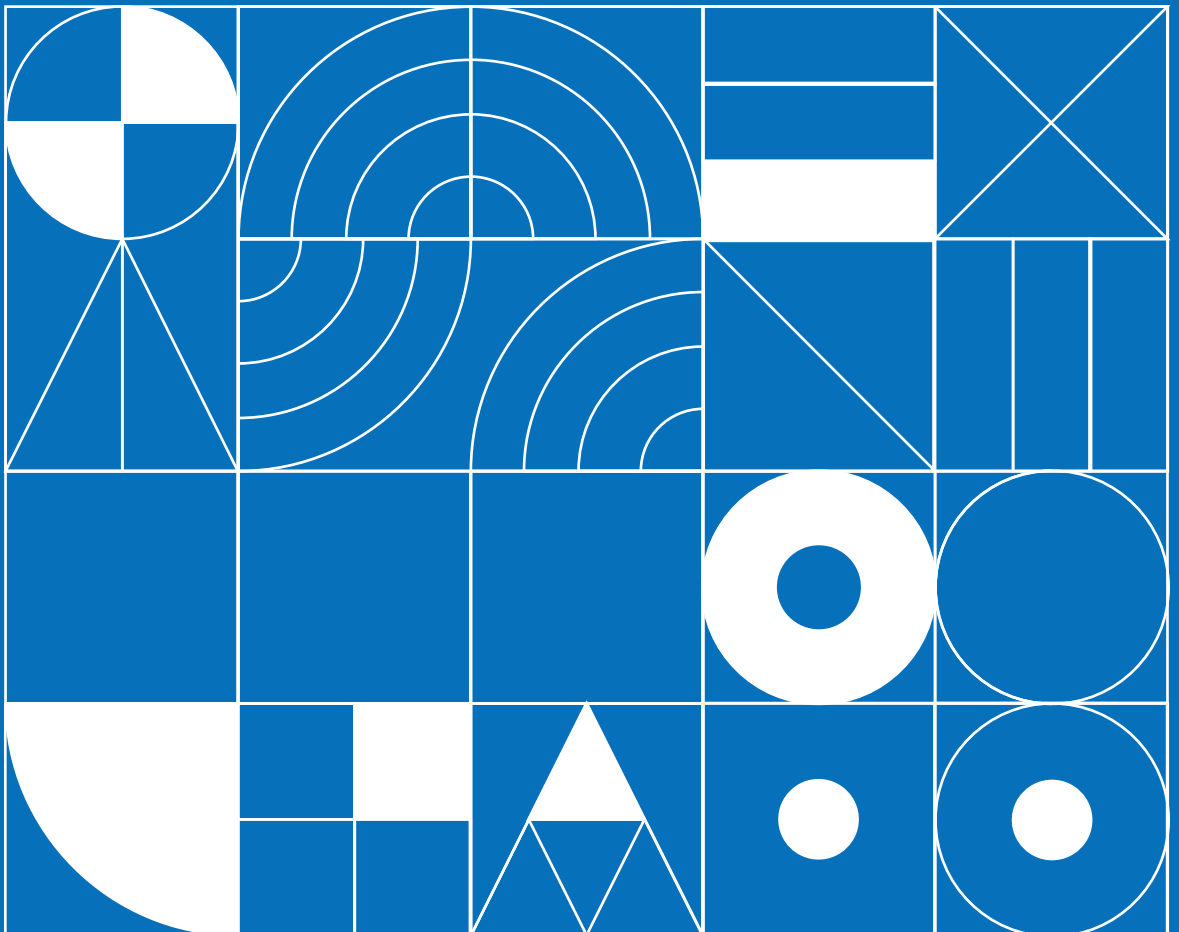


Thematic Review

Flexible Pathways into and within Higher Education

EUROSTUDENT VII

2021



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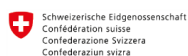
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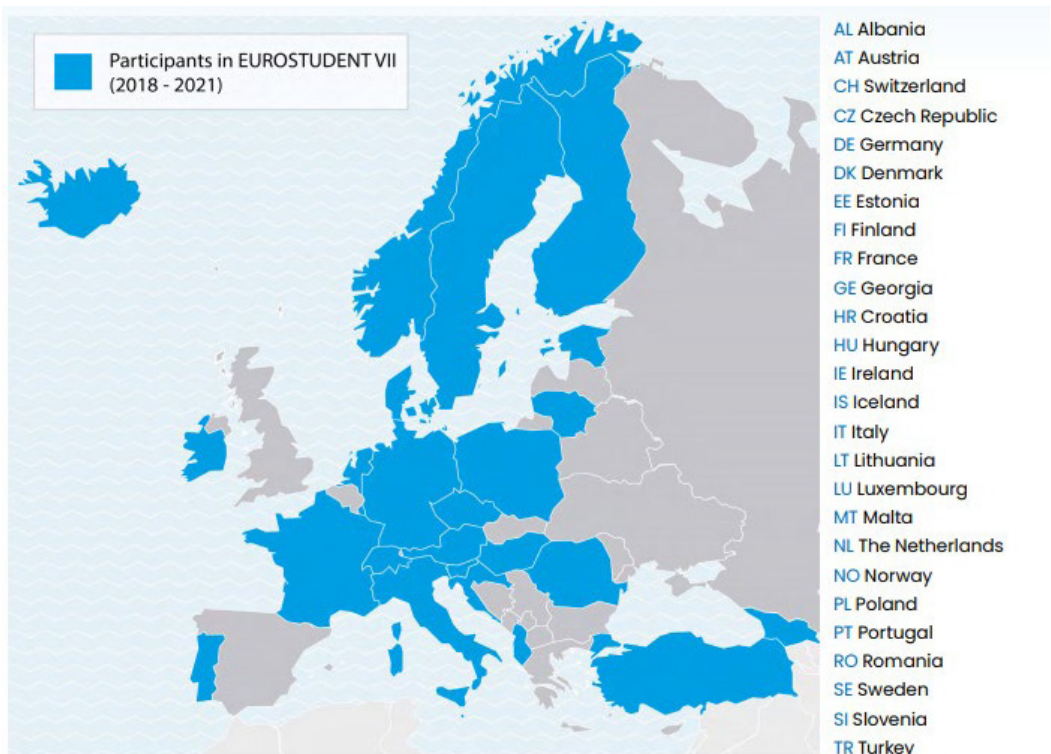


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About EUROSTUDENT

In the current, seventh round of the project, 26 participating countries committed to conducting a survey among their higher education students. The EUROSTUDENT consortium and the 26 countries participating in the seventh round cooperate closely in the collection,

processing, and interpretation of internationally comparative data on the social dimension of higher education. The central coordination is led and supported by the international partners in the project consortium.



Technical notes and student surveys during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic held up the data collection and subsequent delivery in some countries. The ensuing delays have led to delays within the EUROSTUDENT project. There were 21 countries that conducted a student survey with a

reference period before the COVID-19 pandemic: Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Germany (2016), Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Slovenia. Albania, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Romania, and

Turkey were affected by the pandemic and conducted a survey with a reference period during this time.

The figures in this report distinguish between countries with a reference period before the pandemic-related restrictions and lockdowns implemented in the spring of 2020 (shown on the left-hand side of the figures) and countries in which students were surveyed during this unusual situation (displayed on the

right-hand side). The EUROSTUDENT average depicted in the figures and tables is based on survey data referring to the time before the pandemic (i.e. the 'normal' situation). Albanian data could not be finalised in time for inclusion in this report but will be available in the EUROSTUDENT database.

All data are available online in the EUROSTUDENT database:

www.eurostudent.eu/database.

Abbreviations used in this report

BA - Bachelor's degree

FLP - Flexible learning pathways

HE - Higher education

HEI - Higher education institution

MA - Master's degree

RPL - Recognition of prior learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PATHWAYS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

What are the transition patterns into HE?

Flexible transitions to HE are an exception rather than the usual way of entering HE in most EUROSTUDENT VII countries. On average, 16 % of students enter HE in a delayed manner, i.e. more than two years after leaving secondary school. An even smaller share of students (8 %) enters HE using alternative access routes, i.e. without the standard upper secondary entry qualification obtained when leaving the regular school system for the first time, or having obtained it later in life (e.g. via evening classes or adult learning).

Malta, Iceland, Norway, and Austria can be considered as the most flexible countries in terms of entry pathways to HE as the largest shares of non-traditional students who enter HE after at least a two-year-long break or using alternative access routes can be found there. In contrast, half of the EUROSTUDENT VII countries are comparatively rigid, which is demonstrated by the domination of traditional students who enter HE directly after finishing school and/or via a traditional access route.

What is the profile of students who access HE via non-traditional ways?

Non-traditional students are older than the traditional students. On average,

delayed transition students are seven years older than direct transition students. Alternative access route students are six years older than those who accessed HE via standard access route.

Delayed transition and alternative access route students more often live outside their parents' home, have children, work alongside their studies, and even perceive themselves as a worker, rather than a student – i.e. they have the characteristics that relate to older age of the students. In general, delayed transition and alternative access routes students are mainly similar in socio-demographic, study-related, and employment characteristics. However, the share of students with impairments that limit them in their studies is larger among alternative access route students than among delayed transition students.

Delayed transition and alternative access route students have a different socio-economic background than those who entered HE using traditional pathways. Students without a tertiary education history in their families make up more than a half of delayed transition and alternative access routes students. In contrast, among direct transition and standard access route students, the larger share makes up those with a tertiary education background in their families. Furthermore, the

non-traditional student population more often comes from financially disadvantaged families.

What is the student experience of recognition of prior learning (RPL)?

Before entering HE, prior regular work experience is a common characteristic of delayed transition and alternative access route students (this is true for 69 % of delayed transition students and 57 % of alternative access routes students). Moreover, in most EUROSTUDENT VII countries, prior work experience is related to the current study programme to a larger extent among the non-traditional students than their counterparts who transitioned to HE directly or using a standard access route. The extent of recognition of previously gained competences upon admission into HE

and during the study process varies greatly among countries, reflecting the diversity of national recognition systems and practices of admission to HEIs. On average, 17 % of students who entered HE after a two-year or longer break after leaving school reported the recognition of prior work experience/ competences upon admission process, and 14 % during the study period. Alternative access route students reported roughly the same extent of recognition of prior work experience.

While previously gained experience/ competences from other HEIs and prior work experience are recognised within the study process among delayed transition and alternative access route students most often, competences gained outside formal education are recognised less often.

TRANSITION WITHIN HE

What are the transition patterns within HE?

Delayed transition to Master programmes is more widespread than to Bachelor programmes across EUROSTUDENT VII countries. On average, one out of four students transitioned to a Master programme after two years or a longer break after graduating with a Bachelor degree. The share of delayed transition Master students varies greatly across countries: from 10 % or less in Denmark, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Germany, and Italy, to roughly half of all students in Malta and Ireland. Several countries demonstrating

a large flexibility in the transition to Bachelor studies (e.g. Finland, Iceland, Malta, Norway) also have large shares of students entering Master studies following a break. However, for other countries this is not the case. For instance, whereas in Denmark and Sweden the share of delayed transition students entering to HE is above the EUROSTUDENT VII countries' average, the transition within HE tends to be rather direct in these countries. In contrast, Ireland, Estonia, Lithuania, Turkey, and Portugal demonstrate comparatively low shares of delayed transition into HE, while the transition within HE takes longer compared to the

EUROSTUDENT VII average.

What is the profile of students who transition within HE with a delay?

Students who transitioned to Master programme with a delay are older by 9 years than their direct transition counterparts. Being older, delayed transition Master students also have different living situations and experiences, including their housing situation, having children, working alongside their studies, etc. These circumstances require them to balance their time and effort between studying and other responsibilities. Delayed transition Master students also more often originate from families with lower educational backgrounds than students transitioning within HE without considerable pause.

The gender imbalance among delayed transition Master students is evident. On average, women make up 62 % of the analysed group, compared to 56% among the direct transition Master students.

Employment during studies is more common among delayed transition Master students than among those having transitioned directly. On average, 70 % of delayed transition Master students report working during the entire lecture period (vs. 54 % of direct

transition Master students). Moreover, they tend to work more intensively – on average 8 hours per week more than the direct transition Master students – and study less intensively than those who started Master studies directly after a Bachelor programme. In line with this pattern, delayed transition Master students who work are more likely to perceive themselves as workers rather than students. The opposite pattern is evident among direct transition Master students.

What is students' experience of RPL?

On average, 28 % of delayed transition Master students reported having the experience of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) within the study process. The extent of RPL during the studies varies greatly among EUROSTUDENT VII countries (e.g. differing from 64 % in Turkey, or roughly 40 % in Finland, Malta, or Estonia, to less than 20 % in Georgia, The Netherlands, or Denmark). Whereas previously gained experience/competences from other HEIs followed by the experience/competences acquired from prior work are recognised the most (on average, 16 % and 13 %, respectively), competences gained outside of formal education are recognized the least (5 % of delayed transition Master students declare the recognition of non-formal education experience while studying in their current Master programme).

FLEXIBLE STUDY ORGANISATION

What are the challenges facing delayed transition and alternative access route students?

The most often reported personal reason for difficulties among delayed transition students are the obligations of one's paid job (25 % of delayed transition students). Among alternative access students, the most common personal reason is financial difficulties (25 % alternative access students). These challenges are much less prevalent among direct transition and traditional access route students (reported by 15–18 %). Among delayed transition Master's students, obligations of one's paid job cause difficulties for 76 % of students, compared to 40% of direct transition Master's students.

Investigating the possible outcomes of such challenges – dropping out – revealed no remarkable differences between the shares of delayed and direct transition students who have serious intentions of dropping out. However, the comparison of traditional and alternative access route students showed that in 70 % of EUROSTUDENT VII countries, serious drop-out intentions are more common among students who entered HE via alternative access routes.

What is the role and quality of study support provided for delayed transition and non-traditional access students?

Regarding average satisfaction with study support services, non-traditional access students do not significantly differ from their more traditional peers, but in 60 % of EUROSTUDENT countries, delayed transition students show a higher average satisfaction with study support than direct transition students. Across all examined focus groups, students are the most satisfied with the provision of learning facilities at their HEIs (60 % all students) and the least satisfied with the lack of support provided to help balance their studies with paid jobs and family responsibilities (24 % and 25 % of all students, respectively).

Further investigation of the association between dropout intentions and support to balance studies and a paid job revealed that in Estonia, Malta, Austria, Poland and Slovenia, alternative access route students are more satisfied with support to balance work and study than on average and less likely than on average to be considering dropping out. However, there are multiple EUROSTUDENT countries in which fewer alternative access students than on average are satisfied with the support provided to balance work and studies, yet the share of alternative access students in these countries showing serious dropout intentions is also low. This might mean that in these countries, there are protective factors other than satisfactory support for balancing studies and a paid job.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last decades Western countries have seen an enormous expansion of higher education (HE) (Marginson, 2016). HE, previously a privilege for elite groups, is now developing knowledge for a broader population (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). In less than two decades global enrolment in HE has more than doubled, reaching 221 million students in 2017 (Ibid.). This number is expected to be 590 million by 2040 (Martin, 2019). Between 2000 and 2017 the global share of people aged 19 to 23 participating in HE has risen from 19 % to 38 % (UNESCO, 2018, referred by Martin and Godonoga, 2020).

However, HE expansion has not taken place only among the so-called traditional students (i.e. young students who enter HE directly after finishing their studies at the upper secondary school) (DZHW, 2018). The student population has become increasingly diverse; besides traditional students HE is now increasingly taken up by adult learners, people with caring responsibilities, migrants, and people with special needs (Unger and Zaussinger, 2018). A more diverse student population refers to more diverse needs and expectations of students. Therefore, the diversification of the student body has brought with it a growing need towards the flexibility of admissions and improved study organization within higher education.

On the other hand, while the

diversification of the student population has indeed taken place in many areas, the student body still does not completely represent the population in most of the EUROSTUDENT countries (DZHW, 2018). This refers to a potential issue in advancing social justice (Brennan and Goastellec, 2007) and equality of opportunity in HE (Brennan and Naidoo, 2008). This is because it is generally accepted and agreed by European HE policymakers that in order for the HE system be socially equitable and capable of providing individuals with different backgrounds equal opportunity for their future lives, the student body should reflect the social structure of the population (Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 2020; London Communiqué, 2007). Therefore, according to this general understanding and agreement made by the policymakers of European Higher Education Area, in order to increase social justice and the equality of opportunity by making HE studies more accessible to different social groups, a continuous need towards increasing the flexibility of pathways both into and within HE exists (e.g. from Bachelor's to Master's studies).

The Thematic Review is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter focuses on the background by introducing the concept of flexible learning paths in HE and its benefits. The second chapter gives an overview of the methodology used in this research. Chapters 3, 4

and 5 are oriented towards sharing the empirical results of the EUROSTUDENT VII study in a cross-country comparative manner. This review focuses on both of the dimensions of flexibility mentioned earlier – that is, the flexibility of the pathways into (Chapter 3) and within HE (Chapter 4), including the flexibility of study organization (Chapter 5).

EUROSTUDENT data enables the investigation of the flexibility of learning paths in terms of describing the transitions (e.g. the time between finishing the upper secondary education

and entering to HE) but does not bring out the explanations behind students' learning path choices and the convenience of these choices (e.g. whether delayed transition was student's first preference or not and whether the actualization of this choice really was flexible and convenient for them or not). Therefore, this Thematic Review captures the topic of flexibility into and within HE in this framework and provides the relevant contextual explanations to investigate the topic of flexibility in a more substantial way.

1. What are flexible learning pathways in higher education and what are their benefits?

Flexible learning pathways (FLP) to HE do not have a single universally accepted definition. However, there seems to be a consensus among researchers that FLPs have a critical role in ensuring that HE systems are equitable and serve the needs of society (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). In the Education 2030 Agenda, UNESCO has defined FLPs as 'entry points and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal education' (Ibid.). The European Commission has come up with a similar definition, according to which FLPs are 'measures to implement flexible regimes for study programmes and to enable the previous educational achievements of students to be more widely recognized within the HE system. This allows students to transfer more easily between institutions and study programmes as prior achievements can be utilised' (European Commission, 2015, p. 51).

There are other terms used in the literature that have a similar meaning to the FLPs, such as transferability and permeability (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). Transferability refers to the 'capacity (of skills and competences) to be transferred to and used in a new occupational or educational environment' (MacKenzie and Polvere,

2009, p. 74, referred by Martin and Godonoga, 2020). Permeability, frequently used interchangeably with transferability, is defined as the 'capacity of education and training systems to enable learners to access and move among different programmes, levels and systems and validate learning outcomes acquired in another system or in non-formal or informal settings' (CEDEFOP, 2014, pp. 193). Transferability or permeability can be horizontal or vertical (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). Horizontal permeability means that smooth transitions are possible between study opportunities that differ in content but are provided at the same level of education, whereas vertical permeability refers to the organization according to which all learners, irrespective of whether they have academic or vocational educational background, have the opportunity to pursue their academic path at the tertiary level (Spöttl, 2013). Permeability, therefore, means that there are no 'dead ends' to studying and that opportunities to transfer from one type of provision to another exist (Martin and Godonoga, 2020).

All of the concepts discussed – FLPs, transferability and permeability – are very similar in meaning, as they share the idea that it is important to create strong links between formal education institutions and providers of non-formal and informal studying in HE, while providing more flexibility for students and

recognizing different types of studying (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). Some examples of flexible (access) pathways meant to include underrepresented or disadvantaged groups to HE are quotas or lower admission requirements in standard entry routes, programmes providing standard entry qualifications, programmes providing alternative entry qualifications, accreditation/RPL and/or vocational experience, entrance exams in combination with RPL, and entrance exams without RPL or bridging programmes (Unger and Zaussinger, 2018; Hauschildt et al., 2015). No country in the European Higher Education Area offers all these types of pathways, yet most of the countries provide at least one (Unger and Zaussinger, 2018). Still, even

though the variety of these possibilities is broad, the FLPs are seldomly used in many countries; there are very few countries in which more than 10 % of students enter higher education through one of these paths (Ibid.).

The introduction and the expansion of FLPs is recommended by several researchers (see e.g. Martin and Godonoga, 2020), as well as major organisations such as UNESCO (Martin and Godonoga, 2020), the European Union (European Commission, s.d.), the OECD (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal, 2008) and the The World Bank (2021). The driving force behind this support lies in the following assumed benefits of flexible learning pathways:

Flexible learning pathways ...

... promote social equity and support lifelong learning opportunities for all.

HE is considered to have an important role in providing access to and supporting lifelong learning opportunities for all individuals, which is a precondition for the development of inclusive societies, responsible citizenship, and a qualified workforce (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). The latter is increasingly recognized as one of the key drivers of economic and social development. Flexible pathways into and within HE help improve access

to HE for people whose opportunities to acquire HE and actively participate in lifelong learning would otherwise be more limited. By broadening the scope of groups actively participating in HE, flexible learning pathways help to promote social equity – a value that is at the core of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of the 2030 Agenda, as well as national policies across the world (Ibid.).

... help HE systems to become more efficient and effective in reaching their missions and goals.

The last decades have brought an enormous increase and diversification of student populations. The global student

population has more than doubled in less than two decades (Martin and Godonoga, 2020), and the share of non-

traditional students – dependent on age, parental status, impairments, and migration background – is noteworthy in many places around the world. Flexible HE provision can enable HE systems to better answer to increasingly

diversifying needs and expectations of students, employers, and society (Martin and Godonoga, 2020; Orr et al., 2017), and therefore support HE systems in becoming more efficient and effective in reaching their missions and goals.

... can make studies more efficient for students.

Students can have their prior learning recognized and used in entering to HE or in transferring between study programmes (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). As a result, this may reduce the costs of time and money that need to

be acquired to complete a degree. It can also reduce the 'dead ends' in the learning process, giving students the opportunity to move to higher levels of learning (Ibid.).

2. Methodology

The EUROSTUDENT project has developed indicators to investigate the flexibility of learning pathways into and within HE. This review focuses on two main indicators: access route and transition route (see Table 1). Therefore, the review concentrates on two groups of students based on their experiences of entering to different levels of the HE system: alternative access route

students and delayed transition students. To put the results in context, these groups are compared with the two contrasting groups: standard access route students and direct transition students. The data comes from the EUROSTUDENT VII study that was carried out between 2018 and 2021 in 26 countries.

Table 1. Student groups analysed in the Thematic Review

<p>Access route – this category divides students based on their entry qualification into higher education.</p>	<p>1. Standard access route students – students who possess an upper secondary qualification or equivalent obtained in direct relation to leaving school for the first time (e.g. Matura, Abitur, Baccalaureat), either in the country of survey or abroad;</p>
	<p>2. Alternative access route students – students who either do not possess such a qualification, or obtained it later in life, e.g. via evening classes or adult learning.</p>
<p>Transition route – this category distinguishes the students according to the duration between leaving the school system for the first time and entering higher education.</p>	<p>3. Direct transition students – students who have a delay of no more than 24 months between leaving school and entering higher education;</p>
	<p>4. Delayed transition students – students who have entered higher education for the first time more than 24 months after leaving the regular school system for the first time.</p>

Source: DZHW, 2018

In the further analysis, the duration of the transition and access route indicators were used to define focus groups. In contrast, RPL indicators (i.e. the recognition of prior work experience during the initial admission to HE and the recognition of professional experience, other experience/competences gained outside and within the formal education system during the studies) are used to describe the experience of RPL and

estimate the extent of its application among focus groups and across EUROSTUDENT countries.

The review gives an overview of the results of the research in a cross-country comparative manner. EUROSTUDENT relies on self-reported data by students currently in higher education. Findings may therefore not always completely align with information about the

existence of different types of access routes and RPL available from other sources. Additionally, to create cross-national comparability, EUROSTUDENT relies on broad categories that allow for the classification of students and access routes capturing the same concept. Within national contexts, a more differentiated or even deviating understanding may exist. The strength

of the EUROSTUDENT data lies in the student-centric approach, which allows an in-depth understanding of the national circumstances: how do different student groups make use of the existing structures? In which way are students' past experiences related to their current study situation? By asking for student self-reports, the EUROSTUDENT data allow such analyses.

The next chapters will answer the following questions:

What is the situation regarding FLPs at the Bachelor's level? (Chapter 3)

- What are the cross-country patterns regarding the students' use of FLPs when entering HE, i.e. to Bachelor's level, if such cross-country patterns exist?
- What characterizes Bachelor's students who have used FLPs to enter the

- Bachelor's level?
- What are the experiences of recognition of previous learning (RPL) among focus groups and across EUROSTUDENT countries?

What is the situation regarding FLPs at Master's level? (Chapter 4)

- What are the cross-country patterns regarding students' use of FLPs when entering into Master's level, if such cross-country patterns exist?
- What characterizes the Master students

- who have used FLPs to enter into Master's level studies?
- What are the experiences of RPL among Master's students and across EUROSTUDENT countries?

What are challenges related to study organization that the alternative access route students and delayed transition students perceive? (Chapter 5)

The results in this Thematic Review are complemented and illustrated with generalised insights and thoughts from policymakers, representatives of the HEIs, and students from various European countries (Austria, Estonia,

Lithuania, and Malta). The insights come from the discussion "*Flexible pathways into and within higher education: importance, practices, students' experience*", which was carried out during the EUROSTUDENT VII final conference on May 18th, 2021.

3. Pathways into HE

KEY FINDINGS

1. On average, 16 % of students enter HE in a delayed manner, and 8 % via alternative access routes. Large differences between countries exist, though. Malta, Iceland, Norway, and Austria can be considered as the most flexible in terms of transition time to HE and alternative access routes. However, in half of EUROSTUDENT VII countries the standard access to HE after graduating from secondary school clearly dominates.
2. Students entering HE through flexible pathways are different from those entering HE in a traditional manner. In general, delayed transition and alternative access routes students share most of the same socio-demographic, study, and employment-related characteristics. One of the differences of analysed non-traditional student groups is their health condition; the share of students with impairments that limit them in their studies is slightly larger among alternative access route students than among delayed transition students. Delayed transition students are more often enrolled in part-time studies and work alongside their studies.
3. Older age is the most distinct characteristic of non-traditional students. On average, students who have entered HE with a long delay after school are older by seven years, while alternative access route students are older than their direct access route counterparts by six years. Delayed transition and alternative access route students more often live outside the parents' home, have parental obligations, and work alongside their studies.
4. Students without a tertiary education background in their families make up the majority among alternative and, especially, among students having delayed transition into HE. Furthermore, the non-traditional students slightly more often come from financially disadvantaged families.
5. Prior work experience is more common for delayed transition and alternative access route students than students who entered HE using traditional entry pathways. Seven out of 10 delayed transition students reported having prior regular work experience (vs 17 % of direct transition students) before entering HE. Alternative access route students enter HE having less professional experience than the delayed transition students (57 % vs. 69 %).

6. The extent of recognition of previously acquired professional competences upon admission into HE and during the study process varies greatly among countries. Still, it does not exceed 30 % among delayed transition or alternative access route students in most countries. On average, 17 % of delayed transition students report having the experience of recognition of prior work experience/competences upon admission to HE, and 14 % report experiencing it over the course of their studies. Similar RPL experience is reported by alternative access route students as well.

7. Previously gained experience/competences from other HEI and prior work experience are the most recognised types of prior learning over the study period. In contrast, competences gained outside formal education are the least recognised among focus groups.

Aiming to strengthen the social dimension of European HE, the time of transition into higher education and the variety of pathways can be treated as meaningful indicators reflecting the accessibility of educational systems (European Commission, 2020). In this chapter, the analysis is focused on pathways into higher education in terms of entry time (delayed vs direct) and access routes (alternative vs standard).

The chapter is divided into three sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter investigates the extent to which flexible pathways into HE are used. The second sub-chapter analyses delayed transition and alternative access route student profiles in terms of socio-demographic, study, and employment characteristics. Following this, the last sub-chapter examines the experience of recognition of previous educational and professional experience upon the initial admission to HE and over the course of the studies.

3.1 What are the cross-country patterns regarding access to HE?

3.1.1 Transition into HE

The transition time between leaving the regular school system and entry into HE is an important indicator, providing some background information about the openness of educational systems regarding entry patterns. A delayed transition is associated with the lifelong learning traditions as an opportunity to get back into the system for students

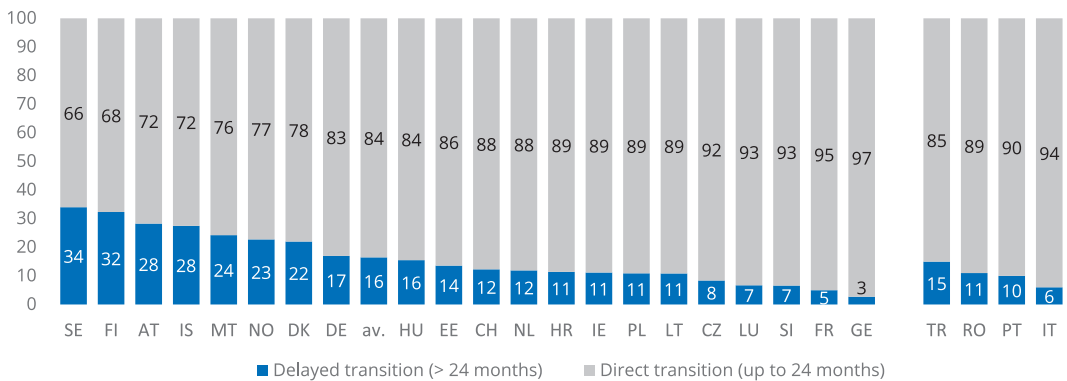
who dropped out or for those who wish to develop new skills. However, it might also be related to difficulties in accessing HE, such as selective entry requirements or numerous restrictions; for example, a fixed maximum number of entrants admissible to a particular academic institution (OECD, 2020).

EUROSTUDENT VII results revealed that a large majority of students (84 %) enter HE directly or within up to two years after graduating from secondary school for the first time. Every sixth student enters HE after at least a two-year break. However, the variation across countries is large. The greatest shares of students who have entered HE with a long delay after school were found in Sweden (34 %) and Finland (32 %), followed by Austria (28 %) and Iceland (28 %). On the contrary, the lowest shares of delayed transition students were found in Georgia (3 %), France (5 %), and Italy (6 %).

Various factors may have an impact on the extent of postponing entry into HE. For example, in Finland and Sweden, the delayed transition is related to the admission systems, which are restricted for many programmes and fields of study, resulting in more than 60 % of applicants being rejected (OECD, 2020). The share of students entering HE with a delay might also be affected by existing national-level regulations or cultural factors (ibid).

Figure 1. Transition from secondary school to HE

Share of all students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.16.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.4 How long after leaving the #regular school system for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: AT, CH, DE, IT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: DE, IE, IT, PL.

3.1.2 Access routes to HE

Alternative access routes into HE play a significant role in improving the accessibility of HE for people with different backgrounds and contribute

to strengthening the social dimension of higher education (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2014). Alternative access routes into HE exist in

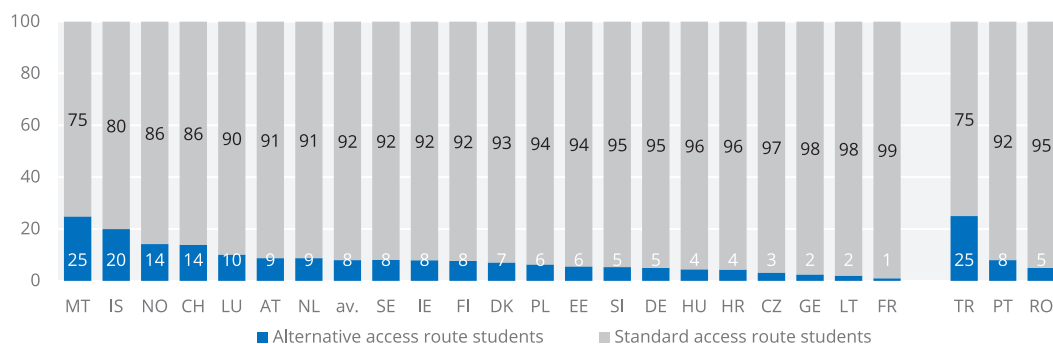
all EUROSTUDENT VII countries, but the variety of existing alternatives and their different incidence is notable between countries. Upper secondary school academic track through adult learning, special exams for certain student groups, special access courses, and RPL are usually treated as alternative ways to access HE (Hauschildt et al., 2015). In the further analysis, we will be focusing on students who reported accessing HE without a standard minimum access requirement (#SMAR) or obtained the qualification later in life (rather than in conjunction with leaving school).

Considering the share of students who accessed HE using non-traditional pathways, alternative access routes into HE are not common across EUROSTUDENT VII countries. The great majority of students (92 % on average)

enter HE via the standard access route, i.e. with an upper secondary school-leaving qualification or equivalent obtained within six months after leaving school. Nevertheless, the variation across countries is large, and only a few countries demonstrate considerably larger shares of alternative access route students. Malta, Turkey, and Iceland stand out as countries comparatively having the highest shares of alternative access route students (20 % - 25 %). In Norway and Switzerland, the share of alternative access route students also makes up 14 % of all HE students and is considerably greater than in other countries. The lowest shares of alternative access route students were found in France, Lithuania, Georgia, the Czech Republic, Croatia, and Hungary, making up less than 5 % of student population.

Figure 2. Access routes into HE

Share of all students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.17. **No data:** IT.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.1 Do you have a Standard Minimum Access Requirement (#SMAR) or foreign equivalent?; 2.2 [Only students with #SMAR] When did you obtain your #SMAR?; 2.3 [Only student without #SMAR] Where did you last attend the #regular school system?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: AT, CH, DE, EE, MT.

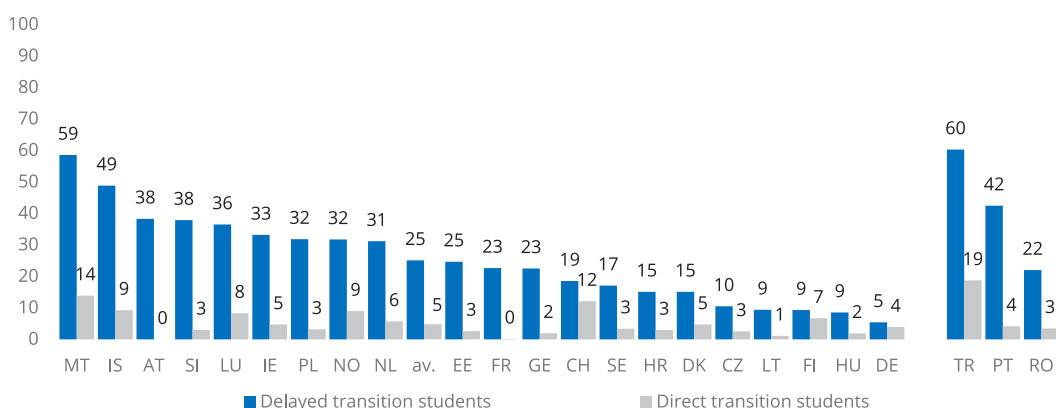
Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: DE, IE, PL.

A relationship exists between a delayed transition to HE and alternative access to HE. Students undergoing a delayed transition more often enter HE via alternative access routes compared to those who transition HE directly after secondary school. On average, roughly one-quarter of delayed transition students enter HE using alternative access routes. In contrast, the share of alternative access route students among direct transition entrants is five

times lower, making up 5 % on average. In several countries, like Malta, Iceland, and Turkey, a half or even larger share of delayed transition students enrolled HE using alternative entry routes, whereas direct transition students commonly enter HE in a traditional way. Different patterns were found in Switzerland, Finland, and Germany, where alternative access routes are used by direct and delayed transition students to a comparatively similar extent.

Figure 3. Students with alternative access among delayed and direct transition students

Share of alternative access route students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.17. **No data:** IT.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.1 Do you have a Standard Minimum Access Requirement (#SMAR) or foreign equivalent? 2.2 [Only students with #SMAR] When did you obtain your #SMAR?; 2.3 [Only student without #SMAR] Where did you last attend the #regular school system?

Note(s): The percentage of those who transitioned from secondary school to HE with a delay of two or more years. In Austria students with alternative access routes are categorized as delayed (2 year or more).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: AT, CH, DE, EE, MT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: DE, IE, PL.

Considering the extent of alternative access and delayed transition to HE, EUROSTUDENT VII countries were positioned on a two-dimension axis matrix (Figure 4). The Y-axis shows the share of students having delayed

transition into HE, while the X-axis represents the share of alternative access route students. The crossing point of the axes represents the EUROSTUDENT VII average (in keeping with the calculations in the EUROSTUDENT main report, the

average is based only on countries in which the reference period fell before the COVID-19 pandemic).

Countries where the shares of delayed transition and alternative access route students exceed the EUROSTUDENT VII average are in the top-right quadrant. These countries can be considered as the most flexible in terms of accessibility to HE. It is easier to access HE in those countries in terms of time and the ways of enrolment. Four countries are found in this quadrant: Norway, Iceland, Malta, and Austria.

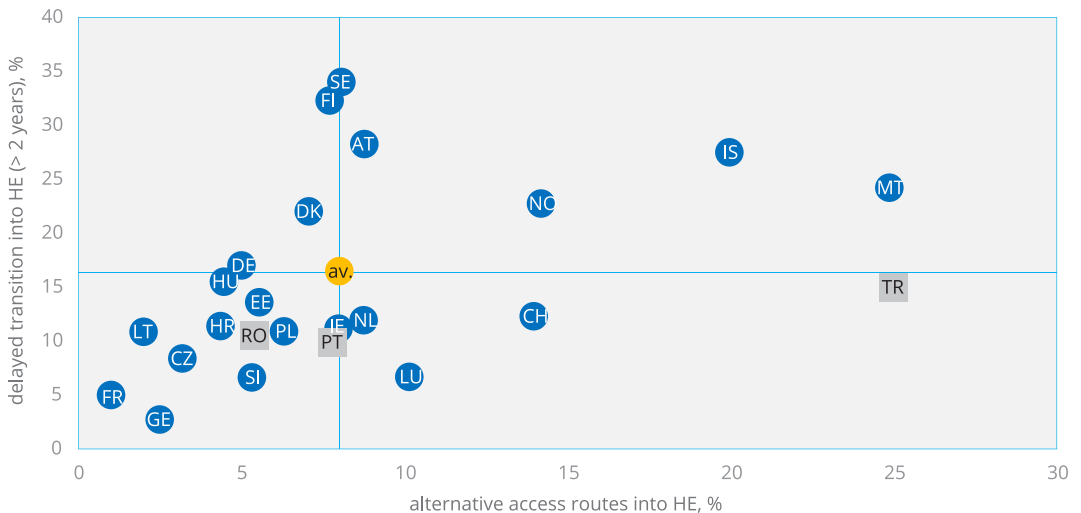
The bottom left quadrant represents the

opposite patterns. HE in these countries is dominated by traditional students, i.e. those who enter HE in a traditional way and directly after secondary school. Half of the EUROSTUDENT VII countries belong to this category.

Countries located in the top left and bottom right quadrants can be considered as flexible only in one of two analysed dimensions – either in the flexibility of access routes (the Netherlands, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Turkey) or in the transition into HE time (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Germany).

Figure 4. Delayed entry and alternative access to HE

Share of all students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.16, B.17. **No data:** IT.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.4 How long after leaving the #regular school system for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time? 2.1 Do you have a Standard Minimum Access Requirement (#SMAR) or foreign equivalent? 2.2 [Only students with #SMAR] When did you obtain your #SMAR?; 2.3 [Only student without #SMAR] Where did you last attend the #regular school system?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: AT, CH, FR, DE, EE, MT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: DE, IE, PL.

Blue shapes: data collection before COVID-19 pandemic. Grey shapes: data collection during COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2 Which student groups are most likely to enter HE in a delayed/non-traditional manner?

A more diverse student population comes with more diverse needs and demands for HE, having a different set of skills and motivations for studying (Unger and Zaussinger, 2018). Knowledge about the background of students undergoing non-traditional entry into HE may provide valuable information for the improvement of HEIs performance in the provision of relevant services, about the corresponding needs of non-traditional students, and for identifying the challenges students might face during the study process. Moreover, analysis

of student profiles will complement the whole picture of analysed student groups, highlighting their main similarities and differences through the scope of the social dimension.

The profiles of the examined target groups are provided in the infographics. The numbers represent the EUROSTUDENT VII countries¹ average. For detailed splits across countries please refer to the data base of EURISTUDENT VII (<https://database.eurostudent.eu/>).

Socio-demographic profiles

In general, a delayed transition into HE is related to an older age of students. Every second delayed transition student is over 30 years old; in contrast, 71 % of direct transition students are younger than 25 years old. The age of delayed transition students upon entrance to HE is also considerably higher than that of those who transitioned into HE directly after school. On average, 40 % of delayed transition students entered HE at the age of 25 or older. The older age upon entry into HE is also more common among alternative access route students, but two-thirds of them enter HE before the age of 25.

Whereas women tend to be overrepresented among delayed transition students, the gender balance is mainly maintained among the alternative access route students.

Students with children make up a considerably greater share among delayed transition and alternative access route students than their traditional entry counterparts. On average, 34 % of students who have entered higher education more than two years after leaving school have children compared to 7 % of those who transitioned directly. It means that every third delayed transition or alternative access route

¹ Averages are calculated from countries where data collection took in spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016). IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021) are excluded from countries averages.

student must find ways to balance their childcare responsibilities with their studies.

Educational background, i.e. the highest level of parents' education, is an important factor affecting students' journey from the secondary school system to HE and within HE. EUROSTUDENT VII results show that among non-traditional students, the share of students without a tertiary education background is higher than among traditional students (for instance, 56 % of delayed transition students come

from lower educational background families whereas among direct transition students this share makes up 37 %). Furthermore, non-traditional students more often come from families who are financially disadvantaged (based on students' self-assessment) compared to their fellow students who transitioned to HE via traditional pathways. The less affluent financial background of non-traditional students indicates the potential difficulties that can arise and the need to support these students on their journey toward graduation.

Study-related characteristics

Delayed transition students in most EUROSTUDENT VII countries study at non-university² types of HEIs more often than direct transition students (ca 40% vs. 23%). Similar proportions are noticeable when comparing alternative and standard access route students.

Additionally, the formal status of enrolment in HE vastly differs when comparing traditional students with non-traditional students. 38 % of students who have entered HE with a long delay after school reported studying in a part-time study program. This share is roughly threefold lower among the direct transition students. Alternative access route students also tend to study in part-time programs, though to a lesser

extent than delayed transition students (25 % on average).

Interestingly, the actual reported study intensity among alternative and standard access route students remains almost the same (both spend 33-34 hours per week on average on study-related activities). Students who have entered HE with a long delay after school spend slightly less time on study-related activities in an average week (32 hours) than those who transitioned into HE without interruptions (35 hours).

When comparing delayed and direct transition students' profile by their field of study, the observed differences are minimal. A slightly higher share of

² Types of HEIs are characterised based on national legislation and understanding. If a distinction between types of HEIs exists within a country, institutions classified as universities are typically allowed to award doctoral degrees. Other types of HEIs may include, depending on national legislation, universities of applied sciences, polytechnics, professional HEIs, and similar institutions, which offer HE programmes covered in the EUROSTUDENT standard target group. These are included in the EUROSTUDENT focus group 'non-university'.

students who have entered HE after more than two years of leaving school can be found in education, business, or healthcare fields. In contrast,

engineering, natural or social sciences are slightly more popular among direct transition students.

Employment characteristics

Delayed transition and alternative access routes students engage in paid employment alongside studies more often compared to the traditional student population in almost all EUROSTUDENT VII countries. On average, 71 % of delayed transition students are working alongside their studies, whereas, among direct transition students, this share is lower by 12 percentage points. Alternative access route students tend to engage in paid employment slightly more often than their standard access peers (on average, 65 % and 61 %, respectively). As delayed transition and alternative access route students are more engaged in employment during the whole lecture period, they also report spending more time on paid jobs. For instance, delayed transition students report spending 20 hours per week on average on paid jobs, whereas their direct transition peers report spending 12 hours. When comparing alternative and standard access route students' time spent on paid jobs, the difference makes up four hours per week on average. Therefore, delayed transition and alternative access students have a tighter time budget.

Differences in students' self-perception indicate the heterogeneity of delayed

and direct transition, as well as of alternative and standard access route students. Working students who have entered HE more than two years after leaving school are vastly more likely to perceive themselves as a worker rather than as a student, and this is true for 56 % of them. Direct transition students working during the whole lecture period mainly self-identify firstly as a student (71 %). Roughly the same trend is observed when comparing alternative and standard access route students.

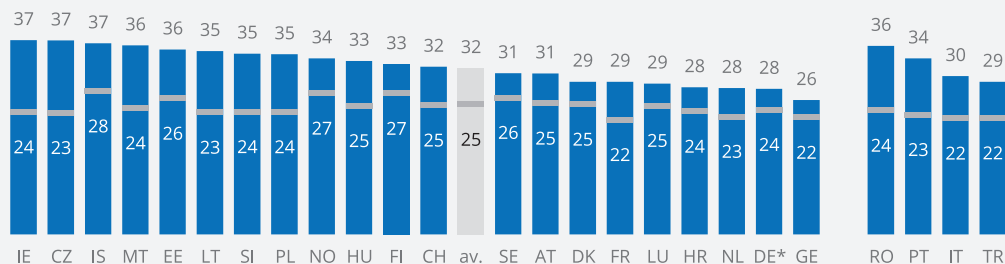
According to students' perceptions, working alongside studies is mainly driven by financial reasons. On average, roughly three-quarters of students who have entered higher education more than two years after leaving school agree that covering living costs requires them to work when studying. Two-thirds of them agree that they could not afford to study without paid jobs. Four of ten delayed transition working students report working because of the necessity to support other dependents financially. The reasons to have a paid job during one's study period remain quite similar among alternative access route students as well.

PROFILE OF DELAYED AND DIRECT TRANSITION STUDENTS

How to read: Students with children make up 34 % of the delayed transition student population, those without children – 66 %. Among direct transition students, the share of students with children makes up 7 %, and the remaining 93 % have no children.

Delayed transition students are on average seven years older than their direct transition counterparts. Nevertheless, the average age variation across sample countries is considerable

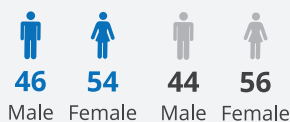
Mean age in years



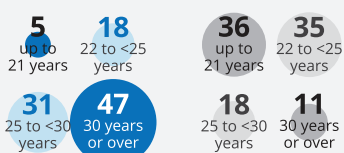
Socio-demographic profile

Sample averages (in %)

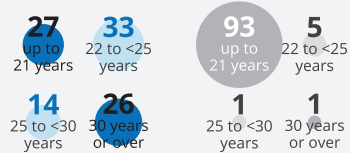
Sex



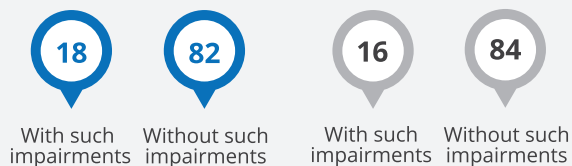
Age at time of the survey



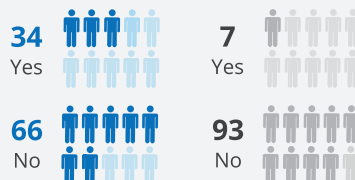
Age at entering HE



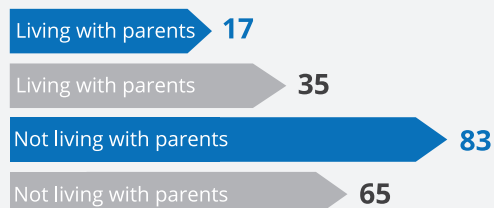
Impairments limiting in studies



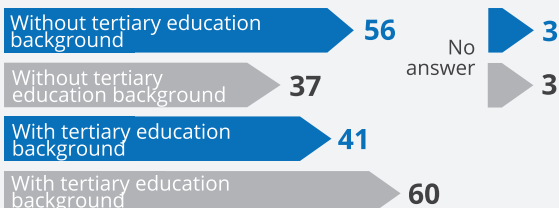
Students with children



Housing situation



Educational background



Assessment of parental wealth relative to other families

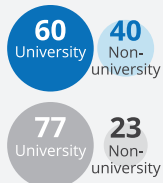


■ Delayed transition students ■ Direct transition students

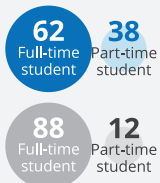
Study-related characteristics

Sample averages (in %)

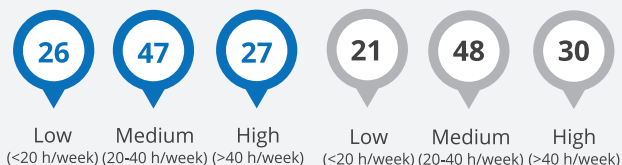
Type of HEI



Formal status of enrolment



Study intensity



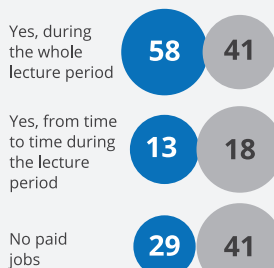
Field of study



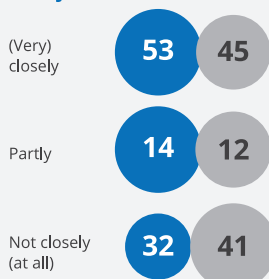
Employment-related characteristics

Sample averages (in %)

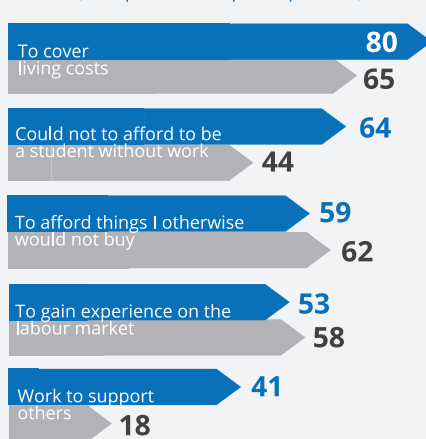
Students with paid jobs



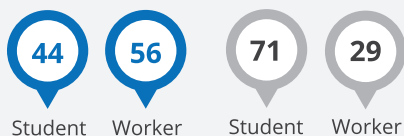
Relation between previous job and studies*



Motivation to work* (multiple answer options possible)



Self-perception as worker or student*



* Students working from time to time or during the whole lecture period

Time budget

Hours per week, on average

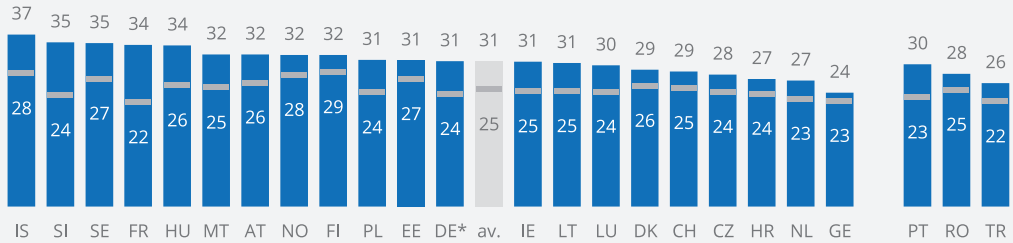


PROFILE OF ALTERNATIVE AND STANDARD ACCESS ROUTE STUDENTS

How to read: : Students with children make up 29 % of alternative access route students, those without children - 71 %. Among standard access route students, the share of students with children makes up 10 %, and the remaining 90 % have no children.

Alternative access route students are on average six years older than those who accessed HE via standard route. Large differences between and within countries exist with regard to students' age

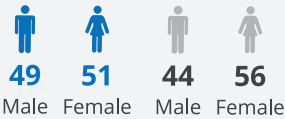
Average age in years



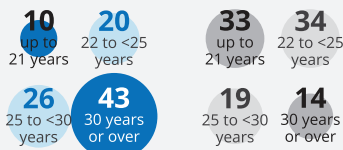
Socio-demographic profile

Sample averages (in %)

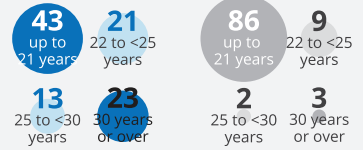
Sex



Age at time of the survey



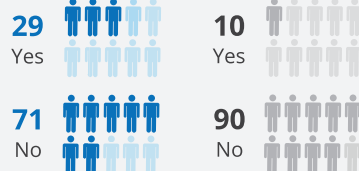
Age at entering HE



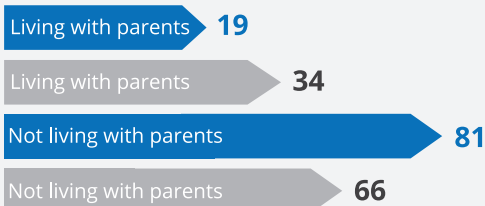
Impairments limiting in studies



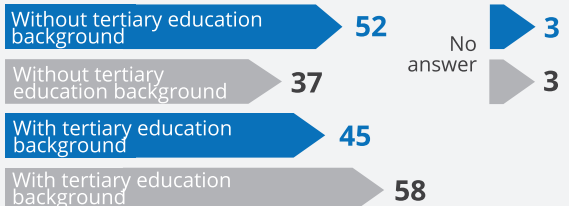
Students with children



Housing situation



Educational background



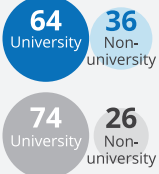
Assessment of parental wealth relative to other families



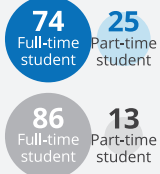
Study-related characteristics

Sample averages (in %)

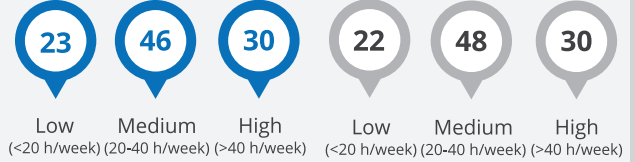
Type of HEI



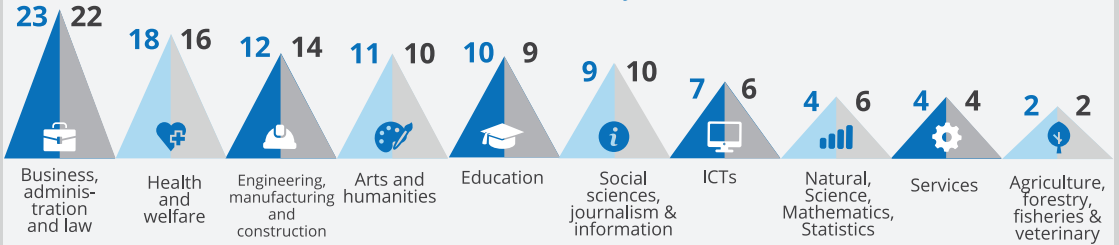
Formal status of enrolment



Study intensity



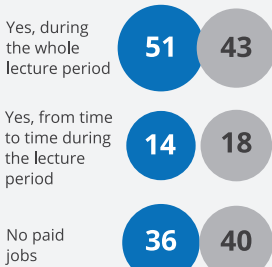
Field of study



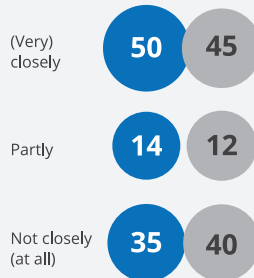
Employment-related characteristics

Sample averages (in %)

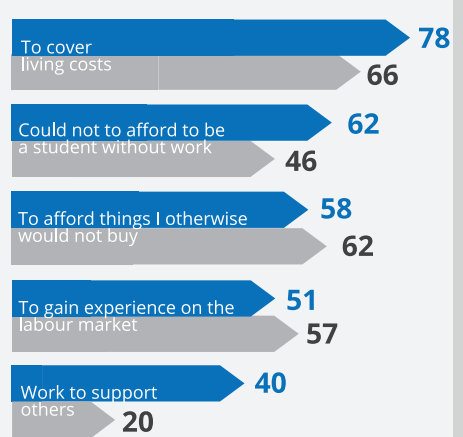
Students with paid jobs



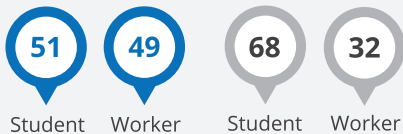
Relation between previous job and studies*



Motivation to work* (multiple answer options possible)



Self-perception as worker or student*



* Students working from time to time or during the whole lecture period

Time budget

Hours per week, on average



3.3 What is the scope of RPL practices within flexible entry pathways?

The RPL (making non-formal and informal learning transferable when accessing HE and progressing through programmes) or HEIs can increase the openness of HE and make access more flexible. RPL policies are considered a key enabler of alternative admission routes (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). RPL and widening access through validation of non-formal

and informal learning are among the top priorities of various policies. However, the degree of implementation still varies greatly across countries (Unger and Zaussinger, 2018). In this review, we seek to measure the RPL experience among focus groups, i.e. those students who transitioned into HE with a delay or using alternative access routes.

3.3.1 RPL among delayed transition students

3.3.1.1 The scope of prior work experience

Students who delay entry to HE or access it using alternative access routes more often enter HE already having some prior learning and/or work experience. Acknowledgement of the value of prior working could facilitate admission to HE or the study process. The further analysis comes in line with the policies related to RPL for access to HE (e.g. exemption from certain access requirements) and progression (e.g. exemption from certain requirements like specific courses or compulsory internships). The extent to which prior learning was recognized during the admission to HE and/or while studying is investigated based on students' reported experience. Before analysing the RPL practices, the extent of prior regular work experience (i.e. experiences in which students have been working for at least one year and more than 20 hours per week) will be investigated.

Students entering HE after being outside

of the educational system for two years or longer usually bring some prior work experience, unlike their counterparts who enter HE right after secondary school or within two years of finishing it. As a cross-country average, 69 % of students with a large gap between school and HE have regular work experience. In contrast, only 17 % reported having regular work experience before entering HE among direct transition students. However, results greatly differ between countries when comparing students with prior work experience by transition into HE time. The largest share (at least 80 %) of delayed transition students with prior work experience can be found in the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Iceland, Sweden, and Romania, whereas the lowest shares are found in Turkey, Italy, and Georgia.

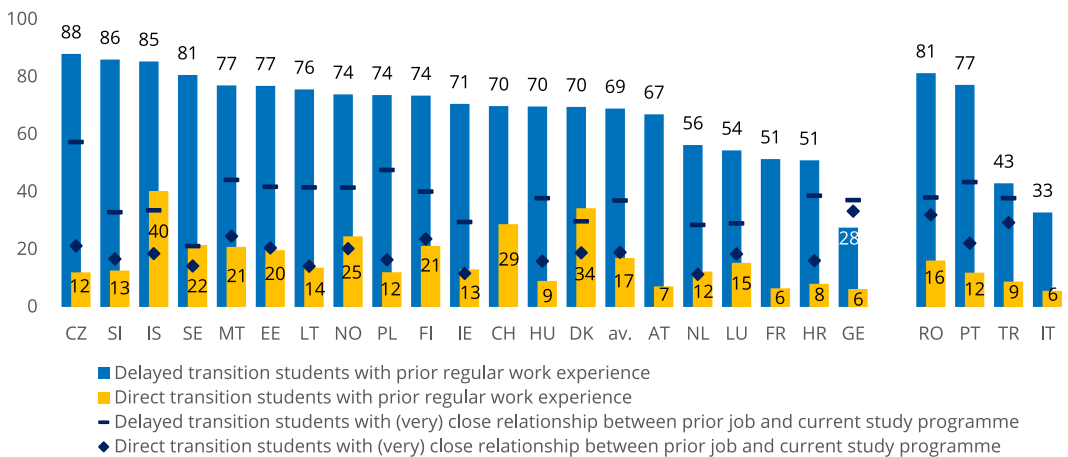
EUROSTUDENT VII results also allow us to measure to what extent the prior professional experience and current

study programme are related (students evaluated how close the relationship between the prior job and current study programme is). Prior work experience, especially when related to the current study programme, can be expected to be recognised upon admission to HE or within the studies through RPL practices. A (close) relationship between the prior job and current study programme is twice as common for students who entered HE with a delay than those who transitioned into HE directly after school (on average 37 % and 19 %, respectively). In countries like Sweden, Ireland, Iceland,

and Slovenia, a comparatively higher share of students work while taking a break between secondary school and HE, yet their prior paid work experience is relatively less related to the current study programme compared to the EUROSTUDENT VII countries' average. A different pattern is evident in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Malta, where delayed transition students enter HE also being relatively more professionally experienced, and their prior work and current study programme are more related than in the sample average.

Figure 5. Students having regular (> 1 year, > 20h/w) prior work experience by transition time and the (close) relationship between prior paid job and current study programme

Share of students with regular work experience prior to entering HE (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.20; B.23. No data: 2.9. DE, 2.10. DE, AT, CH, IT, FR.

Data collection: Spring 2019, IT, PT, RO, TR (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.9. Did you have any paid job(s) prior to entering higher education for the first time? 2.10. How closely related was/were your paid job(s) to your current #(main) study programme?

Note(s): 2.9. The share of students having a regular prior work experience, i.e. who worked continuously for at least one year without interruption and at least 20 h per week. 2.10. Percentage from students with regular prior work experience (irrespective of duration and working hours).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: 2.9. AT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, IT, PL.

3.3.1.2 RPL during the admission to HE and over the course of the studies

The RPL is considered to be an important tool to improve the conditions for under-represented groups to access HE. However, the insufficiency of concrete actions to implement the framework for the RPL among many countries has also been identified (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). European higher education systems aim to accelerate the recognition and portability of qualifications for further learning (European Commission, 2020). A national qualifications framework plays an important role in expanding the RPL practices. National qualifications frameworks facilitate entry to and progression through HE based on learning outcomes and competences comparable across institutions and study programmes (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). EUROSTUDENT VII results reveal the experience of RPL among target groups and the peculiarities of its application practices across countries.

As noted at the beginning of the chapter, in the EUROSTUDENT VII survey, RPL experience is separately investigated upon the initial admission to HE and during the study period. Upon admission, the focus is on the recognition of prior professional/work experience. When investigating the study period, the focus is not on the professional experience only, but experience/competences gained outside and within the formal education system is also examined.

Figure 6 shows the RPL experience among delayed and direct transition students. In all the sample countries,

the recognition of previous professional experience is more common among delayed than direct transition students. However, despite a relatively common practice to study in a HE programme which is related to one's professional experience (on average, 37 % of delayed transition students have a (close) study-related prior professional experience), the recognition of prior work experience is not commonly considered upon admission to HE. On average, 17 % of students who have entered higher education more than two years after leaving school report that their previous professional experience was considered during the admission into the current study programme, while a lesser number (14 %) report that it was recognised over the course of their studies.

Professional experience plays a more considerable role upon admission to HE in Denmark, Ireland, and Malta, where every third delayed transition student benefits from it. In contrast, in Georgia or Sweden, the recognition of prior work experience usually does not play any role upon admission for the vast majority of delayed transition students.

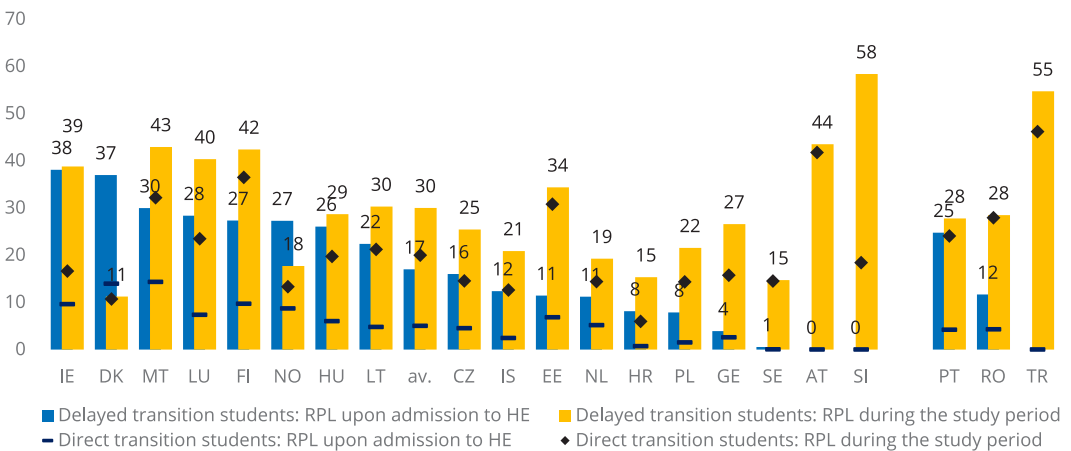
Previously gained experience/competences were recognised during the study process for 30 % of delayed transition students on average. A considerably smaller share (20 %) of direct transition students reported having any RPL experience during the studies. However, the experience of RPL varies greatly among EUROSTUDENT VII

countries. In Denmark, Estonia, Austria, Sweden and Romania, the difference of RPL experience between delayed and direct transition students is minimal and makes up to three percentage points. In contrast, in Slovenia, Ireland, and Luxembourg, delayed transition students have considerably more RPL experience compared to those who transitioned HE within two years after secondary school. Variations of implementation and regulation of RPL practices determine large cross-country variations. In some

cases, a recognition procedure is enough for applicants to access (selected) higher education programmes. Still, the application of such a recognition procedure is not compulsory for higher education institutions in other countries. For instance, in Austria, Germany and Portugal, the recognition procedure is not enough for applicants to access HE – the candidates must pass an additional entrance examination (EC/EACEA/ Eurydice, 2020).

Figure 6. RPL experience among delayed and direct transition students

Share of all delayed and direct transition students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.21, B.24. **No data:** 2.7. DE, FR, CH, IT, 2.8. DE, FR, CH, IT.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), PT, RO, TR (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.7. Was any previous work experience explicitly taken into account in #country during your initial admission process into higher education? 2.8. Did you officially replace any requirements in your current #(main) study programme with previously gained experience/competences?

Note(s): 2.7. The percent of those, who answered “Yes, my professional experience was otherwise explicitly taken into account in my initial admission process (e.g. advantages in the allocation of study places via #quota/#higher score values for GPA)”. 2.8. The percent of those, who choose at least one of three options: “Yes, through recognition of my work experience”, “Yes, through recognition of competences gained outside of school or higher education study programmes (e.g. non-formal courses, self-study, volunteer work etc.)”, “Yes, through recognition of competences gained in other higher education study programmes or school”.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: 2.7. AT, SI, CZ, EE, GE, HU, PL, SE, TR; 2.8. EE, MT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

To examine the structure of RPL in the study process, EUROSTUDENT VII also differentiates the recognised previous

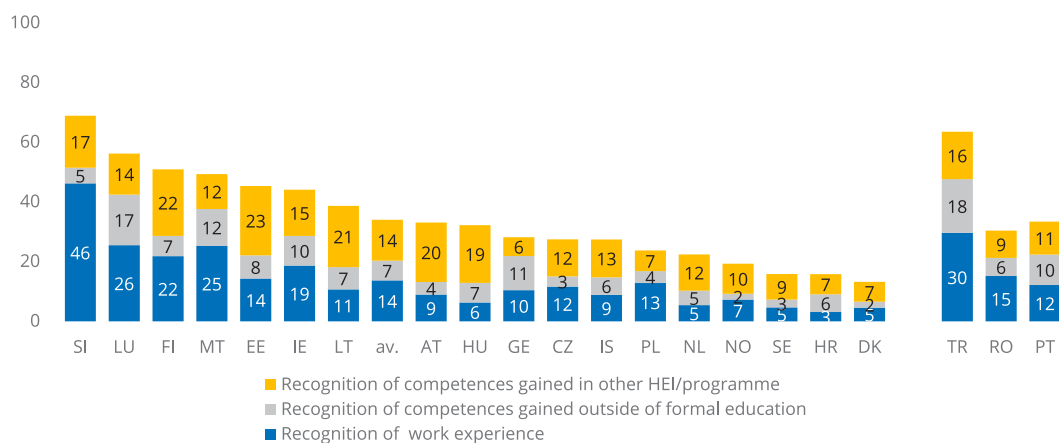
learning experience/competences by its origin (Figure 7). The results show that competences/experience from

other HEI/programmes and work experience were more often recognised than the competences gained outside of formal education (on average 14 % and 7 %, respectively). There is also a considerable cross-country variation in the application of RPL during the study period. In Slovenia, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Romania, and Turkey, the recognition of work experience dominates compared to other examined types of prior learning (i.e. competences gained in other HEI/programme or competences gained outside of formal education) among delayed transition students.

Recognition of competences gained in other HEI/programmes is more commonly applied than the other ones in Estonia, Lithuania, Austria, Iceland, Hungary, Norway, and the Netherlands. Despite the link between non-formal learning and formal education being an important factor in strengthening inclusion and reducing socio-economic inequalities (European Commission, 2020), EUROSTUDENT VII results show that the recognition of competences gained outside formal education remains the least applicable.

Figure 7. RPL experience during the study period among delayed transition students

Share of delayed transition students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.24. **No data:** DE, FR, CH, IT.

Data collection: Spring 2019, PT, RO, TR (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.8. Did you officially replace any requirements in your current #(main) study programme with previously gained experience/competences?

Note(s): Multiple answer options possible.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, MT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

The generalised overview of RPL practices among students with a large gap between school and HE across

EUROSTUDENT VII countries is presented in Figure 8. A two-dimension matrix is used to visualise the practices of RPL

among delayed transition students. RPL at the initial admission to HE is depicted on the Y-axis, and RPL throughout the progress of the studies - on the X-axis. Considering these two dimensions and the EUROSTUDENT VII average as a crossing point of axes, four country types with different RPL practices can be identified. Moreover, considering prior work experience (Figure 5), countries in the matrix are marked in different shape symbols (the meaning of each symbol is explained below the matrix).

Countries with relatively more frequently applicable RPL practices upon admission and during the study period can be found in the top-right quadrant. Four countries hold a strong position here: Ireland, Finland, Malta, and Luxembourg. The greater RPL experience among delayed transition students reflects the larger prior work experience in these countries, except Luxembourg, where the share of delayed transition students has comparatively less prior regular work experience. Still, the extent of recognition of prior work experience in this country is larger than the sample average.

The bottom left quadrant represents the weakest RPL extent among delayed transition students either during the

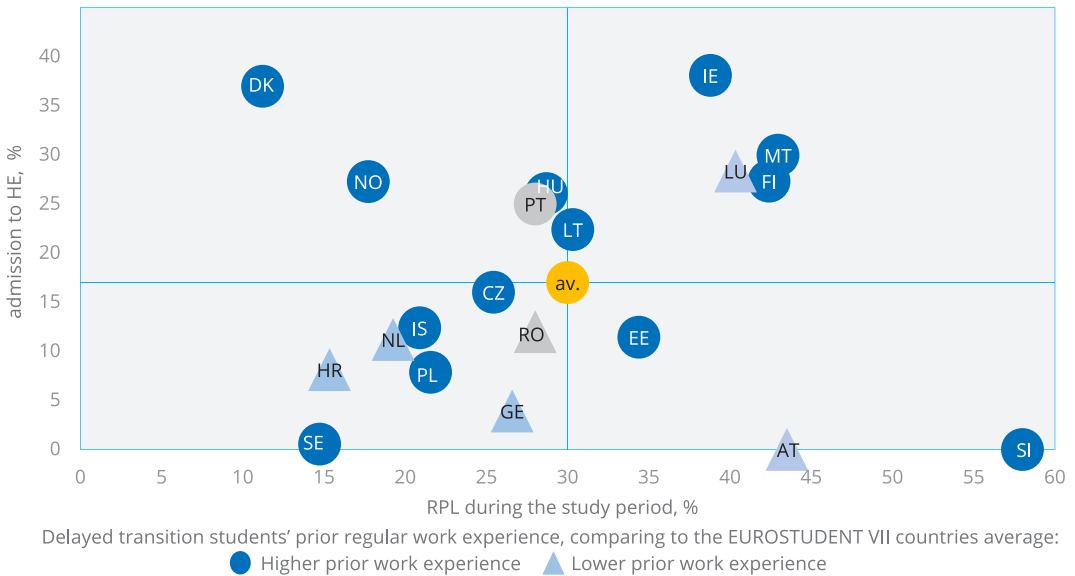
initial admission to HE or over the course of the studies – roughly 40 % of countries belonging to this quadrant. Iceland, the Czech Republic, and Poland have a potential to demonstrate a larger recognition of prior work experience practices since the share of delayed transition students with regular prior work experience exceeds the average.

In the top-left and bottom-right quadrants, countries demonstrating the comparatively large extent of applying one of two examined RPL indicators – the recognition of prior work experience upon admission to HE (the top-left) or RPL during the study process (the bottom-right) can be found. Estonia holds the position in this quarter. The opposite patterns can be found in Norway, Denmark, Portugal, or Hungary where delayed transition students prior work experience facilitate enrolment to a comparatively large extent. Still, their experience of RPL during the studies is not frequent.

An atypical position in this quarter belongs to Austria, Slovenia, and Sweden, as the recognition of prior work experience is not applicable upon admission to HE but are widely applied during the studies.

Figure 8. RPL upon admission and over the course of the studies among delayed transition students

Share of all delayed transition students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.21, B24. No data: DE, CH, FR, IT, TR.

Data collection: Spring 2019, PT, RO, TR (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.7. Was any previous work experience explicitly taken into account in #country during your initial admission process into higher education? 2.8. Did you officially replace any requirements in your current #(main) study programme with previously gained experience/competences?

Note(s): 2.7. the percent of those, who answered “Yes, my professional experience was otherwise explicitly taken into account in my initial admission process (e.g. advantages in the allocation of study places via #quota/#higher score values for GPA)”. 2.8. the percent of those, who chose at least one of three options: “Yes, through recognition of my work experience”, “Yes, through recognition of competences gained outside of school or higher education study programmes (e.g. non-formal courses, self-study, volunteer work etc.)”, “Yes, through recognition of competences gained in other higher education study programmes or school”.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: 2.7. AT, SI, CZ, EE, GE, HU, PL, SE. 2.8. EE, MT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

Blue shapes: data collection before COVID-19 pandemic. **Grey shapes:** data collection during COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3.2 RPL among alternative access route students

3.3.2.1 The scope of prior work experience

Alternative access route students, usually being older than their peers who enter HE through the traditional access route, are more professionally experienced, i.e. considerably larger share of them have been working before entering HE. More than half of alternative access routes students enter HE having prior regular work experience. The average share of

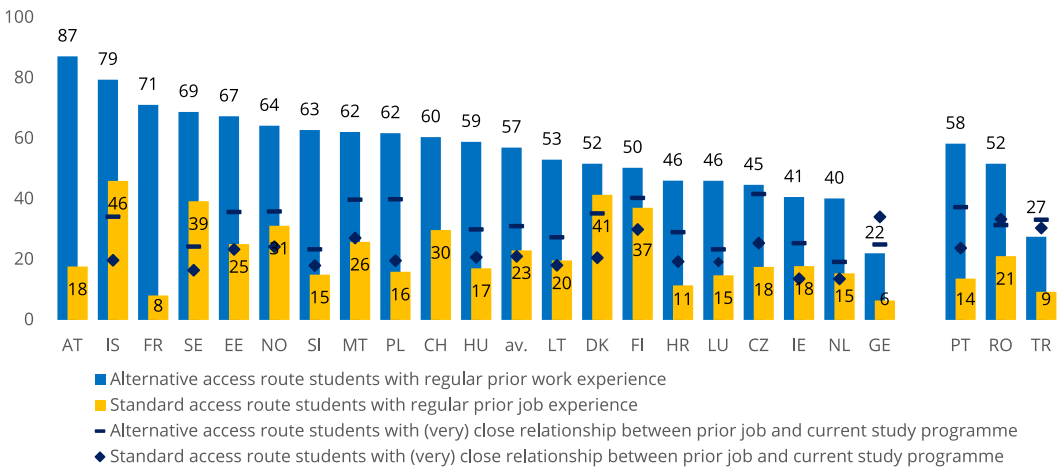
professionally experienced (i.e. having regular work experience) standard access route students is more than twice as low and makes up 23 %. Nevertheless, the cross-country variations are notable. The largest differences (45 percentage points or even larger) between alternative and standard access route students’ prior regular work experience can be found in

Austria, France, Slovenia, Portugal, and Poland. In contrast, the comparatively lowest difference is in Finland and Denmark (10 and 13 percentage points, respectively). Moreover, alternative access route students with prior work experience also report a closer relationship (on average, 31 % vs 21 % among standard access route students)

between their prior job and the current study programme. The largest shares of alternative access route students having a close relationship between the prior job and current study programme are in Malta, Poland, Finland, and the Czech Republic (roughly 40 %), while the lowest is present in Sweden and Slovenia (roughly one quarter).

Figure 9. Students having regular prior (> 1 year, > 20h/w) work experience by access routes and the (close) relationship between prior paid job and current study programme

Share of students with regular work experience prior to entering higher education (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.20; B.23. **No data:** 2.9. DE, IT, 2.10. DE, IT, AT, CH, FR.

Data collection: Spring 2019, PT, RO, TR (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.9. Did you have any paid job(s) prior to entering higher education for the first time? 2.10. How closely related was/were your paid job(s) to your current #(main) study programme?

Note(s): 2.9. The share of students, having a regular prior work experience, i.e. who worked continuously for at least one year without interruption and at least 20 h per week. 2.10. Percentage from students with regular prior work experience (irrespective of duration and working hours).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: 2.9. AT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

3.3.2.2 RPL during the admission to HE and over the course of the studies

Further in this chapter, RPL experience will be investigated. The focus is on the extent to which previously gained competences/experience was

recognised upon admission to HE, or during the progress of one's studies among students who entered HE via alternative access routes (Figure 10).

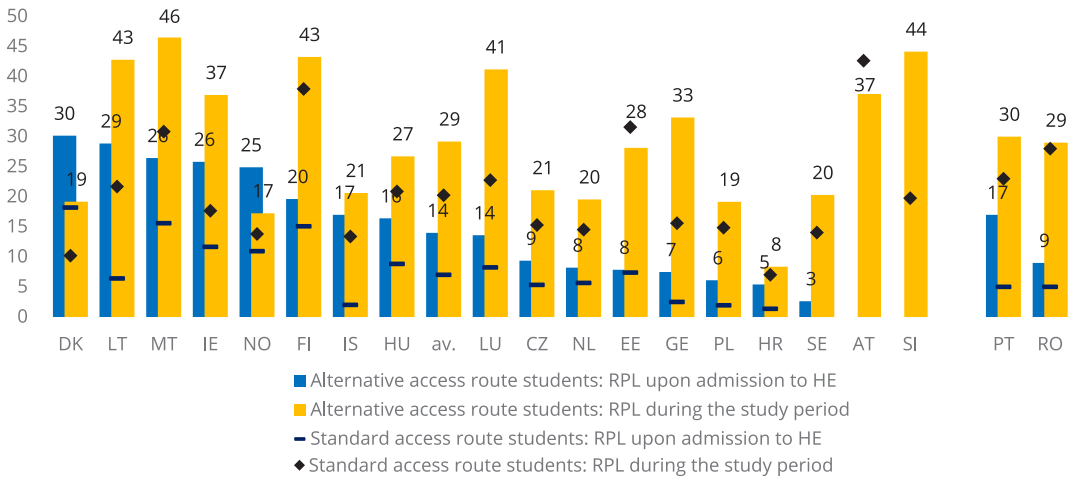
The professional experience acquired before HE studies plays a more considerable role within the initial admission to HE among alternative access route students compared to those admitted via standard routes practically in all sample countries (except Estonia, where roughly the same share – 7 % of students from analysed focus groups reports the recognised prior work experience upon admission to HE). However, the prior work experience does not play a considerable role upon admission to HE for the majority of students who have entered HE via alternative access routes. On average, 14 % of alternative access route students report that their prior work experience was considered upon admission to HE. Roughly the same share of these students (13 %) has an experience of recognition of professional experience over the course of their studies (Figure 11). In total, 29 % of alternative access route students reported having any experience of RPL over the course of their studies, including the recognition of formal and non-formal education, as well as work experience. RPL practices are relevant to a twice lower share of traditional access route students.

EUROSTUDENT VII countries demonstrate a large variety of recognition practices upon the initial admission to HE: among alternative access route students, the RPL experience varies from approximately 30 % in Denmark and Lithuania to 6 % (or less) in Poland, Croatia, and Sweden. The largest share of alternative access route students having RPL experience over the course of the studies is in Malta (46 %), followed by Slovenia, Luxembourg, Finland, and Lithuania. In contrast, the lowest shares can be found in Croatia (8 %). However, in some countries, like Austria, Estonia, or Croatia, RPL practices are similar or even slightly more common among standard access routes students.

When interpreting Austria's RPL upon admission related results, it is important to bear in mind that in this country every second alternative access route student reported that their work experience replaced a #SMAR (Standard Minimum Access Requirement) upon initial admission to HE.

Figure 10. RPL experience among alternative and standard access route students

Share of all alternative and standard access route students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.21, B.24. No data: 2.7. DE, FR, CH, IT, TR. 2.8. DE, FR, CH, IT.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except PT, RO (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.7. Was any previous work experience explicitly taken into account in #country during your initial admission process into higher education? 2.8. Did you officially replace any requirements in your current #(main) study programme with previously gained experience/competences?

Note(s): 2.7. the percent of those, who answered "Yes, my professional experience was otherwise explicitly taken into account in my initial admission process (e.g. advantages in the allocation of study places via #quota/#higher score values for GPA)". 2.8. the percent of those, who choose at least one of three options: "Yes, through recognition of my work experience", "Yes, through recognition of competences gained outside of school or higher education study programmes (e.g. non-formal courses, self-study, volunteer work etc.)", "Yes, through recognition of competences gained in other higher education study programmes or school".

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: 2.7. AT, SI, CZ, EE, GE, HU, PL, SE. 2.8. EE, MT.

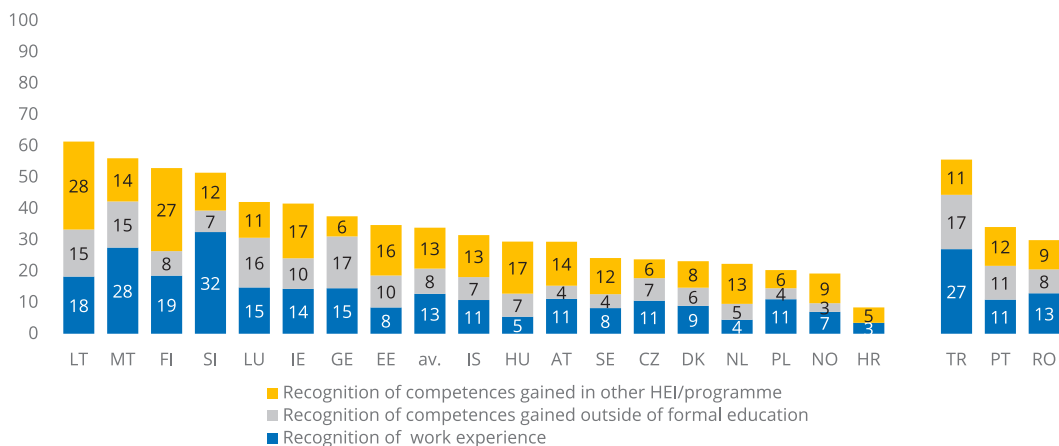
Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

There also are large disparities between countries regarding the extent to which the practices of RPL are applied among alternative access route students in the progress of studies. Competences from other HEIs/programmes and work experience are often recognised among alternative access route students (Figure 11). Each was applied to 13 % of the alternative access route students on average. Nevertheless, the extent of RPL during the study period varies notably

across EUROSTUDENT VII countries. The recognition of work experience among students who have entered HE via alternative access routes varies from 3 % in Croatia, to 32 % in Slovenia, or 28 % in Malta. The recognition of competences gained in other HEI/programmes dominates in Lithuania, Finland, Estonia, Hungary, and Ireland. RPL of informal learning is less common across countries and varies from 0 % in Croatia, or 3 % in Norway, to 17 % in Turkey and Georgia.

Figure 11. RPL experience during the study period among alternative access route students

Share of all alternative access route students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.24. No data: DE, CH, FR, IT.

Data collection Spring 2019 except PT, RO, TR (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.8. Did you officially replace any requirements in your current #(main) study programme with previously gained experience/competences?

Note(s): Multiple answer options possible.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, MT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

Overall, across EUROSTUDENT VII countries, the various RPL practices apply to varying extent. To reflect the cross-country patterns in terms of RPL practices among students who entered HE via alternative access routes, sample countries were positioned on a two-dimension matrix (Figure 12). The X-axis depicts the share of alternative access route students who had an experience of RPL over the course of their studies, while the Y-axis shows the recognition of prior work experience upon the initial admission to HE. Considering these dimensions and the EUROSTUDENT VII averages as a crossing point of axes, four country types with different RPL practices were depicted. Moreover, considering prior work experience, countries in the matrix were visualised

with a different shape symbol (the meaning of each symbol is explained below the matrix).

Countries situated in the top-right quadrant exhibit comparatively higher application of RPL practices upon admission to HE and throughout the progression of studies. In this quadrant, four countries hold a strong position: Malta, Ireland, Finland, and Lithuania. Beyond the extent of RPL application, these countries have a slightly different prior work experience background. In Ireland, Lithuania, and Finland, the RPL experience among alternative access route students is above the average, while the extent of prior work experience does not exceed the sample average. Still, alternative access route students

in these countries benefit from RPL more often than the sample average. Alternative access route students in Malta enter HE with relatively more prior professional experience than the sample average, and the extent of recognition is also high.

In the countries belonging to the bottom left quadrant, the practices of RPL application among alternative access route students are comparatively the least common upon admission and during the study period. Thirty percent of countries fall in this quadrant.

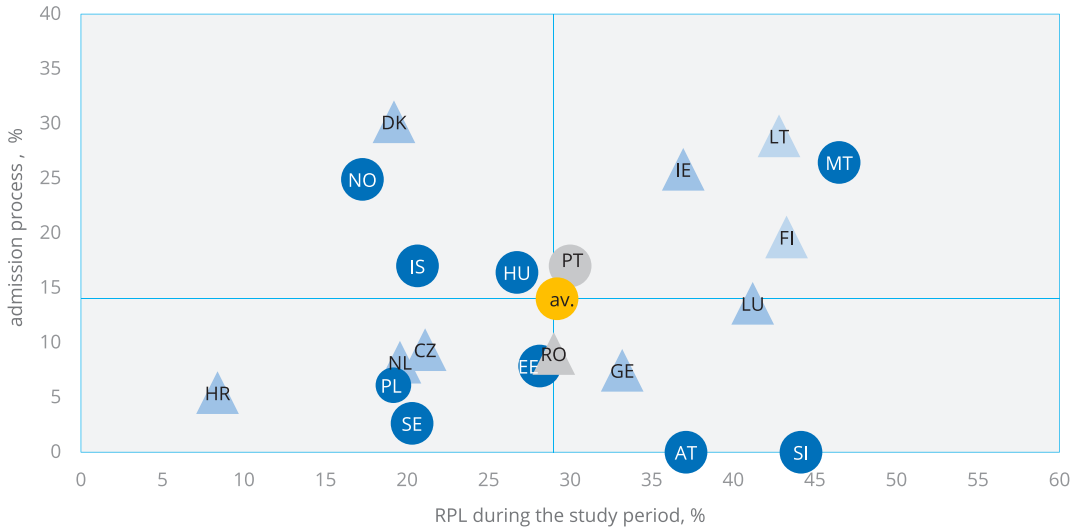
In the top-left and bottom-right quadrants are countries that demonstrate a comparatively larger extent of applying one of two examined RPL indicators – the recognition of prior work experience upon admission to HE (the top-left quarter) or RPL during the study process (the bottom-right quadrant) can be found. In Luxembourg

and Georgia, prior work experience recognition seems to be less applicable upon admission to HE but is frequently applied during the studies. However, alternative access route students in Luxembourg and Georgia have relatively less prior regular work experience. The opposite patterns can be found in Norway, Denmark, Iceland, and Hungary, where the prior work experience of alternative access route students facilitates enrolment to a large extent. Still, their experience of RPL during the study period is not common.

Austria and Slovenia have relatively atypical positions in the matrix, where the option of considering prior work experience upon admission to HE is not applicable. Still, the value of any prior learning is frequently acknowledged during the studies in this case. Moreover, every second alternative access route student accessed HE in Austria by replacing a #SMAR with work experience.

Figure 12. RPL upon admission and over the course of the studies among alternative access route students

Share of all alternative access route students (in %)



Alternative access route students' prior regular work experience, comparing to the EUROSTUDENT VII countries average:

● Higher prior work experience ▲ Lower prior work experience

Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.21, B24. No data: DE, CH, IT, FR, TR.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except PT, RO (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.7. Was any previous work experience explicitly taken into account in #country during your initial admission process into higher education? 2.8. Did you officially replace any requirements in your current #(main) study programme with previously gained experience/competences?

Note(s): 2.7. the percent of those who answered "Yes, my professional experience was otherwise explicitly taken into account in my initial admission process (e.g. advantages in the allocation of study places via #quota/#higher score values for GPA)". 2.8. the percent of those, who choose at least one of three options: "Yes, through recognition of my work experience", "Yes, through recognition of competences gained outside of school or higher education study programmes (e.g. non-formal courses, self-study, volunteer work etc.)", "Yes, through recognition of competences gained in other higher education study programmes or school".

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: 2.7. AT, SI, CZ, EE, GE, HU, PL, SE. 2.8. EE, MT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

Blue shapes: data collection before COVID-19 pandemic. **Grey shapes:** data collection during COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Transition within HE

KEY FINDINGS

1. Every fourth student enters a Master's programme after being away from the HE system for at least two years, meaning that they are a delayed transition Master's student. Nevertheless, the share of delayed transition Master students varies greatly across EUROSTUDENT VII countries. In general, delayed transition to Master programmes is more prevalent than to Bachelor programmes.
2. There are more women (62 %) than men among the delayed transition Master students. Delayed transition Master students are, on average, 9 years older than their direct transition counterparts. Students who transitioned to the Master programme with a delay often have a different living situation from those who transitioned directly. For instance, they often live separately from parents, have children, and work alongside their studies. Moreover, they tend to work more intensively and study less intensively than those who started Master studies without interruption or within two years after graduating from a previous programme. A lower educational and financial family background is more common among delayed transition Master students than among their direct transition peers.
3. On average, 28 % of delayed transition Master students reported having a RPL experience during the current studies. The extent of RPL during the study period in the examined focus group varies greatly – from 64 % in Turkey, to 16 % in the Netherlands. Delayed transition Master students from countries where the data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic (Turkey, Portugal, and Romania) report having a greater experience of RPL (though it is not known if this result is affected by the pandemic).

4.1 What are cross-country patterns regarding the transition from Bachelor to Master studies?

To complete the whole scope of transition pathways to and within HE, EUROSTUDENT VII examines the transition pathways within HE, i.e. from Bachelor's to Master's programmes. This chapter focuses on Master students and their transition to the current study

programme – direct or delayed by at least two years after graduation from their previous HE degree. Transition into Master's programmes, student profiles, and RPL practices will be investigated further in this chapter. An in-depth analysis of transition within HE (direct vs

delayed) provides insights to ensuring relevant support for a smooth Master study process, especially for those who transition to HE with interruptions.

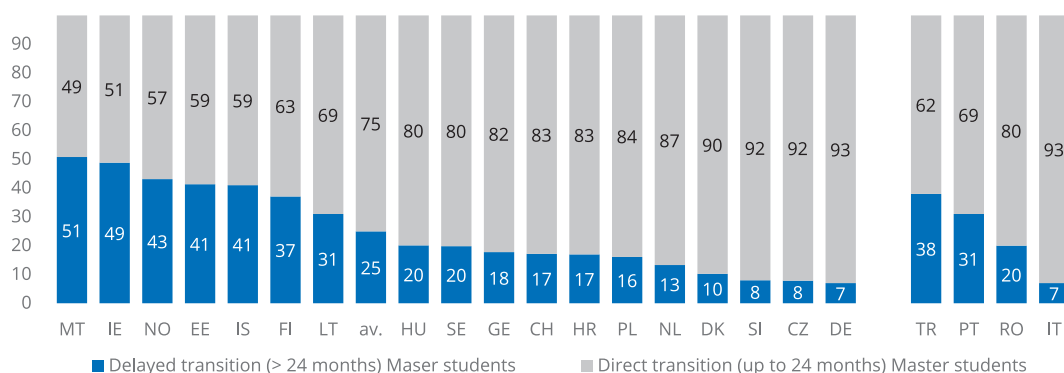
EUROSTUDENT VII results revealed that every fourth student has entered Master's studies in a delayed manner, which means taking a break of at least two years between graduating from the previous degree and the current programme. However, the share of delayed transition into Master studies varies from 7 % in Germany and Italy, or 8 % in the Czech Republic and Slovenia, to 49 % in Ireland or 51 % in Malta. In 13 out of 22 EUROSTUDENT VII countries, direct transition Master students make

up 80 % or more of the total Master student population.

Various factors may impact the transition within HE patterns. For instance, in Denmark, aiming to reduce the time until graduation, students are encouraged to start their HE programmes immediately after completing secondary school and to finish HE as soon as possible, or in other words, without interruptions (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). This is reflected in the results: the share of delayed transition students at the Bachelor's level is greater than average, but in the Master's programmes, the share of delayed transition students is among the lowest in the sample.

Figure 13. Transition from Bachelor to Master

Share of all alternative access route students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.9. No data: AT, LU, FR.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 1.9. [Only for Master students] How long after graduating from your previous study programme did you start your current Master programme?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: DE, DK, SE, IT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: DE, IE, IT, PL.

The duration between the transition into and within HE is largely related – countries having high shares of delayed transitions into HE also tend

to be the ones with higher shares of delayed transition between Bachelor and Master studies. Considering the delay to both Bachelor and Master

studies allows classifying countries by patterns of transitioning into and within HE. In Figure 14, the Y-axis depicts the share of delayed transition Master students, while the X-axis presents the share of delayed transition students in Bachelor's studies. The crossing point of the axes represents the EUROSTUDENT VII average (in accordance to the calculations in the EUROSTUDENT main report, the average is based only on countries in which the reference period was prior to the Covid-19 pandemic).

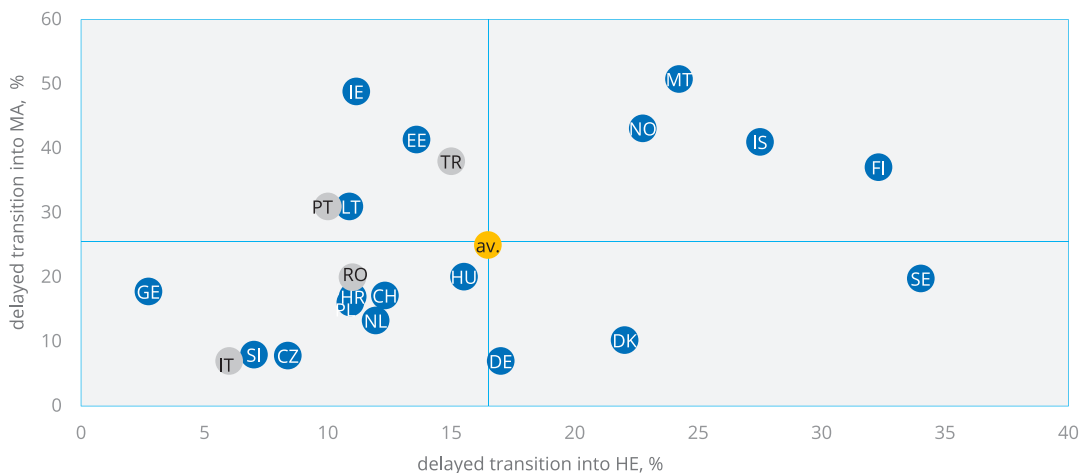
In Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Malta (the top-right quarter of the matrix), the flexible use of learning paths throughout HE is more common than the average. On the opposite end are countries where

straightforward paths to and within HE strongly dominate. Ten countries hold position in this quarter.

In Lithuania, Estonia, Ireland, Turkey and Portugal, the transition into Bachelor studies is more often direct compared to EUROSTUDENT VII countries average. However, Master studies more frequently follows a few years break. On the contrary, in Denmark, Sweden and Germany, a more common practice is to enter HE within a minimum two-year break after finishing school. Nevertheless, the transition into Master studies tends to happen immediately following graduation from Bachelor's studies.

Figure 14. Delayed entry into HE and delayed transition to Master programmes

Share of Bachelor and Master students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.9, B.16. No data: AT, LU, FR.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 1.9. [Only for Master students] How long after graduating from your previous study programme did you start your current Master programme? 2.4 How long after leaving the #regular school system for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: 1.9. DE, DK, SE, IT. 2.4. CH, DE, IT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: DE, IE, IT, PL.

Dark blue shapes: data collection before COVID-19 pandemic. **Grey shapes:** data collection during COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Which student groups are most likely to postpone transitioning to a Master's programme?

In this subchapter, the transition within HE will be investigated from the perspective of students who transitioned from Bachelor to Master directly or those who delayed transition to a Master by at least two or more years. The profile of Master students who transitioned to a Master programme with a delay versus those who did it directly will be portrayed

in terms of socio-demographic, study-related and employment characteristics. The profiles of examined target groups are provided in the infographics. The numbers represent the EUROSTUDENT VII countries average³. For detailed splits across countries please refer to the data base of EURISTUDENT VII (<http://database.eurostudent.eu/>).

Socio-demographic profiles

The greatest share of delayed transition MA students is over 30 years old (68 % on average), while in contrast, the largest majority (87 %) of direct transition MA students are younger than 30 years old. Nevertheless, when analysing age at the entry into HE, survey results suggest that interruptions of studies occurred during the study period rather than before entering HE for the first time. The age at the entry to HE for the first time was only slightly higher among delayed transition Master students – 74 % of delayed transition Master students entered initial HE programmes being 21 years old or younger. The respective share of those entering the Master programme directly is 86 %. Nevertheless, at the time of the survey, the average age differs to a considerably large extent.

At the Master's level, in almost all EUROSTUDENT VII countries, the share

of students with a tertiary education background is slightly higher among direct transition students (vs delayed transition). Moreover, it is also noticeable that the gap between direct and delayed transition Master students having a HE history in the family is comparatively low and makes up 6 percentage points on average. Meanwhile, in Bachelor studies, the gap between analysed groups is even larger (19 percentage points). These numbers suggest that delayed transition students without a tertiary education background are probably more likely to leave the HE system after graduating from their Bachelor's degree, or even before.

It is also important to stress that the gender imbalance among delayed transition Master students is evident. Women among delayed transition Master students make up 62 % of delayed

³ Averages are calculated from countries where data collection took in spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016). IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021) are excluded from countries averages.

transition students on average. At the Bachelor level, gender imbalance among students with a large time gap between school and HE is lower. This could be

explained by the fact that women more often experience study interruptions due to family situations.

Study-related characteristics

Analysis of study-related characteristics among focus groups reveals that delayed transition Master students tend to study less intensively than their direct transition counterparts. Part-time students make up nearly half of the delayed transition Master students, whereas this share is three times lower among their direct transition peers. Delayed transition Master students also tend to spend less time on study-related activities. On average, 37 % of delayed transition Master students are low-intensity students (i.e. they spend up to 20 hours a week on study-related activities). Among those who transitioned into Master programmes directly or within two-year interruption from previous HE studies, low-intensity students make up 26 % of this group. Moreover, if direct and delayed transition

Master students report spending roughly the same amount of time on taught studies (13 and 11 hours per week, respectively), then delayed transition Master students tend to spend slightly less time on personal study time (by at least 3 hours per week, on average).

Looking at delayed and direct transition Master student profiles by their field of study, some disparities can be found. Delayed transition Master students can be found slightly more often in education or healthcare fields of study. In contrast, direct transition Master students more often study engineering and natural sciences, or mathematics/statistics. Similar trends were identified among delayed transition students at the Bachelor level.

Employment characteristics

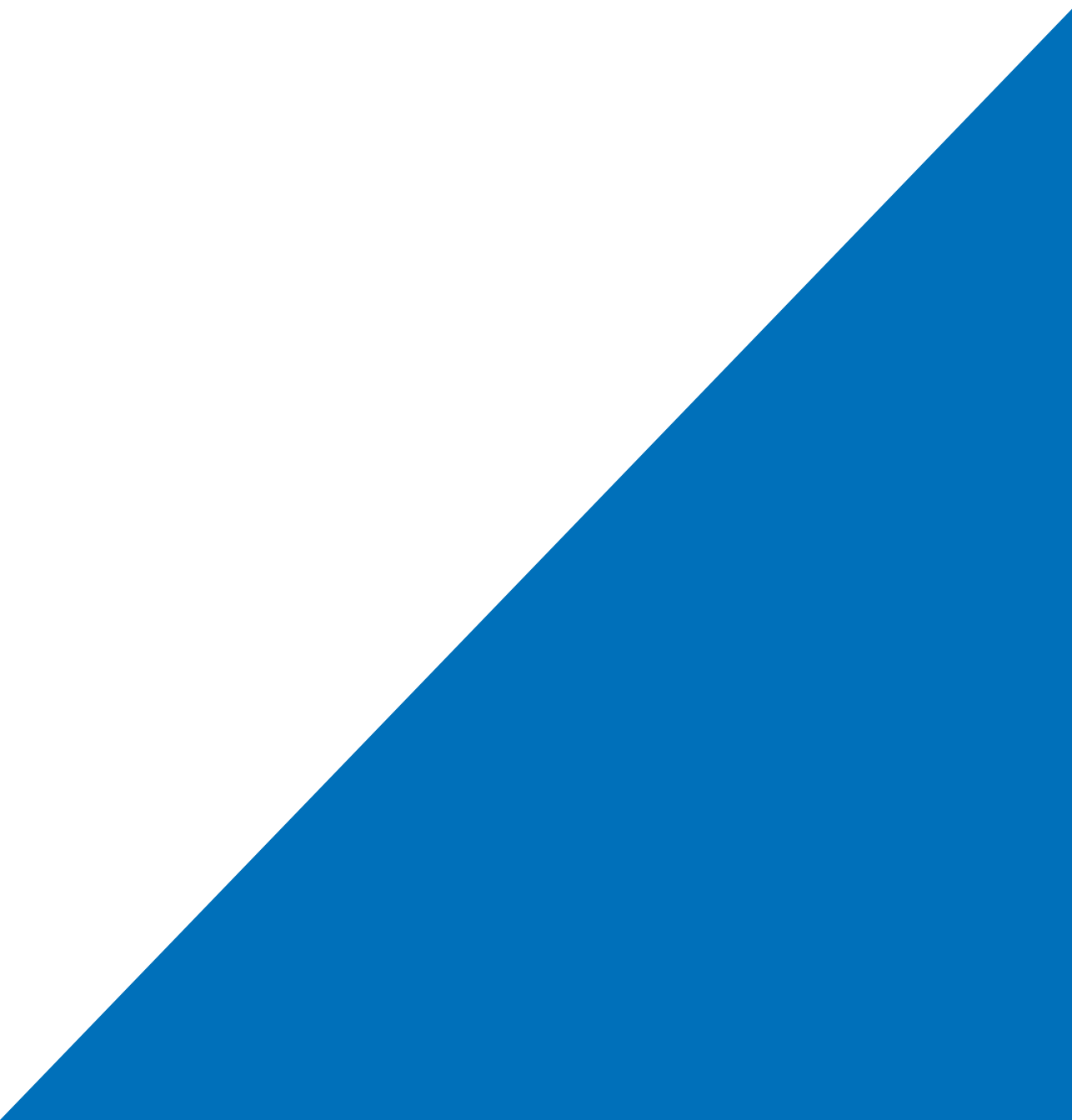
Employment during the study period is more widespread among delayed transition Master students than the direct ones. During the whole lecture period, 70 % of delayed transition Master students report working, while 54 % of those who transitioned to Master studies without an interruption longer than 2 years reported doing so. Furthermore, delayed transition Master students work more. On average, the

time budget of delayed transition Master students dedicated to their paid jobs is higher by eight hours per week (delayed transition Master students report spending 26 hours per week on paid jobs on average) than those who transitioned to the Master programme directly. Also, working delayed transition Master students are more likely to perceive themselves as workers (76 % on average) than students (24 %). The opposite trend

is noticeable among working direct transition Master students – they mainly perceive themselves firstly as students.

Financial reasons are the most important drivers of working during the lecture period for delayed transition Bachelor students. Financial reasons are also relevant for direct transition Master

students but to a lesser extent. The most frequently indicated reason to work is to cover the cost of living. When comparing the reasons to work among delayed transition Bachelor and Master students, survey results reveal supporting others and gaining experience in the labour market are more relevant reason to work for delayed transition Master students.

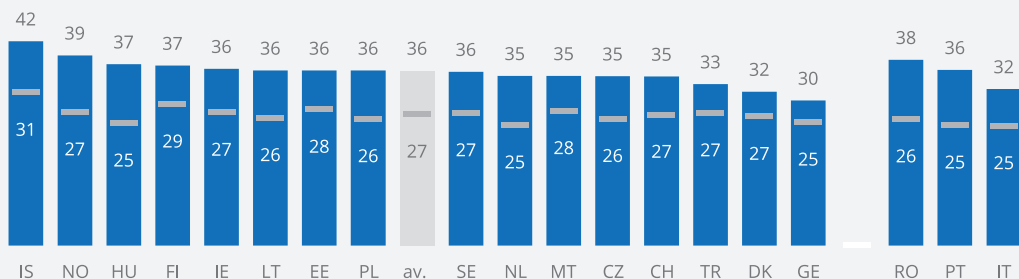


PROFILE OF DELAYED AND DIRECT TRANSITION INTO MA STUDENTS

How to read: Students with children make up 43 % of the delayed transition Master student population, those without children - 57 %. Among direct transition Master students, the share of students with children makes up 11 %, and the remaining 89 % have no children.

The average age of delayed transition Master students is around nine years higher than their counterparts who entered Master studies within two years after graduating from a previous HE programme

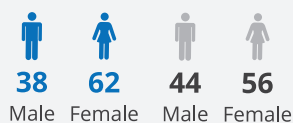
Average age in years



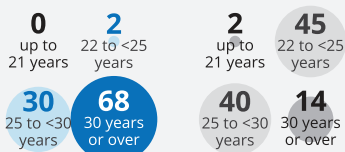
Socio-demographic profile

Sample averages (in %)

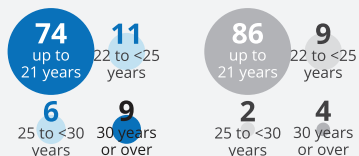
Sex



Age at time of the survey



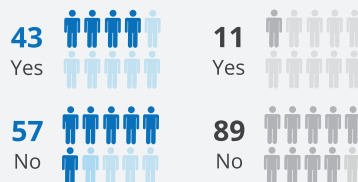
Age at entering HE



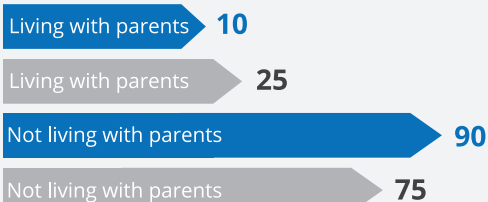
Impairments limiting in studies



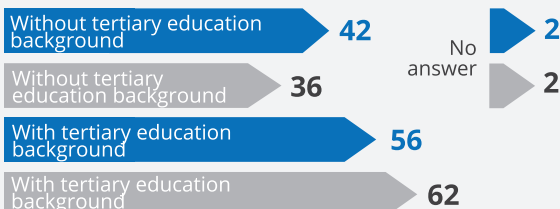
Students with children



Housing situation



Educational background



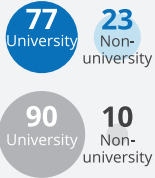
Assessment of parental wealth relative to other families



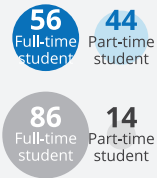
Study-related characteristics

Sample averages (in %)

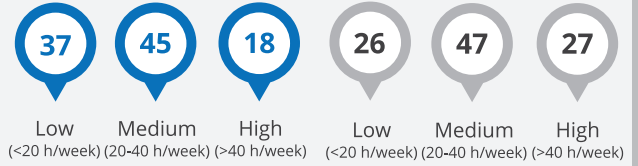
Type of HEI



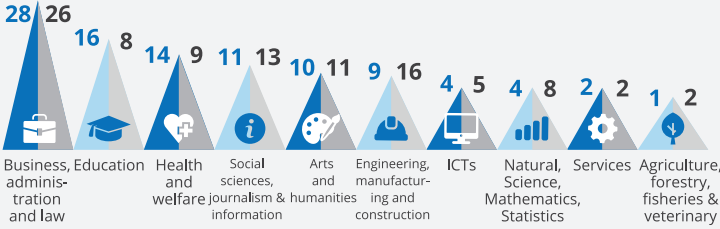
Formal status of enrolment



Study intensity



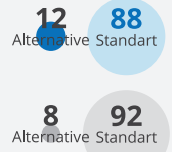
Field of study



Transition to HE



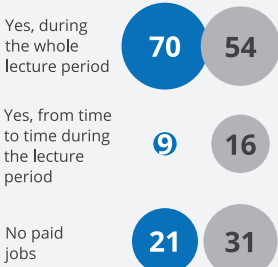
Access route to HE



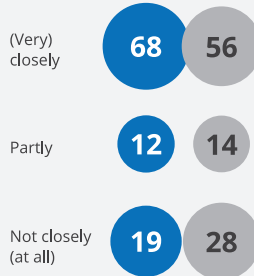
Employment-related characteristics

Sample averages (in %)

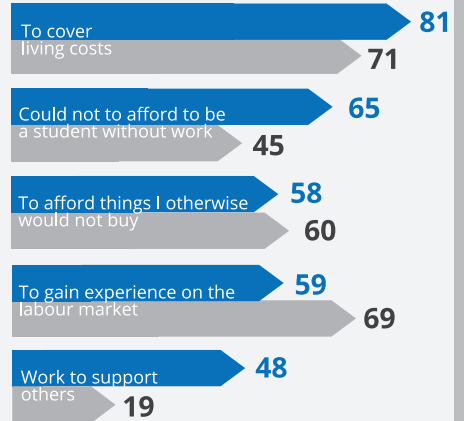
Students with paid jobs



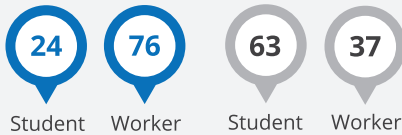
Relation between previous job and studies*



Motivation to work* (multiple answer options possible)



Self-perception as worker or student*



* Students working from time to time or during the whole lecture period

Time budget

Hours per week, on average



4.3 What is the scope of RPL among Master students?

The RPL is considered as a measure to improve the accessibility of HE and facilitate the journey through it, especially for underrepresented groups. The acceleration of recognition and portability of qualifications is relevant not only at the Bachelor level but at the Master programmes as well. EUROSTUDENT VII results reveal the differences between countries and experience of RPL among Master students (delayed vs direct).

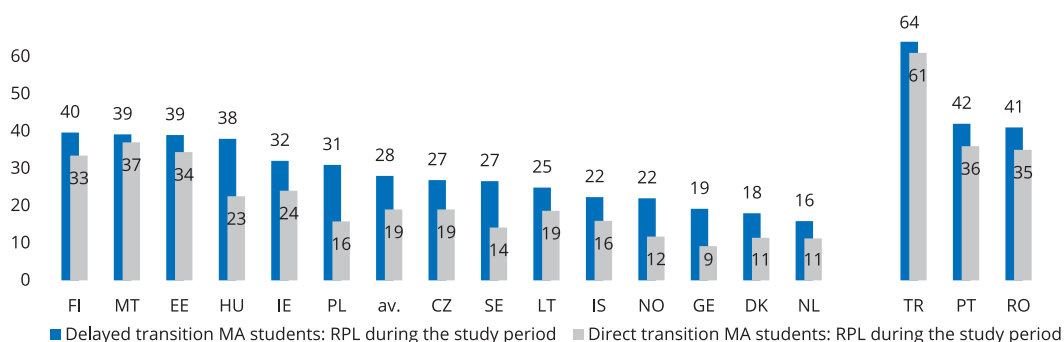
Figure 15 shows the RPL experience among delayed and direct transition Master students. Delayed transition Master students slightly more often report having the experience of RPL in the progress of their studies than their direct transition counterparts. On average, 28 % of delayed transition Master students reported having any

RPL experience during studies. Among those who transitioned to the Master programme within two years after graduating from a previous study programme, RPL experience applies to every fifth student.

When comparing the extent of RPL during the study period, countries demonstrate different patterns. In Finland, Malta, Estonia, Turkey, Portugal, and Romania Master students (despite the transition time) have the relatively largest RPL experience. Different patterns are obvious in Poland, Sweden, Georgia, and Norway, where RPL practices are considerably more common among delayed transition Master students than among their direct transition peers. The Netherlands, Denmark, and Georgia are countries in which RPL in Master programmes is the least applicable.

Figure 15. RPL during the study period among delayed and direct transition Master students

Share of all delayed and direct transition Master students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.24. **No data:** AT, DE, FR, CH, IT, LU. Too few cases: HR, SI.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.8. Did you officially replace any requirements in your current #(main) study programme with previously gained experience/competences?

Note(s): 2.8. the percent of those, who choose at least one of three options: "Yes, through recognition of my work experience", "Yes, through recognition of competences gained outside of school or higher education study programmes (e.g. non-formal courses, self-study, volunteer work etc.)", "Yes, through recognition of competences gained in other higher education study programmes or school".

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, MT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

The recognition of competences gained in other HEIs, or other study programmes, is the most common type of recognition among delayed transition Master students. On average, 16 % of delayed transition Master students from EUROSTUDENT VII countries indicate that competences gained in other HEIs or programmes was recognised in this way, with quite a large variation – from 2 % in Georgia to 28 % in Finland.

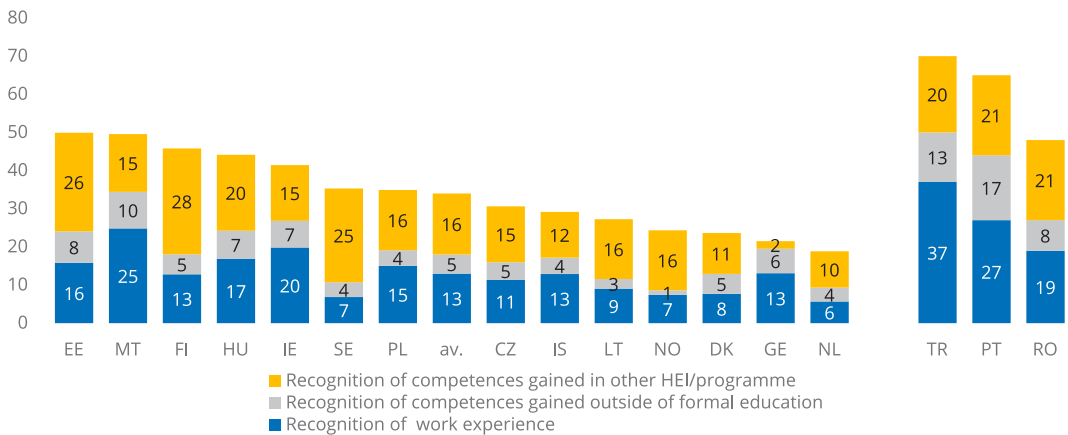
The recognition of work experience is reported by 13 % of delayed transition Master students on average. The extent of recognition of work experience varies across countries, making up at least 7 %

in Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands to 20 % or even more in Malta and Ireland. Countries with the reference period during the COVID-19 pandemic report considerably larger experience of recognition of any surveyed types of prior learning among delayed transition Master students.

Competences gained outside of formal education are the least recognised compared to other ways of recognition during the progress of Master studies, making up 5 % on average. The variation across countries is comparatively low (except Turkey and Portugal).

Figure 16. RPL experience during the study period among delayed transition Master students

Share of delayed transition Master students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, B.24. **No data:** AT, DE, FR, CH, IT, LU. Too few cases: HR, SI.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.8. Did you officially replace any requirements in your current #(main) study programme with previously gained experience/competences?

Note(s): Multiple answer options possible.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, MT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

5. Flexible study organisation

KEY FINDINGS

1. In more than half of EUROSTUDENT VII countries, both the intentions of changing one's study programme and leaving HE completely are more common among students who entered HE via alternative access routes (vs via traditional access routes).
2. Difficulties caused by financial issues and paid work are more common among students who transitioned into HE with a delay or via alternative access routes, whereas difficulties caused by lack of motivation are more frequent among students with a traditional profile.
3. Obligations of one's paid job cause difficulties for three out of four Master's students who entered their programme with a delay.
4. Regarding satisfaction with support offered by HEI, students across all focus groups (delayed, direct, alternative access, traditional access route) are the least satisfied with support to balance studies with their paid job and family obligations.

5.1 What are the challenges of delayed transition and alternative access route students?

As seen in Chapter 3 and previous studies (e.g. DZHW, 2018), students who enter HE with a delay often have a background and social situation different from their fellow students who transitioned to HE directly after completing secondary education. Students who have delayed their entry into HE are older, more likely to have prior work experience and children, have no tertiary education background, and are more likely to depend on paid work during studies. Therefore, the challenges of delayed transition students might also differ

from the challenges that direct transition students face.

Moreover, considering that students who have delayed their entry into HE have lower completion rates (see for instance, Wells & Lynch, 2012) and more often interrupt their studies (Hauschildt et al., 2015), it is important to investigate the reasons for the difficulties these students face and consider how they compare to the difficulties of more traditional students.

Similarly, previous studies show that students who enter HE with a non-traditional secondary education qualification or have obtained their secondary education qualifications later in life (e.g. through adult learning or special access courses) have a background and current social and economic situation different from the students who used traditional access

routes to HE (see Chapter 3). Alternative access route – or the ‘second-chance’-students could therefore be affected by challenges different from those of their more traditional fellow students.

In the EUROSTUDENT VII survey, students were asked if they were experiencing difficulties due to any of the reasons listed in Table 2.

Table 1. Student groups analysed in the Thematic Review

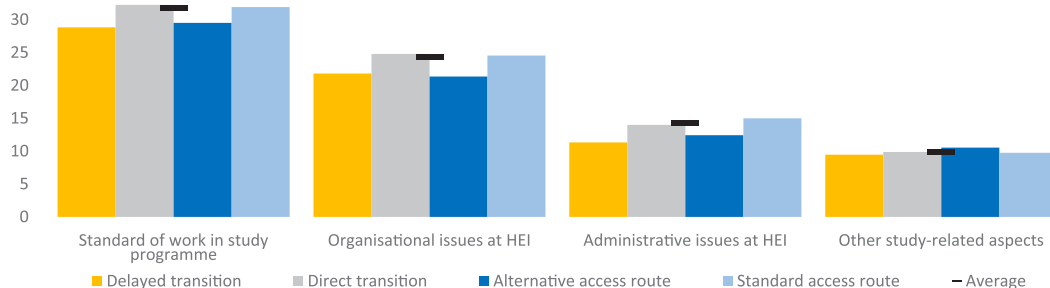
Study-related reasons	Personal reasons
Standard of work required in my study programme (demanding exams/ papers/ presentations, number of tests, etc.)	Financial difficulties
Organisational issues at my higher education institution (e.g. timetable organisation, space restrictions in lectures/classes, mandatory attendance, etc.)	Obligations of my paid job
Administrative issues at my higher education institution (e.g. delayed grades/results/credit transfers, registration procedures for courses/ exams, etc.)	Childcare obligations or pregnancy
Other study-related aspects	Lack of motivation
	Health issues, impairments, accidental injuries
	Other personal reasons (e.g. family matters)

The results demonstrated that one in three students in EUROSTUDENT VII countries experience difficulties due to both study-related and personal reasons. At the same time, on average 28 % of students report experiencing no difficulties. Investigating the specific

reasons for students’ difficulties shows that the most common study-related source of difficulties is the standard of work in one’s study programme. On average, it affects 32 % of all students (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Study-related reasons for difficulties

Share of all students who are experiencing difficulties due to a particular study-related reason (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, C7. **No data:** DE, AT, FR.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH (spring 2020).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 3.1. During the current #lecture period, are you experiencing any difficulties in your current #(main) study programme due to any of the following?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, HU, MT, NO, SE, SI, IT.

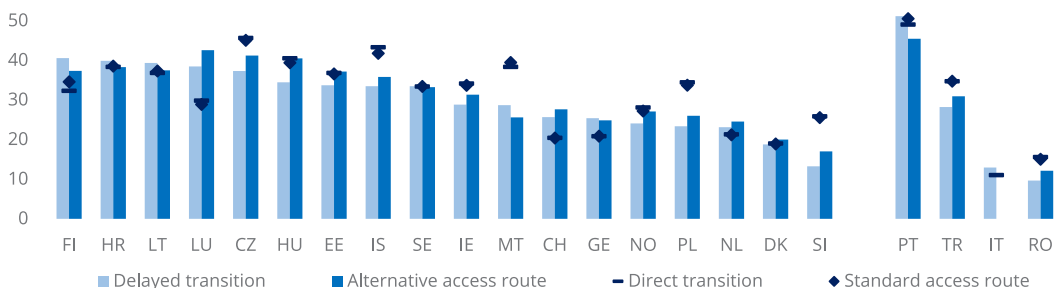
Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

Comparing students who transitioned into higher education with a delay to direct transition students does not reveal any clear patterns: in 50 % of the countries, difficulties due to work standard are more common among

delayed and in the other half, among direct transition students. Neither does the comparison of alternative vs. standard access route students reveal any such patterns (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Difficulties due to standard of work in study programme

Share of all students who are experiencing difficulties due to the standard of work in their main study programme (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, C7 **No data:** AT, DE, FR, IT (alternative access route).

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic); IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 3.1. During the current #lecture period, are you experiencing any difficulties in your current #(main) study programme due to any of the following?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, HU, MT, NO, SE, SI, RO, IT.

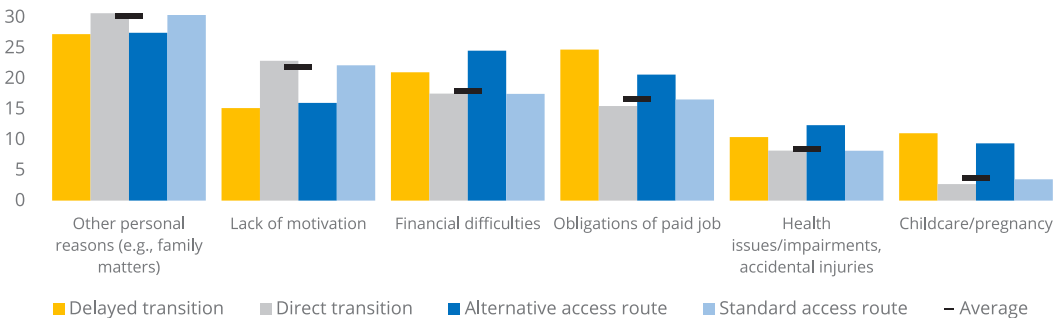
Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

Figure 19 shows personal reasons for difficulties that were examined in EUROSTUDENT VII, again comparing direct vs delayed transition and traditional vs alternative access route students. Whereas on average, the most common personal reason for difficulties is the lack of motivation (22 % of all students), the most often reported personal reason among delayed transition students is the obligations of a paid job which is reported by 25 % of delayed transition students. Importantly, 25 % of alternative access students report financial difficulties, making this the most prevalent personal reason for difficulties among the alternative access student group.

At the same time, obligations of a paid job and financial issues are much less common among direct transition and traditional access students: respectively, 17 % and 18 % report financial difficulties, while 15 % and 17 % report obligations of paid job as a reason for difficulties. Another personal reason for difficulties where delayed transition and alternative access route students notably differ from their more traditional counterparts is difficulties due to childcare or pregnancy which is more often reported by students who delayed their entry into HE or accessed it via alternative routes.

Figure 19. Personal reasons for difficulties

Share of all students who are experiencing difficulties due to a particular personal reason (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, C7. **No data:** AT, DE.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH (spring 2020).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 3.1. During the current #lecture period, are you experiencing any difficulties in your current #(main) study programme due to any of the following?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, HU, MT, NO, SE, SI, IT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

The obligations of one's paid job being the reason for difficulties is where delayed transition and alternative access route students differ the most from more traditional students; having analysed this, we also examine the patterns

regarding this particular difficulty across all EUROSTUDENT VII countries (Figure 20). In Denmark and Sweden, the difference between delayed and direct transition students is two percentage points or less. The greatest differences

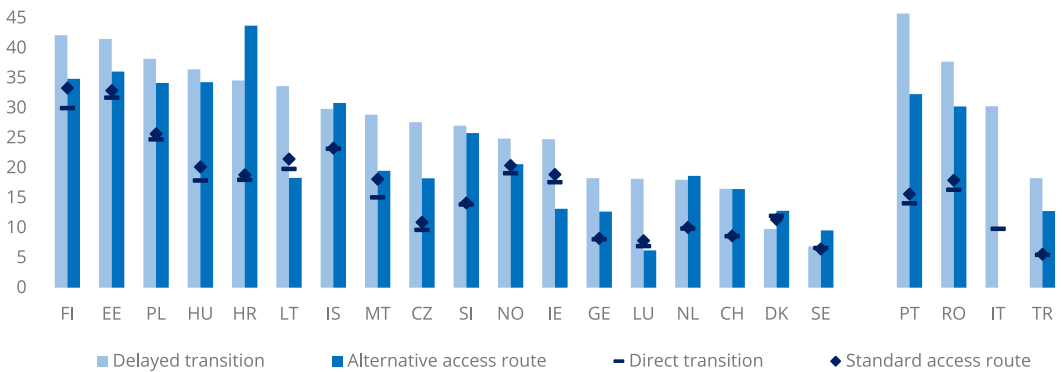
can be observed in the Czech Republic, Croatia, and Hungary, where the shares of direct and delayed transition students who experience difficulties due to their paid job's obligations differ by more than 16 percentage points. The differences between delayed and direct transition students are even greater in countries which collected their data during the COVID-19 pandemic (Portugal, Romania, Italy), which indicates that the pandemic might have enhanced challenges caused by working while studying specifically for the less traditional, delayed entry students.

The comparison of alternative and traditional access route students shows that the countries where paid job's obligations cause difficulties for a rather

similar share (difference of less than two percentage points) of alternative and traditional access students are Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Malta, and Norway. The largest differences between alternative and traditional access route students can be observed in Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, and Portugal. Overall, in nearly all countries, difficulties caused by the obligations of one's paid job are more common among students who entered higher education via alternative (vs traditional) access routes, or those who experienced a delay after completing secondary education (vs directly). These differences are likely to stem from the significantly different social circumstances of the less traditional student groups, as seen in Chapter 3.

Figure 20. Difficulties due to obligations of a paid job

Share of students who are experiencing difficulties due to obligations of their paid job (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, C7. **No data:** AT, DE, FR.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic); IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 3.1. During the current #lecture period, are you experiencing any difficulties in your current #(main) study programme due to any of the following?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, HU, MT, NO, SE, SI, IT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

Considering study-related and personal difficulties together, the standard of

work in one's current study programme remains the most common difficulty

reported across all groups compared here: direct and delayed transition, and traditional and alternative access route students.

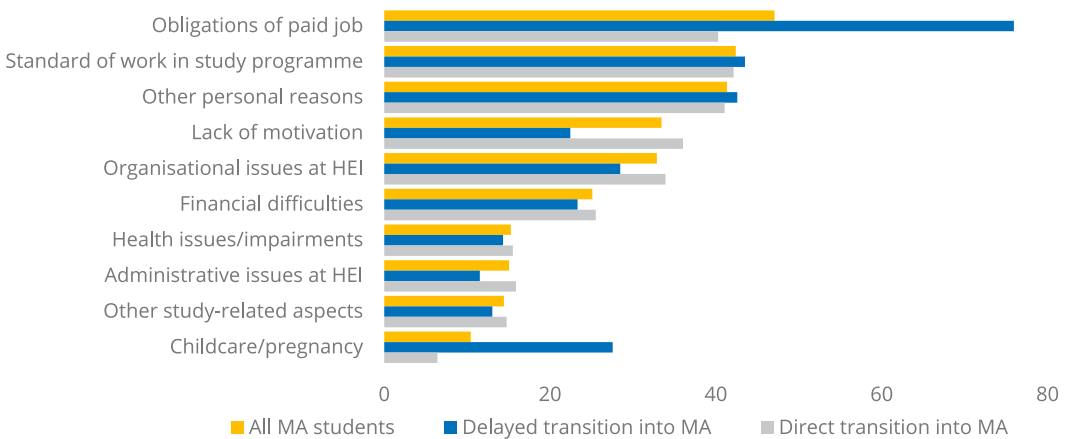
Investigating the reasons for Master's students' difficulties reveals considerable differences, compared to the difficulties experienced by Bachelor's students. However, we will focus on the comparison between the students who transitioned into their Master's programme with a delay of at least 24 months from their previous study programme and the students who transitioned into Master's directly.

These two groups are more similar regarding study-related difficulties, e.g. standard of work, and other study-related

reasons, which are reported by quite a similar share of students from both groups (Figure 21). Regarding personal difficulties, direct and delayed Master's transition students differ the most in their experience of difficulties due to obligations of a paid job. Obligations of one's paid job causes difficulties for 40% of direct Master's transition students, whereas the rate among delayed Master's transition students is as high as 76 %. Notable differences between these two groups can also be observed regarding difficulties due to childcare or pregnancy, which is more common among delayed transition Master's students, as well as lack of motivation, which is experienced by 22 % of delayed students but more than one third of direct Master's transition students.

Figure 21. Master's students' reasons for difficulties (study-related and personal)

Share of all Master's students who are experiencing difficulties due to a particular (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, C7. **No data:** AT, DE, LU. Too few cases: SI, HR.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH (spring 2020).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 3.1. During the current #lecture period, are you experiencing any difficulties in your current #(main) study programme due to any of the following?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, HU, MT, NO, SE, SI, RO, IT.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

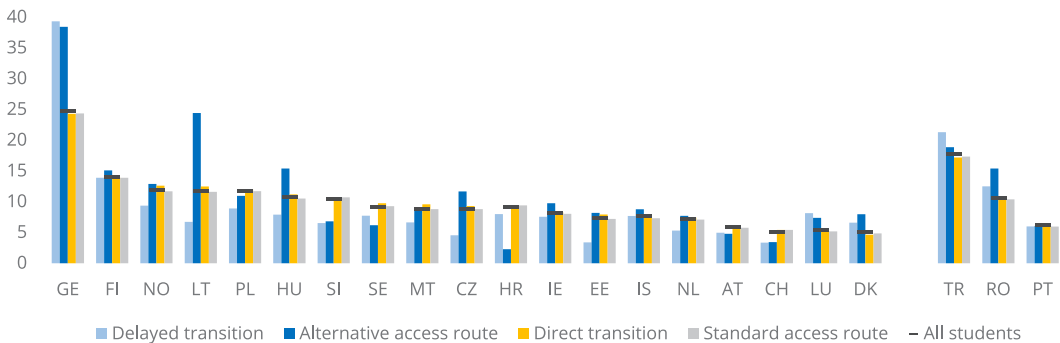
Considering that more than half of all students reported experiencing some form of difficulties, the following section will explore the possible consequences of difficulties in higher education: students' intentions to change their study programme or leave HE completely.

In over 70 % of EUROSTUDENT VII countries, the percentage of all students who are thinking about changing their current study programme ranges

between 3 % and 11 %. In around 70 % of countries, seriously thinking about changing the current main study programme is more common among students who entered HE via alternative, compared to traditional access routes (Figure 22). At the same time, in around 60 % of countries, direct transition students have (slightly) higher programme change intentions than delayed transition students.

Figure 22. Programme change intentions

Share of students seriously thinking about changing current main study programme by countries (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, C25. **No data:** DE, FR, IT.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic); IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 3.6. Generally, to what extent do you agree with the following thoughts regarding your studies?

Note(s): The share of students who answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the statement "I am seriously thinking about changing my current #(main) study programme." Item adapted from Trautwein et al. (2007).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: DK, EE, HU, CH, RO.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

In addition to programme change intentions, study-related and personal difficulties might lead students to drop out of HE completely. Causes for student dropout identified in previous studies include low study motivation (Paura & Arhipova, 2014), financial issues (Chen & Desjardins, 2008), poorly-informed study programme choice (Zajac & Komendant-Brodowska, 2019), and low

academic performance (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2014).

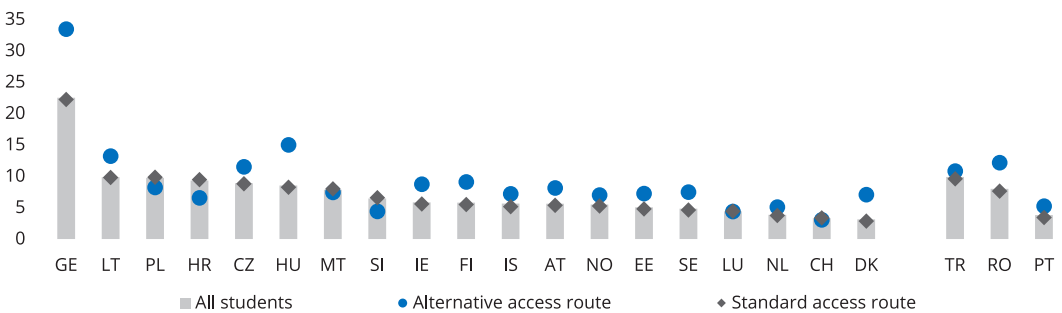
EUROSTUDENT data does not allow the investigation of the perceived difficulties of students who have already dropped out of higher education. However, the survey included a question about dropout intentions, which gives an important insight into the issue of students' withdrawal from studies.

The share of all students in EUROSTUDENT VII countries who are seriously thinking about completely abandoning HE studies ranges between 3 % and 22 %. Whereas there are no remarkable differences between the shares of delayed and direct transition students who have serious drop-out

intentions, the comparison of traditional and alternative access route students shows a clear pattern (Figure 23). In more than 70 % of EUROSTUDENT VII countries, serious drop-out intentions are more common among students who entered HE via alternative access routes.

Figure 23. Drop-out intentions

Share of students who are seriously thinking about completely abandoning HE studies (strongly) agree (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, C26. No data: DE, FR, IT.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic); IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 3.6. Generally, to what extent do you agree with the following thoughts regarding your studies?

Note(s): The share of students who answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the statement 'I am seriously thinking of completely abandoning my higher education studies.' Item adapted from Trautwein et al. (2007).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: DK, EE, HU, CH, RO.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

5.2 The role and quality of support provided for delayed transition and non-traditional access students

Student support services are often designed for students with a background and social circumstances different from those of delayed transition and alternative access students. The need for reviewing support services, focusing on the needs of non-traditional students has also been voiced in previous studies (e.g. Fortin et al., 2016; Mishra, 2016; Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008; Fairchild, 2003).

This chapter examines the extent to which support provided by HEIs matches the needs of students who enter HE with a delay or via alternative access routes. EUROSTUDENT data allows looking at students' average satisfaction with support provided by HEIs. Moreover, the EUROSTUDENT VII survey included questions about students' satisfaction with particular aspects of support, such as support to balance studies and family

responsibilities, or the infrastructure to support one's learning (e.g. access to a library, study spaces, a computer centre). As discussed in Chapter 3, in Sweden, Finland and Iceland, roughly every third student delayed their entry into HE for more than 2 years. Students who use alternative access routes make up a much smaller part of the student body – an average of 8 % in EUROSTUDENT VII countries, but their profiles are similar to delayed transition students. Are HEIs responding to the needs of these students? Figure 23 indicated that students who enter HE via alternative

routes are more likely to be seriously thinking about leaving HE completely. Therefore, simply facilitating entry to HE for students with a broad range of backgrounds might not be sufficient to ensure students' wellbeing and successful completion of HE studies. Support services offered by HEIs could play a major role in alleviating some of the difficulties that make students with less traditional profiles to withdraw from their studies. Is the support offered by HEIs sufficient for delayed transition and alternative access students? What type of support do they need the most?

Do delayed transition and alternative access students receive sufficient support?

Students' average satisfaction with support provided to them by their HEIs or cooperating organisations ranges between 39 and 60 points out of 100 in EUROSTUDENT VII countries. No clear patterns emerged from the comparison of alternative and traditional access

students. Neither does the comparison of direct and delayed transition students reveal great differences between the groups. This indicates that the average satisfaction with study support might not be related to the students' transition or entry routes into higher education.

What forms of support are students satisfied with?

Students' satisfaction with study support services does not indicate which services are used most frequently or by the most students. Nevertheless, examining student satisfaction with specific forms of study support can still give an insight

into where improvements are the most critically needed.

EUROSTUDENT VII survey asked students to rate their satisfaction with the following types of study support:

1. Study support services
2. Provision of learning facilities
3. Support to balance studies and paid job
4. Support to balance studies and family
5. Support in preparation for working life

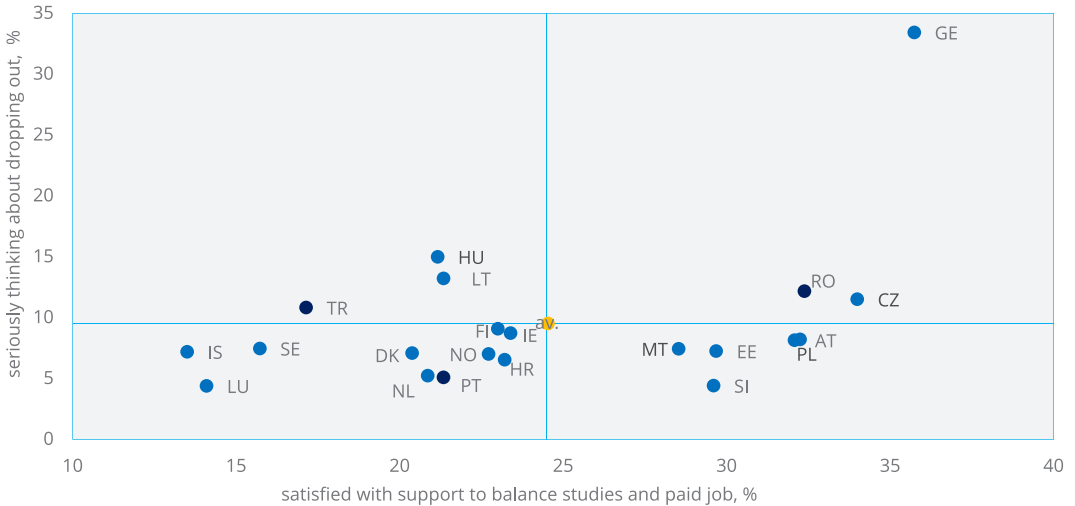
Across all examined focus groups, students are the most satisfied with the provision of learning facilities at their HEIs (60 % all students entirely or partly satisfied) and the least satisfied with support to balance their studies with paid jobs and family responsibilities (24 % and 25 % of all students). Regardless of the specific form of study support, a larger share of alternative access and delayed transition students than direct transition and traditional entry students reported received study support as sufficient. However, the differences between the direct vs delayed transition and alternative vs traditional access route students remain lower than 10 percentage points for all specific study support aspects.

Earlier in this chapter, we saw that financial difficulties and difficulties caused by the obligations of a paid job are the most common reason for difficulties among alternative access route students. It was also highlighted that in most countries, intentions of dropping out were more common among alternative access route students than their more traditional counterparts. Therefore, adequate support from HEIs to balance working and studying may be crucial for alternative access route students to allow them to complete their studies. Figure 24 illustrates the relationship between alternative access student satisfaction with provided support to balance work and study and their drop-out intentions in different EUROSTUDENT VII countries.

In Estonia, Malta, Austria, Poland and Slovenia, alternative access route students are more satisfied with support to balance work and study than on average and are less likely to be considering dropping out. In a smaller group of countries – the upper left quadrant of the figure – alternative access route students are relatively less satisfied than the average with the support provided to balance work and study, and more of them have serious intentions of dropping out. In Georgia, the Czech Republic, and Romania, a relatively larger share of alternative access route students are satisfied with the work-study balance support, yet a larger share than on average are also considering dropping out. In these countries, the reasons for dropping out may be due to difficulties other than insufficient support to balance work and study. At the same time, in the countries in the lower left quadrant, alternative access route students have lower dropout intentions than on average, despite lower-than-average satisfaction with support to balance studies and working. This could mean that there are other protective factors than this aspect of study support. Moreover, in several lower-left quadrant countries, lower shares of alternative access route students reported difficulties caused by their paid job's obligations (Figure 20), which further explains this pattern.

Figure 24. Alternative access students' drop-out intentions and satisfaction with support to balance work and study

Alternative access route students who are entirely or partly satisfied with support from HEI to balance studies and paid job (x-axis) and alternative access route students who (strongly) agree that they are seriously thinking about dropping out of HE completely (y-axis). Share of alternative access students, in %



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, C26, C30. **No data:** C30 - CH, DE; IT, FR; C26 - DE.

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic); IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 3.6. Generally, to what extent do you agree with the following thoughts regarding your studies?; 3.7. How satisfied are you with the support provided to you by your #higher education institution or #cooperating organisations (#example organisation for student affairs) regarding the following aspects?

Note(s): 3.6. - The share of students who answered 'Agree' or 'Strongly agree' about the statement 'I am seriously thinking of completely abandoning my higher education studies.'. Item adapted from Trautwein et al. (2007). 3.7. - The share of students who answered 'Sufficient' or 'Entirely sufficient' about 'Support to balance my studies and paid job'.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: AT, DK, EE, HU, MT, NO, RO.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL.

Light blue shapes: data collection before COVID-19 pandemic. **Dark blue shapes:** data collection during COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Flexible transition as an essential aspect of the social dimension

An important aspect of the social dimension is that HE should be open to non-traditional students who missed the opportunity to enter higher education when leaving secondary school. Flexible entry pathways to HE can offer a second chance for non-traditional students to acquire HE. Moreover, the traditional pathways of transitioning to HE directly after school are becoming less prevalent (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). However, EUROSTUDENT VII results revealed that flexible entry paths (i.e. delayed transition and alternative access) are not frequently used by students to enter

HE in most countries. Malta, Iceland, Norway, and Austria demonstrate the largest flexibility in terms of entry pathways to HE. In contrast, roughly half of the EUROSTUDENT VII countries may be considered to be relatively rigid as the students who entered HE using traditional entry pathways make up the vast majority. There is an evident need to encourage countries, especially those where flexible entry pathways are used the least (for example, Georgia, France, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovenia), to foster flexible pathways into HE.

Flexible transition students' different social situation and study challenges

EUROSTUDENT VII results show that students entering HE through flexible pathways are different from those using the traditional entry pathways. Compared to those who transition into HE directly after school and/or using the standard entry route, non-traditional students are usually older, more often living outside their parents' homes, and are having children. They also more often originate from families without a tertiary education background and report a lower financial status of their parents.

Non-traditional students also more often report working during the lecture period. They tend to dedicate more time on paid jobs (especially those who transitioned

to HE and the Master programme after a long pause). Still, they report devoting only slightly less time to study-related activities than traditional students. This suggests that non-traditional students have a tighter time budget and must make more efforts to juggle between studies, work, and family-related obligations. These circumstances suggest that non-traditional students may be facing specific difficulties throughout the journey towards successful graduation. This was also confirmed by our analysis: non-traditional students more often experience financial issues and difficulties caused by their paid jobs. Meanwhile, they are less likely to be experiencing difficulties due to lack of motivation.

How can policy better support flexibility in HE?

The increasing diversity of students in the HEIs necessitates a review of existing study structures, student support services, and funding opportunities (EHEA, 2015). Special attention should be paid to the non-traditional students in HE. Student support system helping to combine study-related and family and/or employment-related obligations should be strengthened. In addition to efforts meant to help students reconcile their studies with living and working situations and policy measures to help ensure this balance the best, it is also important to set clear goals and key performance indicators (KPI) that would be continuously monitored.

RPL has been on the EU agenda for years. Widening access and establishing alternative access routes through the validation of non-formal and informal learning have particularly been among the top priorities. The general aim is to ease transition into higher education for non-traditional students by making the whole range of potential experiences gained outside the formal education system visible (Unger & Zaussinger, 2018). Expanding the application of RPL

practices can contribute to the growth of alternative access route students' population and promote lifelong learning in HE. However, acknowledging the value of prior learning for facilitating alternative access to HE and progression in studies is not frequent enough among non-traditional students. Over two-thirds of delayed transition students and more than half of alternative access route students have prior regular work experience (i.e. they had been working at least one year and 20 hours per week), which is also usually related to the current study programme. Despite that, prior work experience in EUROSTUDENT VII countries is rarely recognized both upon admission into HE as well as during the study period (in Bachelor's as well as in Master's level).

There is another trend that warrants closer attention: the narrow extent of recognition of non-formal learning. Compared to prior work experience or learning from other HEIs, non-formal learning remains the least acknowledged type of prior learning in a great majority of EUROSTUDENT VII countries.

Reflections on the challenges that increased flexibility in HE may cause for the educational system, HEIs, and students

These reflections come from the discussion *“Flexible pathways into and within higher education: importance, practices, students’ experience”* with ministry representatives and representatives of students and universities from Austria, Malta, Estonia, and Lithuania at the EUROSTUDENT Final Conference in May 2021. Discussion participants: Dr. Maria Keplinger, Higher education

development, Science and Research, Austrian Federal Ministry of Education; Joonatan Nõgisto, Vice Chair of the Estonian Student Union; Marco Tabone, Assistant Registrar, Office of the Registrar, University of Malta; Andrius Zalitis, Adviser to the Minister, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania.

The changing priorities of HE were emphasized by speakers, particularly due to growing expectations to respond to the needs of students with diverse backgrounds and life situations. Growing flexibility of HE either in content or in forms of learning (including ways of accessing HE and ways of participating) is inevitable. However, facilitating and broadening access to HE for all, while developing new forms of learning and flexible study pathways, are also related to various challenges. Participants of the discussion highlighted several challenges related to flexible study pathways:

- **Study organisation** for non-traditional groups needs to be structured in ways different from those of traditional groups. Non-traditional students usually work alongside their studies and have limited time and other obligations to be reconciled with their studies, so they need special support and attention from HEIs.
- **Additional financial resources** are needed to respond to the requirements of non-traditional students upon admission to HEIs and during their studies. For instance, bridging courses, teaching in smaller groups, higher time flexibility in courses, updated didactics, staff-related challenges, like staff training for working with diverse groups of students, etc., requires additional finances to HEIs.
- **The lack of knowledge about the non-traditional students.** Increasing flexibility leads to fragmentation of the student population. HEIs are still not sufficiently knowledgeable about non-traditional students’ values, motivations to study and their prior learning experiences. It is also a challenge for student organizations to represent non-traditional students as they tend to be less active in traditional areas of student life, hence also risking underrepresentation in student unions.

Measures to increase flexibility of HE based on examples of good practice

Participants within the discussion shared good examples of practice on how flexible learning pathways in HE could be expanded:

- **Shortening study programmes** may encourage accessing HE, especially for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Short-cycle studies and micro-credentials are considered as elements of social dimension focused policy and practice in HE.
- Providing **various options of flexibility** in HE tailored to the needs and preferences of a diverse student population. For instance, flexible entry pathways for adult learners considerably contribute to the large non-traditional student population in Malta. Those who do not transition to HE right after school and start working at the age of 23 or older can enrol in undergraduate courses as adult learners, using the way of recognition of prior work experience as an alternative pathway to enter HE. A considerable share of lifelong learners who get back to HE after 2-3 years of work experience can be also found in Austria. Several special study programmes are implemented for these students and are tailored to their situation (for instance, studies are compatible with employment, lectures are on weekends, etc.).
- Due to the **proactiveness of HEIs** in increasing the flexibility at the institutional level, i.e. besides national-level strategies for flexibility HEIs are seen as active contributors when developing institutional level measures to support the flexible entry and learning pathways. However, the strategies and flexibility must be followed by a clear implementation plan, including incentives to work on the topic.
- **Using an individualised approach at the admission** to HE to ensure the evaluation of the candidates' goals and needs along with the suitability of the particular study programme.

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