Dropout and Completion in Higher Education in Europe

Executive Summary

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Dropout and Completion in Higher Education in Europe

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In the Europe 2020 strategy, one of the goals is to have at least 40% of 30-34–year-olds complete higher education. Reducing dropout and increasing completion rates in higher education is one of the key strategies for achieving this goal, which is regarded as crucial for creating the high-level skills that Europe's knowledge-intensive economic sectors need as well as for Europe's capacity to innovate and foster productivity and social justice. Related to this challenge, this report addresses a comparative study on higher education dropout and completion in Europe (HEDOCE). It is based on an extensive review of literature and policy documents on study success in higher education, a Europe-wide survey of national higher education experts and eight in-depth country case studies. The main aims of the study are 1) to make an inventory of policies and developments in study success in 35 European countries; and 2) to explore the available evidence of the effectiveness of policies and good practices in addressing study success on the country-level as well as the institutional level.

Key findings

Study success is an important issue on the European policy agenda

The HEDOCE study found that study success is regarded as important in three quarters of the 35 European countries surveyed. In almost half of the countries it is high or very high on the policy agenda (see table below).

Importance of study success	Countries
Very high or high on the agenda	Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Flanders (Belgium), France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden
On the agenda	Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Switzerland
No or little relevance	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovak Republic, Turkey

Source: Reporting from national experts.

The definition of study success varies across countries in Europe

National governments and higher education institutions use different orientations to guide their policy-making with respect to study success:

- **Completion**: to have students successfully complete their study programme with a degree.
- **Time-to-degree**: to have students complete their study programme within a reasonable time period.
- **Retention or dropout**: the aim to have students re-enrol in a study programme until they complete their degree and to reduce the likelihood they drop out before completing their programme.

To monitor the situation with respect to each of these orientations, various indicators are used at national and institutional levels. Depending on their orientation and policy focus, governments and higher education institutions employ different definitions for each of these phenomena. For example, many countries regard completion within the nominal (stipulated) study period plus one extra year as an indication of study success. Realising that the transition from the first to the second year of study is a crucial step in students' educational pathway, other countries focus on retention (or dropout) during the first year in higher education.

There is great variety in the funding, information and organisational measures facilitating study success in Europe

There is great variety in the policy instruments countries use to increase study success. Across Europe, over 170 national and institutional policy instruments have been identified in 35 countries. These may be grouped into 22 typical policies falling under three main policy headings:

- **Funding and financial incentives:** Financial rewards or sanctions to change the behaviour of students and/or institutions towards study success.
- **Information and support for students:** The provision of information and any other kinds of (non-financial) support to (prospective) students by national organisations or higher education institutions in order to improve their decision-making and study behaviour. Examples include counselling, career guidance related to study and future job opportunities, tutoring, etc.
- **Organisation of higher education:** Putting in place structures and procedures related to the organisation of teaching and learning in order to improve study success, for example addressing the duration of study, types of degrees offered (short degrees, Bachelor, Master's), quality assurance and accreditation, etc.

There is a lack of systematic knowledge, data and indicators on study success in Europe

Although there are many studies focusing on factors that may have an impact on the study success of individual students, research on study success policies and their effectiveness is rare, particularly research taking an international comparative perspective. In addition, the data that is available across Europe on study success is diverse in terms of availability, data collection methods, definitions, and usage. Cross-country overviews of completion rates, let alone other indicators of study success such as retention, dropout and the average time to complete a degree, are barely available. Overviews, such as the ones presented by the OECD in Education at a Glance, have to be interpreted with care due to differences in underlying indicator definitions as well as differences in national contexts and institutional arrangements between countries. Our own inventory of existing national data collections demonstrates that only 12 out of 35 European countries regularly report a national indicator of completion. Even fewer countries report on retention and dropout rates and time-to-degree. A recent report on computing and collecting data on completion rates and average duration in higher education concludes that the monitoring of study success and its calculation method need to be harmonised across Europe (ICON and QUANTOS, 2015). Only this would allow meaningful comparisons to inform the various stakeholders interested in higher education. The same need for systematic knowledge, data and indicators is also felt in Australia and the U.S.A.

A clear definition of study success is the first step towards a more effective policy design

A central finding of the current study is that in many countries study success is only implicitly defined, making the objectives and relevance of the related policy instruments unclear. However, countries that place study success high on their policy agenda and have a clear vision on what they want to achieve seem to have a more effective combination of policies in place than countries that do not show this engagement. The effectiveness of the policies is heavily dependent on the policy mix – some policies explicitly addressing study success need supportive policies to become effective. For example, policies aimed at improving the match between (prospective) students' demands and the programmes offered by higher education institutions are more effective when institutions are also required to improve their counselling and service structures.

Though many countries and higher education institutions are actively stimulating study success by means of one or more policy instruments, the general impression from the current study is that policies are likely to be more effective if there is a mix of policy instruments each addressing different aspects of study success. A policy mix that includes strengthening students' choices, promoting their social integration in the programme, monitoring and counselling, and rewarding successful completion – is more likely to be successful. In addition, countries and institutions need to be consistent, both in terms of policy instruments and over time, with respect to their overall study success objectives and incentives. For example, if governments reward institutions for successful degree completions, the student financial support system should include similar incentives for students.

Increased institutional responsibility is seen as a requirement for study success, but funding is not a miracle cure

The use of study success related indicators in funding formulas and performance agreements is becoming more widespread. This form of performance-based funding is generally directed at changing institutional behaviour and shifts more responsibility for the success of students towards the institutions as they are rewarded for the number of graduates, their students' credits or for student retention. Many countries make additional funding available to encourage their institutions focusing more on study success. An example is the 'Student Opportunity Allocation' in England that encourages institutions to improve study success. In Germany, the 'Quality Pact for Teaching' helped improve student-staff ratios and stimulated innovations in teaching and learning and improved the qualifications and training of teachers. The French 'Plan to Successfully Obtain a Bachelor Degree' prompted institutions to develop innovations in teaching and learning. In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia additional funds were invested in upgrading educational resources and infrastructure such as scientific books, manuals and teaching laboratories, to encourage students to succeed.

Performance-based funding mechanisms, however, require a careful design. If the mechanism is complex and incorporates numerous indicators, it may not be fully aligned to various policies, such as in Denmark and Austria. If it involves open-ended funding with possible unintended side-effects as in Norway, or if the budget involved determines only a small proportion of total funding, then its impact is less significant. In the Netherlands, between 1993 and 2011, 50 per cent of the teaching funds was distributed along the relative number of graduates per institution. This incentivised institutions to implement measures to reduce the average duration of study.

Some countries also include performance related incentives in the student financial support schemes to encourage students to spend more time on their study and thus to

achieve sufficient progress. Examples are imposing a limited period for grant availability; providing scholarships to high achieving students; or rewarding completion, for example by turning loans into grants. Such incentives may be less effective in reducing time-to-degree if the total support received by students is relatively small and students have to supplement their monthly income with significant amounts of paid work. In the U.S.A., current policy debates focus on the high tuition fees and the high debts these may incur. Not all graduates are expected to get jobs that enable them to repay their debt. Government therefore initiates policies such as employment guarantees, saving schemes for tuition fees, tax reductions and free community college education. In Australia, the income-contingent loan scheme for students is seen as an important feature underlying study success, because the high financial investments stimulate students to engage with their study.

Monitoring students creates a foundation for institutional action

Students' individual and social characteristics have a strong impact on their probability of success in higher education. In this light, some institutions have initiated systematic monitoring of students' attendance and their individual study progress to identify students at risk and facilitate institutional follow-up actions through personal counselling, coaching and mentoring. Some institutions have developed this into more general mandatory systems for personal tutoring and peer-mentoring among students to stimulate the relationship between students and their programme by creating a community and a sense of belonging and engagement among students. A key idea behind several of these initiatives is the closer alignment of programme objectives, teaching and learning activities, and examination and assessment of students. Australian higher education institutions very actively monitor, consult and advise students, particularly in the first study year. This is found to be the key institutional activity to improve study success for a diversified student population.

Matching and social integration create a solid basis for study success

While matching students with the most suitable study programmes is less of an issue in selective systems of higher education, some institutions in less selective, relatively open systems have launched initiatives to familiarize students with their programme of choice before they are admitted to the institution (interviews, trial lectures in the institution, online self-assessment tests, informing student choice, etc.). To facilitate social integration and student engagement, many higher education institutions throughout Europe have established special welcome programmes for students.

Social integration of students into higher education is an ongoing responsibility for institutions and in mass higher education systems there is a need for more tailored and individualised follow-up of students to provide them with a sense of belonging and increase their engagement with their studies. For example, in France, more personalised support and career services for students have been introduced by institutions, providing students with a 'one-stop service' where both academic and social challenges can be considered and addressed.

Various countries have integrated new types of programmes, or new alternatives within existing degree structures, to better accommodate diverse target groups of students. Short degree programmes in Portugal and the Netherlands offer students short routes towards a profession with the option to continue to a Bachelor degree. Other countries or institutions offer students an introductory orientation phase or a less-specialised Bachelor programme with a broader range of subjects, as in Austria, France, Norway and some German universities. This allows students to make their final choice of specialisation later and more carefully, thus preventing them from making a switch of programme or institution early on in their education career.

Integrating study success outcome data in publicly available platforms, e.g. on quality assurance and student choice, helps institutions and (prospective) students to make the right choices

To allow students and institutions to learn from examples elsewhere, several countries have set up platforms to facilitate the sharing of experiences. England, Finland, Germany and Montenegro have set up organisations (such as the Higher Education Academy in England) and structures in which good practice examples of study success are shared through discussion papers (Finland) or dissemination projects (Nexus in Germany). The Netherlands recently highlighted several good practice examples in its 2015 Strategic Agenda for Higher Education and Research. Some countries have set up student choice databases and information systems, including the *Key Information System* in England, *Studiekeuze123* in the Netherlands, the '*Zeit Ranking*' in Germany and the Bulgarian University Ranking. In the US, a national College Ranking of about 5,000 higher education institutions includes study success performance indicators next to other information. Such systems stimulate study success if reliable information on dropout, retention, completion, time-to-degree, or even student satisfaction about lecturers, the quality of programmes, etc. is included. Informing prospective students as such will make institutions programmes pay attention to the impact of their study success record on their reputation.

As quality assurance and accreditation systems emerge and develop, they are gradually becoming a platform for more sophisticated policy making. Study success is increasingly becoming part and parcel of quality assurance through integrating completion, retention and dropout rates in self-evaluation reporting structures. Croatia, Flanders, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy and Montenegro are recent examples of this. Study success rates are important for reaccreditation, but in many cases are also published on national websites. This serves benchmarking purposes and thus pushes institutions to care about study success.

Recommendations

Based on the outcomes of this study we identify some generic recommendations that provide a broad menu for informing future policy-making to increase study success. These recommendations highlight possible actions to be taken at European, national and institutional levels.

The need for an increased European effort to facilitate study success

The current study has clearly shown that while study success is high on the policy agenda in Europe, systematic knowledge of various national policy initiatives and their impact is limited. In general, there is a need for more coordinated action across national borders to acquire a more solid knowledge base on what works.

- There is a need to create a Europe-wide arena for discussing issues related to study success. Given the diverse understandings of study success, one of the aims of such an arena could be to generate agreement on key definitions and explicit indicators for study success.

- As there is currently limited knowledge on the impact of policies specifically aimed at study success, there is a need for more systematic and comparative empirical research on the effectiveness of these policies.

- There is also a need to link the (inter)national study success agenda to related policy areas such as modernising higher education institutions, quality assurance, graduate employability, etc. One could start systematic monitoring of study success indicators using specific benchmarking instruments (such as U-Multirank) and create a European platform for national and institutional good practices.

The need for conscious national policy designs to boost study success

As many countries currently define their study success aims in an implicit way, there is a need for more conscious national policy designs meeting the following criteria:

- National governments can be clearer and explicit on the specific study success orientations that they regard as important and the reasons for these priorities.
- National governments can develop policy designs based on an underlying behavioural model that specifies the links between a specific study success orientation, the policy instruments used, the roles of stakeholders and the expected impacts.
- European countries can think of systematic efforts to collect and monitor indicators of completion, dropout and average time-to-degree at agreed-upon levels and based on shared definitions. Such indicators are more useful when they reflect the diversity of institutions and study programmes.
- The public availability of performance information can help to boost public interest in study success, to hold higher education providers accountable for promoting themselves in a responsible way, and to facilitate student choice.
- Governments can consider developing national policy designs that reflect a mix of financial, informational and organisational policy instruments and address both students and higher education institutions. The policy instruments need to support each other, for example more flexible educational pathways need clear rules for the recognition of previous learning and study achievements.
- It is suggested to enable institutions to monitor pathways of individual students to identify students at risk of dropout. This also helps them understand specific patterns underlying dropout and completion and will inform future policy-making.

The need for comprehensive institutional strategies to boost study success

Because the European higher education landscape is diverse and includes institutions with very different profiles and characteristics, study success priorities differ between types of institutions and study programmes. Furthermore, as institutions increasingly have to strategically position themselves in a more competitive sector, they gain more responsibility for their students' success. This calls for comprehensive institutional strategies to boost study success, based on the following recommendations:

- Higher education institutions' strategic plans could specify how issues of study success relate to their profile and what actions will be taken on areas such as internal quality assurance.
- With growing institutional responsibility for study success, institutions and students will benefit from student monitoring, counselling and mentoring systems as well as from structures to socially and academically integrate students.
- Institutions can consider publishing key institutional indicators on study success on their webpages to assist future students in making the right study choices as well as to raise and sustain institutional awareness of study success.
- Institutional responsibility for study success can also include measures and facilities to assist students in their learning process.
- Institutions will benefit from institutional research on the specific patterns underlying dropout and completion. This will enable them to formulate adequate measures to address study success within their own context.

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