

# EUROSTUDENT VI in Estonia: Summary and Main Conclusions

EUROSTUDENT is a European-wide student survey which aims to collect and collate reliable and comparable data on the social dimension of higher education in Europe. The survey covers such topics as choice of field of study and satisfaction with studies, access to higher education (based on the student's education and socio-economic background), living conditions (e.g. place of residence, children, health problems), working and time management, income and expenses as well as international mobility.

The target group of the Estonian survey comprised of all students (incl. foreign exchange students) enrolled in degree programmes (e.g. professional or applied, bachelor, integrated and masters programmes) at Estonian higher education institutions and who were not on academic leave or in external study during the time this survey was conducted (May 2016). Randomly chosen respondents were asked to fill out an online questionnaire either in Estonian, Russian or English with altogether 2148 students participating. The data has been weighed against the general population on sex, type and form of ownership of educational institution, level of studies and time of enrolment.

**The survey reveals that, in general, the Estonian student body has become more diverse.** Alongside young people who enrol straight after completing secondary education, there is also a significant share of older students (30 and older) who enter higher education with a very different background, circumstances and needs. Two out of three students work during studies, every fifth student has a child, every fourth student lives with parents or relatives with also every fourth student living in a dormitory. Every fifth student is a foreigner (i.e. they or their parents have been born outside Estonia) and every tenth student has acquired basic education in the Russian language.

Two students out of five come from families where the parents do not have higher education, meaning that they are the first generation in their family to enter higher education. In broad terms, the educational structure of parents is similar to the general distribution among the Estonian population, students coming from rural areas and Russian-speaking schools are somewhat underrepresented. When starting out, students prioritise interest in the subject and the opportunity to study tuition-free. The majority of students are satisfied with the teaching staff, the quality of teaching, organisation of studies, timetables and also the physical environment of their place of study. What is more, while students are satisfied with the amount of taught instruction, they would like to spend more time on independent study. More than two-thirds of students rated their education as good enough for the Estonian labour market, while a third of students indicated that they feel as confident with regard to the international labour market.

Since the student body in Estonia is very diverse, the EUROSTUDENT survey also revealed some challenges and problems. The following provides an overview of the main results and conclusions of the Estonian survey. The focus is primarily on topics in Estonian higher education that need to be addressed by policy-makers and educational institutions.

In Estonia, the average student is 26 years old, which is similar to Nordic countries (Hauschildt *et al.*, 2015), while also setting us apart from many European countries where the average age still stands at 25 or less. Understandably, students have different needs when pursuing their educational goals at different stages of their lives. In Estonia, educational support services focus mainly on so-called typical students (those enrolling straight after completing secondary education) and are less considerate of the needs of other types of students.

More than a fifth of Estonian students (excluding doctoral students) are 30 or older, which indicates that educational institutions should take the diversity of the student body into more careful consideration, particularly age-related circumstances and needs, especially for combining studying and working. The students that are at least 30 years old are predominantly working full time and have decided to pursue academic studies alongside work, with 87% working during studies, and 86% identifying mainly as workers who also study. What is more, their reasons for working differ from those of younger students, i.e. they work to cover their living expenses. As much as 66% of 30-year-olds and older students feel that they could not afford to pursue higher education without having a full-time job. Another factor that sets them apart from younger students is that most of them (65%) have a job that is closely related to their field of study, but at the same time, working prevents them from fully committing to studies and also gaining international experience by studying abroad.

The weekly workload is the highest for students who are at least 30 years old. On average, they spend approximately 70 hours per week on studying and working, incl. 16 hours on taught courses, 16 hours on independent study and 38 hours on paid employment. According to their own assessment, they do not spend less time on their studies than their younger counterparts, however, their cumulative workload per week amounts to so much that one activity is bound to suffer at the expense of the other. At the same time, 22% are of the opinion that they would prefer to spend more time on taught courses and 36% would prefer to have more time for personal study, while 27% wish to spend less time working.

We must also bear in mind that an astounding 72% of students in this age group are also parents, adding an extra dimension to their workload. Every other student in this age group, who is raising a child under 7 years of age, feels that child rearing prevents them from focusing on their studies. Almost half (46%) of them have put their studies on hold for at least two semesters because of family-related reasons. Although gaining international experience should be an integral part of academic pursuits, there are not many people (13%) among this age group who plan to study abroad even for a short time, and compared to younger students, this group boasts the highest share (78%) of students who are not even planning to study abroad, citing separation from loved ones and loss of paid employment as main reasons.

Therefore, the situation of students over 30 differs significantly from the experiences of their younger peers who have enrolled straight out of secondary school. At a time when the number of young people entering higher education is declining due to demographic trends, when almost a third of Estonia's working age population is without either vocational or higher education and at a time when the rapidly changing labour market demands constant and/or agile upgrading, Estonia needs to make the pursuit of higher education more attractive and flexible for older students in order to maintain and/or increase the competitiveness of its workforce.

Although Estonia already has a large share of students who are at least 30 years old, their specific needs in higher education should be given more consideration in the future. The current organisation of studies, as well as grants and services, must be brought into better alignment with the needs of adult working students with children in order to enable combining work, studies and family life in a more manageable way. One option to consider is to reduce the mandatory workloads stipulated for maintaining a tuition-free status for those adult students (e.g. at least 30 years old) who have enrolled in higher education for the first time.

In addition, it is important to ensure that older students could experience international study in their homeland, e.g. either through foreign lecturers or exchange students, but also by studying international examples (e.g. case studies from other countries) and using different technological solutions. Furthermore, support services need to be critically reviewed as well (e.g. child care). In the current paradigm of life-long learning and diverse labour trends, it is paramount that the Ministry of Education and Research, together with the Ministry of Social Affairs and local municipalities focus on creating different types of public child care options (e.g. open early in the morning, late at night, during night-time and weekends) for people pursuing higher education.

**The reasons why students work, how frequently and their time-use patterns indicate that working is a normal part of modern student life. Therefore, it would be more reasonable to address their working as an opportunity to diversify the learning process, as opposed to approaching it as an unwanted activity that competes with studying.**

Two out of three students (66%) work alongside their studies. This number has remained relatively stable during the past decade, although at the same time, there has been a significant increase – from 40% to 53% - in the number of students in regular employment (i.e. working throughout the semester) that has gone up both among full-time and part-time students. When asked to assess their everyday circumstances, more than half (54%) of working students identified themselves primarily as workers, who study on the side. The main reason for working, in addition to covering living expenses, is the desire to obtain relevant work experience. Similarly to prior studies (Espenberg *et al.*, 2013, Kirss *et al.*, 2011), this one also corroborates that there are no direct links between the probability of students' working and their parents' socio-economic background, indicating that students choose to work because it will have an effect on their future competitiveness, development potential and offers relevant professional work experience (Mägi *et al.*, 2012).

In this context, it is important to take a look at the average weekly working hours of regularly employed students, which has stood at 31 hours per week for the past couple of years, while the number of hours dedicated to studying (33 hours per week) has been steadily increasing. Obviously, there are differences in time-use patterns of working and non-working students, e.g. non-working students spend on average 37 hours per week studying, while working students study for 31 hours. Working students find it more difficult to make time for studying due to the additional workload and we know from previous studies that in case of scheduling conflicts, their first preference will be work (Mägi *et al.*, 2011).

While students are relatively satisfied with the time spent in taught courses (two thirds would like to continue at the current rate), then with regard to time allocated for independent study and working, more than half would prefer to see some changes – 60% and 54% respectively. What is more, most people

calling for changes, would like to dedicate more time to both of those activities (39% and 35% respectively), indicating that more than a third of students want to work even more. Increasing demand for a competent workforce and rising median wages are attracting increasingly more students, meaning that this trend will probably continue.

The increase in the number of students in regular employment, appreciation for obtaining work experience in the course of studies and increasing labour market demand indicate that it would be unreasonable to hinder students from working. Instead, we must find ways to combine studying and working in a way that would mitigate work related challenges; allow work to complement studies and students could apply at work what they have learned at school. The majority (61%) of students are of the opinion that the teaching staff is supportive of obtaining practical experience related to their field of study. At the same time, there is still room for improvement because 15% do not agree with this viewpoint and approximately 25% do not have a clear position on this matter.

If we approach working and studying as competing and even conflicting activities, it may lead to an increase of contradictory expectations among students, the teaching staff and the employers with regard to the quality of higher education. This, in turn, may have an impact on the number of students who discontinue their studies or do not graduate on time. Such measures as learning outcomes and accounting for previous studies and work experience as outlined in the national standard for higher education, already allow for organising studies in various ways, letting people combine work and studies both in higher education institutions and at work.

The public sector, higher education institutions and employers play an important role in contributing to the closer integration of work and studies that could, in turn, facilitate closer collaboration between higher education institutions and employers. Additionally, it could also help achieve the objectives outlined in several strategic documents (e.g. National Research, Development and Innovation Strategy 2014-2010; National Programme for Higher Education 2016-2019; National Programme for Developing the Internship System in Vocational and Higher Education, etc.). At the school level, the primary measures to better combine work and studies is to introduce a more flexible organisation of studies, integrating professional work experience into the study process and a thorough understanding of the student and their (work)experience in order to make the best of it in the learning process. Since the boundaries are blurring between work and study and also between different education sectors, the public sector must support the integration of work and studies by putting forward a clear message that working is a valuable part of a student's development and the learning process.

### **The results of the EUROSTUDENT survey point to the need to modify the terms and conditions for allocating needs-based support to students.**

In Estonia, national higher education policy has treated young students primarily as children who are still dependent on their parents, and as a result, all support schemes have been based on the assumption that students can lean on their parents for help and financial support during studies. This logic manifests clearly in the current needs-based study allowance system that automatically includes under 24-year-old students in their parents' household, disregarding actual circumstances, while EUROSTUDENT data reveals that this approach is not well-grounded.

For under 25-year-old full-time bachelor and professional higher education students, the largest share of their income (50%) comes from their own salary and 31% is contributed by their family or partner (33% for students who do not live with their parents or relatives). More than half of the income of non-working under 25-year-old first level students comes from their parents or partner (52%), while almost a third (29%) is from various support schemes, scholarships and study loans. Only 31% of students under 20 live with their parents or relatives, while for under 25-year-olds this number stands at 29%.

Regular employment is also an important indicator of student autonomy, alongside various housing alternatives and sources of income (e.g. 41% of students aged between 20 to 24 are in regular employment). 72% of these students have cited obtaining professional work experience as the main reason for working, 68% reported the need to cover living expenses and 34% stated that without steady employment they would not be able to afford academic studies. These results indicate that young people are interested in asserting their independence early on, and for them working is a means to cover one's expenses as well as to obtain professional work experience, and that should be taken into account in the next stages of developing the national student support system.

To sum up, survey data indicates that Estonian students are mostly responsible adults who are able to manage on their own and try not to rely on their families. They are not children still clearly dependent on their parents, as viewed by the national needs-based study allowance system. Therefore, it would be advisable to align the study allowance system with actual circumstances. The Estonian Ministry of Education and Research is already analysing the system of needs-based study allowances<sup>1</sup> and based on the results of this study it is a very welcome and necessary step.

### **Data on students in the field of education indicate growing challenges due to ageing teacher workforce.**

In Estonia, the teacher workforce is ageing and stands out among other OECD countries due to the fact that the teachers here are among the oldest – 47% of teachers are over 50 years old (OECD average 35%, 2017). The EUROSTUDENT survey indicates that there is no significant influx of young teachers to be expected because the students in this field of study are considerably older than in other fields. 42% of students in the field of education are 30 or older. Although it is a welcome development that refresher courses and retraining for teachers have been widely promoted across Estonia in recent years, it is problematic that this field of study is not very popular among younger students.

In addition, the data on the new generation of teachers is also troubling as these students stand out because of their somewhat lower interest in their field of study. If in other areas the interest in the field of study stands clearly above tuition-free study as a deciding factor in choosing the programme and the school, in education, the opportunity to study for free is deemed more important. 89% of students in this field indicated that this factor influenced their choice of field of study and school either to a large or even significant extent, while 83% stated that they chose this field of study because they found it interesting, which is a lower number compared to respondents in other fields. Furthermore, it seems

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<sup>1</sup> Main Activities for Academic Year 2017/2018. Estonian Ministry of Education and Research. [https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/2017-2018-oppeaasta\\_tegevused.pdf](https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/2017-2018-oppeaasta_tegevused.pdf).

that lower interest in the field of study does not depend on the respondent's age – the possibility to study tuition-free was ranked as the most important deciding factor both for young applicants fresh out of secondary school as well as for older students who were already working in education.

67% of students are permanently employed in the education sector (average 53%) and the same share of students identify themselves primarily as workers, i.e. for most, studies complement their main activity. It is heartening that in this area work is closely related to the field of study (59% confirm that). The time-use patterns of working students in this field (18 hours spent on taught courses and 16 hours on independent study per week) is similar to the compound average time-use patterns of all working students (17 and 16 hours respectively); however, the reasons why they work, indicate that they usually have no other option. 85% of students in education claim that working is motivated by the need to cover living expenses (average 77%) and for 41% (average 31%) the reason is the need to support other family members financially.

Considering that students in education rate their family's economic situation as poor more frequently than others (in addition, their parents are to a large degree without higher education), they inevitably find themselves in a situation that makes it difficult to focus on studies, which, in turn, may probably impact the efficiency of their studies. For example, the field of education has the largest proportion of students that would like to spend less time working; on the other hand, this group has the smallest share of students who would like to dedicate more time to independent study. It is also important to note that, compared to others, students in this particular field are the most satisfied with the quality of teaching, although they are much less satisfied with organisation of studies and timetables.

In summary, in the field of education, it is critical to make curricula more attractive in order to draw young and talented people (e.g. use „Teach For All“/„Noored kooli“ as an example), and on the other hand, offer these students, due to their socio-economic background, more targeted grants in order to help them focus more on their studies (e.g. support to cover living expenses).

### **The attitudes and behavioural patterns of students in the field of arts and humanities seem inconsistent in light of future developments of the labour market and their subsequent management.**

Based on the EUROSTUDENT survey data, students in the field of arts and humanities are characterised by minimal future-orientation when choosing the field of study and school, e.g. only 32% considered future employability when making these decisions (the compound average for all students is 57%). Additionally, they do not rate their current studies favourably in terms of future usefulness in the labour market. Less than a half (41%) of arts and humanities students think that they will be well or very well prepared for entering the labour market after graduating (the compound average for all students is 62%). This is undoubtedly related to the nature of this field of study and has to do with lack of specific prospects in the labour market.

The fact that there is little demand in the labour market for people with this educational background, puts these students in a difficult position. Latest surveys indicate that arts and humanities graduates are relatively most likely to have low wages. For example, in 2015, the average monthly salary for arts graduates was €872, and €1005 for humanities graduates, which is almost two times less than made by

top earners among ICT graduates (Leppik, 2017). What is more, graduate surveys (Ernst & Young, 2017) indicate that also their job search takes relatively longer (9% are still looking a year after graduation) and their current jobs have more frequently little or nothing to do with their field of study (36% were employed in such positions).

These students are more often able to rely on their families for financial support during studies, e.g. 40% of income is received from their family or partner, they also live with parents or relatives more than on average, and are more often from families with higher education. In addition, they work much less during studies than an average student; their subsequent outlook in the labour market is complicated and they may remain dependent on support from other family members. However, they stand out from other students in terms of greater international mobility, having temporarily studied abroad more often than others (13% vs Estonian average 7%) and this group also has the highest share of students who plan to study abroad. In general, students rate financial expenses as the most serious obstacle to studying abroad, but the better socio-economic background of arts and humanities students may be one of the reasons enabling them to be more internationally mobile.

The minimal demand in the labour market for humanities and arts graduates is probably the reason why many of them wish to pursue higher education in an additional field or are compelled to do that. For example, in 2015, 21% of arts and humanities graduates indicated that they are in the process of obtaining another degree or are planning to do so (Ernst & Young, 2017).

**Responses from students in integrated bachelor and masters studies reflect the need to update curricula or certain elements in order to align them with students' needs, expectations as well as internationalisation objectives outlined in the national higher education policy.**

Students in integrated bachelor and masters studies stand out in the EUROSTUDENT survey in several important aspects. This group has the smallest share of working students (51% vs. compound average 66%), while their jobs is more frequently related to their field of study (71% vs. 56%). Among this group, the most common reason for working is to obtain professional experience (74%). They also spend the most time on studying, especially compared to the average student (42 vs. 33 hours per week) and the least time on work (26 vs. 31 hours per week). Furthermore, they identify themselves primarily as students who also work (75% vs. 46%). At the same time, more commonly than their peers, they are interested in dedicating more time to work and independent study and less on taught courses. This indicates the need to increase independent responsibility for these students, which would, in turn, allow for more flexible study arrangements and improve integration of work and studies.

In assessing the overall study process and methods, this group is considerably more critical than others. It is also worth noting that among students who have interrupted their studies for more than two semesters, a third of students in integrated studies listed lack of motivation as the main reason.

At the same time, this group is more enthusiastic than others about short-term studies abroad, e.g. more than a quarter (28%) plans to do that during their studies. For this group, the main obstacle lies in the difficulty of integrating foreign studies into the structure of their curriculum back home. They highlighted that it is difficult to align studies abroad with their school curriculum (47% sees it as an

obstacle vs. the average for all students is 24%). Additionally, they feel insecure about recognition of results achieved abroad, e.g. transfer of credits (41% see it as an obstacle vs. the average for all students is 20%).

In the case of students in integrated studies, the main takeaway is that although this group is very enthusiastic about short-term study abroad and not worried about possible job loss (64% did not see it as an obstacle), the process is nevertheless complicated. Given the internationalisation objectives outlined in national higher education policy, including the focus on international mobility of students, the curricula must be reviewed to offer more flexibility, e.g. relaxing the requirements for attendance of taught courses as this could potentially boost greater mobility and maintain study motivation.

**Students enrolled after the higher education reform in 2013 do not significantly differ from students that started before them. The EUROSTUDENT survey data does not allow for separate evaluation on the effects of the reform; however, the data does provide an opportunity to observe certain developments in the student body.**

When comparing students under the age of 25 who started full-time studies at the first level of higher education (i.e. professional/applied higher education, bachelor studies) before and after the higher education reform that entered into force in the 2013/2014 academic year, the EUROSTUDENT survey data does not indicate significant differences in their backgrounds, needs or behaviour. There has been a slight increase in the share of students whose parents have higher education (59% among those enrolled before the reform and 65% for after). At the same time, there has been a slight decline in the number of kids who consider their parents to be in a poor socio-economic situation (19% among those enrolled before the reform and 15% for after). However, the latter trend may be due to general improvement of living standards.

There have not been any significant changes in the role of family support to students, i.e. the financial aid received from family or partner has remained the same for both groups (32% of monthly income for those enrolled before the reform and 34% for after), the share of students living with their parents is also the same (34% and 32% respectively). There are also no changes in the share of students who work, i.e. before the reform 50% of students were employed, after the reform this number stands at 48%. The reasons for seeking employment also remain the same due a great extent, i.e. mainly to cover living expenses and/or obtain professional work experience.

Although the weekly average for time spent studying has not changed, there are significantly more students among those enrolled after the reform who would like to dedicate more time to independent study. Additionally, those enrolled after the reform identify themselves more commonly mainly as students who work, and there has been a considerable drop in the share of students who see themselves mainly as workers who study. This is a landmark shift, especially considering how many students combine full-time work and studies, and must, in certain situations (e.g. scheduling conflicts), choose between one or the other. Identifying primarily as students, may give rise to prioritising studies and thereby improve the quality of learning.

However, the most troubling survey results indicate that after the reform there has been a decline in the readiness to study abroad. Before the reform, 47% of enrolled students claimed that they have no plans to study abroad, after the reform their share has increased to 63%. Financial expenses and separation from loved ones is still considered the main obstacle, but there has also been an increase among students who see recognition of results achieved abroad as a considerable impediment.

Thus, the EUROSTUDENT survey data has revealed no apparent changes in the student body during the first three academic years following the higher education reform, at least not among the so-called traditional students who enrol in higher education straight after or a short time after finishing secondary school. On the one hand, not enough time has passed to observe major trends (to establish a causal link with the reform); on the other hand, the EUROSTUDENT survey was not designed for the purposes of evaluating the effects of higher education reforms.

The EUROSTUDENT survey is primarily designed to compare certain changes in the student body, but those changes may be brought about by various other factors alongside the reform (e.g. changes in the labour market). In addition, the new requirements established with the reform may have given rise to the development of certain preconceived notions, both among current and prospective students, and as a result, students may refrain from applying for study allowance, foreign exchange programmes or entering higher education at all. For example, the analysis of needs-based study allowance conducted in 2015 (Haaristo and Leppik, 2015), indicated that many students who consider themselves to be in a poor economic situation, have forgone applying for study allowance specifically because of preconceived notions, thinking that they might not receive any or that they are not eligible.

Considering that the results of this EUROSTUDENT survey indicate possible challenges ahead for reaching the objectives of the higher education reform, it is important to keep collecting data to monitor progress on these goals including undertaking a study designed specifically for that purpose.