



# Learning modern foreign languages in the European Union

Yann Fournier, Anne Gaudry-Lachet

## ► To cite this version:

Yann Fournier, Anne Gaudry-Lachet. Learning modern foreign languages in the European Union: focus on students. 2017, pp. 1-4. 10.48464/ni-17-15-eng . halshs-03833533

**HAL Id: halshs-03833533**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03833533>**

Submitted on 28 Oct 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

## Learning modern foreign languages in the European Union: focus on students

► The European Strategic Framework, **Education and Training 2020**, emphasises the need for European Union member countries to promote multilingualism, particularly by fostering the teaching of at least two foreign languages from the earliest possible age. The fourth edition of the **Eurydice Report, Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe** (2017) offers a comparative look at the evolution of systems and practices for teaching foreign languages in 37 European countries since 2003.

The trend towards earlier learning of a first foreign language is continuing. In the European Union in 2015 this learning began on average at the age of 7. In 2014, 84% of primary-school students were learning a foreign language; the figure was only 69% in 2005.

When a second compulsory foreign language is taught, it is usually introduced in the first cycle of secondary education. In 2014, 60% of the students in this cycle were studying two languages.

In 2014, although English remained the most taught foreign language in the EU, French maintained its place as the second language most frequently chosen by students, followed by German and Spanish.

Lastly, in 2015 the relative proportion of time devoted to teaching foreign languages was clearly higher in secondary education.

Yann Fournier, Anne Gaudry-Lachet, DEPP-MIREI

### ► Learning the first compulsory foreign language began at a younger age in 2015 than in 2003

Since 2003 a majority of European Union countries (16 of 28) have lowered the age for beginning the compulsory learning of the first modern foreign language (MFL) (**figure 1**). At EU level, in 2015 (the latest available year for Eurydice data, cf. "Methodology"), students were generally between 6 and 8 when they began learning a foreign language. One of the major changes since 2003 has been observed in Cyprus and Poland where MFL learning can now start as early as pre-primary education (**ISCED 02**, cf. "Definitions").

Six countries (Austria, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Romania and Spain) begin learning at 6, whilst in the other 19 EU countries for which data are available, it begins later. Only Scotland and Ireland do not require learning an MFL during compulsory education. Nonetheless all Irish students are already learning the two official languages of their country, *i.e.* English and Gaelic.

Earlier learning partially explains the increase in the **average study duration** of the first compulsory MFL in the EU, increasing from 9.9 years in 2003 to 11.3 in 2015. Typically, Cyprus, Belgium (the German-speaking sector), France (where the starting age dropped from 8 to 6 years old), Poland and Romania substantially lowered the age for learning the first compulsory MFL.

England also presents a singular situation with learning extending from 5 to 7 years in compulsory education. Henceforth learning begins at ISCED level 1 whereas it only began at ISCED level 2 in 2003, and the compulsory learning of a first modern language was removed from ISCED 3.

Only the Netherlands and Northern Ireland are exceptions, *i.e.* the learning time of the first compulsory MFL was reduced by one and two years respectively between 2003 and 2015, now covering over 7 years (the Netherlands) and 3 years (Northern Ireland). This reduction in the two education systems only involves ISCED 3.

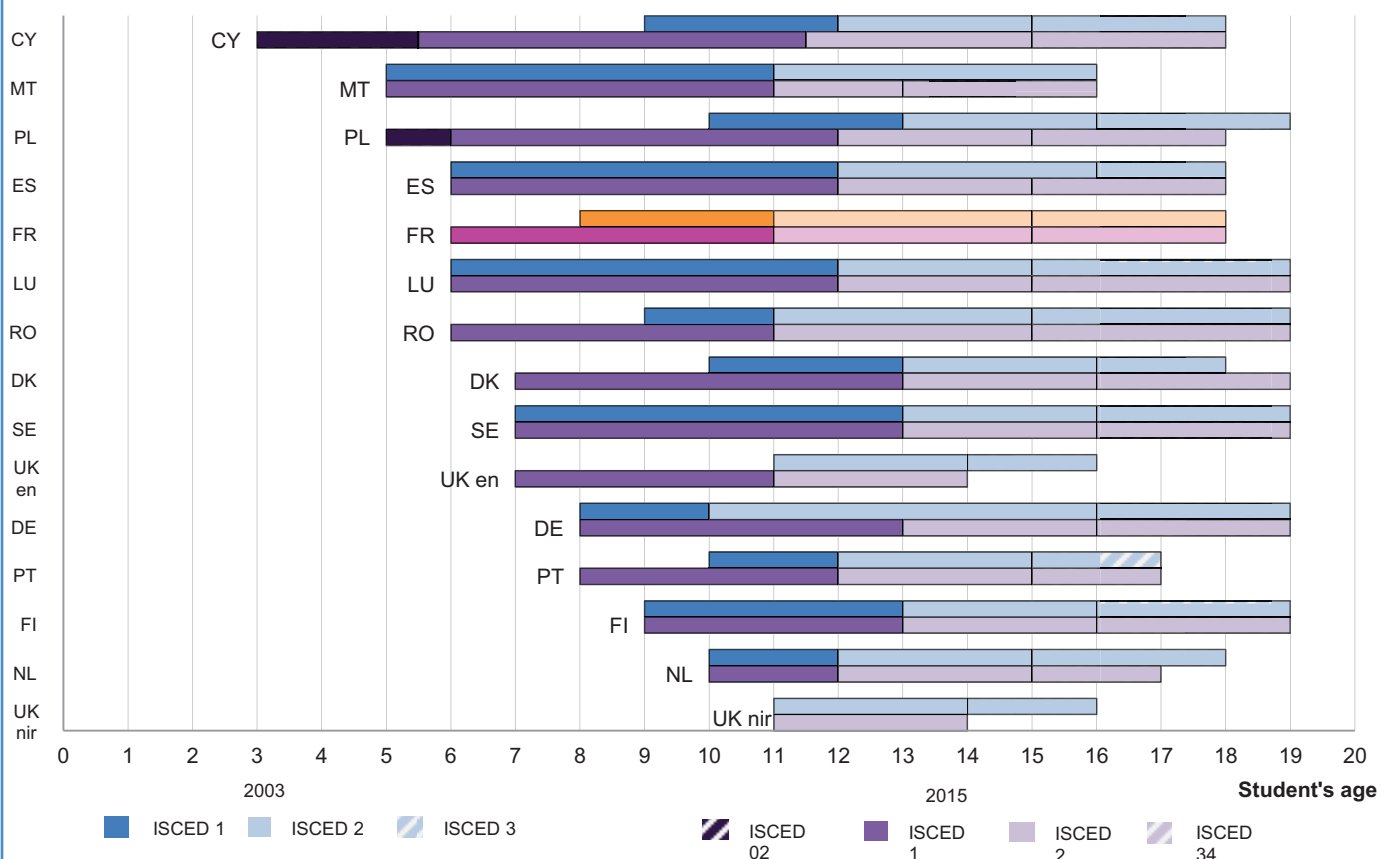
### Learning two foreign languages is more common in lower secondary education than in upper secondary education

In 2015, although almost all EU education systems required the learning of a foreign language, there were only 20 of 28 countries requiring the learning of a second foreign language, with Belgium (French Community), Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom not requiring a second foreign language. Of the six EU countries where there are several official languages, only four require learning two MFLs on the two secondary-education ISCED levels (Cyprus, Finland, Luxembourg and Malta).

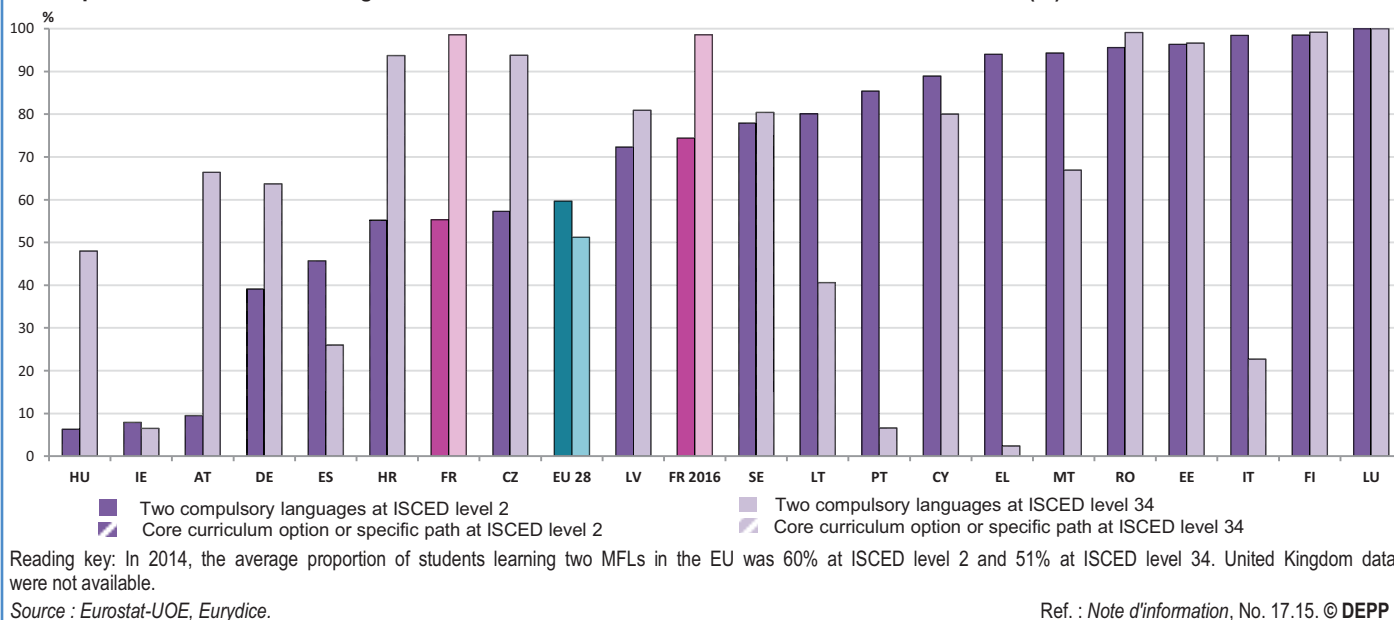
In 2005, the proportion of students learning two modern foreign languages was higher at ISCED level 34: 62% in contrast to 48% at ISCED level 2. These proportions were reversed over the decade. In 2014 (latest years available for the Eurostat data, cf. "Methodology"), 60% of ISCED 2 students were learning two MFLs compared to 51% of ISCED 34 students (**figure 2**).

When the requirement to learn two MFLs covers only partly one education level, the proportion of students involved for the entire level is mechanically affected. This situation is illustrated by the French data. When students began the second MFL in 2014 in the third year of lower secondary education (prior to lower secondary education reform), there were only 55% learning two MFLs at ISCED level 2. In contrast, with the

## 1 – Starting age and learning time of the first compulsory MFL per ISCED level in 2003 and 2015



## 2 – Proportion of students learning two or more MFLs at ISCED level 2 and ISCED level 34 in 2014 (%)



introduction of the second foreign language in the second year of lower secondary education at the start of the 2016 school year, France's proportion of students studying a second language rose to 74%.

Figure 2 shows clear-cut gaps between lower secondary and upper secondary education in certain countries, which are partially explained by the lack of the requirement to learn two modern foreign languages at one of the two ISCED levels (Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania and Portugal).

However Croatia, Sweden and, to a lesser extent, Germany and Spain showed a high rate whilst not requiring the study of two languages for all

students. This was mainly due to the "**core curriculum options**", which led a large number of students to choose a second MFL, and to the existence of specific paths where the learning of several languages was required.

### French is the second most studied language in Europe at ISCED level 2 after English

Of the 24 official languages in the EU in 2014, English continued to progress and was the leading **foreign language studied** in Europe with 79% of the ISCED 1 students, 97% of the ISCED 2 students and 94% of the ISCED 34 students. It is important to note that, as explained for France in the previous section, these ratios have the total population of

ISCED 2 students as denominator. The only exception being Ireland, an English-speaking country (as well as the UK for which data were not available), where French is the most commonly taught MFL (60% of ISCED 2 students).

French was the second most studied foreign language on average in the EU where it was studied on average by 34% of the ISCED 2 students and 23% of the ISCED 34 students (**figure 3**). The highest proportions of learners were recorded in Cyprus (88%), Romania (84%) and Italy (68%).

German is ranked as the third most studied foreign language in Europe (23% of ISCED 2 students), followed by Spanish for 13% of students. At ISCED level 34, German and Spanish share third place with 19% of the EU students.

Languages other than English, French, German and Spanish were studied by a minority of European students (4% of ISCED 2 students in 2014). In the Baltic countries, where there are large Russian-speaking communities, Russian was an exception, as it was studied by a majority of ISCED 2 students, *i.e.* Estonia (65%), Latvia (60%) and Lithuania (67%). Two other languages stand out, *i.e.* Italian in Malta (60%) and Swedish in Finland (92%). This is often explained by geographical proximity and historical relationships.

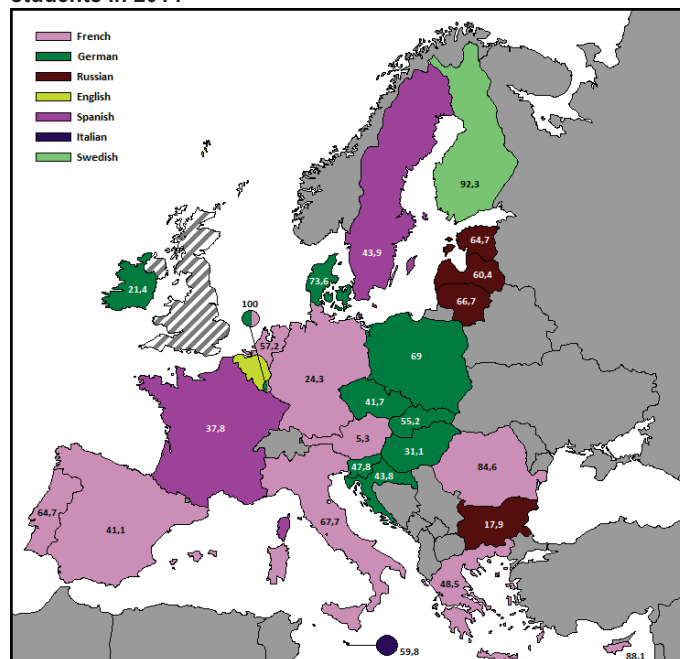
**Figure 3** seems to point up this "neighbouring" effect, *i.e.* all the countries bordering France mostly chose French, just as German and Russian were predominant in the Central Europe and Baltic countries.

Two types of countries stand out. First of all, the countries that promote and disseminate their language beyond their own borders (English, French, German, etc.), in particular by establishing institutions to develop their linguistic and cultural influence (*Alliance Française*, *AEFE*, the British Council and the *Goethe-Institut*). They also happen to be the most populous nations in the EU. The second group includes countries that, by their size or history, are more open to the influence of foreign languages such as Luxembourg and Malta. The coexistence in Malta of three languages bears witness to various influences: Maltese and English (remnants of the British Empire) replaced Italian in 1934, which was until then the official language. Yet over half of the island's population still speaks Italian.

## Instruction time allocated to modern languages is higher at ISCED level 2 than at ISCED level 1

In the EU, in 2015, the **cumulated compulsory instruction time** allocated to learning foreign languages at ISCED level 1 and ISCED level 2 varied substantially from country to country. For the countries where data were available, this instruction time varied from 407 hours in Hungary to 1,279 hours in Malta (**figure 4**). Following the reform of secondary education and the start of learning a second modern foreign language in the second year of lower secondary education, France increased this overall instruction time to 54 hours at ISCED level 2 and henceforth is one of the only three countries to surpass 1,000 cumulated hours at ISCED level 1 and ISCED level 2 along with Germany and Malta.

### 3 - The second most studied foreign language by ISCED 2 students in 2014

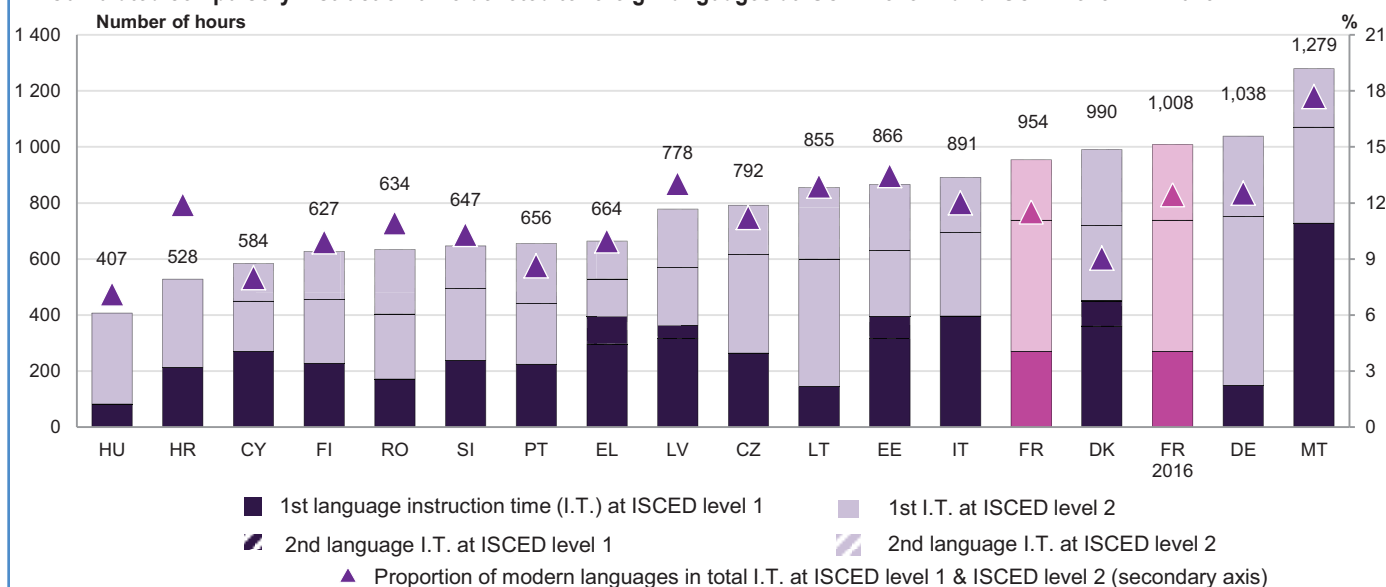


Reading key: In Ireland, with 21.4% of the entirety of the ISCED 2 student population, German was the second most common studied language after French in 2014 (cf. text). The United Kingdom data were not available.

Source: Eurostat-UOE, Eurydice.

Ref.: Note d'information, No. 17.15 ©DEPP

### 4 - Cumulated compulsory instruction time devoted to foreign languages at ISCED level 1 and ISCED level 2 in 2015



Reading key: Estonia allocated 866 instruction hours to the compulsory learning of foreign languages at ISCED level 1 and ISCED level 2, *i.e.* 13% of overall instruction time at these two ISCED levels. The second MFL started at ISCED level 1, and learning continued at ISCED level 2. The countries selected are those in which all students were involved.

Source: Eurostat-UOE, Eurydice.

Ref.: Note d'information, No. 17.15 ©DEPP

In 2015, the proportion occupied by foreign languages in the overall cumulated compulsory instruction time at ISCED level 1 and ISCED level 2, on average 11%, also varied substantially from country to country. Here too the extreme values were in Hungary (7%) and in Malta (18%), for this proportion grew with the amount of instruction time allocated to foreign languages. However, Croatia and Denmark were exceptions. In Croatia this was due to relatively low overall instruction time at ISCED level 1 and ISCED level 2 (4,440 overall hours, of which 12% were allocated to foreign languages). Denmark was the opposite situation with a very high overall amount of instruction time (10,960 hours, of which 9% were allocated to foreign languages).

Despite teaching the first MFL at an earlier age at ISCED level 1, the instruction time allocated to foreign languages remained modest at ISCED level 1, *i.e.* in the large majority of countries it varied from 5% to 10% of ISCED 1 teaching time. ISCED level 2 seemed essential in foreign language learning. Of the 17 countries presented here, 10 (including Finland, France and Germany) focused over 60% of cumulated instruction time on foreign language at just ISCED level 2. This is mainly explained by the introduction of the second MFL at this educational level. Only Greece and Malta had relatively greater instruction time of foreign languages at ISCED level 1 than at ISCED level 2. Besides, at ISCED level 3, the instruction time devoted to languages was often dependent on various options and paths, which explains the lack of international data at this level.

Finally, out of the displayed countries, only 4 (Denmark, Estonia, Greece and Latvia) start their compulsory learning of a second foreign language at ISCED level 1. The instruction time allocated varied from 45 hours in Latvia to 98 hours in Greece. It is also interesting to note that in Estonia

the second most studied MFL at ISCED level 1 was Estonian, considered as a foreign language by the large Russian-speaking community residing in the country. ■

AT: Austria. CY: Cyprus. CZ: Czech Rep. DE: Germany. DK: Denmark. EE: Estonia. EL: Greece. ES: Spain. EU: European Union. FI: Finland. FR: France. HR: Croatia. HU: Hungary. IE: Ireland. IT: Italy. LU: Luxembourg. LT: Lithuania. LV: Latvia. MT: Malta. NL: Netherlands. PL: Poland. PT: Portugal. SE: Sweden. SI: Slovenia. UK en: England. UK nir: Northern Ireland.

## for further information

- "Key data on Languages at School in Europe", *Eurydice Report*, European Commission, 2017.

- RAKOCEVIC R., "Langues étrangères à l'école en Europe : un cadre commun de référence et une diversité de pratiques", *Note d'information*, No. 13.25, MEN-DEPP, november 2013.

French edition on line:

[www.education.gouv.fr/statistiques](http://www.education.gouv.fr/statistiques)

## SOURCES, DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGY

### Sources

**Eurydice** is the information network on education for the European Union. It includes 42 national units in the 38 countries participating in the EU's programme in the field of the lifelong learning and training (EU member-states, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey). The operator in France is the DEPP.

**UOE**: Data gathering common to the three international institutions of Unesco, the OECD and Eurostat. The operator in France is the DEPP.

### Definitions

**Average study duration**: The average study duration is the unweighted arithmetical average of the learning duration of the first compulsory modern language of the 32 education systems in the European Union's 28 Member States.

**Core curriculum options**: Corresponds to subjects from which students are required to choose but are not necessarily a modern language.

**Cumulated compulsory instruction time**: The overall cumulated compulsory instruction time is the sum of the total number of hours of compulsory instruction at ISCED levels 1 and 2. It is given here for all compulsory subjects or for the compulsory foreign languages of students at ISCED levels 1 and 2.

**Education and Training 2020**: The European Union strategic framework setting the common goals in the educational field.

**Foreign language studied**: defined by the ratio of the student population studying a foreign language at a given ISCED level over the total student population of the same ISCED level.

**International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)**: Adopted by Unesco in 1978, the ISCED ranks educational programmes and levels. The 2011 nomenclature, taking effect from the 2014 reference year, defines the following levels: **ISCED 01**: early childhood educational development; **ISCED 02**: pre-primary education; **ISCED 1**: primary education; **ISCED 2**: lower secondary education (minimum duration of 3 years); **ISCED 3**: upper secondary education (minimum duration of 2 years); **ISCED 4**: post-secondary non-tertiary education; **ISCED 5-8**: tertiary education. At ISCED 2 and ISCED 3 levels programme orientation may be presented with a second figure, *i.e.* 4 signifies general education programmes, and 5 signifies vocational programmes. In this *Note d'information*, only ISCED level 34 – general education programmes of upper secondary – has been used.

### Methodology

The Eurydice Report, *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*, highlights the recent developments in teaching languages in the entire Eurydice network with the exception of Albania. It relies on institutional data (organisation, rules, programmes, etc. with 2015 and 2003 as reference years) and on statistical data (Eurostat with 2014 as the reference year). The indicators presented here are limited to primary and secondary general public and subsidised private education. For clarity's sake, certain graphs of this *Note d'information* show only a selection of countries in the Eurydice network. All Eurostat averages are weighted. ■