Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe

Access, Retention and Employability

2014

Eurydice Report

European Commission

Education and Training

Modernisation of

Higher Education

in Europe:

Access,
Retention and
Employability

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Eurydice Report

*Education
and Training*

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FOREWORD

The economic crisis has been a wake-up call, forcing us to focus on issues that really matter. Education is one of these fundamental issues, as it provides the key to build and sustain our future.

At a time of unprecedented challenges, education has been at the centre of a positive European strategy for smart and sustainable growth – the EU 2020 strategy – and I am convinced that it will remain centre stage as Europe moves forward. This Eurydice report, focusing on access to higher education, flexible pathways, student retention, and the transfer to employment, will to help us understand what we have been able to achieve, and what still needs to be done within Higher Education. At the European Commission we have been consistent and resolute in our advice to Member States that we need to continue to invest in our higher education systems.

There is no doubt that higher education systems are changing – opening up to more students, and responding to increasing demands from society. Clearly public authorities and particularly higher education institutions are doing a great deal to ensure success in widening participation, supporting students and educating them for the complex demands of a fast-evolving labour market, and there are many examples of good policy and good practice in the report. But more needs to be done.

Across Europe, we are becoming increasingly conscious that not only do we have to invest more in higher education, but we also have to invest more wisely. It is not enough to encourage young people into higher education. We also have to help them succeed in their study programmes as this is vital for jobs and economic growth, as well as for their self-esteem. More can be done to ensure that students receive good academic guidance before they enter higher education, that they are properly supported while in higher education and that they know about employment opportunities when graduating.

Like all Eurydice publications, this report draws on authoritative information from each country. It provides a clear, comparative view of national policies and actions to support students entering higher education, during their studies and when moving on to the labour market. It also contains interesting examples of institutional practice in different parts of Europe, illustrating how higher education institutions are implementing national policy objectives.

I am convinced that the more we study and reflect on practices developed across Europe, the more we learn from each other and the more we advance in modernizing our higher education systems. I hope that this report helps many of us – policy-makers, higher education institutions and the public – to understand better the different policies and actions that are being implemented in Europe, and that we are able to make the right choices to build a better future.
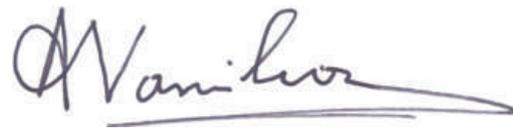
Androulla Vassiliou

Commissioner responsible for
Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth

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CODES

Country codes

EU/EU-27	European Union	MT	Malta
BE	Belgium	**NL**	The Netherlands
BE fr	Belgium – French Community	**AT**	Austria
BE de	Belgium – German-speaking Community	**PL**	Poland
BE nl	Belgium – Flemish Community	**PT**	Portugal
BG	Bulgaria	**RO**	Romania
CZ	Czech Republic	**SI**	Slovenia
DK	Denmark	**SK**	Slovakia
DE	Germany	**FI**	Finland
EE	Estonia	**SE**	Sweden
IE	Ireland	**UK**	The United Kingdom
EL	Greece	**UK-ENG**	England
ES	Spain	**UK-WLS**	Wales
FR	France	**UK-NIR**	Northern Ireland
IT	Italy	**UK-SCT**	Scotland
HR	Croatia	**CH**	Switzerland
CY	Cyprus	**IS**	Iceland
LV	Latvia	**LI**	Liechtenstein
LT	Lithuania	**ME**	Montenegro
LU	Luxembourg	**NO**	Norway
HU	Hungary	**TR**	Turkey

Statistical codes

:	Data not available	(–)	Not applicable

MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction and methodology

This is the second report in a series following the evolution of the modernisation agenda for higher education in Europe, following a 2011 report on funding and the social dimension. It examines policy and practice related to the student experience of higher education through three stages: access, which requires awareness of the offer of higher education, the requirements to be admitted, and the process of admission; progression through the study programme, including support that may be provided when problems are encountered; and the transition from higher education into the labour market.

Information has been gathered from three different sources: the primary source is the Eurydice national units, which have provided information on policy and practice related to the topics through an in-depth questionnaire. This was supplemented by information provided by quality assurance agencies in twelve countries, and with site visits to higher education institutions in eight countries. The quality assurance agencies responded to a short questionnaire asking about the requirements for their agency in relation to access, retention and employability. Site visits were undertaken at eight higher education institutions across Europe to understand better the relationship between national policy and institutional practice.

Access

Although European policy documents stress the priority of the social dimension of higher education, and countries have made commitments in the Bologna Process to develop strategies and define measurable targets, only nine countries have actually defined attainment targets for specified groups. These countries nevertheless present interesting examples of policy development in this area, illustrating that action is taking place at national level, and that a variety of policy models and approaches exist.

Findings on monitoring suggest that there is still a great deal of progress to be made. Practice regarding which characteristics of the student body are monitored and at what stage in the higher education process varies considerably. There is therefore a long way to go before a convincing, evidence-based, European-wide picture of progress in widening access is possible to obtain.

At national level, it appears that a number of issues that are a major part of the discussion of under-representation in higher education are not frequently monitored. Migrant status data is captured in 13 systems, and data on ethnicity of students and staff in only eight. Meanwhile only 13 systems collect data on the labour market status of students prior to entry in higher education.

Even when data is collected, it is not necessarily always exploited. When asked about the main changes that have taken place over a period of ten years, 19 systems – including a majority that collect information related to different characteristics of students – were unable to report on changes to the diversity of the student body.

Monitoring is also an issue in relation to entry routes. In a number of countries where alternative entry routes have been developed as one of the measures to help widen access there is no official monitoring of the numbers of students actually entering via the different possible routes. In the countries where monitoring does exist, there is very commonly a pattern of one route dominating as the primary means of entering higher education.

Both bridging programmes and recognition of prior learning are an access feature of about half of the European higher education systems. However, clear geographical patterns are visible, as they remain most prevalent in the north and the west of Europe. There are few examples of an alternative route accounting for more than 10 % of entrants.

The evidence from quality assurance agencies suggests that their role in widening access is extremely limited, and that a focus on access and admissions is far from being the norm. While quality assurance agencies may examine some issues related to admissions systems, they generally do not do so from a perspective of ensuring that the system is fit for the purpose of widening access. Instead agencies tend to check only that the admissions process is coherent with programme requirements. No agency claimed to look at the differing impact of admissions systems on different types or profiles of student.

Retention

Student retention can be considered as a basic and key performance indicator for higher education systems. The aim should be for as many students as possible to progress and successfully graduate. In the context of widening participation, if governments encourage a broader range of students into higher education, there is also a social responsibility to help reduce the psychological, financial and/or emotional risks of non-completion.

The report's findings suggest that firstly there may be a need for greater clarity in definitions – both at the level of national steering documents and definitions used for statistical purposes. For example a 'completion rate' may refer in some countries to the percentage of students that enter a programme and complete it several years later, while in others only the student cohort in the final year of a programme is considered.

A matter of concern, however, is that a significant number of countries (13) do not systematically calculate completion and/or drop-out rates. This includes countries that have policies addressing retention and completion, but clearly lack basic data to analyse their impact. Even when completion rate data is collected, it is hardly ever differentiated by specific student profiles or characteristics.

Clear and precise targets related to the improvement in the rates of retention are not commonly found. Instead, countries usually mention the general, overarching goal of reducing drop-out and strengthening retention and completion of studies.

While funding might be expected to have a major impact on policy to improve retention rates, the report finds that improvements in retention and completion would affect higher education institutions' funding in only half of the countries. Performance-based funding mechanisms, whereby a part of an institution's funding is dependent on reaching agreed results in a defined timeframe, are found in only ten systems.

A number of developments have taken place, however, to encourage students to finish their studies during a 'regular' period of time. The focus tends to be on measures that incentivise students who finish within a defined period, or penalise those who do not.

The trend to encourage students to undertake and complete their studies in a timely manner goes in parallel with the development of more flexible options to study.

One of the main ways of tackling non-completion is through providing information, advice and guidance, and particularly for those who are most 'at risk' of dropout. While guidance is ubiquitous in all systems, both country information and site visit experience showed that there are often difficulties

related to the level of resources: typically guidance and counselling services are too stretched by increased demand to be able to target and reach those most in need.

Although around half of the higher education systems claim to use data on retention and dropout in their quality assurance processes, there is little evidence that such information is followed up in an attempt to understand and address the underlying causes of dropout. Similarly to access and admissions, the role of quality assurance agencies is a limited one, with the rates of dropout seen purely as indicators of the success and viability of programmes and/or institutions.

Flexibility

Flexibility may relate to a number of dimensions of study organisation, including time (full-time or part-time), modes of learning, (open and distance learning), or to a more student centred instructional approach. The report shows that most European countries offer opportunities for students to formally organise their studies in a more flexible way compared to traditional full-time arrangements. However, the understanding of part-time studies varies greatly across Europe, and even in countries with no formal offer of part-time studies, students may have the possibility to organise their programme to study in a *de facto* part-time mode.

The existence of formal part-time programmes and/or student statuses gains a specific importance when considering private financial investment in studies. In several countries part-time studies require, or are likely to require, higher private financial investment compared to traditional study modes. In addition, part-time students are often eligible only for a limited amount of financial support. This reality suggests that part-time provision is not always organised with the aim of widening participation to more disadvantaged societal groups, but rather targets other categories of the population.

In almost all countries, higher education institutions are able to decide the amount of part-time provision offered, and most countries claim that the majority of higher education institutions offer part-time studies. The experience from the study visits shows, however, that the degree of activity can vary significantly between faculties and departments.

Employability

The report finds that, while employability of higher education graduates is a topic of considerable priority in higher education policy debates, the approaches and level of engagement differ considerably.

Some countries conflate employability with employment by taking an employment-centred approach that focuses primarily on graduate employment rates. Others put the accent on skills development, emphasising the competences relevant for the labour market that need to be acquired through higher education. Several countries combine these two perspectives.

Differences also exist regarding the measures through which countries are encouraging higher education institutions to improve their employability performance. The most common way is through quality assurance: the majority of systems now require higher education institutions to submit employability-related information in quality assurance procedures. In addition, several countries have established incentives for higher education institutions to improve their employability performance, with one prominent mechanism being to make employability-related information public for both current and prospective students. In some countries, public funding levels are linked with employability performance.

There are, however, limitations to the way in which quality assurance agencies consider information on graduates. In particular, there is no evidence of any country or agency systematically analysing employment opportunities in relation to the social profiles of graduates. It is therefore impossible to know whether factors such as socio-economic disadvantage or ethnicity – which are known to have an impact on access and completion of higher education – may also have an impact on employment after graduation.

In 18 education systems, institutions are required to involve employers in at least one of the following areas: curriculum development, teaching, participation in decision-making bodies and external quality assurance. Several countries also oblige higher education institutions to include practical training in (some) higher education study programmes.

Financial incentives can be found in some countries for higher education institutions to establish university-business cooperation projects. Funding is also used to stimulate students' practical training in order to improve their work-related skills.

Evaluating the impact of existing measures is not straightforward. One successful way of doing so is through graduate surveys at both national and European level. Currently such surveys do not exist in all countries, and where they do exist, they are not always undertaken regularly.

Irrespective of the approach and measures taken in relation to employability, countries tend to target students or graduates as a whole, without concentrating on specific – disadvantaged – groups of students. This indicates that there is often a need for the widening participation agenda to be followed through to cover retention issues and also employability policies and practice.

INTRODUCTION

This is the second report in a series supporting the evolution of the European Commission's modernisation agenda for higher education in Europe (European Commission 2011). It follows a 2011 report on funding and the social dimension.

The modernisation agenda supports higher education systems in Europe in responding to the needs of our increasingly knowledge-based economy and societies. To expand the knowledge base and foster progress, an increasing number of European citizens require high level knowledge and competences. Thus, supporting the development of quality mass higher education systems is high on the policy agendas at both national and European levels.

In view of these objectives and to support optimal policy making, this report examines policy and practice in Europe related to three stages of higher education: access, which includes awareness of the availability of higher education, the requirements to be admitted, and the process of admission; retention, including progression through the study programme with support that may be provided when problems are encountered; and employability, including measures supporting students' transition from higher education into the labour market.

Methodology

Information for the report has been gathered from three different sources. The primary source is data drawn from official steering documents collected through the Eurydice Network between May and September 2013 focusing on policy and practice related to the topics. The reference year 2012/13 was used for information that was collected from 36 education systems (all EU Member States, with the exception of Luxembourg and the Netherlands, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway and Turkey).

This material has been supplemented by information provided by quality assurance agencies in twelve countries, and by a series of site visits to higher education institutions in eight countries. The quality assurance agencies responded to a short questionnaire asking about the requirements for their agency in relation to access, retention and employability.

Site visits were undertaken at eight higher education institutions across Europe to understand better the relationship between national policy and institutional practice. At each institution, the research team met representatives of the leadership, a sample of academic staff, a group of students from different faculties, staff working in student services and staff responsible for data collected at institutional level. The institutions were not selected with any intention of being 'representative', but rather a theoretical sample was created, based on the degree of autonomy that higher education institutions have in relation to selecting students and staff. In order to make this initial selection, the research team made use of indicators produced in the European University Association's autonomy scorecard (EUA 2011).

The eight universities that hosted a site visit are: Ghent University, Belgium (Flemish Community); Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic; Aachen University of Technology, RWTH_Aachen, Germany; Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia; University College Cork, Ireland; Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB), Greece; Université Paris-Est Créteil (University of East Paris), France; University of Jyväskylä, Finland. As the information from institutional site visits is of a different nature to the national questionnaire answers, it is presented separately in the report as complementary information.

CHAPTER 1: ACCESS AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION

1.1. Introduction: The concept of access

Supporting the development of mass higher education systems in response to increasingly knowledge-based societies is a key policy objective at both national and European levels. In Europe, the modernisation agenda and the EU 2020 strategy both focus on increasing participation in higher education, with a goal of 40 % participation by 2020 being one of the five headline targets.

Access, however, is not only a question of numbers, but is a key feature of the social dimension of higher education, and thus also concerned with the social composition of the higher education population. In a social and economic environment where skills and competences acquired and refined through higher education are becoming more and more important (European Commission, 2010), it is a societal imperative to expand opportunities to higher education as broadly as possible, by providing, 'equal opportunities for access to quality education, as well as equity in treatment, including adapting provisions to individuals' needs', so that 'equitable education and training systems … are aimed at providing opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes that are independent of socio-economic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage' ([1]).

This chapter sets out the ways in which these policy goals are defined and implemented at national level, and examines the extent to which monitoring systems have been developed to keep track of progress. Some of the main measures are compared between countries, and information from the site visits provides some additional information on how these societal changes and policy developments are perceived and lived at the level of institutions.

The word 'access' may appear to be a self-evident concept. However, it requires interpretation, as it is not used with a single universal meaning. In fact, two very different definitions of the word can be found in international documentation – and actually these two definitions were adopted by the same organisation, the Council of Europe, within a year. The first definition, used in the 1997 Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention), is quite restrictive. Access (to higher education) is defined in this text as 'the right of qualified candidates to apply and to be considered for admission to higher education'.

While this is the most clear-cut international legal definition of the term, it does not necessarily chime with common usage. Indeed in everyday parlance, access is considered more as a synonym of entry or a combination of entry and participation. However, there is another usage of the term that extends further, and that was used by the Council of Europe in its 1998 Recommendation on Access to Higher Education ([2]). In this text, 'access policy' is defined as 'a policy that aims both at the widening of participation in higher education to all sections of society, and at ensuring that this participation is effective (that is, in conditions which ensure that personal effort will lead to successful completion)'.

This definition of 'access policy' is close to the goals and objectives of the social dimension that have been defined within the Bologna process. In 2007 in London, the ministers agreed that 'the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations'. Ministers also emphasised that 'students [should be] able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background' ([3]). The 2007 report of the Bologna

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([1])   Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training, OJ C 135, 26.05.2010, p. 2.

([2])   Council of Europe Recommendation 98/3 on access to higher education.

([3])   London Communiqué: Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges in a globalised world, 18 May 2007.

Follow Up Group (BFUG) Working Group on the Social Dimension and Data on Mobility further clarified that the social dimension is understood as the process towards achieving this overarching goal (Bologna Process Working Group on Social Dimension and Data on Mobility of Staff and Students in Participating Countries, 2007). Thus, the social dimension is understood as a large sphere of activities where governments can enact policies to widen and increase participation in higher education.

The nature of policy approaches is depicted in Figure 1.1 below. The map considers three main elements: general policies and targets related to participation and attainment, targets for specified groups, and implementation of concrete measures to take forward the process of widening participation. While the main combinations of these elements are shown, some choices have been made to simplify the picture and focus on the most important elements. Thus all countries that have participation and attainment targets for specified groups in reality also have general targets as well. Similarly, countries where there are concrete measures also have general policy objectives. In this sense, the elements of concrete measures and targets for specified groups can be understood as representing more advanced steps in terms of tackling the social dimension agenda.

Figure 1.1: National policy approaches to widening participation, 2012/13
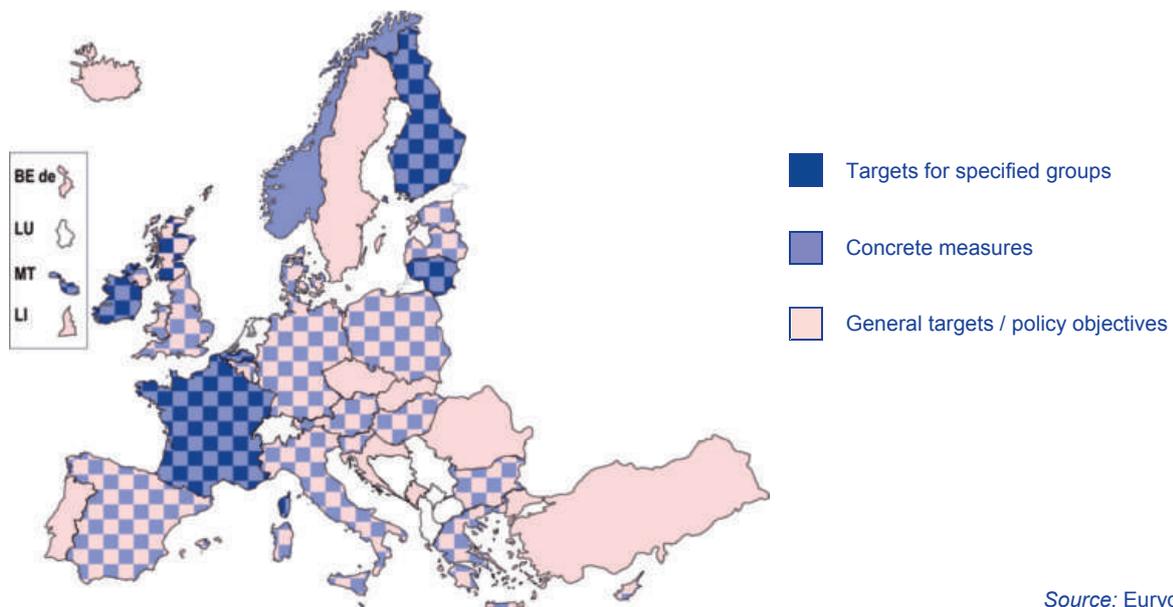
Source: Eurydice.

There are only nine countries with defined attainment targets for specified groups, but these countries nevertheless present perhaps the most interesting examples of policy development in this area in recent years. It is interesting to note that the groups that are identified vary considerably. In Belgium (Flemish Community) the target refers to children whose parents do not hold a higher education qualification, and has been set at 60 % by 2020. Finland focuses on increasing male participation, with the ambition that gender differences in the young age groups will be reduced by 2020, and halved by 2025. Lithuania also addresses gender with the focus on increasing female participation in mathematics and sciences. Malta has set a target of 4 % of adults participating in lifelong learning courses.

Ireland has the most comprehensive set of targets related to under-represented groups. In addition to general participation targets, there are specific targets on mature students (20 % of full-time new entrants by 2013, and on disadvantaged socio-economic groups where entry rates should reach at

least 54 % by 2020. Moreover in 2006, Ireland also set a specific target to double the number of students with disabilities by 2013.

France also has a target for disadvantaged socio-economic groups set at 31.5 % for undergraduate programmes and a lower percentage, 22 %, for masters programmes by 2015. The fact of having different targets for the first and second cycle is itself evidence of the difficulties of progression related to disadvantaged students. In addition, France has a target for the percentage of students receiving a grant – ie the more financially disadvantaged students – in the academic progression routes leading to the selective and prestigious grandes écoles to rise to 30% by 2015.

Interestingly, the United Kingdom (Scotland) is the only country that concentrates on geographical origin. Although Scotland has not set any nationwide quantitative targets, the country has policy documents which prioritise the increase in participation of students from publically-funded schools, students from further education entering higher education and mature students from deprived backgrounds. The exercise of target-setting and monitoring, however, is undertaken at a more local level, with quantitative targets related to socio-economic characteristics of students fixed at institutional level.

The United Kingdom (England) has also recently developed a series of impact indicators, showing the percentage of students receiving free school meals that go on to higher education studies. As eligibility to receive free school meals is determined by socio-economic status, this is a measure of how successful policy is in widening participation to disadvantaged groups.

Slovenia is also a country that intends in the future to focus on specific groups. However, at this stage, the groups have not yet been identified, and the intention is that this will happen on the basis of results from a planned research project.

While Estonia has not specified attainment targets for under-represented groups, it does have a range of measures aiming to widen opportunities. Most importantly the student support system has been revamped with the aim of implementing more comprehensive support for higher and vocational education students, including through a needs-based study allowance system and a study loan system for part-time students. One main focus is on adult learners, with the objective being to offer high-quality training and to develop key competences and social skills for lifelong learning (including ICT, entrepreneurship, and language and learning skills development). A second objective is to help vocational or higher education drop-outs to return to education. Support to access for disabled students has also been addressed, again with financial measures – state-commissioned scholarships, allowances and benefits to educational institutions.

1.2. Monitoring

It is now rare to find examples of countries that do not monitor a range of characteristics of the student body. Nevertheless, there is a considerable variation in which characteristics of the student body are monitored and at what stages during the higher education process. Figure 1.2 gives an overview of the country practices, distinguishing between those countries that systematically monitor a range of characteristics, those that monitor a limited number of basic characteristics (age, gender, etc.) and those where there is no central-level monitoring.

Figure 1.2: Monitoring characteristics of the student body, 2012/13

Systematic monitoring

Monitoring of basic characteristics only (age, gender)

Source: Eurydice.
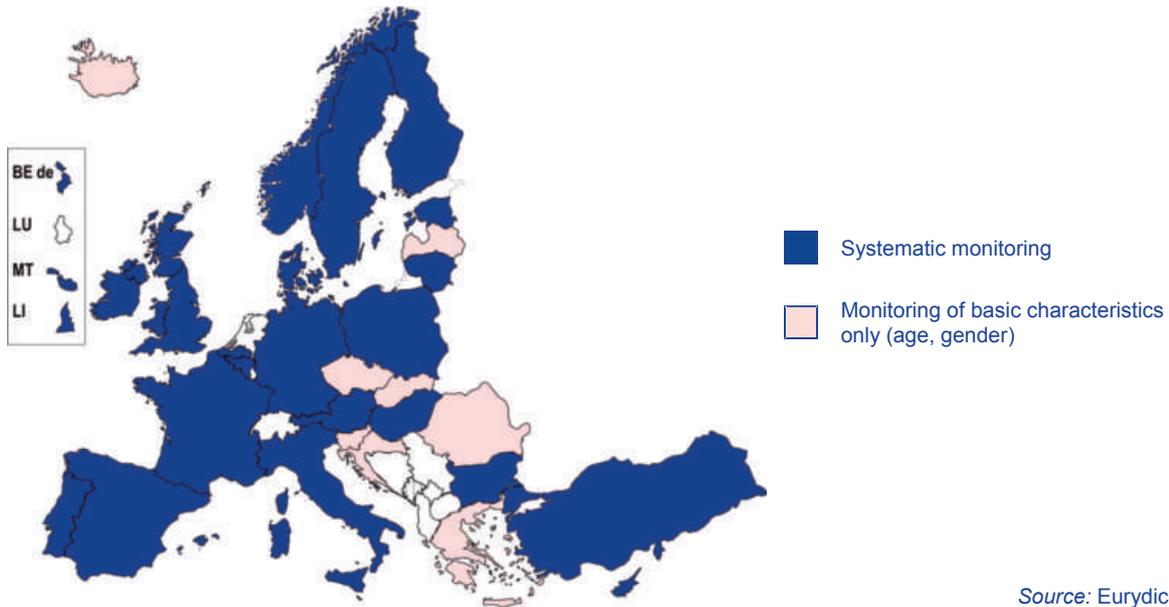
However, Figure 1.2 does not identify the issues where data is most frequently captured, and for this the diagram below is needed:

Left
Monitored at entry or during higher education

Right
Monitored

Source: Eurydice.

UK (1) = UK-ENG/WLS/NIR
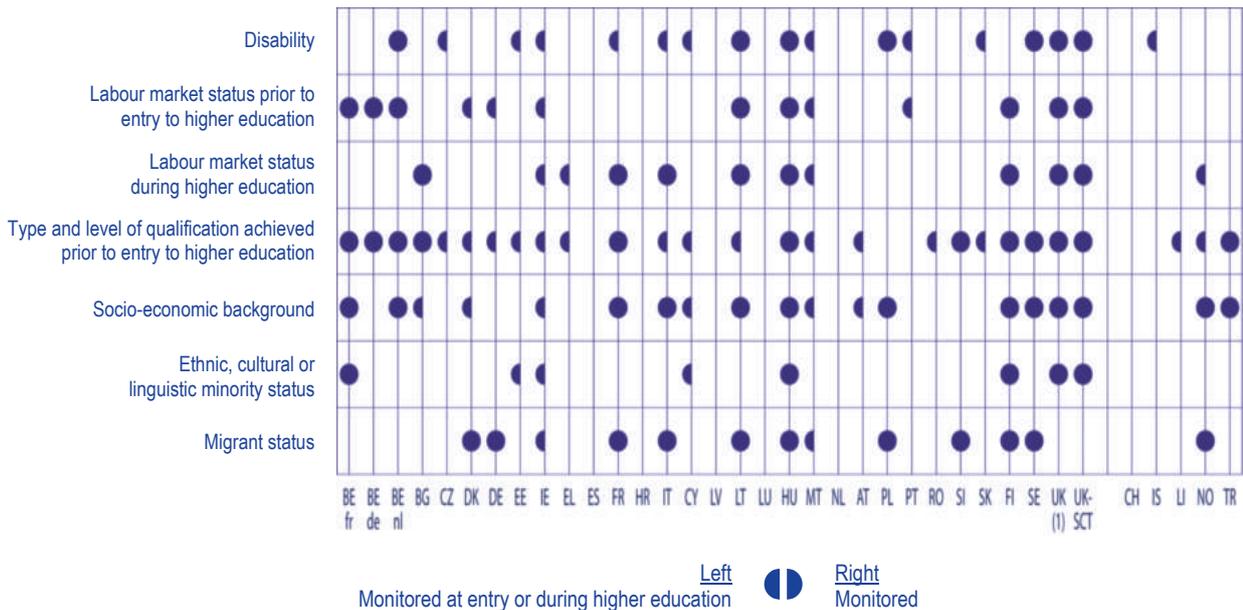
From a list of defined issues, the most frequently mentioned one was qualifications prior to higher education, where data is gathered in 27 systems. Socio economic status is monitored in 19 systems and disability in 17.

However, other issues that are a major part of the discussion of under-representation in higher education are less frequently monitored. Migrant status data is captured in 13 systems, and data on ethnicity of students and staff in only eight. Meanwhile despite rhetoric about higher education systems needing to be more responsive to the labour market, only 13 systems collect data on the labour market status of students prior to entry in higher education. The United Kingdom is the only

country where higher education institutions are requested to gather data on the religion of students. Among the category 'other' the most frequent identified response was 'nationality'.

From this information, it would appear that there is a considerable body of information and data to draw on with regard to the changing profile of higher education students. However, Figure 1.3 suggests that this data is not necessarily always exploited. This map is based on country responses to a question asking, on the basis of the data that is collected nationally to monitor characteristics of the student body, to outline the main changes that have taken place over a period of ten years. 19 systems – including a majority that collect information related to different characteristics of students – were unable to report on changes to the diversity of the student body. Instead they described only changes in terms of increasing numbers of students (or decreasing in a few cases) and changes in gender representation. While these trends in student numbers and gender distribution are significant and interesting, they are generally associated to societal changes that have taken place independently of specific policy measures.

Figure 1.3: Changes in the diversity of students in higher education, 2002/03-2012/13

Increasing diversity among students

Little or no change in diversity of students

No information on changes to diversity of students
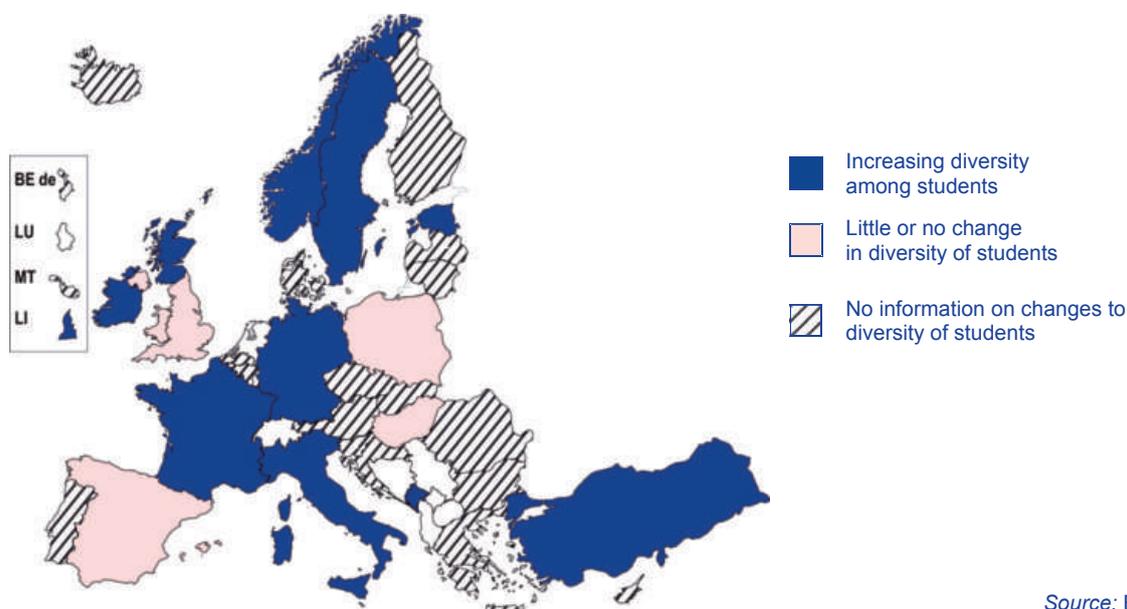
Source: Eurydice.

Where there is information, the most positive outcomes are to be found in Ireland. The country reports that students with disabilities have trebled (from 2 % to 6 % of the higher education student body) between 2004 and 2012, and that mature learners (23 years or older at entry) have increased from 9 % to 13 % of entrants during the same period. Part-time learners have also increased in numbers, and now account for 16 % of participants, compared to 7 % in 2006. Elsewhere, Liechtenstein reports that the number of students with disabilities has increased threefold from 2004 to 2012. Scotland has seen an increase of higher education entering students from deprived backgrounds (from 14.2 % in 2003 to 15.1 % in 2011) and from minority ethnic backgrounds (from 6.2 % in 2002 to 11.3 % in 2012). Sweden reports an increase from 14 % in 2001 to 18 % in 2011 of students of foreign origin.

For many other countries, however, it is unclear why there is such a lack of information at national level when the systems are in place to collect data. In some cases, it is possible that monitoring systems have been developed only recently, and therefore ten year comparisons are not possible. However, it is also appears likely that, in some national contexts, issues related to diversity are of marginal national and public interest, and that the data collected is not being analysed or not being publicised.

It is also notable from responses by quality assurance agencies that there are few requirements set by governments with regard to examining the characteristics of the social composition of the student body. Only two agencies – from Estonia and Switzerland – (from 12 respondents) claimed any role in relation to this topic. In the case of the Swiss agency, the role was restricted to gender issues. In Estonia, however, it is a feature of the institutional accreditation process that issues regarding special needs are addressed. In other countries that claim to monitor systematically the characteristics of the student body – Bulgaria, Denmark, Hungary and Norway – it is interesting to note that quality assurance plays no role in relation to this monitoring.

1.3. Entering higher education

1.3.1. Right to admission

One critical phase with regard to participation in higher education is the transition from upper secondary education to higher education. This is an area where national cultures and practices may differ significantly from each other, as Figure 1.4 illustrates. In 15 systems, success in upper secondary school-leaving examinations gives an automatic entitlement to a higher education study place, usually in the institution and study field chosen by the student. These systems are often categorised as 'open access' systems although, as the systems each have their own distinctive features some of which provide caveats to genuinely open access, this label may be over-simplistic and misleading.

In the majority of systems, however, it is within the autonomy of the higher education institution to select students, either on the basis of achievement in secondary school-leaving examinations or on the basis of the institution's own entry examinations/criteria, or from a combination of the two. These systems can be considered as 'selective' to a lesser or greater degree. There are also systems which fall between these two poles, with admission to some study fields – most commonly specialised professional fields such as medicine – being governed by *numerus clausus* (i.e. students compete for a fixed number of places, whatever the scale of demand) while other study fields are available to all qualified candidates.

Nevertheless, the distinction between open access and selective systems is not clear cut. In Spain, for example, legislation establishes a right to higher education, and indeed also establishes the student's right to study in the university of her or his choice. However, the mechanism for putting this into practice involves both success in upper secondary education and success in the university entrance examination. Places are thus awarded by universities on the basis of an 'admission mark' that takes account of both secondary education and entrance examination performance. In other words, formally there is a guaranteed right, but in practice there is selection.

Two other countries – France and Cyprus – present a mixed situation that at first appearance seems contradictory, but actually has a clear explanation. In the case of France, the existence of a guaranteed right to admission applies to universities. However, there is no guaranteed right of admission to the highly selective *grandes écoles*, to university institutes specialised in technology nor to higher education courses for technicians (*Section de Technicien Supérieur*). Meanwhile, in Cyprus, students with standard entry requirements have a guaranteed right to enter university in all study fields with the exception of a few highly selective professional study fields.

Figure 1.4: Right to admission to higher education for holders of secondary school leaving qualifications, 2012/13

Guaranteed right to admission in all or most study fields

Guaranteed right to admission in some study fields

No guaranteed right to admission

Not available

Source: Eurydice.
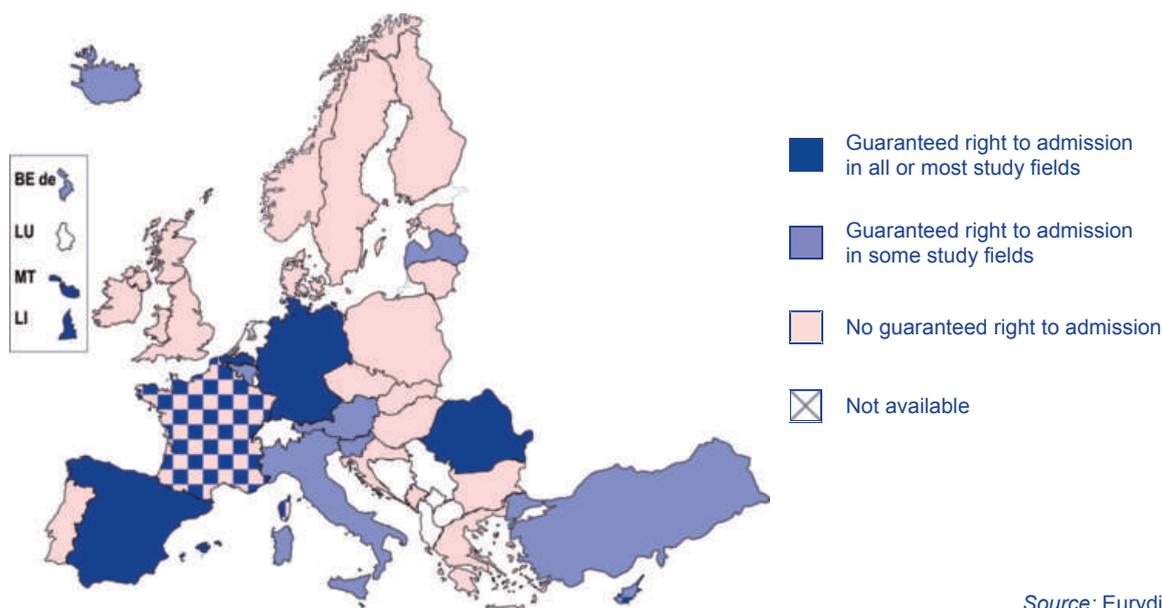
1.3.2. Entry routes

Beyond the question of rights to admission, there is also the issue of what paths are actually taken in order to gain admission to higher education. As illustrated in Figure 1.5, the question is perfectly simple in the countries shown in pink as only one entry route exists. However, there are more possibilities for students to gain entry in all the other systems. It is interesting to note, however, that in a considerable number of countries there is no official monitoring of the numbers of students entering via the different possible routes.

In the countries where monitoring does exist, there is very commonly a pattern of one route dominating as the primary means of entering higher education. Indeed, for almost all of these countries the numbers entering via one main route vary from 75 % (Greece) to 98 % (Italy), and there are no examples of an alternative route accounting for more than 10 % of entrants.

There are, however, three exceptions to this general pattern, and these are countries with a binary system differentiating academic and professional higher education where there is a far less dominant trend towards a primary entry route. Finland has 71 % of students entering through a primary route, its upper secondary general education examination, and 18 % entering through upper secondary vocational education and training. Slovenia also shows a similar pattern, but with 55 % entering through the general education route and 43 % through the vocational route. Montenegro is the only country where vocationally-oriented higher education dominates, with 61 % entering through such a path and 30 % entering through the academic secondary education route.

Figure 1.5: Entry routes to higher education and monitoring of students, 2012/13

More than one entry route exists, **and** there is official monitoring

More than one entry route exists, **but there is no** official monitoring of students

Only one entry route exists

Not available
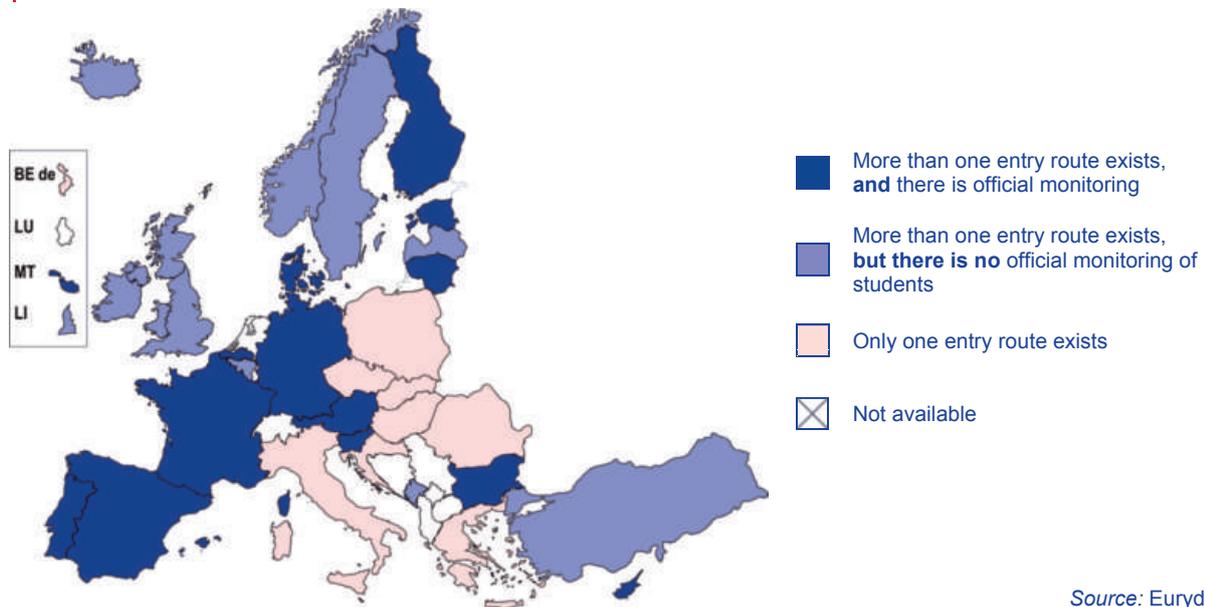
Source: Eurydice.

1.3.3. Bridging programmes and recognition of prior learning

Closely linked to entry routes to higher education is the existence of bridging programmes and recognition of prior learning as mechanisms to gain access to higher education. Indeed such programmes and practice can be a main form of opening opportunities for citizens that have failed, for whatever reason, to complete successfully the form of upper secondary education that gives direct access to higher education. As Figures 1.6 and 1.7 illustrate, both bridging programmes and recognition of prior learning are an access feature of about half of the European higher education systems, and most prevalent in the north and the west of Europe.

Figure 1.6: Bridging programmes, 2012/13

Bridging programmes exist

No bridging programmes

Not available
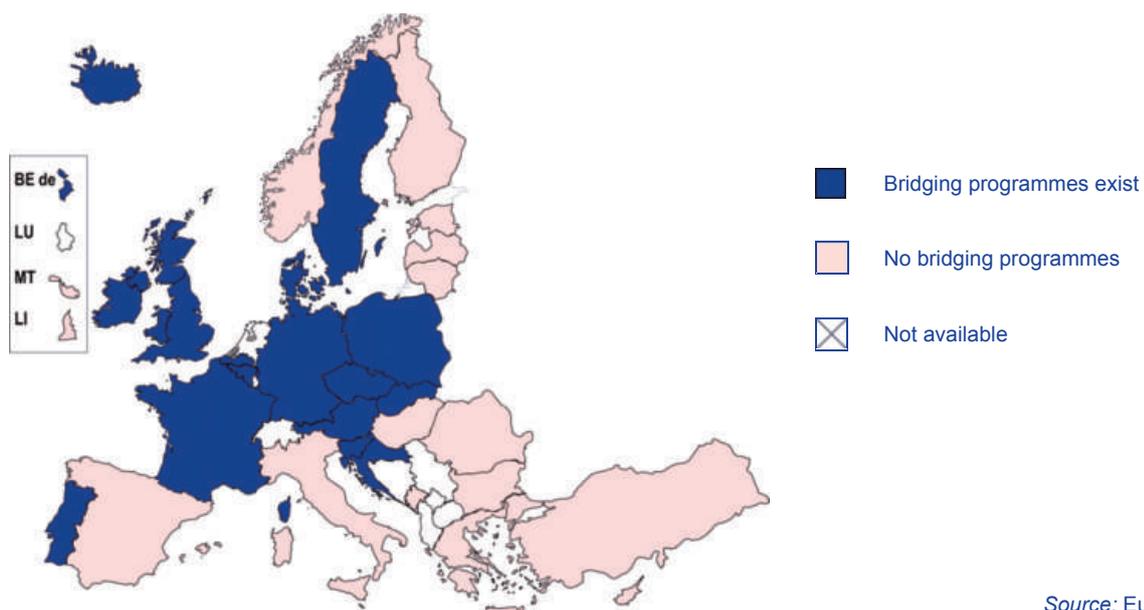
Source: Eurydice.

Where bridging programmes exist, they are most typically provided both for citizens who left school prior to the completion of upper secondary education, and those who have completed a form of upper secondary education that does not give direct access to higher education. In the case of Spain, bridging programmes exist only to advanced vocational training, but not to university higher education programmes. It is also noteworthy that there are significant differences between countries in the north and west of Europe compared to those in the south and east.

Figure 1.7: Recognition of prior learning, 2012/13

Entry via RPL is possible for **all** HEIs/programmes

Entry via RPL is possible for **some** HEIs/programmes

Entry via RPL is not possible
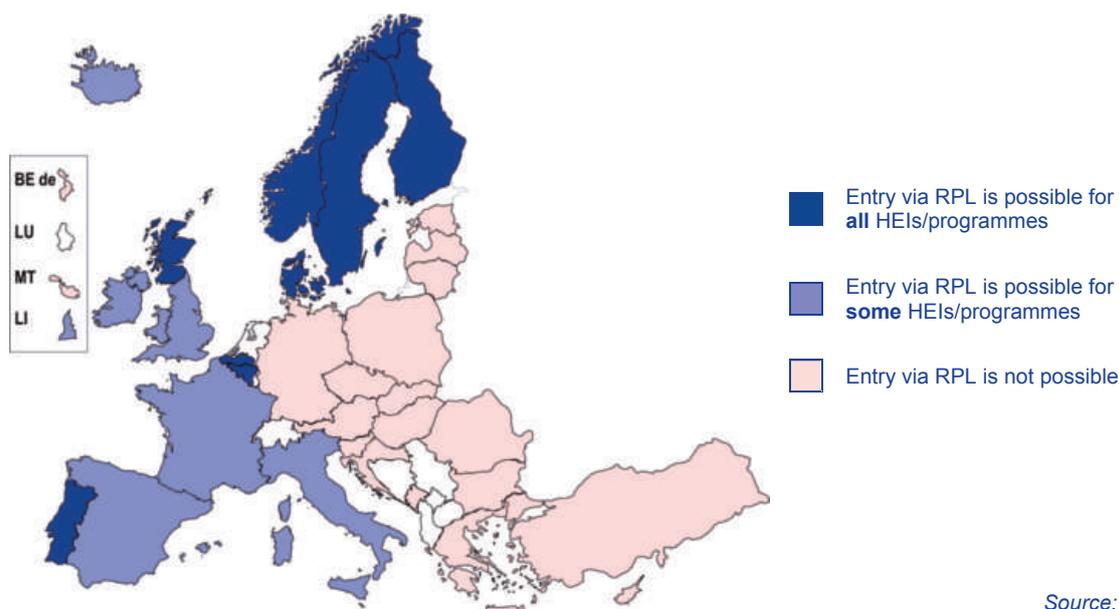
Source: Eurydice.

In countries where admission to higher education can be granted on the basis of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, there are different approaches to implementation. In the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom, for example, higher education institutions have the autonomy to organise their own procedures. In Spain, legislation defines both the categories of learners who are eligible for such procedures, and the methods and approaches that should be used when evaluating the knowledge and skills of non-traditional applicants.

1.3.4. Guidance to prospective students

The provision of good advice to people at a formative stage in their lives is clearly essential – especially in a world where demand for higher education is increasing, and where many new students have few cultural reference points in their family background to help them set an appropriate academic path. Advice can be critical in helping students adjust to a new environment, clarifying expectations, and interpreting higher education experience. Prospective students can thus be prepared for the experience ahead of them, and initial confusion at the experience of starting out in higher education can be reduced if questions and problems are anticipated and answered. Provision of academic advice and counselling is therefore recognised as a key factor in improving student retention and reducing dropout.

The answers on this topic give reasons for optimism. Across Europe, it is the norm to find academic advice being provided free of charge to all school and higher education students. Indeed, as this is apparently such widespread practice that it is possible to pick out just those countries where gaps in public services can be identified.

Montenegro explains that their services are located in higher education institutions only, and not in schools for upper secondary school students. In contrast, Croatian and Romanian students may find academic guidance services at school level, but will not find them in higher education institutions.

The final caveat that should be mentioned to this seemingly positive picture is that the existence of services says nothing about the quality and relevance of their provision. This is something that can only be assessed through research that considers user experience.

1.3.5. Measures to encourage or discourage direct entry to higher education from upper secondary school

Cultural differences with regard to the age of entering higher education are a well-known phenomenon. A glance at the median age of higher education students shows that it varies from 20 years in Belgium, France and Ireland to 26 years in Iceland (Eurostat 2012). In this context, and when there is great concern to ensure that higher education spending is as effective and efficient as possible, national authorities may take measures to influence the time at which prospective students choose to begin their higher education studies.

The evidence from countries suggests that such measures are, however, rather infrequent. France has age requirements for students who do not hold a secondary education certificate when seeking access to higher education. Germany, however, specifically mentions measures designed to encourage students to delay the point at which they begin their studies, and here the explicit purpose is for students to broaden their horizons. These measures in fact amount to a range of voluntary social and cultural programmes which are intended to provide experience in another context to school-leaving students before they embark on a higher education programme.

Five countries implement, or in the case of Finland are planning to implement, direct measures which are designed to have the opposite effect of the German approach – i.e. to encourage students to start their higher education programmes immediately. These countries include three Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland and Norway – where the starting age of higher education is relatively high. In Finland (from autumn 2014) and Norway, the measure is to reserve a quota of study places for those students under a defined age. In Denmark, there are financial restrictions on grants and loans to encourage students to start their studies directly and finish them as soon as possible. Similar restrictions are also in place in Malta, with student support being cut at the age of 30. In Italy, the approach is to strengthen links between upper secondary schools and higher education institutions, allowing students to pre-register and thus to be better informed and prepared for higher education.

Indirect measures may also have an impact on reducing the time to graduation. For example in seven countries (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Lithuania, Austria and Portugal), families are eligible for family allowances if the dependent child is a student under a specified age – most commonly 24-25).

1.3.6. Incentives to higher education Institutions

Given the rhetorical importance attached to widening participation, it would be reasonable to expect that national governments may reward higher education institutions that are successful in recruiting and retaining students from under-represented groups. However, only two countries, Ireland and the United Kingdom (England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland), have established a system where funding is deliberately used as an incentive to higher education institutions to widen participation. Moreover, even this statement would be contested, as although there is significant funding allocated to widening participation (more than £140 million in 2012/13 in the United Kingdom (England), this

funding is not intended to be a reward or incentive for success in widening participation, but rather as a reimbursement to remove a disincentive.

For the Irish and the UK's funding authorities, the funding formula reflects an acknowledged reality that there are additional costs in recruiting and supporting students from under-represented groups. This is the reason why universities with more of these students receive more funding.

The lack of funding incentives to higher education institutions in other systems suggests that either widening participation entails additional costs to higher education institutions only in Ireland and the United Kingdom, or that additional costs in other systems are not fully acknowledged by funding authorities. Given that many countries require little effective monitoring of the many different under-represented groups, it is very likely that they are indeed unaware of the differential costs involved in the process of recruitment, and assisting successful academic progress.

It is also interesting that many answers to the question of whether there are incentives to higher education institutions took the form of 'No, but…' with the following information often outlining incentives to students from under-represented groups. While countries could consider that focusing support on individuals is an explanation for the lack of incentives to institutions, it could also reveal a cultural reality whereby the state considers that its role is not to interfere in the admission processes of higher education institutions, but rather to support those citizens who make certain choices.

An interesting example of providing incentives both to higher education institutions and to students can be found in France, which has an open access system for universities (combined with a selective access system to grandes écoles). France has implemented a partnership of over 300 institutions (*Cordées de la réussite*), ranging from different types of secondary schools to higher education institutions (general, professional, technical). The partnerships aim to reduce socio-economic inequalities in student populations across higher education institutions by providing tutoring, advice on academic programmes, guidance on professional opportunities and sometimes accommodation.

1.4.   Experience from site visits

Site visit experience provided a deeper insight into the actual working of certain systems, and raised a number of questions for further reflection. Of the eight institutions visited, only one (University College Cork) had consciously developed its own strategy and policy to broaden access to different profiles of students. It is interesting to note that this was also the university that collected the most extensive range of data related to the student body. Nevertheless, all the institutions were responding to changes in demand for higher education, and their different experience enabled a number of issues and questions to be highlighted.

A good system doesn't necessarily guarantee good outcomes

In some site visits, there was a clear picture of excellent institutional practice, and in others confirmation of very sound system organisation. Ghent University combined both good practice at institutional level within a system that has impressive design features. The university confirmed the main impression derived from the national questionnaire that the evolution of higher education policy has been towards a very open, flexible, learner-centred system. Moreover, the university has found itself facing the challenges of providing high quality teaching and learning to a rapidly increasing student population – with an increase from around 15 000 students to today's figure of about 38 000 in the last 20 years.

The university – in line with all higher education institutions in the Flemish Community of Belgium – captures excellent data on the social characteristics of its students. It therefore has the data to confirm that the socio-economic profile of today's students has not changed dramatically during this process of expansion. Thus students from lower socio-economic groups and from migrant communities are very poorly represented in the student population. Even though there are possibilities to gain access to the university through the use of alternative admission routes, such as the recognition of prior, work-based learning, these possibilities are rarely used.

Ghent University, and the Flemish system in general, highlights a paradox that a mass higher education system designed to be open and accessible for all actually continues in reality to serve primarily the needs of the same profiles of students as in the past.

The explanation for this paradox, according to our interlocutors in the university, lies in the fact that the policy evolution has aimed to improve the system for all who participate, but has not focused particular attention on under-represented or disadvantaged societal groups. In addition, other societal and cultural realities, particularly with regard to the organisation of the school system, have far more impact on *de facto* exclusion of disadvantaged groups than the 'positive' measures that have been introduced at the higher education level. Indeed one of the main challenges is that disadvantaged students are much less likely to obtain their secondary school leaving certificate, and are therefore unable to consider the possibility of higher education study.

The university representatives also explained that, as the system is essentially based on 'open access', the university does not consider that it has a great deal of influence over which students enter. Moreover, the academic orientation service, although well organised and effective, is working with rather limited human resources. In terms of access, their role is limited to providing clear information to upper secondary school students considering higher education. This may be done through visits to schools or through inviting school students to the university. However, the service is not sufficiently resourced to be able to target particular profies of school student, and the role therefore does not extend to work that is more focused on raising aspirations of talented young people that, for reasons linked to their social background, may not consider higher education.

This example is very important, as it clearly shows two things: firstly that there is no policy recipe that will guarantee success in widening participation; secondly that as inequalities start at a much earlier stage of education, concerted action across all levels of education, and sustained over time will be needed if there is to be significant transformation in terms of the diversity of students.

How to target the right groups of students?

Other site visits in relatively open access systems provided similar information. In Germany, at the Aachen University of Technology (RWTH) enrolment is primarily based on the secondary school leaving certificate – the *abitur*. There is open access, with students generally being accepted to their first choice subject, but not all students are perceived by the academic staff to be qualified for the study courses that they choose. For example, it is possible to apply for engineering programmes without having a high level of mathematics in the school leaving certificate. The university also pointed out that, although there are bridging courses available for those whose secondary school leaving certificate does not provide direct access or for those who need additional academic support, they are often not taken by those students who would most benefit from them. Hence, for institutions, one issue that merits attention is not only whether certain measures and offers exist, but how best to ensure that they reach the right students.

A very good example of a successful policy for widening participation was found at University College Cork in Ireland. Here the widening participation agenda has been developed very extensively, and among the diverse groups that have been attracted in to higher education, the university has the largest share of disabled students in Ireland. The funding incentives for widening participation in Ireland also play a role, suggesting that well-designed funding incentives can indeed achieve desired results.

In order to gain access, mature students do not have to have a school leaving certificate, but have to meet criteria set by the departments. While it may be possible to gain access through recognised prior learning (RPL), this is not formally approved as entry route. When done through a non-traditional route, access is based on a 'personal statement' with information about work experience and studies which are informally recognised.

One access route is the 'UCC+'-programme for students from socio-economically challenged areas, which involves a significant number and range of activities at pre-entry level. UCC works with 32 schools within the Cork region, from the first year of secondary school through to the final year. Criteria for access through UCC+ are income, welfare status, medical card, occupation, school and place of residence. These criteria determine whether a student is eligible, but they do not guarantee a place. There are also a certain number of places set aside for students who do not have enough points on the set criteria.

There are very specific rules for the atypical entry routes: to gain access through DARE (for disabled students) and to get support for disability, the student has to have the disability officially registered. For access through DARE and HEAR (for socially disadvantaged), there are reductions in point limits for gaining entry. The introductory course that has both social, academic and professional elements is a cornerstone. There are both general introductions for all students that are organised in cooperation with student mentors, and targeted orientation and reception for students who have come through specific access routes. Indeed, the widening of student population puts pressure on the support and guidance system for students. As the student support system is already under pressure, the increase in the number of students needing additional support will undoubtedly put more pressure on the guidance and support services.

A strong diversity of practices related to student profile data gathering

The site visits confirmed the national information in relation to different practices related to the collection of student data. In some cases, universities reported that they are restricted by data protection legislation from gathering and using data related to individual characteristics. At the RWTH, Aachen, for example, the only data on student background that can be registered is age, gender and the place where the secondary education certificate (abitur) was taken. At the other end of the spectrum, University College Cork is obliged to provide data on the socio-economic, ethnic and disability status of new entrants through the Irish Equal Access Survey, as well as to provide information on all new entrants, progressing students and graduates. Similarly the University of Ghent reports to the Ministry on a number of defined social characteristics of the student body, and is also able to gather additional information for its own monitoring purposes should it wish to do so. The other universities lie in between these positions in relation to their own data gathering practices, but it is clear that practices in this area are very divergent.

Conclusions

Although European policy documents stress the priority of the social dimension of higher education, and countries have made commitments in the Bologna Process to develop strategies and define measurable targets, very few countries have actually defined participation and attainment targets for specified groups. These countries nevertheless present interesting examples of policy development, illustrating that there is action taking place at national level and interesting policy models to examine.

The report's findings suggest that systematic monitoring of social dimension characteristics is yet to become a normal practice in many higher education systems, and there is therefore still a great deal of progress to be made. There is also a considerable variation in which characteristics of the student body are monitored and at what stages during the higher education process, which implies that there is therefore a long way to go before a European wide picture of progress in widening access is possible to obtain.

At national level, it appears that a number of issues that are a major part of the discussion of under-representation in higher education are not frequently monitored. Migrant status data is captured in 13 systems, and data on ethnicity of students and staff in only eight. Meanwhile only 13 systems collect data on the labour market status of students prior to entry in higher education. This disconnection between policy and monitoring practice is therefore an issue to be addressed.

Even when data is collected, it is not necessarily always exploited. When asked about the main changes that have taken place over a period of ten years, 19 systems – including a majority that collect information related to different characteristics of students – were unable to report on changes to the diversity of the student body.

Monitoring is also an issue in relation to entry routes. In a number of countries, although alternative entry routes have been developed as one of the measures to help widen access, there is no official monitoring of the numbers of students actually entering via these different possible routes. In the countries where monitoring does exist, there is very commonly a pattern of one route dominating as the primary means of entering higher education. There are few examples of an alternative route accounting for a substantial percentage of entrants. These findings raise questions about why alternative entry routes appear not to be attractive to the population for whom they are designed.

Both bridging programmes and recognition of prior learning are an access feature of about half of the European higher education systems. However, a clear geographical divide is visible, as they remain most prevalent in the north and the west of Europe.

CHAPTER 2: STUDENT RETENTION

2.1. Introduction: Understanding retention and dropout

The European Union has set a target that the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment or equivalent should be at least 40 % by 2020. The 2011 Communication on the modernisation agenda for Europe's higher education systems stresses that increasing higher education attainment requires a dual focus on increasing access and participation in higher education (bringing more people into the system) and improving completion rates (ensuring as few students drop out of their studies as possible). Increasing attainment levels in higher education is identified as one of the key issues for Member States and higher education institutions, with the communication stipulating that Europe needs to attract a broader cross-section of society into higher education and reduce drop-out rates (European Commission 2011, p. 3).

This chapter on student retention is divided into three sections. The first explains national policies on student retention and covers definitions and objectives in steering documents. It also presents country-specific targets on student retention and completion. In addition, the first section describes both financial and non-financial incentives to students and higher education institutions focusing on improvement of student retention. The second section deals with measuring student completion rates, and the third section presents information on methods for calculating drop-out rates.

2.1.1. Key findings in recent educational research

There is no generic and universally agreed definition of retention and drop-out. The commonly held conception of retention is the extent to which learners remain within a higher education institution and progress to complete their study programme within a given time frame. Connected to this concept is the idea of a 'drop out' as an individual who leaves a higher education programme early without completing and graduating. The term 'completion rate' refers to an estimate of the proportion of commencing students who will complete their studies. In some countries, completion rates 'will include an estimate of those who will change course before completing' (Quinn 2013, p. 61). Similarly, the two commonly used definitions of retention are to stay in higher education until completion and the proportion of students in higher education one year after enrolment (Gazeley and Aynsley 2012, p. 5).

To improve retention, it is important for higher education institutions to identify and support the needs of different student groups. Research indicates that particular attention should be paid to first-year students and their skills development. Providing information, advice and guidance is one of the key interventions to support student retention and success (Gazeley and Aynsley, 2012).

'Although retention is a key performance indicator it is actually a matter of social justice to ensure that those brought into higher education as part of the widening participation agenda are actively protected from the psychological, financial and/or emotional costs of non-completion in those cases where it is not a positive choice made by the individual concerned' (Gazeley and Aynsley 2012, p. 15). As pointed out by Quinn, drop-out is influenced by social factors as well as by higher education policies and practices (Quinn 2013, p. 60). Indeed, the existence of national policies on higher education as well as the adoption of concrete measures and their follow-up are vital steps to fulfil the envisaged goals of successfully widening participation in higher education.

2.2. National policies addressing student retention

2.2.1. Definitions

Although terms such as retention, completion, graduation and drop-out are often used in policy documents, their exact definitions might differ from country to country. While some education systems define all or at least some of the terms, many countries use them without defining them. As research findings point out, countries that define them put together different components in different ways across different time frames (Quinn 2013, p. 61).

In their responses, around two thirds of countries define the terms retention, completion and drop-out in their higher education systems. Some countries explain that the definitions of these terms have been developed for statistical data collection, but do not appear in steering documents. However, a number of countries use the terms in their laws and other official documents, even when they do not define them. For instance, the Czech Republic mentions that the terms are not officially defined, but are widely used in documents and reports on higher education published nationally and institutionally. Thus, capturing their interpretation in various documents is possible. Similarly, Hungary uses the terms retention and completion in laws on higher education although it does not define them.

Among the three terms, completion is the most commonly defined. The exact definitions of completion are not uniform and highlight various aspects. Some education systems focus on successful examination and graduation in the last year of a programme (Belgium (German-speaking and Flemish Communities) and Poland). Other countries include credits ('required number of credits') years ('certain number of years') or other formulations for the duration of studies ('nominal length/scheduled time') in their definitions (Greece, Spain, France, Montenegro and Norway). Finally, Austria and Sweden define completion by applying a concept of cross-section measurement. This means that they consider completion as the number of graduates in a calendar year who had entered a programme a certain number of years before.

A few countries provide a definition of retention. Rather than focusing on the extent to which learners remain and progress within a higher education institution, a number of countries typically explain retention in terms of 'requirements' for students' progression. For instance, they set a cap for the length that studies can actually last in order to be successfully completed. Retention might also be linked to reaching certain grades in examinations.

> The student who is admitted to the next year must obtain at least 50 % in each examination and has an overall total of at least 60 % **Belgium (German-speaking Community)**.
>
> In the **Czech Republic**, statistical definition states that students who started a study programme at higher education institution and so far have not finished it or did not have a study gap for a period longer than three years. Higher education institutions usually set in their Study and Examination Regulations 'a maximum period of study', which may or may not include the period of interruption.
>
> In **Greece**, duration of studies has not exceeded the duration of semesters required to obtain the qualification according to the indicative curriculum, increased by four semesters.
>
> Whether students successfully re-enrol from one semester to the next and from one year to the next **(Norway)**, continue at the same higher education institution, either on the same course or elsewhere in the institution **(United Kingdom – Scotland)**.

The term drop-out, often considered pejorative, is rarely used and often replaced by more formal, bureaucratic terminology, such as non-continuation, non-completion or discontinuation of education.

Those countries providing statistical definitions of drop-out use a very similar wording. Students are enrolled in a particular academic year but they are not enrolled 'one year later' (Finland, Portugal and

the United Kingdom). The United Kingdom enlarges the definition for part-time studies, providing the period of 'two years later'.

Some countries define a maximum period of study time, requiring students to finish their studies or to be counted as drop-outs:

> The *Exmatrikulation* as defined by **Belgium (German-speaking Community)** concerns somebody who needs more than a double of time of standard study period.

> In the **Czech Republic**, drop-out means that students start to study at a higher education institution and do not successfully finish their studies or do not study at the same level of education in three successive years. If a student starts studying more than one programme at the same time and finishes only one this is not considered as a drop-out.

A few countries also specifically relate drop-out to an absence of registration at the beginning of following academic year (Spain, Italy and Norway).

2.2.2. Objectives and targets

Based on information from respondent countries, the objectives of student retention policies have the following main features:

1. Study faster: Completing study programmes within a regular time

In an age of mass higher education and economic constraint, limiting the time to degree can be a key element of an agenda to improve efficiency in the use of public finances. Some countries have adopted various measures encouraging students to finish their studies during a regular period of time. The higher education objectives of countries such as Denmark, Hungary, Slovenia and Norway provide examples consistent with this trend. Denmark stresses that, in recent years, the focus has been on encouraging students to enter earlier/younger and to complete higher education faster. Hungary also requests higher education institutions to pay attention to retention and urges students to complete their study programme within a limited timeframe. Similarly, Slovenia stresses improving completion rates and shortening the time needed to finish studies. A better completion rate is also one of the goals of the Norwegian Quality Reform in higher education, where completion within a nominal length of a study programme is a key criterion in the quality of higher education.

These findings suggest a clear trend emerging over the past years to limit time available for studies.

2. Focus on specific study field, cycle or a group of students

While there is a trend in some countries to pay attention to the completion time of all students, Spain and the United Kingdom (Scotland) emphasise specific groups of students in their strategic documents. In the United Kingdom (Scotland), there is a particular objective to increase the retention rate of students from deprived areas, as well as to improve student retention in general. Spain also focuses on gender equality of students and people with disabilities within its overall policy for improving retention.

A few countries pay particular attention to completion in study fields that are considered a priority, usually for their perceived importance to economic development. This is the case for Estonia, Ireland, Montenegro and Poland where mathematics, science and technology are the focus.

In all the country examples mentioned, there is a conscious effort to define objectives which feed into the needs of a knowledge-based economy. They strive to secure a better educated workforce, while combining economic need with social justice goals.

3. Reducing drop-out while keeping an open access policy

Many countries apply a non-selective or open access policy approach for admission to higher education (see Chapter 1). Evidence shows, however, that drop-out rates tend to be higher in this type of system. Certain countries, such as Austria, are therefore making specific efforts to reduce drop-out while maintaining open access.

> **Austria** stipulates that regulation of access to higher education and growth of the student population in the most popular study-programmes is needed, but at the same time higher education institutions should strive to reduce high drop-out rates while keeping the 'open-access' higher education policy.

Italy, with a general open access policy but with limitations to some study fields, and Cyprus, which has open access in universities and limited access to the professional higher education sector (see Chapter 1, Figure 2.1) also stipulate a need to reduce drop-out and present this as one of their main higher education objectives.

4. Targets

Clear and precise targets related to improvement in the rates of retention are not commonly found. Instead, countries usually mention an overarching goal of reducing drop-out and strengthening retention and completion of studies. Many countries also point to the EU 2020 national targets for tertiary education attainment (the EU target is 40 % attainment of people between 30-34 years of age). It should be pointed out, however, that reference to these EU targets is not particularly relevant with regard to retention and drop-out rates, as the attainment targets may be achieved without any improvement in retention.

Nevertheless, a number of countries stipulate specific targets:

> The ICT Action Plan in **Ireland** sets a target of improving retention rates by 7 % in the university sector and 9 % in the institute of technology sector in the STEM subjects by 2014.

> **Cyprus** tries to decrease the number of students that fail repeatedly, with the objective of decreasing the number of students that fail to complete their studies within six years of studies.

> **Slovenia** specifies that the percentage of students who enrol in higher education institutions and who fail to graduate should be lowered by two thirds by 2020; currently it amounts to 35 %.

> **Finland** aims to reduce the median age of new polytechnic graduates to 24.1 and the median age of Master's graduates to 26.3.

> Student retention and completion is measured at all **United Kingdom** higher education institutions (HEIs) by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). In **England**, HEIs make Access Agreements which are evaluated by the Office for Fair Access, considering the HEIs' access performance against the range of HESA's widening participation and student retention performance indicators and benchmarks. Meanwhile, in **Scotland** data is used for measuring progress against retention targets set out in university Outcome Agreements. For the academic year 2012/13, HEIs have set targets to maintain or improve retention of students from the most deprived 20 % and 40 % categories of the population as defined within the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD 20/40) and there is also a continued focus on retention of students from all backgrounds. The exact targets set differ by institution.

> In **Montenegro**, the target is to reduce the percentage of drop-outs to 10 % in 2020 and increase the number of graduate students in natural sciences and technology programmes by 10 % annually.

2.3. Measures

In order to reach the objectives and targets set at central, regional or institutional level, concrete measures have to be designed and implemented in national systems. Section 2.3.1 describes general measures aiming to improve student retention, while Section 2.3.2 refers to concrete financial and non-financial incentives to students and higher education institutions.

2.3.1. General measures on student retention and dropout

Student retention

Countries present various measures aiming to support retention and completion of higher education studies. Some education systems stress student-oriented measures striving to help students with their study load and its better understanding. Countries can also offer a reorientation policy system enabling students to change programme without dropping out from a higher education institution (Belgium – French and Flemish Communities). Other countries, such as France, have developed a general package of support measures aiming to improve student retention rates.

> **Denmark** has adopted a number of concrete measures related to the organisation of studies. Students must be enrolled in training courses and examinations equivalent to 60 ECTS every academic year. The possibility of withdrawing registration for the first exam has been abolished. In order to help students with the content of studies, all higher education institutions are obliged to increase the supply of summer courses by 2020. Equally, another institution-based measure for students is to provide a better framework for credit transfer to studies at another institution or for changing study programme. Better transition between undergraduate and graduate programmes is also an objective to be also secured. The universities' development contract with the Ministry for Science, Innovation and Higher Education has three to five obligatory goals which the Minister determines, and three to five self-selected goals which are chosen by the institution. One of the required goals is that students complete their studies quickly.

Countries can also analyse a situation at central level based on the practices of higher education institutions and try to contribute to an exchange of good practices.

> The **United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)** implements projects to identify, evaluate and disseminate institutional analysis and good practice relating to student retention. Individual institutions describe their planned approaches to student retention in their access agreements, but without necessarily setting numerical targets.

> In the **United Kingdom (Scotland)**, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) who funds Scottish universities has outcome agreements with each individual university. The outcome agreements outline what universities currently do and intend to do to measure and improve student retention. Where appropriate, SFC has agreed targets with higher education institutions for improved retention or maintaining their current levels of retention.

Drop-out

Education systems approach students' drop-out from various angles but share the objective of lowering drop-out rates. The approaches either address issues in the institutions or design policies directed at students. Those focusing on institutions try to find a way to motivate them to decrease the drop-out rate. For instance, Belgium (Flemish Community) highlights output financing of higher education institutions which means that higher education institutions have a financial incentive to pay attention to student retention. Fewer students completing their studies indeed means less funding. Austria concludes performance agreements with universities in order to address problems related to drop-out.

Higher education institutions in several countries target students and try to implement processes helping them to finish studies successfully and thus avoid drop-out. For instance, students in Cyprus who fail repeatedly are identified by the higher education institution and provided with further academic guidance.

It is difficult to find examples of countries that track students after dropping out from higher education. However, the Statistical Agency for Higher Education (HESA) in the United Kingdom tracks whether students continue to study at the same institution, to study at another institution, or are absent from higher education completely.

2.3.2. Incentives to students and higher education institutions

Incentives to students

26 education systems state that there are financial incentives encouraging students to complete their studies within a limited period of time.

Only eight education systems mention that there are no incentives encouraging students to complete their studies within a limited period of time. The lack of incentives in some of these cases may be closely linked to the nature of national fee and support systems. For instance, the requirement to pay a certain level of fees may be considered a factor that is sufficiently motivating for many students to complete studies within a regular timeframe.

Figure 2.1: Incentives for students to complete studies within a limited period of time, 2012/13

Financial incentives
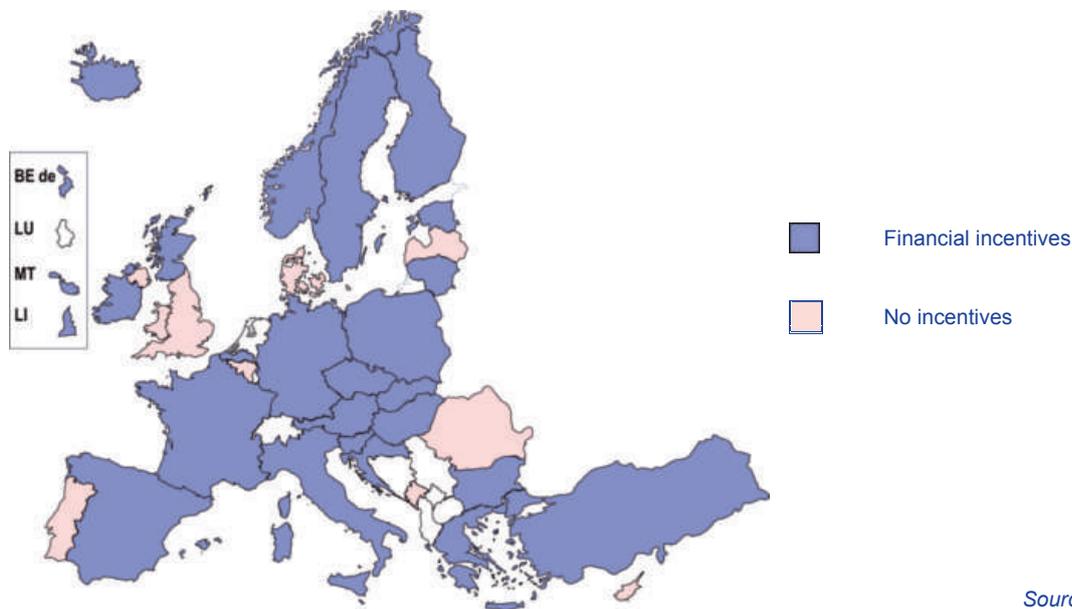
No incentives

Source: Eurydice.

Country specific note

Denmark: Expects to implement incentives as of 1 January 2015.

Fees can be seen as an important tool even in some countries where tuition fees do not officially exist. In education systems with administrative fees, or with a system of state-funded places, students pay fees only if they exceed a regular length of study defined by steering documents (the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia and Turkey). In the case of Spain, students pay a larger share of the tuition fee if they register more than once in a particular subject:

> Students in **Spain** pay 15 % of the actual costs of credits when registering in a subject for the first time, 50 % the second time and 100 % as of the third time.

When asked about financial incentives encouraging students to complete their studies within a limited period of time, countries typically refer to mechanisms of student financial support, which are limited in time. For example, in 18 countries students who are awarded grants continue to be eligible as long as they complete each year successfully or within a certain period of time defined by steering documents.

Incentives to higher education institutions

Countries can also set up mechanisms securing additional funds to higher education institutions if they demonstrate that students progress within a regular programme study time. Figure 2.2 illustrates a link between completion/drop-out rates and the funding of higher education institutions. It is interesting to note, however, that an improvement of completion or drop-out rates in half of Europe's higher education systems would have no impact on institutions' funding. In the remaining half, it does have an impact and countries apply different mechanisms.

Figure 2.2: Impact of completion/drop-out rates on HEIs' funding, 2012/13

	Funding formula
	Performance-based mechanisms
	Purpose-specific funding
	No impact
	Not available

Source: Eurydice.
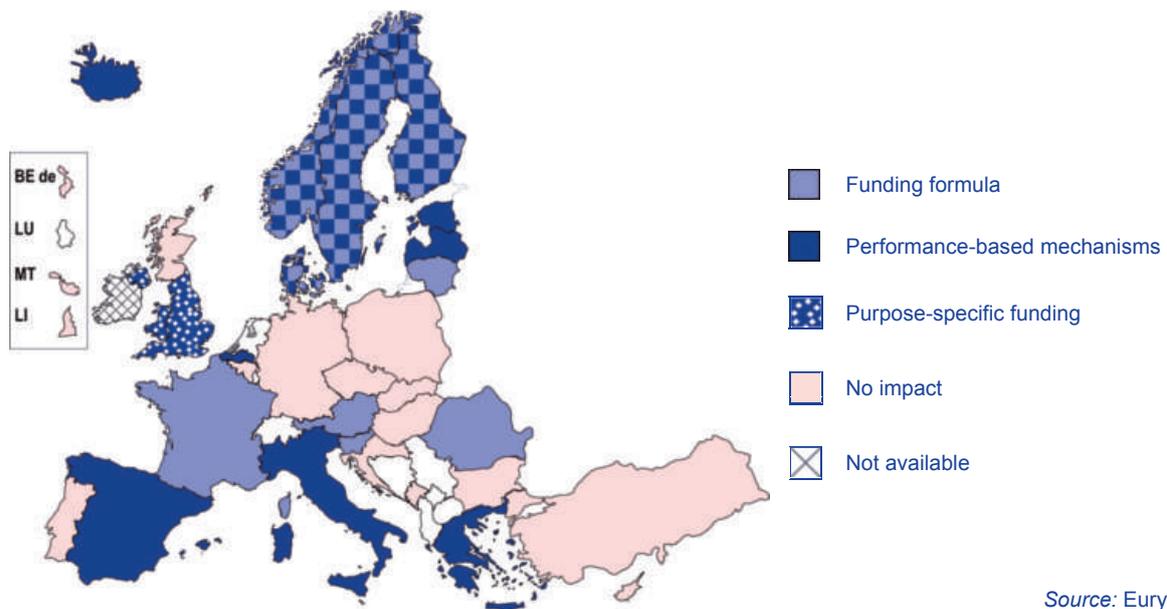
Eleven countries use a performance-based mechanism linking part of an institution's funding to actual results over a certain period. Such funding may be based on outputs, such as the number of graduates, or inputs, such as the number of students/staff exhibiting certain characteristics.

Nine countries implement a funding formula, whereby certain factors automatically trigger the allocation of funds to institutions. The United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) is the only country using purpose-specific funding. This funding is based on expenditure categories, where expenditure by higher education institutions is directly linked to certain functions, tasks and objectives (Salmi and Hauptman 2006, p. 9; Lepori et al. 2007, p. 88).

As shown in Figure 2.2, the Nordic countries are the only European examples where two incentives are typically used – a funding formula and performance-based mechanism.

With regard to external quality assurance systems, completion and/or drop-out rates are considered as a required criterion in procedures in 18 systems. In seven countries, they are taken into consideration in evaluations at both programme and institutional levels. In a further 11 higher education systems, they are used as a criterion for quality assurance either at institutional level (Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Finland and Norway) or at programme level (Belgium (French, Flemish and German-speaking Communities), Greece, Poland and Portugal).

In Lithuania, Romania and the United Kingdom, completion/drop-out rates are an optional criterion for evaluation. In Scotland, the Quality Code, the core reference point for the quality assurance agency's review activity, sets the expectation that higher education providers have systems in place to increase

completion. However completion/drop-out rates are not direct quality assurance criteria. Similarly in Belgium (Flemish Community) reducing drop out and enhancing completion rates is not a 'requirement', but there is a requirement related to the degree to which it is possible for a student to complete the course successfully if a reasonable effort is made. In this context, drop-out rates are an indicator of the chances for a student to complete the course successfully.

Eleven countries state that information on completion/drop-out rate is not a criterion used in external quality assurance procedures.

Figure 2.3: Completion/drop-out rate as a criterion used in external quality assurance, 2012/13
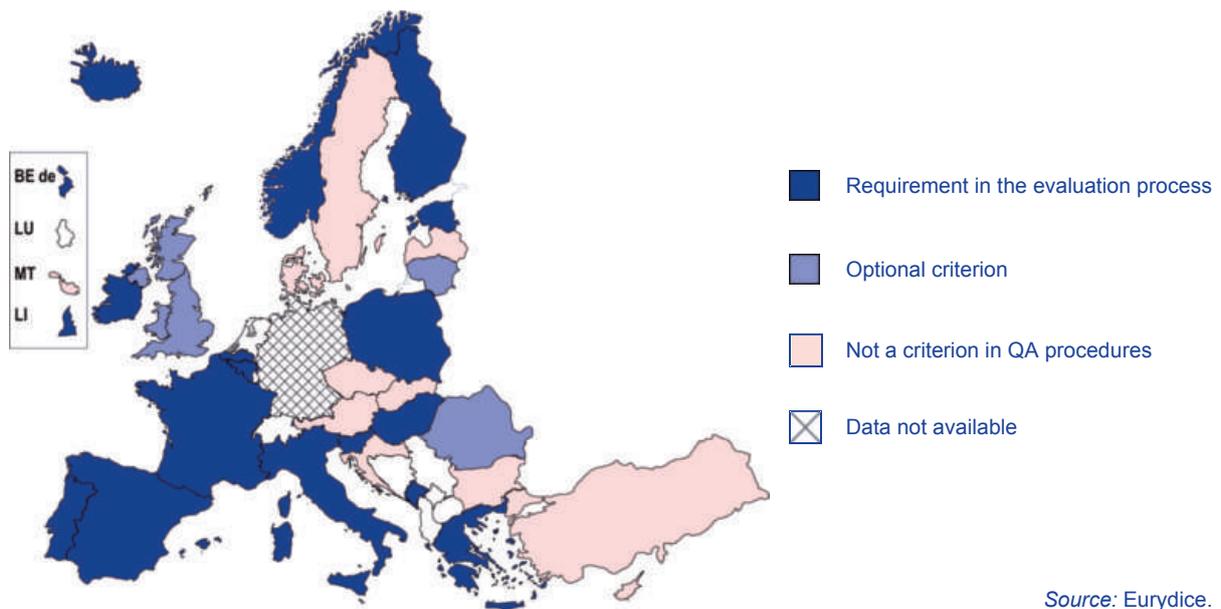
Source: Eurydice.

2.4. Measuring student completion rates

The majority of education systems systematically measure completion rates at the end of the first and second cycles. However, 13 countries do not systematically calculate such rates. This is an issue of concern, as among this group of countries are some that have policies addressing retention and completion, but lack basic data to analyse the impact. Those countries that do not measure completion rates systematically provide different justifications. Some measure rates only sporadically. Others are not able to provide rates of all higher education institutions and thus cannot determine an overall national picture. A number of countries are able to deduce rates from other data they collect, but do not calculate and publish completion rates regularly.

In the **Czech Republic**, completion rates are measured, but not systematically. They are usually calculated for the Eurostat ad-hoc modules on tertiary education, but they are typically not used for policy makers' decisions.

In **Spain,** completion rate data is calculated in the context of accreditation procedures. The Spanish 'University in Figures' contains completion rates of some, but not all universities. Data is not used, however, to provide a national average.

Latvia does not measure completion rates, but these can be calculated from data in statistical reports completed and submitted by higher education institutions.

Lithuanian data on student completion are available in the Education Management Information System (ŠVIS) but so far there is no established practice of systematic measuring of completion rates. Nevertheless, ad-hoc information on completion numbers is being used in the indicators of external evaluation of higher education institutions and in policy debates.

Figure 2.4: Completion rates measured systematically, 2012/13

▨	At the end of **1st and 2nd** cycles
■	At the end of **2nd cycle only**
▨	Not systematically measured
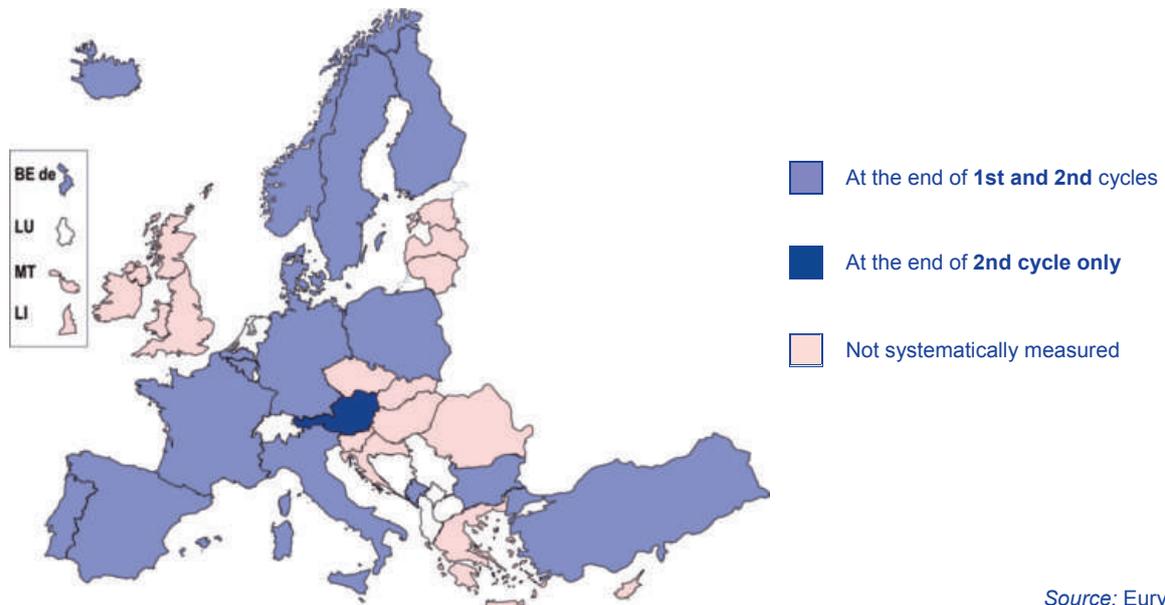
Source: Eurydice.

Country specific notes

Greece: The first set of completion rates data will be available in academic year 2014/15.
United Kingdom: Completion rates in the United Kingdom are not directly measured. HESA collects 'projected outcomes', a projection of the proportion of the full-time first degree starters that are likely to be in each of the 'end states' after a period of 15 years – that is, having gained a qualification (i.e. completion), transferred to another institution, or been absent from higher education for two consecutive years.

Some countries point to information on numbers graduating rather than completion rates:

In **Greece**, annual data are collected only on graduate rates within a normal period and beyond the normal graduate period (n+4 semesters).

While the University of **Malta** publishes annual absolute figures on their graduates, there are no national statistics of completion rates.

Only absolute number of students is measured (new entrants and graduates) in **Slovakia**. However, the central Student Register which is currently in a testing phase will provide data on completion rates.

Romania and Sweden explain that completion rates per se are not calculated, but nonetheless both countries have information about the number of diplomas awarded.

Completion rates in **Romania** are not measured directly, but they may be induced from different procedures, for example, the procedure of issuing degree certificates for graduates.

The number of diplomas in **Sweden** is measured yearly for both cycles and for programmes not divided into cycles. Not all students decide to take out their degree diploma, thus the actual completion rate from the first and second cycle is higher.

It is interesting to note that based on reported data in Chapter 1, Figure 1.1, all countries have a general policy on widening participation in higher education and almost all countries equally claim to have general attainment targets. On the other hand, responses about data collected illustrate that some of these countries do not systematically measure their policy output in the form of completion rates. Thus the implementation of national policy in reality remains slightly unclear.

Countries were also asked whether completion rates are measured for specific groups of students, particularly under-represented societal groups that may be defined and monitored in relation to specific policy objectives. Based on reported data, with very few exceptions, there is a clear absence of data related to these groups. The only collected data include gender, which is more a result of systematic collection of basic student characteristics rather than a targeted choice related to specific groups.

Only Poland specifically notes completion rate data concerning people with disabilities. Belgium (Flemish Community) monitors the completion rate data of first generation students (i.e. those students whose parents did not obtain a higher education qualification). France identifies the socio-economic status of students in its completion-rate data collection. Lithuania calculates completion rates for specific groups only within the state-financed students' population. Otherwise, countries either track completion rate data for the whole student body, or they don't undertake such monitoring at all.

Student completion rate requirements are set at national level in the vast majority of countries. The bodies most often requesting the data are usually the national statistical offices and ministries. Among other authorities mentioned as requesting the measurement of completion rates are accreditation and quality assurance agencies, observatories and Eurostat.

Methods for calculating completion rates

Countries that calculate completion rates on a systematic basis use either a cross-section or a true cohort method. The cross-section method refers to the number of graduates in a calendar year who have entered the programme a certain number of years before (this estimation takes into account different lengths of programmes when possible). The true cohort method is based on panel data (survey or registers) which follow an individual student from entrance to graduation in the programme.

Countries are quite evenly divided in their preferred choice of method. Twelve countries use the cross-section method while thirteen use the true cohort method. France, Austria and Norway use both methods.

Figure 2.5: The method of completion rate calculation, 2012/13

Cross-section method
True cohort method
Not systematically calculated
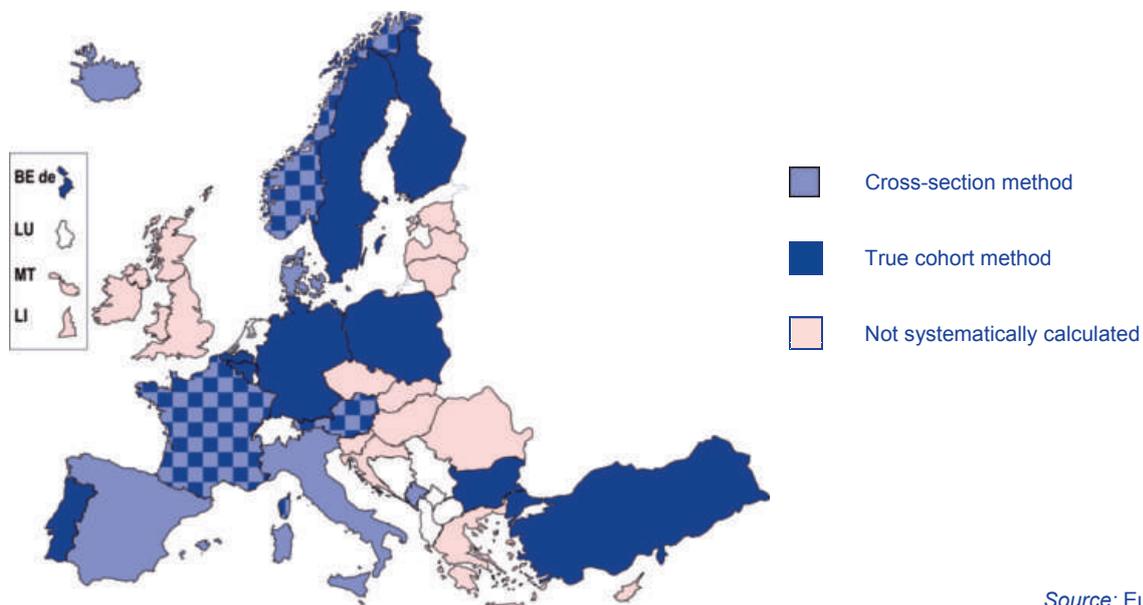
Source: Eurydice.

Data on completion rates which are systematically calculated are usually publicly available. The main sources are the websites of statistical offices and ministries. Some countries have specific statistics and/or databases dedicated to higher education (e.g. Poland, the United Kingdom and Norway). The information is typically published once a year.

In some cases, only certain information is publicly available. For instance, in Belgium (French Community), only information on students who successfully pass the first year and are the first generation in higher education is published by the Higher Education Observatory.

Finally, among countries that systematically measure completion rates, but do not publish them, are Belgium (German-speaking Community), Portugal and Turkey. In these cases, data are theoretically used for policy making and planning, and in the case of Turkey can be made available to researchers on request.

2.5. Measuring student drop-out rates

Apart from completion rates, respondent countries have also been asked to report on how they measure drop-out rates. The situation parallels that of completion rates. Five countries (France, Italy, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Iceland) systematically measure drop-out rates at the end of the first year. Eight education systems (Belgium (German-speaking Community), Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Italy, Finland and Norway) claim to measure the rates at the end of each year. However, the majority of education systems do not systematically measure drop-out rates. In some cases, they might do so in ad-hoc cases and upon request (Belgium (French and Flemish Communities), the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Lithuania and Austria).

Consideration of drop-out rates for specific groups of students is not common practice. Only the United Kingdom defines a range of characteristics used for such systematic analysis. These are: age, subject studied, qualifications on entry, sex, ethnicity, disability, young participation rate, mature participation rate, previous school (i.e. state-run or independent school) and the region of institution.

From those countries that measure drop-out rates, Belgium (German-speaking Community), Bulgaria and Portugal do not publish them. Bulgaria calculates the rates for official use only. Belgium (German-speaking Community) has only one higher education institution and the data serve internal discussion and external quality assurance. In Portugal, 2012/13 was the first year when a student tracking system was implemented, and the drop-out rates have not yet been calculated. However, the information will be published in the course of 2014.

Figure 2.6: Systematic measurement of drop-out rates, 2012/13

▨	At the end of 1st year
■	At the end of each year
▤	Not systematically measured
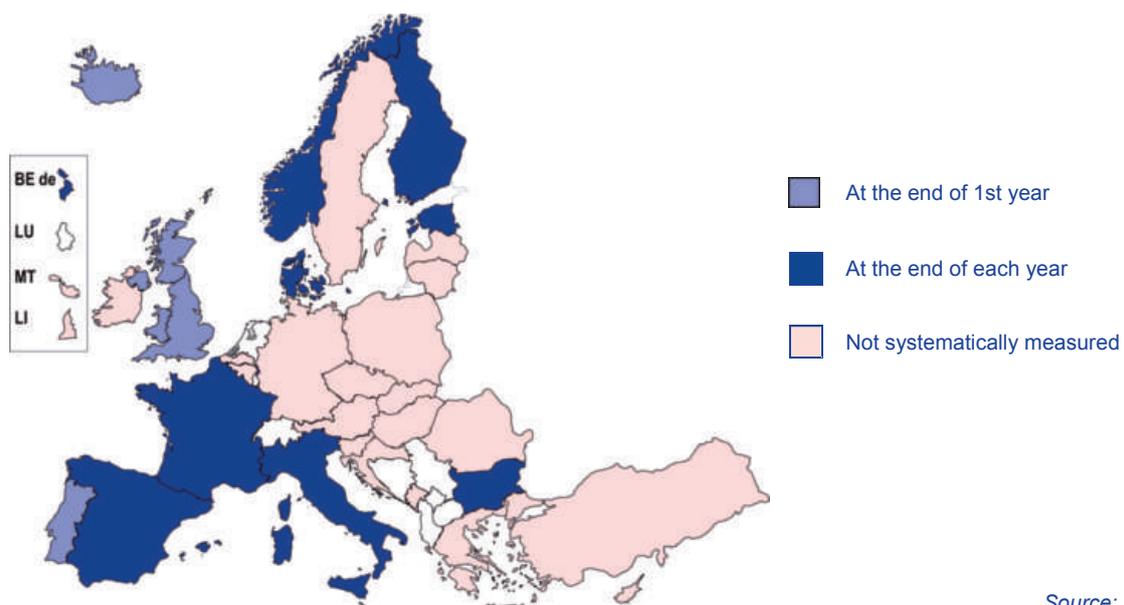
Source: Eurydice.

Respondent countries have also been asked how students who change study programme are considered in the context of drop-out. Many education systems stipulate that students are counted only in the cohort of their new programme. Other education systems count students as a drop-out from

the programme in which they are enrolled. The situation in some countries is however more complex and it is not possible to draw a clear line in this respect.

> Within the context of external quality assurance in **Belgium (Flemish Community)**, students who change study programme are considered as drop-outs. In general, however, students who change study programme are not considered as drop-out if they are enrolled in another study programme.

> Students in the **Czech Republic** who change study programme are counted as 'drop-outs' from the programme in which they are enrolled. However, those students are not counted as 'drop-outs' from higher education. If they finish their new programme they are included in the 'first-enrolled-programme cohort' for calculation of completion rates (true cohort method).

> In **Denmark**, a consideration of whether a student dropped out depends on how closely related the new programme is with the old one, how detailed the specific statement is, and the length of time that has passed between the student drop-out and the entry into a new study programme.

> In **Lithuania**, both possibilities of counting are allowed in the interface of the Education Management Information System (ŠVIS).

> Transfer to other higher education institution in the **United Kingdom** is recorded by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Non-continuation data collection is based on tracking students from the year they enter an institution to the following year (for full-time students) or the following two years (for part-time students), and provides information about where the students are in that year: continuing at the same institution (either on the same course or elsewhere in the institution), transfer to another institution, or absent from higher education completely. HESA's Student Records use the term 'instance' to describe a student's engagement within an institution. A student may enrol on more than one course and therefore have more than one instance.

2.6. Experience from site visits

Guidance and counselling

While measuring the scale of drop-out and taking action to reduce it may be a national challenge in many countries, institutions are more concerned with what they are able to do to prevent it. A common theme for all the universities in the face of increasing demand is the importance of improving guidance services – or at least of finding ways of ensuring that guidance is available for those who most need it.

This issue was explored with a number of interlocutors at the University of East Paris (*Université de Paris Est*) in France. The university has a strong focus on regional development, and ensures provision for a diverse range of students. Students explained their own experience – that they had received little or no academic guidance prior to entering higher education. They felt that it was a rather common experience for students in French higher education to feel lost and unguided in their first year at university. Academic staff also confirmed this reality in this university, explaining that it was impossible for even the most devoted professional to find time for those students that lose interest in their studies during the first year, as there are simply too many engaged students whose learning needs cannot be ignored at the expense of those students who appear uninterested.

The general perception that guidance services have failed to expand as quickly as participation was shared particularly in open access institutions. However, the University of East Paris was remarkable for having developed a holistic approach to student services for disadvantaged and vulnerable students that can be held up as a best-practice example. Rather than being organised as a number of distinct services (welfare, jobs, careers, guidance, and accommodation), the organisational model for these services was to create an integrated and interlinked support network focusing on possible needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable students. Thus a student whose immediate reason for addressing the services might be accommodation would nevertheless also find information available on a wide range of other issues that could be important to her/his integration in the university and in the society.

Moreover the types of service available had been developed in response to identified needs of other vulnerable students. Interestingly, these services were broader in range than in many higher education environments, and sometimes addressed issues in unconventional ways. For example, accommodation services were consciously seeking opportunities for students to live with members of the local community, rather than seeking accommodation in student residences. This strategy had proved to have significant positive side effects – including reducing the fear and prejudice among the local community with regard to foreign students.

In addition to typical services, the university has also focused on developing a considerable number of cultural services. The opportunity to participate in sports, theatre, dance and music activities, for example, has proved to be crucial in integrating migrant and refugee students in the university.

Guidance and counselling were also a key challenge at the Tallinn Technical University, where drop-out rates reached 50 % in some programmes. In common with other universities that have seen large expansion in student numbers, many of the issues related to drop-out are considered as too big to be addressed by the university alone, and a certain level of dropout appears to be unavoidable. However, the university has now developed extremely good student tracking data, and by working at faculty level and analyzing students' previous study choices, earlier intervention with students at risk should be possible. While it is too early to assess the effectiveness of this work, the university is positive with regard to the potential benefits of collecting and using good data.

The issue of early intervention was also highlighted at Ghent University. Here it was felt that many students could be supported and may avoid negative consequences of drop-out if they could be identified early. However, the major problem is that many 'at risk' students are unaware of the level of their difficulties until they are already in a situation of failure. Unfortunately, although there are possibilities for academic support within the faculties, and also at the university level with guidance and counselling services, the university does not have resources to actively seek out or target students who may be at risk, and rather responds to those students who come to request support.

At the Aachen University of Technology (RWTH), the same challenge is being addressed by more proactive measures. A mentoring programme, using a model of pro-active and interactive student counselling, was established two years ago and is now being implemented in all faculties. The mentors are all academic staff, and have access to student results in coursework and examinations. Based on performance results, they contact students who are achieving below an agreed threshold, and invite the student for discussions. It is not compulsory for the student to accept, but it is highly recommended. The aim of the discussion is to find the best way forward for the student. Interestingly the idea for this approach came from the academic staff themselves, and the mentors have also organised themselves into a network to address collective issues. This enables them, for example, to to identify modules that often cause problems to students and to discuss changes with their colleagues.

Conclusions

Student retention can be considered as a basic and key performance indicator for higher education systems. The aim should be for as many students as possible to progress and successfully graduate. In the context of widening participation, retention is also a matter of social justice. If governments are to encourage a broader range of students into higher education, they also have a responsibility to help reduce the psychological, financial and/or emotional risks of non-completion.

The findings in this chapter suggest that firstly there may be a need for greater clarity in definitions – both at the level of national steering documents and for definitions used for statistical purposes. For

example a 'completion rate' may refer in some countries to the percentage of students that enter a programme and complete it several years later, while in others only the student cohort in the final year of a programme is considered.

A significant number of countries do not systematically calculate completion and/or drop-out rates. This includes countries that have policies addressing retention and completion, but clearly lack basic data to analyse their impact of these policies.

Clear and precise targets related to the improvement in the rates of retention are not commonly found. Instead, countries usually mention an overarching goal of reducing drop-out and strengthening retention and completion of studies. In particular, data related to specific groups is rarely collected and analysed.

While funding might be expected to have a major impact on policy to improve retention rates, the report finds that improvements in retention and completion would affect higher education institutions' funding in only half of the countries. Performance-based funding mechanisms, whereby a part of an institution's funding is dependent on reaching agreed results in a defined timeframe, are found in only ten systems.

A number of developments have taken place, however, to encourage students to finish their studies during a 'regular' period of time. The focus tends to be on measures that incentivise students who finish within a defined period, or penalise those who do not. This trend of limiting the time to degree is clearly part of a larger agenda focusing on efficiency in the use of public finances.

The trend to encourage students to undertake and complete their studies in a timely manner goes in parallel with the development of more flexible options to study.

One of the main ways of tackling non-completion is through providing information, advice and guidance, and particularly for those who are most 'at risk' of dropout. While guidance is ubiquitous in all systems, both country information and site visit experience showed that there are often difficulties related to the level of resources: typically guidance and counselling services are too stretched by increased demand to be able to target and reach those most in need.

Although around half of the higher education systems claim to use data on retention and dropout in their quality assurance processes, there is little evidence that such information is followed up in an attempt to understand and address the underlying causes of dropout. The role of quality assurance agencies is a limited one, with the rates of dropout seen purely as indicators of the success and viability of programmes and institutions.

CHAPTER 3: FLEXIBILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES

Discussions on the growing heterogeneity of the student population often go hand in hand with those on flexibility of higher education studies. In other words, flexible learning is commonly identified as a means to cope with changes in the composition of the student body and to accommodate the needs and constraints of a more diverse student population. Following this approach, the European agenda for the modernisation of higher education recognises flexible learning and delivery methods as a means to improve quality and relevance of higher education while expanding student numbers, widening participation to diverse groups of learners and combating drop-out (European Commission, 2011). In the framework of the agenda, Member States have been invited to 'encourage a greater variety of study modes (e.g. part-time, distance and modular learning, continuing education for adult returners and others already in the labour market), by adapting funding mechanisms where necessary' (ibid.).

This chapter explores flexibility in higher education in six sections. The first one examines the concept of flexibility, highlighting its different dimensions and components. The sections that follow analyse flexibility in higher education in the light of the higher education modernisation agenda, focusing on selected areas promoted by the agenda. Within this framework, the second section looks at the extent to which higher education systems provide opportunities for students to organise their studies on a part-time basis and it also examines the impact of part-time study modes on financial aspects related to studies. The third section deals with distance learning, e-learning and blended learning, looking at the degree to which higher education institutions across Europe ensure its provision. The fourth section focuses on the possibilities for learners to have their prior non-formal and informal learning recognised and validated towards the completion of higher education study requirements. The fifth section provides information on other means of enhancing flexibility in higher education, while the final section considers experiences gained from site visits in higher education institutions.

3.1. Approaching the concept of flexible learning

Despite the fact that there is a common understanding of the notion of flexible learning, it is widely acknowledged that the concept is difficult to define. When approaching this theme, definitions commonly refer to a higher degree of individualisation compared to traditional studies and a wider range of options from which to choose with respect to different aspects of the learning experience (Collis and Moonen, 2001). Flexible learning is also referred to as learner-centred rather than teacher-centred learning, or as learning that enhances the independence of the learner and changes the role of the teacher to one of facilitator and mentor (Moran and Myringer, 1999; quoted in Cornelius and Gordon, 2008).

Literature referring to flexible learning often refers to the five dimensions identified by Collins et al. (1997), namely flexibility related to time, content, entry requirements, instructional approach and resources, and delivery and logistics. Each of these dimensions includes various options for flexibility. For example, flexibility related to time can include (or combine) a possibility to study at agreed times during the regular workday, during evening or weekends or during a block of released time, away from the regular job entirely (ibid., p. 206). Flexibility related to course delivery and logistics can comprise support via a helpdesk, face-to-face consultations with a tutor, the possibility to contact a tutor via electronic media, group sessions, etc. (ibid., p. 207).

In addition to the five dimensions of flexible learning, Collis and Moonen (2001) identify four key components that interact together when implementing flexible learning, namely technology, pedagogy, implementation strategies and institutional frameworks. Among these components, it is in particular

the internet coupled with growing pressures on higher education institutions that are bringing new opportunities for the realisation of flexible learning (ibid.).

The following sections explore selected aspects of flexibility in higher education looking at the provision of part-time studies, distance learning, recognition of prior learning for progression in studies and additional means for enhancing learning flexibility.

3.2. Studying in higher education as a part-timer

One of the most common approaches for adapting higher education to the needs of those who cannot follow traditional 'full-time' studies is to offer a possibility for students to register with an alternative student status, which offers more flexibility compared to full-time study mode. However, as already highlighted in previous comparative reports (e.g. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, Eurostat & Eurostudent, 2012), it is difficult to approach this topic in a comparative perspective, as the understanding of terms such as 'full-time' or 'part-time' studies varies greatly across countries. The aim of the following section is to contribute to understanding the situation across Europe, paying particular attention to conceptual questions, financial arrangements related to different study modes and the extent to which higher education institutions offer these alternative study approaches.

3.2.1. Existence and definition of part-time studies

Figure 3.1 shows that most European countries offer a possibility for students to formally organise their studies in a more flexible way compared to traditional full-time arrangements. However, the concept of part-time studies varies greatly across Europe.

In several countries, part-time study is defined in relation to the workload of full-time studies, where being a part-timer means a less intensive workload. Students' workload can be expressed in ECTS credits (e.g. Lithuania and Ireland), study hours/weeks (e.g. the United Kingdom – England, Wales and Northern Ireland) or the combination or both (e.g. Latvia, Sweden and the United Kingdom – Scotland).

> In **Latvia**, full-time studies correspond to 40 LV credits (60 ECTS) per academic year and no less than 40 study hours per week. Part-time studies correspond to less than 40 LV credits (60 ECTS) per academic year and fewer than 40 study hours per week.
>
> **Lithuania** offers two forms of study: 'continual form' (i.e. full-time form) and 'extended form' (i.e. part-time form). In the first case, student shall achieve 60 credits per academic year and should not achieve less than 45 credits. In the second one, a student is not expected to achieve more than 45 credits per year.
>
> In **Sweden**, the Higher Education Ordinance states that full-time studies take 40 weeks per academic year and correspond to 60 ECTS. A part-time student studies at less than full-time intensity.
>
> In the **United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)**, students are deemed full-time if they are studying a course for which each year of study requires attendance for at least 24 weeks out of the year. Part-time students are any students who are studying at less than full-time intensity. They may be studying full-time on courses with less than 24 weeks of study in the year, on block release, or during the evenings.

Estonia and Portugal use a similar approach, but they define the difference between full-time and part-time students in terms of the percentage of workload of full-timers. Both countries require full-time students to complete at least 75 % of their planned yearly workload and, consequently, part-time students are defined as those who complete less than 75 %.

Figure 3.1: Formal recognition of a part-time student status and/or part-time programmes in European countries, 2012/13

Only one formal study mode

Student status and/or programmes formally recognised as part-time exist
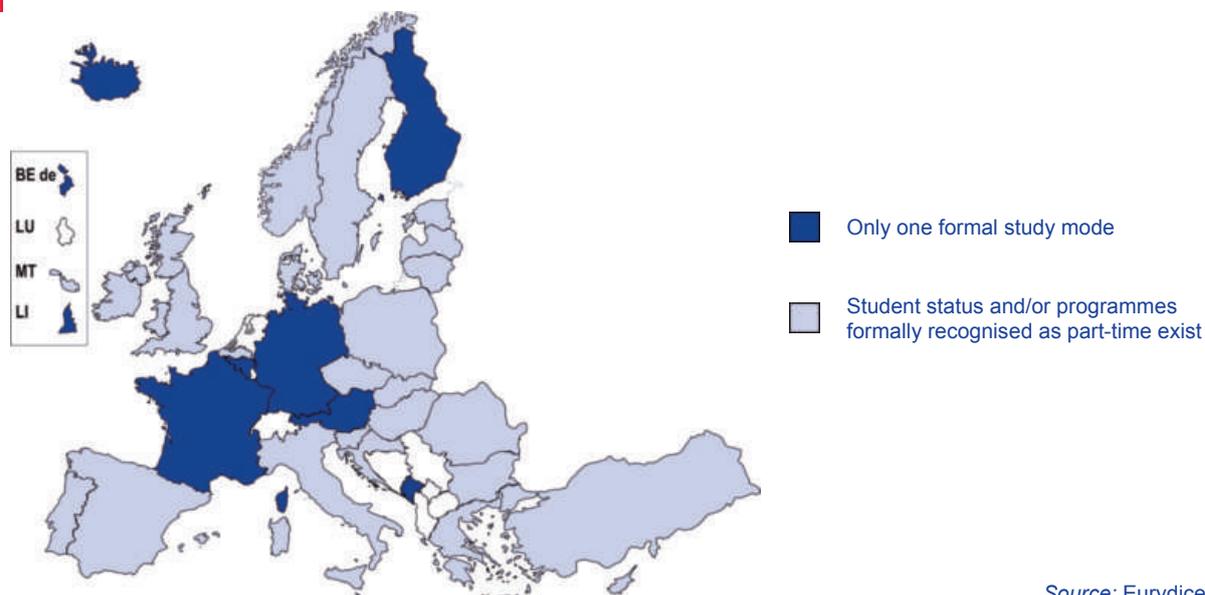
Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

The figure does not take into account arrangements targeting only specific categories of students (e.g. students with disabilities or sportsmen/women). The possibility for students to temporarily interrupt their studies is also not taken into consideration.

All the above approaches are combined in steering documents in the United Kingdom (Scotland), where full-time students are required to attend an institution for periods amounting to at least 24 weeks within the year and dedicate at least 21 hours per week to their studies. Part-time students are those whose course is equivalent to 50 % of a full-time course. It is the college, university or distance-learning provider that decides whether they are working towards at least 50 % of a full-time equivalent higher education course.

In Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania, part-time students do not have a reduced workload in terms of study hours or credits, but their direct participation in study sessions is limited (i.e. limited contact hours). In Hungary, for instance, part-time students are defined as those who follow a programme which includes at least 30 % and at most 50 % of contact hours of a full-time programme. In Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, part-time students are expected to accomplish the same volume of study in terms of credits, but they are not obliged to attend all lectures. In Poland, lectures for part-timers generally take place from Friday to Sunday.

In some countries (e.g. Spain, Italy and Slovenia), steering documents refer to part-time studies, but they do not provide their exact definition. This means that higher education institutions can autonomously define in their regulations what the part-time study mode will involve. A similar situation can be observed in Norway, where students may register on a part-time or full-time basis, but the workload related to each student status is defined individually and stipulated in an individual education plan. The establishment of the plan is obligatory for all programmes financed by the Ministry of Education and Research.

There are also higher education systems, where legislation expressly refers to alternative study modes, but these are not 'full-time' and 'part-time' studies. This is the case in the Flemish Community of Belgium, where students can choose between three formal student statuses or 'contracts'. The latter are: a 'diploma/degree contract' for studies leading to a complete higher education degree, a

'credit contract' for studies leading to a limited number of credits and an 'examination contract' for studies where students do not take courses, but participate only in examinations aiming at a limited number of credits. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, steering documents refer to three distinct study modes, namely 'on-site/presence', 'distance' and 'combined studies'. While the first term refers to traditional 'full-time' studies, the two latter options allow students to study in a flexible way. In particular, 'combined studies' are commonly delivered during weekends and their concept is similar to alternative study modes that exist in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania (see the information provided in previous paragraphs of this section).

Beyond the question of terminology related to alternative study modes, it is also worth noting that part-time studies are not necessarily open to all students. In Greece, for instance, the legal framework that is currently phasing in foresees a possibility to study part-time only for students who can justify that they work at least 20 hours a week.

Finally, if a country does not offer a possibility for students to formally register as part-timers, it does not necessarily mean that students cannot study in a flexible way. For example, in Austria, there is no official part-time student status, but students do not have to study according to the time limit given in the curriculum. A similar situation can be observed in France, where higher education institutions may provide students with an opportunity to adapt their study rhythm to their needs. This is commonly offered to high-level sportsmen/women, working students, students involved in various higher education associations and/or bodies, and those following in parallel more than one higher education programme. In Germany, flexibility is offered through dual programmes, combining work experience and higher education studies, as well as individualised programmes that are designed to enable people to better combine studies with family duties, such as care for children or elderly people.

3.2.2. Financial aspects related to part-time studies

When analysing part-time studies, one of the central questions is whether and to what extent they have an impact on financial aspects related to studies, i.e. whether students following studies other than full-time are expected to pay different amount of fees and whether they are eligible for a different amount of financial support.
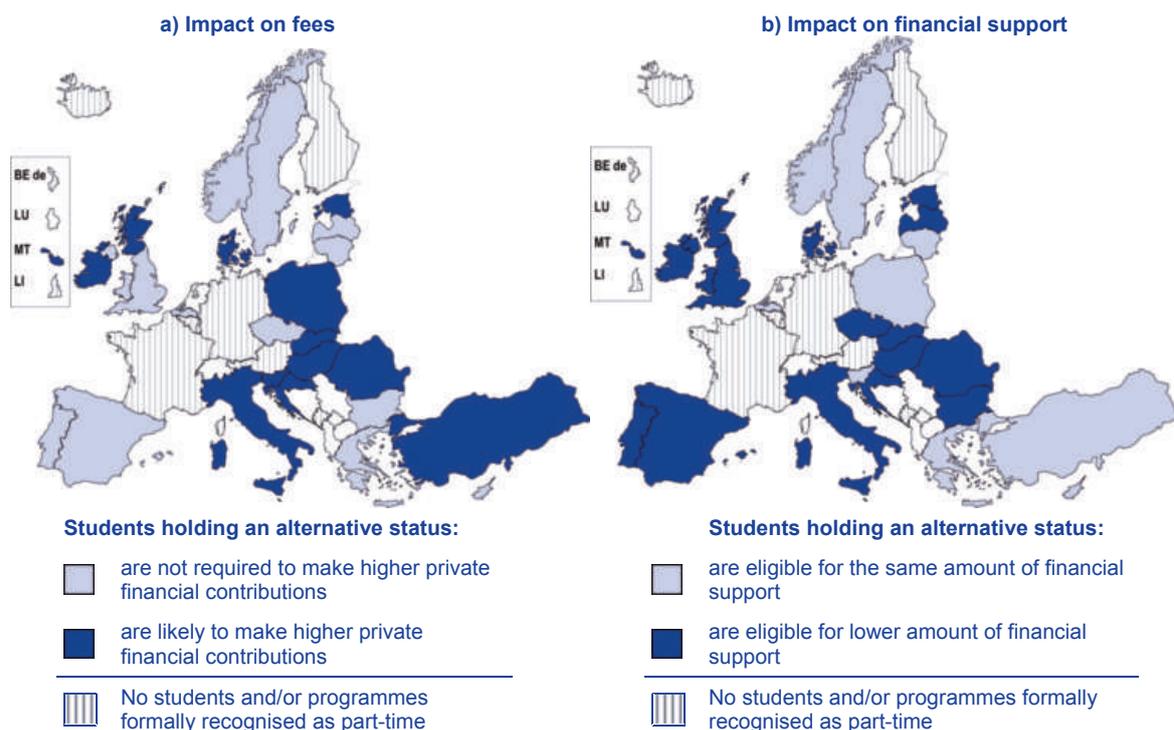
Available data show (see Figure 3.2a) that in several higher education systems (Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Croatia, Italy, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, the United Kingdom – Scotland, and Turkey), part-time studies are related, or are likely to be related, to higher private financial investment compared to traditional studies.

In Denmark, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia, full-time students generally do not pay fees for their first degree, whereas part-time students are expected to do so. A similar situation can be observed in Turkey, where, since 2012, there have been no tuition fees, except for those who participate in degree programmes delivered in the evening. In Croatia, certain categories of full-time students pay fees while others do not. Part-time students all pay fees and these are higher than for fee-paying full-timers. The expectation to make higher financial contributions can also be expressed indirectly, such as in countries where fees for part-time studies are unregulated, whereas fees for full-time programmes are subject to regulation (Estonia and the United Kingdom – Scotland). A similar situation can be observed in Ireland and Italy, where institutions have a certain degree of autonomy regarding student fees and, consequently, part-time students can be treated differently compared to full-timers. Another indirect measure that can oblige part-time students to make higher financial contributions can be observed in Hungary, where the number of 'no fee' part-time places is very

limited, and where part-time students commonly pay fees that are close to the total calculated cost of a full-time programme.

In most countries where part-time students pay or are likely to pay higher fees, the financial support to which they are entitled is also limited (see Figure 3.2b). However, there are exceptions. In Slovenia, for instance, part-time students pay higher fees, but they are eligible for the same amount of financial support, except students who are employed or registered as unemployed.

Figure 3.2: Impact of formal student status on financial arrangements related to higher education studies, 2012/13

a) Impact on fees — b) Impact on financial support

Students holding an alternative status:

☐ are not required to make higher private financial contributions

■ are likely to make higher private financial contributions

▥ No students and/or programmes formally recognised as part-time

Students holding an alternative status:

☐ are eligible for the same amount of financial support

■ are eligible for lower amount of financial support

▥ No students and/or programmes formally recognised as part-time

Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

The figure only considers the situation in countries that formally recognise a part-time student status and/or part-time programmes.

When referring to the same amount to financial support or fees, the figure refers to the amount that is calculated proportionally to study workload of students.

In Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Spain, Latvia, Portugal and the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), students are not expected to pay higher fees, but they are not eligible for the same amount of financial support as full-time students. However, this may only concern certain types of financial support. For instance, in Spain, part-time students are generally eligible for grants, but they are not eligible for certain grant components, including residence costs and an academic performance bonus. Similarly in the Czech Republic, part-timers are eligible for different types of financial support, except for the accommodation scholarship that is only available to those studying full-time (i.e. 'on-site' study mode; for more details, see Section 3.2.1). In the United Kingdom (England), part-time students have access to tuition fee loans, but not to student maintenance grants. This goes hand in hand with the fact that they are deemed to be able to combine study and work, or benefit from other support schemes if they are outside the labour market. A comparable situation can be observed in Slovakia, where part-timers can apply for study loans, but not for need-based scholarships.
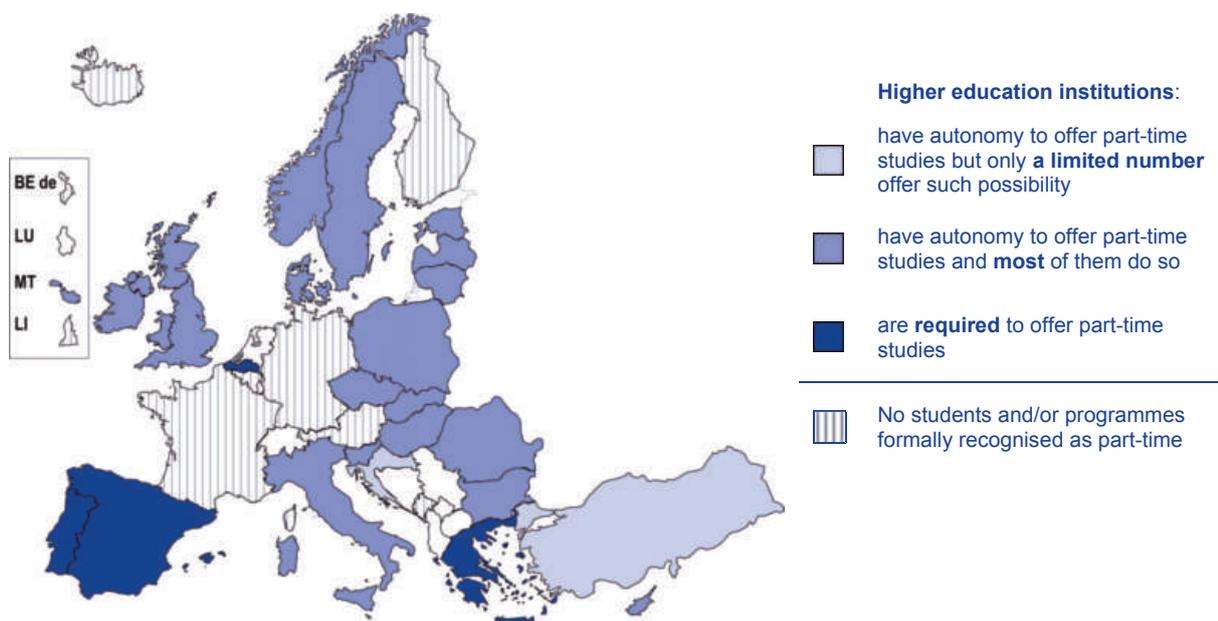
Only in a few countries or regions within countries (Flemish Community of Belgium, Greece, Cyprus, Lithuania, Sweden and Norway), part-time students are not expected to pay higher fees for the same amount of study and they are eligible for the same amount of support. In the Nordic countries, with the exception of international students from outside the EU, students generally do not pay fees regardless of whether they study full-time or part-time. The same applies to Greece, but only as regards the first cycle of higher education studies.

Although the figure does not represent the situation in countries with no formal part-time student statuses or programmes, in most of these countries *de facto* part-time students study under the same financial conditions as students following a full-time schedule. However, since *de facto* part-time studies are likely to be spread over a higher number of years – each year requiring the payment of tuition fees – the overall cost of this mode of study may be higher compared to studies achieved within traditional time-span (e.g. the German-speaking Community of Belgium and Liechtenstein). This obviously does not apply to countries, with no fees for any category of students (e.g. Finland).

3.2.3.   Extent of provision

After providing an insight into existence of part-time student statuses or programmes and their impact on financial arrangements related to studies, this section examines the extent to which higher education institutions offer opportunities to study 'part-time'.

Figure 3.3: Extent of the provision of part-time studies where a formal part-time student or programme status exists, 2012/13

Higher education institutions:

have autonomy to offer part-time studies but only **a limited number** offer such possibility

have autonomy to offer part-time studies and **most** of them do so

are **required** to offer part-time studies

No students and/or programmes formally recognised as part-time

Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

The figure only considers the situation in countries that formally recognise a part-time student status and/or part-time programmes.

Figure 3.3 shows that in almost all countries, higher education institutions can autonomously decide whether they will offer part-time studies. In the majority of countries where such autonomy exists, most higher education institutions offer this possibility. Only in Croatia and Turkey, part-time studies are offered only by a limited number of institutions. At the other end of the spectrum are the Flemish Community of Belgium, Greece, Spain and Portugal, indicating that all higher education institutions are required to offer part-time studies. Slovenia is a rather specific case, where the institutional

autonomy in providing part-time studies is more limited compared to most other countries. There, public higher education institutions can make proposals regarding the number of part-time places they would like to offer, but the proposals must be endorsed by central authorities. Despite this limitation, most higher education institutions in Slovenia offer part-time studies.

As regards countries that recognise only one formal student status (French and German-speaking Communities of Belgium, Germany, France, Austria, Finland, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Montenegro), the provision of *de facto* part-time studies is spread to a variable degree. While in some of them, most higher education institutions provide possibilities for students to follow *de facto* part-time studies (e.g. the French Community of Belgium, France, Iceland and Liechtenstein), others report that the number of institutions offering this possibility is rather limited (e.g. the German-speaking Community of Belgium and Germany).

3.3. Distance learning, e-learning and blended learning

In the higher education sphere, the terms distance learning, e-learning and blended learning are often used interchangeably. However, while the first phenomenon had already entered higher education in the early half of the nineteenth century as an alternative to campus-based university, the second one is relatively new and relates to the use of electronic media for a variety of learning activities that can take place in or outside traditional classrooms. In other words, e-learning is not necessarily used for distance learning purposes, while distance learning is not necessarily delivered through the new electronic media (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005). However, at present, there is a strong overlap between the two areas, as distance learning is often delivered through e-learning technologies. Moreover, e-learning approaches can also be integrated in the traditional classroom learning, which is commonly referred to as blended learning.

This section explores the extent to which higher education institutions across Europe ensure the provision of distance learning, e-learning and blended learning programmes. In doing so, it first focuses on higher education institutions using these alternative modes of learning as the main pedagogical approach. Second, it examines the degree of implementation of distance learning, e-learning and blended learning by traditional higher education institutions.

3.3.1. Focus on higher education institutions specialising in distance learning

Available data show (see Figure 3.4) that higher education institutions focusing on the provision of degree programmes through distance learning and e-learning are rare across Europe. They currently exist only in a dozen higher education systems, including Germany, Ireland, Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. In some of them, these specialised providers are mainly small private institutions (e.g. Ireland, Italy, Malta and Slovenia), whereas in others, they count among the key players in the system (e.g. in Germany, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Portugal and the United Kingdom).

Southern Europe is characterised by the highest concentration of higher education institutions focusing on the provision of distance learning. The oldest and the biggest institution in this geographical area is the National Open University (UNED) in Spain – the institution that was created in the early 70's and currently has more than 180 000 students. Publicly funded distance learning higher education institutions that exist in other southern European countries – namely the *Universidade Aberta* in Portugal, the Hellenic Open University in Greece and the Open University of Cyprus – were founded slightly later, in 1988, 1992 and 2006 respectively, and their student populations vary from around 4 300 students in Cyprus to around 7 800 in Portugal and 33 000 in Greece.

Figure 3.4: Existence of higher education institutions focusing on the provision of distance learning and e-learning programmes, 2012/13

HE institutions focusing on the provision of distance learning:

do not exist

exist
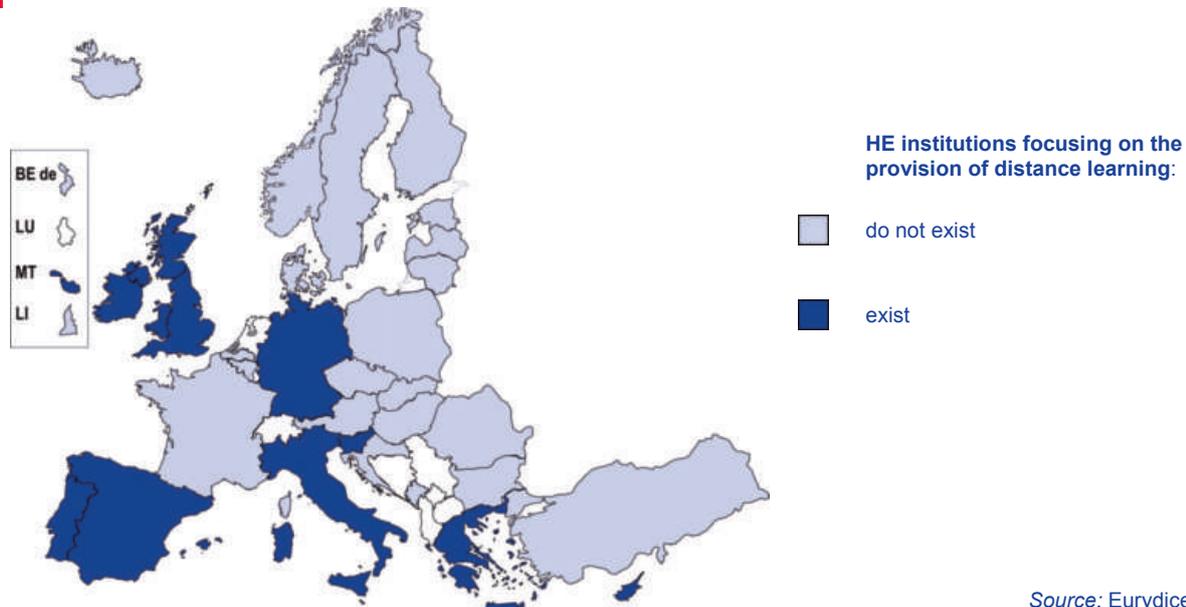
Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

The figure only refers to institutions which are recognised by educational authorities and ensure provision of degree programmes.

The largest distance learning provider in terms of student numbers is the Open University in the United Kingdom – the institution that was founded in 1969 and currently has around 240 000 students of whom more than 70 % work full- or part-time. It is funded by a combination of student fees, allocations from the higher education funding bodies throughout the United Kingdom and other resources. The Open University had a strong influence on the establishment, in 1974, of the state-funded German *FernUniversität* (Kappel, Lehmann and Loeper, 2002). This higher education institution is based in Hagen and has a student population of around 70 000.

Although in the Flemish Community of Belgium and Austria there are no public higher education institutions focusing specifically on the provision of distance learning, these two systems have established agreements with existing institutions in other countries. For example, central authorities in the Flemish Community of Belgium provide funding for study centres hosted by the five Flemish universities, which are designated to provide pedagogical support to students following courses at the Open University of the Netherlands. Similarly in Austria, the University of Linz has an agreement with the German *FernUniversität* in Hagen and there are seven distance learning centres proving support for Austrian students who follow programmes falling under the agreement.
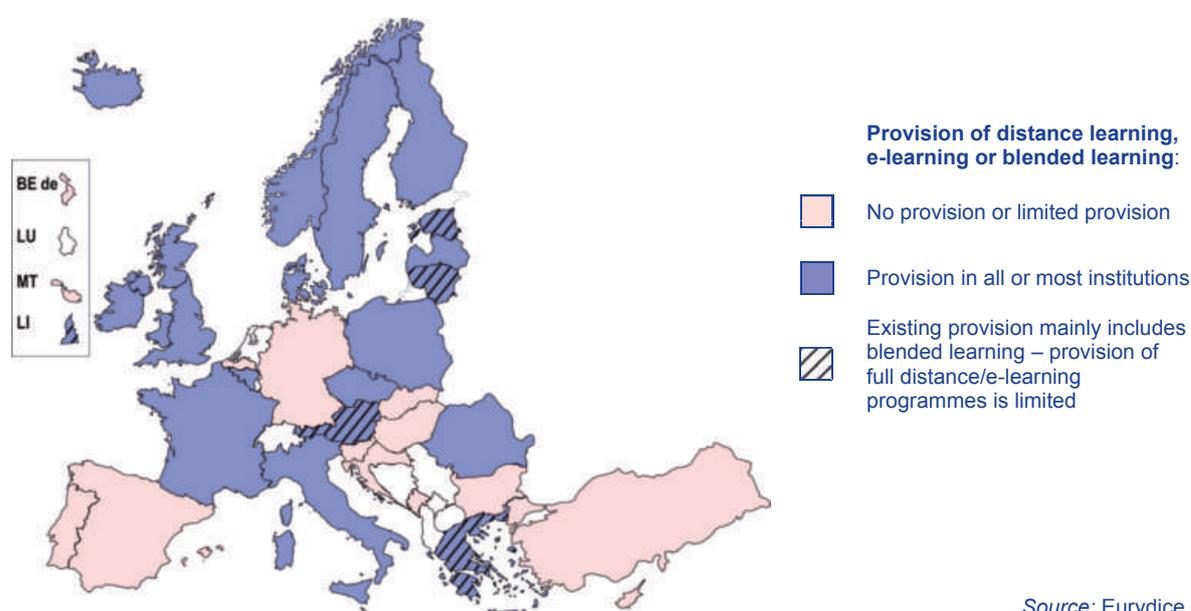
To some extent, the situation in France can be compared to the systems described above. Although there is no degree-awarding higher education institution focusing on distance learning, it is possible to follow higher education programmes at the National Centre for Distance Education (*Le Centre national d'enseignement à distance* – CNED), which is a publically subsidised institution delivering programmes at various educational levels. Higher education courses offered by CNED are ensured in partnerships with universities and other higher education institutions.

Among systems with no higher education institutions focusing on the provision of distance learning or e-learning, the French Community of Belgium is currently considering such an option. The prospective institution would be formally recognised by educational authorities and all its programmes would be available on-line. At present, such programmes are only offered by institutions not recognised by the ministry of education.

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3.3.2. Distance learning, e-learning and blended learning in traditional higher education institutions

The degree to which conventional universities ensure the provision of distance learning, e-learning or blended learning varies across Europe. While a few countries or regions within countries (German-speaking Community of Belgium, Croatia and Montenegro) claim that no traditional higher education institution offers this type of provision, a dozen countries report that it is offered by a limited number of institutions. On the other hand, another dozen countries indicate that all or most higher education institutions offer distance learning, e-learning or blended learning. To further complicate the picture, there are a few countries (e.g. Estonia, Greece, Austria, Lithuania and Liechtenstein) reporting a limited provision of programmes in conventional universities that are fully delivered through distance learning or e-learning, but there is a significant provision of blended learning, i.e. e-learning integrated in traditional higher education courses.

Figure 3.5: Provision of distance learning, e-learning and blended learning in traditional higher education institutions, 2012/13

Provision of distance learning, e-learning or blended learning:

☐ No provision or limited provision

■ Provision in all or most institutions

▨ Existing provision mainly includes blended learning – provision of full distance/e-learning programmes is limited

Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

The figure refers to higher education institutions, where distance learning or e-learning is not the main mode of programme delivery. Only institutions providing degree programmes are considered (i.e. non-degree/non-formal provision is not taken into account).

Although these disparities may reflect a real diversity of situations across Europe, they can also mirror the fact that institutions have autonomy in this area and generally do not have to report the extent of their distance learning provision to central authorities. Austria and Norway seem to be the exceptions, as they have put in place mechanism obliging higher education institutions to report on the degree of the implementation of distance and e-learning courses. More specifically, in Austria, this element is included among the criteria for evaluating performance of higher education institutions. In Norway, the government formulates in its annual budget that flexible provision is one of the objectives of higher education institutions, on which they must report. According to available data, in the Norwegian higher education system, between 6 % and 7 % of all students were enrolled in e-learning courses in 2012.

3.3.3. Other activities in support of distance learning, e-learning and blended learning

Despite the fact that the provision of distance learning, e-learning and blended learning mainly falls under the responsibility of higher education institutions, central-level authorities in several countries or

country communities (e.g. the German-speaking Community of Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Estonia, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the United Kingdom and Norway) have provided specific support for the development of these study modes.

The support can take a form of statements in steering documents inviting higher education institutions to include such provision in their offer (e.g. the German-speaking Community of Belgium, Ireland, Latvia and Poland) or enabling the accreditation of distance learning programmes (e.g. the Czech Republic). Moreover, some central authorities have formally stipulated their engagement to enhance the provision of distance learning, e-learning and blended learning in strategic policy documents. This is the case in the Czech Republic, France and the United Kingdom.

In the **Czech Republic**, the Strategic Plan for the Scholarly, Scientific, Research, Development, Innovation, Artistic and Other Creative Activities of Higher Education Institutions for 2011-2015 includes an objective to diversify the modes of study and educational methods in close connection to the needs of different categories of students. In this context, and within the Institutional Plans of Development of Higher Education Institutions, the Ministry shall support project-oriented education, e-learning, blended learning that should, among other things, serve the needs of specific target groups of students (already employed adult learners, individuals with physical or social disadvantages). Higher education institutions are eligible to receive financial support for these developments.

In **France**, the new law on Higher Education and Research adopted in July 2013 establishes ICT as a primary concern in higher education. In October 2013, the Ministry responsible for higher education and research launched an ICT agenda for higher education, which is composed of 18 distinct actions and the first French platform of online courses (Massive Open Online Courses – MOOC).

In the **United Kingdom (England)**, the policy document 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System' (2011) emphasises the importance of flexible provision methods such as distance and online learning, two-year accelerated honours degrees, and flexible routes for progression from further to higher education, including work-based options.

In the **United Kingdom (Scotland)**, in 2011, the Government published the document 'Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education', which states that central authorities will consider how new technologies, including digital platforms can enable greater use of virtual learning environments in order to enhance learner choice, support larger learner numbers (including those in-work) and extend geographical reach through distance learning.

Apart from strategic policy documents stipulating prospective initiatives, central authorities in some countries have recently supported projects aiming to enhance the provision of distance learning, e-learning or blended learning. Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Lithuania and Norway provide relevant examples in this respect.

With the help of European funding, **Bulgaria** was able to put in place a number of initiatives to support distance learning in higher education. For instance, within the project 'Raising qualification of academic teachers' (2008-2011), more than 250 academic teachers were trained on the use of e-learning and distance learning methods in their specific discipline. Furthermore, a project entitled 'Development of electronic forms of distance learning in higher education' is being implemented during 2013-2014.

In **Estonia**, the Ministry of Education has supported e-learning through the programme called 'Best' 2008-2013 covering 20 higher education institutions. In addition to this initiative, the Innovation Centre for Digital Education Initiatives coordinates and facilitates activities and developments in the field of ICT-supported learning. Its activities include the coordination of the Estonian e-University consortium for the higher education sector.

In **France**, the first platform of online courses – 'France – ICT university' (*France Université Numérique*) – was launched in 2014 and over 200 000 students have already registered on one of the first 25 MOOCs. This experimental platform aims at pooling the online resources of several higher education institutions in a single place and making them available to the wider public. Public funds will also be mobilised to finance calls for proposals of French ICT companies to further support and develop the MOOC platform.

In **Lithuania**, the Programme of Lithuanian Virtual University, running from 2007 to 2012, aimed at promoting e-learning and the development of the necessary infrastructure in higher education institutions. The programme was financed from the state budget and the EU Structural Funds. This programme was renewed in December 2012 and continues under the name 'Program for the Development of Research and Higher Education IT Infrastructure in Lithuania 2013-2016'.

In **Norway**, in 2004, the Ministry of Education and Research established Norway Opening University (NOU) as an instrument of stimulating flexible modes of higher education teaching and learning through funding of projects and generating and sharing of knowledge. Every other year the NOU conducts a national survey on the use of ICT in the Norwegian higher education system. Moreover, in 2012, the Ministry of Education and Research has initiated and financed a 5-year programme to provide intercampus infrastructure – the eCampus-programme. The aim of the programme is to facilitate learning, teaching and research by providing ICT tools and making it easy to access digital learning resources.

3.4. Recognition of prior learning as a mean to fulfil higher education study programmes

The recognition of prior learning has been addressed in various policy documents on higher education, including the Bologna communiqués and the European Universities Charter on Lifelong Learning (EUA, 2008). According to these documents, prior learning refers to any type of learning – be it formal, non-formal or informal. However, while higher education institutions are relatively open to recognising prior formal learning, in particular studies at other higher education institutions, the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning remains underexploited. In 2012, the EU institutions provided support for further developments in this field, adopting a recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ([4]). This recommendation covers all sectors of education and training, including the higher education sector, and invites Member States to 'have in place, no later than 2018, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning' ([5]).

This section looks at recognising prior non-formal and informal learning as a means of fulfilling higher education study requirements. It is divided into three parts: The first part examines whether prior non-formal and informal learning can be taken into account towards the completion of higher education study requirements. The second one provides mapping of the requirements towards candidates who wish to benefit from the recognition procedures. The last part looks at the amount of higher education requirements that can be fulfilled through the recognition of prior learning. The content of this section complements the information provided in the section on access to higher education studies (see Section 1.3.3), which examined whether the recognition of prior non-formal learning and informal learning can be used for entering higher education.

3.4.1. Extent of provision across European countries

As Figure 3.6 shows, in most European countries students can have their prior non-formal and informal learning recognised and validated towards fulfilment of higher education study requirements. Only in the German-speaking Community of Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Austria, Romania, Slovakia and Montenegro, higher education institutions cannot take into account learning outside formal education settings.
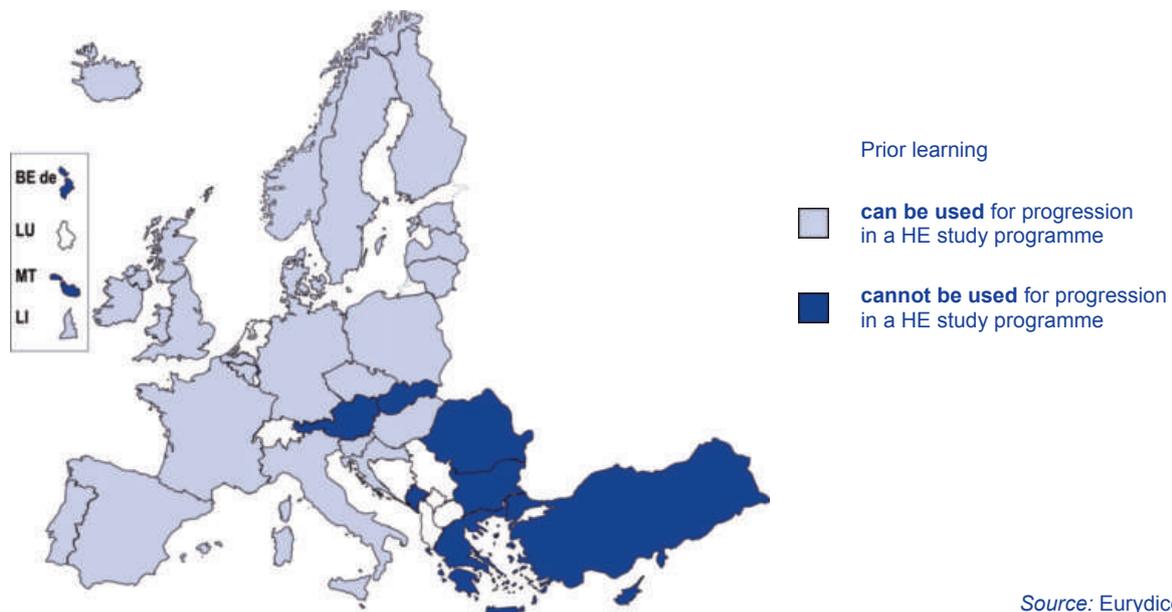
However, while Figure 3.6 examines whether recognition is legally possible, it does not provide infor-mation on how widespread the practice is. Indeed, in most countries, higher education institutions can autonomously decide whether they will put in place evaluation procedures allowing students to have their non-formal and informal learning recognised. Only the Flemish Community of Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France and Latvia report that students have a legal right to relevant evaluation procedures and higher education institutions must ensure their provision. Yet, legal texts referring to this obligation are formulated in a variety of ways. For example, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, the obligation

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([4]) Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

([5]) Ibid.

is not imposed on each individual higher education institution, but on an 'association of institutions'. The situation is different in France, where legislation enables citizens to have their prior learning recognised in the institution of their choice (i.e. all institutions have to put in place relevant procedures). This right concerns almost all higher education qualifications, except certain qualifications that are subject to *numerous clauses* (e.g. medicine) or qualifications not registered in the national directory of professional qualifications (*Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles* – RNCP). In Estonia and Latvia, higher education legislation includes general statements requiring higher education institutions to establish conditions and procedures for the recognition of prior learning.

Figure 3.6: Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning for progression in higher education studies, 2012/13

Prior learning

□ **can be used** for progression in a HE study programme

■ **cannot be used** for progression in a HE study programme

Source: Eurydice.

Central authorities generally do not monitor to what extent institutions recognise prior non-formal and informal learning. Therefore, most countries are unable to quantify the proportion of institutions that have implemented relevant procedures. When official statistics or estimates are available, the situation varies from country to country. For example, in Hungary and Norway, less than 5 % of institutions offer the recognition procedures, while in the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) it is between 75 % and 95 % of institutions.

In the systems that have established a legal entitlement to the recognition of prior learning, the institutional practice in this field is not always subject to monitoring. France, where central authorities monitor the situation, seems to be a positive exception. However, while the French ministry responsible for higher education monitors the situation in universities and the specialised higher education institution 'CNAM' (*Conservatoire national des arts et métiers*), data regarding the implementation of the recognition of prior learning in other types of higher education institutions, in particular *grandes écoles*, is incomplete.

Another approach for evaluating the extent of recognition of prior learning is to examine the number of beneficiaries. However, here again, data is unavailable in the great majority of countries. Only the three Baltic States, the Flemish Community of Belgium and France have such information. As regards the Baltic States, Estonia estimates that in 2012, around 15 % of all students took part in the process, whereas in Latvia and Lithuania the figure is less than 1 % (around 50 and 120 students, respectively). In the Flemish Community of Belgium the percentage stands at less than 5 %. Official numbers

collected by central authorities in France on universities and CNAM appear more significant. They indicate that in 2011 around 4 000 candidates successfully completed the process (Le Roux, 2012). However, when interpreting these data, it is necessary to take into consideration the size of the student population in France. Also worth noting is that central authorities in this country collect the information on different categories of the population involved in the process. Available data show that successful candidates are mainly the employed (85 %), followed by the unemployed (14 %) and inactive citizens (1 %). As for the occupational field of the employed, the majority (45 %) occupy managerial positions (*cadres*), followed by intermediate occupations (*professions intermédiaires*) – 33 %, administrative, sales and service occupations (*employés*) – 21 %, and workers (*ouvriers*) – 1 % (Le Roux, 2012). In other words, in France, employed adults occupying managerial positions are the main beneficiaries of the recognition of prior learning for progression in higher education studies.

3.4.2. Requirements towards candidates and approaches for evaluating prior learning

In most countries, there are no centrally established requirements regarding which candidates can take part in the process of the recognition of prior learning for progression in studies. Where such requirements exist, they commonly refer to the duration of prior experiential learning or to specific age criteria. In France, for instance, candidates are required to have at least three years' relevant experience that can include paid or unpaid work as well as voluntary activities. Similarly as in France, in the French Community of Belgium, it is also possible to take into account both professional and extraprofessional experience. However, the duration of experiential learning must be at least five years. In addition, the French Community of Belgium has established specific age requirements, which depend on the level of qualification to be achieved: candidates applying for a higher education diploma must be at least 22 years old, while those applying for a bachelor and master degrees must be, respectively, at least 23 and 24 years old. Similar requirements may be stipulated directly by higher education institutions in their internal regulations rather than in central steering documents. For example, in the United Kingdom, there are no mandatory requirements applicable to all institutions but the Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning guidelines published in 2013 by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education indicate that each institution may set a time limit on how long ago the learning was achieved.

Methods and approaches for evaluating prior learning of candidates are commonly established by higher education institutions themselves, without any steering from central authorities. Only in a few countries, or regions within countries (the French Community of Belgium, Estonia, France, Latvia, Lithuania and the United Kingdom), higher education steering documents refer to methods and approaches to be used within the process. These documents sometimes set a few binding requirements (e.g. the preparation of a portfolio), but they generally leave a significant degree of autonomy to higher education institutions for developing their own approaches. In countries such as Lithuania and the United Kingdom, steering documents on the recognition of prior learning have the character of a guideline or recommendation, which means that no elements are binding for institutions.

> In the **French Community of Belgium**, candidates are required to prepare a portfolio and participate in an interview. They can also be invited to take part in additional tests or examinations. In order to align approaches across the whole sector, higher education institutions have put in place various bottom-up initiatives.

> In **Estonia**, higher education legislation stipulates that professional experience or another type of experience should be documented by employment contracts and certificates. Besides certification of professional experience, candidates should include its description as well as a self-evaluation. The board of the educational institution has the right to establish additional requirements. The institution also has the right to assign practical tasks, interview the person or evaluate his/her knowledge and skills in any other manner.

In **France**, all candidates are required to prepare a portfolio which must be evaluated by 'juries' that consist of higher education teachers as well as those active in the field related to the required qualification. The role of the jury is to examine the portfolio and carry out an interview with the candidate.

In **Latvia**, higher education legislation stipulates that all candidates are required to submit a portfolio that is evaluated on the basis of criteria established in the legislation. For example, prior non-formal and/or informal learning cannot be recognised in place of a final thesis or an exam, and certified professional experience can only be validated in place of the practical experience included in the programme.

In **Lithuania**, central authorities have issued a recommendation stipulating that candidates should provide evidence of their competencies in a portfolio, which can include employment certificates, references from employers, examples of their written work, documentation of projects, self-analyses, audio and video records, etc. The candidate can be invited for an interview or the institution can choose another method of evaluation.

In the **United Kingdom**, the document 'Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning' published in 2013 by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education emphasises that the essential feature of the recognition of prior learning is that it is the learning gained through the student's experience which is being assessed, not the experience itself. The publication does not prescribe how exactly candidates' learning should be presented and evaluated, but it indicates that higher education institutions often use portfolios of evidence, interviews and/or the completion of an assessment. Whatever approach is chosen, institutions must make explicit their arrangements for making decisions to recognise prior learning.

3.4.3. Amount of study that can be validated

In most countries, steering documents set explicit limitations regarding the outcomes of the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning. This means that the process generally cannot lead to the award of a full higher education qualification. The limitations set vary from one country to another, and are formulated differently across Europe. For example, in Italy, the recognition is limited to 12 credits of a full degree, in Spain and Latvia, to 15 % and 30 % respectively, of a higher education programme and in Lithuania to 75 % of a programme. Estonian steering documents stipulate that the whole programme can be subject to the recognition of prior learning, except for the final examination or thesis. In Norway, students must follow at least one full year of studies. Finally, it is worth noting the case of Hungary that has recently reformulated its higher education legislation, increasing the number of credits that can be achieved through the recognition of prior learning. While earlier law of 2005 limited the validation to 30 credits, the new Act on Higher Education, which took effect in 2012, allows the validation of up to two thirds of the total credits.

Despite the fact that in some countries legislation does not set any limitations regarding the outcomes of the process, most of them report that it is uncommon for higher education institutions to award an entire degree based on the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning. In this context, France seems to be the only country with a statistical evidence on the number of candidates who obtained a full higher education degree based on the recognition of prior experiential learning ([6]): From around 4 000 candidates who successfully completed the process in 2011, around 2 400 achieved a full degree, whereas around 1 600 validated a part of their programme (Le Roux, 2012).

([6])   Data only covers universities and the specialised higher education institution 'CNAM' (*Conservatoire national des arts et métiers*). Other types of higher education institutions (e.g. *grandes écoles*) are not covered.

3.5. Other means of enhancing flexibility

Apart from initiatives listed in the previous sections of this chapter, some countries address flexibility in higher education through additional approaches. These include the modularisation of programmes, creation of specific higher education sub-systems or implementation of projects/programmes combining several different approaches to flexibility. The French Community of Belgium, Spain, Slovenia and the United Kingdom provide relevant examples in this regard.

In the **French Community of Belgium**, there is a specific higher education sub-system targeting non-traditional learners that is a part of the system known as *promotion sociale* ('social promotion'). The programmes offered within this sub-system take into account needs of students that cannot follow traditional higher education arrangements (e.g. courses are commonly delivered during evening or weekends) and are organised in modules. Studies in programmes of *promotion sociale* can lead to diplomas equal to those delivered in the traditional higher education sector as well as to diplomas specific to this sub-system.

In **Spain**, there is a specific higher education sub-system known as 'Advanced Vocational Training'. Programmes offered within this system are organised in training modules (equivalent to subjects) that can be certified independently. They can be offered on a full-time as well as a part-time basis, and are delivered in secondary schools, vocational training schools or specific vocational training centres. Distinct modules can also use alternative study approaches (e.g. distance learning) or can be obtained through the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In **Slovenia**, every short-cycle higher vocational programme must be derived from one or more vocational standards and structured in modules, where each module enables the acquisition of a vocational qualification. Students can choose to complete only one or a combination of modules to acquire the vocational qualifications necessary for seeking employment.

Between 2005 and 2010, central authorities in the **United Kingdom (England)** provided development funding to eight higher education institutions to pilot various forms of flexible provision. This programme was named the Flexible Learning Pathfinders and it piloted a range of provision, including two-year accelerated degrees (instead of three-year degrees) and work-based degrees, all delivered via a variety of flexible methods such as acceleration, deceleration, new learning technologies and distance and blended learning.

3.6. Experience from site visits

The need for increased academic flexibility was a common concern raised across the higher education institutions that were visited. This goes hand in hand with an increased diversity of the student population, in particular a higher proportion of students following their academic career together with professional, family or other engagements. Site visits confirmed that higher education institutions are actively responding to the needs of a more diverse student population, enhancing their offer of flexible study arrangements (including part-time studies, individual study plans and modular curricula), provision of distance and/or blended learning as well as opportunities for validation of non-formal and informal learning. Alongside these general patterns, a few issues related to flexibility in higher education attracted the specific attention of the research team.

Higher education institutions often operate in contexts where a significant proportion of students need to combine studies with employment – a phenomenon that has been accentuated by the post 2008 economic crisis. This has often stimulated higher education institutions to enhance opportunities for flexible study arrangements. For example, the University of Jyväskylä in Finland has developed degree programmes specifically for students in employment, which last from three to six years. In addition, a new feature the university will implement this year is the option for students to take their examinations online.

A similar situation could be observed at the Tallinn University of Technology in Estonia and the University College Cork in Ireland, where the management recognised an increased need for students to combine studies with (at least) part-time employment. To support students in such situations, the Tallinn University of Technology has invested significantly in enhancing its offer of online study

materials and programmes. Meanwhile the University College Cork has given focused attention to providing greater flexibility in study timetables.

However, the management and academic staff of several institutions emphasised that flexible study arrangements have to be handled with care, as in some cases they may be associated with lower academic performance and/or the non-completion of studies. This is related to the fact that students who are in need of flexible arrangements are commonly combining their studies with significant personal and professional responsibilities. In this context, it has become crucial for higher education institutions to find a balance between a sufficient degree of flexibility offered to students and efficient study-support mechanisms.

Where flexibility has been strongly developed and 'institutionalised', some institutions are now in the process of reconsidering the degree of flexibility offered to students. For example, the management and faculty representatives at Ghent University pointed out that too much flexibility can be considered counter-productive for some students. This statement was based on the experience of students who were able to progress in their studies without completing certain prior components often regarded as essential by their teachers. This might mean, for example, that students would fail to complete successfully a fundamental first-year mathematics module while still being able to continue their studies to the end of the first cycle or even into the second cycle. Yet without the mathematics module they would not be able to achieve a qualification. As a result of introducing slightly more restrictive rules for progression, whereby a first year course cannot be taken beyond a certain time limit, the university could observe an improvement in students' achievement.

Another approach following a similar logic was observed at the University of Jyväskylä, where students were previously able to register at the university for more than seven years. Once registered, they could study at different parts of the university. At present, and following national policy measures, the university is phasing in a seven-year limit for the student study allowance.

These developments at the University of Jyväskylä also go hand in hand with a focus on new learning and teaching methods, with particular attention to e-learning. The university is one of only two in Finland that require all teaching staff to have followed a teacher-training programme, and there is encouragement for academic staff to experiment with a variety of teaching and learning formats. There is also an increasing use of online study programmes, responding to the reality that between 20 % – 30 % of students live outside Jyväskylä.

Site visit experience has also shown that the degree of flexibility may vary not only across institutions, but also across faculties and/or departments of the same institution. The interviews carried out in the Czech Republic allowed better understanding of reasons that may influence intra-institutional differences in offering flexible study arrangements. Indeed, all interviewees at Charles University of Prague reported that flexible study modes (so called 'combined studies' that commonly take place during weekends) are spread across faculties to a variable degree: while some faculties offer an extensive number of 'combined programmes', the degree of provision in other faculties is more limited. As clarified by faculty representatives, this relates to the fact that programmes provided under flexible arrangements need a separate approval ('accreditation') requiring the development of specific study-support materials. Central authorities have established this prerequisite with the aim of limiting drop-out rates from this type of programmes. However, the investment needed to develop these specific study-support materials has been indicated by faculty representatives as among the reasons why certain faculties do not propose 'combined studies'.

A final example of good practice was to be found at the Aachen University of Technology (RWTH) which is now implementing the concept of a "family friendly university". The main idea is to respond

positively to the needs of those students who, because of family responsibilities, require more flexibility in organising their study schedule. The concept allows part-time modes of study to be adapted as far as possible to the optimum pace of individual students, and is opening opportunities particularly for young mothers.

Conclusions

Starting with a conceptual consideration regarding flexible learning, this chapter has examined selected aspects of flexibility in higher education. In particular, it has looked at the provision of part-time studies, possibilities for distance learning, e-learning and blended learning, approaches to the recognition of prior learning for progression in studies and additional means of enhancing flexibility in higher education.

The analysis indicates that most European countries offer a possibility for students to formally organise their studies in a more flexible way compared to traditional full-time arrangements. However, the understanding of the concept of part-time studies varies greatly across Europe, and so does the terminology employed when describing 'part-time' study modes. Moreover, if a country does not offer a formal part-time student status or part-time programmes, it does not necessarily mean that students have no possibility to study in a flexible way. Indeed, in several countries with no formal offer of part-time studies, students can organise their programme in a flexible way and follow *de facto* part-time studies.

The existence of formal part-time programmes and/or student statuses gains a specific importance when considering private financial investment to studies. Data show that there are several countries where part-time studies require, or are likely to require, higher private financial investment compared to traditional study modes. In addition, part-time students are often eligible only for a limited amount of financial support.

As regards the degree of provision of part-time studies, in almost all countries, higher education institutions can autonomously decide whether they will offer such a possibility. However, despite institutional autonomy in the field, most countries are claiming that the majority of higher education institutions offer part-time studies. Yet, this must be interpreted with caution as, the experience from the site visits shows that the degree of activity can vary from one faculty and/or department to another, some providing students with a substantial provision of part-time studies, whereas others limiting their activity in this field.

When examining distance learning, it appears that institutions focusing on the provision of this study approach exist only in some European countries. However, among countries with no higher education institution of this type, some have put in place systematic support for students who study at a distance learning institution located in another country. The analysis also shows that distance learning and e-learning are already quite spread across traditional higher education institutions. Yet, it is still more common for higher education institutions to integrate these approaches into traditional programmes (i.e. blended learning) than to provide programmes that are fully delivered through distance learning and e-learning. It is interesting to note that central authorities in several countries have provided a support for the development of distance learning, e-learning and blended learning either through policy statements or concrete projects aiming to enhance these modes of study.

Another approach to flexibility – the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning for progression in studies – seems to be now possible in most European countries. However, higher education institutions are quite autonomous in this area and can decide whether they will put in place relevant procedures. In addition, central authorities generally do not monitor the degree of institutional

activity in this field and it is therefore difficult to accurately evaluate the institutional activity in this field and the number of beneficiaries. There is also only very limited information on the methods and approaches used to evaluate prior non-formal and informal learning as they are commonly established by higher education institutions themselves, without any steering from central authorities. However, in several cases, legal frameworks intervene in setting explicit limitations regarding the amount of study that can be validated through the recognition of prior learning. This means that the process generally cannot lead to the award of a full higher education qualification. In this context, France seems to be the only country with clear statistical evidence on the number of candidates who obtained a full higher education degree based on the recognition of prior experiential learning.

Moreover, some systems use additional approaches to enhance flexibility of higher education studies, including the modularisation of programmes, creation of specific higher education sub-systems targeting non-traditional learners or implementation of programmes that combine several different approaches to flexibility.

Overall, the analysis of policy frameworks together with the site visits of the eight higher education institutions show an evolution towards a less structured and institutionalised form of higher education that is less, if at all, constrained by time and space. These new organisational patterns appear as a direct response to the needs of a more diverse student population. However, site visit experience also suggests that most higher education institutions are challenged by the reconciliation between flexibility and the provision of study-support allowing academic excellence and success.

CHAPTER 4: EMPLOYABILITY AND TRANSITION TO THE LABOUR MARKET

Employability plays a central role in the European Commission's higher education reform strategy (European Commission, 2011) as well as both in the Europe 2020 (European Commission, 2010) and the Education and Training 2020 ('ET 2020') ([7]) strategies. Within the ET 2020 strategy, the Council of the European Union adopted a benchmark on graduate employability in 2012 ([8]). According to this benchmark, 'by 2020, the share of employed graduates (20-34 year olds) having left education and training no more than three years before the reference year should be at least 82 %' ([9]). While in this context the term 'graduates' refers not only to those finishing higher education but also to graduates with upper secondary or post-secondary, non-tertiary qualifications, both public authorities and higher education institutions have a prominent role in achieving this goal.

European Commission policy stresses the role of higher education in equipping graduates with the knowledge and core transferable competences they need to succeed in high-skill occupations, and the importance of involving employers and labour market institutions in the design and delivery of programmes, and including practical experience in courses. It also emphasises the importance of better monitoring by institutions of the career paths of former students in order to increase the relevance of programmes (European Commission, 2011).

Against this policy background, this chapter discusses national practices aiming to enhance graduates' employability and to ease their transition to the labour market. The first section provides a brief introduction on various conceptualisations of employability, both in theory and in national practice. The second and third sections then examine some ways in which higher education institutions are seen to be able to fulfil expectations regarding labour market demand and graduates' employability. In the fourth section, the chapter turns to practices of evaluating higher education institutions' performance in these respects. The final section presents the conclusions.

4.1. Conceptualising employability

Employability is a complex concept encompassing many definitions and approaches. For this reason, this first section discusses some assumptions and limitations of the different conceptualisations of employability. In doing so, the section emphasises the importance of employability for all students and graduates, and also places employability within the widening participation agenda. The section also outlines the potential role of higher education institutions in enhancing employability, and shows how European countries define this term in their policy documents.

4.1.1. A focus on graduates' success

Definitions of employability focus on graduates' transition to the labour market after finishing higher education. There are two main types of definition: employment-centred and competence-centred.

An employment-centred definition is used for example within the ET 2020 process, in the above-mentioned 2012 Council conclusions on employability. These Council conclusions define employability as 'a combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or enter employment, to stay

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[7]   Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), OJ 2009/C 119/02, 28.5.2009.

[8]   Council conclusions of 11 May 2012 on the employability of graduates from education and training, OJ 2012/C 169/04, 15.6.2012.

[9]   Ibid., p. 10.

in employment and to progress during their career' ([10]). Similarly, within the Bologna Process, the term is understood as 'the ability [of graduates] to gain initial meaningful employment, or to become self-employed, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market' (Working Group on Employability 2009, p. 5).

An alternative (or complementary) approach is to focus on the skills and competences higher education students gain during their studies. For example, Yorke (2006, p. 8.) defines employability as 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations'. Such skills and competences are usually understood as needed (and demanded) by employers. In essence, the 'student exhibits employability in respect of a job if he or she can demonstrate a set of achievements relevant to that job' (Yorke 2006, p. 8).

There are many existing classifications of such relevant skills and competences. There are the so-called 'generic', 'transferable' or 'key skills', which are not necessarily related to specific professions, but generally enable graduates to find jobs and move around in the labour market (e.g. communication skills, entrepreneurial skills, 'learning to learn' skills, but also being able to work in a team, etc., see e.g. Teichler, 2011). In addition, there are skills and competences related to specific professions or the subject of study (e.g. medicine, law, etc.).

In terms of all definitions, however, it has to be emphasised that *employability* does not equal *employment*. Employment-centred definitions can sometimes blur the difference, especially when using employment rates as proxies for measuring employability. Competence-centred definitions – especially if formulated as in Yorke (2006) – can help to clarify the relationship between employability and employment: certain skills and competences make graduates 'more likely' to gain employment, but do not guarantee it.

Indeed, employment certainly does not only depend on the quality of education graduates had received during their studies. On the one hand, changes in the general state of the economy and the labour market are the most important determinants of job opportunities. On the other hand, there are many factors that influence the employment prospects of an individual, which means that not all graduates who received the same education have similar labour market opportunities. Such factors include the mode of study (full-time or part-time), the students' location and mobility, graduates' previous work experience as well as their age, gender, ethnicity or social class (Harvey 2001, p. 103). Regarding the last set of factors, the discriminatory practices graduates might face in the labour market are often overlooked by employability discourses (Morley, 2001). For example, as shown by Moreau and Leathwood (2006), 'non-traditional' learners (based on their ethnicity, socio-economic background, disability or other characteristics) are systematically at a disadvantage when looking for jobs in the graduate labour market (see also Gorard et al., 2006).

The policy issues related to employability therefore have a dual aspect. Firstly, it is crucial to strengthen employability for all students, and this has been identified as an issue of importance for all public authorities as well as for the EU 2020 agenda. It is also necessary to recognise that employability is an integral element of the widening participation agenda in higher education (Thomas and Jones, 2007). Widening participation does not stop at providing access to students from underrepresented groups (or in other words, to 'non-traditional' learners), but has to include measures ensuring that such students complete their studies and have a successful transition to the labour market (Ibid.). This highlights the complex role of higher education institutions in the context of employability.

([10]) Ibid., p. 4.

4.1.2. The role of higher education institutions

A focus on graduates' labour market success necessarily leads to an 'output and outcome awareness' in higher education (Teichler 2011, p. 29). However, according to some researchers, this process may have the tendency of defining higher education output rather narrowly, overlooking a range of other individual and social outputs of higher education to concentrate on graduates' employment prospects. In this context, higher education institutions are usually perceived as having the role of 'producing' employable graduates, and in doing so, responding to the needs of the labour market.

As will be shown below, there are two main perspectives in outlining employability-related outcomes in higher education. Putting emphasis on the needs of the labour market focuses more on the demand-side (what higher education institutions need to respond to), while an emphasis on employable graduates implies a more supply-side perspective (what higher education institutions need to achieve in terms of output). However, in most cases, it is difficult to disentangle these different perspectives.

In terms of concrete implementation, employment-centred definitions of employability leave higher education institutions' role relatively open. Many different practices at universities can increase graduates' chances of finding employment soon after graduation: examples include embedding practical training and work placements in study programmes, involving employers in teaching and curriculum development, or providing career guidance to all students (see also Section 4.3.2).

Definitions focusing on skills and competences, on the other hand, foresee a more concrete task for higher education institutions. Besides providing profession-specific teaching and skills, they have to develop the 'generic', 'transferable' or 'key skills' of students. How higher education institutions achieve this, however, remains open. Institutions (or faculties, departments) can decide to 'embed' such skills and competences within existing courses (through new teaching methods, for example); or else, they can include specific courses in the curriculum aiming to develop generic skills (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009).

In the context of the widening participation agenda, it is also important to highlight the role of higher education institutions in enhancing the employability of non-traditional learners. According to Thomas and Jones (2007, p. 23), besides providing access to relevant work experience for students with 'non-traditional' backgrounds, higher education institutions have a particular responsibility to ensure that non-traditional learners can receive (targeted) advice and career guidance throughout the whole student lifecycle (i.e. from the very beginning of a student career). Such guidance can contribute to: 1) developing students' awareness about employability; 2) improving the confidence and self-esteem of students; and 3) developing the appropriate job search and application skills (Ibid.). In this way, guidance can help bring down the 'indirect' barriers non-traditional learners can face on the labour market: the fact that due to their background and earlier education opportunities, they might not evaluate labour market reality and their own competences well, and as a consequence, they often exclude themselves from getting the matching graduate jobs ([11]) (Thomas and Jones, 2007).

4.1.3. Defining employability in European countries

After providing an insight into potential definitions of employability and higher education institutions' role in this context, this section examines how European countries reflect on this concept in their steering documents for higher education.

Very few countries define employability directly or use the term explicitly. Even translating the originally English term into many other languages might be difficult. For this reason, this section looks

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([11]) 'Direct' barriers, on the other hand, refer to the discriminatory practices of employers (Thomas and Jones, 2007).

at employability-related conceptualisations of higher education institutions' roles instead of examining direct definitions.

As was mentioned above, two main perspectives on higher education institutions' roles can be distinguished: a more demand-side perspective focusing on the needs of the labour market, and a more supply-side perspective focusing on graduates' employability. Certainly, these perspectives are interlinked, but countries can choose to emphasise one over the other. In a number of countries, both approaches may exist, with different emphases given according to the missions of specific institutions – some more focused on specific professional education than others. Figure 4.1 illustrates the different perspectives and provides some country examples.

The more demand-side perspective focuses on higher education institutions' need and responsibility to *respond to labour market demands*. This responsibility is either stated generally, or specifically refers to the need to *consult employers* or employers' organisations when designing study programmes. In this case, such consultation ensures that labour market information and demand is embedded in higher education curricula. Countries only generally referring to the higher education sector's need to respond to labour market demand are Estonia, Spain, Hungary, Romania, the United Kingdom (some universities refer to the demand more specifically than others) and Liechtenstein. Countries specifically mentioning the need to involve or consult employers in their steering documents are Belgium (French Community), Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Ireland, France, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria (only universities of applied sciences), Poland, Slovenia, Montenegro, Norway and Turkey.

In the second case, higher education institutions are regarded as responsible for producing *'employable' graduates*. Regarding graduates' employability, the two approaches discussed above (employment-centred and competences-centred) can also be distinguished when looking at the policy and steering documents for higher education in European countries.
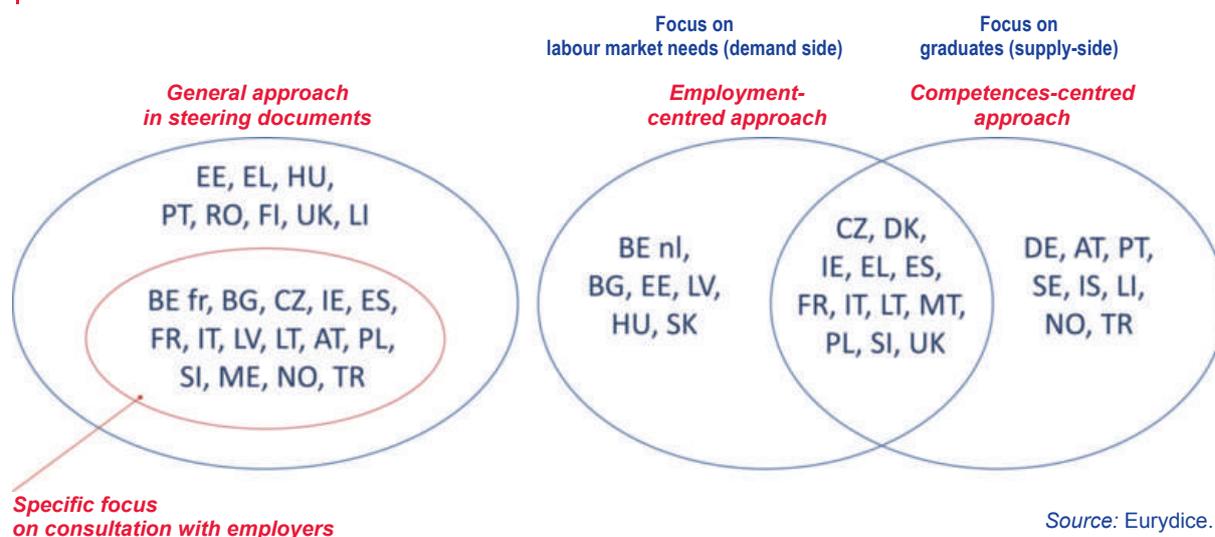
Employment-centred approaches focus directly on graduates' employment prospects: higher education institutions are responsible for preparing graduates for employment. In these cases, higher education institutions are often evaluated based on graduate employment rates. This employment-centred approach can be found in Belgium (Flemish Community), Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia and the United Kingdom (Scotland).

Competences-centred approaches, on the other hand, refer to the responsibility of higher education institutions to develop the skills and competences of graduates necessary to find a job. Worth noting, however, that employment-centred and competences-centred approaches are not contradictory and often exist in parallel. In these cases, the competence-centred approach specifies ways for higher education institutions to enhance graduate employability. The competence-centred approach can be found in the Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Spain, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Austria, Slovenia, Sweden, the United Kingdom ([12]), Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey.

Irrespective of their emphasised perspective or approach, European countries usually discuss employability-related concerns from the perspective of higher education institutions or the student population *as a whole*. This aspect of the employability agenda is thus a relatively high profile policy issue.

([12]) In the United Kingdom (England), the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills adopted Yorke's employability definition (Yorke, 2006).

Figure 4.1: Perspectives and approaches on employability in higher education, 2012/13

Focus on
labour market needs (demand side)

Focus on
graduates (supply-side)

*General approach
in steering documents*

*Employment-
centred approach*

*Competences-centred
approach*

EE, EL, HU,
PT, RO, FI, UK, LI

BE fr, BG, CZ, IE, ES,
FR, IT, LV, LT, AT, PL,
SI, ME, NO, TR

BE nl,
BG, EE, LV,
HU, SK

CZ, DK,
IE, EL, ES,
FR, IT, LT, MT,
PL, SI, UK

DE, AT, PT,
SE, IS, LI,
NO, TR

*Specific focus
on consultation with employers*

Source: Eurydice.

The large majority of countries pay no particular attention to employability with regard to specific, underrepresented social groups. The exceptions are Estonia, Greece and the United Kingdom. In Estonia, there are measures, for example, for extending the study period for students not proficient enough in the official language, and for people with disabilities or small/disabled children. In Greece, specific actions aiming to increase students' practical training include special arrangements for students with special needs, minorities, foreigners or students coming from other vulnerable social groups. In the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), students with disabilities have specific access to careers education, information and guidance. In addition, in England, in 2010, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) provided funding for a programme to support internships for disadvantaged students with the aim of widening access to the professions.

4.2. Responding to labour market needs

In their steering documents for higher education, several countries emphasise that higher education institutions should respond to the needs of the labour market. There are basically two sources of information about such labour market demand: labour market forecasts and employers or employers' organisations. This section discusses related practices in turn.

4.2.1.   Labour market forecasting as an information source

Labour market forecasting is a common way to anticipate labour market needs in terms of skills demand and supply. Labour market forecasting is usually conducted by occupation and qualification levels. According to Cedefop (2008), such forecasting practices mainly serve two purposes: they have a 'policy function', in which they inform policy planning; and they have an 'information function', in which they aid guidance and information services on labour market trends. In the case of higher education institutions, this means that labour market forecasting can potentially influence programme planning and management such as designing study programmes, determining the number of state funded places, or allocating public funding. In addition, guidance and information services can guide (potential) students in orienting themselves towards more 'demanded' fields of study.

Certainly, todays' global 'knowledge economy' can change much faster than labour market forecasts can predict. Labour market forecasts are always based on past trends and cannot foresee bigger shifts in skills demand due to changes in economic reality (e.g. economic crises). Higher education

graduates themselves can change the world of work and their innovative capacity is hard to take into account. In addition, while labour market forecasts tend to be national, in the EU, labour markets are becoming increasingly 'European'. Furthermore, as was discussed above, competences students gain during their higher education studies might be more important than the qualification they receive in the end ([13]). Therefore, relying on labour market forecasting has its own limitations.

Besides a few exceptions (Bulgaria, Croatia, Portugal and Liechtenstein), labour market forecasting exists at national and/or regional levels in most European countries ([14]). As Figure 4.2 shows, labour market forecasts are conducted in an *ad hoc* manner in 10 countries, while there is a regular, established system in 13 countries. In Lithuania, a regular labour market forecasting system is currently under development.

However, using such labour market information systematically in higher education policy planning is relatively rare in European countries. Only 11 countries (Ireland, France, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Finland, the United Kingdom, Montenegro and Norway) reported that their education authorities take account of labour market information in higher education planning and management.

Figure 4.2: Labour market forecasting in European countries, 2012/13

Regular forecasting

Ad hoc forecasting

No forecasting

Not available
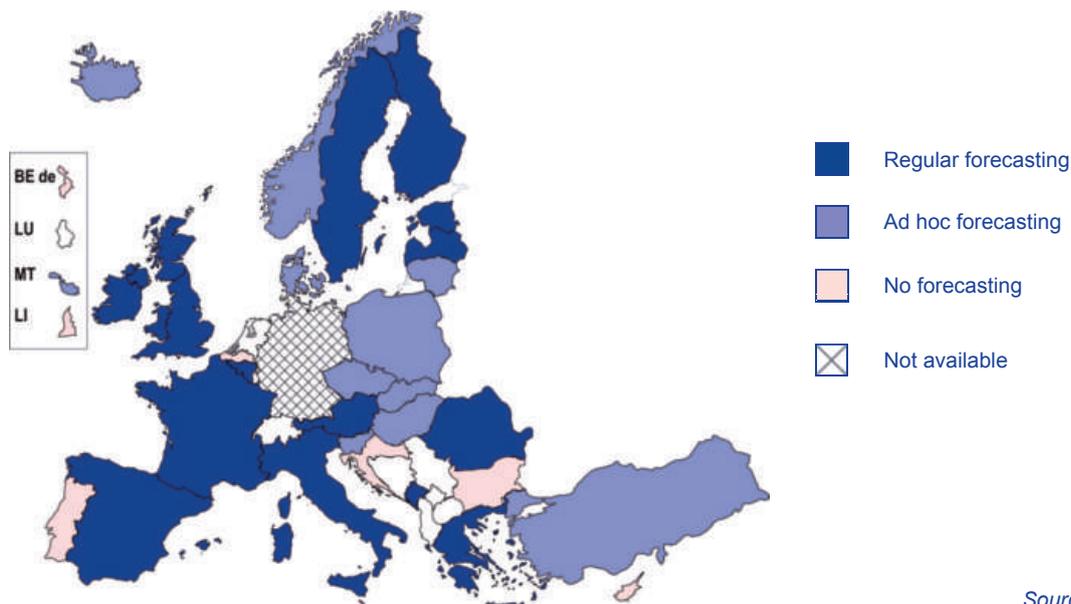
Source: Eurydice.

Most commonly, information from labour market forecasting is used for determining the *number of publicly funded study places* in some or all the programmes. This is the case in seven education systems: Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Finland, the United Kingdom (Scotland), Montenegro and Norway. Alternatively, in Ireland, Poland and the United Kingdom (England), *additional funding* is allocated to areas with identified skills needs or to subjects considered to be 'strategically important'.

> In **Ireland**, the Future Skills Needs reports inform the development of specific targeted funding and education provision to address emerging skills needs. Such initiatives include the 'Springboard' and the 'ICT skills conversion' programmes. Springboard provides free part-time higher education courses for unemployed people in areas where there are identified labour market skills shortages or employment opportunities. The ICT graduate skills conversion programmes are being provided for graduate jobseekers as part of the joint industry Government ICT Action Plan to build the domestic supply of high level ICT skills.

([13])   There have been some efforts to include generic skills into labour market forecasting models in several countries, but the operationalization of such an inclusion is quite difficult (Gács and Bíró, 2013).

([14])   For a list of labour market forecasts and related studies by country, see the EU Skills Panorama:
http://euskillspanorama.ec.europa.eu/

In the **United Kingdom**, the Higher Education Funding Council for **England** (HEFCE) monitors the availability of programmes in so-called 'strategically important and vulnerable subjects' (SIVS), which include science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), modern foreign languages, and quantitative social science. The Government is concerned to prioritise the subjects that require support to avoid undesirable reductions in the scale of provision. In 2012, HEFCE commissioned research into how other countries or states with similar higher education funding and student finance systems to England have identified and mitigated risks towards particular subjects or skills, and the policy approach adopted. HEFCE also provides additional funding for the teaching of high-cost STEM subjects, including a supplement for those which cost the most to deliver (chemistry, physics, chemical engineering and mineral, metallurgy and materials engineering). This has increased the overall level of funding for STEM teaching from 2012/13. In addition, HEFCE funded 'Routes into Languages', a £7.3 million programme that aimed to encourage the take-up of modern foreign language courses in England and which ran until July 2013.

4.2.2. The involvement of employers

Another way of including labour market information in higher education is through consulting or involving employers, employers' organisations and business representatives in the various steps of developing and evaluating higher education study programmes. Employers' participation is a more decentralised mechanism for ensuring that study programmes meet the needs of the labour market.

This section considers the involvement of employers in three areas: curriculum development, teaching, and participation in decision-making or consultative bodies at national, regional, sectoral or institutional level. Employers' participation in external quality assurance will be discussed in Section 4.1.

The involvement of employers in at least one of these three areas is a requirement in 18 education systems. Out of these 18 education systems, employers' participation in decision-making or consultative bodies is required in 16 (see Figure 4.3c). These bodies can be national (e.g. in France, Latvia, Slovenia or Finland), regional (e.g. in Italy), sectoral (e.g. in Montenegro) or institutional (e.g. in Lithuania, Austria, Sweden or Norway). The involvement of employers in curriculum development is compulsory in seven education systems; their participation in teaching is a requirement in five.

Yet, employers can be involved in higher education planning and programme development even if it is not required by central authorities. In practice, the involvement of employers in curriculum development and teaching, or their participation in decision-making or consultative bodies is much more widespread than what is prescribed by law. Again, as Figure 4.3c shows, involving employers is the most common in decision-making bodies at different levels: employers typically participate in such bodies in 22 education systems. Employers are involved in curriculum development in 19 education systems, and they frequently participate in teaching in 15 education systems.

Employers' participation can be facilitated by university-business cooperation projects. Through financial means, governments can provide incentives for both higher education institutions and business organisations to develop innovative projects together. In some countries (e.g. in Denmark and the United Kingdom), cooperation projects involving higher education institutions and enterprises can receive such financial support directly. Alternatively, other countries have established specific centres (e.g. Innovation and Liaison Offices in Greece and Centres of Technology Transfer in Latvia), the role of which is to facilitate cooperation between universities and businesses.

The **Danish** government has allocated DKK 40 million (EUR 5.3 million) for 2013 to support innovation projects at university colleges and business academies in cooperation with public and private enterprises. The projects are aimed at motivating widespread practice-based innovation and knowledge activities. The projects will focus on specific practical challenges in enterprises and involve teachers and students in strengthening the students' innovative competencies and develop education programmes. In order to participate, enterprises will have to contribute with significant self-financing to the projects.

Figure 4.3a: Involvement of employers in curriculum development, 2012/13
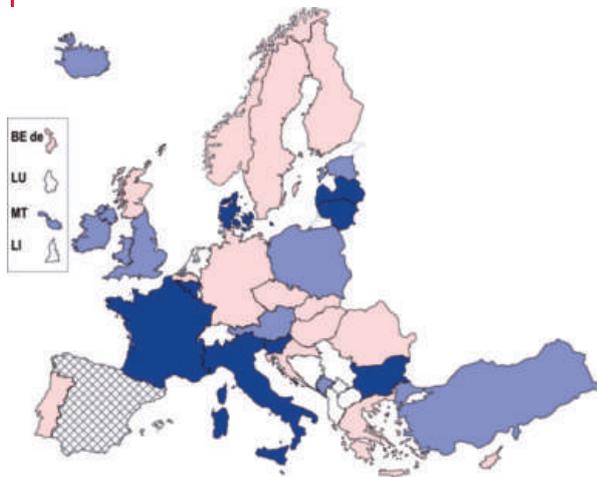

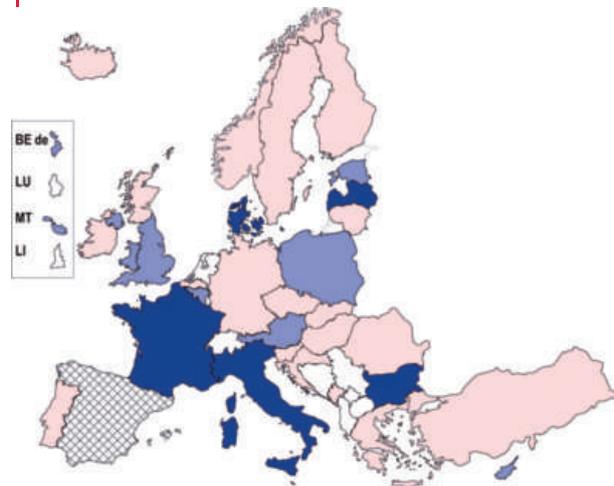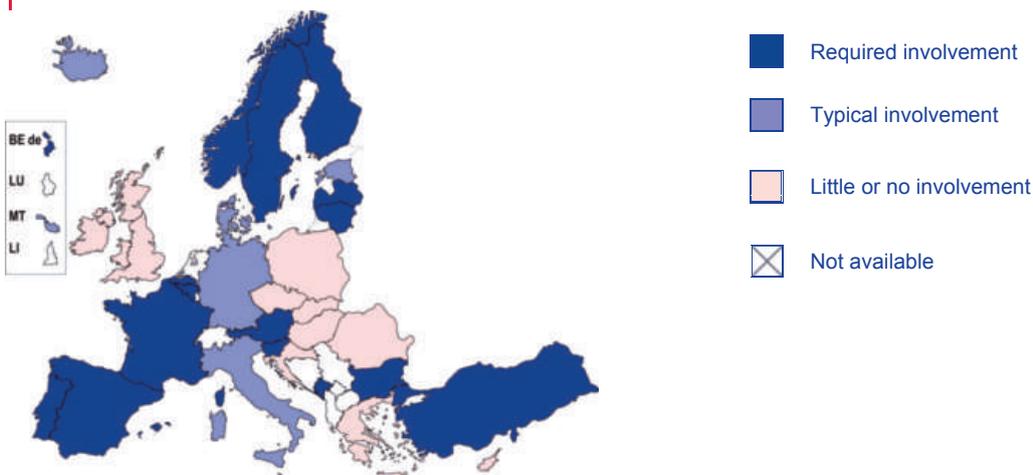**Figure 4.3b: Involvement of employers in teaching, 2012/13**

Figure 4.3c: Involvement of employers in planning and management with decision-making or consultative bodies, 2012/13

■ Required involvement

■ Typical involvement

□ Little or no involvement

⊠ Not available

Source: Eurydice.

Country specific notes

Spain: Figures 4.3a/b. It is the competence of the Autonomous Communities to regulate the involvement of employers.
France: Requirement only in professional and technical higher education.
Slovenia: Figure 4.3b. In short-cycle higher education, employers are also required to be involved in teaching.
United Kingdom (ENG/WLS/NIR): Figure 4.3c. Such activity does occur but information about its extent is not held centrally.

In **Greece**, the 'Education and Lifelong Learning' Operational Programme within the National Strategic Reference Framework (2007-2013) finances Liaison Offices. Liaison Offices are meant to facilitate connections between the education sector and the labour market by developing channels of communication, networking and collaboration with businesses, employers' organizations and the wider society, as well as through the provision of comprehensive support and guidance to students and graduates for planning their further studies and personal career. The overall budget of the action amounts to EUR 10 million. The number of students benefiting from the program operating in 39 HEIs exceeds 150 000.

In addition, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Units aim to strengthen cooperation between academia and industrial partners, and to promote research in entrepreneurship-related fields. Their goal is to develop students' basic, as well as specific entrepreneurial skills and competences. The overall budget of the action amounts to EUR 9.97 million. 33 units have been created so far, while more than 37 000 students have benefited.

In **Latvia**, Centres of Technology Transfer have been established, partly financed from European Structural funds. Their aim is to facilitate collaboration between universities, industry and scientific institutions. There are nine such centres organised in Latvia.

In the **United Kingdom**, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) operates Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) worth £150 million per year to incentivise HEIs to increase their interactions with businesses, public and third sector organisations, community bodies and the wider public. The funding is designed to support the range of knowledge exchange activities that result in economic and social impact. Currently a high policy priority is to encourage activity that can help the country's economic growth.

In some countries, there are also special degree programmes designed specifically to meet employers' demand, where curricula are developed with the involvement of employers.

In **France**, the professional bachelor degree, established in 1999, is issued by the university and has the prime objective of ensuring student employability. The qualification provides an opportunity for training designed and organised through close partnerships with employers. The university is required to present an application to establish a professional bachelor programme, and this is examined by a national expert commission that operates for a three year mandate and involves equal representation from experts appointed for their professional expertise and university representatives.

In the **United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)**, foundation degrees, which have been available since 2001/02, are two-year higher education qualifications offering flexible and accessible ways of studying for skills that are in demand among employers. In addition, Higher Education Funding Council for **England** also has a workforce development programme, one of whose goals is the design and delivery of higher education courses in partnership with employers. Details of employer engagement projects focused on the development and delivery of higher education programmes with the cooperation of employers are available from the HEFCE website ([15]).

4.3. Enhancing graduate employability

A more supply-side perspective on employability in higher education concerns graduates' employment prospects and/or their competences enhancing their employability. This section considers two main ways of improving graduates' employability: inserting practical training and work placements into study programmes on the one hand, and career guidance provision on the other.

4.3.1. Practical training and work placements

Practical training and work placements are regarded as key elements in enhancing graduates' employability. Data from both European comparative studies and national reports show that students who participated in practical training before graduation are more likely to find jobs than their counterparts without relevant work experience (see e.g. Blackwell et al., 2001; Garrouste and Rodrigues, 2012; Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009; van der Velden and Allen, 2011). Thomas and Jones (2007) also emphasise the importance of work experience for non-traditional learners. Therefore, it is important to look at whether and how European countries provide incentives for higher education institutions to include structured work experiences or practical training in their study programmes.

In the European Union, Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications ([16]) regulates the embedding of practical training into certain, professionally oriented study programmes (e.g. for medical or pharmaceutical studies). In the majority of countries, the inclusion of practical training is required for such degrees.

For other study programmes, higher education institutions are mostly free to decide whether they include such structured work experiences and whether they are optional or compulsory. However, some countries do limit this freedom of higher education institutions. In some cases, such limitation

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([15]) See: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/employer/projects/

([16]) Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications, OJ L 255, 30.9.2005.

can relate to certain types of institutions. For example, in Denmark, practical training is required at Academies of Professional Higher Education and University Colleges, but not at universities. In other countries, practical training is required for certain degree types (e.g. for the *licence professionnelle* in France). In Lithuania, all 1st cycle students are required to undergo practical training. In Montenegro, in the accreditation process of a new study programme, higher education institutions are obliged to enclose pre-agreements on business cooperation regarding students' practical training.

The proportion of students participating in practical training or work placements is not available in the large majority of countries. Among the countries with available data, participation is among the highest (100 %) in Finland, where all first-cycle polytechnic courses include at least three months long work placement period, and practical training is compulsory for some university degrees. Participation is also quite high in Lithuania (100 % of 1st cycle students participate), Latvia (86 % of 1st cycle and 14 % of 2nd cycle students gain work experience through practical training) and Italy (nearly 60 % of 1st cycle students and 56 % of 2nd cycle students participate).

However, besides such – mostly short – structured work placements, also other arrangements exist with the aim of ensuring that students gain professional experience during their studies. For example, in France, students can participate in a dual system (*alternance*) which combines theoretical studies in higher education institutions with professional experience gained at work. In this case, students have work contracts throughout their studies. Currently, 7 % of higher education students and 5 % of university students study in such an arrangement.

It is not only through regulations that governments can encourage work experience to become an integral part of an increasing number of higher education programmes. Many countries provide financial incentives to higher education institutions and employers alike to increase the number of available traineeships. These initiatives are open to all students, and in most cases, this means that the costs of practical training are – at least partly – covered by public sources (e.g. in Belgium (French Community), Bulgaria, Greece, France, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Finland and the United Kingdom). Targeted initiatives focusing on disadvantaged students exist only in the United Kingdom (England).

In **Bulgaria**, the 'Student placements' project run within the Human Recourses Development Operational Program aims to ensure practical training in real working environment and is open for both full-time and part-time students. Funding is provided for the remuneration of students, academic mentors from universities and mentors from the employer.

In **Greece**, within the Operational Programme on 'Education and Lifelong Learning' of the National Strategic Reference Framework (2007-2013), a framework of incentives is developed, both to increase the number of participating students, and to attract more businesses to host internships. The overall budget of the action amounts to EUR 82.5 million. In addition, Innovation and Liaison offices operating in HEIs also organise the practical training of students.

In **Croatia**, the Employment Promotion Act (2012) provides opportunity for employers to contract, up to a total of 12 months, higher education graduates with no prior work experience using the so called 'agreement on professional training for work without employment' scheme. During this period, employers are exempt from paying any taxes and other contributions (health insurance, etc.) for these employees and such trainees receive from the state the monthly fee of about EUR 200. The aim of this is to enable higher education graduates without prior work experience to obtain some initial work experience and hence to make them more attractive to the labour market.

In **Lithuania**, the implementation of practical training is incentivized via the National Study Programme, through which support is provided for the practical training of students of both study cycles and all areas of study in private and public enterprises, institutions and organisations. The goal is to develop the entrepreneurial skills of students as well as to create partnerships between HEIs and various social partners. Eligible applicants for this support are associations of employers in partnership with HEIs, institutions and organisations. In addition, scientific practices of academically-oriented students are supported via the Researcher's Career Programme. The measure finances placements and practical training of students of both cycles and all areas of study in leading scientific groups and institutions of the country.

In **Poland**, a new programme was launched in 2013 by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and National Research and Development Centre (a governmental agency), aimed at supporting higher education institutions in providing internships for students. The funds are granted through a competitive procedure between institutions that have created the best training programmes with industry. The pilot edition of the new programme will fund at least three months training at companies for approximately 10 000 students. The budget for the programme is PLN 50 million (ca. EUR 12 million).

In the **United Kingdom**, the Higher Education Funding Council for **England** (HEFCE) has run a number of funding programmes designed to help businesses find the skills they need and also help graduates find the skills that lead to employment, e.g. internship schemes for undergraduates and graduates. In one of such programmes, HEFCE provided £1 million to 30 HEIs in 2010 to support undergraduate internships for disadvantaged students to work in professional organisations, to widen access to the professions. 850 internships were completed under this initiative.

Since 2010, the Adopt-an-Intern programme is run by the Centre for Scottish Public Policy to match graduates with businesses, offering paid, meaningful and career-enhancing internships in **Scotland**.

4.3.2. Career guidance

Providing labour market information, career guidance or mentoring students is another way of enhancing the employability of graduates. As mentioned above, career guidance is regarded as particularly important for non-traditional learners (Thomas and Jones, 2007), especially if it is provided throughout the whole student lifecycle.

Figure 4.4: Career guidance provision throughout the whole student lifecycle, 2012/13

	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	HR	IT	CY	LV	LT
HEI *	●	○	●	●	○	●	:	●	●	●	●		●	●	○	●
**External ** **		●		○			:	●			●	●		●		●

	HU	MT	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK	IS	LI	ME	NO	TR
HEI *	●	○	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
**External ** **		●		●	○		●	●	●		●		●			●

● All students   ○ Some students

* : Career guidance available to students at HEIs; ** : External career guidance available to students; *** : Only last year at HEI.
Source: Eurydice.

As Figure 4.4 shows, career guidance is available throughout the whole student lifecycle in higher education institutions in almost all countries. The exceptions are the German-speaking Community of Belgium, where career guidance is only available in the last year before graduation; the Czech Republic, Latvia and Portugal, where higher education institutions are fully autonomous in their decision to establish career guidance services; Croatia, where only external services are available; Malta, where only some students have access to internal career guidance services, but all of them may access external services.

Guidance services tend to be open to all students, and respond to individual student demands. The only countries reporting targeted guidance are Greece and the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland). In Greece, Liaison Offices responsible for career guidance and counselling provide specific services to students and graduates coming from vulnerable social groups in order to develop their professional qualifications and to support their professional integration. In the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), students with disabilities are particularly supported to ensure that they have access to the same provision as other students.

Guidance services in higher education institutions are less widespread for graduates/alumni. As Figure 4.5 depicts, alumni career services are available to all students in higher education institutions in 18 education systems, and some graduates can access such services in eight. In France, besides

general alumni guidance services, there are also specific graduate placement services in the *grandes écoles*.

Graduate career guidance is externalised completely in the German-speaking Community of Belgium, Estonia, Croatia, Lithuania, Malta and Sweden. No such guidance services are available in Ireland, Romania, and Norway.

Figure 4.5: Career guidance provision to graduates/alumni, 2012/13

	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	HR	IT	CY	LV	LT
HEI *	●		○	○	○	●	:			●	●		●	●	○	
External **		●		●			:	●		●	●		●	●	●
	HU	MT	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK	IS	LI	ME	NO	TR
HEI *	○		●	○	○	-	●		●		●	●	●	●	-	●
External **		●		●	○	-	○	●	●	●	●	●	●		-	●

● All students   ○ Some students   - No guidance

* : Career guidance available to graduates at HEIs; ** : External career guidance available to graduates

Source: Eurydice.

4.4. Evaluating employability

Higher education institutions' employability performance is often subject to external evaluation. Evaluation processes on the quality of higher education provision can include criteria on employability. Most prominently, employability criteria can form part of external quality assurance processes. In addition, several countries have established other procedures of evaluating how well higher education institutions perform in 'producing' employable graduates. This section provides an overview about such evaluation processes.

4.4.1. Quality assurance

Quality assurance is the main mechanism through which education authorities can encourage higher education institutions to enhance the employability of their graduates. Indeed, as Figure 4.6 shows, in the large majority of countries, higher education institutions are obliged to submit employability-related information to quality assurance agencies before programme accreditation or for the continuing evaluation of institutions and/or programmes. Employability-related information is considered optionally during the evaluation process in nine education systems. This may also include systems such as in Hungary, where accreditation procedures consider employability, but there is no minimum requirements connected to the criteria. Such criteria do not form part of quality assurance procedures in six countries.

Employability-related quality standards can focus on a variety of issues. Higher education institutions can be required to show that their programmes are relevant for the labour market answering an existing demand (e.g. in Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Italy, Austria (in case of accreditation, curricula for universities of applied sciences, not obligatory for universities) and Slovenia). In other cases, higher education institutions have to provide proof that they involve employers or include employers' perspectives in programme development (e.g. in Belgium (French Community), Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Austria, Poland, Finland, Switzerland and Norway). In several countries, higher education institutions have to regularly submit data on the employment of their graduates or have to prove that they have a monitoring or tracking system in place (e.g. in Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Spain, Italy, Latvia and Lithuania). In Italy, the quality assurance agency verifies the presence of student services that can provide support for the labour market transition of graduates.

Figure 4.6: Employability-related criteria in quality assurance procedures, 2012/13

Requirement criterion

Optional criterion

Not considered

Not available
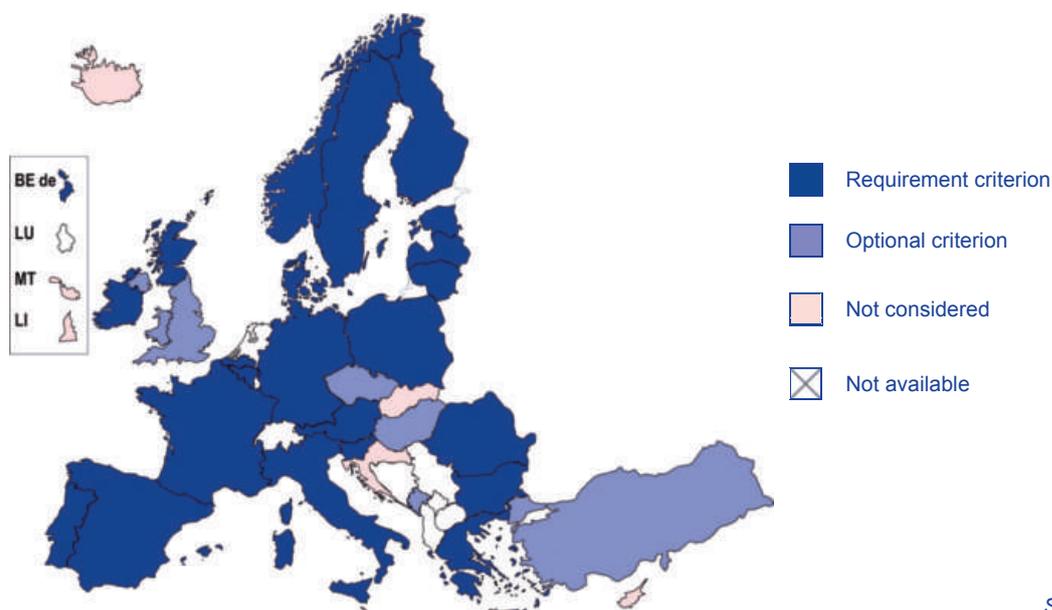
Source: Eurydice.

Another way of ensuring that employability criteria – the labour market relevance of programmes or the involvement of employers in programme development – are considered during the evaluation process is through the participation of employers in external quality assurance procedures. Employers participate in external quality assurance processes in around half of the education systems (see Figure 4.7). In almost all countries where employers participate, they are required to do so. The exceptions are the German-speaking Community of Belgium and Iceland, where employers are involved in external quality assurance without any formal requirements.

Figure 4.7: The involvement of employers in external quality assurance, 2012/13

Required involvement

Typical involvement

Little or no involvement

Not available
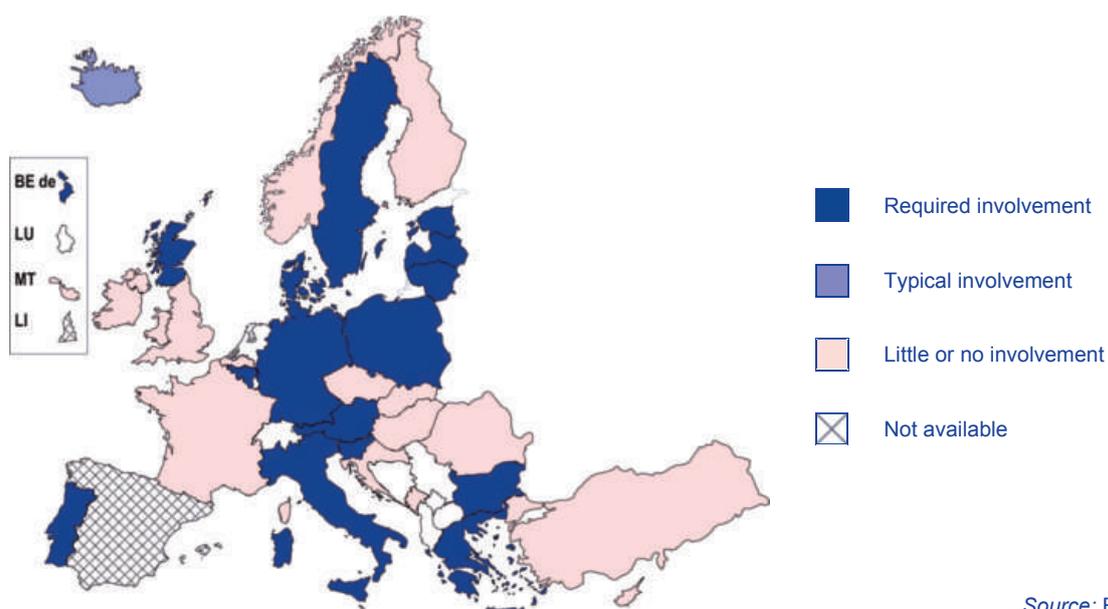
Source: Eurydice.

Country specific notes

Spain: It is the competence of the Autonomous Communities to regulate the involvement of employers.
France: Required involvement for engineering schools only.

4.4.2. Other evaluation processes and financial schemes

Besides formal quality assurance procedures, several countries have established other processes of evaluating study programmes based on employability criteria. The basis of such evaluation is most often student and graduate surveys, where students and/or graduates can evaluate their study programme as well as can provide details on their transition to the labour market. Examples of graduate surveys and graduate tracking systems are discussed in detail in Section 4.3.

Besides students and graduates, another source of information can be employers. Employers' surveys can reveal how satisfied employers are with the level of competences of their employees recruited after their studies and how well those competences match job requirements. Employers' surveys have been conducted in many European countries [17]. Ireland, for example, organised the first National Employers' Survey in 2012, and aims to establish a regular system for evaluating higher education institutions.

Finally, another information source can be higher education institutions themselves. Besides organising their own graduate surveys or tracking systems, they can also publish their plans on how they intend to improve the employability of their graduates. For example, in the United Kingdom, higher education institutions funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) have been requested to write employability statements, short summaries of what they offered to their students to support their employability and their transition into employment and beyond.

One prominent goal of setting up such evaluation processes is to make employability-related information on higher education study programmes public. This can inform current and future students on their potential career prospects. For example, Bulgaria established a Universities Ranking System [18], where graduates' employment and income form part of the composite indicator on 'career and relevance to labour market'. Or else, in the United Kingdom, the Unistats [19] website compares higher education course data, enabling prospective students to compare information on a course by course basis (see also Section 4.3). Information includes previous students' satisfaction, professional body accreditation, graduate employment destinations and salary, as well as higher education institutions' employability statements. In addition, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) publishes performance indicators for higher education institutions, one of which is the employment rate of graduates.

Several countries (e.g. the Czech Republic, Estonia (from 2016 onwards), Spain, Italy, Austria, Poland and Finland) have also developed (or are in the process of developing) systems of performance-based or purpose-specific funding, where employability-related information is not only made public, but relevant criteria can also influence the funding of higher education institutions.

> In the **Czech Republic**, the budget that HEIs receive directly from the state is composed of many items. About 80 % of the overall budget from the state is the so-called normative part. About 75 % of the normative part is allocated by a funding formula based on the number of students enrolled; and about 25 % of the normative part is allocated by the so-called qualitative indicators, one of them being the level of employment of graduates.
>
> In **Spain**, the labour insertion of graduates is one element to be taken into account in the funding of universities. Indicators to measure labour insertion include: the graduate employment rate one year after graduation; the graduate employment rate five years after graduation; and the percentage of graduates who five years after graduation achieve a higher level of income than the population with secondary studies. Nevertheless, how this information affects the universities' funding depends on the Autonomous Communities.

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[17] For examples, see the EU Skills Panorama: http://euskillspanorama.ec.europa.eu/

[18] See: http://rsvu.mon.bg/

[19] See: http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/

In **Italy**, internships during the study programme and the proportion of employed graduates one year after graduation on the total number of graduates of the same year are an indicator used when assigning financial resources to higher education institutions.

In **Austria**, public universities are funded by global budgets consisting of the basic budget and the higher education area structural funds. The basic budget is to be negotiated under performance agreements (*Leistungsvereinbarungen*) concluded between the individual university and the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy every three years. In such performance agreements, universities have to point out their plans, e.g. for the improvement of employability. Universities are then evaluated based on these agreements.

In **Finland**, a part of polytechnics' state funding is based on their employability performance, starting in 2014. For example, completed degrees are part of performance-based funding. Also indicators on R&D and influence on regional development and cooperation with the working life are used in calculation of performance-based funding.

4.4.3. Career tracking of graduates

Graduate surveys that rely on the self-assessment of graduates are considered to be the most accurate tools for evaluating the employability of higher education graduates (van der Velden & van Smoorenburg, 1997). Career tracking surveys (or in other words, tracer studies) do not only provide the means to measure the percentage of graduates finding employment after graduation, but they are also able to describe the quality of jobs, the length of the job search period, graduates' job satisfaction, and the match between graduates' skills and job requirements (see Teichler, 2011). Furthermore, based on graduate surveys, it is possible to conduct analyses on the relative impact of graduates' individual characteristics and the higher education programme they attended (Ibid.). This way, tracer studies are useful tools for a multi-dimensional evaluation of employability in higher education.
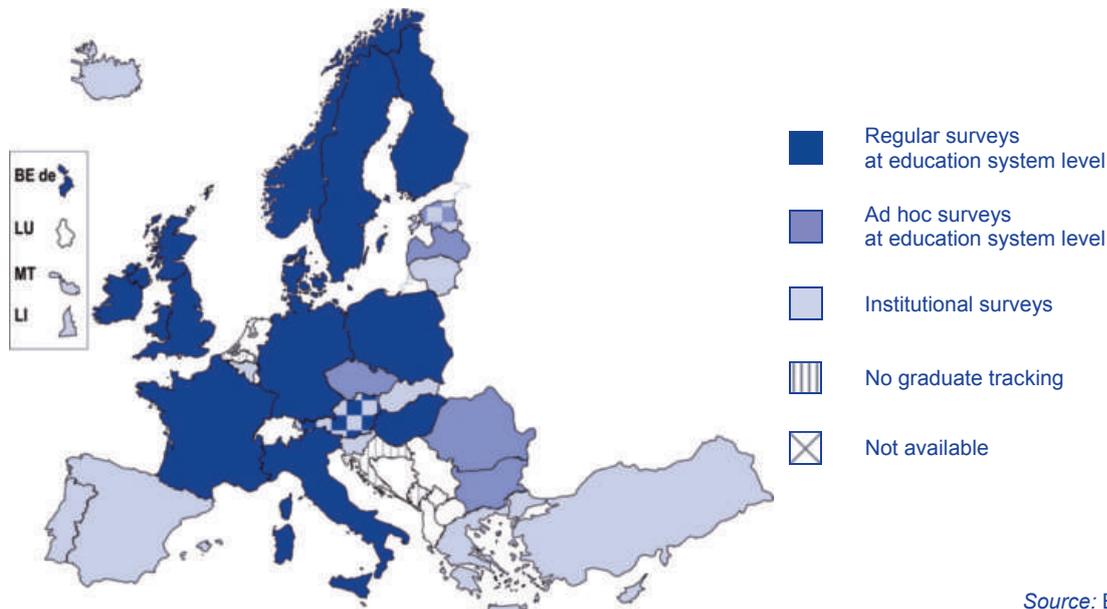
Few comparative graduate surveys ([20]) exist at European level. Their advantage is the comparability of information across countries. However, these surveys took place only in a limited number of countries and only once, which does not allow for comparisons across time. In addition, it is more difficult for such information to be channelled back to higher education institutions. Therefore, graduate surveys are also needed to be conducted regularly at national level in order to allow for an efficient flow of information between graduates, higher education institutions/programmes and education authorities.

With the exception of Croatia and Montenegro, graduate surveys exist in every education system participating in this report, at least at the level of (some) higher education institutions. However, in Montenegro, a new law foresees an obligation for higher education institutions to conduct such surveys regularly. As Figure 4.8 shows, regular graduate surveys at national/regional level exist in 14 education systems, while ad hoc national/regional surveys take place in six. In Belgium, at the level of the French Community, a regular system for the tracking of graduates is currently being developed. Some examples of graduate tracking systems ([21]) are summarised in Figure 4.9.

([20])   Such comparative graduate surveys include the CHEERS project, conducted between 1998 and 2000 covering 12 countries (Schomburg & Teichler, 2006; Teichler, 2007); the REFLEX project, conducted in 2005-2006 covering 16 countries (Allen & van der Velden, 2011); the HEGESCO project, conducted two to three years after REFLEX following its methodology in five additional countries (Allen, Pavlin & van der Velden, 2011); and the TRACKIT project of the European University Association (see: http://www.eua.be/trackit).

([21])   The EU Skills Panorama also lists graduate surveys by country: http://euskillspanorama.ec.europa.eu/

Figure 4.8: Graduate tracking surveys, 2012/13

Regular surveys
at education system level

Ad hoc surveys
at education system level

Institutional surveys

No graduate tracking

Not available

Source: Eurydice.

Country specific note
Spain: Graduate tracking also takes place at the level of the Autonomous Communities (see also Figure 4.9).

However, only in a few education systems do education authorities make a systematic use of the information collected on the basis of graduate surveys. Most often, graduate surveys are used in quality assurance or other evaluation processes of higher education study programmes (e.g. in Estonia, Spain, France, Italy, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, Iceland and Norway). In Poland, such a system is starting. In addition, information and guidance services can use information to guide prospective and current higher education students.

4.5. Experience from site visits

Enhancing employability at universities

All the eight universities that were visited reported an increase in attention to issues of employability in recent years. However, there were notable differences related to study fields, with technically-oriented faculties showing a tendency to develop more systematic approaches to issues of employability than arts and humanities faculties. Nevertheless, all universities reported a general trend towards more systematic attention to facilitating the transition of graduates to the labour market, with some notable good practice examples found in places where they might not be anticipated.

The approach to issues of employability was often tied to the institutions 'position' in the university world. For example, at the highly ranked technical University of Aachen, while the employment of graduates is considered a matter of great importance, there is a perception that all graduates will have acquired the knowledge and skills that equip them for the labour market, and that there is therefore no need to pay more specific attention to this issue. In some universities, such as the Tallinn Technical University, employability has been taken up and addressed in institutional policy and practice following developments in national policy. At the University of Jyväskylä, employability issues are embedded in an integrated policy approach which aims to create more links to regional companies, and also encourages students to undertake voluntary projects to enhance skills needed in working life.

However, perhaps the most striking example of innovative thinking towards employability was found at the Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB). Here change had clearly been accelerated by the extremely difficult economic, political and social environment, with Greece experiencing a reality described by the University Rector not merely as economic crisis but rather as structural economic collapse. Athens University of Economics and Business is a specialised university and the oldest of its kind in Greece (established in 1920) providing education in all three cycles in the fields of Economics, Business Administration, Informatics, Statistics, Marketing, Accounting and Finance. While the university is highly ranked with an excellent reputation both in the country and internationally, the focus of discussion was on initiatives related to supporting the employability of students in a reality where the labour market nationally has practically ceased to exist. Students have therefore been forced to change their labour market expectations radically. With little hope of public sector employment, or indeed of gaining typical graduate employment in the private sector, students have become increasingly interested in creating new forms of employment for themselves, and supporting each other in developing the skills that they would need. An extremely significant shift had consequently occurred at the university with support being channelled to a dynamic blend of employability and entrepreneurship. Very interesting interlinked services have been developed on careers innovation/entrepreneurship and internships.

All of these services have been developed using European structural funds by young, dynamic and highly motivated staff. Vitally, however, all services have also been guided by experienced academic staff, thus ensuring a link with the teaching and research work at the university. Staff involved clearly have a very student-centred approach. The three services were also clearly well integrated with one another and have had a great impact.

Through the career services not only is information and training provided to students throughout their studies, but the university has also been working as an agency for matching specific candidates with companies. It was reported that many students found their first employment in the company where they had had an internship. The unit also undertakes research, with a regular survey on the employment status of graduates. The office is also very active in using social media, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, to provide information and follow the progression of graduates.

In recent years, a new focus has been on promoting innovation and entrepreneurship. The university provides courses, but also seminars on different aspects of starting new businesses, with plans in the pipe-line for the establishment of a Centre for entrepreneurship. The students we met had been extraordinarily active in internships, developing their own start-ups, contributing to research projects, supporting fellow students in their endeavours, and even in advising their peers from other countries.

The provision of internships was very actively supported by a specific service for the whole university, even if the internship was only mandatory in one department – and the students would receive a nominal remuneration from the government for their work. The students were prepared through seminars on how to apply, how to behave during an interview and their application was put in a database where once the application/CV had been approved was visible to potential companies who are looking for an intern. The internship lasts two-three months and there are more than 1 500 companies in the database following a recent effort to include SMEs. The administrators explained that many students found their first job through their internship, and a particular focus has also been placed on the importance of mobility. The Erasmus programme in particular is being used to offer internships in other European countries.

Another example of changes to more emphasis on employability issues can be found at the University of Jyväskylä, where it is a common theme flowing throughout the university course provision, and

students were also reported to find it increasingly important to prepare what they become after finishing their studies. Therefore, there are attempts to make career guidance available throughout the studies and to include alumni both as advisors for curricula development, but also as mentors for students. Small modules that support third mission engagement have been introduced and 1-2 ECTS are given for doing projects that have external engagement – one such project was companies that have a problem that they would like to have solved by students. An e-portfolio has been introduced which helps the student identify not their academic skills, but also other skills that are needed in the labour market. Internships are in one form or another becoming increasingly popular and efforts are made to collect information on these and make them available to students.

Career service helps students in their search for employment: help to define their skills and their attitude – help with writing CVs, job applying skills. One specific tool is the above-mentioned e-portfolio, another is to encourage a structured path for obtaining general skills in a variety of courses. The portfolio is developed with both academic and extra-curricular activities, such as voluntary work which can be included in the portfolio. Their use is voluntary, so they are not used yet by so many students.

Some courses at the university are labour-market oriented, or focus on obtaining skills through establishing summer school or other practical engagement in society. They are called expertise courses that are focused on career and generic skills development. There is a new course on entrepreneurship as it is expected that more graduates will become self-employed.

Figure 4.9: Examples of graduate tracking systems, 2012/13

Country/region	Responsible authority/institute	Regularity	Survey timing	HEI participation/ sample	Results
Czech Republic	Funded by the Ministry of Education, carried out by the Education Policy Centre (Charles University, Prague) [22]	Ad hoc (follow-up of the REFLEX project, conducted in 2010 and 2013).	Up to five years after graduation	Voluntary (21 out of 26 public HEIs participate in 2013)	Information on: satisfaction with studies; transition from HE to labour market; current employment status; competences of graduates
Germany	Higher Education Information System (HIS) [23]	Every four years	One, five and ten years after graduation	Sample of graduates (2013: BA and MA separately for the first time)	Data on employment status
Germany	Bottom-up cooperation of HEIs: KOAB project; comparative analysis conducted by INCHER-Kassel [24]	Yearly	1.5 and 4.5 years after graduation as follow-up	Voluntary (around 60 HEIs)	Data on: the professional and occupational fields where graduates work, the type of contracts and salary, skills match, satisfaction with studies, etc.
Ireland	Higher Education Authority (HEA) publishes the First Destination Reports [25]	Yearly	Six to nine months after graduation	Sample of graduates at different levels	Information on: pattern of first destinations, composition of the graduate labour market, employment sector and occupational classification, region in which employment was found in Ireland and abroad, salary

[22]   See: http://www.strediskovzdelavacipolitiky.info/default.asp?page=reflex13

[23]   See: http://www.dzhw.eu/ab22

[24]   See: http://koab.uni-kassel.de/en/koab/state-of-the-project.html

[25]   See: http://www.hea.ie/en/statistics/statistics-section-publications/first-destinations-reports

Country/region	Responsible authority/institute	Regularity	Survey timing	HEI participation/ sample	Results
Catalonia, Spain	AQU Catalunya ([26])	Every three years	Three years after graduation	Representative sample of graduates (data for each study programme)	Data on: employment situation, job security, job-education match, salary, job satisfaction, transition to labour market, satisfaction with studies, etc.
France	*Conférence des Grandes Écoles* (CGE) ([27])	Yearly	Each January (transition periods are different for graduates)	*Grandes écoles*	Proportion of graduates in work, the net employment rate, those having an indefinite contract, those having found their first job in less than two months. Salaries are also reported with and without bonuses.
France	Directorate General for Higher Education and Professional Insertion (DGESIP) of the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research ([28])	Yearly	30 months after graduation	Universities	Four indicators: the employment rate, the ratio of jobs in managerial positions (*cadres*) and in intermediate occupations (*professions intermédiaires*), the proportion of graduates employed through permanent contracts and the proportion of graduates employed full-time
Latvia	Ministry of Education and Science	Yearly	Yearly in the three years after graduation	Compulsory data collection by each HEI	No common methodology, incomparability of information due to diversity of data collection approaches
Hungary	Financed through ESF, conducted by the Educatio Nkft ([29])	Yearly	One, two and five years after graduation	Required involvement of HEIs (32 participated in the last round)	Data on employment status and salary
United Kingdom	Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) conducts the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey ([30])	Early survey: yearly; longitudinal survey: every two years	Early survey: six months after graduation; longitudinal survey: 3.5 years after graduation	Early survey: all students; longitudinal survey: representative sample	The resulting Key Information Sets ([31]) enable informed decision-making by prospective students.

Source: Eurydice.

Conclusions

All European countries participating in this report engage in one form or another in improving the employability of higher education graduates. However, approaches differ, as does the level of engagement. As Section 1 showed, there are differences between countries in focusing on labour market demand or supply, though these approaches are often inseparable. In addition, some countries take an employment-centred approach measuring employability through graduate employment rates, others emphasise equipping students with competences relevant for the labour market, and several countries combine the two perspectives.

In addition, differences between countries exist regarding the measures through which they are encouraging higher education institutions to improve their employability performance. The most common way to promote the employability agenda is through *quality assurance*: 23 education systems

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([26])   See: http://www.aqu.cat/insercio/graduats/2011_en.html

([27])   See: http://www.studyramagrandesecoles.com/home.php?idRubrique=643&Id=6124

([28])   See: http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/pid24624/taux-insertion-professionnelle-des-diplomes-universite.html

([29])   See: http://www.felvi.hu/felsooktatasimuhely/dpr

([30])   See: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1899&Itemid=239

([31])   See: http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/

require higher education institutions to submit employability-related information in quality assurance procedures. In addition, several countries have established alternative evaluation procedures to provide incentives for higher education institutions to improve their employability performance. One prominent mechanism through which authorities expect better results is *making employability-related information public* for both current and prospective students. Another, more direct mechanism is to *link public funding levels with employability performance*. In this latter case, partial funding of higher education institutions depends on whether they focus on enhancing their graduates' employability.

When looking at the detailed measures aiming to improve graduates' employability, similar differences between policy approaches can be detected. One prominent approach is a *regulatory* one: education authorities simply make it compulsory for higher education institutions to implement certain practices. For example, in 21 education systems, institutions are required to involve employers in at least one of the following areas: curriculum development, teaching, participation in decision-making bodies and external quality assurance. Or else, several countries oblige higher education institutions to include practical training in (some) higher education study programmes.

Another approach many education authorities take is *providing financial incentives* for higher education institutions to establish certain institutional practices. For example, authorities can fund university-business cooperation projects in order to increase the involvement of employers in higher education study programmes. Or else, they can provide funding for students' practical training in order to improve their work-related skills.

However, no matter which approach education systems take, they mostly target students or graduates *as a whole*, without concentrating on specific – disadvantaged – groups of students. This shows that the widening participation agenda still needs to be extended to cover employability policies as well.

Evaluating the impact of existing measures and approaches is not straightforward. One way to do so is through establishing regular graduate surveys at both national and European levels. National level graduate surveys can provide better feedback for individual higher education institutions, while graduate surveys conducted on a European scale can provide a comparative insight into the effectiveness of different policy approaches.

Issues of employability were taken into account in all eight institutions that were visited, with different approaches taken, depending on the country and type of institution in question. At Athens University of Economics and Business in Greece, the changing economic environment has forced the university to think of radical ways to enhance the career prospects of students. This has resulted in a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship, as creating employment is both a major priority of the economy and the best prospect for employment of future graduates.

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Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014

The report sheds light on current national and institutional policies and practices aimed at increasing and widening access, reducing student dropout, and improving the employability of higher education graduates in Europe. The primary objective is to support Member States in their reform efforts by outlining and analysing national policies, and by highlighting evidence-based practice that is contributing effectively to positive outcomes. The impact of policies and practice on non-traditional groups in higher education is a particular focus of the report.

The Eurydice Network's task is to understand and explain how Europe's different education systems are organised and how they work. The network provides descriptions of national education systems, comparative studies devoted to specific topics, indicators and statistics. All Eurydice publications are available free of charge on the Eurydice website or in print upon request. Through its work, Eurydice aims to promote understanding, cooperation, trust and mobility at European and international levels. The network consists of national units located in European countries and is co-ordinated by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. For more information about Eurydice, see http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice.

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