

PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION AND HAVING CHILDREN: The growing need to make it more compatible ¹

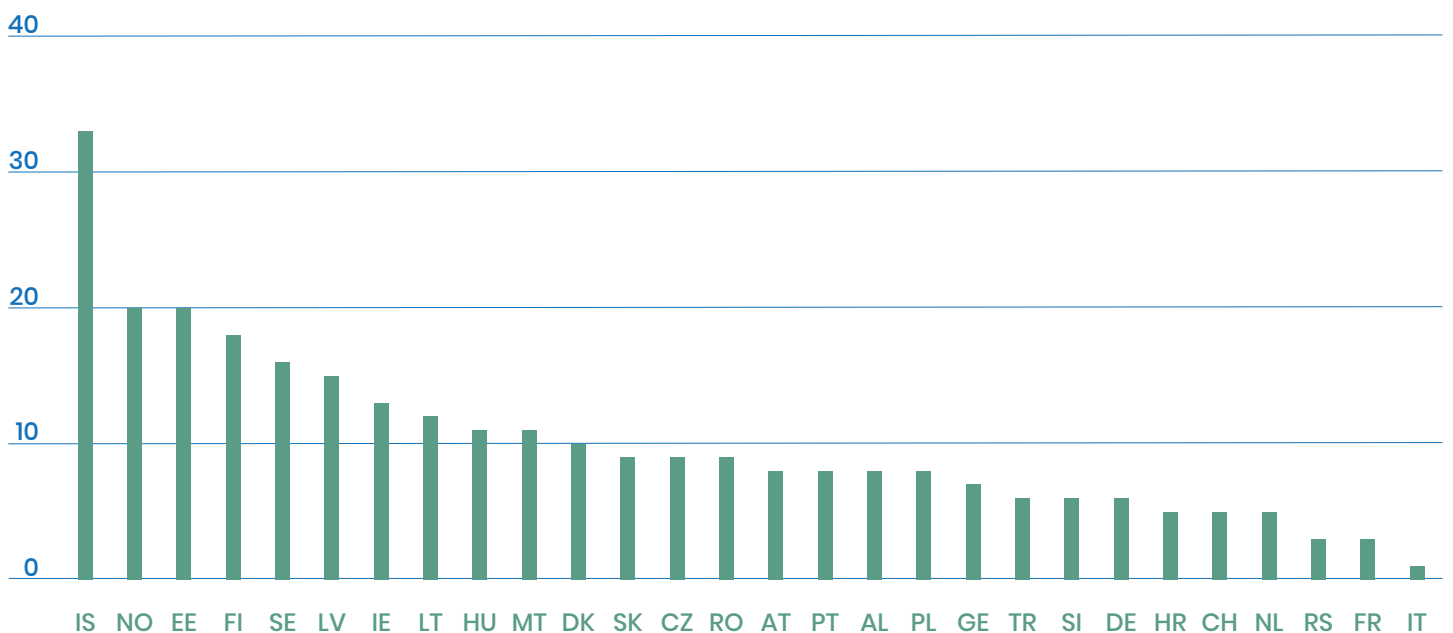
EUROSTUDENT INTELLIGENCE BRIEF 1/2018

The student population is becoming more and more diverse all around the world. As different groups of students have different needs, it is important to map this diversity in order to provide relevant policy solutions for all of the students. One group that has become more visible in many countries is student-parents, i.e. students with dependent children to take care of alongside studies. According to EUROSTUDENT VI every 10th student in Europe is a parent.

Students with children constitute a very special group, considering their need to juggle multiple responsibilities and roles (a student, a parent, plus potentially a partner to the father/mother of their child, plus potentially an employee/entrepreneur). Several studies have identified many challenges that student-parents face, e.g. time constraints, complexities regarding setting up childcare, inflexible timetables at universities, additional financial demands, difficulties with integrating different roles, and constructing a consistent identity (Alsop et al., 2008; Brooks, 2012; Dibiasi et al., 2015; Lynch, 2008; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Osborne et al., 2004). These challenges make it

harder for the parents to successfully participate in higher education, which is why some parents may avoid entering higher education in the first place. Thus, policies addressing student-parents would potentially benefit students not only in countries where many students already have children, but also in countries where their share is (still) very small. Figure 1 is an illustration of the fact that in the European context, both aforementioned situations do exist: while in Italy, France, and Serbia the share of student-parents is very low (no more than 3%), in Norway (20%), Estonia (20%), and especially in Iceland (33%) the same indicator can be considered as high.

Figure 1. Students with children (share of students in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VI, [A.12](#)
 Deviations from EUROSTUDENT conventions: AT.
 Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: AL, DE, IE, IT, LV, RS.

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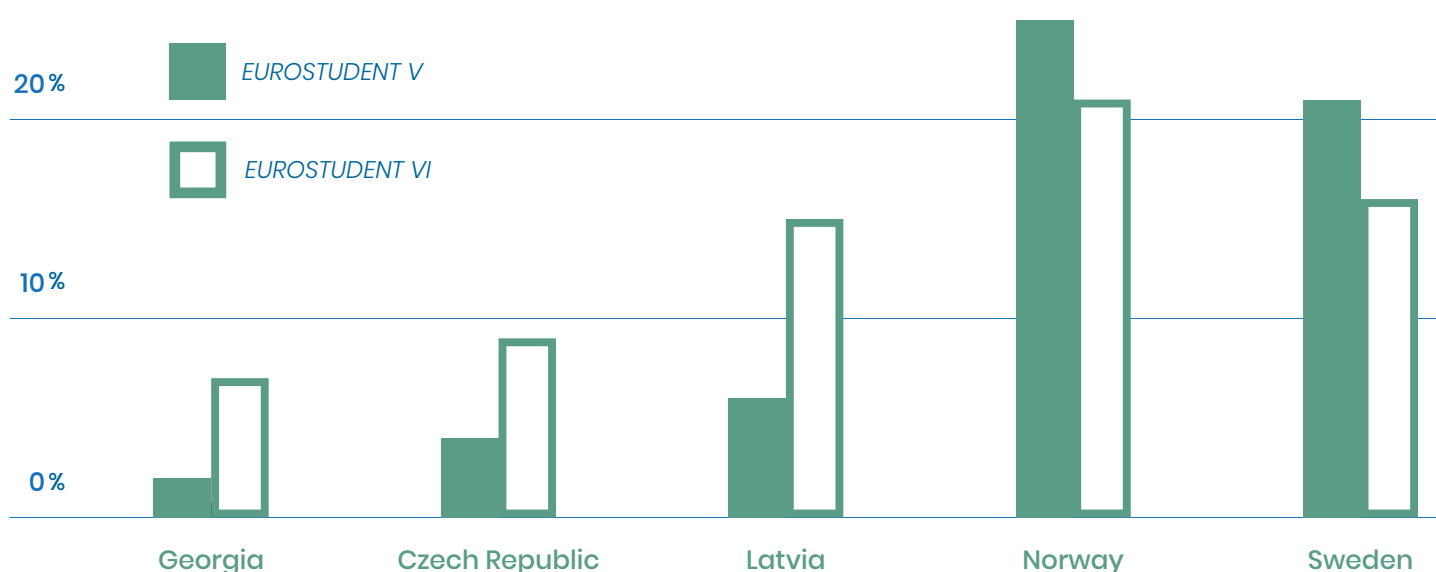
SOME STRIKING DYNAMICS – WHAT ARE THE EXPLANATIONS?

While on a general level the average share of student-parents from EUROSTUDENT V to EUROSTUDENT VI has changed only marginally, some noteworthy shifts have occurred on the country level (see Figure 2). Considering the overall positive relation between the age of student

population and the share of student-parents, it could be said that as the average age of students in the presented countries have not changed significantly during this period, these cases can be considered as quite remarkable ones. What could explain the dynamics?

- **Georgia** – while the average age of students has risen by only one year (from 21 to 22), the share of student-parents has increased by more than 5 percentage points. One potential explanation is that the overall fertility rate (children per woman) in Georgia has risen significantly as well: from 1.81 in 2010 to 2.23 in 2016 (Eurostat, s.d.).
- **Czech Republic** – while the average age of students has remained the same (25 years), the share of student-parents has risen 5 percentage points. Similarly to the Georgian case, the overall fertility rate in the Czech Republic has risen (from 1.51 in 2010 to 1.63 in 2016), although not as remarkably as in Georgia. Potentially, the increase is due to the changes in legislation initiated in 2013 and implemented in 2014, e.g. the right to interrupt the studies based on pregnancy, childbirth, or parenthood for the recognized period of parenthood (The Higher Education Act, 2017).
- **Latvia** – appears to be a rather clear-cut case as the shift (i.e. the rise of the share of student-parents from 6 % to 15 %) is in line with at least two trends: the increase of the average age of students (from 23 to 25.5) on the one hand and the rise of the overall fertility rate (from 1.36 in 2010 to 1.74 in 2016) on the other hand.
- **Norway & Sweden** – contrary to the previous cases, in these two Scandinavian countries the share of student-parents has decreased (by four to six percentage points) instead of increasing. This change cannot be explained with the shift of students' average age as the latter has remained the same or changed only marginally. A potential explanation is the minor fall of the overall fertility rates between 2010 and 2016.

Figure 2. Changes in the shares of student-parents from EUROSTUDENT V to EUROSTUDENT VI, only countries with at least 4 percentage points change



Source: EUROSTUDENT V and EUROSTUDENT VI, author's synthesis.

WHO IS THE IDEAL-TYPICAL STUDENT-PARENT?

- A woman over the age of 24
- Has used alternative ways (e.g. entrance tests carried out by the universities instead of the upper secondary school level national exams, second-chance routes) to enter higher education
- Participating in a Master's programme (vs. Bachelor's programme)
- Struggling with financial difficulties

NB! This model is an ideal-type, i.e. somewhat simplifying in its essence and applies in the majority instead of all countries. For example, in some countries (namely, in Ireland, Malta, Portugal, Serbia, and Turkey) there are more fathers than mothers among students. Additionally, obviously not all student-parents struggle with financial difficulties: despite the

fact that there are more student-parents who claim to have financial difficulties than those who claim not to have any in three quarters of the participating countries, in Norway and the Netherlands, for example, the pattern is reversed.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The notable shares of student-parents could be considered as a success as well as a challenge for today's education systems. On the one hand it is a sign that the higher education institutions have succeeded in including different groups into the higher education, thus making the field more and more diverse and similar to the overall society. On the other hand it puts the education systems to the test as finding out specific needs of student-parents and coming up with suitable policy solutions to support them as substantially as possible could be a challenge for the policymakers. Flexible timetables, parental leave, and day care for children on campus are some potential measures

to help student-parents, but which kinds of combinations work in specific countries remains largely a question unanswered, considering that the students with children, as a relatively new group in the field of higher education, are also yet rather under-investigated (Brooks, 2012). However, in light of demographic, social, and economic pressures and the paradigm of lifelong learning this question has to increase its importance both in the eyes of the researchers and policy-makers so that the compatibility of pursuing higher education and having children will be a difficult question but normal practice.

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ABOUT EUROSTUDENT

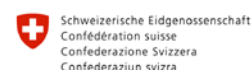
The EUROSTUDENT project collates comparable student survey data on the social dimension of European higher education, collecting data on a wide range of topics, e.g. the socio-economic background, living conditions, and temporary international mobility of students. The project strives to provide reliable 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 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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