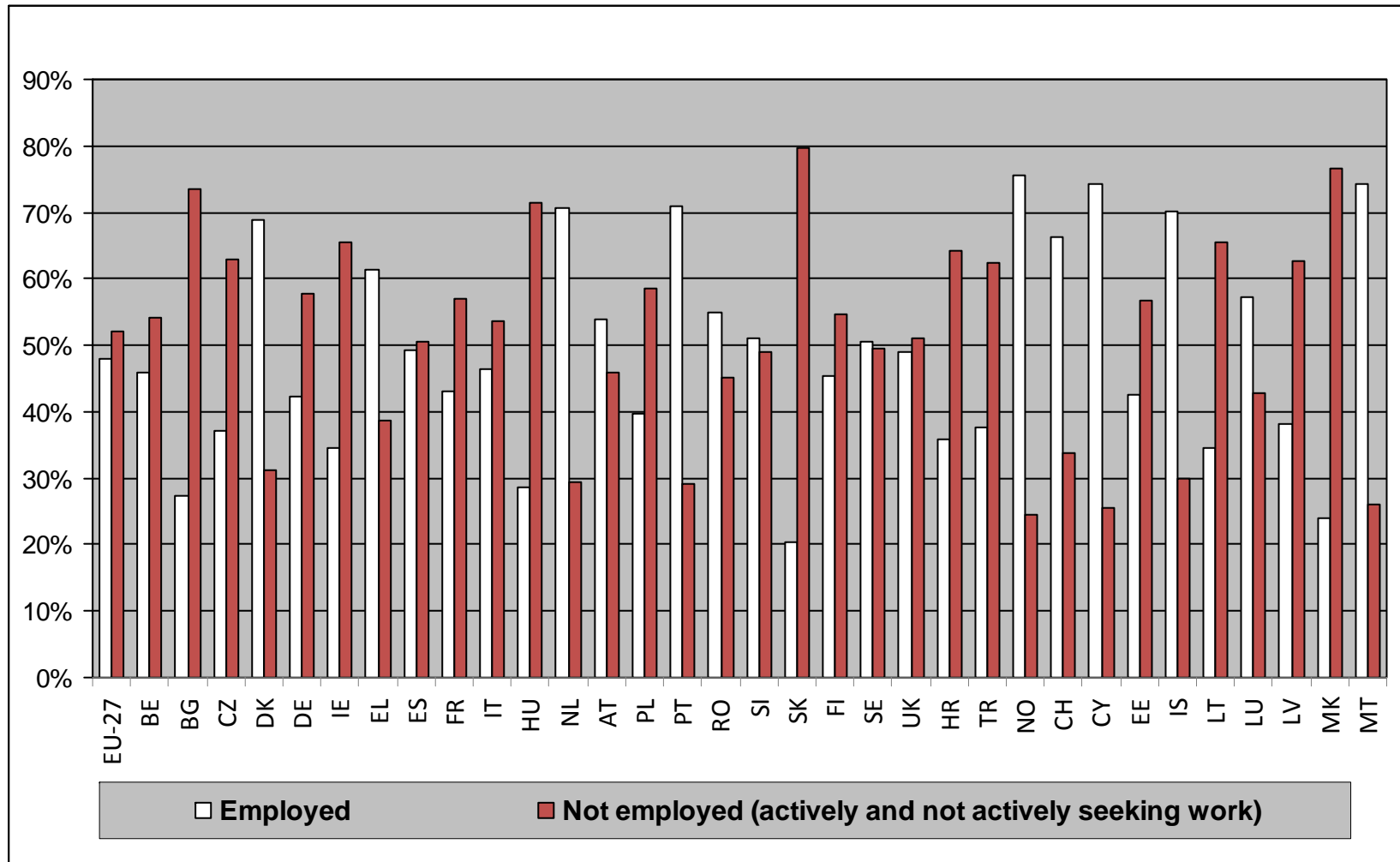
³ Eurostat (Labour Force Survey); MK= former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Students living abroad for more than one year or more or conscripts on compulsory military service are not covered by the EU Labour Force Survey, which may imply higher rates than those available at national level. This is especially relevant for Cyprus. Data for Slovenia and Croatia lack reliability due to a small sample size; Bulgaria, Poland and Slovenia: evolution refers to the period 2001-2009; Czech Republic, Ireland, Latvia, Slovakia and Croatia: evolution refers to the period 2002-2009. In Finland, the educational attainment level is measured at the beginning of the year (register data). This implies overestimation of the indicator in the country.

Chart 2: Early leavers from education and training by highest educational level completed, 2009 (%)⁴



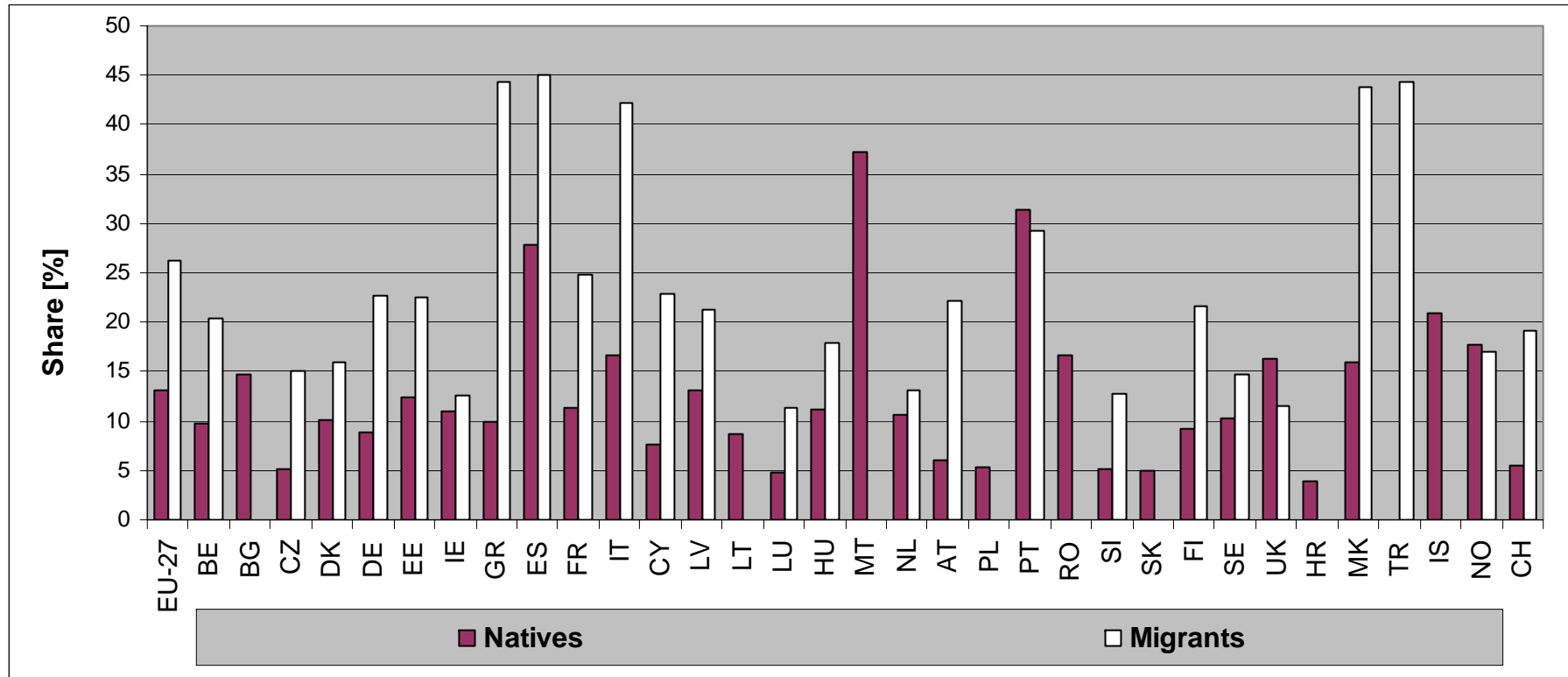
⁴ Data source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey), 2009; MK= former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;
 NB: Data from the following countries lacks reliability due to small sample size: ISCED Level 1: Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Latvia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; ISCED level 2: Croatia, Slovenia and Luxembourg; ISCED level 3C: Ireland, Cyprus and Luxembourg.

Chart 3: Early leavers from education and training by employment status, 2009 (%)⁵



⁵ Data source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey), 2009. MK= former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;
 NB: Data from Slovenia, Croatia, Estonia and Luxembourg are unreliable for both categories and for Lithuania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for the category 'employed' only.

Chart 4: Early leavers from education and training by migrant status, 2009 (rates)⁶



⁶ Data source: Eurostat (LFS). MK= former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Data for the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Iceland and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia lacks reliability due to small sample size. Migrants include non-nationals and those born abroad.