

INTELLIGENCE BRIEF:

SHORT-TERM MOBILITY AND MOBILITY OBSTACLES¹

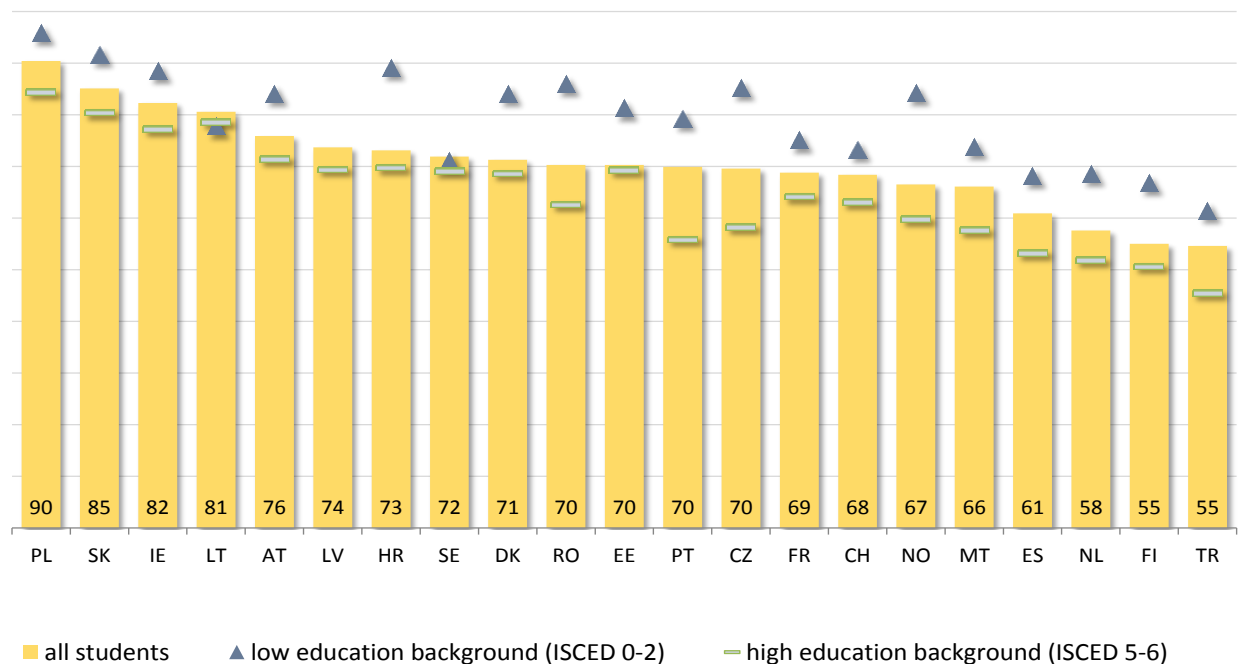
The EUROSTUDENT project collates comparable student survey data on the social dimension of European higher education. It focuses on the socio-economic background and on the living conditions of students, but it also investigates temporary international mobility. The project strives to provide reliable 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.

Does student mobility vary by social background?

In the majority of EUROSTUDENT countries, the most likely type of student mobility is enrolment abroad (followed by internships and language courses).² The rate of this ‘foreign enrolment’ varies from below 5% in Turkey, the Slovak Republic, Poland and Croatia to over 10% in Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden. Foreign enrolment rates are comparatively low in Eastern and South-Eastern countries.

Furthermore, in the majority of countries, foreign enrolment rates vary by social background,³ with students from high social backgrounds having higher rates than students from low social backgrounds. Even in those countries where access to higher education seems to be generally equitable (Finland, Switzerland, Ireland and the Netherlands) we find that this is the case. It may be that in these countries, students from high social backgrounds are trying to give themselves the edge over their peers by choosing to study abroad for a period during their higher education. In most countries, a large majority of students have neither studied abroad, nor do they have any plans to do so. As can be seen from Figure 1, in Poland, the Slovak Republic, Ireland and Lithuania, this is the case for over 80% of all students. We can also see that in all countries (except Lithuania and Sweden), it is students from low social backgrounds who are more likely not to have any plans to study abroad.

Figure 1: Students who have not been enrolled abroad and who do not plan to enrol abroad by social background in %



Source: EUROSTUDENT IV, Subtopic I.1 & I.3. No data: DE, E/W, IT, SI. Too few cases for low education background (ISCED 0-2): LV.

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² 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.

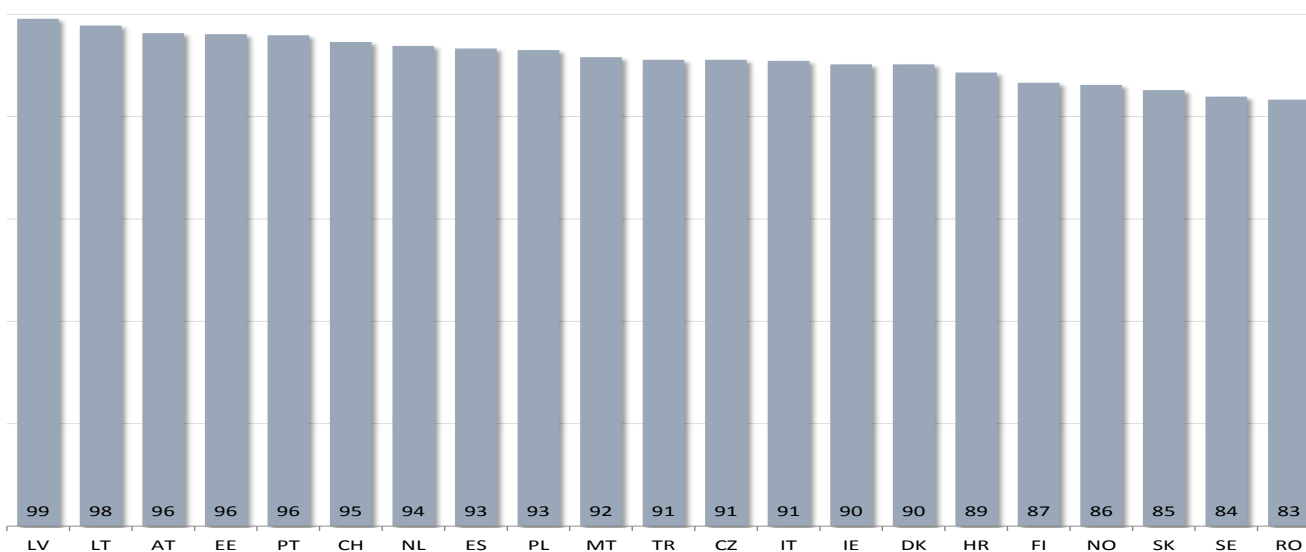
³ Social background is measured through the proxy-indicator of parents’ highest educational attainment. High education background = ISCED 5-6, low education background = ISCED 0-2.

It may be that students from low social backgrounds experience more obstacles, and/or experience certain obstacles more intensely than their peers from high social backgrounds. But does it matter that in most EUROSTUDENT countries foreign enrolment is socially selective? Are students who have not studied abroad (and are not planning to do) possibly missing out on some rather important aspects of higher education?

What do students gain from studying abroad?

The overwhelming majority of students who have studied abroad had expected personal development to be an important or very important benefit of foreign enrolment. On average, over 90% of these students found their expectations in respect of personal development were fulfilled at a (very) high level.

Figure 2: Fulfilment of personal development expectations, students rating as high or very high, in %



Source: EUROSTUDENT IV, Subtopic I.7. No data: DE, E/W, FR, SI.

But as Figure 1 shows, the majority of students seem to be missing out on the opportunity for such development; and students from low social backgrounds are more likely to be missing out than their counterparts from high social backgrounds. We also know from other EUROSTUDENT data (not shown here) that students from low social backgrounds are more likely than students from high social backgrounds to consider their higher education a good basis for personal development. So in a sense, the fact that students from low social backgrounds seem to be missing out on an additional opportunity for personal development through studying abroad may be more critical for them than for their counterparts.

What are the obstacles to studying abroad?

Students consider that the biggest obstacle to studying abroad is the expected additional financial burden associated with a foreign enrolment period (not shown here). In Croatia, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Estonia and Turkey, over 70% of students cited finance issues as the main obstacle. In the Scandinavian countries (Finland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden) it is the separation from partner, child(ren) and friends that constitutes the most critical obstacle to enrolment abroad, and in Romania it is problems with the recognition of the results attained abroad. Further obstacles are (in order of frequency cited): expected delay in the progress of studies; insufficient foreign language skills; difficulty getting information; limited access to mobility programmes in home country. As the data in Figure 1 suggest, we should also not forget that some students may simply not be interested in spending time abroad (cf. Eurobarometer, Youth on the Move, 2011).⁴

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_319b_en.pdf

The perceived obstacles to enrolment abroad do not only differ across countries, but also between types of students within countries. For example, financial insecurities (including expected additional financial burden, loss of opportunities to earn money, loss of social benefits, problems with accommodation in the home country) are more often perceived as a big obstacle by students from low social backgrounds than by their peers from high social backgrounds. The fact that students from low social backgrounds experience these financial insecurities as obstacles more intensely may help to explain why they are less likely to have studied abroad and less likely to be planning to do so, than those from high social backgrounds.

The general debate - does unequal access to study abroad matter?

The promotion of student mobility has been a key political goal since the start of the Bologna process. Such mobility is seen as fostering desirable competences, including the further development of students' personalities, the promotion of their linguistic capabilities and the generation of intercultural sensitivity and professional competences; and as such, it is seen as serving as a catalyst to the realisation of the European Higher Education Area. As recently as 2009, European ministers with responsibility for higher education were calling for improved participation rates in foreign enrolment from diverse groups (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué).⁵ Previous studies have pointed out that in most European countries, students' participation in study-related experiences abroad depends on their social background (cf. Souto-Otero, M., & McCoshan, A., 2006).⁶

The data presented above once again show that foreign enrolment is socially selective, with those from low social backgrounds being less likely to take part, and less likely to be planning any study abroad.

The data also confirm that those students who choose to undertake studies abroad rate highly the opportunity for personal development that such experience brings. But it is students from high social backgrounds that are more likely to access these opportunities, rather than those from low social backgrounds.

In 2009, the countries involved in the Bologna Process agreed on a benchmark for mobility: "In 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad." Following on from this, the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) is currently developing a mobility strategy and specific indicators related to student mobility, including targets for participation in study abroad. In developing such indicators, BFUG should bear in mind that currently the vast majority of students seem to face motivational, organizational and especially financial obstacles to enrolment abroad. In trying to ensure equitable access to such mobility for diverse groups of students, individual countries will need to explore further the perceived obstacles to mobility within their own national study frameworks and national support systems.

EUROSTUDENT IV Data set

Of course, there are other important questions when it comes to students' short-term mobility abroad during higher education. What sources of finance do students access to fund their studies abroad? To what extent do the different perceived obstacles vary for certain groups of students? Are some of the obstacles more amenable to rectification than others? What about students' assessment of the quality of their studies abroad? 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.



Lifelong Learning Programme

⁵ http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Declarations/Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve_Communique%C3%A9_April_2009.pdf

⁶ http://www.immagic.com/eLibrary/ARCHIVES/GENERAL/EU_EC/Eo6o8ooO.pdf