European Commission

Developing Key Competences at School in Europe

Challenges and Opportunities for Policy

Across Europe, the concept of 'key competences' has gained importance in recent years both at policy and school level. Key competences are considered essential skills and attitudes for young Europeans to succeed not only in today's economy and modern society but also in their personal lives. They are defined at EU level and comprise the following: 1) ability to readily and easily communicate in the mother tongue, 2) the ability to speak foreign languages, 3) mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, 4) IT skills, 5) social and civic competences, 6) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, 7) capacity to learn to learn, and 8) cultural awareness and expression.

European countries have made significant progress in incorporating these key competences into national curricula and other steering documents, a fact that demonstrates commitment to make the skills taught to young people at school more relevant for their lives and societies. However, challenges remain – especially in regard to the practical implementation of the reformed curricula.

This brochure highlights some of the main achievements and challenges regarding the development of key competences at school in Europe. The status of all key competences listed above, with the exception 'learning to learn' and 'cultural awareness and expression', are taken into consideration. The report covers compulsory and secondary general education levels in 31 European countries (EU member States, Croatia, Iceland, Norway, and Turkey) for the year 2011/12.
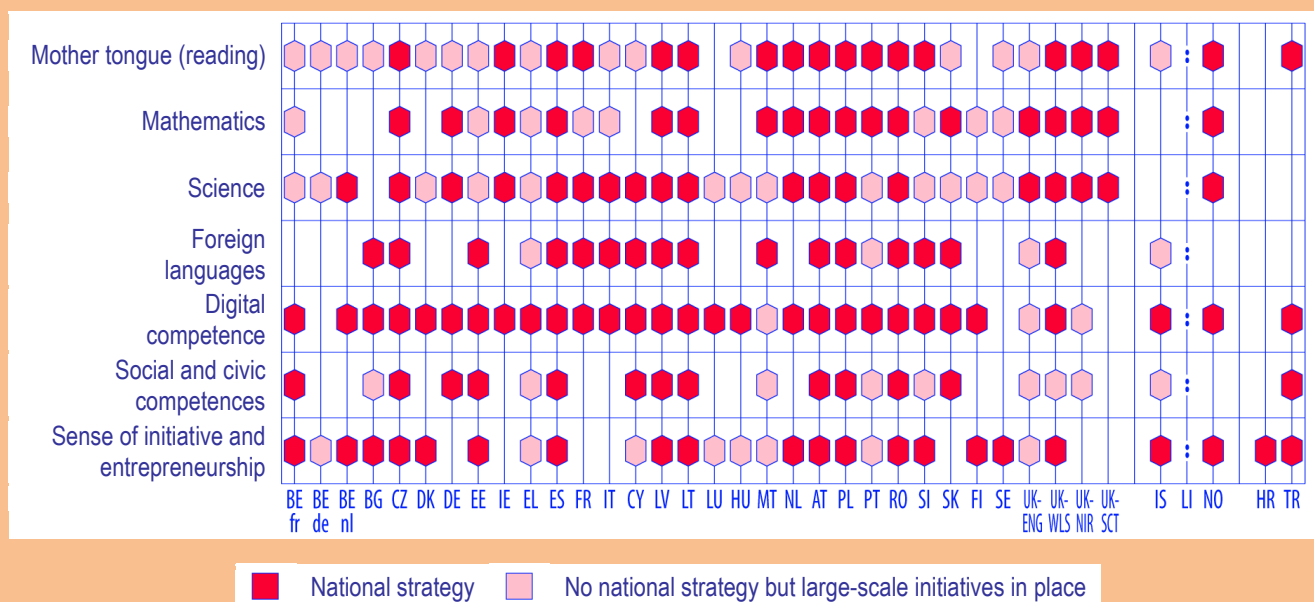
Eurydice

All countries support the development of key competences

All European countries have made significant progress in embedding key skills into steering documents and school curricula to meet today's societal demands. However, countries do so using different approaches and to varying degrees. While a number of countries have launched national strategies to improve the teaching and learning of all key competences, others focus only on some of them. Other countries yet do not have any strategies at national level for specific key competences. Instead, they launch centrally coordinated initiatives to promote these competences.

Large scale initiatives range from school partnerships to national campaigns and mainly aim at increasing students' interest in the respective subject area. While reforms and improvements can be implemented without a strategy, the existence of a strategic action plan has the advantage of clearly defining policies and goals for improvement, and, together with a timeframe for completion, may help mobilise efforts to bring about substantial change.

Existence of national strategies to promote key competences in general education (primary and secondary education), 2011/12

National strategy | No national strategy but large-scale initiatives in place

Source: Eurydice.

Toward competence-based curricula and the use of achievement scales

All European countries have reformed their curricula during the last decade toward a learning outcome approach. This means that instead of focusing solely on subject content to be delivered by the teacher, they contain statements summarising what students are supposed to know, understand or be able to do at given stages of the learning process of a subject. In recent years, curricula reforms in many countries have also focused on bringing this competence-based approach more in line with the teaching of key competences.

To measure student attainment in these competences, a minority of countries have started using achievement scales. These scales, which match achievement statements with grades, serve as ready-made tools for teachers to assess students' work and competence level. The Common European Reference Framework (CEFR), for example, is becoming a main tool for assessing students' ability in foreign languages. This tool was developed by the Council of Europe in 2001.

Basic and transversal skills don't receive equal attention

The key competences are comprised of basic and transversal skills. While the status of the basic skills (literacy, mathematics, science), as well as foreign language, is well established, the promotion of the transversal skills (IT, civic and entrepreneurship skills) is lagging behind. Most countries today have reformed their curricula to integrate transversal skills, but this is not done consistently. Only one in three European countries, for example, do not explicitly recognise entrepreneurship in central steering documents at primary level, while digital competences are addressed almost everywhere at that level. Transversal skills are also less often taught as standalone subjects compared with basic skills.

They are generally integrated into other subjects or into the curriculum as a whole, whereby all teachers share responsibility for delivery (a cross-curricular approach). However, implementation reveals on-going challenges. For example, integrating IT skills into subjects such as mathematics, science and languages is a surprisingly rare occurrence in European countries. A cross-curricular approach calls for teachers to not only change the way they traditionally teach, but also demands increased collaboration on developing and agreeing specific learning outcomes and using appropriate assessment methods.

Integration of digital, civic and entrepreneurship competences into national curricula (primary to upper secondary level), 2011/12
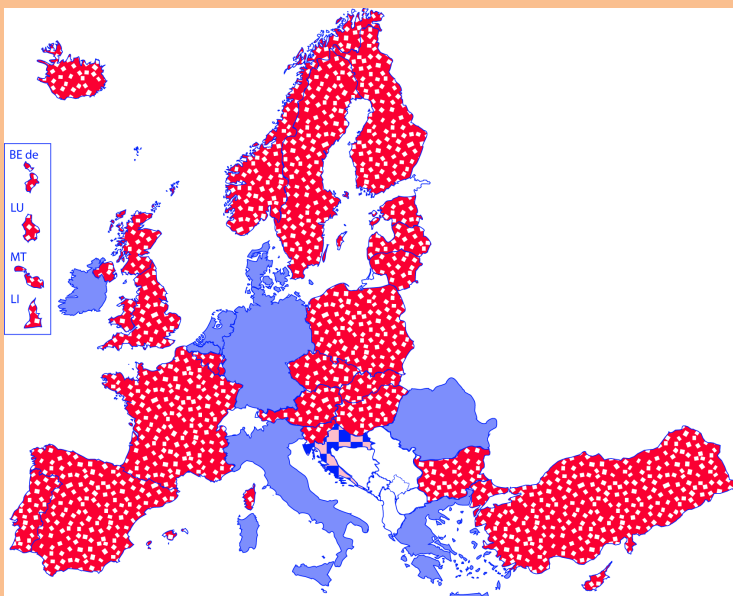
Legend:
- Integration of the 3 transversal competences
- Digital competences are not integrated at primary level
- Entrepreneurship is not integrated at primary level
- Entrepreneurship is not integrated at any school level

Source: Eurydice.

Testing IT, civic and entrepreneurship skills at school remains a challenge

Only by assessing students can we know if what has been taught has been learned. Proper assessment can thus play an important role not only in evaluating students' knowledge, but also in evaluating schools. If students sit the same test throughout a country, that is, are tested in a standardised way, test results can be used to monitor education systems as a whole. This type of national testing is in fact a widespread practice in European education systems. However, tests focus largely on the basic skills, especially on literacy and mathematics and often neglect transversal skills. Among the key transversal skills, only civic competences undergo standardised assessment but this is only the case in around one third of European countries. While this is not to say that standardised tests

are the answer and different assessment methods need to be used in a coherent assessment framework, it is clear that testing transversal skills, which are often embedded into other subjects, poses a challenge of its own. Testing tools which cross subject boundaries are needed. Testing tools for IT are already widespread throughout Europe. For example, the 'European Computer Driving Licence', a European level certificate, is used in around half of European countries to test IT skills. To obtain the certificate, students need to master seven groups of computer skills and competences. Other countries offer similar, nationally recognised ICT (Information, Communication and Technology) certificates.

Key competences assessed through nationally standardised tests (primary and lower secondary level), 2011/12
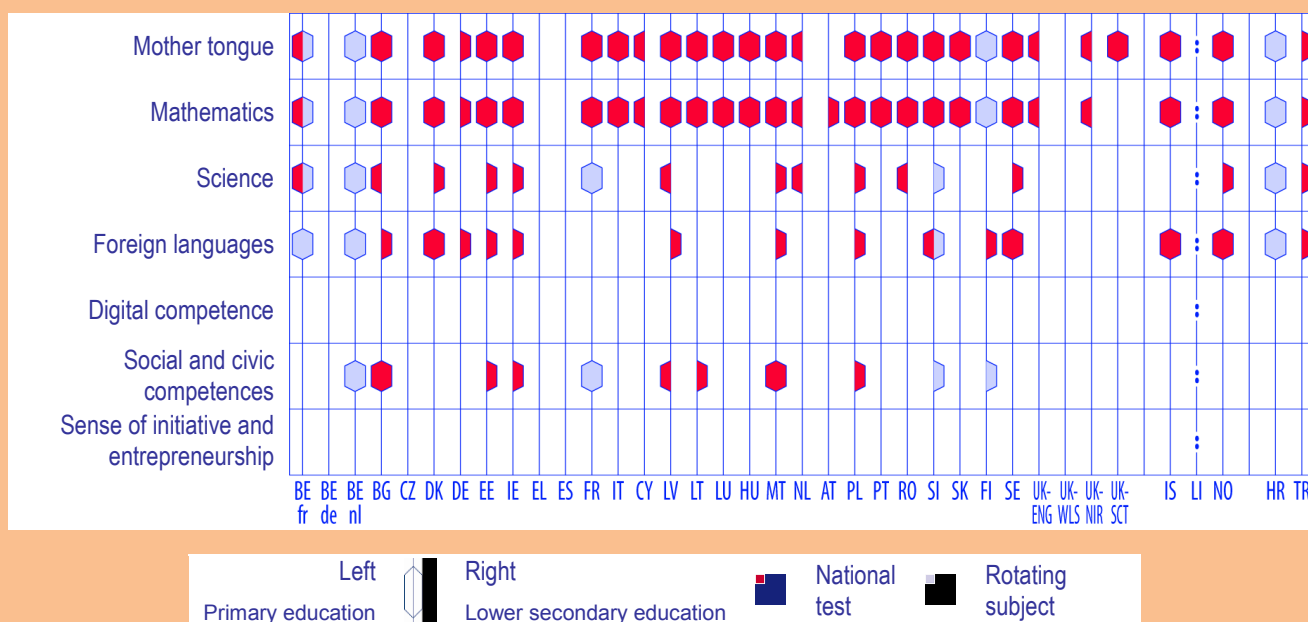
Low student achievement in literacy, mathematics and science still an issue

Much progress has been made in teaching basic skills in European countries. Nevertheless, low student achievement in literacy, mathematics and science remains a challenge. These results put in question not only the effectiveness of teaching and learning, but also of the education systems as a whole.

For example, although providing specialist reading teachers is a demonstrated effective support measure for students with difficulties, this occurs only in Ireland, Malta, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the five Nordic countries. There has been no progress in this area since 2009.

Europe faces skill shortages in MST fields (Mathematics, Science and Technology)

While the number of MST graduates in the EU has increased over the past decade, the total share of MST graduates compared to other subject areas has been declining. Looming skill shortages in MST fields are now seen as a threat to today's technology and science driven economies. Therefore, the majority of European countries have made increasing the proportion of their MST graduates one of their priorities. Measures that encourage students to follow careers in MST fields are already taken at school level. Efforts that increase students' motivation to learn mathematics and science by, for example, rectifying preconceived beliefs that the subjects are particularly difficult, are important steps to take.

Flawed perceptions on the relevance of mathematics and science to future careers also need to be addressed. Students often have narrow views on the career options that MST studies can offer. Specialised career guidance and counselling services at secondary level could be one way to redress this situation. This type of guidance, however, is currently available in only around half of European countries.