European Commission

Eurydice Highlights

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

Supporting the development of mass higher education systems is high on the policy agendas at both national and European levels. This is because higher education systems in Europe should be designed to quickly respond and adapt to the needs of our increasingly knowledge-based economy and societies. Likewise, to expand the knowledge-base and foster progress, an increasing amount of European citizens are required to hold higher education degrees. In Europe, the EU 2020 strategy, with a goal of 40 % completion by 2020, and the modernisation agenda, for example, both focus on increasing participation in higher education.

In view of these objectives and to support optimal policy making, the Eurydice report on *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability* examines policy and practice in Europe related to three stages of higher education:

- *Access*, which includes awareness of the availability of higher education, the requirements to be admitted, and the process of admission;
- *Retention*, including progression through the study programme with support that may be provided when problems are encountered;
- *Employability*, including measures supporting students' transition from higher education into the labour market.

This brochure summarises key findings of the report.

Education and Training

What is Eurydice

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

The full study
Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability
can be found in English on the Eurydice website
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/thematic_reports_en.php
Printed copies of the report
are available upon request at:
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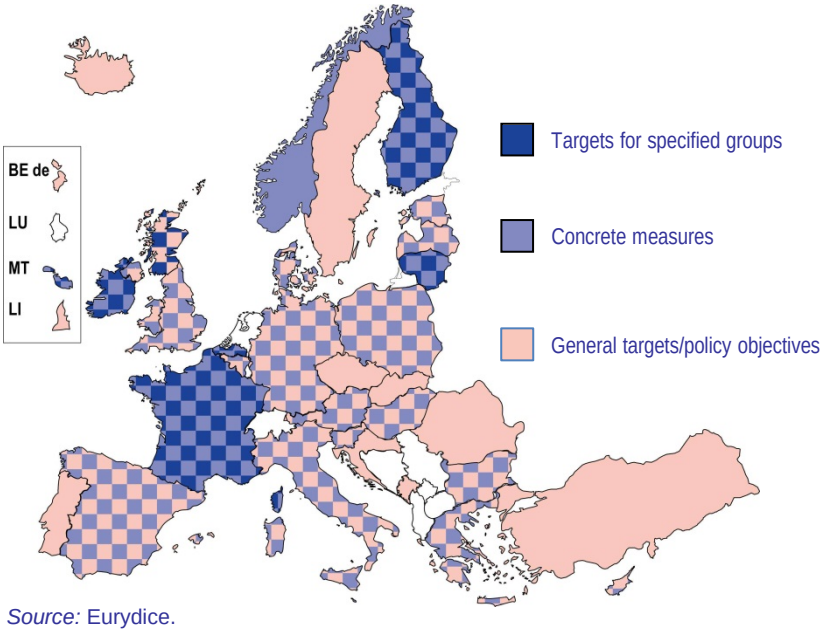
Only eight countries have set targets to increase participation of specified student groups

The concept of access to higher education no longer only entails the right of eligible students to apply to, and to be considered for, a study programme. It now also encompasses a 'social dimension', which aspires for student bodies to reflect all sections of society. In practice, this means that policies should aim at removing obstacles related to disadvantages such as the social and economic background of applicants. General targets regarding access have been set by nearly all countries. However, there are only eight countries that have defined participation targets for specified student groups. Moreover, the student groups that these countries have identified as targets vary considerably. For example, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, the target refers to children whose parents do not hold a higher education qualification. Finland focuses on increasing male participation while Lithuania would like to increase female participation in maths and sciences.

National Policy approaches to widening participation 2012/13

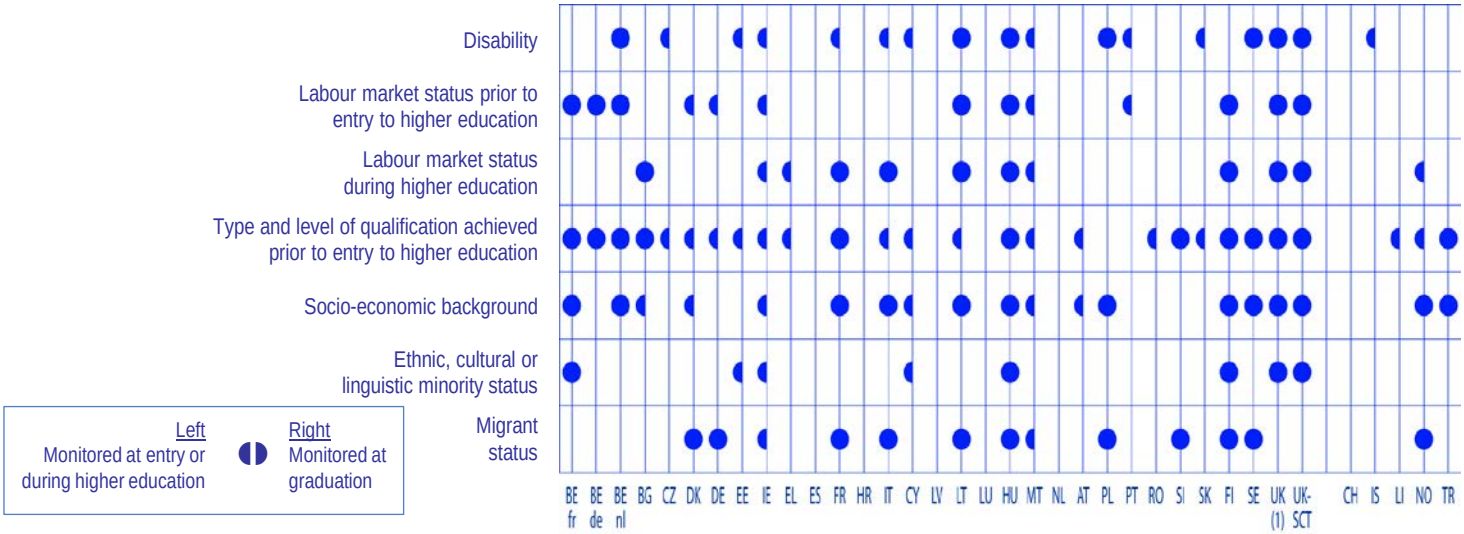


Source: Eurydice.

Monitoring of student characteristics varies significantly between countries and data is not exploited optimally

Although nearly all countries capture basic characteristics of the student population such as age and gender, the range of student characteristics that countries monitor over time varies significantly: 'type and level of qualification achieved prior to entry to higher education' is by far the most frequently monitored aspect, whereas the 'ethnic, cultural or linguistic minority status' of the student population is rarely taken into account.

Most frequently monitored student body characteristics 2012/13



Even when student data is monitored systematically, it is not always exploited optimally. 19 education systems were for example not able to report on specific changes to the diversity of their student body between 2002/03 to 2012/13 beyond those of a general nature such as student numbers or gender distribution.

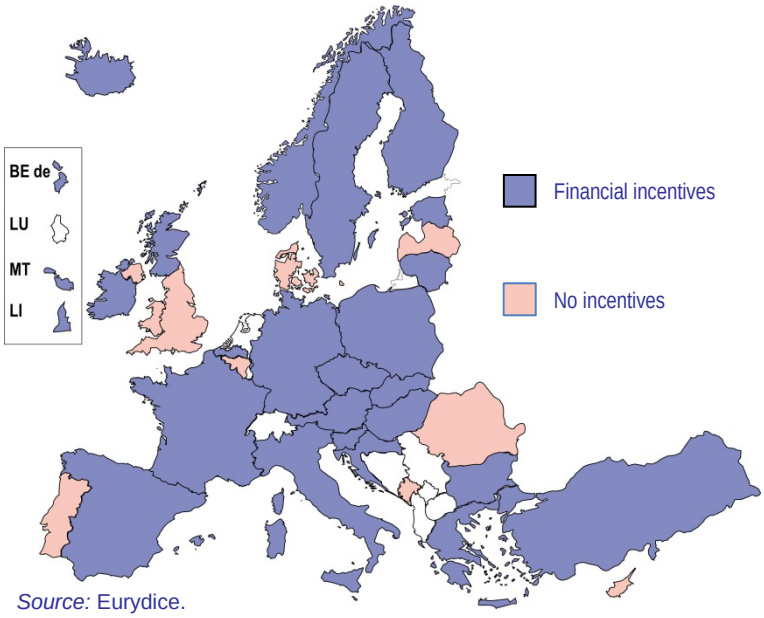
Higher education institutions rarely receive financial incentives to widen access

Another striking fact that contradicts policy ambitions lies in the lack of financial incentives to higher education institutions to widen access. Only two national governments, Ireland and the United Kingdom, reward higher education institutions that are successful in recruiting, and retaining students from under-represented groups throughout their whole study programme.

26 education systems use financial incentives for students to finish their studies on time

Facilitating access to higher education alone does not guarantee high graduation rates. That's why adequate attention needs to be paid to students actually completing their studies. While precise targets related to improving student retention are not commonly found, individual countries usually set overarching goals to reduce student drop-out and provide specific reward measures to students. 26 education systems, for example, have in place financial incentives that encourage students to complete their studies on time. In these systems, students may for example be asked to pay tuition or administrative fees only if they exceed the regular length of study. Another measure would be to limit financial student support to the regular duration of the studies.

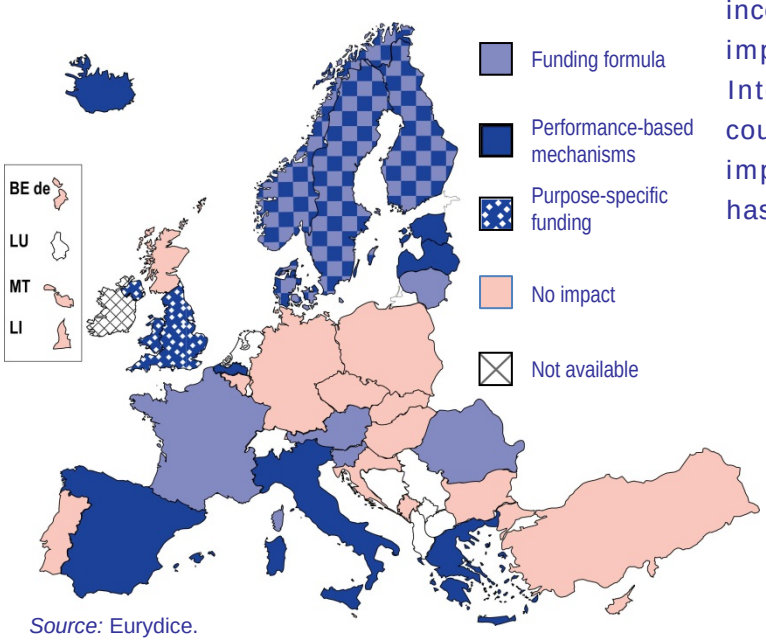
Incentives for students to complete studies within a limited period of time, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

Half of European countries offer financial incentives to institutions that work on increasing completion rates

Impact of completion/drop-out rates on higher education institution's funding, 2012/13



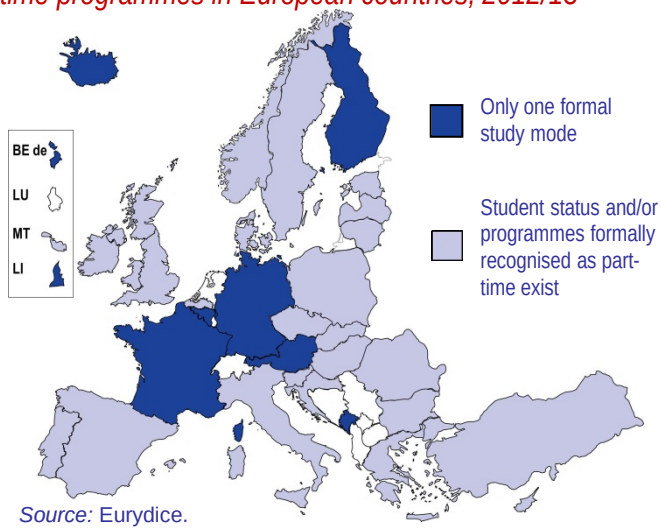
Source: Eurydice.

In addition to financially rewarding individual students, countries can also give financial incentives to higher education institutions that implement measures to retain their students. Interestingly enough, only half of European countries offer such incentives. In the other half, improving completion or reducing drop-out rates has no impact on an institution's funding.

Part-time studies are often more expensive for individuals than their full-time equivalents

Offering students more flexibility to complete their studies, such as through part-time education or distance learning, can also positively impact on both access and completion rates. Most European countries now offer an opportunity for students to formally organise their studies in a more flexible way compared to traditional full-time, on-site arrangements. Although part-time education should facilitate the lives of those who cannot study full time, such flexibility may come at a cost. In 12 education systems, for example, part-time studies are related, or are likely to be related, to higher private financial investment compared to traditional studies. In addition to higher private fees, the financial support to which they are entitled is also often limited.

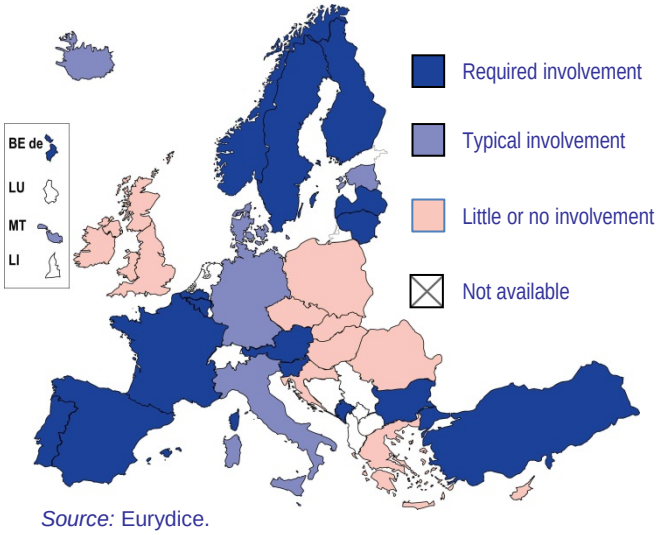
Formal recognition of a part-time student status and/or part-time programmes in European countries, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

17 education systems consult employers to help them match study programmes with labour market needs

Involvement of employers in planning and management with higher education institutions, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

National systems and higher education institutions put lots of effort into increasing the employability of their graduates. They can do so by either designing their study programmes in such a way that these respond to labour market needs, or by making sure students will be provided throughout their studies with the right skills to successfully pursue employment. Consulting or involving employers and businesses directly in the design of higher education study programmes is one mechanism for matching study programmes to the labour market. In fact, 17 education systems use this method and involve employers in curriculum development, teaching, and participation in decision-making or consultative bodies.

Quality assurance agencies rarely look at access, retention and employability data in relation to specific student profiles

While higher education quality assurance agencies take some account of access, retention and employability data, they rarely consider different student profiles. For example, agencies may be required to consider admission systems, but do not typically focus on how admissions systems may play a role in access for disadvantaged students. Likewise, quality assurance processes that look at retention may consider trends in completion rates but rarely attempt to understand the underlying causes of dropout. There is also no evidence of any country or quality assurance agency systematically analysing employment opportunities in relation to the social profiles of graduates. It is therefore impossible to know whether factors such as socio-economic disadvantage or ethnicity, which are known to have an impact on access and completion rates, also impact employment after graduation.

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