

## Chapter B3

# Transition into and within higher education

Hendrik Schirmer

German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW)

# Key

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### Diverse paths of higher education access

Standard qualifications and entry routes are predominant in entering higher education, with only minorities utilising alternative pathways. Older students tend to rely more on alternative access routes, facilitating their entry into higher education. These routes consequently contribute to social inclusion and lifelong learning opportunities. Moreover, a non-tertiary educational background and older age frequently go hand in hand with more extensive work experience prior to higher education enrolment.

### Impact of alternative access routes on transition time

On cross-country average, around one in six students commence higher education more than 2 years after leaving school, with substantial variation across countries. Students entering higher education through alternative access routes have notably longer transition periods than those entering through standard access routes.

### Interplay of access routes, participation, and age diversity

With increasing use of alternative access routes into higher education in a country higher entry ages, greater age heterogeneity, and a higher level of the population's participation in higher education are found. Overall, diversifying access pathways appear to go hand in hand with openness of higher education systems.

# findings

## Study interruptions and return patterns

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On average, 8 % of students report having previously interrupted their current studies, primarily for short periods ( $\leq 1$  year). Social disparities in interruption duration exist, with students from older age groups indicating longer breaks.

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## Transition time into Master studies

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A considerable portion of Master students experience a delay of at least 2 years between completing their previous studies and starting their Master programme (28 %). Non-tertiary educational background and older age correlate with longer transition periods, highlighting the need for flexible educational pathways to accommodate diverse student circumstances.

## Academic success and study progression

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Extended study durations (i.e. above the standard period of study) are associated with lower sense of belonging into higher education, lower self-assessed study performance, and higher likelihood of contemplating study dropout. Master students generally exhibit higher integration, higher performance, and lower dropout intentions compared to Bachelor students.

## Main issues

Flexible options for higher education (re-)entrance are important measures to foster social justice (Boyadjieva et al., 2024) and lifelong participation (European Commission et al., 2022; OECD, 2021<sup>1</sup>) in (higher) education systems with the aim to ultimately create equitable, diverse, and inclusive systems (Šauckeckienė et al., 2021; United Nations, 2015). This chapter looks at these flexible (re-)entry routes from four perspectives along different phases of the study cycle. Not only is the extent of the use of flexible access and return routes across countries considered, but also their suitability for promoting the participation of socially disadvantaged (here operationalised by educational background; Christoph et al., 2024) and older population groups in higher education.

### Diversity and diversification of higher education entry paths

In this context, it is first necessary to take stock of the diversity of higher education entrance paths:

- In which countries is it common to enter studies without a standard qualification, after later acquisition of a standard qualification, and after periods of intensive employment?
- Are non-traditional access routes actually successful in making it easier for socially disadvantaged and older people to start studying?

Current analyses of policy success in relation to the opening of higher education have provided mixed findings regarding the encouragement of disadvantaged groups to enter higher education through alternative access forms (Jackson et al., 2023; Schindler & Bittmann, 2023). In all of these analyses, the larger framework of the respective education system, in particular inequalities that already have their roots in the school system, must always be taken into account (European Commission et al., 2022; Terrin & Triventi, 2023).

### Accessibility and representation in the context of lifelong learning

An examination of the access routes to studying inevitably raises questions about the openness of higher education systems and the participation of society as a whole in higher education. While >Chapter B1 and >Chapter B2 examine aspects of the representation of certain disadvantaged population groups, the chapter at hand additionally aims to analyse participation in higher education in connection with non-traditional access routes over the life course:

- (How) does the degree of non-traditional access relate to a) the level of representation compared to the population, b) the age at higher education entry, and c) the age structure of student populations?

While previous analyses have produced inconclusive or negative results regarding the effect of alternative access extent and increased participation in higher education (Orr et al., 2008; Schindler & Bittmann, 2023), a repeated evaluation based on current data may yield more encouraging results.

<sup>1</sup> See chapter „Indicator B4. Who is expected to enter tertiary education?“.

## Interrupted study-paths and return to higher education

Understanding the prevalence and patterns of re-entering higher education after extended breaks is crucial for policymakers and higher education institutions (HEIs) to tailor support mechanisms effectively (DesJardins et al., 2006). It sheds light on the flexibility and accessibility of educational systems, impacting decisions on programme structures, funding allocation, and outreach strategies (OECD, 2021<sup>2</sup>). Moreover, insights into transition durations between academic stages illuminate the efficacy of pathways within higher education, aiding in the design of smoother progression routes for students, especially those with diverse backgrounds or non-linear educational trajectories. Thus, examining these phenomena enriches comprehension of educational dynamics, contributing to enhanced inclusivity and student success in higher education systems.

- How common is it to re-enter higher education after long(er) breaks from studying and which differences are observable between diverse social and age-related backgrounds?

## Study success prospects along the student life-cycle

Key indicators of study success include peer integration, academic performance, and dropout intention (Becker & Brändle, 2022; Weber et al., 2018). These indicators are pivotal as they shed light on the dynamics influencing students' educational trajectories and, as such, they serve as crucial metrics in understanding the transition into and within higher education. An examination of prospects for academic success through the cross-sectional EUROSTUDENT data presents a nuanced perspective because it can contribute to a deeper understanding of retention conditions.

- How do study success conditions and prospects change over the course of studies?

## Data and interpretation

### Higher education access qualification

At 89 % on cross-country average, a vast majority accessed the higher education system through a standard access qualification acquired in the country of their studies (Figure B3.1). An additional 9 % used a standard access qualification from a foreign country (see also [international students](#), > [Chapter B1](#)). Remarkably, only 2 % of students entered higher education with an alternative qualification, i.e. alternatives equivalent to or replacing the standard access qualification (Box B3.1). However, there is considerable variation between countries with regard to these alternative qualifications: While in some countries there are no means to access higher education through qualifications other than the standard one (the Czech Republic, Georgia, Estonia, Poland, Azerbaijan, and Romania), 8 to 5 % percent of students in Malta, Iceland, Switzerland, Ireland, and Germany have made use of a non-standard access qualification.

*Vast majorities access higher education through a standard access qualification.*

A more in-depth evaluation by age groups also shows that older students are less likely to have a standard entrance qualification and therefore use alternative qualifications more than is the case with younger students (Table B3.2). Higher education access options other than standard qualification certificates can therefore help older population groups to participate in higher education. Differences in terms of educational background are not clearly apparent across countries, but non-standard qualifications are commonly used by students without tertiary educational background in a few countries (e.g. Switzerland, Iceland).

<sup>2</sup> See chapter „Indicator B5. Who is expected to graduate from tertiary education?“.

## Box B3.1

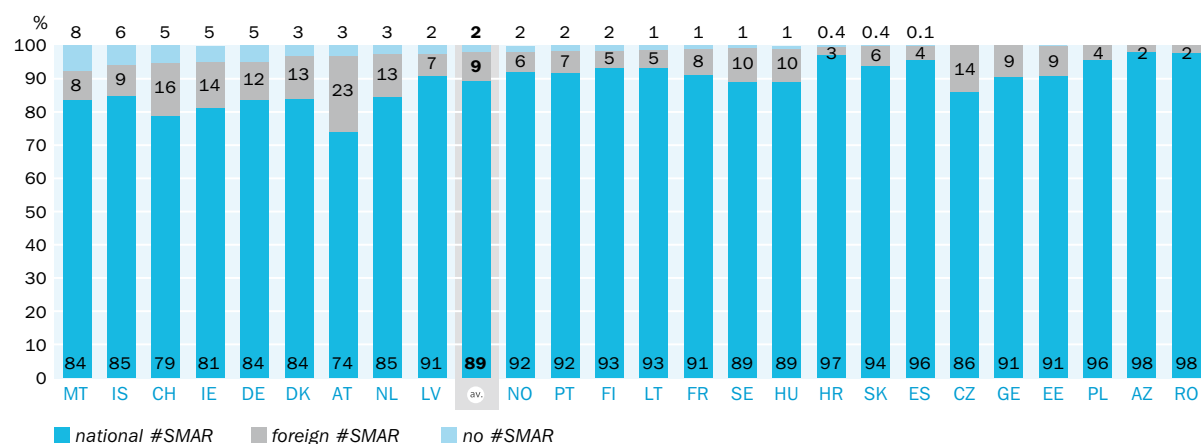
**Methodological note: What is a #SMAR?**

Every country has a Standard Minimum Access Requirement (☛ # SMAR, as EUROSTUDENT names it) for entering higher education. It is ‘standard’ because there might be alternatives and it is ‘minimum’ because there might be additional requirements. The SMAR is obtained in different countries in different ways: It can just be the positive passing of the last year in upper secondary school, it can be a specific exam at the end of secondary schooling (matriculation exam, e.g. Matura, Abitur, Baccalaureat), a state exam, or maybe another way. Some countries have different upper secondary school types (usually academic or professional tracks) and sometimes these different schools lead to different types of SMAR (general or specific). While there might be additional requirements (admission exams or specific grades), in any case, one type of SMAR is needed to access higher education. The ‘regular/traditional’ SMAR is obtained around graduating from upper secondary school, usually at the age of 17 to 20. However, the possibility to obtain the SMAR later in life exists in all countries.

Nevertheless, in some countries other, alternative ways to access higher education also exist. In such countries, there might be alternatives equivalent to or replacing the SMAR. Thus, in some countries, another exam/certificate similar to the SMAR exists, in other countries specific work experience is recognised instead of a SMAR, in a few countries a certain age is enough to access higher education without a SMAR, and again other countries honour certain achievements and allow access to higher education on this basis. All these kinds of alternative SMAR or replacements of the ‘regular’ SMAR are regarded as alternative access qualifications in the EUROSTUDENT framework.

Figure B3.1 [↓](#)**Type of qualification used for access to higher education**

Share of students (in %)

**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8, B.9.**Data collection:** Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, ES, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.1 Do you have a #SMAR or foreign equivalent?**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions:** AT, CH, GE, SE.**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group:** IE, NL.

## ‘Standard’ and ‘alternative’ higher education access routes

Not only the formal qualification for entrance to higher education, but also the point in time at which such a qualification is acquired in the course of one’s life can be important for the study conditions. Therefore, those students who found their way into higher education either through an alternative qualification or who only acquired their standard entrance qualification at a later point in life (and not when they left the secondary school system) are grouped together as students who entered higher education through ‘alternative access routes’ (Box B3.2). On average across countries, 8 % of students started their studies via such a non-traditional access route (Figure B3.2). In a country comparison, the variation ranges from 25 % in Iceland to only 1 % in the Czech Republic, France, and Azerbaijan.

### Box B3.2

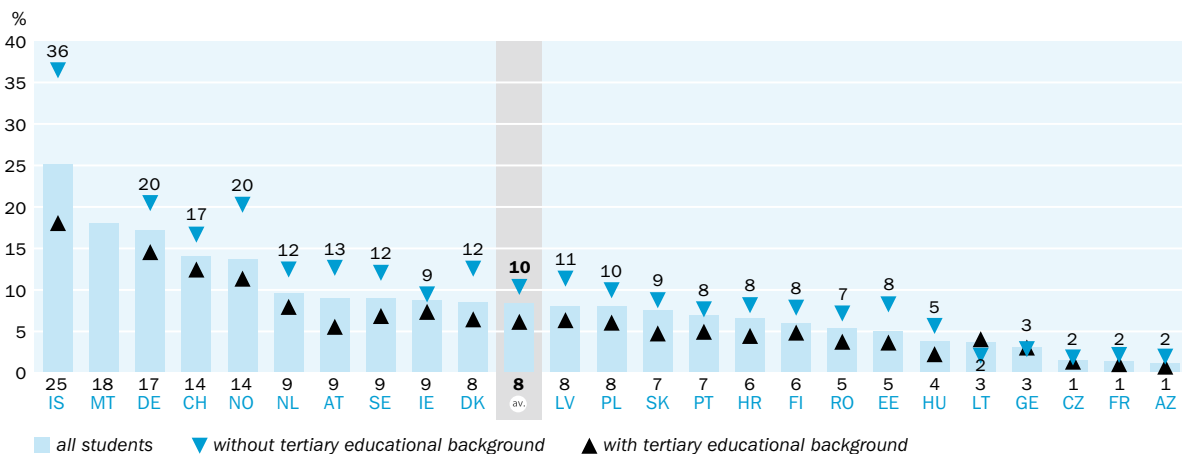
#### Methodological note: What are standard (‘traditional’) and alternative (‘non-traditional’) higher education access routes?

Students who obtained a (national/foreign) #SMAR in conjunction with/when leaving regular upper secondary school for the first time are categorised as using ‘standard access routes’. Those who did not enter higher education with a #SMAR or obtained their #SMAR (or foreign equivalent) later in life – not directly after/when leaving the regular school system for the first time but at least 6 months later, e. g., via evening classes, adult learning, etc. – are considered as using ‘alternative access routes’. For reasons of easier readability, the terms ‘alternative’ and ‘non-traditional’ as opposed to ‘standard’ and ‘traditional’ are sometimes used synonymously in this chapter.

Figure B3.2 [↓](#)

#### Alternative access route into higher education by educational background

Share of students (in %)



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8, B.16. **No data:** ES.

**Data collection:** Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.1 Do you have a #SMAR or foreign equivalent? 2.2 [Only students with #SMAR] When did you obtain your #SMAR? 2.3 [Only students without #SMAR] Where did you last attend the #regular school system?

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions:** AT, CH, DK, GE, LV, SE.

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group:** IE, NL.

**Students without tertiary educational background and of older age commonly use alternative access routes.**

Despite all the variation between countries regarding extent of alternative access route usage, there is, however, an almost general finding regarding the educational background of students: students with parents without tertiary qualifications use non-traditional access routes more often than students from academic parents. Alternative access routes to studying therefore make a contribution to the social opening of higher education systems. In addition, the age-pattern that has already been identified with regard to entry qualifications is also reflected here, when considering alternative higher education entrance routes (Table B3.2); older students use these more often to enter higher education and are thus given the opportunity to participate in higher education through alternative qualifications or later acquiring a standard entrance qualification.

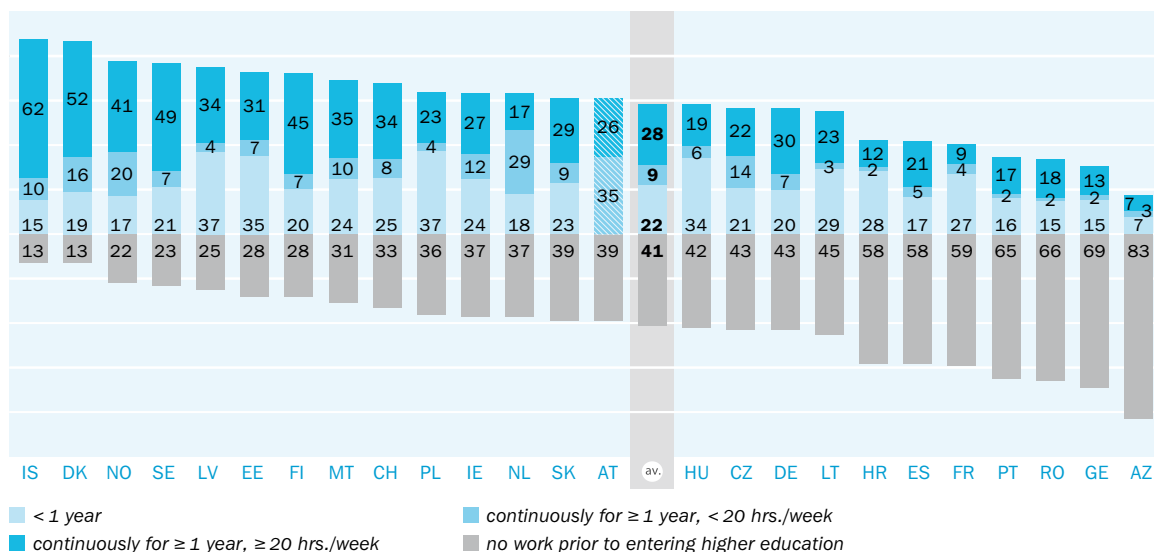
### Labour market experience prior to higher education entry

Although in a large number of countries it is very common for a majority of students to gain experience in the labour market before starting studies – only in Croatia, Spain, France, Portugal, Romania, Georgia, and in particular Azerbaijan does a majority of students indicate not having been employed before entering higher education – there are clear differences in the intensity and duration of such periods of employment (Figure B3.3).

Figure B3.3 [↓](#)

#### Work experience prior to entering higher education

Share of students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8, B.16b.

Data collection: Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, ES, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.4 Did you have any paid job(s) prior to entering higher education for the first time?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: AT, CH.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, NL.

- In Poland (37%), Latvia (37%), Estonia (35%), and Hungary (34%), for example, a good third of the students said they worked for less than a year before starting their studies. A duration of more than a year but with a small number of hours (less than 20 hours per week) is particularly common in the Netherlands (29%).

- Students in Iceland (62 %), Denmark (52 %), and Sweden (49 %), on the other hand,

*Intense labour market experiences before HE entry in Iceland, Denmark, and Sweden.*

commonly gained extensive labour market experience (of at least a year and with more than 20 hours per week) before starting their studies.

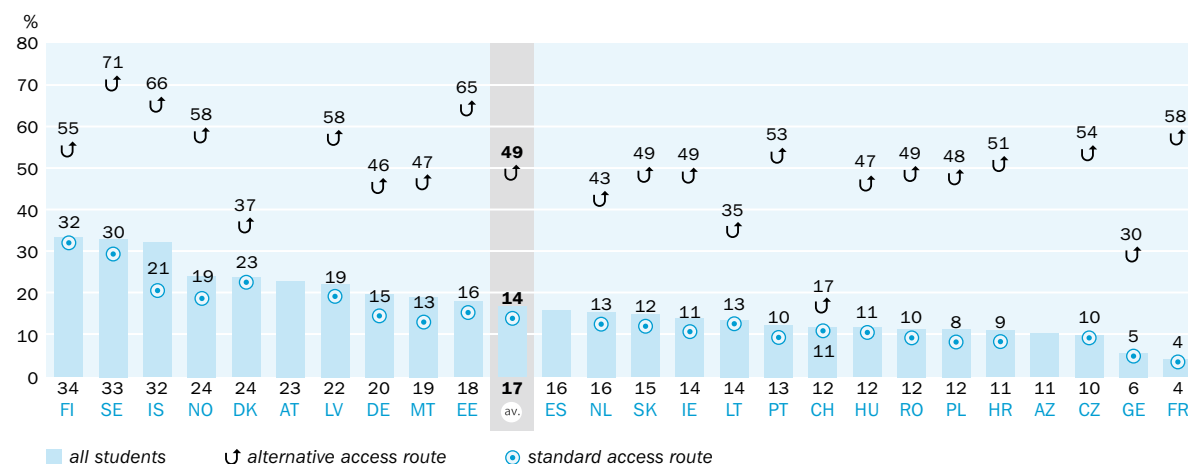
Across all countries, both students from non-tertiary educated parents and students of older age often have intensive and long-term employment histories before they start studying (Table B3.2).

### Transition duration from the school system into higher education

How do the different life trajectories – acquiring a standard entrance qualification later or not at all – manifest with regard to the average transition time from the school system into higher education? On cross-country average, one in six students reported starting their studies ‘delayed’, i.e. more than 2 years after leaving school (17 %; Figure B3.4). The range extends from around one in three in Finland, Sweden, and Iceland to just 6 and 4 % in Georgia and France. Despite all this variation, however, there is a clear cross-national finding: alternative access routes to studying go hand in hand with a longer transition period. While only 14 % of students who entered higher education through the standard access route first enrolled with a delay of at least 2 years after leaving the school system, about half of those with alternative access routes experienced such a delay (49 %).

Figure B3.4 ↓

**Delayed transition (> 24 months after leaving school) into higher education by access route into higher education**  
Share of students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8, B.14.

Data collection: Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, ES, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.5 How long after leaving the #regular school system for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: AT, CH, FR.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, NL.

### Connections between access routes, participation of society in higher education, and diversification of student population's age structure

In the analyses of this chapter so far, a clear connection has been established between alternative higher education entrance qualifications and routes (after longer and intensive periods of employment) and students' age: the higher the age, the more likely it is



that students began studying through alternative forms of entry. But how do alternative access routes relate to the degree of participation in higher education within societies on the one hand and the student populations' age structure on the other hand? This question cannot be answered using the cross-sectional data of students from the EUROSTUDENT project alone (as it does not cover persons not currently enrolled in higher education).

**The higher the use of alternative access routes, the higher the entry age, the greater the age heterogeneity, and the higher the population's participation in higher education.**

In a first step, the proportion of students who started their studies via non-traditional access routes is related to students' mean age at entering higher education, the standard deviation of this mean age (as a measure of age heterogeneity), and the gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education<sup>3</sup> (Table B3.1). The correlation coefficients show that alternative access is positively correlated with entry age, standard deviation of entry age, and gross enrolment ratio. This means: The higher the use of alternative access routes, the higher the entry age, the greater the age heterogeneity, and the higher the population's participation in higher education. However, since correlation does not imply causation (Aldrich, 1995), one should not hastily conclude from these findings that a high degree of non-traditional access into higher education automatically has a positive influence on the level of participation and a diverse age structure of student bodies.

Table B3.1

**Relationship between alternative access route, entry age, variation of entry age, and gross enrolment ratio**

Pearson's correlation coefficient ( $r$ ), statistical significance ( $p$ )

	Age at entering HE (in log. years)	Standard deviation of age at entering HE (in log. years)	Gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education (in log. %)
Alternative access route into HE (in log. %)	$r = 0.682$ ( $p \leq 0.001$ )	$r = 0.660$ ( $p \leq 0.001$ )	$r = 0.518$ ( $p = 0.009$ )

**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8, B.16, A.2; UNESCO SDG 4.3.2. **No data:** ES.

**Data collection:** Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.1 Do you have a #SMAR or foreign equivalent? 2.2 [Only students with #SMAR] When did you obtain your #SMAR? 2.3 [Only student without #SMAR] Where did you last attend the #regular school system? 2.6 When did you enter higher education for the first time? 6.1 When were you born?

**Note(s):** Gross enrolment rate (UNESCO SDG 4.3.2) corresponding to year of survey, except AT, CZ, HR, HU, IE, IS, LT, NL, PT, RO (all 2021), and FR (2022).

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT conventions:** AT, CH, DK, GE, LV, SE.

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group:** IE, NL.

The connection between alternative access routes and population participation in higher education is illustrated in more detail in Figure B3.5, where a high value of the gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education (vertical axis) shows a high degree of participation in tertiary education by students of all ages (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). Most EUROSTUDENT countries are in the lower left quadrant or in the upper right quadrant (or close to both quadrants), which confirms the positive and statistically significant relationship from Table B3.1: The higher the proportion of students who entered the higher education sector via alternative access routes, the higher the gross enrolment ratio (although the explanatory power of this simple linear

<sup>3</sup> The gross enrolment ratio "is defined as the total enrolment of students in tertiary education regardless of age and is expressed as a percentage of the population in the 5-year age group immediately following upper secondary education." (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019, p. 54)

regression model is not particularly high at  $R^2 = 0.15$ ). Therefore, earlier findings that could not establish such a connection (Orr et al., 2008) can no longer be confirmed. A stronger connection ( $R^2 = 0.38$ ) can be identified between alternative access routes and the structure of the age at which students begin higher education studies (as well as the heterogeneity measure, the standard deviation of the age at which students start studying): The higher the proportion of alternative access students, the higher the mean age at the start of studies and the higher the entry age heterogeneity of a student population.

### Box B3.3

#### Methodological note: Correlation

Correlation in the broadest sense is a measure of a relationship between variables. Correlation coefficients (i.e. Pearson's product-moment coefficient;  $r$ ) do not indicate causality and are not used to make predictions, but instead show the degree of association between variables. In correlated data, the change in the magnitude of one variable is associated with a change in the magnitude of another variable, either in the same (positive correlation) or in the opposite (negative correlation) direction. The underlying data in Table B3.1 was logarithmised to the natural base  $e$ ; this transformation helps to stabilise variance and make the relationship between variables more linear, which is a requirement for Pearson correlation. Values of  $r$  closer to 1 or -1 indicate stronger relationships, while values closer to 0 indicate weaker relationships. Taking established thresholds as a reference, the resulting correlation coefficients can be classified as moderate ( $r$ : 0.40 to 0.69; Schober et al., 2018). Established significance levels such as  $p < 0.05$  indicate the probability of observing the correlation coefficient by chance –  $p$ -values above 0.05 indicate random findings; all findings in Table B3.1 may consequently be interpreted as statistically significant.

But what connection can be made between alternative access routes, population representation, and age taken together? For the purpose of such an analysis, again, available data from EUROSTUDENT can be supplemented by an additional data source, namely students in tertiary education by age groups as percent of the corresponding age population. Due to the space available, such a detailed examination must necessarily be selective, i.e. limited to a selection of countries (Figure B3.6):

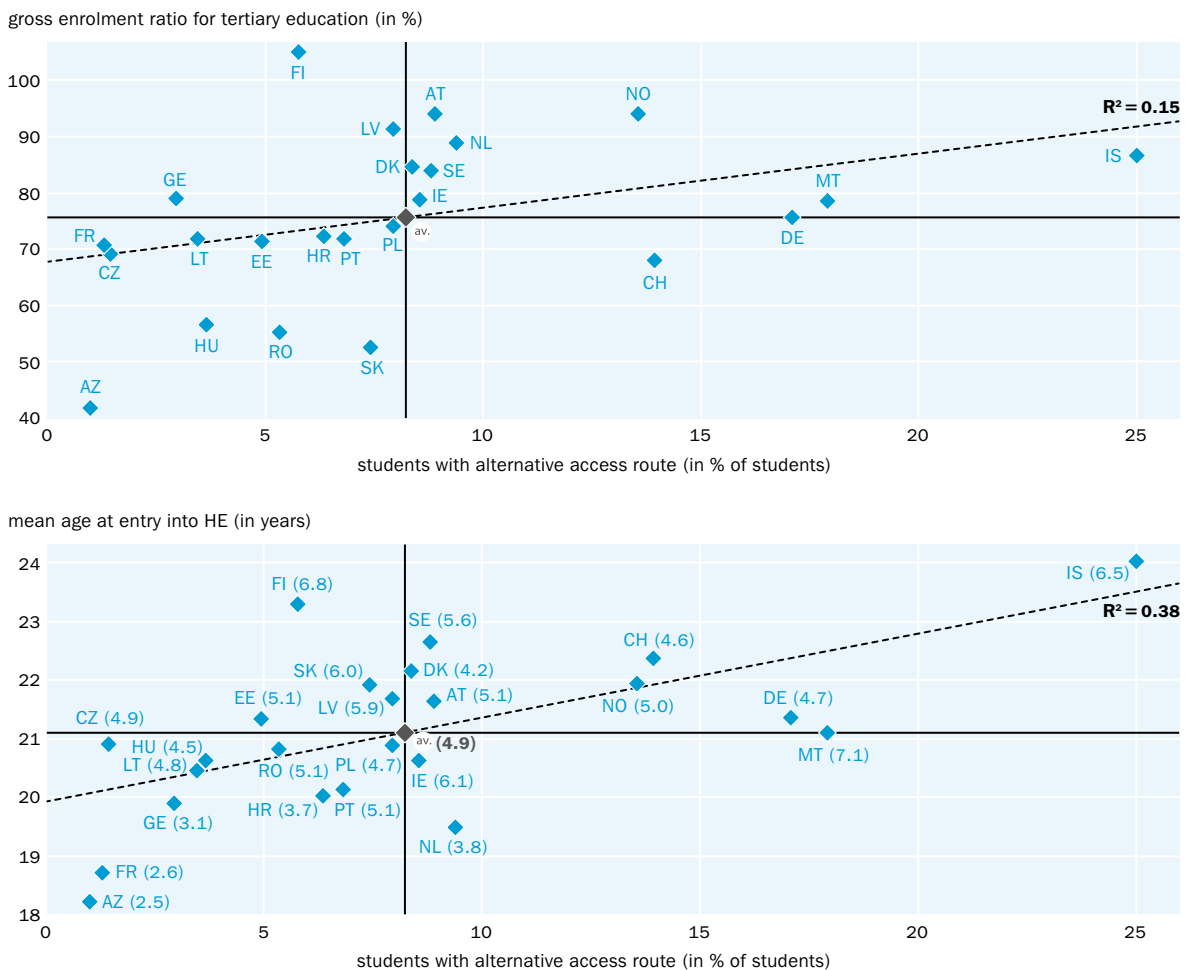
- France succeeds in getting exceptionally large proportions of young age cohorts (up to 20 years of age) into tertiary education, usually through the standard entry route. Even in the older age cohorts, who study comparatively rarely, access to tertiary education seldom takes place via an alternative access route. Although less pronounced, this pattern also occurs in the Czech Republic and Lithuania.
- This is different in Norway, where people rarely study at a young age, but disproportionately often in older cohorts (aged 22 and over) – and very often through non-traditional access routes. Similar patterns of participation and alternative access routes over age groups also occur in Switzerland, Germany, and Iceland.
- In contrast, Hungary has below-average participation in tertiary education over all age cohorts and students rarely use alternative access routes. Similar patterns occur in Estonia, Romania, and Slovakia.

*The relationship between access route, HE participation, and student population's age structure is intertwined.*

- In Finland (and likewise also in Latvia and Sweden), on the other hand, access is mostly through standard access routes across all age groups, but a comparatively large proportion of older cohorts are still brought into studies.
- In the other countries that can be examined – Austria, Denmark, Croatia, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, and Portugal – there are hybrid forms of the patterns described above or completely separate patterns.

Figure B3.5 [↓](#)**Alternative access routes, gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education, and entry age structure**

Shares of population and students (in %), mean age of students at higher education entry (in years, SD in brackets)



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8, B.16, A.2; UNESCO SDG 4.3.2. **No data:** ES.

**Data collection:** Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.1 Do you have a #SMAR or foreign equivalent? 2.2 [Only students with #SMAR] When did you obtain your #SMAR? 2.3 [Only students without #SMAR] Where did you last attend the #regular school system? 2.6 When did you enter higher education for the first time? 6.1 When were you born?

**Note(s):** Gross enrolment rate (UNESCO SDG 4.3.2) corresponding to year of survey, except AT, CZ, HR, HU, IE, IS, LT, NL, PT, RO (all 2021), and FR (2022).

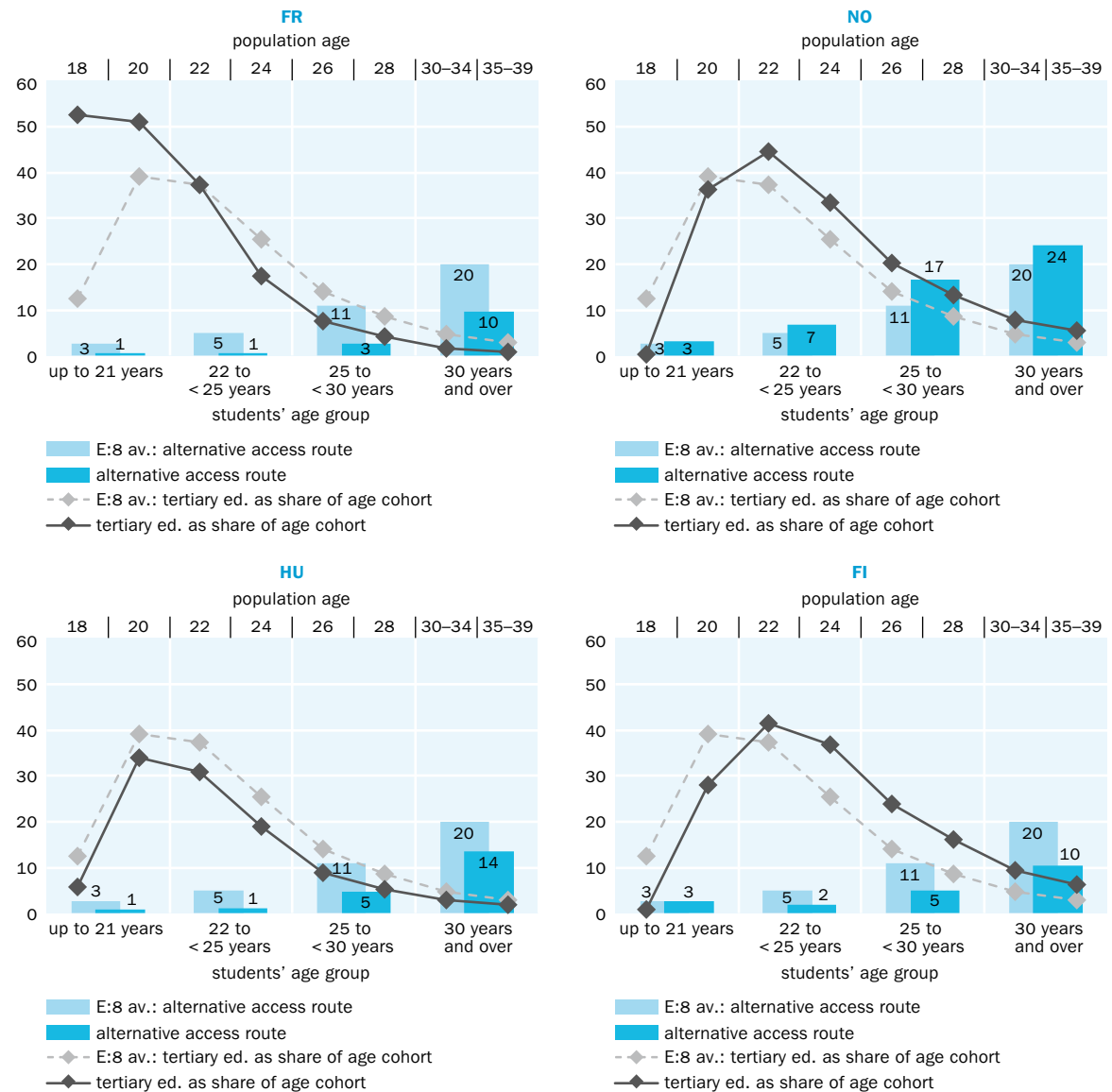
**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions:** AT, CH, DK, GE, LV, SE.

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group:** IE, NL.

Figure B3.6

Representation of population in tertiary education and alternative access routes by age groups (selected countries)

Share of students / in age cohorts (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8, B.16; Eurostat, educ\_uoe\_enrt07.

Data collection: FI, HU, NO (spring 2022 – summer 2022), FR (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.1 Do you have a #SMAR or foreign equivalent? 2.2 [Only students with #SMAR] When did you obtain your #SMAR? 2.3 [Only students without #SMAR] Where did you last attend the #regular school system?

Note(s): All Eurostat data referring to 2021. In the figures, the dark grey dotted lines represent the proportion of the respective age cohort (see upper horizontal axis) that is enrolled in tertiary forms of education; the average for the E:8 countries is plotted as a light grey dotted line in each figure for reference purposes. The dark blue columns represent the proportion of the respective age group of students (see lower horizontal axis) who entered higher education via an alternative access route; the light blue columns represent the complementary E:8 average for reference purposes.

The selection of countries shown (with the associated similar countries described) reflects, at least in many cases, the distribution in the first coordinate system in

4 [https://doi.org/10.2908/EDUC\\_UOE\\_ENRT07](https://doi.org/10.2908/EDUC_UOE_ENRT07).

Figure B3.5. The findings suggest that there is a complex interplay between alternative access routes, age demographics, and tertiary education participation across different countries. Overall, however, it can at least be said that the opening of higher education access to non-traditional pathways commonly goes hand in hand with increased participation in tertiary education in general and increased participation among older population groups in particular (through alternative access routes) as well as a more heterogeneous age structure of student populations, even if causal relationships of these associations require further investigation.

### Return into higher education after study interruptions

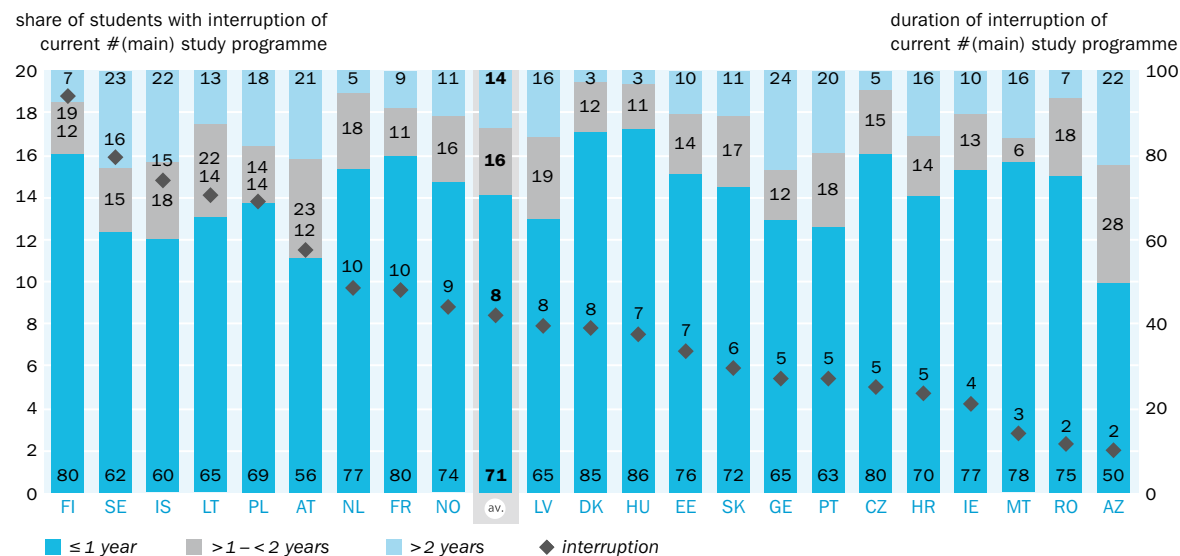
The student surveys as part of EUROSTUDENT naturally cannot provide any information about the proportion of dropouts; there are more suitable data sources and indicators for this (e.g. OECD, 2021<sup>5</sup>). However, a great added value in the EUROSTUDENT data is that we can quantify the proportion of those who interrupted and returned to their studies and can also determine the duration of these interruptions (Figure B3.7). On cross-country average, 8 % of students state that they have already interrupted their studies (officially or unofficially). In the vast majority, these interruptions are only short periods of less than a year (71 %), more rarely 1 to 2 years (16 %) or even longer (14 %).

- In a few countries (Finland, Sweden, Iceland, Lithuania, Poland, and Austria) a comparatively large number of students have interrupted their studies, but in the vast majority this makes up a maximum of 2 to 10 % of students.
- Interruptions of long duration (> 2 years) are particularly mentioned by Georgian, Swedish, Icelandic, Azerbaijani, Austrian, and Portuguese study interrupters ( $\geq 20$  %).

Figure B3.7 [↓](#)

#### (Duration of) interruption of current study programme

Share of students (in %), duration of interruption (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8, C.6b. No data: CH, DE, ES.

Data collection: Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.8 Have you ever officially or unofficially interrupted your current # (main) study programme?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: AT, FI, GE, NO.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, NL.

5 See chapter „Indicator B5. Who is expected to graduate from tertiary education?“.

Social inequalities (approximated through educational background) in study interruptions of returnees are minor on cross-country average as well as throughout countries with regard to the proportion of interrupters overall. However, they sometimes vary with regard to the duration of interruptions (Table B3.3): Long interruptions of at least 2 years are more common among students without tertiary educational background than among their peers from academic families in e.g. Estonia, France, Ireland, Norway, and Poland; the reversed trend (longer interruptions commonly among students with tertiary educational background) appears e.g. in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Latvia, and Romania.

Among students in the older age groups of 25 to < 30 (15 %) and 30 years and over (13 %), study interruptions are considerably more common on cross-country average than among students aged 21 or younger (3 %) and 22 to < 25 years (8 %). There are also clear differences in the length of interruptions; the proportion of long interruptions increases between age groups from 2 (< 22) and 6 % (22 – < 25) to 13 (25 – < 30) and 26 % (30 years and over).

*Older students have interrupted their studies more frequently and for longer periods than their younger peers.*

### Transition time from previous studies to a Master programme

Not only the return to a course of study from periods of study interruptions, but also the time elapsed between completing a first-cycle degree and taking up a second-cycle degree can provide information about the extent of flexible (further) education options in a country. On cross-country average, 28 % of students in Master programmes have had at least 2 years pass between completing their previous studies and starting the Master programme (Figure B3.8).

*A good quarter of Master students started the second cycle with a delay.*

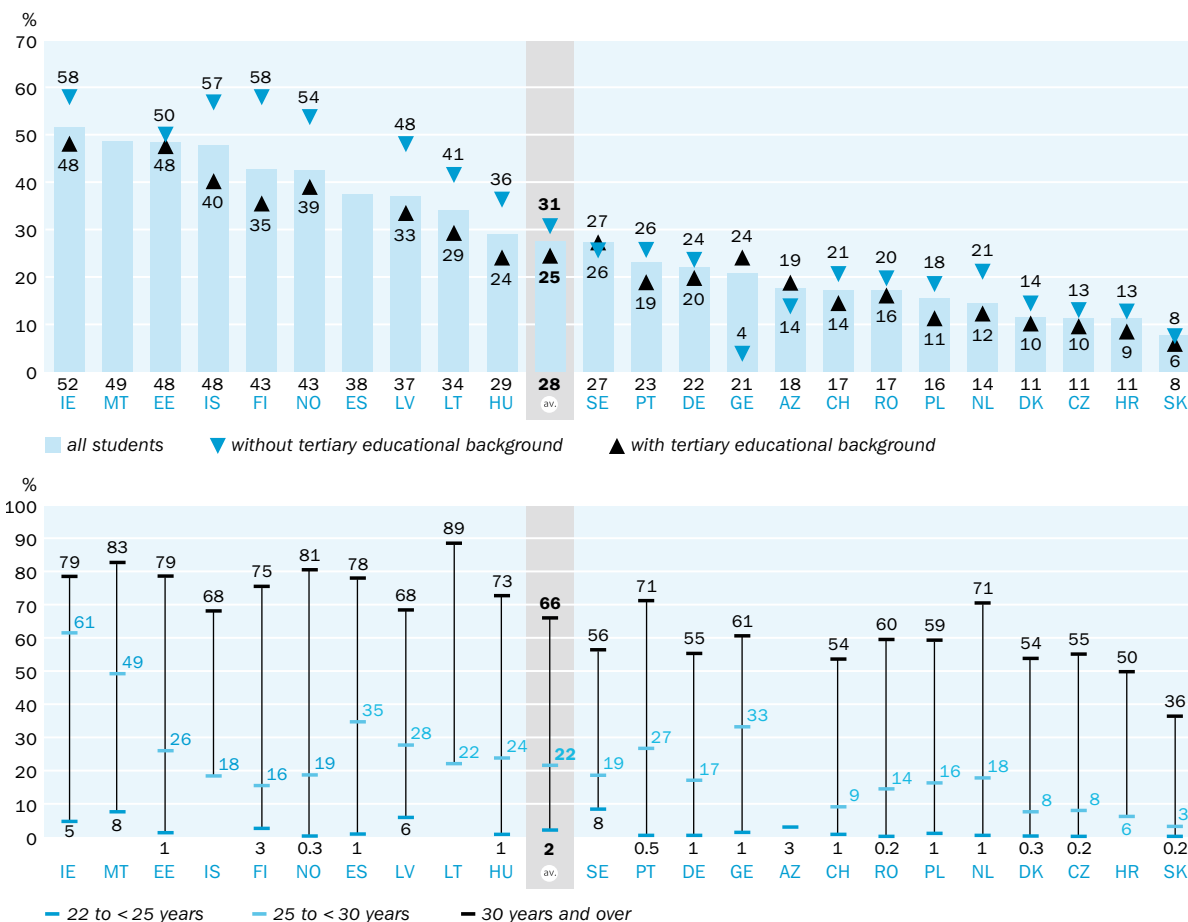
A clear trend towards a longer transition period into a Master degree programme can be identified with regard to student's educational background. On average, a quarter of Master students with tertiary education background report a delayed transition into their Master degree programme (25 %), while for students from a non-tertiary educational background the share is almost a third (31 %). This trend holds true when looking at national data in almost all countries (except Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Sweden). These findings (as already described at the beginning of this chapter with regard to entry into higher education) provide further evidence that students from non-tertiary parents are dependent on flexible options to (re-)enter their studies because they can rely on fewer resources in their family environment (> Chapter B2) and therefore more often have to rely on own resources, e.g. through (savings made in periods of) gainful employment (Chapters > B6, > B7).

With regard to age, there is also a clear trend in delayed transitions to a Master degree. While, on cross-country average, only 2 % of 22 to 24 year old students started their Master studies 2 years or more after graduating from a first-cycle degree programme, the proportion among 25- to 29-year-olds is 22 % and ultimately reaches two-thirds among those aged 30 and over (66 %). While respective percent values vary between countries, this general age pattern in delayed transition between first-cycle and Master studies observed on cross-country average holds true in all countries.

Figure B3.8

**Delayed transition between graduating from previous programme to current Master programme by educational background and age groups**

Share of students in a Master programme (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8, B.8. No data: AT, FR.

Data collection: Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), ES, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 1.10 [Only if 1.6 “#Master degree [ISCED 7]”, not “#Long national degree / integrated Master [more than 3 years, ISCED 7]”] How long after graduating from your previous study programme did you start your current Master programme?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: CH.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, NL.

**Prospects of academic success over the course of studies**

**Study progress impacts sense of belonging, study performance, and dropout intention.**

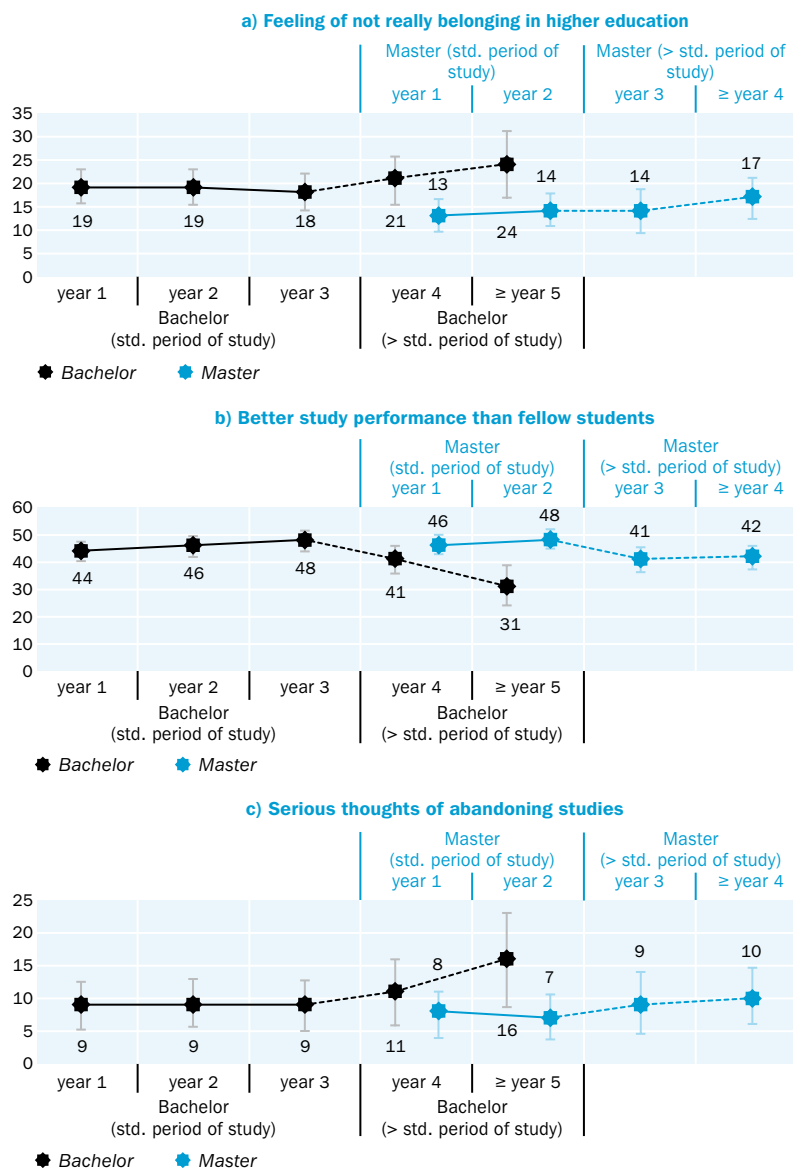
While the previous analyses have looked at different study entry paths and forms of re-entry, this section focuses on students’ prospects of academic success from a study progression perspective. Figure B3.9 shows cross-country average values for a lacking sense of belonging in higher education, self-assessed study performance, and serious thoughts of dropping out of higher education in Bachelor or Master programmes at different stages of study progress. One can clearly see that students who study beyond the standard period of study a) have a lower sense of belonging, b) are less likely to rate their academic performance better than that of their fellow students, and c) are more likely to have thoughts of dropping out than those fellow students in their respective degree programme who are within the standard period of study. The (more or less

pronounced) ‘jumps’ in the percentage values between Bachelor and Master students in the sense of belonging and thoughts of study dropout also make it clear that the more integrated and those with few thoughts of dropping out opt for a continuation of studies after first-cycle graduation.

Figure B3.9 ↓

### Students' academic success prospects by years of study in Bachelor and Master programmes

Share of students (in %, 95 % between-country CIs)



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8, C.12., C.15., C.14. **No data:** a) AT, ES, FR; b) CH, ES, FR; c) ES, FR.

**Data collection:** Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 3.1 Generally, to what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding your studies? 3.4 How would you rate your performance so far in your current #(main) study programme in comparison to that of your fellow students? Items adapted from Trautwein et al. (2007).

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group:** IE, NL.



## Discussion and policy considerations

In conclusion, the findings in this chapter shed light on several crucial aspects of the transition into and within higher education. Firstly, a predominance of standard qualifications and entry routes can be observed, with alternative pathways being less common. However, older students more often turn to these alternative routes, facilitating their entry into higher education and taking advantage of lifelong learning opportunities. Additionally, we find that a non-tertiary parental educational background and older age often coincide with more extensive work experience before enrolling in higher education. Alternative access routes, i.e. higher education entry through non-standard qualifications or standard qualifications acquired later in life, is related to transition time. Furthermore, an interplay between access routes, participation in higher education, and student populations' age structure can be observed, suggesting that countries in which alternative access routes are more commonly used tend to have higher entry ages, greater age heterogeneity, and increased overall participation in higher education. Distinct disparities in study interruptions can be observed regarding students' age, with older age groups (consistently) indicating longer breaks. Moreover, we find that a significant portion of Master students experience delays in starting their programmes; again, particularly those with non-tertiary parental educational backgrounds and older age. Lastly, the findings reveal that extended study durations (above the standard period of study) are associated with lower sense of belonging, inferior self-assessed performance, and higher likelihood of contemplating dropout, emphasising the importance of support to ensure smooth progression towards graduation. Overall, the findings taken together underscore the need for flexible educational pathways to accommodate the diverse circumstances of students' journeys throughout higher education.

### Considerations for policymakers

Older students and those without tertiary educational background commonly access higher education through alternative pathways, often after extended periods outside the formal education system and with significant work experience. Additionally, countries with higher proportions of students entering through alternative routes tend to have more representation of older population groups in their student bodies. This correlation suggests that promoting openness in higher education systems to alternative entry options can lead to more representative participation across the lifespan. To advance lifelong learning and address socio-economic disparities, policymakers should prioritise easing accessibility into higher education as a crucial starting point.

### Considerations for HEI staff

Implementing tailored support services for non-traditional students, such as mentorship programmes, academic advising, and financial assistance, can help address their unique needs and challenges. Staff participation in projects such as 'ENTRANTS – Enhancing the transition of non-traditional students'<sup>6</sup> can be a meaningful measure to reduce dropout rates and promote academic success, especially among disadvantaged student groups. Offering flexible learning options, including online courses, evening classes, and part-time study opportunities, can accommodate the diverse schedules of

<sup>6</sup> <https://entrants.eu/>

non-traditional students, enabling them to balance their studies with work and other responsibilities (>Chapter B4, >Chapter B5). Finally, collaborating with community organisations (Allinson & Gabriels, 2021; Schlanger, 2018) can provide additional resources and support networks for non-traditional students, enhancing their overall academic experience and success.

### Considerations for researchers

The relationships (and especially directions of influence) between offerings of alternative pathways to higher education access and higher overall societal participation in higher education require deeper analyses than what is possible within the context of this book chapter. Which measures of openness actually contribute over time to opening up the higher education sector for disadvantaged population groups? In this regard, national traditions and contexts need to be considered in more detail than what is possible within the framework of the very abstract indicators used here.

# Tables

Table B3.2

## Type of qualification used for access to higher education, alternative access route into higher education, and work experience prior to entering higher education by educational background and age group

Share of students (in %)

	Share of students without #SMAR						Share of students with alternative access route				Share of students with continuous work for at least one year without interruption and at least 20 hrs./week					
	Educational background		Age groups				Age groups				Educational background		Age groups			
	Without tertiary educational background	With tertiary educational background	Up to 21 years	22 to <25 years	25 to <30 years	30 years and over	Up to 21 years	22 to <25 years	25 to <30 years	30 years and over	Without tertiary educational background	With tertiary educational background	Up to 21 years	22 to <25 years	25 to <30 years	30 years and over
AT	4	3	1	2	3	8	2	4	10	22	33	21	8	16	31	52
AZ	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.5	2	5	2	8	7	4	6	33	41
CH	7	4	1	2	6	21	4	10	17	30	42	29	9	24	41	77
CZ	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1	1	2	7	28	15	10	14	30	73
DE	5	5	2	2	6	12	5	10	22	37	36	26	10	21	35	62
DK	4	3	4	2	3	7	5	4	8	24	54	51	31	50	56	72
EE	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1	2	7	10	39	26	12	22	40	51
ES	n.d.	n.d.	0.0	0.1	0.4	0.3	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	2	12	40	73
FI	2	2	2	1	1	2	3	2	5	10	59	39	18	32	45	65
FR	2	1	1	1	3	10	1	1	3	10	13	7	6	8	17	32
GE	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	3	2	10	18	12	10	13	17	35
HR	0.5	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.1	2	3	3	7	27	16	8	4	6	19	53
HU	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	5	14	27	13	4	12	27	55
IE	5	5	1	6	10	10	3	8	14	18	36	22	10	23	51	60
IS	8	4	0.3	1	2	12	3	9	22	41	70	56	29	54	67	72
LT	1	2	1	3	0	0.2	2	4	2	8	29	19	8	23	33	59
LV	3	2	2	3	4	2	2	6	11	16	46	28	7	26	45	74
MT	n.d.	n.d.	2	4	17	14	8	14	26	31	n.d.	n.d.	11	23	54	69
NL	2	3	1	3	5	6	3	10	18	31	22	14	7	14	29	68
NO	3	2	1	1	3	4	3	7	17	24	51	37	17	29	47	62
PL	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	6	16	26	30	15	9	18	39	71
PT	2	1	0.2	1	3	8	2	5	13	25	20	11	3	10	36	69
RO	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	4	13	13	23	11	4	9	33	60
SE	1	1	0.3	0.3	1	2	1	4	10	19	56	44	18	43	58	69
SK	0.1	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.5	0.3	5	4	8	23	35	21	12	20	42	83
av.	3	2	1	2	4	6	3	5	11	20	34	23	11	21	39	62

n.d.: no data. n/a: not applicable. Decimal points shown for values &lt; .5

Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8, B.9, B.16, B.16b.

Data collection: Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, ES, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.1 Do you have a #SMAR or foreign equivalent? 2.1 Do you have a #SMAR or foreign equivalent? 2.2 [Only students with #SMAR] When did you obtain your #SMAR? 2.3 [Only students without #SMAR] Where did you last attend the #regular school system? 2.4 Did you have any paid job(s) prior to entering higher education for the first time?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT conventions: AT, CH.

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, NL.

Table B3.3

**(Duration of) interruption of current study programme by educational background and age group**

Share of students (in %), duration of interruption (in %)

	Educational background								Age groups															
	Without tertiary educational background				With tertiary educational background				Up to 21 years				22 to <25 years				25 to <30 years				30 years and over			
	Interruption	≤1 year	1–2 years	>2 years	Interruption	≤1 year	1–2 years	>2 years	Interruption	≤1 year	1–2 years	>2 years	Interruption	≤1 year	1–2 years	>2 years	Interruption	≤1 year	1–2 years	>2 years	Interruption	≤1 year	1–2 years	>2 years
AT	12	52	24	24	11	59	23	18	2	97	3	0	6	84	15	1	14	61	27	11	24	37	25	38
AZ	2	72	13	15	2	41	33	25	1	79	21	0	6	31	38	31	6	47	26	26	6	40	0	60
CH	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
CZ	5	82	13	5	5	79	17	5	1	95	3	1	5	86	11	2	13	77	18	5	7	69	22	10
DE	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
DK	7	86	11	3	8	83	12	4	2	98	2	0	4	92	8	1	13	85	12	3	12	77	17	6
EE	6	68	15	17	7	78	14	8	2	96	4	0	6	92	7	1	12	73	22	4	9	61	16	23
ES	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
FI	17	80	11	9	19	80	13	7	6	100	0	0	18	92	7	1	22	83	14	3	22	69	16	16
FR	10	73	14	14	10	83	10	7	3	93	7	0	13	90	8	2	24	68	18	14	11	43	14	43
GE	5	76	11	13	5	63	12	25	2	75	11	15	6	57	18	25	13	64	8	29	9	81	6	13
HR	5	71	15	14	5	68	13	18	1	98	2	0	4	91	7	2	11	65	21	14	11	43	18	40
HU	7	83	13	4	8	88	9	3	2	94	3	3	8	95	5	0	16	85	14	1	11	73	16	11
IE	4	73	11	16	4	80	12	7	2	92	6	2	7	88	10	2	5	66	20	14	7	60	18	22
IS	16	52	22	26	15	63	16	21	4	94	0	6	7	87	9	4	18	73	18	10	20	47	21	32
LT	14	70	16	14	14	60	28	12	5	89	11	0	17	62	23	15	29	56	29	15	22	64	21	14
LV	9	72	17	11	8	60	21	19	1	86	13	1	6	84	12	5	19	64	20	17	13	55	23	22
MT	3	63	10	27	2	97	0	3	1	81	0	19	4	69	19	12	5	76	0	24	3	86	2	12
NL	9	77	17	6	10	77	18	5	4	96	3	1	13	82	17	0	18	62	25	12	13	51	31	18
NO	10	65	19	16	8	76	15	9	2	95	5	0	6	90	9	1	12	78	16	6	13	61	19	20
PL	13	65	13	22	15	71	14	15	5	95	5	1	15	86	10	3	33	56	21	23	22	31	14	55
PT	5	61	17	21	6	65	18	17	2	86	13	1	5	78	13	9	13	64	24	12	13	35	19	46
RO	2	82	18	0	3	71	16	13	1	96	4	0	3	84	16	1	7	57	27	16	2	64	25	11
SE	15	60	15	25	16	63	15	22	4	96	4	0	10	84	13	3	22	61	19	20	25	48	14	38
SK	5	66	23	10	6	80	14	6	2	92	4	4	7	79	12	9	15	72	19	9	6	42	32	26
av.	8	71	15	14	9	72	16	12	3	92	6	2	8	81	13	6	15	68	19	13	13	56	18	26

n.d.: no data.

**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT 8, C.6b.**Data collection:** Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, ES, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.8 Have you ever officially or unofficially interrupted your current #(main) study programme?**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT conventions:** AT, FI, GE, NO.**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group:** IE, NL.

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