

# THE PLURALITY OF TRANSITIONS INTO AND WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION <sup>1</sup>

INTELLIGENCE BRIEF 3/2019

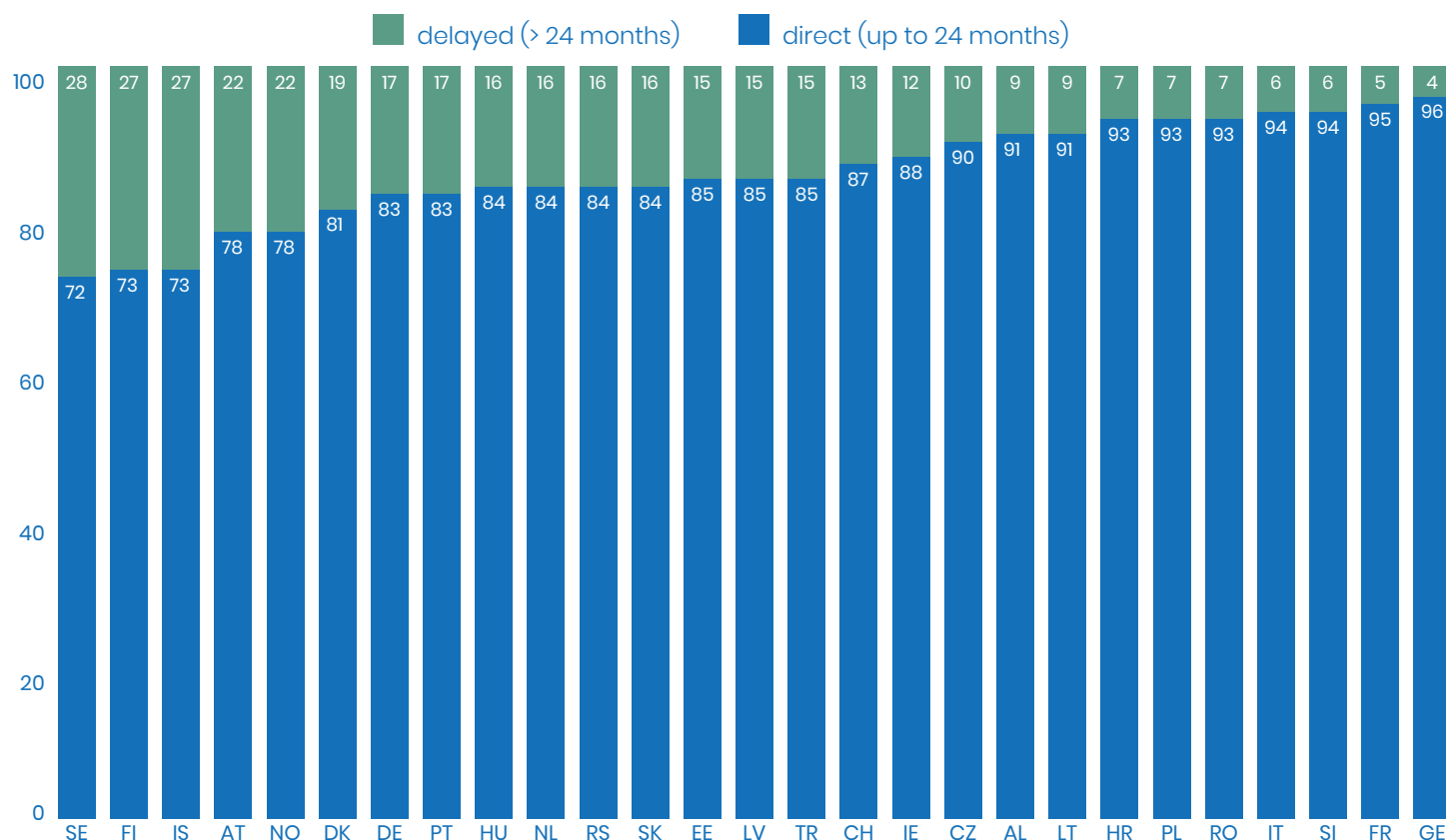
Despite the fact that educational opportunities have increased all over the Western world and that 'educational expansion' has become a common term in the discourse of today's educational scholars (see for example Kivinen, Hedman, & Kaipainen, 2007; Busemeyer, Franzmann, & Garritzmann, 2013), several studies have revealed that the socio-economic stratification problem in the field of higher education has not disappeared (see for example Blanden & Machin, 2013). Analogous conclusions were drawn by the EUROSTUDENT VI survey, which found that the student body does not completely represent the overall population in most EUROSTUDENT countries (Hauschildt, Vögtle & Gwosc,

2018). Providing equal access to people from different backgrounds, therefore, remains one of the main challenges in European higher education (European Higher Education Area, 2015). In order to alleviate this problem, many countries have introduced alternative pathways into higher education, i.e. enabling students to enter without the standard upper secondary qualification, or to acquire the secondary school qualification after leaving school (European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2018). This Intelligence Brief will provide an overview of these pathways by focusing on the plurality of transitions into and within higher education.

## TRANSITIONS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

In all EUROSTUDENT countries, the majority of students enter higher education using a direct route, i.e. within two years of leaving the school system for the first time. However, in some countries, quite a noteworthy share of the student population has delayed its transition from secondary school to higher education. For instance, this is true for 28 % of students in Sweden; and in Finland as well as in Iceland, 27 % enter higher education with a delay (Figure 1). In Georgia, France, Slovenia, and Italy, in contrast, the respective shares are very low (no more than 6%), i.e. students are mainly using direct routes for entering higher education.

**Figure 1. Duration of transition from secondary school to higher education, share of students in %**

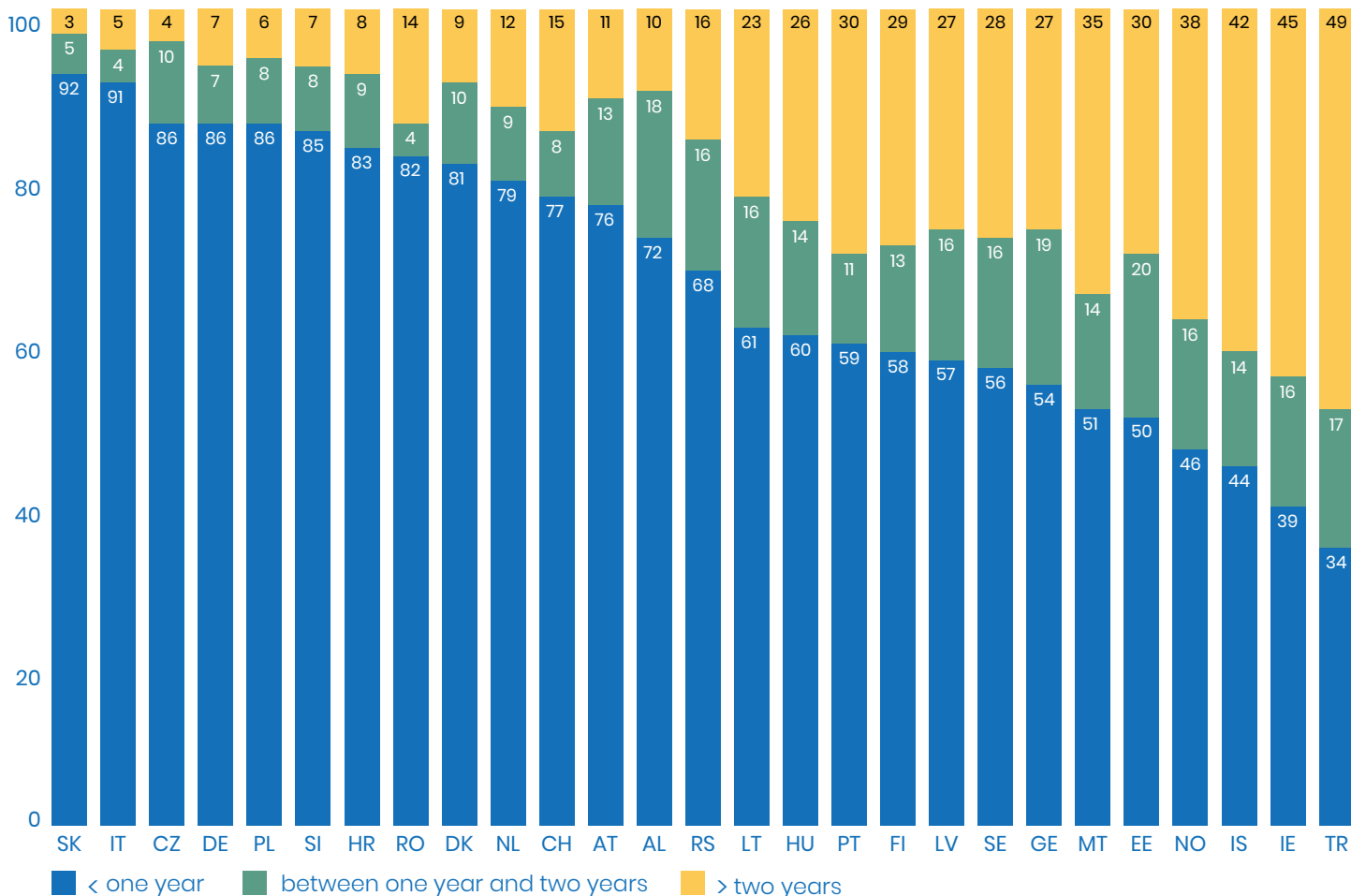


Data source: EUROSTUDENT VI, B.4., No data: MT  
 EUROSTUDENT Question(s): 2.3 How long after leaving the #regular school system for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time?  
 Deviations from EUROSTUDENT conventions: AT, CH, DE, FR, HU.  
 Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: AL, DE, IE, IT, LV, RS.

## TRANSITIONS WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

In most of the EUROSTUDENT countries, the majority of Master students have transferred from the previous programme into the Master programme directly within a year of graduating (Figure 2). The extreme cases in this group are Slovakia and Italy, where the share of students who entered Master studies within a year after the previous programme is more than 90 %. Malta, Norway, Iceland, Ireland, and Turkey, on the other hand, are quite the opposite examples – more than a third of Master students in those countries have delayed the transition into the Master program for more than two years after graduating from the previous programme.

**Figure 2. Duration of transition between graduating from previous programme to current Master programme**



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VI, B.10 No data: FR.

EUROSTUDENT Question(s): 1.8 How long after graduating from your previous study programme did you start your current Master programme?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT conventions: CH, DE.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: AL, DE, IE, IT, LV, RS.

## THE VARIETY OF TRANSITIONS INTO AND WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

The duration of transitions into and within higher education seem to be related – countries that show high shares of delayed transitions into higher education, tend also to be the ones with high shares of long interruptions between Bachelor and Master studies, and vice versa. Among the countries on the more extreme ends, Iceland and Norway, on the one hand, tend to register relatively long delays both between gymnasium and university as well as between Bachelor and Master programme, whereas in France, Italy and Georgia, on the other hand, only a few delayed transition students can be found. Table 1 illustrates further differences between countries with regard to diverse transition patterns.

For instance, in Iceland the share of delayed transition students is one of the highest in EUROSTUDENT countries (27 %, vs. EUROSTUDENT average 14 % and Italy 6 %); students in Iceland use more alternative access routes (e.g. special entry exams for certain student groups, special access courses, recognition of vocational experience etc.) than in any other EUROSTUDENT country – namely 29 % (vs. EUROSTUDENT average 10 % and Georgia 3 %). In addition, Iceland has the highest shares of students with any kind of prior work experience – only 12 % of the students in Iceland have no prior work experience (vs. EUROSTUDENT average 47 % and Italy 74 %); and, in Iceland 42 % (vs. EUROSTUDENT average 21 % and Italy 5 %) of the Master students delayed their transition from a previous programme to their current Master programme for more than 2 years.

**Table 1. Transitions into and within higher education – the most outstanding cases**

	High shares of delayed transitions	Low shares of delayed transitions	
High shares of alternative access routes	IS	FR	Low shares of alternative access routes
High shares of prior work experience	IS, NO	GE, IT	Low shares of prior work experience
Among the students without higher education background the share of delayed transitions is much higher than among the students with higher education background (the difference between the groups is 16–19%)	IS, FI, AT	FR, GE	Among the students without higher education background the share of delayed transitions is a bit higher than among the students with higher education background (the difference between the groups is below 3%)
High shares of students whose transition from the previous study programme to Master programme was more than 2 years	NO, IS	IT	Low shares of students whose transition from the previous study programme to Master programme was more than 2 years
High shares of BA students who have not decided to continue their studies	EE	RO, HR, IT	Low shares of BA students who have not decided to continue their studies

Source: EUROSTUDENT VI, Subtopic B3, author's synthesis.

## THE GENERAL DEBATE & POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Despite the fact that there are some exceptional cases such as Iceland and other Nordic countries, in most of the EUROSTUDENT countries, the majority of students still follows a relatively direct path of transitions into and within higher education. What determines the extent of transitions in each specific country is not fully known. However, explanations could be related with the culture as well as policies (including the institutional framework of the school systems) (Orr et al., 2017). In other words, the pathways that the students choose may be influenced by the specific socio-cultural understandings of „how things are done“ (see for

instance Charles, 2016), but also by the nature and amount of choices regarding transitions into and within higher education that students have. In order to substantially improve the socially equal access to higher education in the context of the overall educational expansion, the most pressing question in need of an answer is whether the delayed transition students, who tend to be older and often dependent on their own earnings, are really able to reconcile the studies with their living and working situation, and which policy measures would help to contribute to this balance the best.

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## About EUROSTUDENT

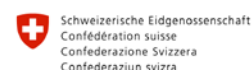
The EUROSTUDENT project collates comparable student survey data on the social dimension of European higher education, collecting data on a wide range of topics, e.g. the socio-economic background, living conditions, and temporary international mobility of students. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. The data presented here stem from the sixth round of the EUROSTUDENT project (2016–2018) as well as the fifth round of the project (2012–2015).

The comparative report "[Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe](#)" (2018) provides insight into many other questions related to students' characteristics as well as other aspects of student life in Europe. Furthermore, the [EUROSTUDENT database](#) allows users to explore country data by topic area and in comparison between countries. Also visit [www.eurostudent.eu](http://www.eurostudent.eu) for more information and results.

## Country abbreviations

AT = Austria	FR = France	LT = Lithuania	RO = Romania
CH = Switzerland	GE = Georgia	LV = Latvia	RS = Serbia
CZ = the Czech Republic	HR = Croatia	MT = Malta	SE = Sweden
DE = Germany	HU = Hungary	NL = the Netherlands	SI = Slovenia
DK = Denmark	IE = Ireland	NO = Norway	SK = Slovakia
EE = Estonia	IS = Iceland	PL = Poland	TR = Turkey
FI = Finland	IT = Italy	PT = Portugal	

EUROSTUDENT Consortium members:



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