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Commission

Eurydice *Brief*

Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe

Education and
Training

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

2014

The information in this Eurydice Brief is drawn from the report, Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe 2014: Access, Retention and Employability. The report is the second in a series examining the evolution of the European Commission's modernisation agenda for higher education in Europe. Information for the report was gathered from 36 education systems (all EU Member States, with the exception of Luxembourg and the Netherlands, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway and Turkey).

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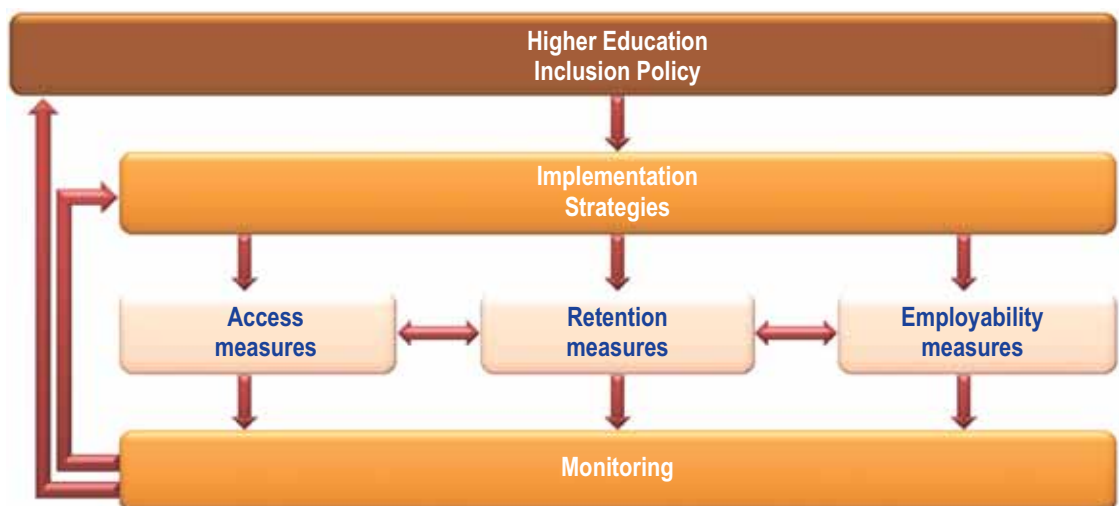
Importance of access, retention and employability

The modernisation agenda (European Commission 2011) supports higher education systems in Europe in responding to the needs of our increasingly knowledge-based economy and societies. To expand the knowledge base and foster progress, an increasing number of European citizens require high level knowledge and competences. Supporting the development of quality mass higher education systems is therefore high on policy agendas at both national and European levels.

Equal opportunities to higher education are a societal imperative

In a social and economic environment where skills and competences acquired and refined through higher education are becoming increasingly important (European Commission, 2010), it is a societal imperative to expand opportunities to higher education as broadly as possible ⁽¹⁾. As Figure 1 illustrates, policy, strategies, measures and monitoring are all interlinked aspects of a broad higher education agenda for social inclusion.

Figure 1: Access, retention and employability: policy and implementation



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

What are the main challenges for access and widening participation?

Definition of access:

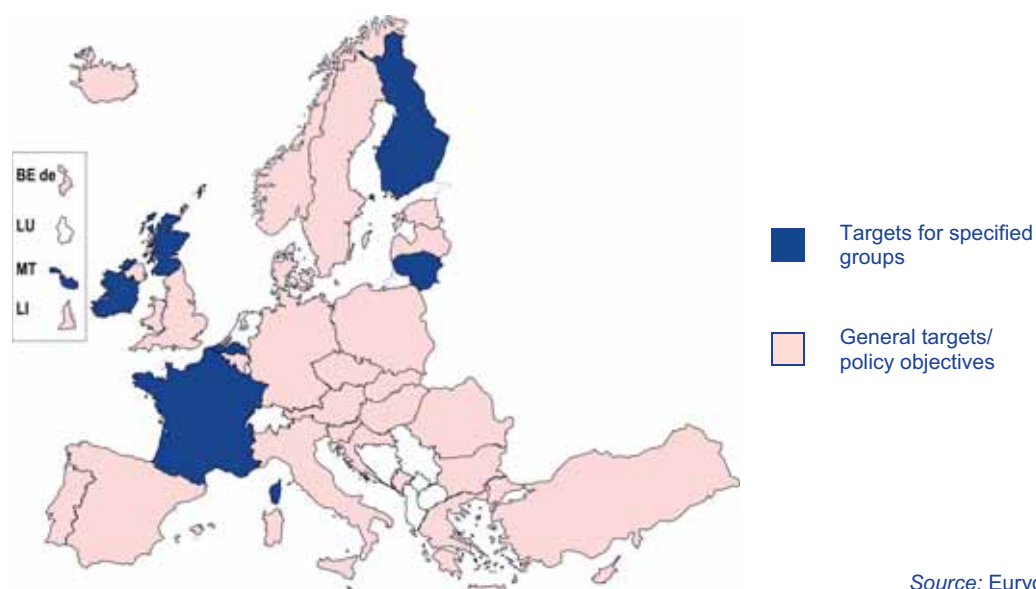
Widening participation in higher education by ensuring equal opportunities to all sections of society, irrespective of socio-economic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage.

In Europe, the modernisation agenda and the Europe 2020 strategy both focus on increasing participation in higher education. Indeed, the goal that 40 % of those aged 30-34 should have a higher education or equivalent qualification by 2020 is one of the five headline targets.

Access, however, is not only a question of increasing numbers, but is also a key feature of the social dimension of higher education, and thus concerned with the social composition of the higher education population.

1) Set clear policies

Figure 2: National policy approaches to widening participation, 2012/13



European countries have made commitments to develop strategies and define goals for the social dimension

In recent years, European policy has increasingly stressed social dimension issues in higher education, with countries making commitments through the Bologna Process, the modernisation agenda and the Europe 2020 strategy to develop strategies and define measurable targets. One of the five headline targets of the Europe 2020 strategy is to reach higher education attainment levels of 40 % by 2020, and the overall policy framework embraces broader societal goals to widen participation.

However, progress in implementing policy to widen access varies greatly between countries. Some countries deliberately mainstream their policy approach, preferring not to expose particular groups to special measures, and Figure 2 shows that only a minority of countries have actually defined participation and attainment targets for specified groups. General objectives are therefore far more commonplace.

Case study: Ireland

Ireland has the most comprehensive set of targets related to under-represented groups.

The national plan has five objectives:

- Institution-Wide Approaches to Access
- Enhancing Access Through Lifelong Learning
- Investment in Widening Participation
- Modernisation of Student Support
- Widening Participation for People with Disabilities



Quantitative objectives relate to students entering, participating and completing higher education and these are set for specific groups of students – students with disabilities, unemployed, adults/mature students, students with vocational education and training, travelers, students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background. The objective is to reach a 72 % participation rate and a 60 % attainment rate in tertiary education for 30-34 year olds by 2020, and for all socio-economic groups to have entry rates of at least 54 per cent by 2020.

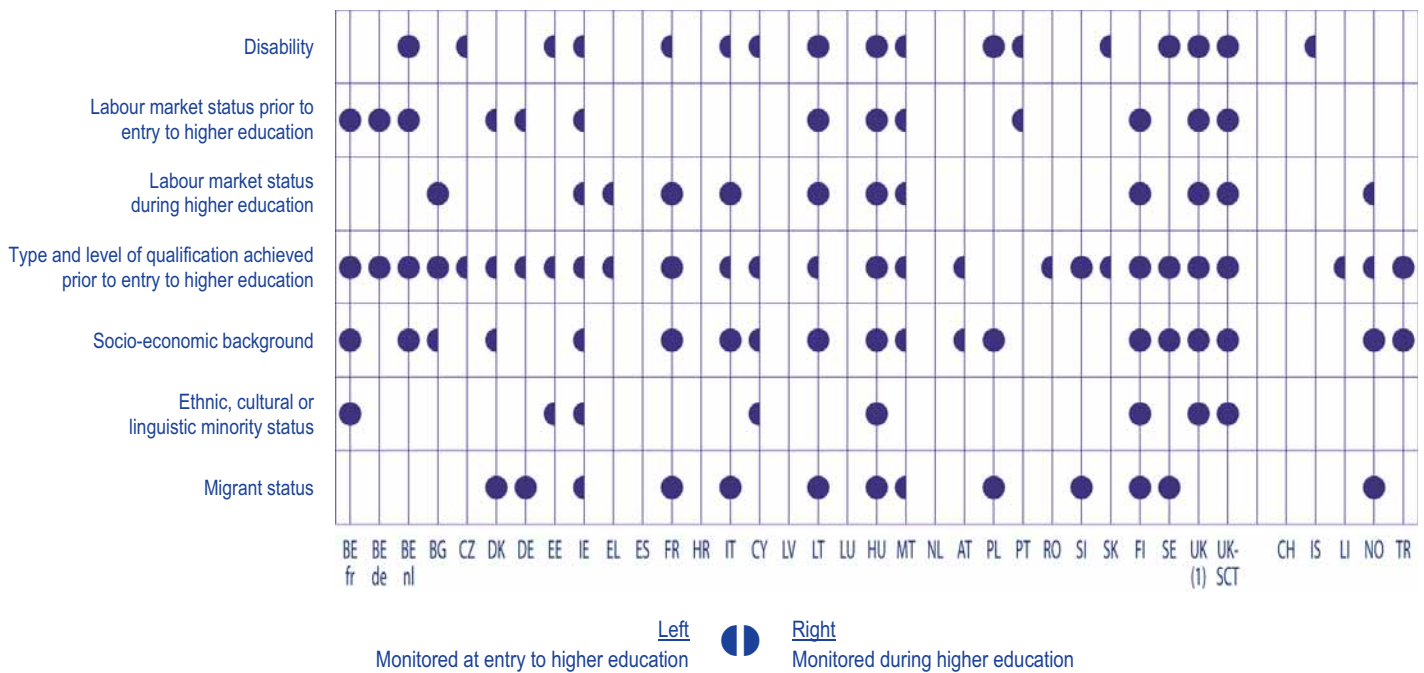
There is systematic monitoring in place for all the categories. All institutions are obliged to return details on all new entrants, progressing students and those graduating through the Student Record System, including data on the socio-economic, ethnic and disability status of new entrants.

Countries fix targets for different under-represented groups

It is interesting to note that the countries that have set targets consider different groups. In Belgium (Flemish Community), the target (60 % by 2020) refers to children whose parents do not hold a higher education qualification. Finland focuses on increasing male participation, with the ambition that gender differences in the young age groups will be halved by 2025. Lithuania also addresses gender, with the focus on increasing female participation in mathematics and sciences. Malta has set a target of 4 % of adults participating in lifelong learning courses. France has targets for programmes regarding the number of students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups while the United Kingdom (Scotland) prioritises the increase in participation of students from publicly-funded schools, students from further education entering higher education and mature students from deprived backgrounds.

2) Monitor the impact of policy

Figure 3: Monitoring of student social profiles



Source: Eurydice.

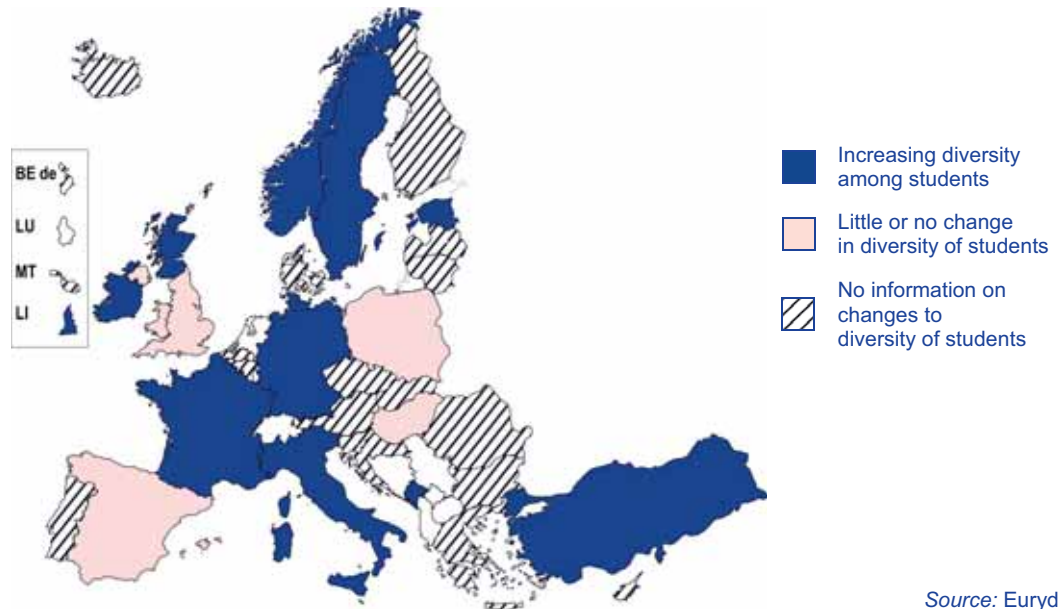
UK (1) = UK-ENG/WLS/NIR

Social dimension characteristics are not systematically monitored

There is a long way to go before a Europe-wide picture of progress in widening access is possible to obtain. Systematic monitoring of social dimension characteristics is yet to become a normal practice in many higher education systems. There is a considerable variation in which characteristics of the student body are monitored and at what stages during the higher education process, with issues such as migrant status, ethnicity or the labour market status of students prior to entry in higher education often ignored. There are, however, several countries – Hungary, Finland, Ireland, the United Kingdom that monitor all, or practically all of the main social dimension characteristics.

3) Use data in policy making

Figure 4: Changes in the diversity of students in higher education, 2002/03-2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

Many European countries do not know if their higher education populations are becoming more diverse

Despite gaps in monitoring systems, most countries should still have a considerable body of information and data to draw on with regard to the changing profile of higher education students. However, this data is not necessarily always exploited. Indeed, 19 systems are unable to report on changes to the diversity of the student body over a ten year period.

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

Information collected may not always be used to monitor the changing profile of the student population

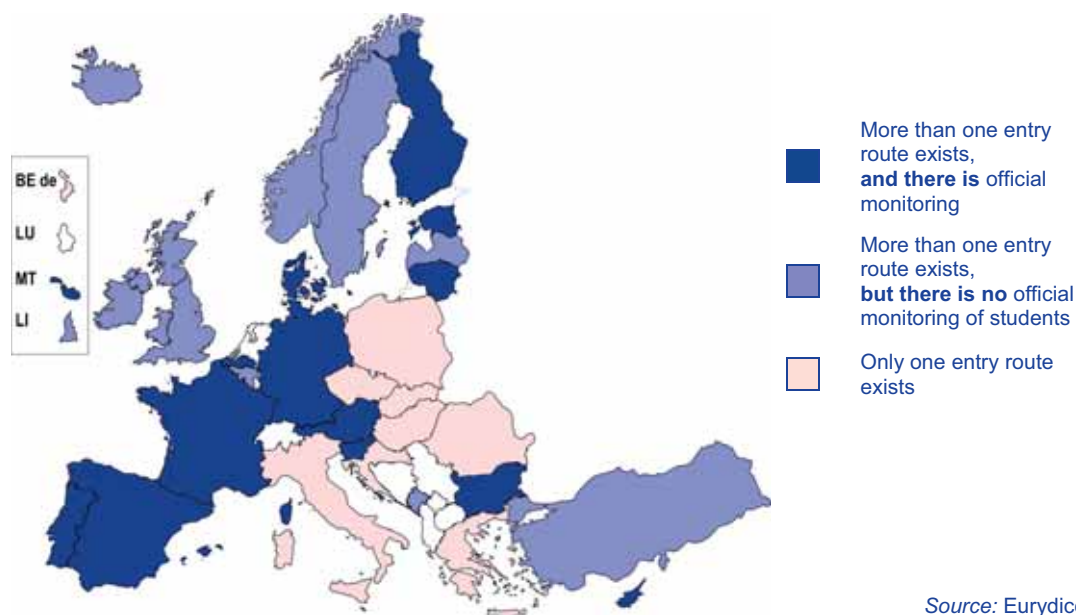
For many other countries, however, it is unclear why there is such a lack of information at national level when the systems are in place to collect data. In some cases, it is possible that monitoring systems have been developed only recently, and therefore ten year comparisons are not possible. However,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

4) Provide incentives to higher education Institutions

Given the rhetorical importance attached to widening participation, it would be reasonable to expect national governments to reward higher education institutions that are successful in recruiting and retaining students from under-represented groups. However, only two countries, Ireland and the whole of the United Kingdom, have established a system where funding is deliberately used to remove a disincentive to higher education institutions to widen participation. Indeed for the authorities in these two countries, the funding formula reflects an acknowledged reality that there are additional costs in recruiting and supporting students from under-represented groups. This is why higher education institutions with more of these students receive additional funding.

5) Develop alternative entry routes

Figure 5: Entry routes to higher education and monitoring of students, 2012/13

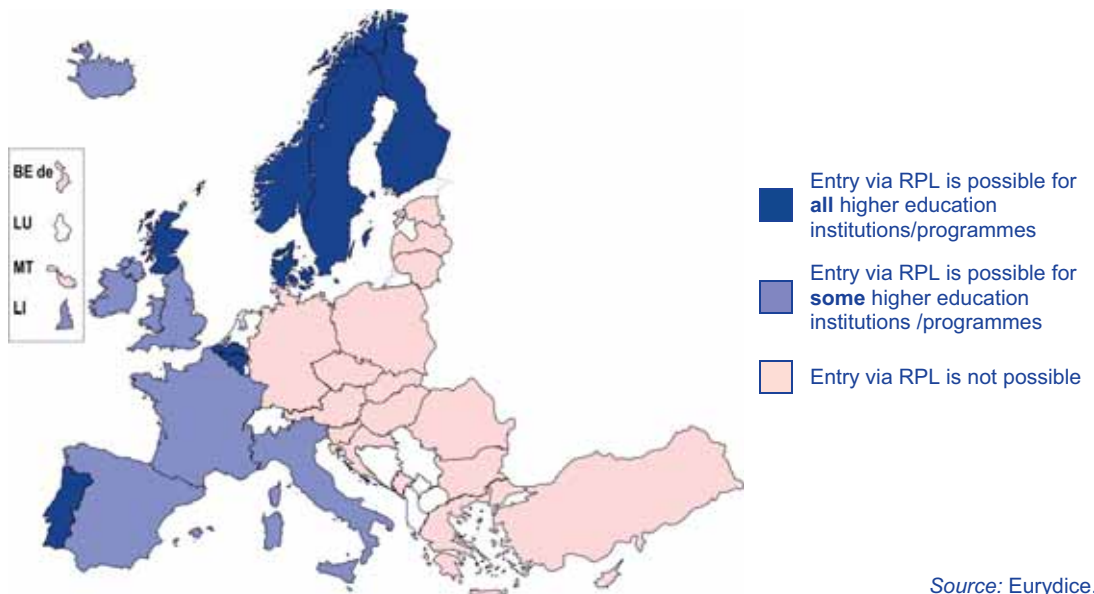


Countries often collect no information on the profile or numbers of students using alternative entry routes

In eight countries, only one entry route to higher education exists – a factor that may itself be a major barrier to many potential students. In countries with alternative entry routes, there is often no official monitoring of the numbers of students entering via the different possible routes. So again, countries are unaware of the effectiveness of their systems in providing opportunities for under-represented groups to access higher education.

6) Develop recognition of prior learning(RPL)

Figure 6: Recognition of prior learning for entry into higher education, 2012/13

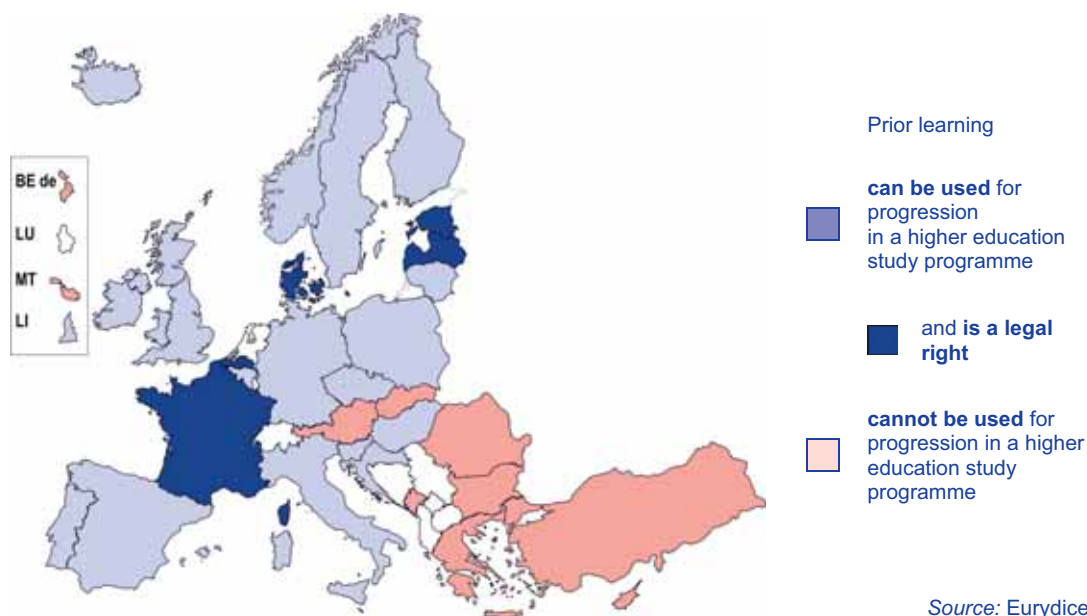


Closely linked to entry routes to higher education is the existence of recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a mechanism to facilitate access to higher education. Such practice can be a main form of opening opportunities for citizens that have failed, for whatever reason, to complete successfully the form of upper secondary education that gives direct access to higher education. There is, however, a significant geographical difference between most western European countries, where RPL can be used to gain access at least to some higher education programmes, and those in east and south-east Europe where the practice does not exist.

Few countries give students a legal right to have their prior learning considered for recognition

In a majority of European countries, students can have their prior non-formal and informal learning recognised and validated towards fulfilment of higher education study requirements. However, while recognition may be legally possible, in practice it may be difficult to implement. In most countries, higher education institutions can autonomously decide whether they will or will not put in place evaluation procedures allowing students to have their non-formal and informal learning recognised. It is only in the Flemish Community of Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France and Latvia that students have a legal right to relevant evaluation procedures, requiring higher education institutions to ensure their provision.

Figure 7: Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning for progression in higher education studies, 2012/13



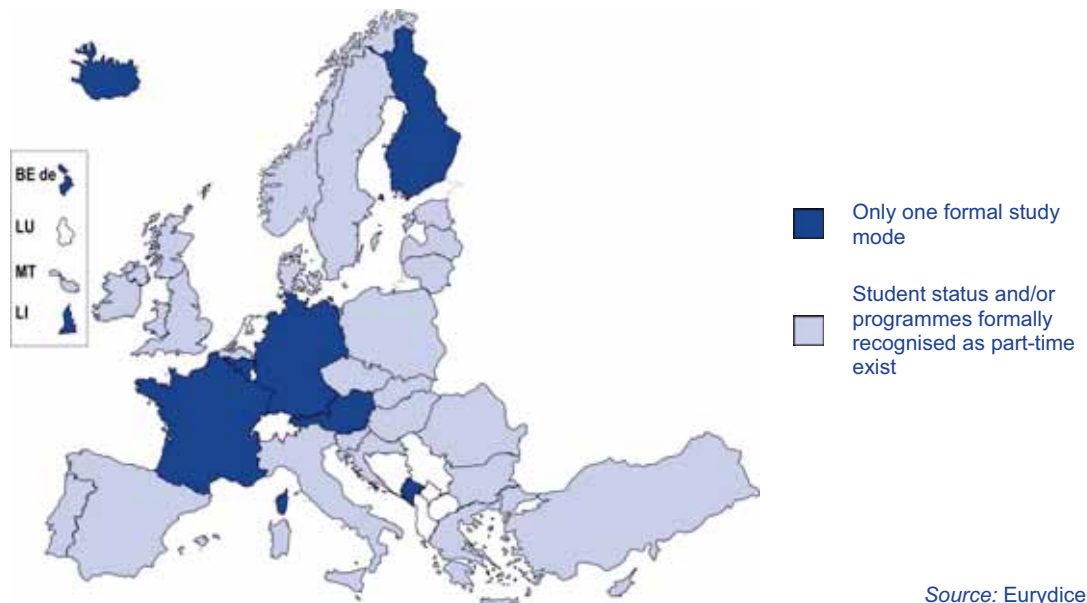
Data on the numbers of students who benefit from RPL procedures is not available in the majority of countries

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

Data is also often unavailable on the number of beneficiaries of recognition of prior learning. Only the three Baltic States, the Flemish Community of Belgium and France have such information. Estonia estimates that in 2012, around 15 % of all students took part in the process, whereas in Latvia and Lithuania the figure is less than 1 % (around 50 and 120 students, respectively). In the Flemish Community of Belgium, the percentage stands at less than 5 %. The percentage in France is less than 1 %, although numbers are more significant with around 4 000 candidates successfully completing the process in 2011.

7) Develop part-time studies

Figure 8: Formal recognition of a part-time student status and/or part-time programmes in European countries, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

The understanding of part-time studies differs from country to country and sometimes within countries

One of the most common approaches for adapting higher education to the needs of those who cannot follow traditional 'full-time' studies is to offer a possibility for students to follow a different study mode. However, the understanding of terms such as 'full-time' or 'part-time' studies varies greatly across countries.

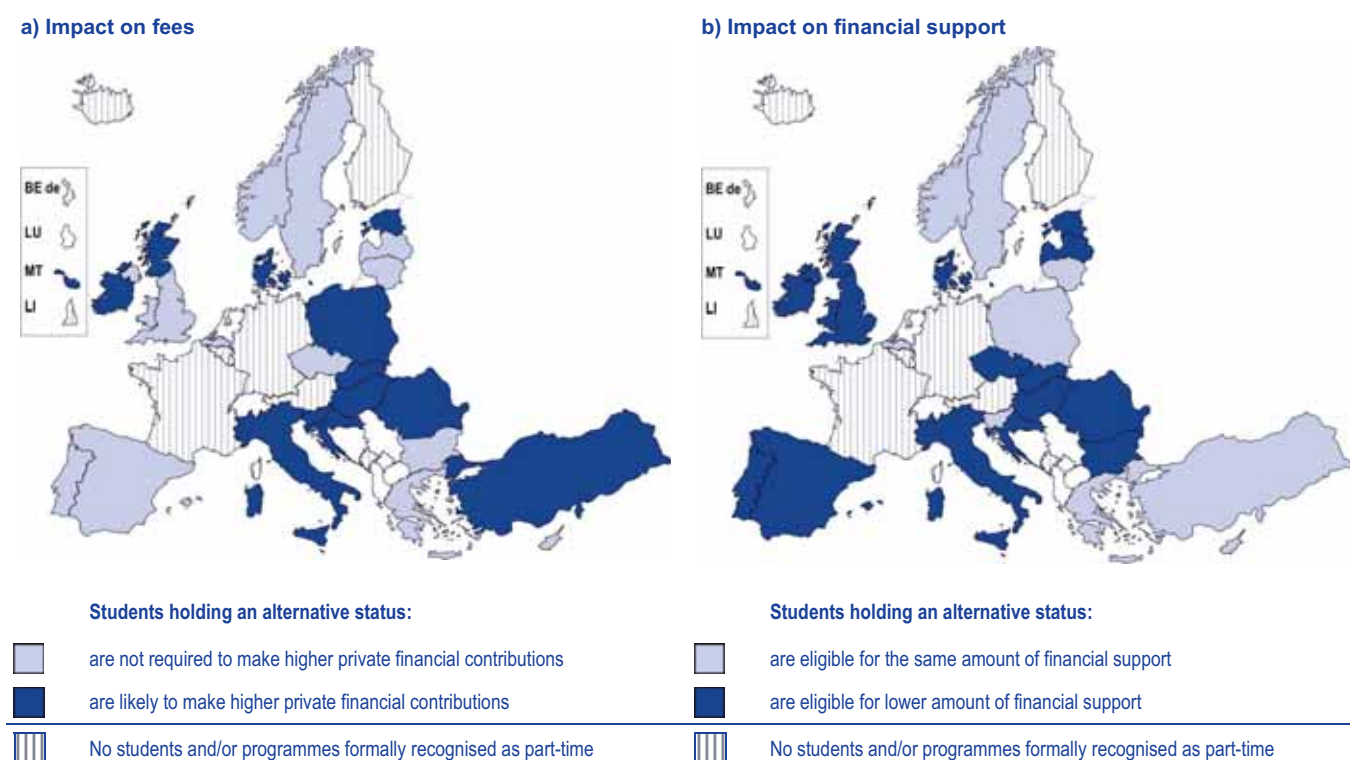
Most European countries offer a possibility for students to organise their studies in a more flexible way compared to traditional full-time arrangements. In some countries (e.g. Spain, Italy and Slovenia), steering documents refer to part-time studies, but leave their exact definition to higher education institutions. A similar situation can be observed in Norway, where students may register on a part-time or full-time basis, but the workload related to each student status is defined individually and stipulated in an individual education plan.

Case study: Flemish Community of Belgium

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, alternative study modes are not conceived as 'full-time' and 'part-time' but students can choose between three formal student statuses or 'contracts': a 'diploma/degree contract' for studies leading to a complete higher education degree, a 'credit contract' for studies leading to a limited number of credits and an 'examination contract' for studies where students do not take courses, but participate only in examinations aiming at a limited number of credits.



Figure 9: Impact of formal student status on financial arrangements related to higher education studies, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

Although part-time studies offer more flexibility to students, they often require higher contributions from students

When analysing part-time studies as a potential measure to widen participation to new target groups, one of the central questions is whether and to what extent they have an impact on financial aspects related to studies – amounts of fees and entitlement to financial support. In around half of the countries, part-time studies are related to higher private financial investment compared to traditional studies. In most countries where part-time students pay or are likely to pay higher fees, the financial support to which they are entitled is also limited.

8) Develop guidance services to prospective students

Across Europe, it is the norm to find advice on selecting appropriate educational programmes being provided free of charge to all school and higher education students. The provision of good advice to people at a formative stage in their lives is clearly essential in a world where demand for higher education is increasing, and where many new students have few cultural reference points in their family background to help them set an appropriate academic path.

Advice can be critical in helping students adjust to a new environment, clarifying expectations, and interpreting higher education experience. Guidance to prospective students can also help reduce drop-out caused by unrealistic expectations in the first year.

What are the main challenges for student retention?

Definition of student retention:

The extent to which students remain within a higher education institution and progress to complete their study programme within a given time frame.

Student retention is a key performance indicator for higher education systems and also a matter of social justice to ensure that those brought into higher education as part of the widening participation agenda are supported appropriately to reduce the risk of non-completion.

Concerns over the levels of non-completion have increased in many countries, with the median rate across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) indicating that nearly one in three students entering a programme do not complete.

The 2011 Communication on the modernisation agenda for Europe's higher education systems stresses that increasing higher education attainment requires a dual focus on increasing access and participation in higher education (bringing more people into the system) and improving completion rates (ensuring as few students drop out of their studies as possible). To improve retention, it is important for higher education institutions to identify and support specific student needs. Research indicates that particular attention should be paid to first-year students and their skills development. Providing information, advice and guidance is one of the key interventions to support student retention and success.

1) Develop national policies, objectives and action

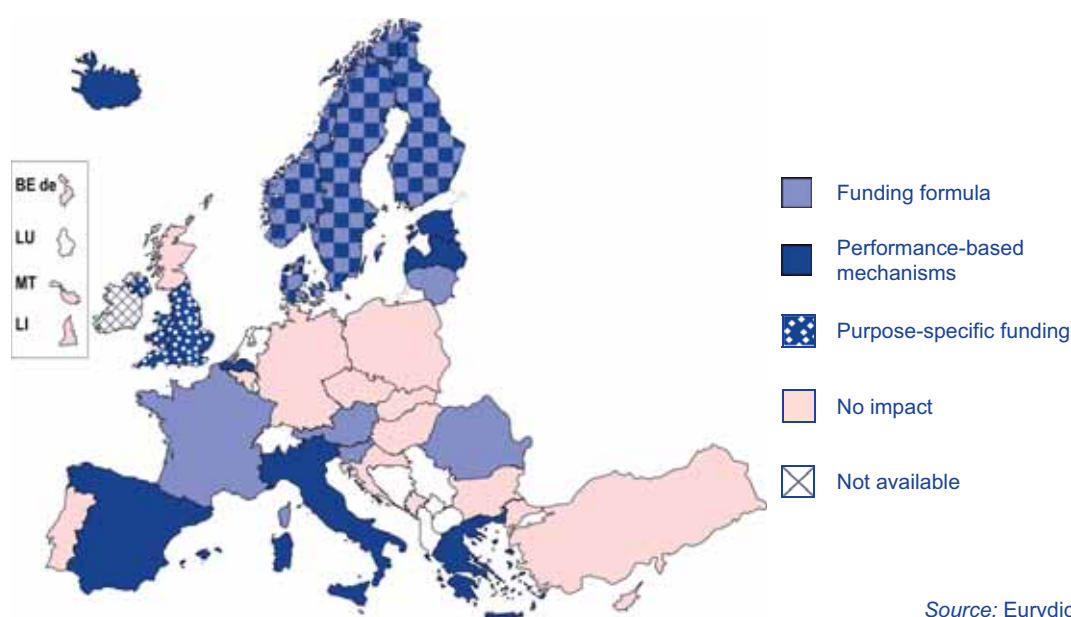
Objectives regarding retention are rarely focused on students that are more at risk of drop out

Although countries are concerned about the waste – both human and financial – of non-completion of studies, few countries have developed policy to address this issue directly. Target setting is rarely found in relation to groups of students more at risk of dropping out. The tendency is more to define general goals of improving completion rates.

Policy developments can, however be seen in relation to completing study programmes within a regular time. Limiting the time to degree is often seen as a key element of an agenda to improve efficiency in the use of public finances. Fees and support are often used to encourage students to complete their studies within a limited period of time. For example, students in 26 countries may be required to pay additional fees if they exceed a regular period of study time, while in 18 countries students who are awarded grants continue to be eligible for such support only if they complete each year successfully or within a certain period of time defined by steering documents.

2) Provide incentives to higher education institutions to improve performance

Figure 10: Impact of completion rates on higher education institutional funding, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

Improving completion rates would have no impact on funding to higher education institutions in around half of Europe's countries

In some countries, government policy attempts to motivate higher education institutions to take action to decrease the drop-out rate. For instance, Belgium (Flemish Community) highlights output financing of higher education institutions, thus providing a financial incentive for higher education institutions to pay attention to student retention. Austria includes action to address problems related to drop-out in the performance agreements concluded with universities.

It is interesting to note, however, that an improvement of completion or drop-out rates in half of Europe's higher education systems would have no impact on institutions' funding.

There are also no examples of countries that track students after dropping out from higher education.

What are the main challenges for employability and transition to the labour market?

Definition of employability:

A combination of knowledge, competences and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and progress during their career.

Europe has set a benchmark for graduate employability

Employability plays a central role in the European Commission's higher education reform strategy and is a central pillar of both the Europe 2020 (European Commission, 2010) and the Education and Training 2020 ('ET 2020')⁽²⁾ strategies. Within the ET 2020 strategy, the Council of the European Union adopted a benchmark on graduate employability in 2012⁽³⁾. According to this benchmark, 'by 2020, the share of employed graduates (20-34 year olds) having left education and training no more than three years before the reference year should be at least 82 %'⁽⁴⁾. While in this context the term 'graduates' refers not only to those finishing higher education but also to graduates with upper secondary or post-secondary, non-tertiary qualifications, both public authorities and higher education institutions have a prominent role in achieving this goal.

The policy issues related to employability have a dual aspect. Firstly, it is crucial to strengthen employability for all students, and this has been identified as an issue of importance for all public authorities as well as for the EU 2020 agenda. It is also necessary to recognise that employability is an integral element of the widening participation agenda in higher education. Widening participation does not stop at providing access to students from under-represented groups, but has to include measures ensuring that such students complete their studies and have a successful transition to the labour market.

⁽²⁾ Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), OJ 2009/C 119/02, 28.5.2009.

⁽³⁾ Council conclusions of 11 May 2012 on the employability of graduates from education and training, OJ 2012/C 169/04, 15.6.2012.

⁽⁴⁾ Ibid., p. 10.

1) Involve employers

Figure 11a: Involvement of employers in curriculum development, 2012/13

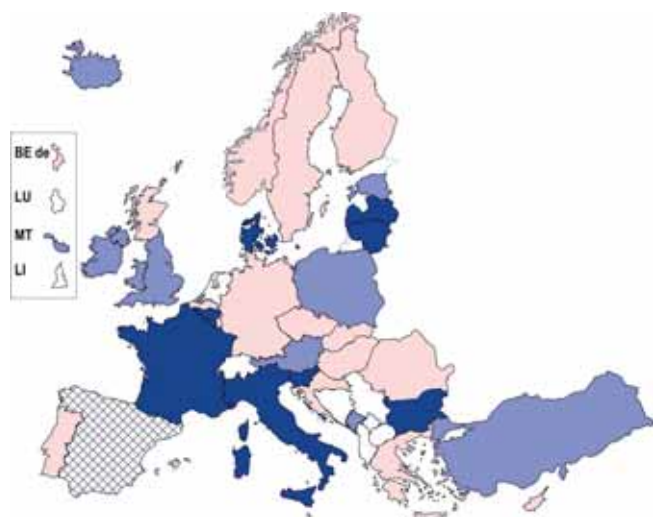
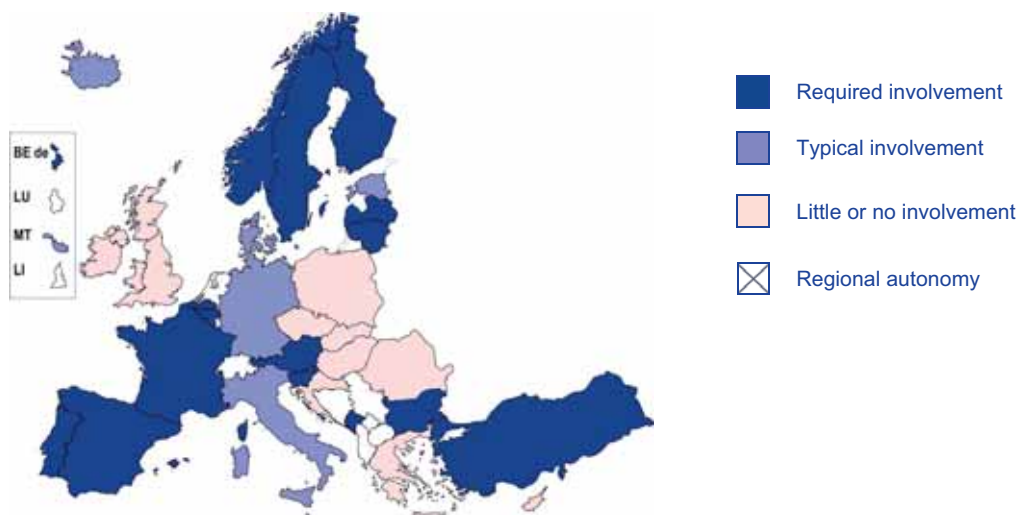


Figure 11b: Involvement of employers in teaching, 2012/13



Figure 11c: Involvement of employers in planning and management with decision-making or consultative bodies, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

There are different ways of involving employers and providing labour market information to higher education

One important way of ensuring the relevance of higher education to the labour market is through consulting or involving employers, employers' organisations and business representatives in the various steps of developing and evaluating higher education study programmes. As the maps illustrate, employers are more often involved in decision making or consultative bodies than they are in curriculum development or teaching.

2) Increase training and work placements

The majority of countries do not monitor student participation in training and work placements

Practical training and work placements are key elements in enhancing graduates' employability, as evidence shows that students who participated in practical training before graduation are more likely to find jobs than their counterparts without relevant work experience.

However, the proportion of students participating in practical training or work placements is not available in the large majority of countries. Among the countries with available data, participation is among the highest in Finland, where all first-cycle polytechnic courses include at least three months long work placement period, and practical training is compulsory for some university degrees. Participation is also relatively high in Lithuania and Latvia.

Many countries provide financial incentives to higher education institutions and employers alike to increase the number of available traineeships. However, targeted initiatives focusing on disadvantaged students exist only in the United Kingdom (England).

3) Ensure high quality career guidance

Figure 12: Career guidance provision throughout the whole student lifecycle, 2012/13

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

● All students ○ Some students

Source: Eurydice.

Career guidance services rarely target disadvantaged students

Career guidance or mentoring students is another evidence-based way of enhancing the employability of graduates, and is regarded as particularly important for non-traditional learners. However, the only countries reporting targeted guidance are Greece and the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland). In Greece, Liaison Offices responsible for career guidance and counselling provide specific services to students and graduates coming from vulnerable social groups in order to develop their professional qualifications and to support their professional integration. In the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), students with disabilities are particularly supported to ensure that they have access to the same provision as other students.

Case Study: Greece: Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB)

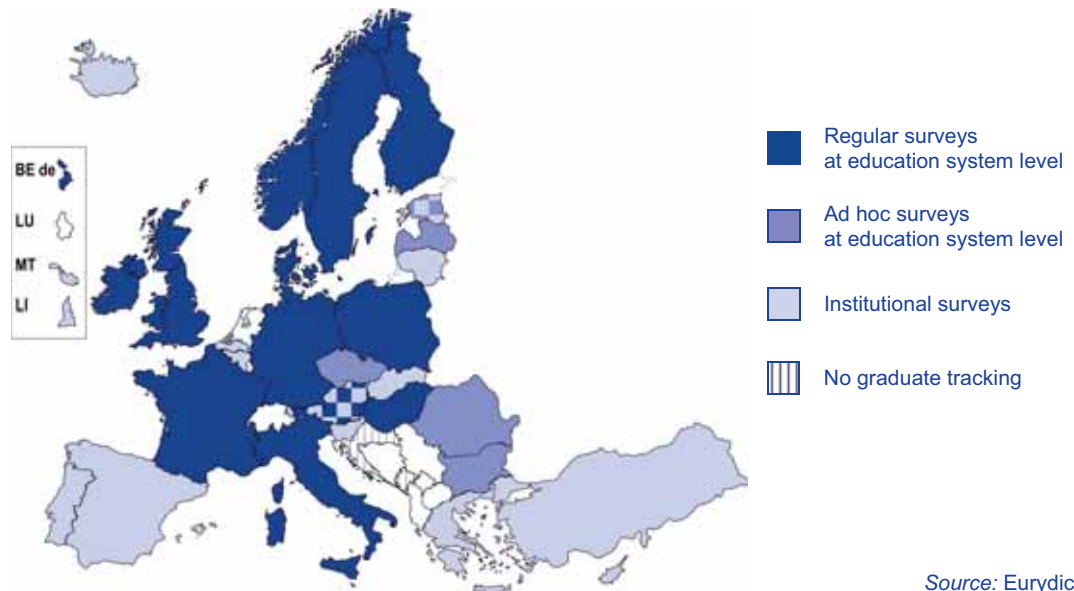
The AUEB provided clear evidence of how positive change can be stimulated by an adverse economic, political and social environment. The university faced the challenge of supporting the employability of students in a reality where, since 2008, the labour market nationally had collapsed. Students have been forced to change their labour market expectations radically. With little hope of public sector employment, or indeed of gaining typical graduate employment in the private sector, they have become increasingly interested in creating new forms of employment for themselves, and supporting each other in developing relevant skills.

A significant shift has consequently occurred at the university with support being channelled to a dynamic blend of services focusing on employability and entrepreneurship. This development has been guided by experienced academic staff, thus ensuring a link with the teaching and research work at the university.



4) Monitor graduates' labour market entry

Figure 13: Graduate tracking surveys, 2012/13



Countries could make better use of graduate tracking surveys

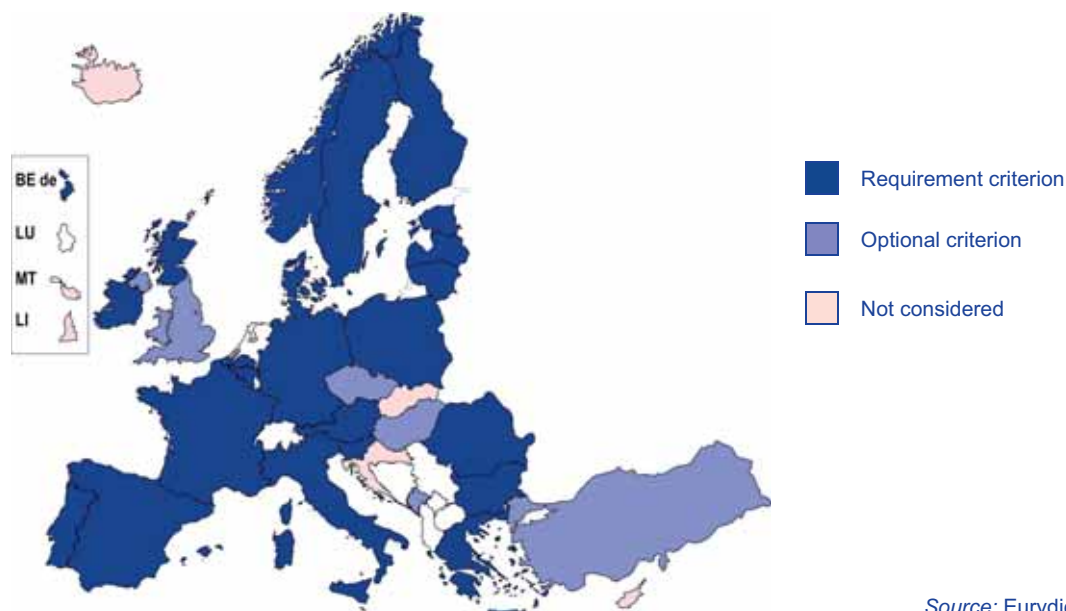
Graduate surveys that rely on the self-assessment of graduates are currently the most accurate tools available for evaluating employability. Career tracking surveys (or tracer studies) do not only provide the means to measure the percentage of graduates finding employment after graduation, but they are also able to describe the quality of jobs, the length of the job search period, graduates' job satisfaction, and the match between graduates' skills and job requirements. Furthermore, they are suitable to detect differences between the labour market entry prospects of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' learners.

Regular graduate surveys at national/regional level exist in 14 education systems, while ad hoc national/regional surveys take place in six.

However, only in a few education systems do education authorities make a systematic use of the information collected on the basis of graduate surveys. Most often, graduate surveys are used in quality assurance or other evaluation processes of higher education study programmes (e.g. in Estonia, Spain, France, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, Iceland and Norway).

5) Evaluate performance

Figure 14: Employability-related criteria in quality assurance procedures, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

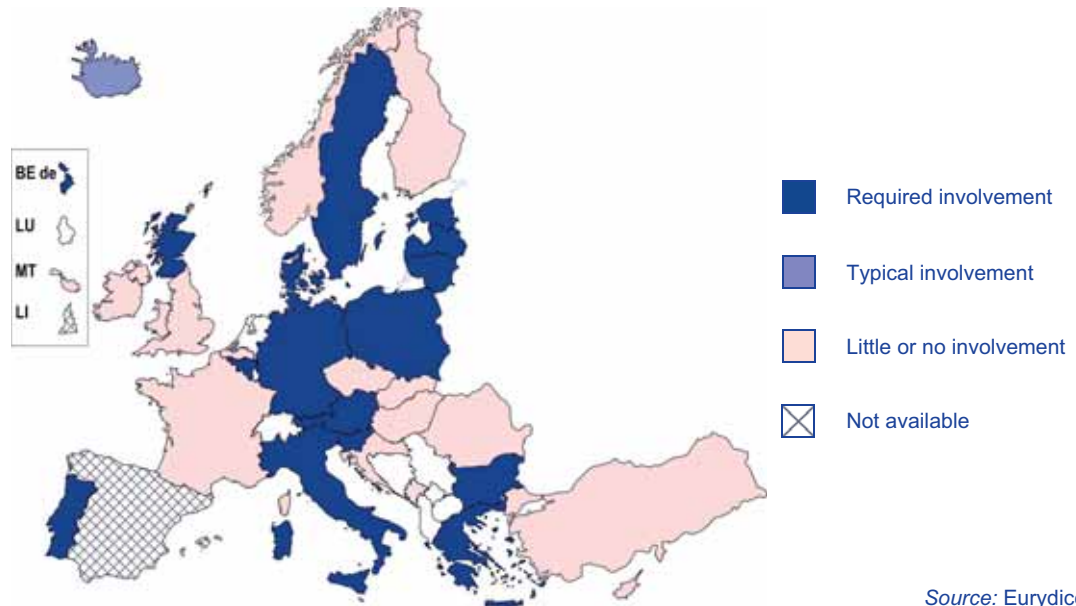
Employability is considered during quality assurance processes in the large majority of countries

Quality assurance is an important mechanism through which education authorities can encourage higher education institutions to enhance the employability of their graduates. In the large majority of countries, higher education institutions are obliged to submit employability-related information to quality assurance agencies before programme accreditation or for the continuing evaluation of institutions and/or programmes. Such information can be also based on graduate surveys.

Employability-related quality standards can focus on a variety of issues. Higher education institutions can typically be required to:

- show that their programmes are relevant for the labour market answering an existing demand;
- provide proof that they involve employers or include employers' perspectives in programme development;
- regularly submit data on the employment of their graduates or have to prove that they have a monitoring or tracking system in place.

Figure 15: The involvement of employers in external quality assurance, 2012/13



Employers participate in external quality assurance processes in about half of the countries

Another way of ensuring that employability criteria are considered during the evaluation process is through the participation of employers in external quality assurance procedures. Employers participate in external quality assurance processes in around half of the education systems.

Concluding remarks

The report on which this Eurydice Brief is based examines the issues of access, retention and employability from the student perspective as one inter-related policy theme. Although there are many positive developments, the findings also reveal many challenges. In particular:

While many countries acknowledge that there are different challenges regarding disadvantaged student groups, few have developed concrete policy priorities, strategies, targets and measures.

Findings on monitoring suggest that significant progress still needs to be made, as an evidence-based picture across Europe is currently impossible to provide.

Many countries could consider developing systems to ensure Recognition of Prior Learning to support all students, and in particular those who are disadvantaged.

Although drop-out rates in higher education are unacceptably high in many countries, there are few national examples of clear strategies with measurable targets being developed to tackle this issue.

More flexible forms of higher education study are increasingly becoming possible. However, while this can support widening participation, countries need to consider the impact of funding and support on students taking advantage of such possibilities.

Employability is a high policy priority, but again engagement in positive action varies between countries, and graduate surveys in particular could be better exploited.

Irrespective of the approach and measures taken in relation to employability, countries tend to ignore the potential impact on disadvantaged students.

The widening participation agenda is not yet followed through by governments and higher education institutions as a coherent policy approach involving access, retention and employability.

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

