

RICERCHE

Risultati dell'indagine ESS: un'analisi comparativa delle variazioni tra Paesi per quanto riguarda la possibilità di raggiungere un livello desiderato di istruzione e un lavoro adeguato.

ESS cross-country findings for Education and Labour Markets challenges.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

Negli ultimi 15 anni, il panorama europeo della vita lavorativa e sociale ha continuato a modificarsi. È possibile considerare la società contemporanea come un puzzle composto da diversi pezzi: a volte, l'integrazione di questi pezzi nella struttura lavorativa e sociale è relativamente semplice, in altri è più complessa. Le sfide globali hanno un impatto sui sistemi di istruzione e sul mercato del lavoro, insieme alla complicata situazione dovuta alla pandemia e ad una guerra che colpisce l'Europa, sia in termini di principi etici sia di effetti sulle economie. Tutti questi fattori rendono cruciale per il mondo dell'istruzione ed il mercato del lavoro adottare strutture socialmente sostenibili. Il presente paper si propone di fornire un'analisi comparativa delle variazioni tra i Paesi per quanto riguarda le componenti indagate nell'indagine sociale denominata ESS European Social Survey, Round 9. Sono analizzate le differenze e le analogie riguardanti la possibilità di raggiungere un livello di istruzione desiderato e un lavoro adeguato, connesse con aspetti di soddisfazione verso la vita e la democrazia. I dati di tutti i Paesi partecipanti sono esaminati e alcuni Paesi, selezionati in base alle loro specifiche caratteristiche culturali, sociali e del mercato del lavoro, più nel dettaglio. Il focus parte dalle risposte derivate dal contesto italiano, caratterizzato da sistemi educativi molto criticati, difficoltà nel mercato del lavoro (alto tasso di disoccupazione giovanile) e un basso livello di fiducia, che rappresenta una concezione tipica dei Paesi del sud dell'Europa. I risultati sono confrontati con altri contesti in cui la percezione della fiducia e le possibilità future sono più positive così come la qualità dei servizi forniti (principalmente i paesi del nord Europa, ad es. la Finlandia). Le diversità di opinioni e di atteggiamenti sono raccolte anche da contesti in cui risiedono molte diverse etnie, credenze e tradizioni, e le prospettive sono quindi dense e complicate (Europa centro-orientale, ad es. la

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Over the past 15 years, the European panorama of working and social life has continued to experience demanding changes. Contemporary society could be considered as a puzzle with different pieces: sometimes, the integration of these pieces into the working and social structure is relatively simple, in others more complex.

Global issues are impacting on education and labour market systems, together with the complicated situation due to the pandemic, and a war which is striking Europe, in terms of ethical principles and economy. All these factors make crucial for education and labour market systems to assume a socially sustainable structure.

This paper aims at providing a comparative assessment of cross-country variations regarding components investigated in the Round-9 of the European Social Survey (ESS).

Differences and analogies regarding the possibility to achieve a desired level of education and an adequate job, connected with aspects of satisfaction towards life and democracy, are analysed. Data from all participating countries are investigated, and few countries have been selected according to their specific cultural, welfare and labour market characteristics for an in-depth analysis.

The focus starts from responses derived from the Italy context which represents a southern European conception, characterized by criticized educational systems and difficulties in the labour market (high young unemployment rate) and eventually a low level of trust. Findings are compared to other contexts where the perception of trust and future possibilities are more positive as well as the quality of the services provided (mainly European northern countries, i.e., Finland). Diversities of opinions and attitudes are also gathered from countries where many different ethnicities, beliefs, and traditions reside, and perspectives are therefore dense and complicated (Central Eastern Europe, i.e., Poland).

Introduzione

Over the past 15 years, the European panorama of working and social life has continued to experience demanding changes in its structure. In some countries these changes happen to be slower than in other countries, but the events of recent years are pushing for a more and more awareness towards future challenges.

Contemporary society could be considered as a puzzle with different pieces: sometimes, the integration of these pieces into the working and social structure is relatively simple, in others more complex.

The evolution of globalization, the political and economic harmonization among the European countries, the technological revolution, the employment crisis, the changes in the world of work are some of the global issues impacting on present education and labour market systems. Both the complicated situation due to the pandemic we experienced in the past two years, and a war which is striking the hearth of Europe, make even more important for Education and Labour Market systems to assume a socially sustainable structure.

This paper aims at providing a comparative assessment of cross-country variations regarding components investigated in the European Social Survey (ESS), and mainly detected in the Justice and Fairness rotating module of the Round-9 of the survey (when significant answers from other modules of the questionnaire are integrated).

To understand the interplay between inequalities and levels of opportunities which are the origin of citizens' satisfaction regarding living conditions and the psychological well-being of individuals, social justice is analysed, as connected with aspects of trust (in policy makers), satisfaction towards life and democracy, and the perceived differences in wealth among participating countries.

A deeper level of analysis integrates social justice into two main domains: Education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the Labour Market. Differences and analogies regarding the possibility to achieve a desired level of education and the state of the Education systems are investigated, while social justice essential to the Labour Market is considered in terms of opportunities, which are available to get a desired job and by analysing some elements influencing the recruitment procedures (skills, professional experience, gender).

Thus, data from all participating countries are examined, and few countries have been selected according to their specific cultural, welfare and Labour Market characteristics, for an in-depth analysis in order to have different areas of Europe represented.

The focus starts from responses derived from the Italy context which represents a southern European conception, characterized by criticized educational (and in general all governmental) systems and difficulties of the labour market (traditionally characterized by one of the highest young unemployment rates in Europe) and consequently a low level of trust in political representatives.

However, in Europe there are contexts where the perception of trust and future possibilities is more positive, compared to the Italian situation, as well as the quality of the services provided. Many northern European countries have this solid environment, and Finland has been taken as an example, in this paper, of very high quality regarding the Education and VET systems, as it has developed one of the best education systems in Europe. It is, in fact, at the top of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (1) survey and best ranking of surveys (2) measuring literacy, numeracy and ICT skills of the average of students from different countries.

Diversities of opinions and attitudes are also gathered from countries where many different ethnicities, beliefs, and traditions reside, and perspectives are therefore dense and complicated as in central Eastern Europe, where education has become a priority. In this context Poland has been, in the past years, one of the driving forces of the economy for Europe. This does not mean that the country has not faced delicate moments or that it has been immune from the spectre of the crisis, but it is also true that Polish domestic economy continues to change and update the entire system.

Exploring the European Social Survey

The present analysis is based on the European Social Survey (ESS) (3) Round 9 survey, conducted in 2018-2019 in 30 participating countries.

The ESS is a comparative survey of social and political values and attitudes established in 2001 at the National Centre for Social Research (currently NatCen Social Research (4) in London. Its 10th Round of data collection has just been completed (in 2022) and the preparation for the 11th Round (which is going to be held in 2023) has started. The survey is carried out adopting very high methodological standards; a rigorous set of protocols and procedures regarding how the survey must be developed. Typically, it takes place every two years, except for the Round 10, which was one year postponed because of the pandemic. Interviews must be done face-to-face (a minimum of 1,500 respondents are required), and the average duration is around one-hour. Participants are selected using strict random probability sampling methods, representing the countries' population aged 15 and above.

This data set is a valuable source, due to its high quality and methodological standards, but also for the variety of topics it deals with and for the active participation of almost all European countries and some extra-EU countries, such as Switzerland, Ukraine, Israel, etc.

The survey is carried out through a questionnaire, common to all participating countries, developed in national languages after a complex translation process from the original English source questionnaire.

It is made up of core sections, rotating modules and additional (optional) national questions.

Core sections are sets of questions repeated in each Round, with very few variations from one Round to the other. Core contents are divided into 5 sections.

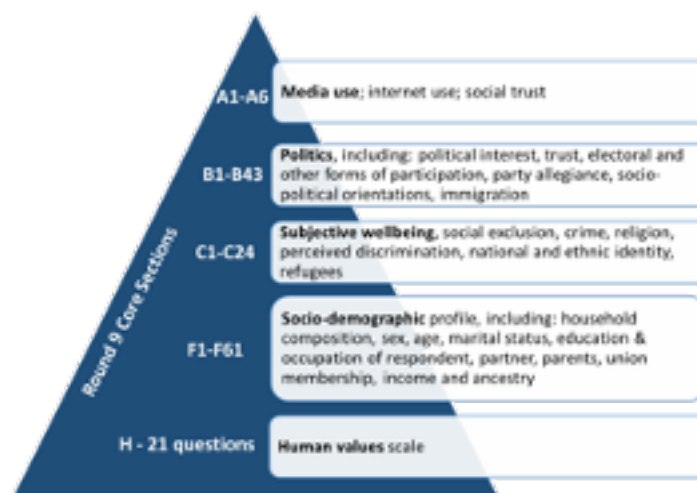


FIG. 1

In core sections there is a focus on the use of (social)media, internet, and social trust. Politics and subjective wellbeing are traditionally two important sets of questions regarding political interests, immigration, discrimination, ethnic identity, satisfaction with government, trust in democracy, religion, and so on. The most articulated section is the one detecting “Socio-demographic” elements (section F) with almost 60 questions (from F1 to F61) where the background of respondents with all education and occupation information is identified. The human values (5) section includes 21-item measuring respondents according to their basic value orientations.

Usually, each Round has two (or maximum three) Rotating modules. These modules are specific for each Round. Sometimes they could be repeated after one or two rounds. These sets of questions concern different areas of contents, listed below:

Rotating modules areas of content (Round 1 – Round 9)	
Immigration and asylum issues	Round 1 (2002); Round 7 (2014)
Citizens involvement	Round 1 (2002)
Justice and Fairness	Round 1 (2002); Round 9 (2018)
Health	Round 2 (2004); Round 7 (2014)
Economic morality	Round 2 (2004)
Family work and wellbeing	Round 2 (2004) Round 5 (2010)
Timing of Life	Round 3 (2006); Round 9 (2018)
Personal and social well-being	Round 3 (2006); Round 6 (2012)
Ageism	Round 4 (2008)
Welfare	Round 4 (2008); Round 8 (2016)
Trust in the Police and Courts	Round 5 (2010)

Democracy	Round 6 (2012)
Climate	Round 8 (2016)

TAB. 1

Thus, in Round 9 the Rotating sections were modules which have already been used: a) Timing of Life, used in 2006 (Section D in Round 9); b) Justice and Fairness used in 2002 (Section G in Round 9). Contents of these two modules are summarized below:

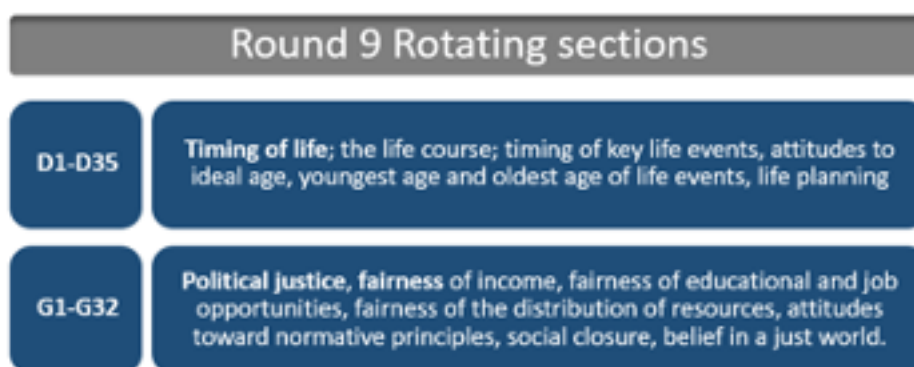


FIG. 2

Within this framework, common to all participating countries, additional national questions could have been included by countries, after a process of verification and approval by the ESS consortium. It is an option to include national questions which is usually used by countries to address relevant issues at country level in that moment. In Italy few national questions were added in Round 9, concisely reported below:

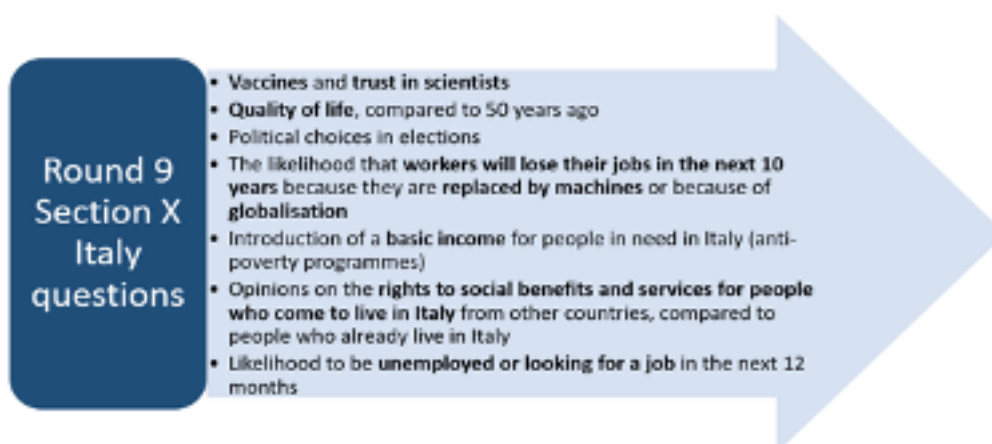


FIG. 3

This paper aims at providing a comparative assessment of cross-country variations regarding mainly (but not exclusively) components investigated in the Justice and Fairness rotating module of the Round-9 (Section G) of the ESS survey.

Social justice and fairness

Social justice is the fulfilment of rights and duties for both citizens and policy makers as representative of the people. It is a synthesis of long historical-cultural paths which has emerged with greater emphasis in the last two centuries. Inequality has grown dramatically since the 1980s and has remained at a high level ever since.

It is very hard to measure the current state of perceived fairness and social justice as it is related, though not exclusively to individuals' earnings, wealth, and property. The impact of income inequality, in particular, might generate health and social problems (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009a), create financial instability and affect the economy of the country in general. However, there are other components of social injustice that have a profound psychological impact on individuals' lives. It is a concept related to a fair distribution of opportunities and privileges as they apply to individuals within a society (discrimination, educational opportunities, chances of getting a job and living in a sustainable environment).

Social justice is above all the realization of the full freedom of individuals and the equality of all citizens (fairness regarding economic needs, literacy, health care (6), employment, impartiality and tolerance); it makes social rights accessible to all. The rationale is clear: all human beings have equal rights and justice implies equality. Therefore, social justice cannot be static, it cannot be limited to maintaining the social order, but it is a dynamic concept that promotes positive changes in the community, following global and local challenges. It is a task for policy makers to remove all the obstacles and therefore promote activities to respond to this challenging dynamism.

In this study we intend to consider the great diversity regarding how political systems are perceived in different countries and the extent to which people trust their politicians to be concretely engaged in fulfilling their claims and their political promise.

Within the ESS questionnaire the awareness of the potential personal contribution on political matters and level of confidence placed on politicians, political parties and governments are observed in several sections. The following Figure 1 represents countries' differences on how politicians and political parties are trusted in participating countries.

	No trust at all in politicians	Little 1, 2, 3	Medium 4, 5, 6	High degree 7, 8, 9	Complete trust in politicians		Complete trust in political parties	High degree 7, 8, 9	Medium 4, 5, 6	Little 1, 2, 3	No trust at all in political parties	
Austria	7.5%	30.1%	48.3%	14.7%	1.4%		1.0%	13.7%	47.5%	30.2%	7.6%	Austria
Belgium	9.2%	23.8%	53.3%	13.3%	0.3%		0.3%	12.8%	53.6%	24.7%	8.6%	Belgium
Bulgaria	31.3%	44.6%	20.3%	2.9%	0.9%		1.0%	3.4%	18.7%	44.9%	30.9%	Bulgaria
Croatia	42.8%	39.7%	15.3%	1.8%	0.4%		0.4%	1.9%	17.7%	41.7%	38.3%	Croatia
Cyprus	21.8%	39.4%	33.8%	5.0%	0.1%		0.1%	5.0%	30.8%	41.8%	22.2%	Cyprus
Czechia	11.5%	39.2%	36.9%	11.4%	1.0%		0.6%	11.0%	36.6%	41.7%	10.1%	Czechia
Denmark	2.2%	18.6%	49.5%	29.1%	0.6%		1.2%	29.2%	51.2%	16.4%	2.1%	Denmark
Estonia	11.5%	28.2%	48.8%	9.6%	0.9%		0.6%	7.9%	47.8%	32.5%	11.1%	Estonia
Finland	4.4%	20.5%	48.3%	26.8%			0.1%	28.5%	48.2%	19.8%	3.4%	Finland
France	13.0%	34.7%	43.9%	8.3%	0.2%		0.2%	4.5%	37.7%	41.1%	16.6%	France
Germany	10.2%	31.4%	44.1%	13.5%	0.6%		0.4%	12.1%	46.6%	33.2%	7.7%	Germany
Hungary	13.6%	30.7%	38.3%	16.2%	1.3%		1.2%	13.9%	38.3%	33.6%	12.6%	Hungary
Ireland	6.1%	25.0%	49.7%	18.9%	0.2%		0.4%	16.1%	49.0%	28.7%	6.9%	Ireland
Iceland	10.8%	31.6%	42.2%	15.0%	0.5%		0.4%	13.0%	42.2%	33.8%	10.6%	Iceland
Italy	21.4%	35.5%	38.2%	6.5%	0.4%		0.3%	6.0%	35.2%	35.8%	22.7%	Italy
Latvia	31.0%	30.6%	32.8%	5.1%	0.5%		0.7%	3.8%	30.3%	34.6%	30.7%	Latvia
Lithuania	16.3%	41.7%	34.0%	7.5%	0.5%		0.5%	6.0%	30.7%	41.2%	21.5%	Lithuania
Montenegro	24.7%	37.4%	26.8%	9.3%	1.8%		1.8%	8.9%	26.9%	39.5%	22.8%	Montenegro
Netherlands	2.6%	12.1%	66.9%	28.0%	0.5%		0.3%	28.1%	57.4%	11.9%	2.3%	Netherlands
Norway	2.3%	16.0%	53.6%	27.5%	0.6%		0.6%	29.8%	53.8%	14.1%	1.6%	Norway
Poland	19.0%	39.0%	34.9%	6.9%	0.1%		0.3%	7.3%	35.6%	38.0%	16.6%	Poland
Portugal	24.9%	40.4%	28.4%	6.1%	0.2%		0.6%	6.4%	30.1%	38.7%	26.2%	Portugal
Serbia	34.5%	29.1%	23.4%	8.6%	4.4%		3.7%	7.6%	21.9%	30.4%	36.3%	Serbia
Slovakia	21.8%	34.2%	28.8%	11.8%	3.3%		3.1%	13.2%	28.8%	36.1%	18.9%	Slovakia
Slovenia	23.3%	43.8%	28.0%	4.7%	0.2%		0.4%	4.7%	27.1%	46.7%	21.1%	Slovenia
Spain	28.3%	36.9%	30.5%	3.9%	0.4%		0.4%	3.8%	29.4%	37.4%	28.6%	Spain
Sweden	3.1%	21.9%	51.6%	22.5%	0.9%		0.7%	24.0%	52.1%	20.9%	2.3%	Sweden
Switzerland	2.4%	13.4%	53.8%	29.3%	1.1%		1.0%	25.4%	56.2%	15.0%	2.3%	Switzerland
United Kingdom	15.1%	35.3%	39.5%	9.7%	0.4%		0.4%	9.1%	41.7%	35.7%	13.1%	United Kingdom
higher per column												
lowest per column												

FIG. 4 (7) TRUST IN POLITICIANS (B9) AND POLITICAL PARTIES (B10)

ESS question: How much you personally **trust** each of the institutions:

B9 ... politicians

B10 ... political parties

There are countries in which the trust in political representatives is very low. In Croatia, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Spain, Portugal, and Latvia, for instance, politicians and political parties are not trusted at all or very little. These are countries where the discontent may be linked to concerns regarding the economy, labour market requirements, individual rights and elitist privileges.

The widespread and growing mistrust for politicians and political parties is also shared in countries with different backgrounds. In Italy a total of 6.9% of respondents claim for a high degree and complete trust in politicians and 6.3% in political parties. A figure that brings the country type closer to other countries, for example, in Poland 7% of respondents stated that they have a high degree and complete trust in politicians (0.1% is one of the lowest referred to complete trust in politicians) and 7.6% when referring to political parties.

In other countries respondents seemed to be very confident in the achievements of their politicians and/or political parties. In Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland, and Sweden a significant number of respondents demonstrated a very high degree of trust and/or complete trust in their politicians and political parties.

These latter are also the countries where people seem to be satisfied with the current state of democracy (see Figure 2 below). While in countries such as Italy, there is significant frustration with politicians who do not seem to care about the interests of the people, which is also reflected in how democracy is perceived, having reached only a middle position when assessing the way democracy works in their own country. Similarly, the position of Poland, which is just one position above Italy, sharing the same levels of distrust, but with better results in terms of levels of trust (high degree and complete trust).

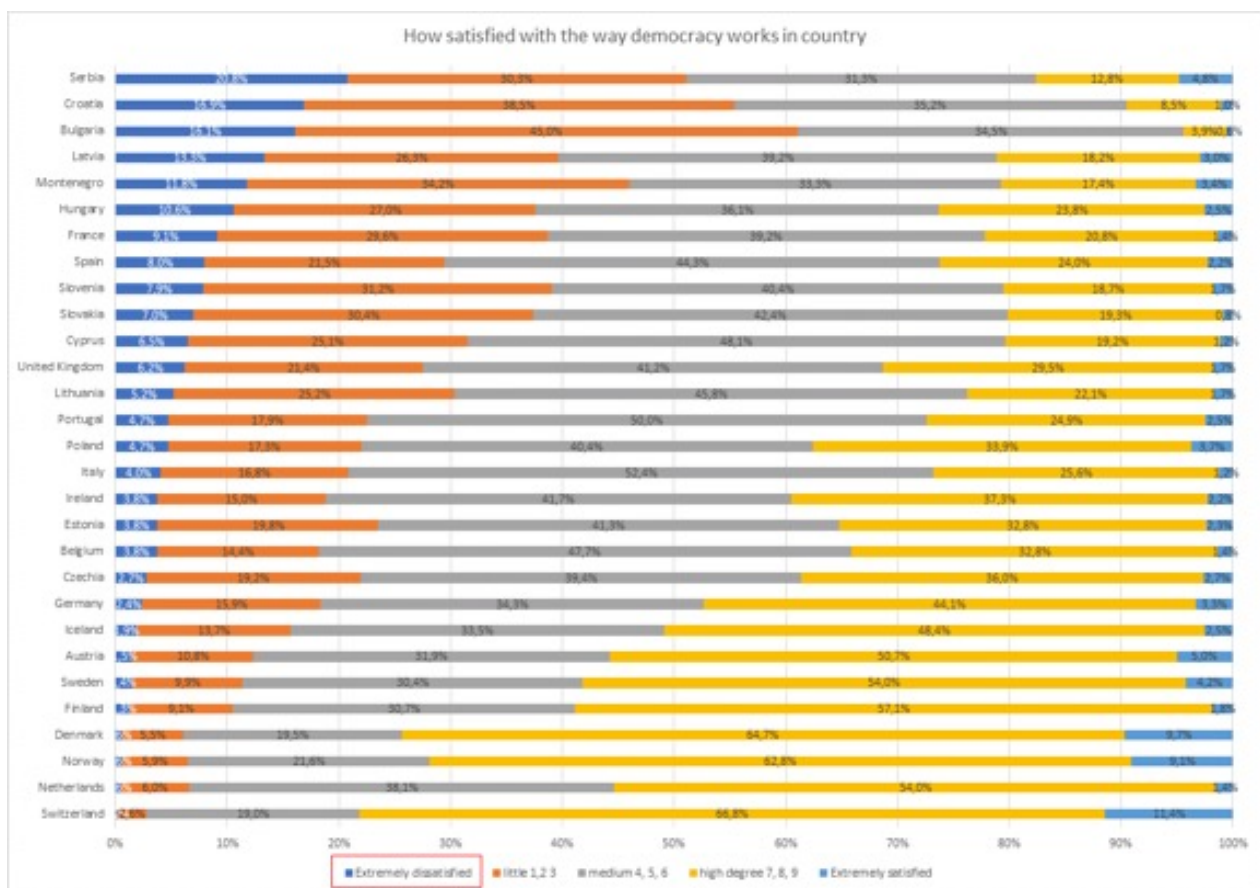


FIGURA 5 (8) → FIGURE 2: SATISFACTION WITH THE WAY DEMOCRACY WORKS IN OWN COUNTRY (B30)^[1]

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: Data were graded on a scale of one to 11

For the elaborations data have been grouped into five categories and sorted by the value "extremely dissatisfied" in a descending order

Another indicator of citizens' satisfaction regarding living conditions and the psychological well-being of individuals is the satisfaction with life. Many studies and experiments proved the connection of the benefits of happiness to several aspects of living conditions. For instance, health benefits (on the immune system (9) or reducing heart diseases (10), but also connected to working life (11). These studies showed that people who are inclined to be happy and satisfied in life, are generally more likely to be happy and satisfied with their work. They are more productive and work harder.

When referring to satisfaction with life as a whole (Figure 3), the best performances come again from European northern countries (Finland, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands). Italians and Polish people are in a low-middle position but they both appear to be more positive than other countries such as the UK and France for instance. This is probably due to a more positive perception of future trends in the economy, variations in the levels of education and few improvements in the condition of the environment.

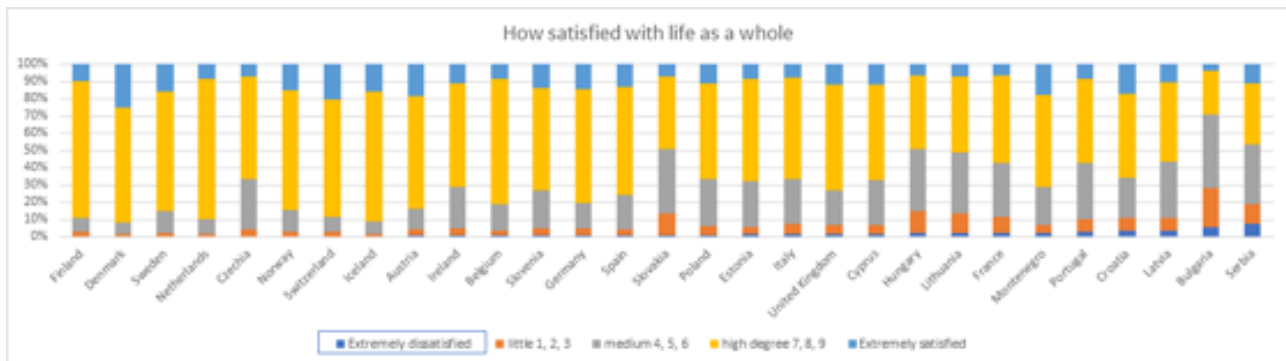


FIGURA 6 (12) → FIGURE 3: SATISFACTION WITH LIFE AS A WHOLE (B27)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: Data were graded on a scale of one to 11

For the elaborations data have been grouped into five categories and sorted by the value "extremely dissatisfied" in ascending order.

Question B30: And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?

Question B27: All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?

In order to understand the evolution of perceived differences linked to well being among participating countries, it is important to take on board a further element; it concerns the perceived fairness (or unfairness) in wealth in own countries (13).

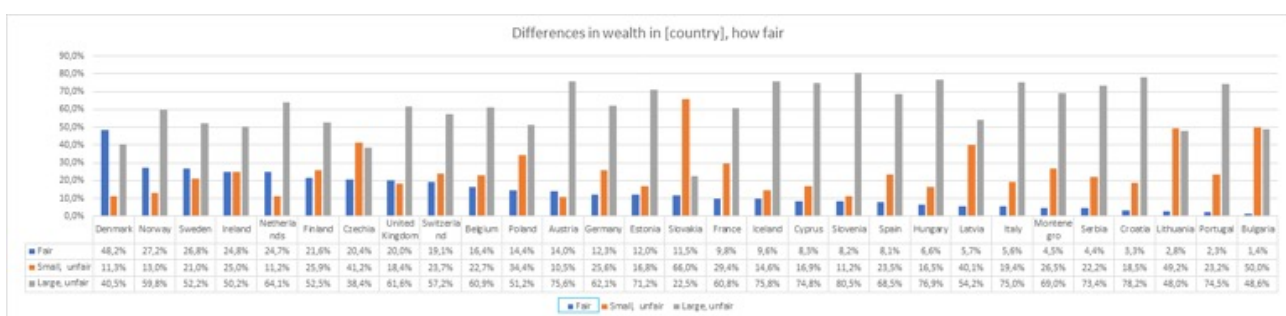


FIGURA 7 → FIGURE 4: PERCEIVED DIFFERENCES IN WEALTH (G420)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: Data were graded on a scale of one to nine

For the elaborations data have been grouped into three categories and sorted by the value "fair" in ascending order.

The level of fairness is quite high in Denmark (48,2%), followed, at a great distance, by Norway (27,2%), Sweden (26,8%), Ireland (24,8%) and the Netherlands (24,7%). Finland (21,6%), Czechia (20,4%) and the United Kingdom (20%) also exceed 20 percentage points.

In countries such as Poland the level of unfairness is quite high (51,2%), but still average. It is higher in Italy where it reaches the 75%, meaning that the level of perceived inequalities linked to differences in wealth distribution is significant.

It will be interesting to analyse in future post-pandemic investigations (such as ESS following Rounds, for instance), if opinions on democracy, freedom and life have the same proportions.

Two years with pandemic have changed our way of understanding society, the world, personal relationships and, of course, institutions and governments. The outbreak of the virus has changed the way of living the present, analysing the past and conceiving the future. The interpretation of yesterday and tomorrow has become more difficult, because only what is happening today has become fundamental, during the pandemic.

In this period, citizens pervaded by anxiety and fear, have expressed a growing demand for security and authority. Thus, confidence in government, central institutions and local authorities may change radically (increasing or decreasing their level of trust), as this great health emergency has forced peoples to accept limitations they were not used to, and this could be reflected in how these restrictions have been digested.

In the current conjuncture it is therefore important to explore the significance of working and social life in both areas: Education/VET systems and Labour Market, which will be analysed in the following sections.

Social justice in education

National educational systems, together with families, are responsible for the younger generation's Education and lifelong learning. Systems (thus governments) and families share the aim of ensuring a free and harmonious development of young people. Their continuous path from childhood to maturity, prepares those who are students today to become mindful citizens in the future, active actors of the upcoming society, individuals trained for work and adults satisfied with their lives.

But the development of education system does not impact only on opportunities for young people, adult learning is a crucial component of modern, innovative and technological societies. All forms of formal and informal learning activities, both general and vocational, undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training and continuing during their entire (working) life, contributes to enhance individuals' employment prospects, to develop personally or professionally, to maintain skills up-to-date and eventually transferrable to different jobs or occupations. Adult learning also contributes to improving social cohesion and promotes active citizenship, thus enriching the competitiveness of enterprises and economies. When learning systems do not provide equal opportunities and privileges, this negatively impacts society both culturally and economically.

National systems should support individual lifelong learning objectives through Education/VET pathways, but also through upskilling and reskilling actions to address changes and innovation. But the importance of how learning systems are designed, the greater or lesser ease of access learning pathways, or the possibility of obtaining the desired qualification, differ among countries.

These differences influence the perception people demonstrate towards the achievement of an adequate level of education. In the ESS module G (Fairness and Justice), this element is observed with a double stance: as a personal experience (Question G4 (14)) and, in general, as the level of existing opportunities within the country they live in (Question G6 (15)).



FIGURA 8 → FIGURE 5: FAIR CHANCE TO ACHIEVE THE LEVEL OF EDUCATION THE RESPONDENT SEEKS (G4)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: Data were graded on a scale of one to 12. For the elaborations data have been grouped into five categories plus 'no education completed' and sorted by the value "does not apply at all" in ascending order.

Figure 5 above shows how in the Northern European area the fairness of being able to achieve the desired level of qualification is identified as extremely possible.

In Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland and the Netherlands the percentage for the higher value expressed in the given scale (applies completely) is for all of them over 40% (the only exception being Finland, which reaches only 29,4 points), while the opposite possibility (Does not apply at all) is very low in these countries, almost around 0 or just above 1 (Denmark and Sweden: 0,6%; Norway: 0,7% and Finland: 1,0%, Iceland 1,1% and the Netherlands 1,3).

The situation is very different in Italy, however, where the value Does not apply at all reaches 6,2%, and a small number of respondents (10,2%) believe that there is a fair chance to achieve the level of education they seek (applies completely). Italy, in fact, ranks among the 10 last positions and it represents a particular context, where country's structural problems are reflected in the negative perspective citizens seem to have on national governments and systems. In this context it is important to rethink national modelling of Education and VET systems (16).

In Poland, respondents' evaluations of their opportunities to achieve the desired level of education seem to be more equally distributed among all the given values. In the last thirty years, Poland has experienced a period of continuous change that has included the national education system. Since the 1999 reform, the changes have involved institutions at all levels of education to align with European standards. The reforms have led to a more dynamic educational system, adapted to the demands of the labour market, and this success has been rewarded by the positive perception of citizens, placing their results in a good position, although not yet excellent.

The long-term implications, based on the different historical development and political traditions of national educational systems, in terms of academic achievements, educational careers and occupational positions, are peculiar to each country. Based on this, it is important to consider those situations where respondents have not completed a level of education (Figure 5 above, last value). The green line shows how in some countries the percentage of respondents who have not achieved a qualification exceeds 2 percentage points: the Czech Republic (3,6%); Germany (2,6%), Slovenia (2,4%) and Austria (2,3%); followed by Finland (2,2%) and Belgium (2,1%).

Regarding the perceived equality of educational opportunities within the respondents' national system, in a less personal view, basically as a chance offered by the country he or she lives in, the attitude of respondents, in some cases, appears to be different from their evaluation when it is part of the individual experience.

As shown in the Figure 6 below (Question G6) the positioning of some countries differs from when the respondent evaluates his/her own opportunity to achieve the desired level of education.

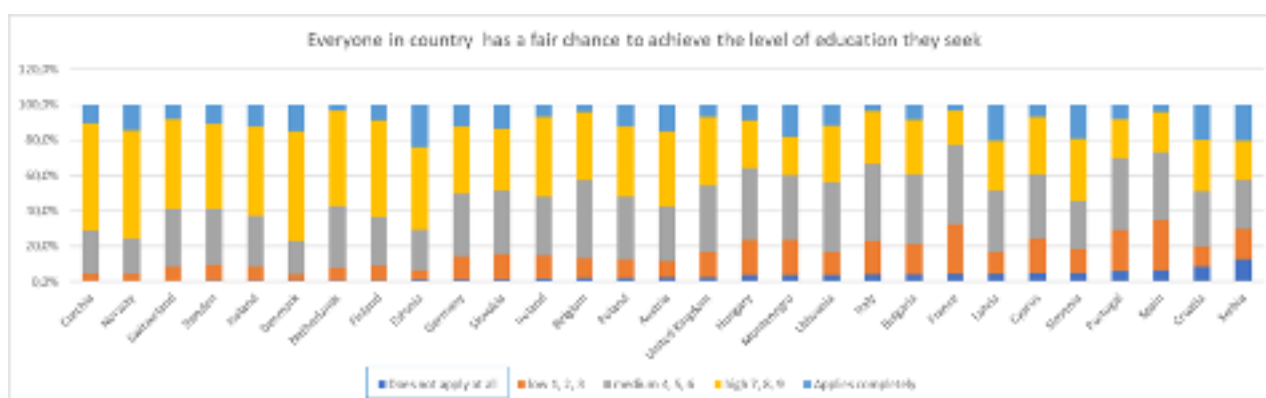


FIGURA 9 → FIGURE 6: FAIR CHANCE EVERYONE HAS TO ACHIEVE THE LEVEL OF EDUCATION THEY SEEK (G6)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: Data were graded on a scale of one to 12

For the elaborations data have been grouped into five categories and sorted by the value "does not apply at all" in ascending order.

For instance, respondents in Czechia, Norway and Switzerland are more confident on the possibility of having a fair chance of achieving the desired level of education - in general - in their own country. By contrast, Finnish respondents are more negative, compared to the individual stance. Countries such as Poland, Italy and Serbia maintain their own positioning, levelling their evaluations of fairness (equally low), an evaluation which appears to be disconnected from the personal approach to get a qualification or the specific opportunities offered by their own national systems.

Besides, to better understand respondents' attitudes towards the perceived fairness related to the qualification level achievement, it is worth considering how the national educational system is evaluated in terms of quality, access, and effectiveness/efficiency.

We can note (Figure 7 below) that a positive evaluation of the state of the national education system coincides with a positive view on the possibility to have a fair chance to achieve the desired level of education (questions G4 and G6). In northern European countries, both indicators are quite highly valued.

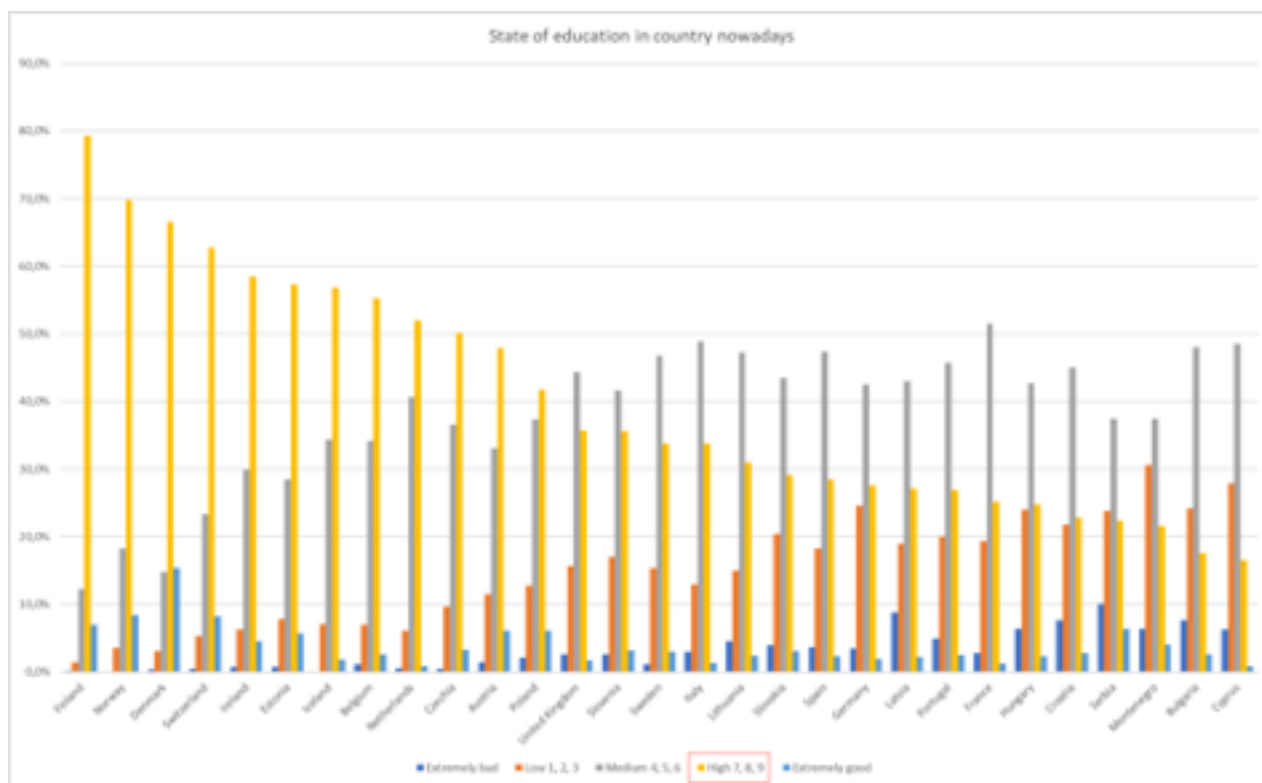


FIGURA 10 (17) →FIGURE 7: STATE OF EDUCATION IN COUNTRY NOWADAYS (B31)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: Data were graded on a scale of one to 11

For the elaborations data have been grouped into five categories and sorted by the value "High 7,8,9" in descending order

Question B31: Please say what you think overall about the state of education in [country] nowadays?

In most European northern countries confirm their systems to be extremely good (i.e: Finland, Norway, Denmark). 79,3% of Finnish respondents evaluate their education system as very high.

Countries such as Poland and Italy reached middle positions. But it is to be noted that Italy has a very good assessment regarding medium evaluations, but very negative scores at the extremes: only 1,4% for extremely good (fourth last position) and a quite high evaluation for extremely bad (3%). Poland instead has a more average positioning in all given values, demonstrating less structural problems.

When education systems are well organised (such as in the Finnish case), they constitute an engine for the people to feel positive in achieving their education goals. Learning opportunities are meant to guarantee people fair educational chances in life and deeply associated with future income levels.

As education levels rise, occupational opportunities (and income perspectives) increase. But the comparative measurement of educational systems is a complex task as national systems of Education and VET are differently organized across countries for historical developments, political traditions, local/regional requirements. In the following Figure 8 and Table 1, qualifications are grouped into five main categories (plus 'other') from no qualification to the highest level of education reachable in all participated countries (Doctoral degree). Qualifications refer to the highest qualifications achieved (18).

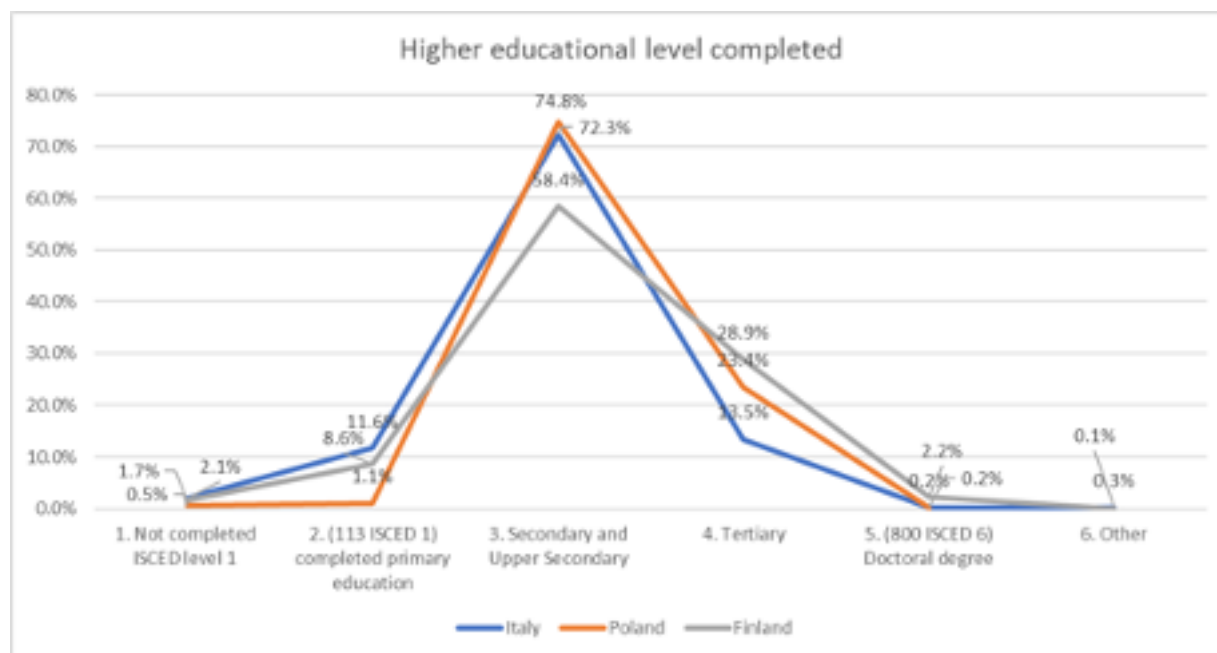


FIGURA 11 → FIGURE 8: HIGHER EDUCATIONAL LEVEL COMPLETED IN ITALY, POLAND AND FINLAND (F15)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: For the elaborations data all (countries) different qualifications have been grouped into five categories, plus 'other'.

Figure 8 shows that in Italy and Poland the percentage of people who have achieved a secondary level qualification is quite high (Poland 74,8%, Italy 72,3%), higher than Finland (58,4%), whose performances in the tertiary level qualification are much better (Finland 28,9) than Italy (13,5%) and Poland (23%).

This tradition of underperformance in Italy in terms of higher qualifications achieved, is not recent. All reforms (19) of Education systems which have occurred in the past two decades have not greatly changed the situation.

In terms of gender equality, Table 1 below shows that there is not much distance between Italy and Finland. It should be noted that in general also in Italy there is a substantial degree of equality between men and women, especially for tertiary degrees. Finland seems to be more virtuous, as in all the different qualifications levels distance between men and women is quite low. In the Polish system, instead, slightly more variation among respondents could be observed.

	1. Not completed ISCED level 1	2. (113 ISCED 1) completed primary education	3. Secondary and Upper Secondary	4. Tertiary	5. (800 ISCED 6) Doctoral degree	6. Other
Italy Male	1,3%	9,3%	75,3%	13,6%	0,2%	0,2%
Italy Female	2,7%	13,8%	69,6%	13,3%	0,2%	0,3%
Poland Male	0,1%	0,4%	79,7%	19,4%	0,3%	0%
Poland Female	0,9%	1,7%	70,4%	26,9%	0,1%	0%
Finland Male	2,0%	9,7%	58,0%	28,1%	1,9%	0,2%
Finland Female	1,4%	7,6%	58,8%	29,6%	2,5%	0%

TAB. 2: HIGHER EDUCATIONAL LEVEL COMPLETED IN ITALY, POLAND AND FINLAND SORTED BY GENDER (F15)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: For the elaborations data all (countries) different qualifications have been grouped into five categories, plus 'other'.

Unfortunately, those countries with lower highest level of qualifications (i.e., Italy and Poland in this case) are also countries where a great number of respondents declared (20) not to have participated in those learning activities (courses, lectures, conferences) directed to improve their skills - for work - in the last 12 months.

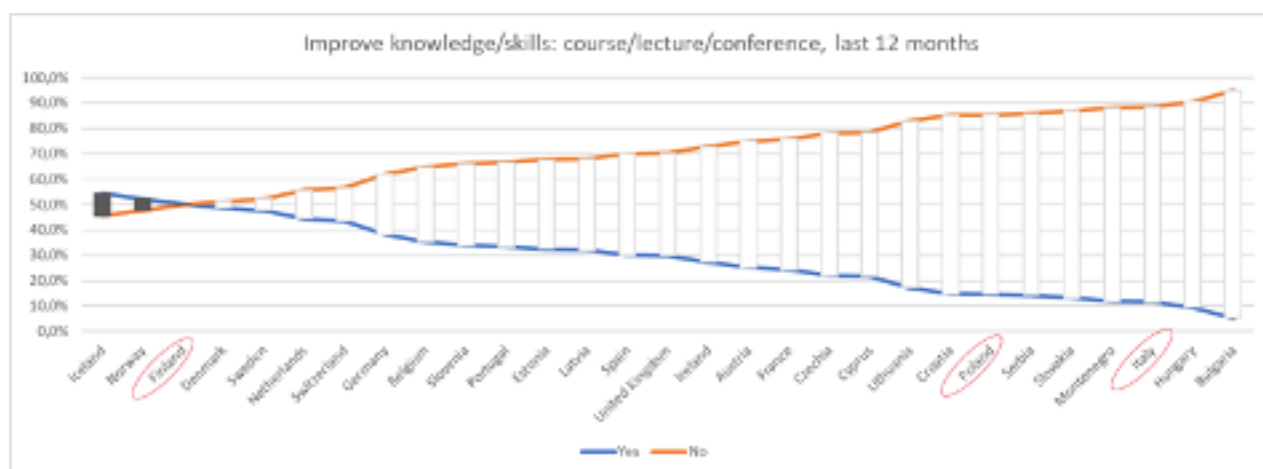


FIGURA 12→ FIGURE 9: TRAINING ACTIVITIES DURING THE LAST TWELVE MONTHS (F60)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

This is a fundamental element that policy makers should take into account when considering that in order to remain competitive (enterprises) and employable (individuals) in a world that is changing at a very fast pace, investing in upskilling and reskilling strategies is essential.

The world is changing in both private life and working environments. The digital transition, the development of technologies and automation; the spread of smartworking, outline a scenario in continuous and profound transformation.

In this scenario workers require to review and renew their skills, with particular attention to digital ones, within upskilling and reskilling processes. Both are essential to be employable and competitive with global challenges. In fact, upskilling processes are dedicated to adjusting and enriching possessed skills and competences, while reskilling processes are more focused on developing new/different skills, mainly those connected to "jobs of the future" to ensure good opportunities for the personal, economic, and professional advancements.

Social justice in Labour Market opportunities

The context of the global (digital) Labour Market, even in the years before the pandemic and the war, was characterised by several difficulties. The world of work has already been transformed by new technologies, globalized requirements, automatized working processes which have often radically changed many occupations and quality standards.

A few decades ago, it was easy to obtain a permanent job and to be employed in that occupation for years, even till retirement, carrying out similar working activities. Careers could be defined as linear in that context. Now careers have turned into irregular paths, made of stages, interruptions, and restarts. Careers should be considered more fluid itineraries. Moments of transition have increased, and upskilling/reskilling pathways have become ineluctable. Difficulties in finding employment and, even more, employment in line with individual expectations, can cause a sense of injustice and unfairness.

Therefore, the concept of fairness in access Labour Market opportunities, more specifically the personal chances to get a job has become increasingly important.

In the ESS module G, the concept of having a fair chance to get a job is observed (as in questions G4 and G6) with a double stance: as a personal chance (Question G5 (21)) and the perceived equality of opportunities within the Labour Market in the respondent's country (Question G7 (22)).

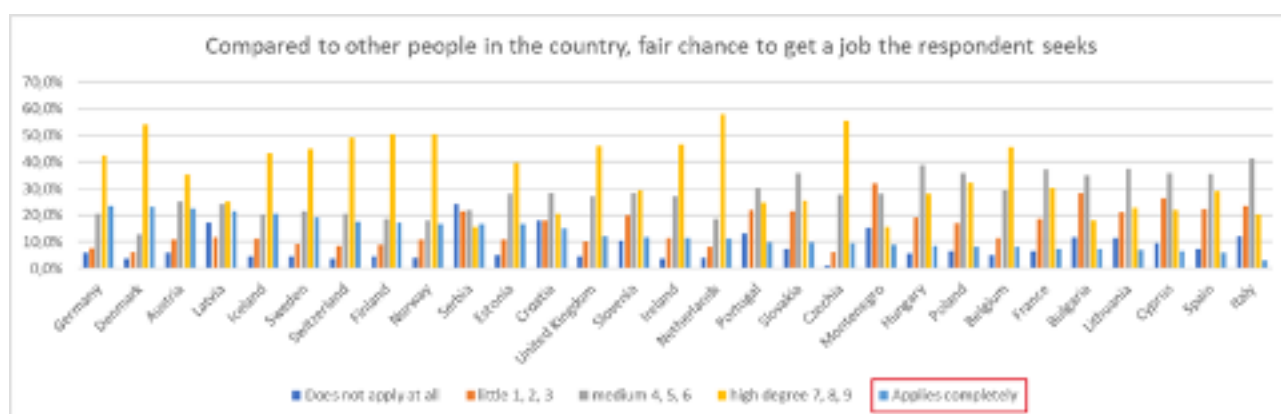


FIGURA 13 → FIGURE 10: FAIR CHANCE TO GET THE JOB THE RESPONDENT SEEKS (G5)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: Data were graded on a scale of one to 11

For the elaborations data have been grouped into five categories and sorted by the value "Applies completely" in descending order

The evaluation of the personal capacity of getting job opportunities is likely to be influenced by the perceived fairness of opportunities that national institutions make available to citizens. The possibility of career and income levels are determined by the type of job an individual may obtain. In this sense governments should put in place actions and investments to support the Labour Market and people employability. This is even more necessary for those people more in need of help, such as citizens who may have to (re)enter the Labour Market (youth, middle-aged workers, women, disadvantaged groups, etc.) or those low-skilled who need to maintain their jobs (obsolescence of skills, competences, and occupations).

Most countries also acknowledged a high likelihood to be offered a job, over 50 percentage points, i.e., in Germany (23.8%), Denmark (23.2%), Austria (22.5%), Latvia (21.7%) and Iceland (20.6%) the chance to get a job applies completely is over 20 percentage points. Finland reaches only 17.4% points, but it has very high values (50.5%) in high degree choices.

Italy instead is the last one (2.9% applies completely; 20.2% high degree) in terms of confidence people have to obtain a job. Unfavourable personal experiences with respect to occupational attainment, negatively affect people attitude and trust towards policy makers to be able to respond to national requirements.

Also, Poland is not performing a very high level of confidence in being offered the desired job (8.3% applies completely; 32.1% high degree), but positiveness is higher than in Italy.

When analysing the country positioning referred to the perceived equality of job opportunities in their country, more linked to the overall chance rather than a personal attitude (Figure 11), the situation does not change much for Italy, whose last positioning (0.3% applies completely; 8.8% high degree) means that structural problems are in place.

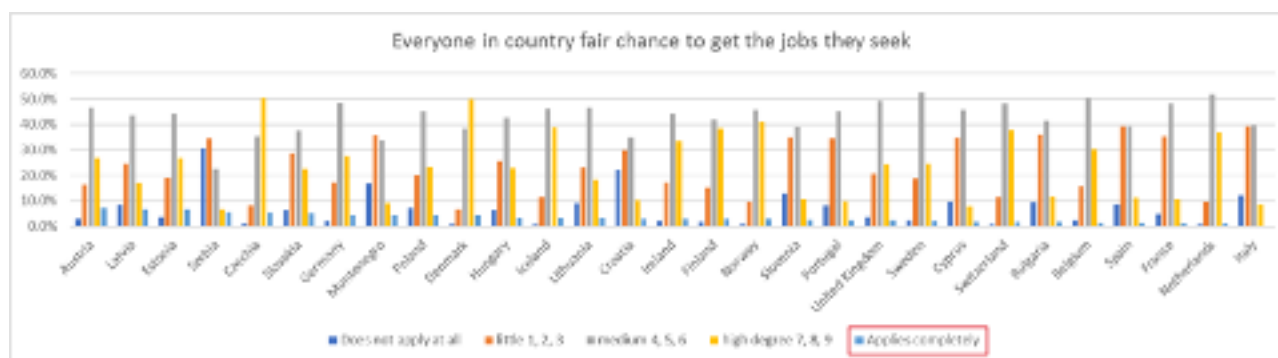


FIGURA 14 → FIGURE 11: FAIR CHANCE EVERYONE HAS TO GET THE JOB THEY SEEK (G7)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: Data were graded on a scale of one to 11

For the elaborations data have been grouped into five categories and sorted by the value "Applies completely" in descending order

Likewise, some countries maintain the same positioning, such as Austria whose performance is even better, getting the highest score for the applies completely value (7.3%) and Latvia (6,5%). Other very good performances come from Czechia (50,3% in the high degree value), Denmark (49,19 in the high degree value) and, at some distance, Norway (41 % in the high degree value).

Some other countries acknowledged some differences when it is considered a general opportunity and not a personal one. Finland has worsened his position, meaning that there is less confident in the general availability of opportunities, while Polish respondents seem to have more trust in the structural Labour Market national frame, having improved its positioning.

Another signal of the functioning of the labour Market opportunities relies on the perception of recruiting procedures.

Recruitment is naturally subject to the influence of several factors, such as: the demand of specific skills required by enterprises; demographic factors (literacy level, economic status, gender), the conditions of the labour-market (ie. unemployment rate, political and legal structure; recruitment legislation, growth and expansion of specific sectors). And of course, internal factors, those endogenous factors within each organization that affect recruiting personnel.

If these procedures are considered as unjust, because of social closure of structural mechanisms on the job market, then their influence may have a negative impact on the perceived distribution of income and wealth.

In the ESS module G, there are several questions related to how the influence of some factors in the recruiting procedures is perceived. One of these questions regards the possessed knowledge and skills (G21) (23)

In the following Figure 12, as expected, the importance given to the skills and knowledge possessed by the individual has great importance in almost all countries, with endogenous differences. For instance, in countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, Latvia and Denmark more than 50% of the interviewed people showed that this issue has a great deal of influence, for both female and male respondents. In few countries such as Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia repondents showed the highest percentage of not much or no influence.

Finland and Poland also are ranked very positively, and this factor has been recognised to have a great deal of influence on recruitment. While Italy is among those countries where recruitment is less based on knowledge and skills.

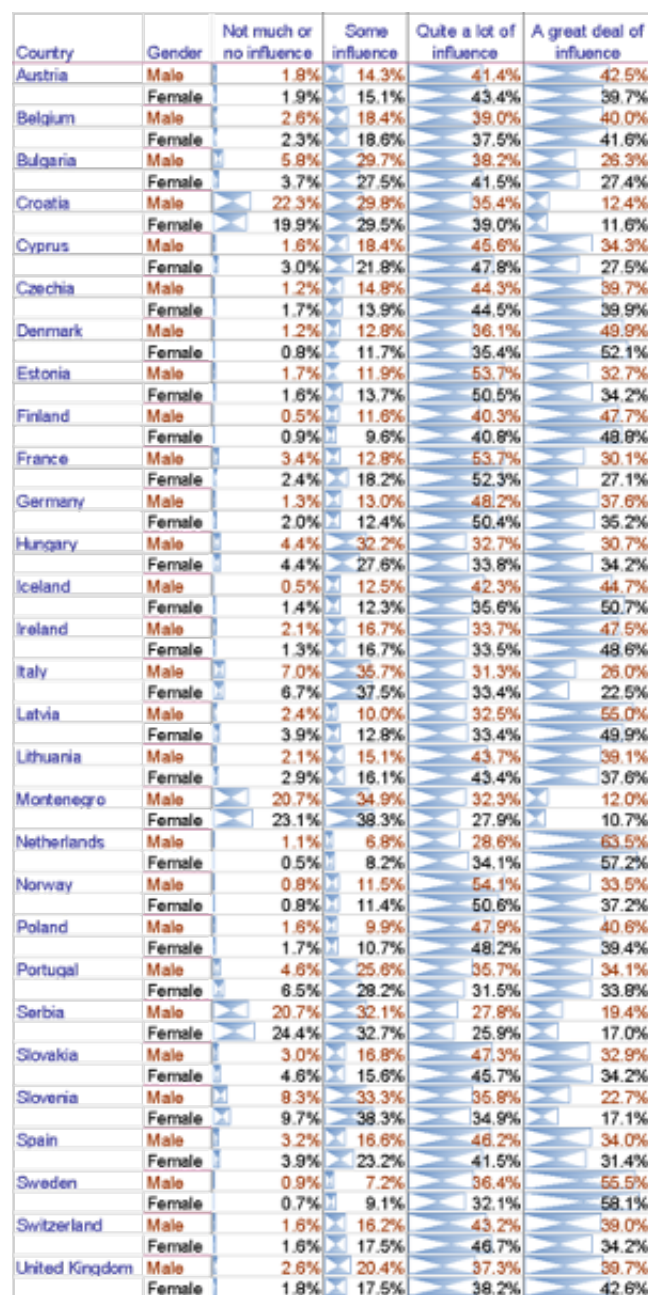


FIGURA 15 → FIGURE 12: INFLUENCE DECISION TO RECRUIT IN COUNTRY: PERSON'S KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS (G21)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: For the elaborations data have been sorted by countries alphabetical order

In terms of differences from a gender point of view, we note that in general there is not a great distance from a male or female evaluation. For instance, in Cyprus, the Netherlands, Latvia, male respondents are more positive than women when considering a great deal of influence. In contrast, in Iceland, we can see the opposite, a situation where women consider more of a great deal of influence knowledge and skills when filling job vacancies.

A second question (G22) (24) regards the individual background, in terms of working experiences. This is a very interesting indicator, especially when the unemployment rate, in a given area is high, as it helps to understand if the Labour Market provides better opportunities for qualified/experienced workers.

In this context the recognition of competences acquired in working contexts have a relevant role. In those countries where it is not easy for individuals to have their knowledge, skills and competences easily recognised, this factor plays a minor role in recruiting. Thus, all process related to job entering or re-entering the Labour Market will not be able to consider the recognition of prior learning.

In the following Figure 13 we can detect that Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Ireland recognised a great deal of influence (over 40 percentage points). Countries which recognise less influence of job experience for recruiting decisions are Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia (more than 15 percentage points within the no much or no influence value).

Italy is not fully influenced by experience when recruiting. 5,2% (male) and 4,7% (female) respondents have claimed for not much or no influence; 31,9% (male) and 34,8% (female) respondents some influence; 35,3% (male) and 36,5% (female) respondents quite a lot of influence; and finally, 27,5% (male) and 24% (female) respondents a great deal of influence. In terms of gender differences, the extremes are lower for women, opposed to central choices in which male respondents seem to claim less influence.

In general, across countries there are few deviations in terms of gender.

Female respondents recognised a greater deal of influence compared to men in Finland (5,7 percentage points difference), Norway (4,5 percentage points difference) and Portugal (4,3 percentage points difference).

While in other countries male respondents recognised a greater deal of influence compared to women such as Germany (4,8 percentage points difference) and France (4,4 percentage points difference).

Country	Gender	Not much or no influence	Some influence	Quite a lot of influence	A great deal of influence
Austria	Male	2.8%	13.5%	43.5%	40.2%
	Female	2.4%	16.1%	43.1%	38.4%
Belgium	Male	2.5%	20.1%	46.7%	30.8%
	Female	2.4%	18.6%	46.9%	32.1%
Bulgaria	Male	4.9%	26.1%	40.9%	28.0%
	Female	3.7%	26.2%	42.3%	27.7%
Croatia	Male	17.8%	31.1%	38.0%	13.1%
	Female	18.1%	26.8%	42.0%	13.1%
Cyprus	Male	0.5%	10.1%	51.0%	38.4%
	Female	1.2%	13.6%	48.1%	37.0%
Czechia	Male	1.2%	11.1%	41.1%	46.6%
	Female	1.5%	11.6%	43.0%	44.0%
Denmark	Male	0.7%	12.8%	49.1%	37.4%
	Female	0.8%	18.1%	46.9%	34.1%
Estonia	Male	0.8%	14.1%	51.4%	33.7%
	Female	2.0%	15.2%	51.9%	30.9%
Finland	Male	0.4%	12.5%	53.5%	33.7%
	Female	0.4%	10.4%	49.7%	39.4%
France	Male	2.5%	13.3%	53.9%	30.2%
	Female	1.5%	12.8%	59.8%	25.9%
Germany	Male	1.3%	15.4%	54.8%	28.4%
	Female	1.7%	17.8%	56.9%	23.6%
Hungary	Male	5.2%	25.5%	33.0%	36.3%
	Female	3.6%	22.8%	36.6%	37.0%
Iceland	Male	1.7%	18.5%	46.0%	33.8%
	Female	1.4%	19.8%	44.9%	34.0%
Ireland	Male	2.1%	15.8%	41.9%	40.2%
	Female	1.6%	17.0%	38.7%	42.7%
Italy	Male	5.2%	31.9%	35.3%	27.5%
	Female	4.7%	34.8%	36.5%	24.0%
Latvia	Male	1.4%	9.3%	31.3%	58.1%
	Female	2.6%	11.1%	32.4%	54.0%
Lithuania	Male	1.1%	11.0%	44.6%	43.3%
	Female	2.5%	13.6%	41.7%	42.2%
Montenegro	Male	17.4%	37.1%	33.9%	11.5%
	Female	20.7%	37.3%	30.6%	11.4%
Netherlands	Male	1.2%	12.4%	42.9%	43.5%
	Female	0.8%	11.8%	47.0%	40.4%
Norway	Male	0.6%	17.7%	58.9%	22.8%
	Female	0.3%	16.7%	55.7%	27.3%
Poland	Male	1.0%	7.2%	42.9%	48.8%
	Female	0.9%	8.6%	41.9%	48.6%
Portugal	Male	2.5%	24.9%	42.7%	29.9%
	Female	3.2%	25.6%	37.0%	34.2%
Serbia	Male	16.3%	32.0%	30.2%	21.5%
	Female	18.9%	33.7%	28.2%	19.1%
Slovakia	Male	3.8%	15.6%	44.2%	36.4%
	Female	4.2%	14.1%	44.2%	37.5%
Slovenia	Male	6.0%	32.4%	39.2%	22.5%
	Female	5.6%	35.2%	39.5%	19.7%
Spain	Male	2.6%	13.1%	48.4%	35.8%
	Female	3.1%	16.7%	42.2%	37.9%
Sweden	Male	1.0%	15.1%	43.1%	40.7%
	Female	0.5%	16.9%	40.7%	41.9%
Switzerland	Male	1.1%	18.5%	49.3%	31.1%
	Female	1.1%	16.7%	53.5%	28.8%
United Kingdom	Male	2.3%	23.3%	44.9%	29.5%
	Female	2.5%	23.9%	42.8%	30.9%

FIGURE 16 → FIGURE 13: INFLUENCE DECISION TO RECRUIT IN COUNTRY: PERSON'S ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCE (G22)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: For the elaborations data have been sorted by countries alphabetical order

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A third question within this set of items, intends to detect the connection between recruitment and gender (G25) (25).

Most government regulations and/or legislations prohibit (gender) discrimination in hiring and employment, but the practice unfortunately may sometimes mismatch the given rules, especially when social and economic aspects may influence the choices of employers to prefer male employees rather than female (cost of labour, absence of female workers for long period due to pregnancy, and so on).

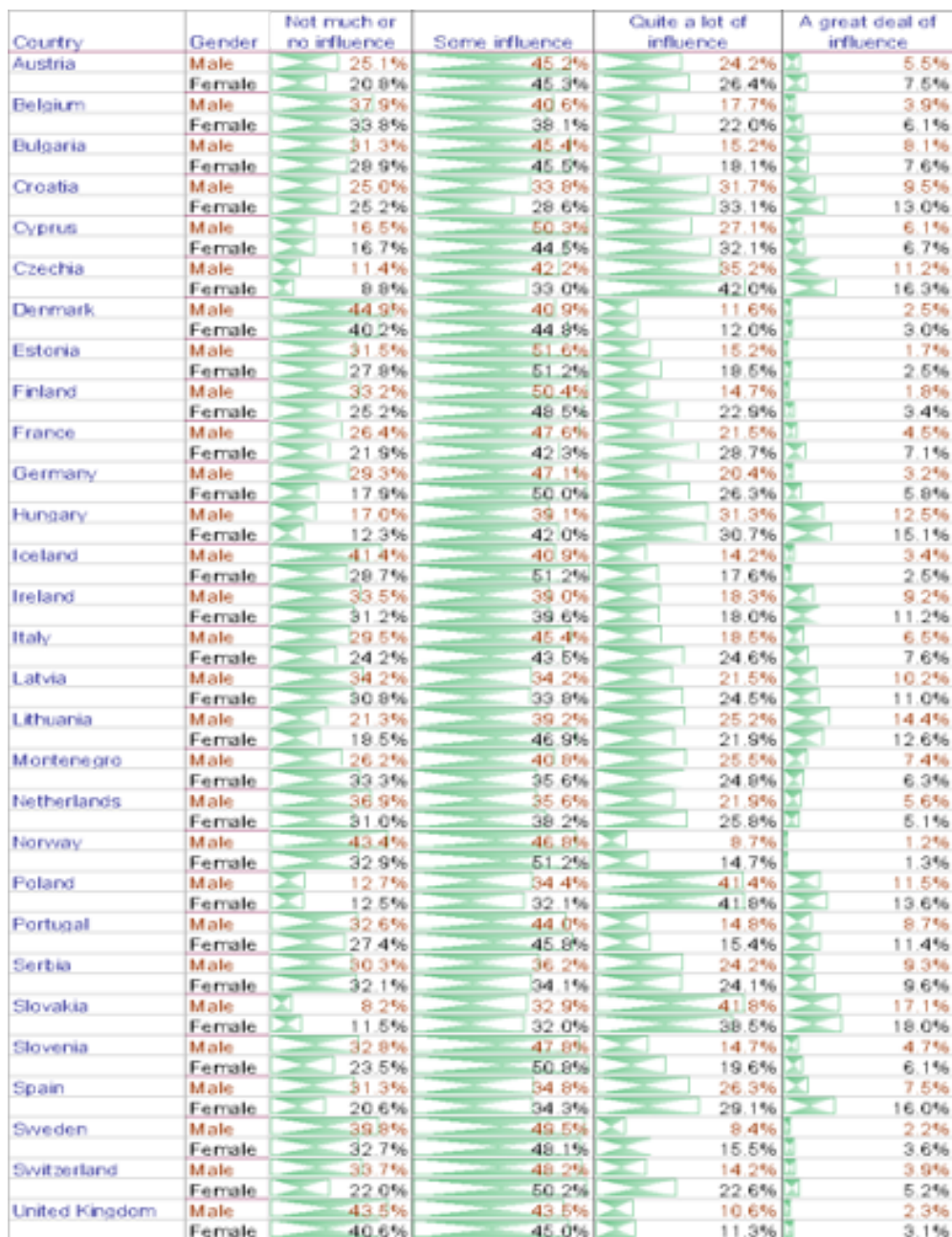


FIGURE 17 → FIGURE 14: INFLUENCE DECISION TO RECRUIT IN OWN COUNTRY – PERSON GENDER (G25)

Source: Author's elaboration of ESS Round 9 data

Note: For the elaborations data have been sorted by countries alphabetical order

Figure 14 above shows how gender does not influence recruitment in some countries, namely Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and UK (below 4% identified a great deal of influence).

In some countries a greater influence is detected. A greater number of respondents, both men and women, in Slovakia, Lithuania, Hungary, Czechia identified a great deal of influence (over 11 percentage points).

Italy shows quite an average situation compared to other countries, but still claiming too high an influence of this component on recruiting procedures. Poland also demonstrates to be slightly influenced by differences in terms of socially acceptable roles and responsibilities.

This is also the case where many significant deviations in terms of female and male responses have been detected. In fact even in those countries where the scores are low (regarding a great deal of influence value), women seem to be more honest, by representing a higher rate compared to men. This is significant for Spain (8,4 difference points within a great deal of influence) and Czechia (5% difference points).

Same when not much or no influence value has been represented. In the following countries there are differences between men and women; Finland (8% points difference), Germany (11,4), Iceland (12,7%), Norway (10,5%), Slovenia (9,3%), Spain (10,7%) and Switzerland (11,8%).

Conclusion

The jobs of the future will increasingly be high skilled and will require higher levels of Education and/or (Technical) Vocational Education and Training, in terms of language, literacy, numeracy, technical skills and competences. Governments, local authorities and stakeholders should drive vital reforms to ensure that all working-age people have knowledge, skills and competences necessary to succeed in finding and maintaining a job, which will be the basis of the prosperity of individuals and the economy.

Too many working-age people have not achieved significantly those skills required by the Labour Market or key (digital) skills and competences, and this should be a concern for policy makers.

If the objective in Europe is to ensure that no individual is left behind, European societies, Education and (T)VET systems and Labour Markets should overcome fragmentation, generational and gender inequalities, skills gaps and qualification mismatches. To support this, it will be of a great importance to develop skilling, reskilling and upskilling pathways, considering that a low depository of skills constitutes an obstacle to the ability to grow and innovate at individual level, but also for modern societies within the new economy.

A precautional long-term strategy is needed in many countries. Thus, more investments in high-quality Education and VET are crucial to reduce this skill gap which permeates all sectors. In fact, even though VET systems tend to be very fragmented, diverse among different contexts and countries with up and down trends (current decline of shorter pathways for instance), they are the basis for upskilling and reskilling processes. They are closely aligned with the evolving demands for skills required by enterprises; they usually focus more on supporting people from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to formal Education. Through their significant component of work-based learning (usually included in these pathways), they support individuals to enter or re-enter the Labour Market (26).

Concluding, we can say that the endless battle between social justice, economic competitiveness (of enterprises) and occupability (of individuals) leads to the concept that it is only through the provision of opportunities for all, achieved through high quality learning, that individuals, enterprises, societies in general may endure. A culture sensible to the changes of the digital age, open to innovation and able to navigate this scenario must be supported and spread.

Note

- (1) For more information on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Pisa survey, visit the web site: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/>
- (2) For instance the OECD-Programme for the International
- (3) ESS web-site: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> while Italy web page (in Italian language) is available at: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/about/country/italy/>
- (4) NatCen Social research web site: <https://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/european-social-survey/>
- (5) The items are taken from the human values scale designed by Shalom H. Schwartz (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)
- (6) It is also important to consider the concept of literacy in health environments. For more information see Bonacci M. (2020).
- (7) ESS question: How much you personally trust each of the institutions: B9 ... politicians; B10 ... political parties
- (8) Question B30: And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?
- (9) Stone et al (1987) explored the persistence of the human immune system when participants reported positive moods by having them ingest a pill that caused an immune response. Participants were asked to rate their mood across different days and then their saliva was tested for antibodies in response to the pill. Those who rated themselves the happiest had a higher level of antibodies. The results suggest that feeling more positive can help support the immune system to defend against foreign bodies.
- (10) Bhattacharyya, Whitehead, Rakhit & Steptoe (2008) found a link between happiness and heart health. The researchers studied individuals who already had, or were suspected of having coronary heart disease. They asked participants to rate their happiness, and their hearts were then tested for symptoms. Those who rated the highest for happiness on the day also had the healthiest heart patterns. This suggests that happiness can still have health benefits, even when illness or disease is already present.
- (11) For instance the research from the University of Warwick conducted by Andrew J Oswald, Eugenio Proto and Daniel Sgroi: 'Happiness and Productivity', available at <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/academic/proto/workingpapers/happinessproductivity.pdf>
- (12) Question B27: All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?
- (13) ESS question G20: In your opinion, are differences in wealth in [country] unfairly small, fair, or unfairly large?
- (14) Question G4: To what extent do you think this statement applies to you? Compared to other people in [country], I have had a fair chance of achieving the level of education I was seeking.
- (15) Question G6: To what extent do you think this statement applies in [country]? Overall, everyone in [country], has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek.

- (16) For more information on the Italian context see XXX(2021).
- (17) Question B31: Please say what you think overall about the state of education in [country] nowadays?
- (18) ESS Round 9 question F15: What is the highest level of education you have successfully completed?
- (19) Italian legislative reforms on lifelong learning and education: Law n. 92/2012 on Lifelong Learning, which established the right to lifelong learning and gradually implemented different steps of the national lifelong learning strategy, based on the development of mechanisms of transparency, accumulation, validation and transfer of skills and competences acquired by the individual.. Law n. 107/2015 on school reform, the so-called Good School bill designed to bring greater transparency to the system.
- (20) ESS Question F60: During the last twelve months, have you taken any course or attended any lecture or conference to improve your knowledge or skills for work?
- (21) Question G5: Imagine you were looking for a job today. To what extent do you think this statement applies to you? Compared to other people in [country], I would have a fair chance of getting the job I was seeking
- (22) Question G7: To what extent do you think this statement applies in [country]? Overall, everyone in [country] has a fair chance of getting the jobs they seek.
- (23) Question G21: In your opinion, how much influence does each of the following factors have on the decision to recruit or not to recruit a person for a job in [country]? The person's knowledge and skills. (24) Question
- (24) G22: In your opinion, how much influence does each of the following factors have on the decision to recruit or not to recruit a person for a job in [country]? The person's on-the-job experience (in terms of professional experience).
- (25) Question G25: In your opinion, how much influence does each of the following factors have on the decision to recruit or not to recruit a person for a job in [country]? The person's gender.
- (26) For more information on the future role of VET, see Cedefop The future of vocational education and training in Europe: volume 2 (2022).

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