

The links between satisfaction with support and drop-out intentions among students with impairments – patterns in EUROSTUDENT VII countries

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Enabling access, participation and completion for students with disabilities in (higher) education is an explicit goal of European policy (European Commission, 2010). Students with impairments often face particular challenges in higher education (HE), such as difficulty in fulfilling the required attendance or study intensity, increased expenditure, lower income and more financial difficulties (Hauschildt, Gwosc, Schirmer & Wartenbergh-Cras, 2021). Across EUROSTUDENT VII countries, 15% of students report having an impairment that is at least somewhat limiting in their studies, most commonly either mental health issues or physical chronic diseases.

The aim of this Intelligence Brief is to investigate drop-out intentions among students with impairments¹ in EUROSTUDENT VII countries. In other words, the brief attempts to shed some light on the question: how successful have European higher education systems been in accomplishing the EU goal of substantially integrating students with disabilities to higher education? To answer that question, we will first give a short overview of existing research about factors impacting students' drop-out intentions. Secondly, we will describe the situation regarding drop-out intentions among students with impairments in EUROSTUDENT VII countries, and lastly some explanations of the most outstanding cases will be offered.

¹ Throughout this brief, we use the term 'students with impairments' when referring to students who in EUROSTUDENT VII survey reported having chronic diseases, mental health problems, mobility or sensory impairments, learning disabilities, or other long-standing health problems or functional limitation that are at least somewhat limiting in their studies. At the same time, we recognize that the impairments themselves are not the root cause of obstacles that students with impairments face as the latter lie in physical structures and social attitudes towards people with impairments instead (the social model of disability, see, for instance, Crow, 1996).

What are the main factors that affect students' intentions to leave HE? Do these factors differ between the general student population and students with impairments?

There are various factors that may impact students' drop-out intentions. According to Tinto's (1975, 1993) Student Integration Model, both the level of social integration (i.e. interaction between the individual and the social systems of the HE institution, like fellow students, faculty members, administrators, etc.) and academic integration (i.e. satisfaction with experiences in the academic environment and perceived intellectual growth and development) influence students' commitment and therefore also the likelihood of drop-out. Other scholars have emphasized the importance of social aspects like social inclusion and supportive interactions as one of the major factors for students in deciding whether to stay or abandon HE studies (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Ekornes, 2021).

Some studies have shown that the predictors of the intentions to drop out are lack of self-esteem as less confident students do not believe that their contribution is important, cynicism, lack of dedication and lack of information about future career possibilities (e.g. Cortes, Mostret & Els, 2014). Additionally, emotions related to learning (i.e. enjoyment of acquiring new knowledge) have an impact on students' intentions to leave their studies (Ekornes, 2021). Research has indicated that older students tend to experience less negative emotions while studying than younger ones (Ibid.).

Only few studies, to the best of our knowledge, specifically focus on the academic outcomes of students with impairments, especially on their drop-out intention. For instance, regarding mental health issues, depression can be considered as a significant predictor of the probability of dropping out from the HE studies (Eisenberg, Golberstein & Hunt, 2009). Moreover, students with mental health problems are more likely to have doubts about whether pursuing higher education is worth

their effort, time and money, and they often lack confidence in their ability to complete the degree which, thus, can easily result in abandoning the studies completely (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018).

Regarding students with learning disabilities (LD), research findings reveal that instead of common indicators of persistence such as academic results and entrance exam scores, for students with LD social integration might be the most influential factor for predicting their persistence in the HE (DaDeppo, 2009).

Offering support to students with impairments is important to empower them throughout the years in HE. Research has indicated that students who received any schoolwork support during their studies, were less likely to drop out (Newman, Madaus, Lalor & Javitz, 2020). Intriguingly, specific disability-related services do not seem to significantly affect students' perseverance, but rather ensuring universally available services, policies and environments that are inclusive for all students, either with or without impairments, encourage students to stay in HE (Ibid.).

In addition, as DaDeppo (2009) pointed out in her research focusing on students with LD, all measures supporting social integration like learning communities, mentoring programs, freshman year seminar classes etc., should be promoted to reduce students' intentions to drop out. Similarly, other scholars (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) have emphasized that ensuring a variety of opportunities for students to interact with other students and with tutors is crucial, but besides that, "material and spatial aspects of their social lives, such as accommodation contexts, meeting spaces, location of campuses and so forth" should not be forgotten to guarantee HE environment as inclusive as possible for students with different backgrounds and needs.

How common are drop-out intentions among students with impairments and students without impairments in EUROSTUDENT VII countries?

EUROSTUDENT VII countries remarkably differ from each other regarding the share of students with drop-out intentions both among the general student population and among

students with impairments (SWI) (Figure 1). For example, in Georgia, almost one in three students with impairments is considering completely abandoning his/her HE studies and more than

one-fifth of the students without impairments (SWOI) have the same intention. At the other end of the scale there are Luxembourg and the Netherlands, where less than 5% of SWI and SWOI have intentions to leave HE.

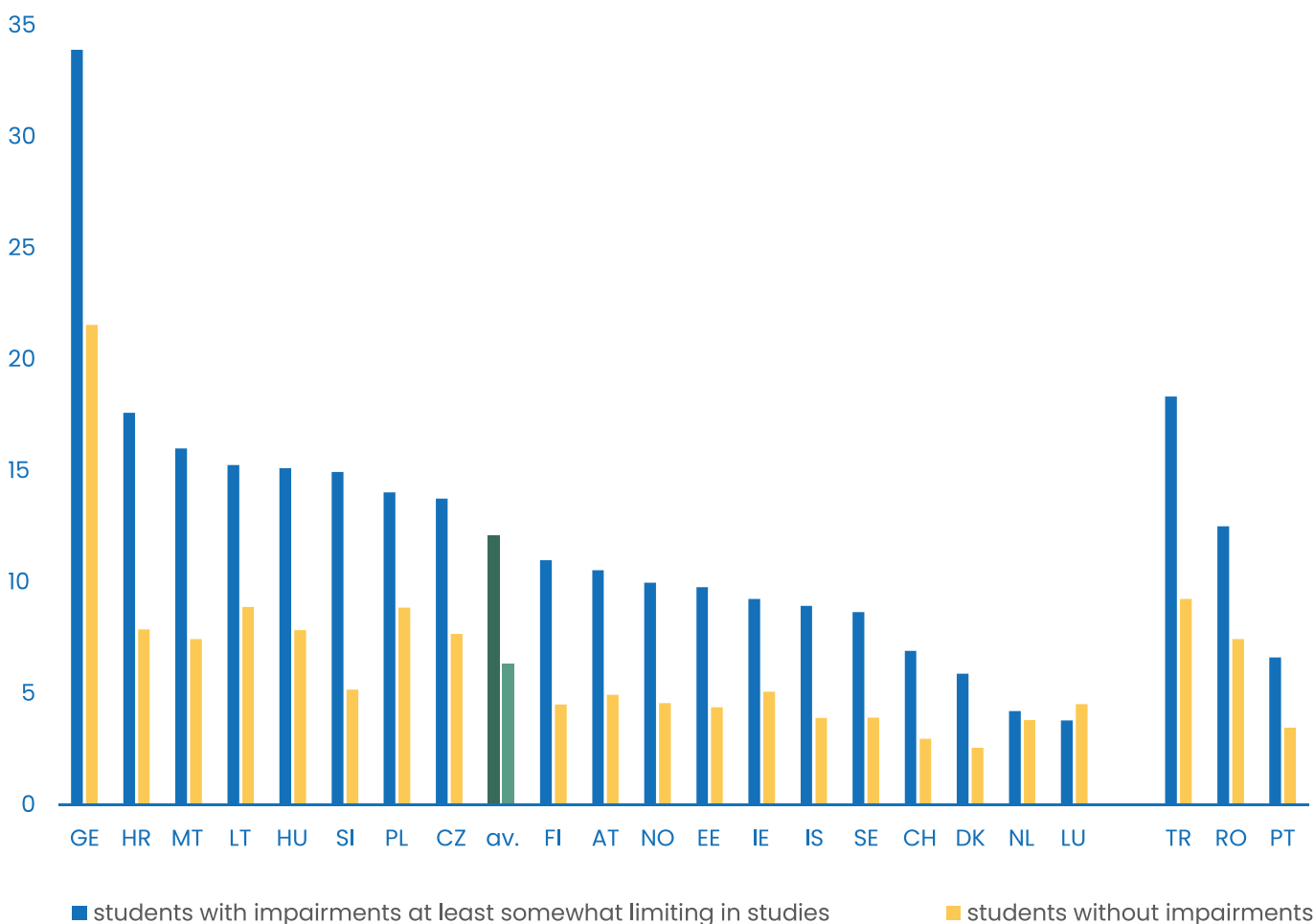
In all Nordic countries, relatively few students are thinking about leaving HE studies: both SWI and SWOI show drop-out intentions that are below the cross-country average, at 12% and 6% accordingly. On the other hand, among Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), only in Estonia the situation regarding students' intention to drop out (SWI 10% and SWOI 4%) is lower than in EUROSTUDENT VII countries on average.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that in almost all countries, SWI are more likely to be seriously

considering dropping out of higher education than SWOI. On average, twice as many SWI have the intention to abandon studies compared to SWOI. In this regard, Slovenia is the most outstanding case, because in this country SWI are as much as three times more likely thinking about leaving HE than the general student population (15% vs. 5%). At the other extreme there is the Netherlands with no difference between the drop-out intentions of SWI and SWOI (both of which are 4%). It is also worth mentioning that in Georgia which has high share of students who are considering abandoning HE whether they report impairments or not (34% vs. 22%), the difference between drop-out intentions when comparing SWI and general student population is lower than on average.

Figure 1. Drop-out intentions

The share of all students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, C26, **No data:** IT, FR

Data collection: Spring 2019, except IT, PT, RO, TR - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021

EUROSTUDENT question(s): Generally, to what extent do you agree with the following thoughts regarding your studies? - I am seriously thinking of completely abandoning my higher education studies. Item adapted from Trautwein et al. (2007).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: DK, EE, RO,

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: DE, IE, IT, PL

How does satisfaction with support services provided for SWI to overcome limitations relate to their drop-out intentions?

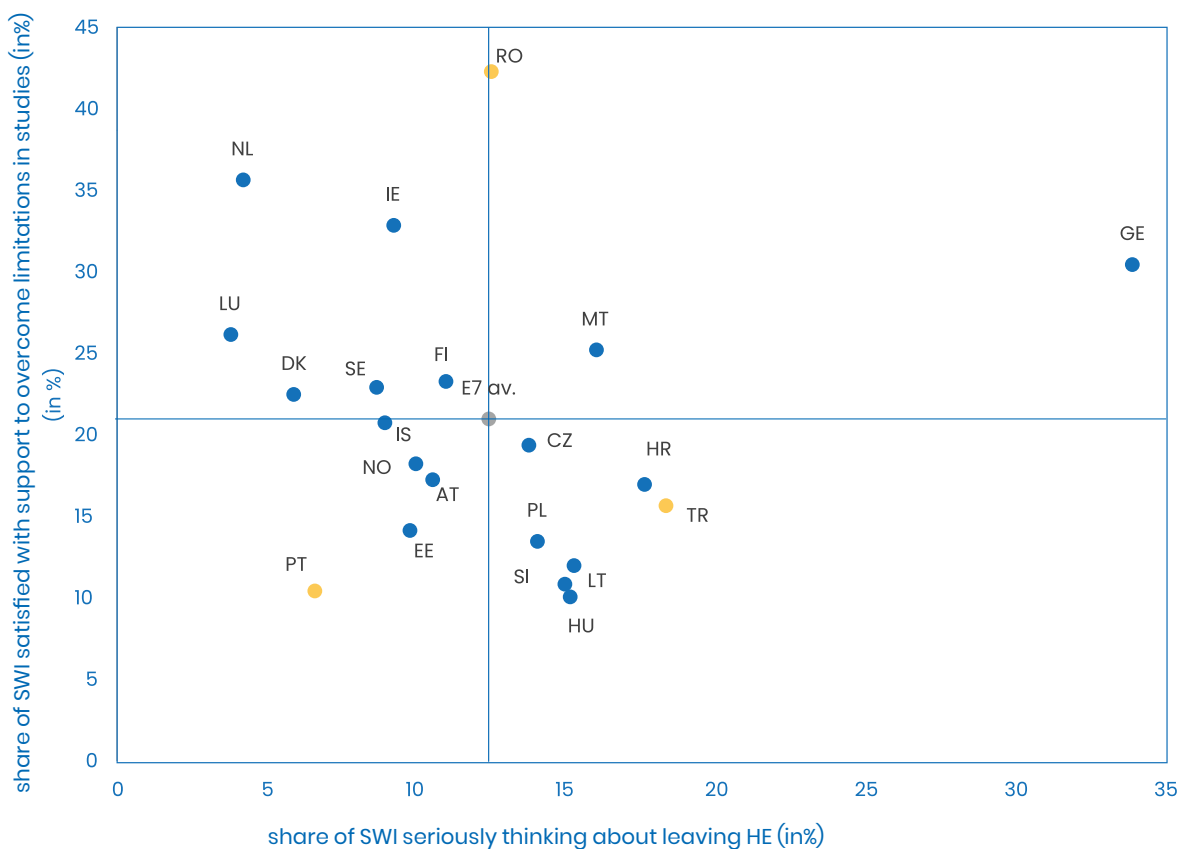
To examine drop-out intentions among students with impairments in more detail, we investigated the relationship between drop-out intentions and satisfaction with support to overcome limitations in studies among SWI. This outlined four different types of countries (see Figure 2).

First, there are countries where students are pleased with support and where few of them are seriously thinking about leaving HE (e.g. Netherlands, Ireland). In these countries, low drop-out intentions among SWI might be connected to adequate support provided for SWI to accommodate impairments. The second group is made up of countries like Georgia and Malta where students' satisfaction with support services is high, but where still relatively many SWI are considering dropping out. Therefore, in these countries the reasons for high drop-out intentions among SWI might lie somewhere else than in poorly established

support services to accommodate impairments. Not surprisingly, a high share of SWI with drop-out intentions also occurs in countries where SWI do not think that available support is helping them to overcome limitations in studies (e.g. Hungary, Lithuania, Slovenia). Strikingly, there are also some countries (e.g. Estonia, Austria) where students' persistence in HE is high despite low satisfaction with support offered. Hence, there must be other protective factors (other study related aspects, cultural factors, etc.) that keep SWI from leaving HE in these countries. SWI can be considered to be most vulnerable in the two latter groups, as in these countries, they do not appear to receive adequate support to accommodate their impairments. In the following section, we will examine the social dimension of higher education by focusing on the explanations of drop-out intentions among SWI in four countries, one from each quadrant in Figure 2.

Figure 2. SWI seriously thinking about leaving HE and SWI who are satisfied with support to overcome limitations

The share of SWI who are limited or seriously limited in studies (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, A12, C26, **No data:** IT, FR, DE, CH

Data collection: Spring 2019, except IT, PT, RO, TR - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021 (yellow dots)

EUROSTUDENT question(s): Generally, to what extent do you agree with the following thoughts regarding your studies? - I am seriously thinking of completely abandoning my higher education studies; How would you rate support you receive to overcome the limitations you face in your studies due to your impairment(s)?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: AT, IE, DK, EE, FR, RO

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, PL

What explains the country-specific relationship between drop-out intentions and satisfaction with support services among SWI in four exemplary EUROSTUDENT countries?

The Netherlands

The Netherlands is an example of a country characterized by high share of SWI who are satisfied with support and at the same time low shares of SWI who are considering dropping out. Also, as there is no difference between the drop-out intentions among SWI and SWOI (it is approx. 4% for both groups), it seems that support offered in the Netherlands helps SWI to overcome their limitations in studies. When looking at SWI by severity of impairment, it turns out that merely 3% of SWI who are considering themselves severely limited are thinking about abandoning HE, which is the lowest figure among EUROSTUDENT VII countries in this regard and also lower than among limited and not limited SWI in the Netherlands itself. Thus, we assume that support offered to SWI is successfully balancing out the limitations caused by the impairment, regardless of the severity of impairment.

In the Netherlands, a variety of support measures are offered for learners with disabilities in HE, including adapted accommodation and equipment, extra student finance, special arrangements for examinations and assessment, guidance, counselling and educational adaptations such as personalized study and exam plans (European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2018).

Georgia

Georgia clearly registers the highest share of SWI who are having drop-out intentions (34%). Paradoxically, at the same time satisfaction with support services among SWI in Georgia is one of the highest in EUROSTUDENT VII countries as well. This could, on the one hand, indicate that the reasons behind high drop-out intentions lie elsewhere than in the inadequacy of support services to accommodate impairments. On the other hand, it could mean that the level of expectations regarding support for SWI is relatively low.

In addition, there are several organisations working specifically with SWI and their needs. For example, there is the ECIO (Expert centre on inclusive education), which supports HE institutions to help make education accessible to students with disabilities and special needs (ECIO, s.d.). There are also organisations that support students with dyslexia, autism, and other neurodiversities (Erasmus University Rotterdam, s.d.). The University of Amsterdam has a special network bringing together students with disabilities (University of Amsterdam, s.d.).

As said earlier, integrating students into social systems of HE institution is crucial for ensuring their persistence and avoiding drop-out. In addition to a variety of support services offered in the Netherlands, initiatives focused on social integration might be creating a more inclusive HE environment for students with diverse needs, which supports SWI's study completion. This highlights the importance of such organisations. EUROSTUDENT VII data show that 70% of SWI (strongly) agree with the statement that they "know a lot of fellow students to discuss subject-related questions" and almost the same share (68%) of SWI feel that lecturers are interested what they have to say. These figures differ only very slightly when comparing SWI and SWOI, demonstrating how the HE system in the Netherlands has been rather successful in integrating students regardless of the limitations they might face while studying.

Indeed, the data show that in Georgia, drop-out intentions are the highest in EUROSTUDENT VII countries not only among SWI, but also among SWOI (22% vs. 6% – the EUROSTUDENT VII average; see Figure 1). Therefore, whereas the share of SWI thinking about leaving HE in Georgia is the highest in EUROSTUDENT VII countries, the ratio between SWI and SWOI with drop-out intentions is noticeably smaller than the average gap in dropout intentions between SWI and SWOI in other EUROSTUDENT VII countries.

The high share of students considering dropping

out of HE in Georgia may be related to a relatively low level of social and academic integration of students. EUROSTUDENT VII data show, for instance, that the relationships between students and lecturers are below the average of EUROSTUDENT VII countries: only 59% among SWOI and 45% of SWI say that they get along well with lecturers (whereas the EUROSTUDENT VII average is 76% and 69% respectively). Additionally, the share of students who often feel that they do not really belong in HE is the second highest in Georgia (after Poland) both among SWI as well as among SWOI. The reasons of low social and

Lithuania

SWI in Lithuania are characterized by low satisfaction with support. They are more likely intending to leave HE than the general student population (15% vs. 9%) and only a bit more than 10% of SWI rate the support to overcome limitation while studying (entirely) sufficient.

In Lithuania some special support (e.g. financial support) is offered to SWI (European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2019) and bigger universities are also working on providing equal opportunities for SWI by offering them adapted studying environment, special equipment, individualisation of the study process, counselling services etc. (Vytautas Magnus University, s.d.; Vilnius University, s.d.).

However, EUROSTUDENT VII data show that the feeling of belongingness in HE among SWI is lower than among SWOI: 29% and 14% of students respectively (strongly) agree with the statement “I often have the feeling that I don’t

Estonia

Estonia is an intriguing case, considering that – similarly to Norway, Austria and Portugal – the share of SWI seriously thinking about leaving HE is below EUROSTUDENT VII average, despite relatively low satisfaction with support services among SWI. This positioning differentiates Estonia from other CEECs where the satisfaction with support services among SWI is generally low (as it is also in Estonia), but where at the same time drop-out intentions among SWI are above the EUROSTUDENT VII average (contrary to Estonia).

A few years ago, the Federation of Estonian Student Unions carried out a research to map

academic integration of students in Georgia are not clear, but they could be related to the Soviet past (i.e. similarly to other post-Soviet countries, Georgia has not had a very long time to build up a sustainable HE system) as well as the policy choices (e.g. until recently the study paths in Georgian HEIs were quite rigid (Chakhaia and Bregvadze, 2018), which meant limited choices in both access to HE as well as changing the study programme during studies; also – low autonomy of Georgian HEIs (Ibid.) which may limit the HEIs opportunities to create an integrative study environment for students).

really belong in higher education”. Additionally, approximately half of SWI (strongly) agree that they “have contact with many students in study programme” and they “know a lot of fellow students to discuss subject-related questions”. At the same time, these indicators among SWOI are 65% and 68% accordingly. Also, SWI are less likely to agree that lecturers are interested in what they have to say. In 2019, at the 7th ASEF Rectors’ Conference and Students’ Forum Laura Alčiauskaitė, a disabled student and a researcher, also pointed out the problems with social inclusion in Lithuanian HE system similarly to EUROSTUDENT VII data. She claimed that it is not only the accessibility of the environment that matters, but at the same time, it is essential to deal with the social participation of disabled students, inclusive extracurricular activities and raising empathy and awareness among the academic community, so that SWI could feel as equal members of it (Alčiauskaitė, 2019).

the services that Estonian HEIs provide for the students with impairments. The study revealed that only a few of Estonian HEIs (the biggest ones) have implemented multifarious services to support SWI. These include special scholarships for SWI, adaptations in the admission procedures and the studies (e.g. the right to participate in studies and pass the exams while being on academic leave), adaptations in the buildings of HEIs (elevators, etc.), tutor support and discussion rounds for SWI. However, even this selection of services is mainly made up of the ones that are material in essence (e.g. monetary support or eliminating the physical limitations

in the HEI's buildings), whereas the social and psychological support seems not to be provided sufficiently. Furthermore, in several HEIs, even the physical limitations regarding access to HE have not been eliminated (Federation of Estonian Students Union, 2017). Therefore, the results of the EUROSTUDENT VII survey that show low satisfaction among Estonian SWI with the support services provided for them, are unsurprising.

In that context, another result of EUROSTUDENT VII study can be considered as quite expected. Namely, in Estonia, SWI 2,75 times more than SWOI often feel that they do not really belong to HE, i.e. the environment of the HE seem not to be welcoming enough for SWI. In Estonia this gap is bigger than EUROSTUDENT VII average (which is below 2).

Considering the low satisfaction with support services and low feeling of belongingness, it is indeed surprising that the drop-out intentions among SWI in Estonia are below average. The explanations lie probably in Estonian societal culture. Namely, Estonian society has long been very individualistic (Kalev, Jakobson & Saarts, 2008), i.e. in Estonia, it is widely believed that individuals themselves are first and foremost responsible for their success in life. Therefore, the support provided 'from outside' may not be expected or even desired. This is confirmed by the EUROSTUDENT VII data that show that every third (33%) Estonian SWI who is (severely) limited in studies says that he/ she does not want or need support, which clearly exceeds the EUROSTUDENT VII average (24%). Therefore,

Conclusion and policy considerations

Substantial integration of students with disabilities into HE is a declared goal of European policy. EUROSTUDENT VII data show that some HE systems have been more successful in accomplishing this goal than the others. In most successful countries (e.g. NL, Nordic countries) the share of SWI having drop-out intentions is low, whereas the satisfaction with support services offered for SWI is high, which indicates that HE systems have succeeded in providing SWI with adequate support. The case study of the Netherlands indeed showed that SWI in this country are provided with multifarious support services and HEIs seem to be socially inclusive which is a crucially important factor in preventing the students from dropping out of HE.

despite the fact that the satisfaction with support services among SWI is low, they still feel that they need to make an effort to finish studies, because of the perceived importance of individual responsibility.

Additional explanation could be that in Estonia, the persons indicating to be severely or somewhat limited in their daily life by an impairment are strongly under-represented among the student population compared to society (Hauschildt, Gwosc, Schirmer & Wartenbergh-Cras, 2021). In Estonia, this gap is the largest among EUROSTUDENT VII countries. For the Estonian SWI, this might mean that in the context where the access to HE among people with impairments seems to be so limited, people who manage to succeed in it, i.e. access HE, feel strong commitment to also finish it – especially considering the individualistic belief rooted strongly in Estonian societal culture.

Finally, one of the explanations of low drop-out intentions among SWI in Estonia could be that whereas with fellow-students Estonian students communicate less than in EUROSTUDENT countries in average, with lecturers their relationships are generally and compared to other EUROSTUDENT VII countries very good: 83% of SWOI and 76% of SWI say that they get along well with lecturers. In other words, while the support services to accommodate the needs of SWI can be considered as insufficient in Estonia, the lecturers seem to have done quite good job in integrating the students, whether the students have impairments or not.

The analysis also showed that there are various other patterns in EUROSTUDENT VII countries: the countries where the drop-out intentions among SWI are high, whereas the satisfaction with support is also high (MT, GE), the countries where both drop-out intentions as well as satisfaction with support is low (e.g. NO, EE), and the ones where the drop-out intentions among SWI are high, but satisfaction with support is low (e.g. PL, LT). The explanations of the patterns are country-specific and related to various factors such as the policy legacy of the country, societal culture or the current educational policies, including the adequacy or inadequacy of the support services provided for SWI.

In order to prevent students from dropping

out of HE, both academic integration as well as social integration are critically important, whereas the latter might in some cases (such as in case of learning disabilities) be even more crucial. Therefore, while in some HEIs and some countries the focus has been put mainly on the material and physical aspects of the support (e.g. monetary benefits, adapting the buildings of HEIs to improve physical access for SWI, etc.) in order to integrate SWI, this is not

sufficient. Facilitating social integration, e.g. by providing accessible counselling services, learning communities, mentoring programs, etc. may be as important for SWI as the material and physical kind of support. While there are other potential explanations, this seems to be the most important key to explain why some HE systems have succeeded in integrating SWI, whereas others have not.

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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

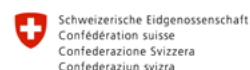
temporary international mobility of students. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. The data presented here stem from the seventh round of the EUROSTUDENT project (2018–2021).

Countries participating in EUROSTUDENT VII

Albania (AL)**	Germany (DE)	Poland (PL)
Austria (AT)	Hungary (HU)	Portugal (PT)*
Croatia (HR)	Iceland (IS)	Romania (RO)*
Czech Republic (CZ)	Ireland (IE)	Slovenia (SI)
Denmark (DK)	Italy (IT)*	Sweden (SE)
Estonia (EE)	Lithuania (LT)	Switzerland (CH)
Finland (FI)	Luxembourg (LU)	The Netherlands (NL)
France (FR)	Malta (MT)	Turkey (TR)*
Georgia (GE)	Norway (NO)	

* reference period during COVID-19 pandemic; ** results will be available in database.

Consortium members



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