

# Does Higher Education Experience Differ Between Male and Female Students?

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EUROSTUDENT VII data show that women make up more than half of the students in higher education across EUROSTUDENT VII countries. However, underlying imbalances persist in the choices of fields of study, the perceptions of difficulties faced during studies and the assessments of various aspects of their studies. Additionally, gender gaps are persisting in the labour market where women are still over-represented in sectors with lower salaries and under-represented in decision-making

positions (Council of Europe, 2018). The topic of gender equality needs further analysis to identify possible underlying inequalities in terms of participation (such as gender representation in fields of study), or perception of experiences in higher education.

The aim of this Intelligence Brief is to take a closer look at the gender differences in students' experiences in higher education across EUROSTUDENT VII countries.

## **Background – policy and theory**

The issue of gender equality has been on the agenda of the EU countries for years. All most recent publications have clearly expressed this. Combating gender stereotypes in education is one of the priorities of the Council of Europe Strategy on Gender Equality 2018–2023. This was also reinforced in the EU Gender Equality Strategy which lays out actions towards a gender-equal Europe by 2025. The United Nations, through its Sustainable Development Goals, also prioritises gender equality: mainly through SDG 4, to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all, and SDG 5, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. In its commitment to achieve the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025, seeking cooperation between EU member states to promote the quality and inclusiveness in

higher education, the Commission proposes to focus its effort along six dimensions one of which is the inclusion and gender equality. Furthermore, the most recent Bologna Communiqué (Rome Communiqué, 2020) backs the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA that focuses on the need to create inclusive higher education which promotes student diversity reflecting the population of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries.

One important factor which may greatly impact women's situation in higher education is the cultural belief system that affects the division of roles and responsibilities between genders in society. Despite the cultural and social changes in households towards the dual-earner and

dual-carer model, this unequal division of labour seems to remain the reality where gender stereotypes persist in expecting men to fill the breadwinning responsibilities and women to take on the caregiving responsibilities (Cunha and Atalaia, 2019, Cunha and Marinho, 2018).

Alsop et al. (2008, p. 629) note that 'The fact that women have been traditionally the carers in the family, and that students have been conceptualised as male and non-carers, influences the way in which women students

## Analysis of the gender dimension based on the EUROSTUDENT VII data

EUROSTUDENT data is an important source of information that gives insights into students' perspectives about their study and living

### Socio-Demographic Characteristics

In general, EUROSTUDENT VII shows minimal differences between female and male students with respect to socio-demographic characteristics. There is no difference in **mean age** of students between male and female students (mean age slightly below 26 for both male and female students).

In EUROSTUDENT VII countries on average, female students tend to make up larger shares of students without **tertiary education background**<sup>1</sup>. The differences in the shares of women and men among students without tertiary education background are the biggest (at least 5 percentage points) in the Czech Republic, Croatia, Iceland, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, and Turkey.

Female students also are more likely to be **living outside the parental home**. On average, females form 57% of the students who are not living with their parents and 53% of the students who are living with parents. This pattern can be seen in most countries with the exceptions of Austria, Georgia, Luxembourg, Malta, Italy, Romania, and Turkey.

As for **migration background**, there is a slight difference between female and male students on average across countries. Females make up 56% of students who are 2nd generation migrants and they also form the same share of students who have no migration backgrounds (Hauschildt et al., 2021).

organise their time and space, the ways in which they are perceived by others, and also the manner in which their own identity is reconstructed. Baxter and Britton (2001, p. 91) analyse how domestic and family obligations are still mainly associated with female students: 'One of the risks associated with higher education for mature students is the threat that this can pose to relationships within the family, in particular, the previously taken-for-granted gender division of labour and responsibilities. These risks are, however, not uniform, but gendered and classed'.

conditions and allows deeper analysis of possible underlying differences between the experiences of men and women in higher education.

### Study Situation

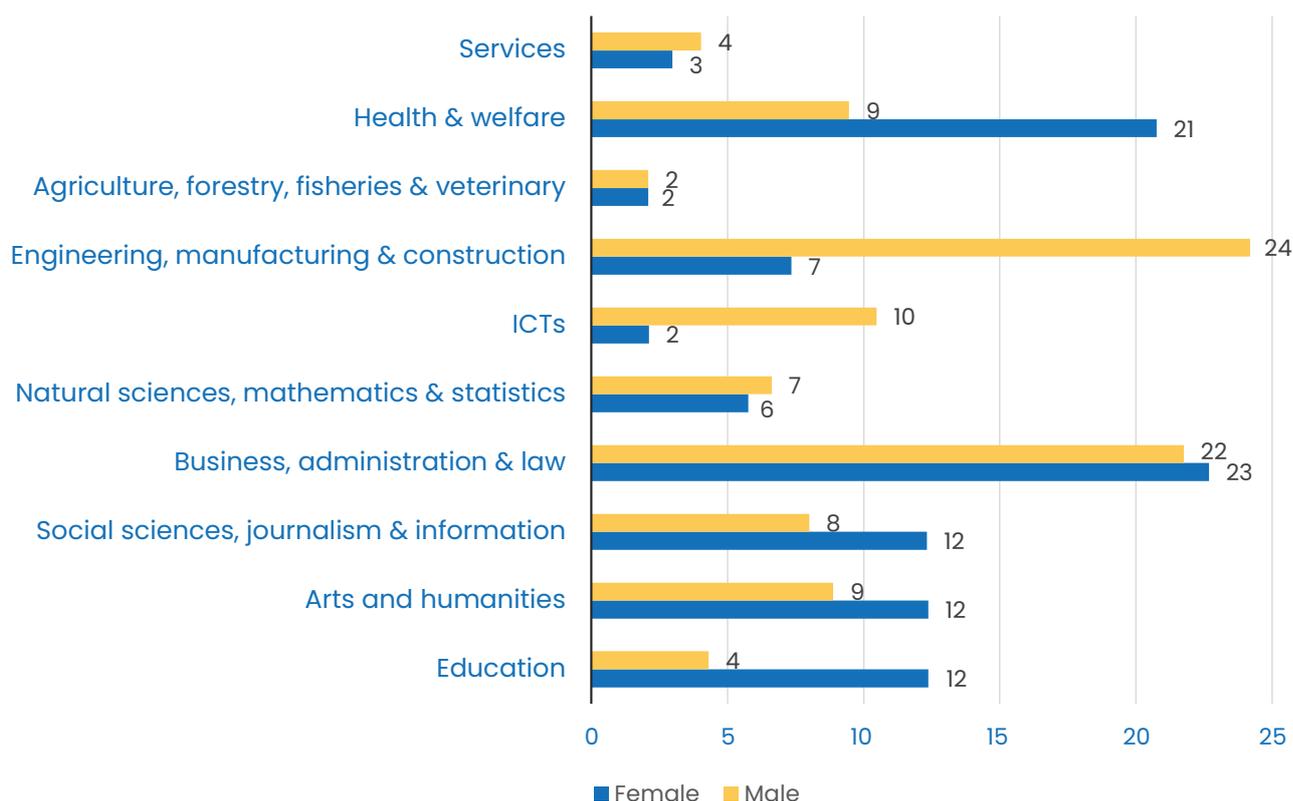
In most countries, no clear patterns regarding gender differences emerged neither in enrolment at different **types of higher education institutions, in part-time vs. full-time studies**, nor in enrolment across **Bachelor's vs. Master's programmes**.

However, regarding **the choice of subjects and fields of study** quite clear gender differences emerged (see Figure 1). In all EUROSTUDENT VII countries, female compared to male students are distinctly more often enrolled in the fields of Education (12% vs. 4%) and Health and Welfare (21% vs. 9%). On the other hand, women compared to men are less often enrolled in Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (7% vs. 24%) as well as ICTs (2% vs. 10%).

Therefore, it is obvious from the EUROSTUDENT VII data that the choice of study fields is still gendered, i.e. the traditional division of subjects between the subjects of men and the subjects of women in HE seems to be quite persistent in all EUROSTUDENT VII countries.

<sup>1</sup> Students without a tertiary education background are the student whose both parents' highest educational qualification is no higher than ISCED 2011 level 4 (post-secondary non-tertiary education).

**Figure 1. Share of students in different fields of study by gender**



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, A.3., C.3.

EUROSTUDENT Question(s): 6.2 What is your #sex?, 1.7 What is your current #(main) study programme?

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 – reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: FI, IT, SE.

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

## Study-related background

No major differences between genders with respect to **transition and access** into higher education emerged. On average, only slightly higher shares of female students used direct transition routes and standard access routes into higher education compared to male students. However, bigger gender differences

emerged in entering to Master's level which women tend to enter with delay more frequently than men. A possible explanation is that despite being motivated to continue their studies, women interrupt longer between Bachelor's and Master's studies due to their childcare and family responsibilities.

## Study experiences and perceptions

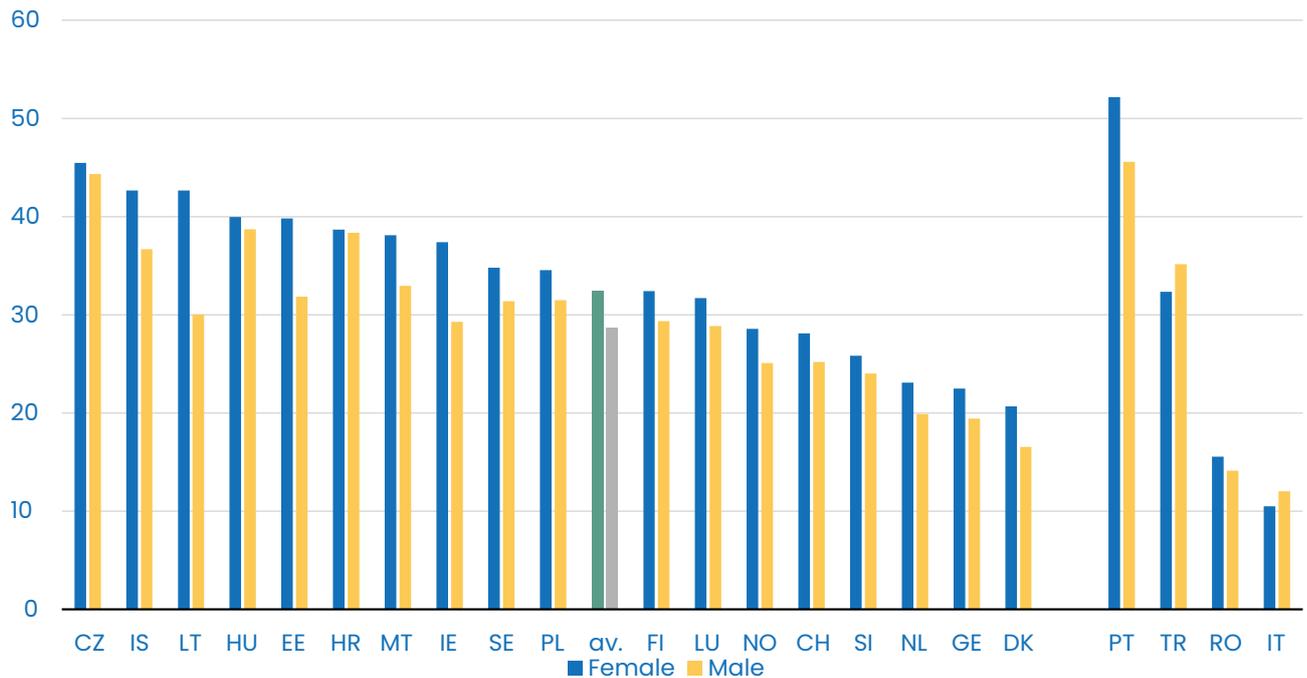
To form a comprehensive overview of the differences in higher education experiences between genders, it is important to complement the above figures with data on student perceptions of difficulties faced during studies, their assessment of study experience and their satisfaction levels.

On average, slightly higher rates of females than males reported difficulties due to standard of work related to study programme (demanding exams/assignments, etc.) (33% vs. 29%, see Figure 2) and organisational issues (e.g., organisation of schedule, space restrictions in

classes, mandatory attendance, etc.) (27% vs. 24%, Figure 3). Female students also more often experience difficulties related to childcare and pregnancy (5% vs. 3%, Figure 4), health issues (8% vs. 6%) and personal reasons (such as family matters, 31% vs. 27%). Both sets of difficulties suggest that females face more difficulties with organisation of study schedules and attendance linked to their family related responsibilities. No major gender differences emerged regarding reporting difficulties related to financial situation or to paid job obligations.

**Figure 2. Female and male students experiencing difficulties due to standard of work (e.g., demanding exams/papers, etc.)**

Share of students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, A.3., C.7.

EUROSTUDENT Question(s): 6.2 What is your #sex?, 3.1 During the current #lecture period, are you experiencing any difficulties in your current #(main) study programme due to any of the following?

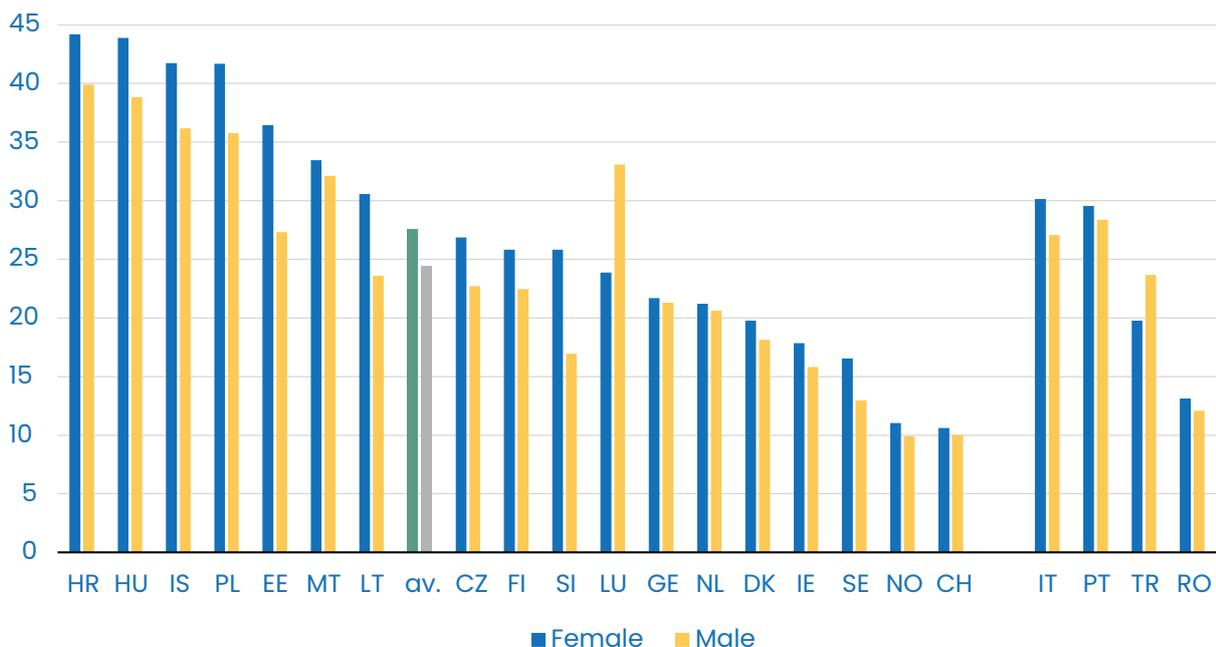
Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 – reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, FR, IT, PT, RO

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

**Figure 3. Female and male students experiencing difficulties due to organisational issues (e.g., organisation of schedule, space restrictions in classes, mandatory attendance, etc.)**

Share of students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, A.3., C.7.

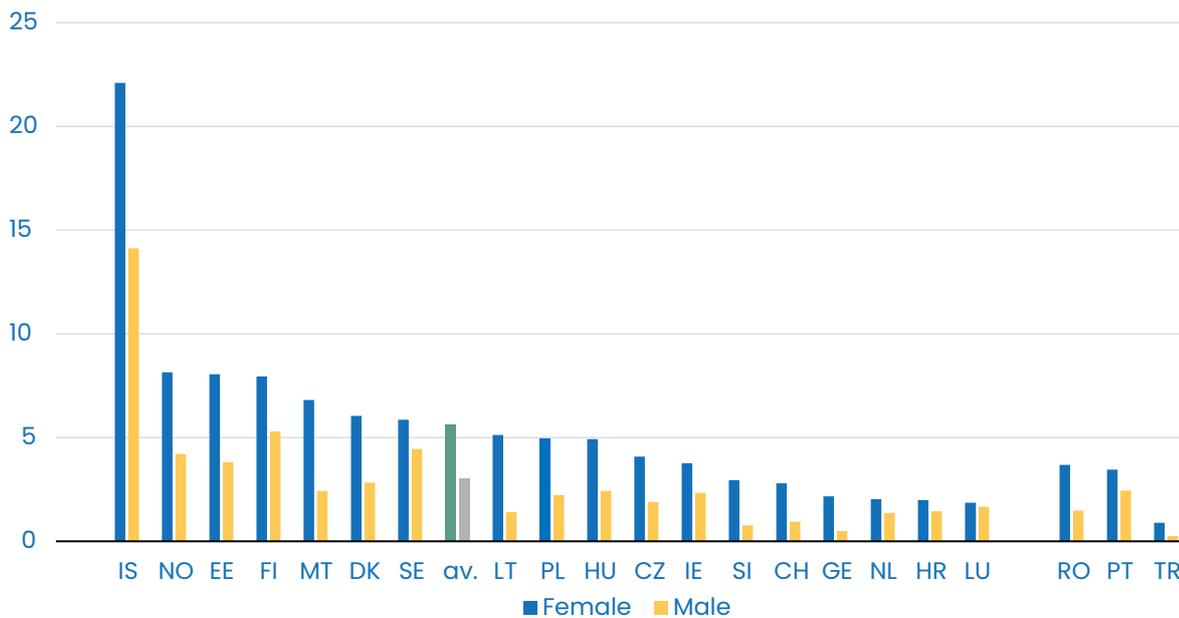
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Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 – reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

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

**Figure 4. Female and male students experiencing difficulties due to childcare responsibilities**  
Share of students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, A.3., C.7.

EUROSTUDENT Question(s): 6.2 What is your #sex?, 3.1 During the current #lecture period, are you experiencing any difficulties in your current # (main) study programme due to any of the following?

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 – reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: EE, FR, IT, PT, RO

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There were no significant differences between female and male students in how they evaluated expertise of the academic staff and their relationship with their lecturers.

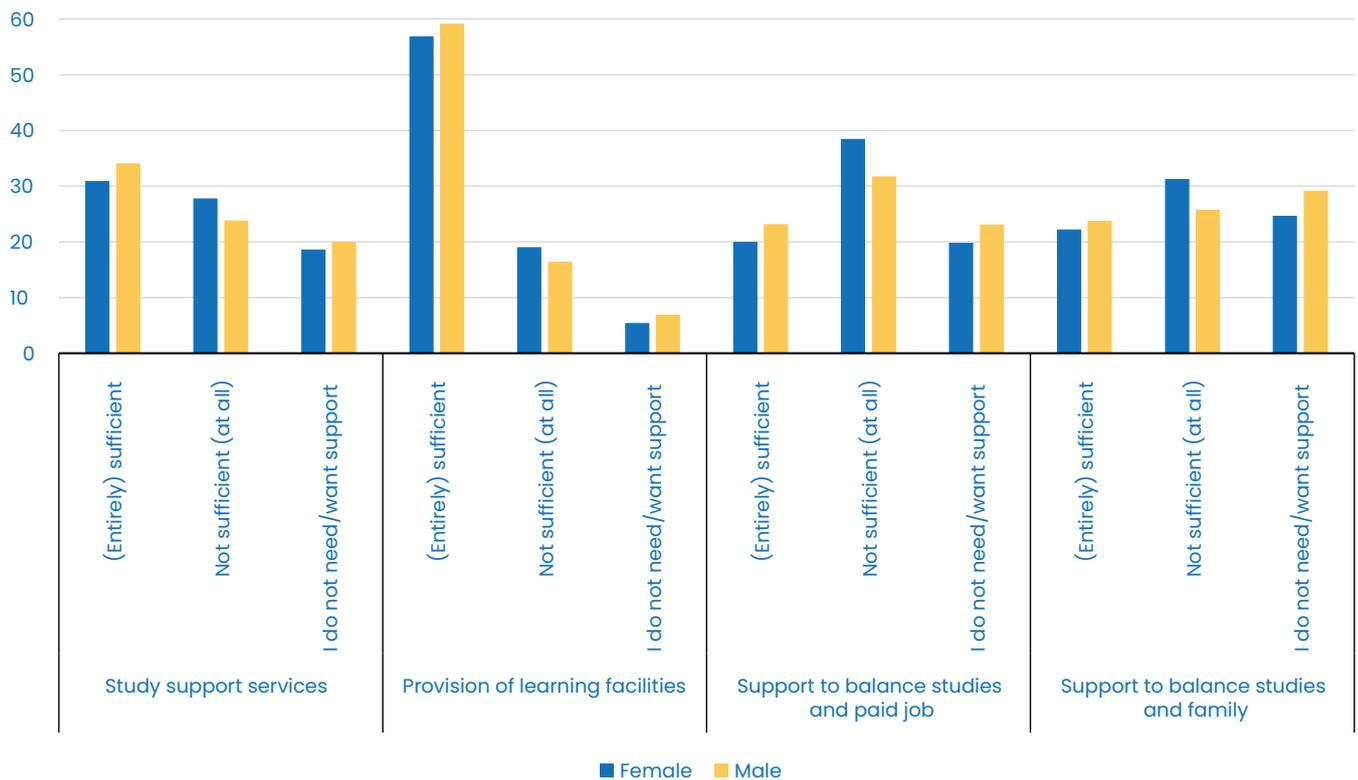
Students were asked about their **satisfaction with different aspects of their studies** (Figure 5), mainly with study support services, and support to balance studies with paid jobs and family. Females compared to males more often rated these services “not sufficient” or “not sufficient at all”. The difference reaches 6 percentage points regarding satisfaction with support given to

balance studies with paid jobs and 5 percentage points for satisfaction with support given to balance studies and family.

Students also had the option to choose that they did not need support for each of the described aspects. In case of not needing support to balance studies with family, males chose that option more often than females with a difference of 5 percentage points confirming that females are the ones most affected by family responsibilities.

**Figure 5. Female and male students' satisfaction with support services**

Share of students (in %)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT VII, A.3., C.28–C.32

EUROSTUDENT Question(s): 6.2 What is your #sex?, 3.7 How satisfied are you with the support provided to you by your #higher education institution or #cooperating organisations (#example organisation for student affairs) regarding the following aspects?

Data collection: Spring 2019 except CH, FR (spring 2020 – reference period before COVID-19 pandemic), DE (summer 2016), IT, PT, RO, TR (reference period during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and/or 2021).

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: : AT, DK, MT, NO

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

## Conclusion

“Reliable data is a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of higher education” (Annex II to the Rome Communiqué, 2020). Adequate administrative data which is sensitive to the different student groups, coupled with survey data which collects students’ subjective views, perceptions and experiences would be key to inform and support the social dimension of higher education. Through the analysis and use of such data, public authorities and education institutions would understand the needs of various student groups and would respond by developing adequate policies and practices.

As discussed above, the socio-demographic composition of students does not differ significantly between male and female students. Differences were also minimal regarding transition and access into higher education and the type and intensity of study programme followed.

EUROSTUDENT data show that whereas regarding the overall participation in HE gender balance

exists between male and female students, unequal representation across the study fields persists. Policies need to keep focusing on dissolving gender stereotypes in fields of study to promote female participation in ICT and engineering from very young age.

Furthermore, as shown above, females tend to face more difficulties with balancing studies with their personal life and seem to be less satisfied than their male counterparts with the support available to balance between different life aspects.

Female and male students experience acquiring higher education differently and face different difficulties during their studies. This was also observed in previous studies where students reported that the biggest challenge for them is to balance their time between the responsibilities as students and as carers in their personal life, irrespective of whether they are part-time or full-time students (Alsop et al., 2008). The same study reported that flexibility in terms of deadlines, timetables, and absences was key

to facilitate studies (ibid.). Flexibility in studies in terms of workload and delivery might support females in successfully combining their studies with other responsibilities.

Gender equality in education forms the grass root of gender equality in society. Ensuring that

females are adequately supported to successfully complete their studies starts with implementing policies, at both national and institutional level, to reconcile between the requirements of the study programmes and of additional roles female students have.

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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

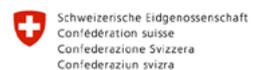
temporary international mobility of students. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. The data presented here stem from the seventh round of the EUROSTUDENT project (2018-2021).

## 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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