

INTELLIGENCE BRIEF 5/2016:

# DELAYED ENTRY INTO HIGHER EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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 below stem from the fifth round of the EUROSTUDENT project (2012-2015).

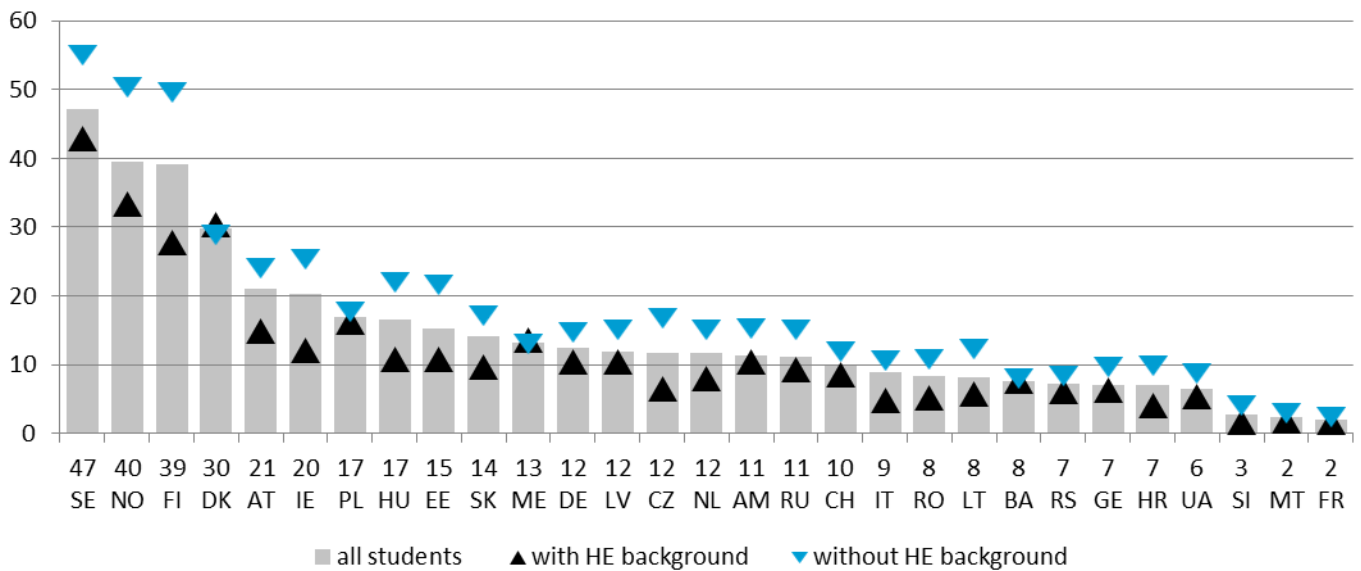
## Overview

- On average across EUROSTUDENT countries, 14 % of students postpone higher education enrolment by more than 24 months after leaving school for the first time.
- In most countries, delayed transition students are more commonly found among students without higher education background.
- In many cases, delayed transition students more often pursue their studies with low intensity, and depend on their own income to finance their living.
- On unweighted EUROSTUDENT average, almost 60 % of delayed transition students have regular work experience before entering higher education, compared to 20 % of all students.
- Delayed transition students more often expressed experiencing (very) serious financial difficulties than all students in the majority of countries.

## Do some students' groups more often delay their higher education enrolment compared to others?

The term “delayed transition students” refers to students who enter higher education with a delay of more than 24 months after leaving school for the first time.

**Figure 1: Students with time delay of more than 24 months between leaving school for the first time and entering higher education by education background (in %)**



Data source: EUROSTUDENT V, B13, B14.

**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.3 When did you obtain the qualification mentioned in 2.1 [highest level of education obtained on graduating from the school system for the first time]? 2.6 When did you enter higher education for the first time?

**Notes:** Values below figure refer to “all students”. See chapter 2 in the EUROSTUDENT Synopsis of Indicators (pp. 27-44) for methodological notes and notes on national surveys.

On average across EUROSTUDENT countries, 14 % of students postpone higher education enrolment by more than two years after leaving school for the first time. The share of delayed transition students varies from less than 5 % in Slovenia, France, and Malta to 30 % and more in the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark). In around one fifth of the

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EUROSTUDENT countries, 20 % or more of students enter higher education with a delay. In another two fifths of the countries this share is between 10 % and 20 % (Fig. 1).

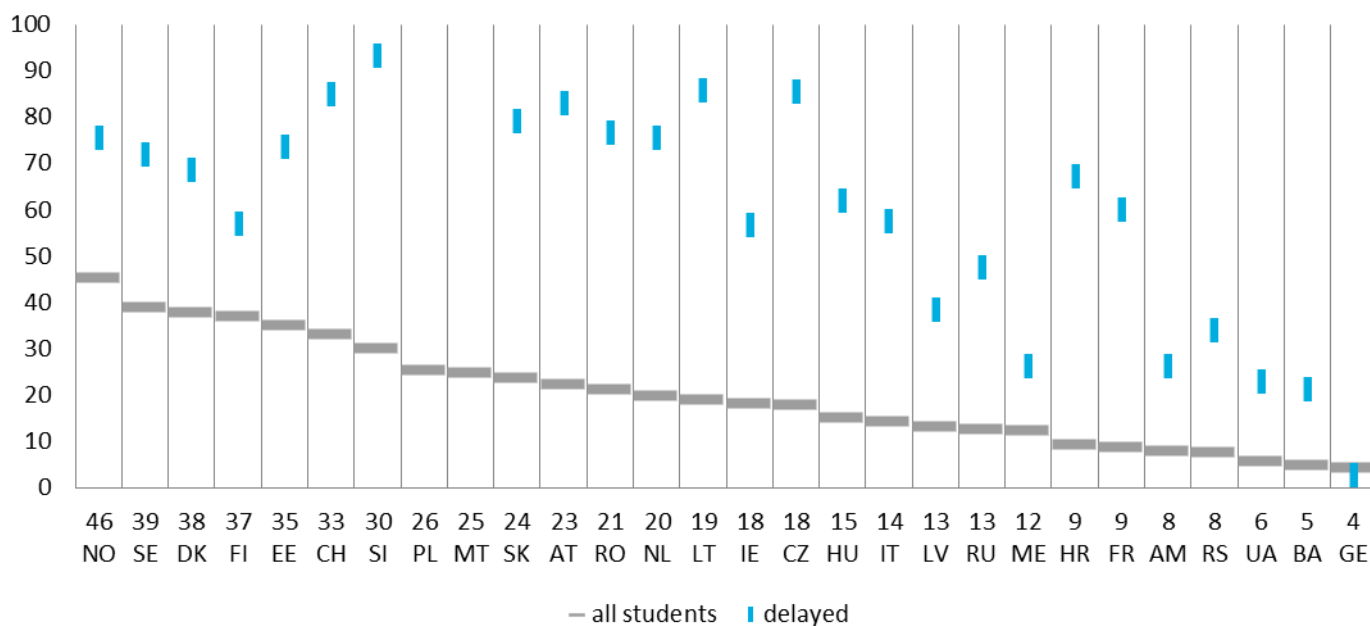
Delayed transition students are similar in many aspects across all EUROSTUDENT countries. In the majority of countries, the share of delayed transition students varies by educational background<sup>2</sup>: higher shares of delayed transition students can be found among students without higher education background than among students with parents who hold a higher education degree themselves. In some countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Ireland, Hungary, Estonia, and the Czech Republic), the share of delayed transition students is at least 10 percentage points greater among students without higher education background than among their counterparts (Fig. 1).

Moreover, the share of delayed transition students is higher among low intensity students, i.e. students who spend less than 20 hours a week on study-related activities (taught and personal studies) than among high intensity students in the majority of countries (see subtopic B13 in the EUROSTUDENT database). Delayed transition students can also, in most countries, most often be found among students depending on their own earnings rather than among students drawing mainly on other forms of financing (family or public support; see subtopic B15).

The higher shares of delayed transition students among low intensity students and those students who depend on their own earnings highlight that students who postpone their higher education enrolment also tend to pursue their studies differently compared to the so-called traditional student groups. What is behind this phenomenon?

### Why do delayed transition students postpone their entry into higher education?

Figure 2: Students with (regular) work experience before entering higher education by transition route (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT V, B7, B8. No data: DE; delayed transition students: PL, MT

EUROSTUDENT question(s): 2.3 When did you obtain the qualification mentioned in 2.1 [highest level of education obtained on graduating from the school system for the first time]? 2.6 When did you enter higher education for the first time? 2.9 Did you have a paid job before entering higher education for the first time?

Notes: Values below figure refer to “all students”. Regular work experience refers to working/vocational training for at least one year and at least 20h per week. See chapter 2 in the EUROSTUDENT Synopsis of Indicators (pp. 27-44) for further methodological notes and notes on national surveys.

There are various factors that may influence students’ decisions on when to pursue higher education. It is not possible to identify all of the factors based on EUROSTUDENT data alone. However, as Fig. 2 shows, in many countries, an overwhelming majority of students who enter higher education with a delay have (regular) work experience before entering

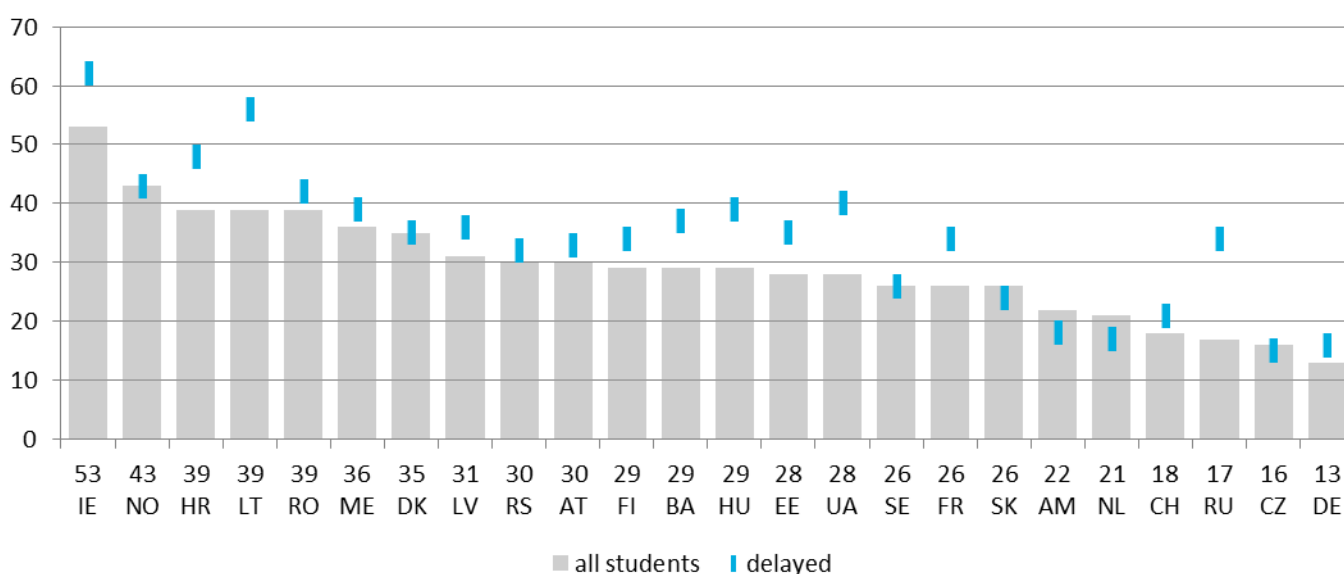
<sup>2</sup> Educational background is measured through the indicator of parents’ highest educational attainment. Students with higher education background have parents of which at least one has attained a higher education degree (ISCED 1997 level 5-6; ISCED 2011 level 5-8). Students without higher education background have parents whose highest education degree is no higher than ISCED 1997/2011 level 4.

higher education. On unweighted EUROSTUDENT average, well over half (59 %) of delayed transition students have regular work experience before entering higher education, compared to 20 % of all students.

There is a fair possibility that many students delay their entry into the higher education system because they engage in paid employment directly after leaving school. Their motives for working – to gain experience or due to economic obligations – however cannot be ascertained directly from the EUROSTUDENT data. Nonetheless, analysis of EUROSTUDENT data on students’ finances shows that delayed transition students more often expressed experiencing (very) serious financial difficulties than all students in the majority of countries (Fig. 3). Financial limitations – that may have existed before entering higher education – may therefore be a reason for delayed transition students more often engaging in employment directly after leaving school and thereby deferring their higher education enrolment. In any case, the data highlight that in the majority of countries, delayed transition students experience more financial difficulties in their current studies than their peers. Notably, this pattern is not found in three of the countries where delayed HE entry is most common (NO, SE, DK).

**Figure 3: Students’ with (very) serious financial difficulties by transition route (in %)**

*Students not living with parents*



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT V, E7, E8. **No data:** delayed transition students: PL, MT; **Too few cases:** SI, GE

**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.3 When did you obtain the qualification mentioned in 2.1 [highest level of education obtained on graduating from the school system for the first time]? 2.6 When did you enter higher education for the first time? 3.8 To what extent are you currently experiencing financial difficulties?

**Notes:** Values below figure refer to “all students”. Students assessed the extent of current financial difficulties on a five-point scale ranging from “very serious” (5) to “not at all” (1). For this figure, the categories “very serious” and “serious” were aggregated. See chapter 2 in the EUROSTUDENT Synopsis of Indicators (pp. 27-44) for further methodological notes and notes on national surveys.

Besides economic reasons, national systems and culture also seem to play a significant role in influencing how students pursue their higher education, including higher education entry. In many countries there is compulsory military service which delays entry into higher education (Halsey, 2011). Further, some countries, for example Nordic countries, strongly emphasise lifelong learning and offer a range of adult education and second chance programmes which enables individuals to enter higher education at a later stage and possibly after gaining work experience (OECD, 2015, p. 344). In Sweden, for instance, it is a common practice for high school graduates to take a break before entering higher education. Prospective students mainly use this time to further enrich themselves by volunteering, traveling or accumulating work experience (Charles, 2016). Available opportunities for part-time studies and distance learning courses may also influence higher education entry decisions (Charles, 2016).

The high share of delayed transition students with (regular) work experience before entering higher education certainly implies that even though these students did not participate in higher education immediately after leaving school, they did gain experience on the labour market and practical knowledge by engaging in paid employment. Moreover, compared to all students, a higher share of delayed transition students continue to engage in paid employment even after entering higher

education (Hauschildt et al., 2015). EUROSTUDENT data also shows that in many countries, these students tend to opt for flexible study structures such as studying part-time (see subtopic C8) or with low intensity (see subtopic B13), presumably as a way to balance the professional and educational demands put on them.

### Policy implications: Supporting delayed transition students

As shown above, delayed transition students make up a large part of the student body in some countries. In many cases, their background and study situation differs from their peers who started studying directly after school. Available evidence also points to the fact that they may differ in their study success: Previous studies (conducted in the United States) have suggested that delayed transition students have lower rates of degree completion compared to traditional students (Bozick, DeLuca, 2005; Roksa & Velez, 2012; Smith, 2008). This is in line with the findings from the EUROSTUDENT study which also suggests that in several countries, delayed transition students tend to more often experience interruptions (of at least one year) between entering and graduating from higher education in many countries (Hauschildt et al., 2015).

All this implies that increasing participation of delayed transition students in the higher education system may require a systematic approach and changes at multiple levels. Student support systems that are based on a more traditional definition of students may not be suitable for delayed transition students who are older, without higher education background, study with low intensity and often depend on their own employment to finance their living. The increasing diversity of students in the higher education systems necessitates a review of already existing study structures, student support services and funding opportunities, making sure that they meet the needs and requirements of a diverse student body.

### References

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### EUROSTUDENT V Data set

Of course, there are other important questions when it comes to delayed transition students in higher education: what is the share of delayed transition students among students who enter higher education through regular and alternative entry routes, what is the share of delayed transition students among students who experience interruptions during higher education, what does the time budget of delayed transition students look like? The comparative report [“Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe”](#) (2015) provides insight into these questions. 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)



Any deviations from the EUROSTUDENT V report in this Intelligence Brief and the database reflect data updates.

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