# INTELLIGENCE BRIEF:
IS HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE?[1]

The EUROSTUDENT project collates comparable student survey data on the social dimension of European higher education. It focuses on the socio-economic background and on the living conditions of students, but it also investigates temporary international mobility. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. The data used here comes from the fourth round of EUROSTUDENT, for which data was collated in the years 2009 and 2010.

Is higher education representative of countries' populations?

One measure of whether social groups are well-balanced in higher education is to compare the share of students whose parents attained a certain level of education with the share of adults of the same age and educational attainment in the general population. One can talk about social exclusion if, for example, the share of students with highly-educated parents is larger than the share of highly-educated adults of the same age in the general population. Figure 1 shows a matrix comparing country results on the basis of two indices which consider the share of students with highly-educated fathers[2] (y-axis) and the share of students whose fathers attained a low level of education (x-axis). The lines of the matrix are determined by cross-country averages.[3]

Figure 1: Typology of social inclusiveness of higher education systems - highest educational attainment of students' fathers as a share of corresponding age group in general population (index: 1 = perfect balance) in %
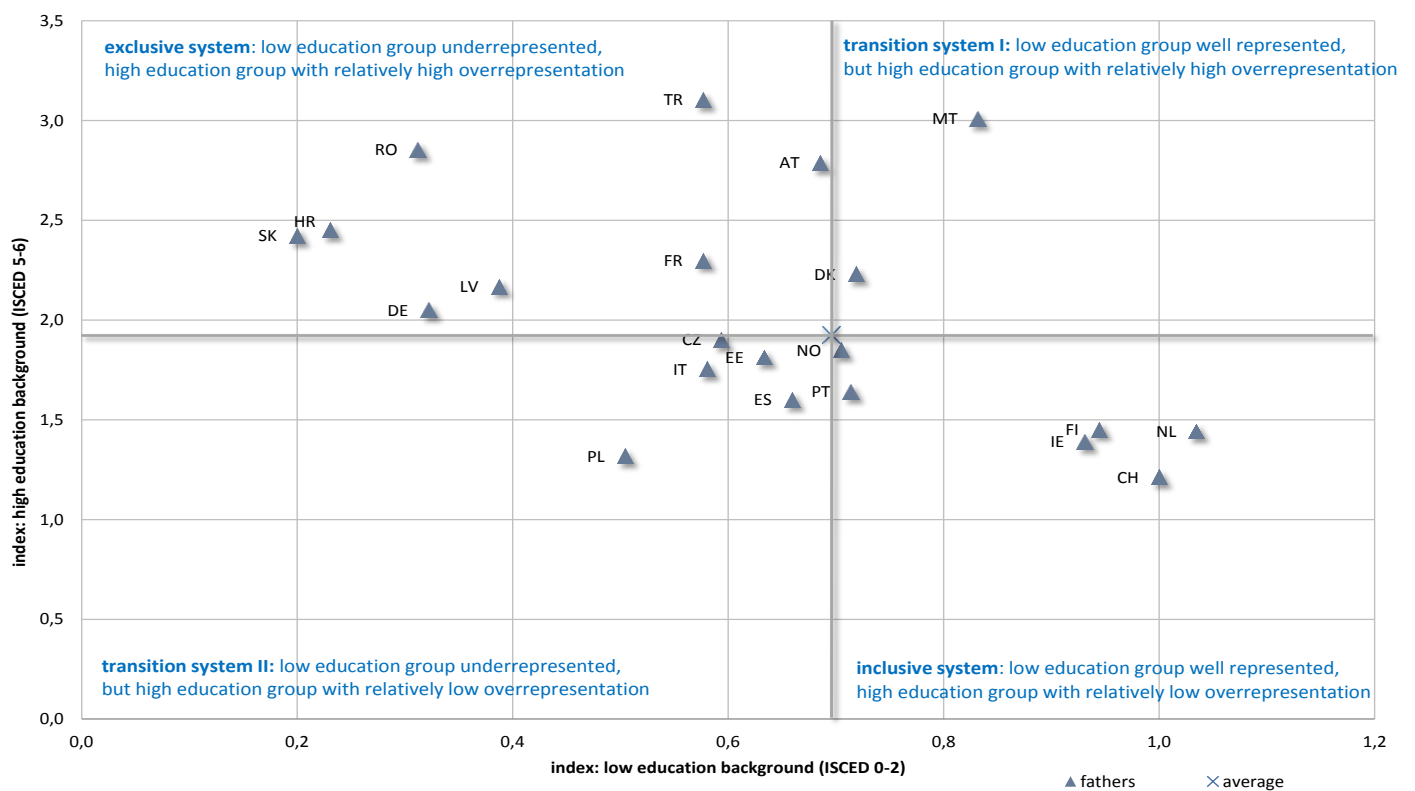
Source: EUROSTUDENT IV, Subtopic C.3 and national statistics/LFS. No data: SI, LT, SE, E/W. No part-time students in sample: DK, LV. High education background oversampled: DK. Low education includes ISCED 3C: CZ. Males of corresponding age are defined as males between the ages of 40 and 60 years old.

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[2] This analysis uses students' fathers' educational attainment as a proxy for students' social background. The EUROSTUDENT data set also includes data on highest educational attainment of students' mothers and of parents.
[3] AT = Austria, CH = Switzerland, CZ = Czech Republic, DE= Germany, DK = Denmark, E/W = England/Wales, EE = Estonia, ES = Spain, FI = Finland, FR = France, HR = Croatia, IE = Ireland, IT = Italy, LT = Lithuania, LV = Latvia, MT = Malta, NL = Netherlands, NO = Norway, PL = Poland, PT = Portugal, RO = Romania, SE = Sweden, SI = Slovenia, SK = Slovakia, TR = Turkey.

The resulting matrix in Figure 1 is a typology of social inclusiveness of European higher education systems. It highlights three country clusters: inclusive systems; exclusive systems; and transition systems. Inclusive systems (bottom-right) are those with a minimal underrepresentation of students from low education backgrounds and a minimal overrepresentation of the students from high education backgrounds. Ireland, Finland, The Netherlands and Switzerland can be identified as socially inclusive on both of these index values. The exclusive systems (top-left) have a high level of underrepresentation of students from low education backgrounds and a high level of overrepresentation of students from high education backgrounds. Slovakia, Croatia, Romania, Germany, Latvia, Turkey and France (and near the borderline Austria) can be identified as socially exclusive on both of these measures.

The remaining countries can be identified as transition systems, since they score well on one of the two measures. Poland, Italy and Spain, for instance, have an index value for overrepresentation of the high education group that is lower than the average, but have comparatively low scores on students from the low education group. In fact, this means that they are good at motivating students from the middle education group to enter higher education (i.e. students whose fathers attained non-tertiary education above lower secondary level).

How well do inclusive systems accommodate students' needs?

In their period of study at university or college students have to balance the demands of various tasks and duties. In the national surveys students are asked to express their satisfaction level regarding their overall time budget and how it is spent on study-related activities and employment. In about half of the EUROSTUDENT countries, around 40% of students are (very) satisfied with their weekly workload. Figure 2 focuses on the share of students stating that they are either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their personal time budget, i.e. the balance between attending lectures, personal study time and paid employment.

Figure 2: Share of all students (very) dissatisfied with their personal time budget, in %
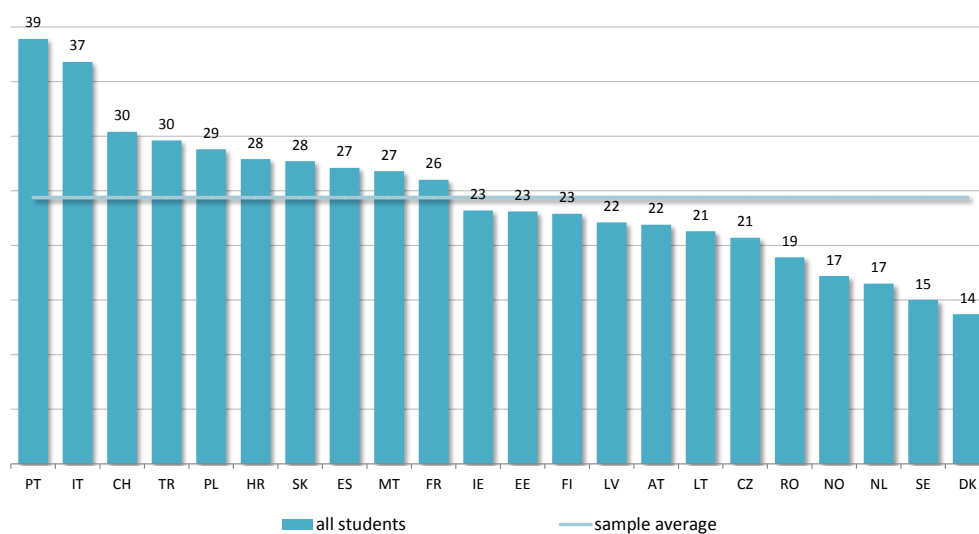
Source: EUROSTUDENT IV, Subtopic G.11. No data: DE, E/W, SI.

The dissatisfaction levels in Portugal and Italy stand out with well over one third of students (very) dissatisfied with their time budget. In Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark the share of (very) dissatisfied students is one sixth or lower. However, viewing these results in conjunction with Figure 1 leads to additional insights.

Figure 1 shows Switzerland and Portugal to be socially inclusive, but this appears to come at a price for a remarkable share of students in these systems, who seem to be comparatively unhappy with their personal time budget. By contrast, Finland and the Netherlands, also shown to be socially inclusive, have rather low levels of dissatisfaction. But even in these countries there appears to be a trade-off. Further analyses of country data (not shown here), show that older students (who are 30 years or older), who are often from low social backgrounds,

have much higher levels of dissatisfaction compared to all students (FI: 30% vs. 23%, NL: 23% vs. 17%).

These findings, therefore, suggest that certain shares of the student population are not finding it easy to balance their time budget. This is likely to be related to the fact that students from low social backgrounds and those who are older often work and have other duties to fulfil alongside their studies. In other words, the dissatisfaction is related to the difficulty in balancing time spent in lectures, on personal study time and on paid employment. The more socially inclusive a system is, the more heterogeneous is the student population, which makes it more likely that certain groups of students will have difficulties in balancing the demands of their various tasks and duties. There are two exceptions to the relation between widening participation and high levels of student dissatisfaction with their time budget: Ireland and Norway. In both of these countries, which have rather inclusive higher education systems (Fig. 1), the share of dissatisfied students is comparably low (Fig. 2), even for students who are 30 years or older. These countries might be examples of best practice for creating study conditions appropriate to different student groups.

The general debate

Higher education is now seen as one of the key drivers of social well-being and economic performance. This is reflected in the recent communiqués of the ministers responsible for higher education in the Bologna Process. The latest documents from within the Bologna Process recognise a growth in participant numbers in higher education, but are increasingly turning their focus to the question of who is getting in. The 47 ministers responsible for higher education concur that one of their main goals for 2020 is to ensure the 'maximisation of talent' by looking at what they term the 'social dimension' of higher education (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009).[4] Improving the social dimension of higher education entails focusing on the real needs and the personal circumstances of certain student groups, since these often constitute barriers to entry, participation and successful completion of higher education. In its 'Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training' (2010),[5] the EU Council invites member states to undertake the following actions with regard to higher education:

• "Promote widened access, for example, by strengthening financial support schemes for students and through flexible and diversified learning paths.
• Develop policies aimed at increasing completion rates of higher education, including through strengthening individualised support, guidance and mentoring for students.
• Continue to eliminate barriers to, expand opportunities for, and improve the quality of, learning mobility, including by providing adequate incentives for the mobility of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
• Promote specific programmes for adult students and other non-traditional learners."

One question is whether all institutions of higher education should undertake such initiatives or if this is a potential for institutional specialisation. In some countries, such as Ireland, universities and colleges receive a premium in the performance-based funding allocation based on the number of 'non-traditional' students which they recruit (National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008).[6] This is done both in recognition of the extra costs and also as an incentive to recruit such students. If institutional specialization does increase, this may help 'non-traditional students', but it may also lead to a new question. As Simon Marginson has stated in the context of this development, the equity question moves from being 'access or not?' to 'access to what?' (Marginson, 2004).[7]

EUROSTUDENT IV Data set

Of course, there are other important questions when it comes to widening access such as: What subjects do different groups of students study? How are students supported by their parents and the state? To what extent do they work alongside their studies? EUROSTUDENT provides some of these analyses in the comparative report Orr, D.; Gwosć, C.; Netz, N. (2011): Social and economic conditions of student life in Europe. W. Bertelsmann Verlag, Bielefeld. The EUROSTUDENT data base allows users to explore country data by topic area and in comparison between countries. See our website for more details: www.eurostudent.eu.

[4] http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Declarations/Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve_Communiqu%C3%A9_April_2009.pdf

[5] http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/118244.pdf

[6] http://www.hea.ie/files/files/file/National_Access_Plan_2008-2013_(English).pdf

[7] Marginson, S. (2004): Competition and Markets in Higher Education: a 'glonacal' analysis. In: Policy Futures in Education, 2(2), 175-244.