CHAPTER 14

Education in Times of COVID-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19-induced policy responses in the education sector were particularly diverse, often with distinct approaches adopted not only across Europe but even at the regional level within one country, for example, in Spain (Díez-Gutiérrez & Gajardo Espinoza, 2021) or Germany (Freundl et al., 2021). Furthermore, countries introduced a variety of measures depending on the level of education. While universities largely switched to digital or hybrid learning, daycare and primary schools that initially also faced restrictions on face-to-face learning became crucial in providing support to workers in essential professions and, in the later stage of the pandemic, to parents working from home.

School closures during the lockdown periods largely disrupted education, leading to potential long-term consequences (Blaskó et al., 2022), especially for young children (Fuchs-Schündeln et al., 2020), and increasing existing educational inequalities (Dimopoulos et al., 2021; Engzell

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et al., 2020). Emerging research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector has shown that suspension of in-person learning has contributed to learning loss, exacerbating achievement gaps in several European countries (Maldonado & De Witte, 2022), and negatively impacted students' well-being (Grewenig et al., 2021). It also challenged the capacities and abilities of parents, who often had to combine their work responsibilities with home schooling (Hank & Steinbach, 2020; Hipp & Bünning, 2021).

At the same time, the transition to distance and hybrid learning accelerated the digitalisation of education institutions and education systems across Europe, amplifying economic disparities across the countries (Arday, 2022). With digital learning becoming the dominant policy measure, especially in higher education sector, supranational actors, such as the EU and the UN intensified competition for global education governance, proposing own policy solutions (Symeonidis et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020; Wulff, 2021).

This chapter discusses differences and similarities in education policy measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic in the countries of the European Economic Area and Switzerland and the role of supranational actors. It addresses the differences between crisis policymaking process in the field of education, contrasting them with the COVID-19-related developments, such as epidemiological data and the introduction of lockdowns or other restrictions. Thus, it aims at providing an in-depth comparative examination of the emergency policymaking in the field of education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Diversity of Policy Responses in the Field of Education Across Europe

The COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of people to stay at home, leaving educational institutions closed for months and, as in other spheres of life in pandemic, often moving everyday life and, as an essential part of it, learning and teaching, into the digital realm. High fragmentation of education governance in the European countries and absence of the EU-wide education policies hindered an effective and coordinated response to the challenges emerging during the pandemic (Symeonidis et al., 2021). In the situation of high uncertainty and growing number of cases and COVID-related deaths, initial crisis-management measures led to closure

of educational institutions and often immediate switch to online education. As a result, educational professionals had to cope with the changing mode of teaching and adopt to the challenges of new learning environment, often compromising own physical and mental health (Baker et al., 2021; Košir et al., 2022).

Early childhood education and care sector serves as crucial support mechanisms for parents and constitutes the first stage of a child's educational journey. The Eurostat data (2022a) reveals that on average 92.9% of children from age three in the EU were enrolled into early childhood education in 2020, though enrolment rates vary between 70 and 100%. In Norway, the share of children attending early childcare facilities was about 95%, whereas in Switzerland this figure drops to 50%. There are also differences between the financial support in this sector, as some countries or even regions provide state support for early childhood education, even from the age of one (e.g., in Vienna state in Austria), whereas other countries have no or limited state-funded kindergarten places.

Primary and secondary schools are the cornerstone of education in Europe. According to the Eurostat statistics (2022b), in 2020 there were 23.3 million primary school pupils with on average 87.3% of them attending public schools. Secondary education still largely constitutes compulsory education in the EEA countries, as children are obliged to attend school until the age of 14–16 (Eurostat, 2022c), with only 2–5% of this age group not attending secondary education institutions. As in the case of primary education, the majority of pupils are educated in public schools.

In 2020, there were 18 million students enrolled in tertiary education programmes in the EU (Eurostat, 2022d), corresponding to on average 70% rate, though there are large discrepancies among countries with lower attendance rates (less than 50%) in the CEE countries (World Bank Group, 2022). These data reflect the existing inequalities in the access to higher education. Though some countries provide state support for tertiary education, disparities in social and economic opportunities often render higher education inaccessible, unlike compulsory primary and secondary education. Levels of educational inequality vary across regions, with Nordic and Western European countries demonstrating lower levels, while Mediterranean and Eastern European countries report higher inequality levels (Palmisano et al., 2022).

As in the other aspects of life in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, education was also impacted, when most countries introduced measures limiting the transmission consequently bringing social life to a standstill.

Italy, Spain, Austria, the UK, and the Netherlands imposed lockdowns of various intensity (see Chazel's contribution to this volume) in March 2020 that with brief phases of reopening lasted until 2022. The Nordic countries, despite similarities in health and welfare systems, adopted various policies: as Finland, Denmark, and Norway enforced lockdowns, Sweden became known for an alternative approach aiming at herd immunity (Pierre, 2020). The Central and Eastern European countries initially followed Western European countries implementing preventive lockdowns early on and limiting the spread of the COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 (Bohle & Eihmanis, 2022). Educational institutions often had to follow suit and either close completely or provide opportunities for hybrid or digital learning.

However, in the later stages of the crisis, most of the CEE countries failed to implement effective vaccination policies and confront increasing mistrust into the governmental decisions. Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia took advantage of the situation, strengthening illiberal democratic practices (Bohle et al., 2022; Popic & Moise, 2022). In the Baltic countries, on the contrary, early restrictive measures and centralised response provided an opportunity to prepare and preserve the health systems (Webb et al., 2022).

An overview of policy responses in the field of education across countries, provided in Fig. 14.1, reflects the results of the EXCEPTIUS project legislative data analysis. The maps demonstrate how often the measures were mentioned in the legal documents and, therefore, the extent of specific measures in the period between January 2020 and May 2021.

The dataset includes six different types of policy measures: distance learning, hybrid learning, full closure, partial closure, minimal service for essential professions, and finally reopening. The first two measures entail the provisions for either distance learning, such as the use of diverse communication tools, existing and specifically developed online learning platforms or other instruments allowing to provide distance education. Given the extensive range of tools used to ensure distance learning, this chapter does not aim to enumerate the exact tools deployed in each country. Universities had been incorporating online learning platforms into their classroom teaching long before the pandemic; however, other educational sectors often had to implement ad-hoc developed tools (Barberi et al., 2020; Katić et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020).

Hybrid learning, a blend of remote and face-to-face instruction, could supplement distance learning or occasionally act as a transitional phase

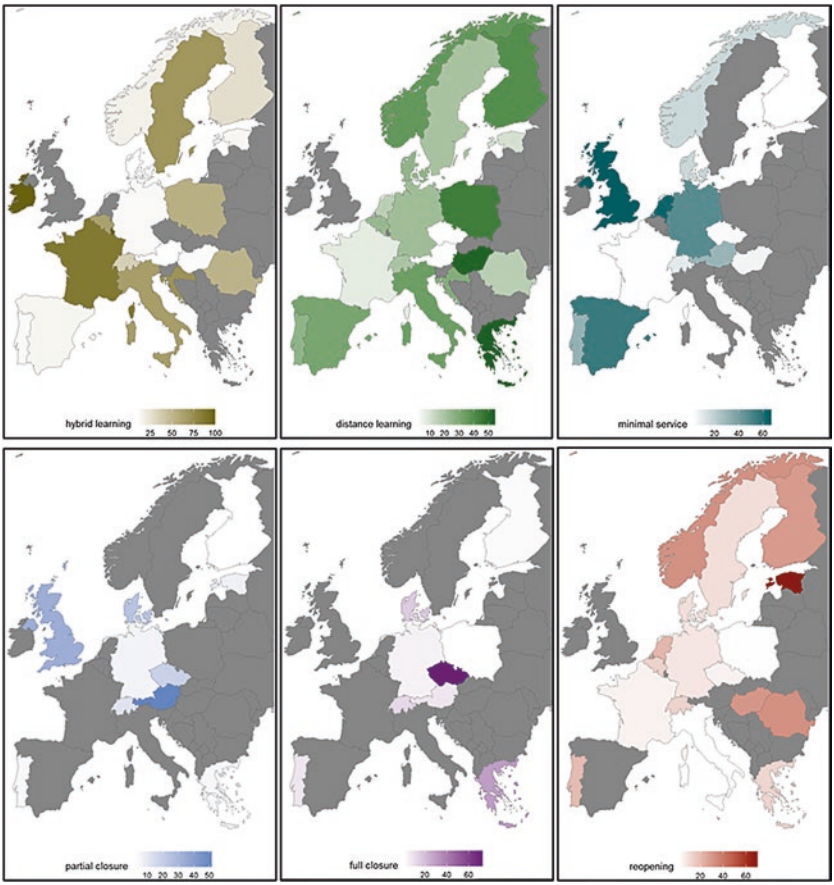

Fig. 14.1 Policy responses in the field of education across countries, January 2020–May 2021. *Source*: EXCEPTIUS dataset, own rendering, demonstrating the salience of the measures in legislative documents by country in percent

between in-person education and remote learning, either prior to or following lockdowns. Full and partial closures of educational institutions encompass restrictions on in-person instruction. Yet, even in the times of full closure of education institutions some countries maintained minimal service for essential professions, offering support for people unable to transition to remote work, such as, for example, doctors, nurses, and

police. All the measures could complement each other and be implemented simultaneously, for example, closures, minimal service, and distance learning, and therefore may be referenced concurrently in the analysed legal documents.

Finally, provisions for reopening educational institutions, though primarily put forth when restrictions were being eased, could also be debated alongside discussions about closures or hybrid learning. Therefore, the presence of one of the measures within a legal document does not necessarily preclude the presence of the others.

Table 14.1 provides an overview of the number of coded measures for each country and serves as a basis for interpretation of the results demonstrated in Figs. 14.4, 14.5, 14.6, 14.7, 14.8, and 14.9 in the following sections. In case no legislative documents in a country mentioned specific measures, these countries were excluded from the analysis.

Figure 14.1 reveals important patterns in policy measures in the field of education, elucidating the differences and similarities between the countries. Hybrid and digital learning provisions dominated the policy response and were to some extent introduced in almost all the countries analysed within the project.

However, only a small number of countries implemented full or partial closures of education institutions. Among these countries are Germany, Denmark, the UK, Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, and Finland that opted for strict lockdowns in the early days of the pandemic. These countries are also among those who maintained minimal educational service for essential professions, aiming to support the crucial workforce. The data demonstrates the lack of this policy measure in the CEE countries except for Hungary and the Czech Republic.

As the pandemic evolved, the policy focus shifted towards relaxing measures in education sector. Despite the positive effect of the closures on the infection transmission, increasing number of expert advice highlighted the negative impact of the closures on socio-emotional well-being of children, youth, educational professionals, and parents (Brooks et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2020), the long-term learning losses (Blaskó et al., 2022) and inequalities between the countries and regions (Esteban-Navarro et al., 2020; Mitescu-Manea et al., 2021). Contrary to the restrictions, relaxing measures contributed to positive emotions (Eisele et al., 2021). Therefore, the prevalence of educational reopening provisions across Europe found in the analysed legal documents is not surprising.

Table 14.1 Overview of the policy measures data by country

	Full closure	*Partial closure*	*Minimal service*	*Hybrid learning*	*Distance learning*	*Reopening*
Austria	13	84	49	14	3	
Belgium				24	9	5
Croatia				5	2	
Cyprus					53	32
Czech Republic	63	16	3		1	4
Denmark	38	59	40	21	62	24
Estonia		2		4	3	21
Finland	2	1	2	26	39	29
France			1	38	3	2
Germany	15	19	160	41	74	27
Greece	49	7			92	21
Hungary			2	4	19	11
Ireland				3		
Italy				204	106	4
Luxembourg				4		
Malta				8		8
Netherlands			12		3	4
Norway			4	4	9	8
Poland	1			71	59	2
Portugal	4	2	16	6	13	10
Romania				16	5	10
Spain			153	39	87	
Sweden				7	2	1
Switzerland	19	18	14	57	31	21
United Kingdom		3	6			
Total	204	211	462	596	675	244

Source: EXCEPTIUS data

The comparison of the WHO epidemiological data (WHO, n.d.) on the new cases of the COVID-19 and total deaths for all the countries (Figs. 14.2 and 14.3) generally demonstrates the link between the negative health dynamics during the pandemic and the measures restricting in-person education. Given the existence of significant outliers, such as days with a high number of newly registered cases, for instance, with a maximum of 57,506 in Italy, Fig. 14.2 amplifies the core findings of the comparison for up to 5000 new cases per day, disregarding the outliers. As the figures show, decrease in the number of new cases and fatalities aligns

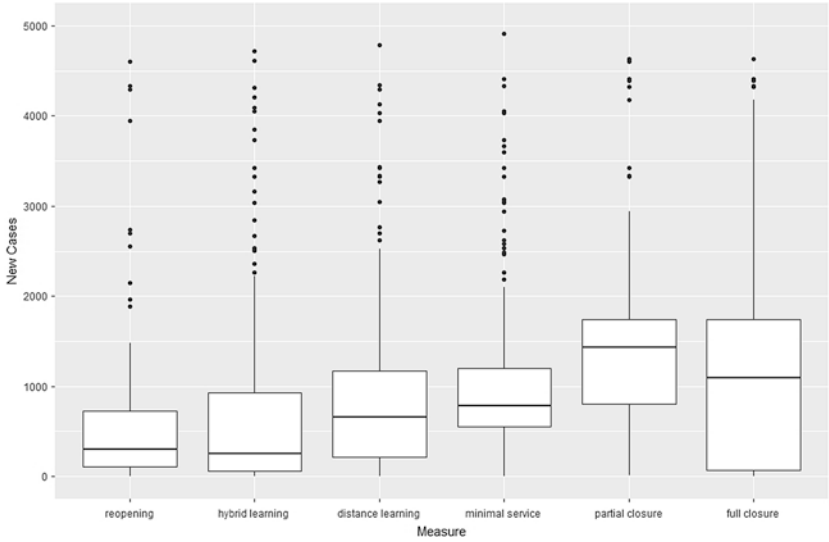

Fig. 14.2 Association between the daily number of new COVID-19 cases limited to maximum 5000 and mentions of policy measures, January 2020–May 2021. *Source*: EXCEPTIUS data, own rendering

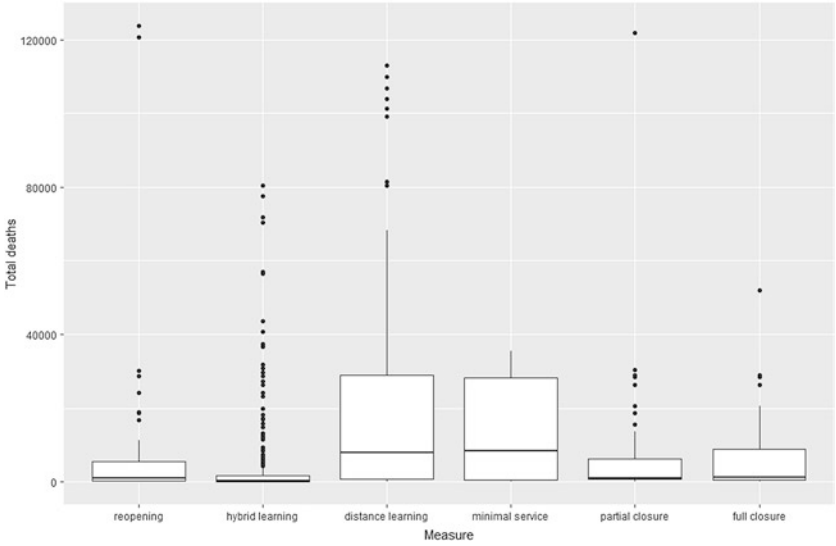

Fig. 14.3 Association between the daily total number of deaths and mentions of policy measures, January 2020–May 2021. *Source*: EXCEPTIUS dataset, own rendering

with legislation on reopening measures and the shift towards hybrid education. There is, however, a large range in the daily number of cases when it comes to the introduction of the full closure measures. The boxplots that link distance learning and the provision of minimal service to total deaths in Fig. 14.3 reveal comparable trends.

Table 14.2 provides an overview of the measures within the dataset concerning different educational fields. It reveals that legislative attention to primary, secondary, and tertiary education is relatively equal, while the portion of documents addressing early childhood education constitutes approximately half of that dedicated to each of the other sectors.

Table 14.2 Policy measures by country and education sector

	Early childhood education	*Primary education*	*Secondary education*	*Higher education*
Austria	19	56	56	32
Belgium	5	10	12	11
Croatia	1	2	2	2
Cyprus	N/A	22	43	20
Czech Republic	8	27	26	26
Denmark	21	122	30	71
Estonia	1	9	11	9
Finland	11	21	44	23
France	12	14	11	7
Germany	87	91	94	64
Greece	37	44	44	44
Hungary	13	5	5	13
Ireland	0	1	1	1
Italy	68	80	86	80
Luxembourg	1	1	1	1
Malta	4	4	4	4
Netherlands	5	6	4	4
Norway	6	6	6	7
Poland	18	22	26	67
Portugal	13	17	16	5
Romania	4	6	12	9
Spain	17	87	88	87
Sweden	2	3	4	1
Switzerland	32	32	48	48
United Kingdom	2	3	3	1
Total	387	691	677	637

Source: EXCEPTIUS data

Wide range of policy responses adopted by nations within the EEA reflects the variety of educational institutions, the distinct characteristics of different educational levels, and their societal roles. The next part of the chapter focuses on the in-depth discussion of the measures introduced within the educational sectors, from early childhood education to primary and secondary schools and, finally, university sector.

Distance and Hybrid Learning Measures

Distance and hybrid learning measures dominated the policy response in the field of education (see Figs. 14.4 and 14.5). Almost all the countries investigated within the EXCEPTIUS project made legal provisions for either one or both measures. However, the extent of these measures across different levels of education varies.

Compared to all other education fields, both distance and hybrid learning measures prevail in the field of tertiary education. Due to their age, students at this level typically exhibit greater independence. Coupled with the high level of digital skills they were often considered capable to, often almost immediately, transition to digital learning. Indeed, the Eurostat data (Eurostat, 2020) reveals that in 2019 about 80% of European youth aged between 16 and 24 had basic or above basic digital skills.

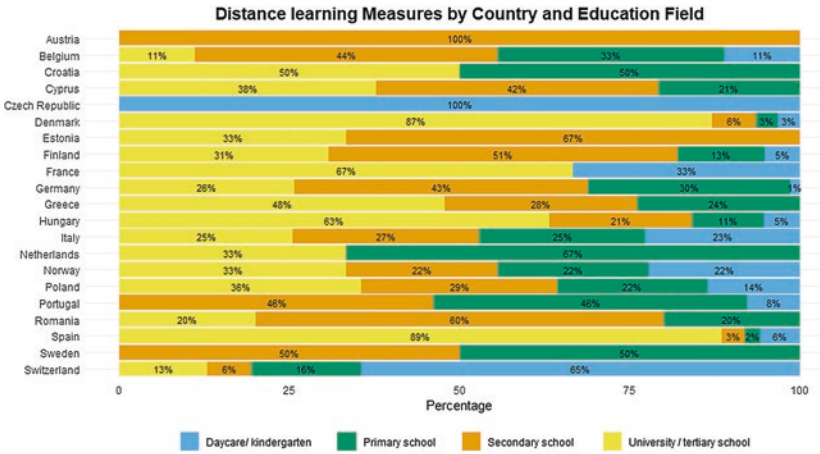

Fig. 14.4 Distance learning measures by country and education field introduced from January 2020 to May 2021. *Source*: EXCEPTIUS data, own rendering

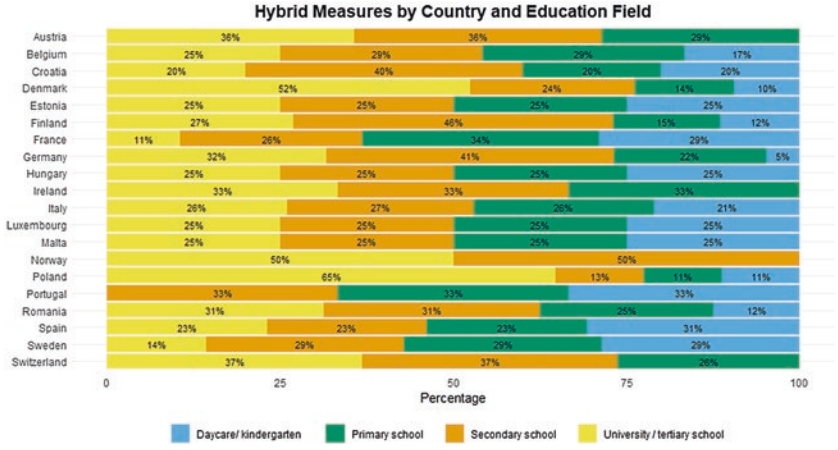

Fig. 14.5 Hybrid learning measures by country and education field introduced from January 2020 to May 2021. *Source*: EXCEPTIUS data, own rendering

Analysis of legislative documents revealed that distance learning was the sole policy response for tertiary education in Greece and neighbouring Cyprus. In Spain, Hungary, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Croatia, and Germany, distance learning emerged as the dominant response in the higher education sector, supplemented by hybrid learning. The data shows that, notably, only Austria, Portugal, and Czech Republic did not make any distance learning provisions for higher education in the legislation analysed, with the latter adopting the measure only in the field of early childhood education and care, that is, daycare and kindergarten. However, both Austria and Portugal largely employed hybrid learning in higher education, resulting in students primarily using online tools for learning and attending exams physically.

On the contrary, distance learning is seldom used in early childhood education and care, a sector pivotal in supporting the workforce by alleviating childcare responsibilities. Considering comparatively high occurrence of the early childhood education mentions in legal documents in Switzerland (see Table 14.2), extensive focus on distance learning in early childhood education is remarkable. In Switzerland, 65% of the documents discussing distance learning provide legal provisions for early childhood education sector. Predictably, most European countries channelled their efforts into creating hybrid possibilities for early childhood education. In

case of Croatia, Sweden, and Luxembourg, these were the only identified measures in the analysis of the legal basis for early childhood education policies in the pandemic. In France, Belgium, Poland, Malta, Italy, Romania, and Spain, hybrid learning was the most crucial policy response in the sector of early childhood education with more than a half of the analysed documents legislating its use.

Given the similarities between primary and secondary education sectors, it is not surprising that emergency decision-making often yielded similar policy responses for both, with comparable prominence in the analysed documents. With a very few exceptions the trends in pandemic response in secondary education remain the same as in the primary education, with hybrid and distance learning predominantly used across the EEA countries. In Germany, Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, and Greece, distance learning was the prevailing measure in secondary education sector, though, as discussed later, the school closures are seldom mentioned in the countries' legislation. Although the data suggests that distance and hybrid learning provisions are important in Romania, Norway, and Sweden, the limited number of documents coded for these countries precludes definitive interpretations.

Closures and Provision of the Minimal Service for Essential Professions

Overall full or partial closures (see Figs. 14.6 and 14.7) were rather rare with fewer than half of all the European countries examined within the EXCEPTIUS project opting for these approaches. Even when these measures were implemented, in Finland, Estonia, Poland, Portugal, and the UK, the overall number of mentions of these measures in the data was fewer than 10, thereby making any resulting conclusions somewhat tentative. The measures often complement each other or are used at different times during the pandemic. However, the exact timing is not the focus of this overview. This section largely addresses the closures in combination with the minimal service for essential professions.

The analysis of closures in education corresponds to the trends revealed in the previous section. A distinguishing factor in higher education was the greater prevalence of full or partial closures complemented by distance or hybrid learning provisions discussed earlier. Consistent with its approach in other education sectors, the Czech Republic outlined measures for

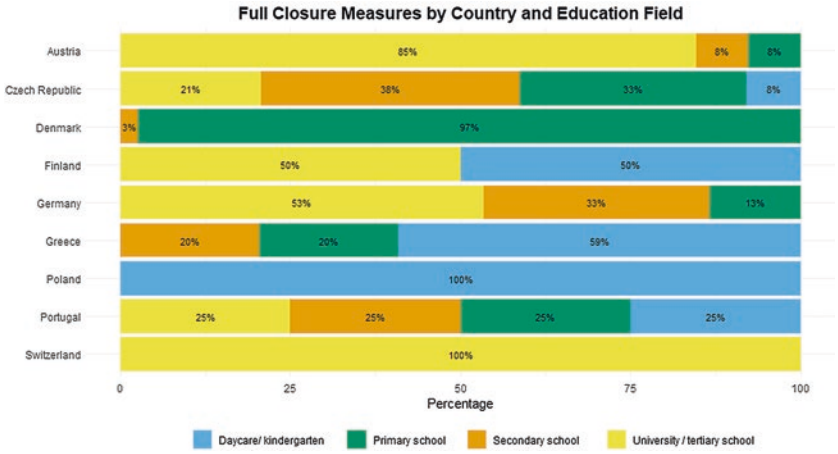

Fig. 14.6 Full closure measures by country and education field introduced from January 2020 to May 2021. *Source*: EXCEPTIUS data, own rendering

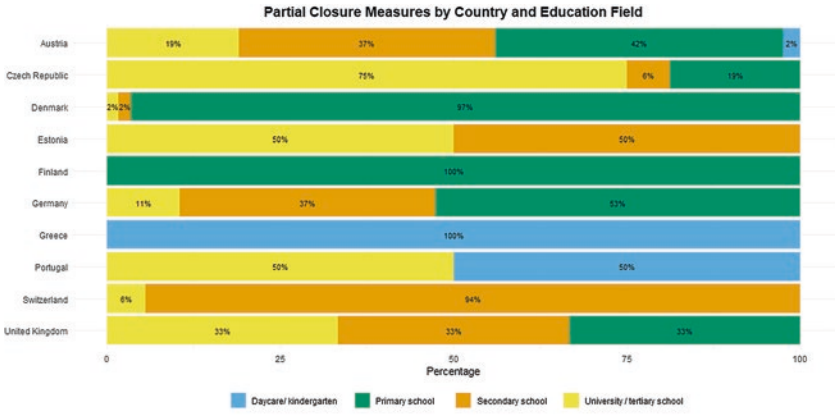

Fig. 14.7 Partial closure measures by country and education field introduced from January 2020 to May 2021. *Source*: EXCEPTIUS data, own rendering

comprehensive and partial closures of tertiary institutions. Similar trends were observed in Austria, where universities remained closed for nearly 2 years, relying on regional and institution-specific distance learning tools. Switzerland notably used full closure measures only for universities, paired with hybrid learning that essentially meant long-term remote learning. The findings on the prevalence of full and partial closures in Finland, Estonia, Poland, Portugal, and the UK are not particularly meaningful, given the limited instances of these measures within the legislative documents.

Full closure policies were less common in secondary education, with Greece, Germany, and the Czech Republic once again standing out. Further, Austria widely implemented partial closures in secondary education. This strategy complemented full closures in Germany, a variation potentially attributable to the specifics of educational decision-making in Germany. It is worth noting that legislative power in the educational sector in Germany is often decentralised, residing more often with the German states than the federal government.

The full closure measures for primary education institutions were rare, though Denmark represents a distinct exception with about 97% of the full closure legislation targeting primary schools. Other countries like Greece and Czech Republic implemented this measure to some extent both in primary and secondary education, opting for a unified approach to these educational fields. Partial closure of secondary educational institutions dominated legislative responses in countries like Austria, Denmark, Germany, Czech Republic, UK, and Finland, aligning with their stringent lockdowns.

The results on the early childhood education demonstrate once again how important the provision of service in this field was during the pandemic. Only a minority of countries broadly implemented full closure measures in early childhood education, with Poland, and to a large extent Greece and Finland being the prime examples. Few countries largely adopted full closure of the early childhood education. Two countries, however, stand out in this regard: Greece and the Czech Republic. Though the latter had provisions for minimal service for essential professions and some distance learning, the COVID-19 response in the country largely entailed the complete closure of early childhood education. In Greece, the governmental response to the pandemic was even more drastic, as almost all the legislation analysed focused on either the full closure or partial closure of early childhood education institutions.

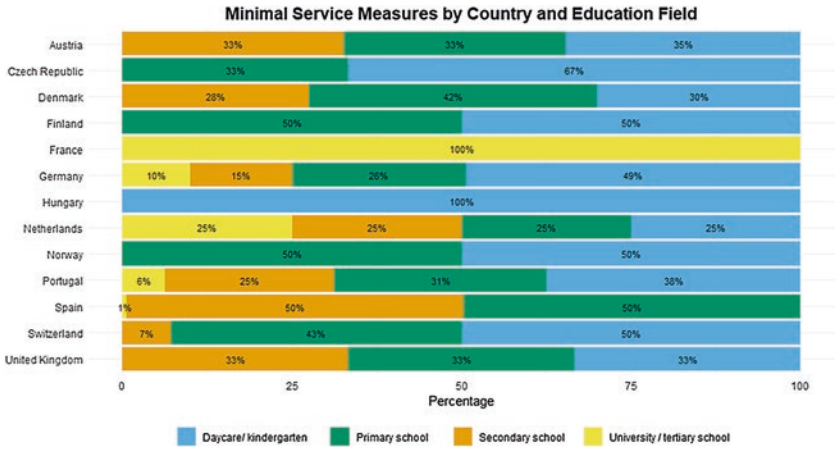

Fig. 14.8 Minimal service provision for essential workers by country and education field introduced from January 2020 to May 2021. *Source*: EXCEPTIUS data, own rendering

When it comes to the provisions of minimal educational services (Fig. 14.8), most measures target early childhood, primary, and secondary education sectors. Large percentage of the provisions for the university education in France and the Netherlands translates to a small number of instances when viewed in absolute terms. Germany stands out as a country that to some extent preserved minimal service in all the fields of education.

The EXCEPTIUS data demonstrates that countries enforcing strict lockdowns, such as Austria, UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Portugal, and Germany, enacted significant legislative measures to preserve early childhood education and care for essential workers. As discussed earlier, this educational sector was also rarely affected by the closures. The overall approaches to early childhood and primary education highlight their importance for society, particularly for working parents. The pandemic-induced closures, as discussed earlier, added pressure on such parents, thus making minimal service maintenance or distance learning provisions crucial for sustaining the economy and health systems.

Though children in secondary school require less caring as children of pre-school and primary school age, secondary education programmes are more challenging for parents that had to adopt to home schooling. Therefore, providing minimal secondary school service for essential

professions remained one of the main legislative priorities for the countries with strict lockdowns. This measure held particular significance in the UK, Denmark, Spain, and to a lesser extent, in Portugal and the Netherlands. As in the case of primary education, approximately a third of all legislative documents related to secondary education in Austria, Germany, and Portugal incorporated similar provisions for maintaining minimal service.

Overall, the similarities between the early childhood and primary education sectors reflect the role the education for young children plays in society, providing important support for working parents. In the time of high uncertainty during the pandemic the closures of these education institutions contributed to overall stress put on parents, some of whom had to juggle home office with childcare and education (Spinelli et al., 2020). Thus, the maintenance of minimal service or at least some provisions for distance or hybrid learning observed in the most EEA countries were necessary to preserve economic performance of adult population, but also to reduce the strain on the health systems.

Reopening Measures

The variety of measures employed by the European countries to navigate the educational implications of the COVID-19 crisis has been substantial, and reopening measures tied directly to the level of restrictions, closures, and limitations on face-to-face instruction. In line with the findings discussed above, legislating reopening of educational institutions (Fig. 14.9) was crucial for countries that underwent closure or transitioned to distance learning.

Yet, the level of attention towards these measures in many countries (see Table 14.1) should be taken in consideration, when interpreting the results. Cyprus, Finland, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, and Switzerland demonstrated the greatest legislative focus, with mentions of reopening exceeding 20 instances in their legal documents.

The results indicate that reopening legislation across countries mostly focused on the primary and secondary school education, followed by the early childhood education and care, and, finally, to a lesser extent by higher education. The findings reveal a relatively uniform attention patterns across countries, with only a handful of exceptions prioritising a particular educational sector.

With respect to early childhood education and to a lesser extent primary education, Hungary's prominence in attention to reopening

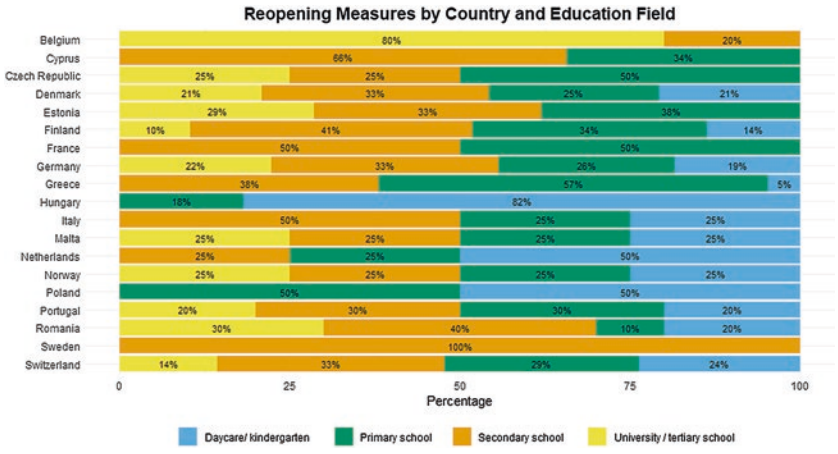

Fig. 14.9 Reopening measures by country and education field introduced from January 2020 to May 2021. *Source*: EXCEPTIUS data, own rendering

measures reflects both the pandemic fatigue and scepticism towards the crisis exhibited by the nation's right-wing government. Primary education was dominating legislative documents on reopening in Greece, and to some extent in Czech Republic and Poland. These measures also highlight the exacerbation of existing gender inequalities during the COVID-19 crisis, especially prominent in Central and Eastern European countries.

Considering the critical role secondary education plays in granting access to higher education and improving life prospects (Grewenig et al., 2021; Hammerstein et al., 2021; Maldonado & De Witte, 2022; Reimers, 2022), it is understandable it often receives equal or even greater attention in reopening-related legislation compared to primary education. Cyprus, Finland, Italy, Romania, and Sweden notably prioritised the reopening measures pertaining to secondary education.

Finally, regarding higher education, reopening measures have been less prominent as universities mainly operated in a distance or hybrid learning mode. Belgium stands out with more than 80% of legislation addressing reopening measures focusing on the university sector. Though other countries, such as Estonia or Romania, target about one-third of their reopening policy measures towards higher education, emphasis on this sector is relatively low. Consequently, these results should be interpreted

considering the general lower legislative attention towards higher education, when it comes to reopening measures.

Conclusion: Lessons Learnt from COVID-19 Policymaking in Education Field

Though both salience of education across legal acts related to COVID-19 and policy responses in this field differ, some patterns emerge across Europe, often conditioned by general country response to the pandemic and the extent of restrictions rather than by geographical or cultural factors.

Overall, the EEA countries largely made use of digital and hybrid learning, especially in the primary, secondary, and higher education fields. The countries that had imposed strict lockdowns and closure of early childhood and primary education institutions often aimed to provide support to the parents working in essential professions, offering minimal service in such cases. To some extent, the same trend pertained to secondary education, whereas in higher education minimal service was rather rare.

The analysis has revealed overall consistency in the pandemic policy response in the fields of primary and secondary education sectors across the EEA countries, as measures in the two sectors often converge. Articulation of reopening provisions was important for the sectors that placed additional strain on parents, such as early childhood and primary education.

A challenge to the education systems around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic became a critical juncture that has led to re-evaluation of existing policies and practices in education. Fostering the digitalisation in higher education, it has highlighted the existing inequalities in the access to education, social and geographical digital divides (e.g., between rural and urban regions, see Esteban-Navarro et al., 2020), as well as generational differences among teaching professionals (Webb et al., 2021). In the aftermath of the pandemic, the educational institutions, especially in the field of higher education, returned to the new normal with the changes in teacher training (Baker et al., 2021; Díez-Gutiérrez & Gajardo Espinoza, 2021) and increasing use of digital means in education.

Though overall focus of the EU education policies remained on upskilling and sustainable development, the lessons learned during the pandemic contributed to acceleration of digitalisation in education policies

(Symeonidis et al., 2021). Focus on digitalisation would allow to make education more resilient to new crises and decrease inequalities in access to education, especially in primary and secondary sector, as the future generations of students and education professionals become more proficient in digital skills.

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