

# To what extent does the recognition of prior work experience facilitate access to and progress within higher education for delayed transition students?

Intelligence Brief, 1/2021

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## **Key facts on the recognition of prior work experience practices among delayed transition students<sup>1</sup> across EUROSTUDENT VII countries:**

- Students having delayed transition into higher education for more than two years after leaving school make up 16 % of all students across EUROSTUDENT VII countries on average, varying from 3 % in Georgia to 34 % in Sweden.
- On average, 69 % of delayed transition students have regular work experience<sup>2</sup> before entering higher education. Among direct transition students, this share is four times smaller (17 %).
- 17 % of delayed transition students report that prior work experience was recognised upon admission to HE, 14 % report it was recognised towards their study progress.

This Intelligence Brief takes a closer look at the practices of recognition of prior work experience among delayed transition students across EUROSTUDENT VII countries. The recognition of prior work experience is a relevant topic for delayed transition students as, in most cases, these students

have entered HE after gaining some work experience. The transition time between leaving the regular school system and entry into HE therefore provides valuable information about the openness of the higher education systems.

<sup>1</sup> Students who have postponed the enrolment to higher education (HE) by more than two years after leaving secondary school for the first time.

<sup>2</sup> Regular work experience, in this case, means that before entering HE, students have been working at least one year and more than 20 hours per week.

## Delayed transition into higher education

How many students interrupt their educational career between school and HE?

EUROSTUDENT VII results show that countries greatly differ with regard to the typical transition time between school and higher education. On average, a large majority of students (84 %) enter HE directly or within up to two years after graduating from secondary school for the first time (Figure 1). However, every sixth student enters HE after at least a two-year break after leaving school, but the variation across countries is considerable. The greatest shares of students who have entered HE with a long delay after school can be found in Sweden (34 %) and Finland (32 %). On the contrary, Georgia (3 %), France (5 %), and Italy (6 %) register the lowest shares of delayed transition students.

### What are the reasons for a delayed transition into HE?

Delayed entry to HE may be caused by various factors, such as admission procedures or cultural perceptions of the value of professional or personal experiences outside of education (OECD, 2020). Strong lifelong learning traditions and second-chance policies facilitate entering higher education for students wishing to develop new skills. On the other hand, a larger share of delayed transition students might indicate difficulties in accessing HE because of selective entry

requirements or numerous restrictions, such as a fixed maximum number of entrants. For instance, in Finland and Sweden admissions to HE are restricted for many programmes and fields of study and this results in more than 60% of applicants being rejected (Ibid.).

### What characterises delayed transition students?

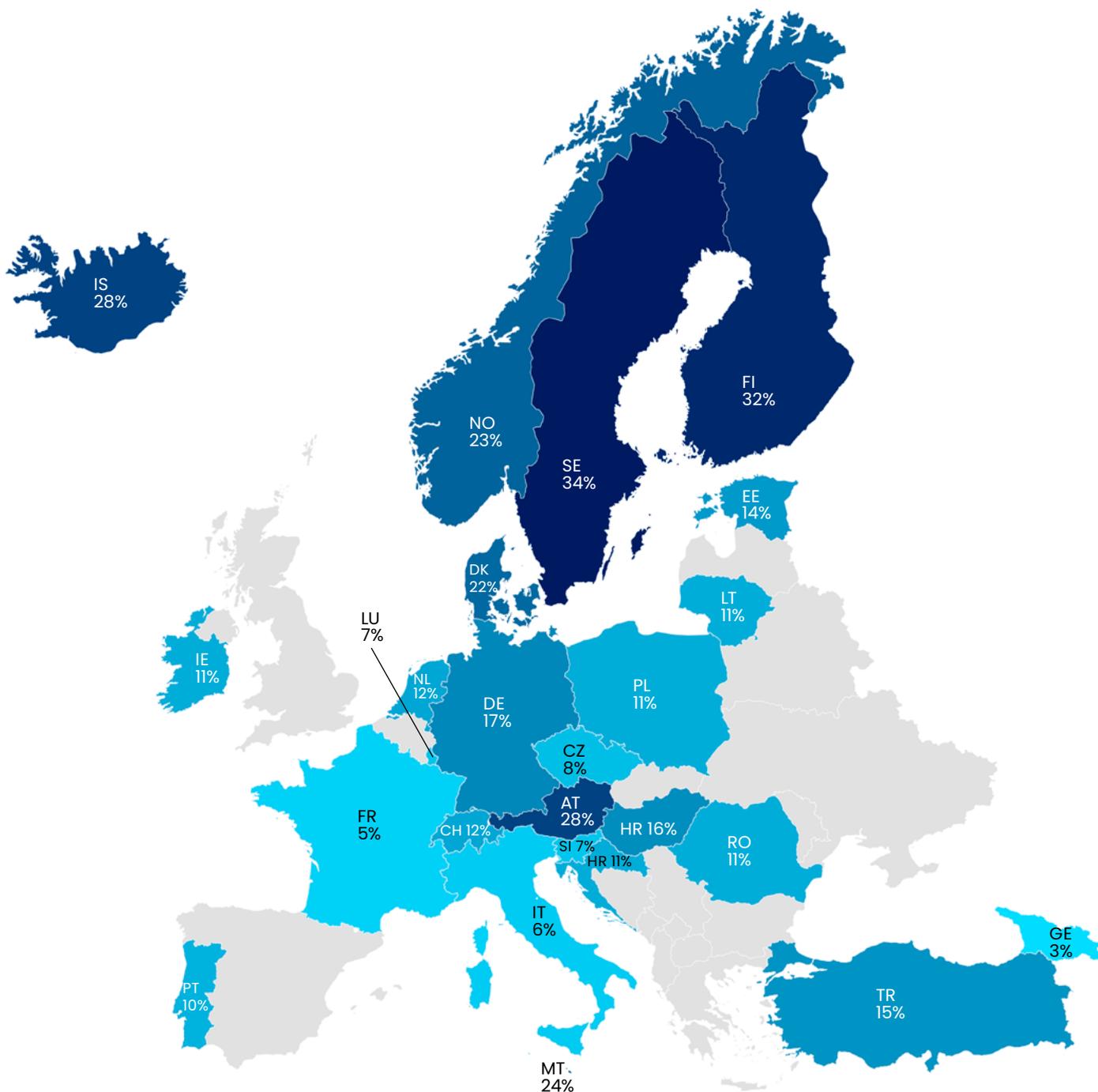
Delayed transition students are different from their direct transition peers in several socio-demographic, study and employment-related characteristics. Firstly, delayed transition students are on average 32 years old, which is seven years older than those who transitioned into HE without delay. They also are more often combining studies and paid jobs and have family-related obligations. Being in a different situation, delayed transition students tend to be less satisfied with the support offered from HEIs to balance studies with their paid job and family obligations (for more information about delayed transition students, please see the thematic review “Flexible Pathways into and within Higher Education”<sup>3</sup>). This implies that this focus group needs more attention from policymakers and HEIs to facilitate the study process and prevent drop-out.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.eurostudent.eu/publications>

## Figure 1. Delayed transition into HE (> 24 months after leaving school for the first time)

Share of students (in %)



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT VII, B.16.

**Data collection:** Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 - reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.4 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.

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

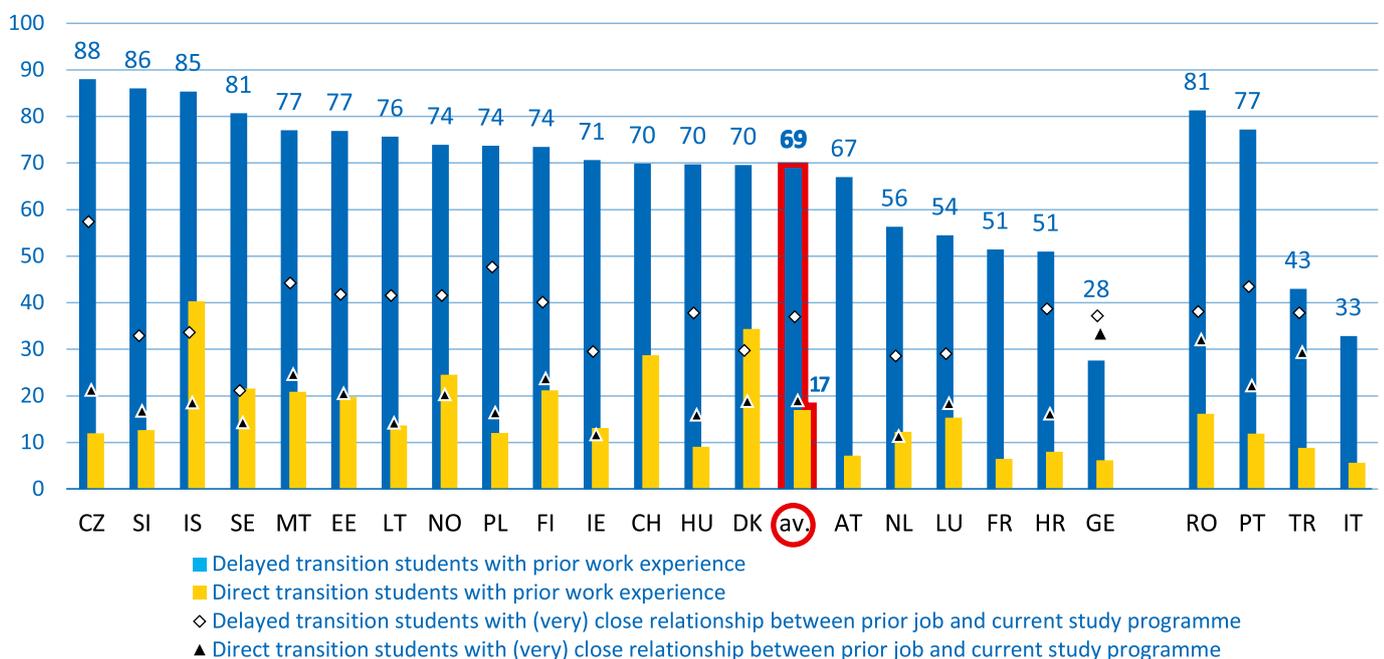
## What type of work experience do delayed transition students have?

Delayed transition students usually have acquired some work experience before entering HE. They four times more often declare having regular prior work experience than those who transitioned to HE directly or within two years after school. Their prior work experience is also

related to the current study programme to a larger extent than that of those who start studying relatively directly after school (Figure 2). These experiences and priorly gained competences could facilitate the admission to HE and journey towards successful graduation.

### Figure 2. Students having prior regular work experience and the relationship between prior job and current study programme

Share of students with work experience prior to entering higher education (in %)



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT VII, B.20; B.23. **No data:** 2.9. DE. 2.10. AT, DE, FR, CH, IT.

**Data collection:** Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 – reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), IT, PT, RO, TR (summer 2020 – reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.9. Did you have any paid job(s) prior to entering higher education for the first time? 2.10. How closely related was/were your paid job(s) to your current #(main) study programme?

**Notes:** 2.9. The share of students, having a regular prior work experience, i.e. who worked continuously for at least one year without interruption and at least 20 h per week. 2.10. Percentage from students with regular prior work experience (irrespective of duration and working hours).

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions:** 2.9. AT.

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group:** IE, IT, PL.

## Recognition of prior learning

The recognition of prior learning (RPL), i.e. making non-formal and informal learning transferable when accessing HE and progressing through programmes, can increase the openness of HE and make access more flexible. RPL policies are also considered a key enabler of alternative

admission routes (Martin and Godonoga, 2020). RPL and widening access through validation of non-formal and informal learning are among the top priorities of various policies. However, the degree of implementation still varies greatly across countries (Unger and Zaussinger, 2018).

## What role does the prior work experience play upon admission to HE and during the study period?

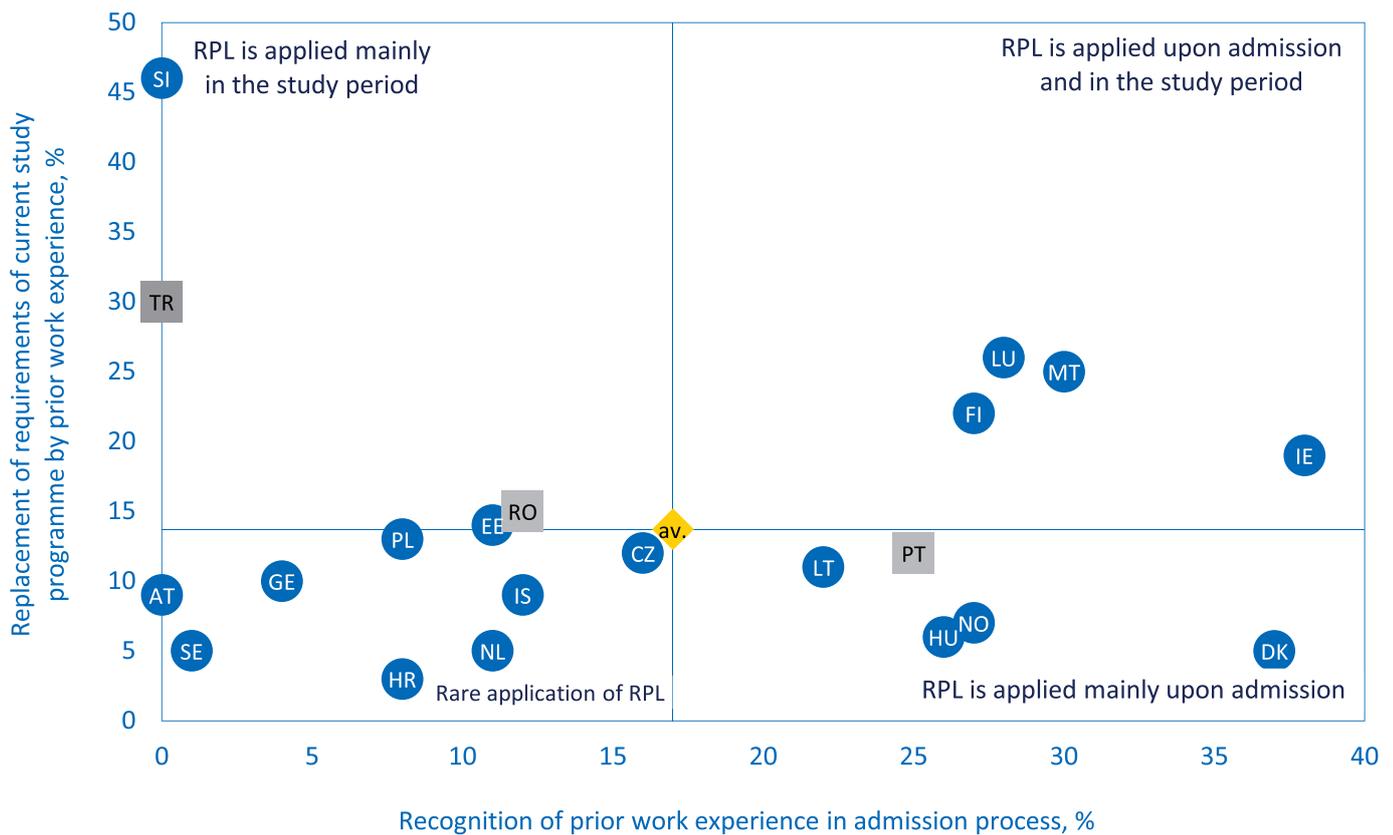
EUROSTUDENT VII examines the recognition of prior work experience practices. Professional experience and competences acquired before entering HE may potentially be recognised to facilitate admission and/or to replace requirements during the study period. An overview of recognition of prior work experience practices among students with a large time gap between school and HE studies across EUROSTUDENT VII countries is presented in Figure 3. Countries are compared based on two indicators: the share of delayed transition students having any experience of (1) recognition of prior work experience upon the admission to HE (x axis) and (2) replacement of requirements of current study programme by prior work experience (y axis). The crossing point of the axes represents the EUROSTUDENT VII average<sup>4</sup>.

- Countries in which recognition of prior work experience practices upon admission and during the study process takes place comparatively more often are positioned in the top-right quadrant. Ireland, Finland, Malta, and Luxembourg represent this country type. Malta and Finland also have greater than average shares of delayed transition students and those having prior gained work experience in HE. In contrast, Luxembourg, despite the comparatively small delayed transition student population, who also have less prior work experience compared to the average, demonstrates a large extent of recognition of prior work experience practices among them.
- The bottom left quadrant represents the opposite pattern. Here, recognition of prior work experience practices among delayed transition students, either during the initial admission to HE or over the studies, is comparatively weak. Eight EUROSTUDENT VII countries belonging to this group – Sweden, Iceland, Croatia, Georgia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands. Iceland and Sweden, in particular, appear to have some untapped potential in applying the recognition of prior work experience since the share of delayed transition students and those who have some prior work experience is above the average.
- The bottom-right and top-left quadrants depict countries with above-average values in one of the examined indicators: either on the extent of recognition of prior work experience upon admission to HE (Norway, Hungary, Denmark, Portugal, and Lithuania) or within the study period (Estonia and Romania).
- Austria, Slovenia and Turkey have atypical positions in the matrix, as only one of two considered indicators of RPL has been measured, i.e. only the recognising prior work experience during the study period (the recognition of prior work experience upon admission to HE is not applicable). Nevertheless, in Slovenia, almost half of the delayed transition students report that current study programme requirements were replaced with prior work experience, which is roughly three times more than EUROSTUDENT VII countries' average.

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<sup>4</sup> In keeping with the calculations in the EUROSTUDENT main report, the average is based only on countries in which the reference period fell before the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Figure 3. Recognition of prior work experience in admission to HE and during the study period among delayed transition students**



**Data source:** EUROSTUDENT VII, B.21; B.24. **No data:** 2.7. DE, CH, FR, IT, SI, AT, TR. 2.8. DE, CH, FR, IT.

**Data collection:** Spring 2019 except PT, RO, TR (summer 2020 - reference period during COVID-19 pandemic).

**EUROSTUDENT question(s):** 2.7. Was any previous, professional experience explicitly taken into account in #country during your initial admission process into higher education? 2.8. Did you officially replace any requirements in your current #(main) study programme with previously gained experience/competences?

**Note(s):** 2.7. The percent of those, who answered "Yes, my professional experience was otherwise explicitly taken into account in my initial admission process (e.g. advantages in the allocation of study places via #quota/#higher score values for GPA)". 2.8. The percent of those students, who choose an answer "Yes, through recognition of my work experience".

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions:** 2.7. AT, CZ, FI, GE, IE, MT; 2.8. DK.

**Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group:** DE, IE, PL.

**The meaning of symbols in the matrix:** Light blue circle – reference period before COVID-19 pandemic; Grey square – reference period during COVID-19 pandemic.

## Discussion and policy considerations

RPL is considered to be an important tool for improving the conditions for under-represented groups to access and complete HE. However, the insufficiency of concrete actions to implement the framework for the RPL among many countries is identified (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). National qualification frameworks have been highlighted as key in expanding RPL practices, facilitating entry to and progression through HE by making learning outcomes and competences comparable across institutions and study programmes

(Martin and Godonoga, 2020). The findings from EUROSTUDENT VII confirm the necessity to accelerate RPL practices among delayed transition students in many countries, as the value of the experience from prior work, in many cases, does not seem to be acknowledged by HEIs. Particularly in countries where the share of delayed transition students and those having prior work experience is comparatively high, but the recognition practices are rare (e.g. Iceland and Sweden), some untapped potential appears to exist. Through

recognition practices, the experience and competences acquired when working may facilitate the access of HE and make students' journey towards graduation smoother, at the same time making HE more attractive and accessible to people with limited opportunities to access HE and to lifelong/ adult learners.

In parallel with the expansion of RPL practices, the strengthening and tailoring of student support services (including entry, participation, and graduation phases) to various student groups are crucial. Students' personal circumstances (family

status, working while studying, financial situation, etc.) should be considered when designing or developing the measures to facilitate combining studies with other responsibilities.

Besides efforts to make HE systems more open for various student groups and respond to their needs and life situations, it is also crucial to regularly monitor the trends and main indicators of the non-traditional student population in order to measure their experience and performance in HE.

## References

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020. The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Martin, M., Godonoga, A. (2020). SDG 4 – Policies for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education Taking Stock of Good Practices Internationally. Retrieved from: <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/publication/sdg-4-policies-flexible-learning-pathways-higher-education-taking-stock-good-practices>

OECD (2020), Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>

Unger, M., Zaussinger, S. (2018). Background Paper. Higher Education Expert Conference „The New Student: Flexible Learning Paths and Future Learning Environments“. Retrieved from: <https://www.eu2018.at/calendar-events/political-events/thenewstudent.html>

## Further readings

Detailed analysis of delayed transition student population can be also found in following publications:

Hauschildt, K., Gwosć, C., Netz, N., Schirmer, H., Wartenbergh-Cras, F. (2021). Social and economic conditions of student life in Europe: Synopsis of indicators. EUROSTUDENT VII 2018-2021.

Šaukeckienė V., Jėckaitė V., Kendrali E., Haugas S. 2021. EUROSTUDENT VII. Flexible pathways into and within higher education. Thematic review.

The final versions of both above mentioned publications will be available in September 2021. Also visit [www.eurostudent.eu](http://www.eurostudent.eu) for more information and results.

## 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

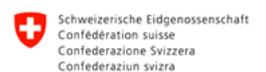
temporary international mobility of students. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. The data presented here stem from the seventh round of the EUROSTUDENT project (2018–2021).

## 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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