

PART 2A: EUROPEAN TRENDS, DISPARITIES AND CHALLENGES WITH ACCESS AND RETENTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONAL SURVEY: ACCESS TO SUCCESS - THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE, WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND INTERNATIONALISATION

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The demographic make-up of the European population is changing, as is the landscape of European higher education with the last 20 years or so of reforms, but does that mean that the student population is diversifying and the ability to access higher education is changing? The Finnish EU presidency in 2006 re-introduced a focus and a debate on lifelong learning and widening participation; two issues that, in the European context, are intrinsically linked, following the lines of the Bologna Process Communiqués from Berlin (2003) and Bergen (2005) that re-iterated the importance of the ‘social dimension’ of European higher education as it was phrased. In response, the European University Association (EUA) has actively supported and promoted the lifelong learning agenda for universities, an agenda that asks universities to consider the diverse profiles and learning needs of students, and subsequently how to widen and increase access.

In 2008, EUA adopted the “European Universities’ Charter on Lifelong Learning” (EUA 2008). The Charter sets out ten commitments for European universities and ten commitments for European governments. The charter was adopted at the EUA Autumn Conference 2008 “Inclusive and responsive universities – ensuring Europe’s competitiveness in the knowledge society”, a conference devoted to lifelong learning and widening participation. The Charter is a call for European universities and governments, together with the social partners and other stakeholders, to support proactively the lifelong learning agenda, and to assist Europe’s universities in developing their specific role in this context. It places all types of higher education in the framework of lifelong learning in a ‘cradle to grave’ perspective. The Charter and the conference were followed-up by two projects: Access to Success that focused on widening participation in a comparative European and African context¹ and, most recently, in the SIRUS project “Shaping Inclusive and Responsive University Strategies” where 29 European universities discuss and draft strategies for lifelong learning and widening participation.

The present article is based on the preliminary results of these two projects, in particular on a survey within the Access to Success project that targets European universities, as well as several case studies of European HEIs carried out within the project. In addition, it takes into account the most recent Trends report “EUA Trends 2010: A decade of change in European Higher Education”, and a literature review of recent articles and studies on different aspects of the social dimension with a focus on widening access

¹ The Access to Success project attempted to take an issue of global significance in higher education – access and retention- and trace trends and challenges in two different parts of the world: Africa and Europe. The intention was to stimulate a wider international dialogue on this issue, and identify ways in which African and European universities can cooperate in the future.

and participation. It will briefly outline how European higher education institutions (HEIs) regard their contribution in their national context to the widening access and participation agenda in a Europe on the threshold of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the responses to the widening participation agenda in different contexts in Europe.

The use of the terminology ‘widening access and participation and the social dimension’ is based on the definition used in the Bologna Process:

“The social dimension of the envisaged European Higher Education Area aims at **Equality of opportunities in higher education**, in terms of: access, participation and successful completion of studies; studying and living conditions; guidance and counselling; financial support, and student participation in higher education governance. This implies also equal opportunities in mobility, when it comes to portability of financial support, removing barriers, and providing incentives.”²

The article will briefly outline how European HEIs in their national context regard their contribution to the widening access and participation agenda in a Europe on the threshold of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and how the responses to the widening participation agenda vary in different contexts in Europe.

Methodology

The survey has been undertaken in the context of the Access to Success project, and has identified priorities and practices for improving the social dimension of the European higher education sector, with the assistance of the European national rectors’ conferences and European HEIs with interest in widening participation policies. The European HEIs participating in the survey were asked to share their perception of national and institutional initiatives in a questionnaire designed to help to build further knowledge and understanding of European HEIs’ responses to the widening participation agenda. The intent was to identify good practice as well as challenges to be shared across and between the continents, thus forming part of the basis of the EUA White Paper: Africa-Europe Higher Education Cooperation For Development: Meeting Regional and Global Challenges.

The participating HEIs were not only selected on the basis of their interest in widening participation either at the national level (non-traditional and/or underrepresented students) but also on a combination of an expressed interest in cooperation with Africa and a more general interest in the project. A general call was put out to national rectors’ conferences to help identify a sample of institutions with diverse profiles and an underlying interest in international cooperation. The results thus reflect the reality at ground level of a very diverse sample of European higher education institutions. The survey has gathered information on both national and institutional policies and practices in the access and participation/retention of both traditional and non-traditional students and on how national strategies and policies support the institutional efforts. The project can be seen as a pilot project, the first of its kind directly to canvas European higher education institutions on how they respond to the challenges presented by a changing demography, globalisation and technological developments when it comes to attracting (and graduating) a diverse student population. It is also unique in that it then uses these results to stimulate an international dialogue on the issue, with HEIs in Africa.

² <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/actionlines/socialdimension.htm>

The Access to Success questionnaire was answered by 43 HEIs and university colleges (89% were public institutions) from 19 European countries. Out of these, 37 were valid responses. It is a small sample and can only give a snapshot of the situation as it was at the beginning of 2009. Following this first survey stage, a number of institutions were asked to write short articles expanding on particularly interesting practices as they transpired from the answers to the questionnaires.

In connection with the analytical work on the Access to Success project and the most recent Trends publication, the author has made a first attempt to create an “Overview of national and institutional strategies for lifelong learning, widening participation and access to higher education” in a country-by-country overview, as it was in 2007³. The information was collected from a great number of official studies and from information collected in different EUA studies. The table is used in the context of this article to highlight the differences between having the legal framework in place and implementing the spirit of the legislation at the institutional level. Policies and discussions on access and participation issues are not new on the political agenda, and, as the survey shows, is not necessarily a question of lack of policies, but the need for a change in attitude as highlighted in one of the Finnish questionnaires:

The “Majority of the issues addressed in this questionnaire are nationally legislated (for)...(but) the legislation is weakly enforced, anomalies are brushed under the carpet and (the) government does not allocate resources directly to the higher education institutions for this work.”

The article will address the policies supporting the expansion of the European higher education sector, the challenges of creating a diverse student portfolio and the institutional obstacles to diversification.

Widening and increasing participation

Widening participation and lifelong learning have become intrinsically linked during the Bologna decade as shown in the [“European universities’ charter on lifelong learning”](#) and in the Bologna Process Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué under the heading “lifelong learning”:

“Widening participation shall also be achieved through lifelong learning as an integral part of our education systems. Lifelong learning is subject to the principle of public responsibility. The accessibility, quality of provision and transparency of information shall be assured. Lifelong learning involves obtaining qualifications, extending knowledge and understanding, gaining new skills and competences or enriching personal growth. Lifelong learning implies that qualifications may be obtained through flexible learning paths, including part-time studies, as well as work-based routes.”

Or, as phrased in the Charter:

“Currently European societies are missing out on a huge pool of readily available human talent, and comparing higher education participation rates in Europe with those in other world regions makes disturbing reading and calls for action. Widening access to higher education is not about introducing less qualified students, but rather about supporting all learners with the potential to benefit both themselves and society through participating in higher education. This means reaching out to an increasingly broad range of learners with different motivations and interests: not only offering programmes for professional development adapted to a fast-changing labour market, but also

³ See Appendix 2, pg.27

catering for the growing demand for personal development opportunities through the cultural enrichment that universities offer. There is also an urgent need for debate on how lifelong learning provision that will be of benefit to individuals, employers and society as a whole can best, and most fairly, be funded.”

The aims of providing learning throughout life to all potential learners cannot be reached if accessibility (intellectual and physical) is not targeted and the teaching and learning is not adapted to a diverse student portfolio. Trends 2010 indicates that the Bologna structures are largely in place and a change in the perception of the role of higher education as a key player in creating a Europe of Knowledge has slowly evolved over the past decade and paved the way for the introduction of more flexible learning paths. It should be pointed out that the largest changes to the degree structures have been for countries in continental Europe. Here, the traditional university degree was a “one-stop shop” with one long integrated programme, in principle preparing the student to become a potential researcher without any possibility of taking a break or stopping with a shorter degree. In other words, this type of education was not a particularly attractive nor financially viable option for the non-traditional or first-generation immigrant student.

With an average of 56% of the population participating in tertiary education in Europe (OECD, 2009) it is self-evident that offering long research degrees with no regard for employment preparation is no longer acceptable, desirable or competitive. This means that the bachelor degree needs to be established as a stand-alone degree that can either be a final degree or lead to a plethora of different master degrees, ranging from strong research based degrees to professionally oriented degrees. As technological development in society makes the development of new skills over time necessary for all parts of a population, the flexibility and possibility to learn throughout life has become increasingly important.

Conditions have been created over the past decade with the introduction of the Bologna Process and the modernisation agenda prompted by the EU’s Lisbon Agenda to make it possible for European higher education institutions to provide education as and when necessary for a diverse student population. The introduction of a modular, credit-based system with clearly defined learning outcomes (ECTS) should, in theory, make it possible for students who, for personal or economic reasons, do not want to follow the traditional route in higher education to apply for recognition of prior learning (RPL), to collect credits and create their “own degrees” (with certain defined conditions of progression). In other words, the stage has been set for European universities to offer a plethora of degrees and courses in a lifelong learning perspective.

The majority of European universities are still struggling with creating systems that are attractive yet flexible, encouraging students to design individual degrees. One example of a transparent and flexible system built on student-centred learning can be found in Sweden, where in the 1970’s Sweden introduced a higher education system that has successfully been able to be fairly accessible, flexible and transparent while maintaining high quality⁴. Lifelong learning⁵ is a concept that is taken for granted by HEIs, employers and students, but it did not happen overnight and has not meant that the participation of the non-traditional student groups has changed radically in comparison to the rest of the Nordic countries.

⁴ Swedish article in this Compendium

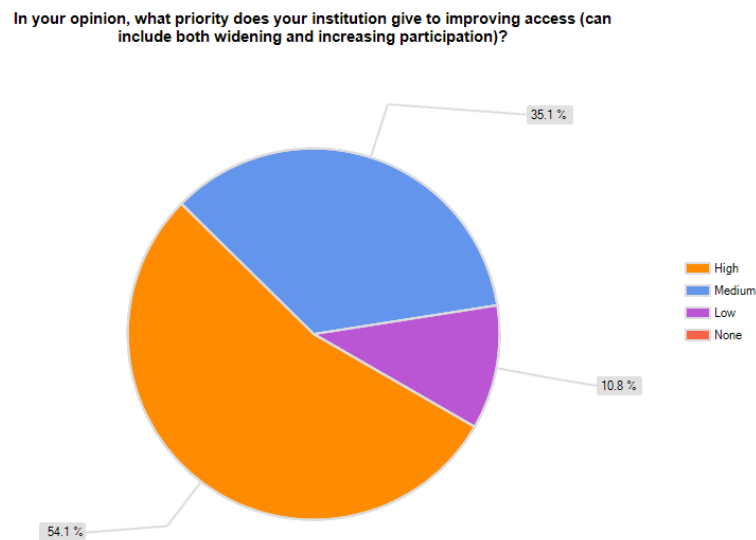
New or renewed European policies: expanding higher education by lifelong learning and internationalisation

Over the past decade, both the introduction of the Bologna Process and greater institutional autonomy have created the conditions enabling European higher education institutions to adapt their educational provision more closely to the diverse needs of learners. There is, however, no indication in the Access to Success survey that a common European consensus has been created. While the agenda of increasing and widening participation has been formulated in a multitude of policy agendas, processes and communiqués, by the Bologna Process, the EU, OECD, and UNESCO, during the past decade, no common approach of how to respond to it can be identified, nor can a common understanding of the terminology used in this field be detected. On the other hand, it is also clear that an increasing number of European HEIs have begun to rise to the challenge of attracting and teaching a more diversified student body driven either by legislation or by social responsibility.

The past decade has seen a significant increase in participation rates across most European countries as highlighted by a recent OECD report that also notes the virtual doubling of graduation rates from 18% in 1995 to 36% in 2007 (OECD 2009). This expansion has taken place at the same time as the implementation of the Bologna reforms in Europe. It can be argued that the Bologna reforms will make it easier for students from both traditional and non-traditional backgrounds to reach the level of educational attainment to which they aspire by using flexible learning paths. The importance of both access to higher education and flexible learning paths throughout life becomes increasingly important, as European higher education starts catering to a growing and increasingly diverse student population in the future. The size of traditional student cohorts in certain parts of Europe will begin to shrink and economies, responding to globalisation pressures, will demand new skills from the European workforce. The latest Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué phrased the need for widening access:

“Access into higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies. This involves improving the learning environment, removing all barriers to study, and creating the appropriate economic conditions for students to be able to benefit from the study opportunities at all levels.” (paragraph 9)

The overall result of the survey carried out among European HEIs under the Access to Success project supports the political intentions in the Communiqué: there seems to be a growing consensus that access is an issue of rising importance: 54% of institutions give it high priority.

Table 1

The interpretation of the importance of access issues is – as are the Bologna reforms in general - very often based in the particular national context as other recent reports have highlighted. Higher education reforms and changes are always implemented in a national context. The findings of this survey support this observation: institutional responses have to be examined within a specific national legislative, financial and cultural context, and a great number of obstacles still need to be overcome.

Examples of new initiatives can be found in a number of countries, predominantly in Northern Europe, the UK (which has introduced the AimHigher programme⁶), and Ireland (which has introduced the HEAR programme⁷), and other countries with new initiatives such as Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, and Norway⁸. It has become increasingly important to share these initiatives across borders in Europe, and to generate concrete institutional good practice in addressing access and retention. However, one important point that has come out of both the Access to Success and the SIRUS projects is that there is no common understanding of the terminology for widening access and widening participation. The term is often very narrowly understood as the physical accessibility of the higher education institution premises for students with disabilities.

The call for widening participation and equal access is not new. It has come in successive waves after the Second World War. But as the recent Czech study “Who is more equal” (2009: 29) highlights, the call has been met with moderate success in the large majority of European countries irrespective of their very different political systems. Expansion of higher education was expected to go hand in hand with social equity.

⁶ AimHigher is a national programme which aims to widen participation in higher education (HE) by raising HE awareness, aspirations and attainment among young people from under-represented groups in England 2008-2011.

⁷ The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is an Irish university initiative targeting socially-disadvantaged students.

⁸ See Appendix 2, pg.27

“The assumption was that the severe selection in admission to tertiary education in elite systems was to blame for the fact that, due to (a) number of economic, social and cultural reasons, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds either did not apply at all, or they were less successful in stiff competition during the admission proceedings”.

The study points out that already in the 1990s, it transpired that, despite the expansion of the higher education sector, there was only a limited decrease in inequality in access to longer higher education studies. Despite the growing number of students (both advantaged and disadvantaged) the level of inequality remains the same. This leads to speculation on the relationship of access to student selection systems, and also on the kind of education and teaching that is on offer once the students have been accepted. Alex Usher points out in his recent article: “Ten years back and ten years forward: Developments and trends in higher education in Europe region” (2009: 9) that there is no simple solution:

...“widening access is not simply a matter introducing re-distributive programs for financial or social capital. It is also a matter of changing the nature of higher education itself. (...) The old-school universities – the ones that are very traditionally used to train the new elites – do not provide a type of education which is universally desired by youth or universally desirable in the labour market. So there has been a move to create new forms of higher education at new types of institutions – education that is less theoretical, more practical and (in theory at least) more welcoming to non-traditional students. Thus universalization has to some extent driven institutional diversification over the years”.

The need to adapt the teaching methods is clearly reflected in the survey where nearly 90% of the European HEIs identify innovative approaches to teaching and learning along with internationalisation as their policy focus.

The recent EUA study on Institutional Diversity in European Higher Education, (Reichert: 2009: 151) investigates the wide-ranging diversity factors that are presently driving European universities. It points to the need for new practices when it comes to providing education to a diverse student body and the changes in attitude to the importance of teaching when it comes to addressing different communities of learners. The study also underlines the fact that internal diversity challenges (one example is student diversity) are not always perceived as an asset:

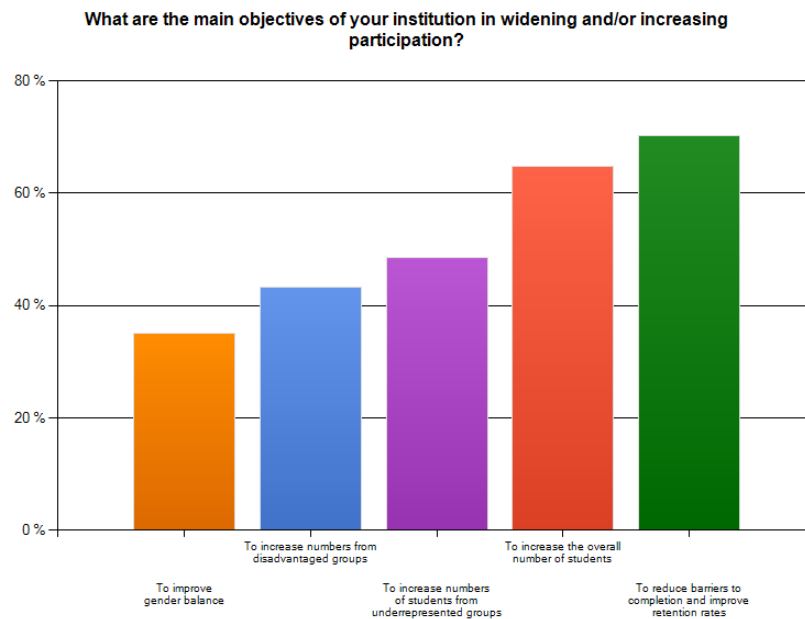
“but often perceived as a challenge for institutions. While most European institutions, with a few exceptions (most often in England), are relatively indifferent to the ethnic, social or religious diversity of their student bodies, attitudes to diversity of student qualifications are ambivalent.”

Furthermore, in the midst of the tension between elite and mass education (Usher: 2009), institutions that expect to attract the most qualified or the most talented students from less educationally privileged backgrounds, need to provide special support services (particularly guidance and counselling), and in both cases, institutions want to be recognised for their excellent learning environment. There are, however, hardly any rewards or public recognition for institutions which have pursued excellence in teaching and supporting diverse student bodies. The survey looked at the provision of student services as well as the issue of retention; it will be further discussed in Part 3.

The Trends 2010 report, that reviews the past decade of the Bologna Process from the European higher institutions’ perspective, has found no common conception of the importance of engaging in the support for non-traditional students across Europe. However, European HEIs are being asked to focus on the

benefits of attracting and retaining the best students, regardless of background or nationality, as part of their mission to support the development of society. In the Access to Success European survey, nearly half of the institutions in the sample consider it very important to increase the number of non-traditional students. This can be seen from the table on increasing and widening participation, where the overall retention and increase in general student numbers (maybe not surprisingly) takes precedence over non-traditional students.

Table 2



However, increasing and widening participation does not top the list of future institutional priorities. This sub-section of European HEIs expects internationalisation to be the main focus in the next decade, with 64% of the institutions⁹ indicating this as the highest priority, and this trend is confirmed in the much larger Trends 2010 sample. The international agenda tends to overshadow the national agenda. Internationalisation seems to be more important for the identity of the institution than the social make-up of the student body. It has to be pointed out, however, that adding international students to the national student mix is also a way to diversify the student population and carries with it another set of educational challenges for the higher education institutions.

The focus on internationalisation follows the different European and national agendas for promoting the international competitiveness of European HEIs. An indication that European HEIs are addressing the need to diversify their funding (e.g. through the introduction of tuition fees or providing external services, continuing education or collaborative research to industry), and support mobility and recognition. One explanation could be that these universities are aware of the challenges of the changing European demography, and are looking to maintain student numbers either via international or non-traditional students, or that they are thriving “cosmopolitan” universities, that want to meet a variety of strategic objectives in order to enhance their reputation. As mentioned previously, however, there is

⁹ See table 6

very little national or European level recognition for socially-responsive HEIs at this stage, whereas internationalisation (attracting international students and faculty) seems to be both a national and institutional priority. The retention of students and innovative approaches to teaching and learning came in second place on the priority list in the survey (behind internationalisation), both at 46%, and widening participation came only in fourth place at 32%.

A diversified student portfolio

European higher education in 2010 has to cater to an increasingly diversified student population; the traditional first-time young student, the international student, the returning student, the student who wants to up-grade and students from diverse backgrounds. The Access to Success survey indicates that there is a growing awareness of the importance of developing innovative teaching methodologies in order to deliver education effectively to an increasing number of diverse students.

The traditional student body made up of full-time young students is a thing of the past. A great number of different changes to the student population have taken place over the past decades. The traditional full-time student is rarely a full-time student, as was found in the European Students' Union's 'Bologna with Students Eyes 2009', but rather a part-time student working up to 20 hours a week in addition to studying. Furthermore, women now make up the largest group of students at the majority of European universities. This change has been so rapid that some countries view it as a feminisation of higher education, though as per table 7, changing attitudes take much longer.

International students are another rapidly growing group, that has started to make a significant contribution to the student body in some European countries. The last group are the students from a non-traditional background¹⁰, and even if they are not yet a significant group, they are slowly increasing in numbers. In order for both the student and the university to be successful, it is essential not only to concentrate on accessibility, but also to implement follow-up policies for both retention and employability. As can be seen in table 3, the reduction of barriers for completion and retention is at the top of the priority list of European university agendas irrespective of their geographical and cultural situation.

Table 4 indicates that European universities are well-aware of the fact that they have not been successful in attracting and graduating students that reflect the diverse European population. The survey also indicates that while European higher education institutions are challenged to widen the social diversity of the student population, it can be a difficult task as legislation in many countries, for historic reasons, prohibits the university from obtaining data on the student's social background.

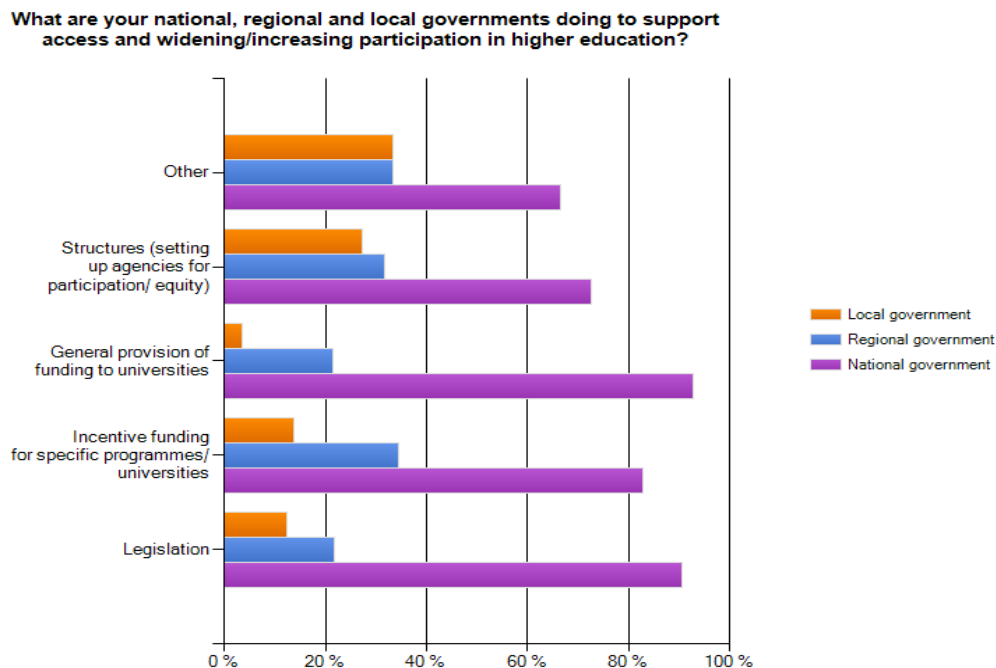
National support for widening participation and access

The European universities participating in the survey indicate that national governments have put measures in place both at national, regional and local level, but at the same time these are perceived as inadequate. Inadequate funding is perceived as a major obstacle to students' success and for HEIs to successfully support students. 69% of the responding universities indicate that lack of funding for students or for universities to support widening participation is considered as an obstacle.

¹⁰ The non-traditional background covers a number of groups of students from the socially and economically disadvantaged to ethnic minorities and immigrants as well as first-generation and adult students.

Data from the Access to Success survey show that universities do not consider national legislation to be an obstacle for widening participation by European universities. The data collected on national and institutional policies in Table A¹¹ support the view that national strategies and policies for widening participation and lifelong learning are in place or are currently being introduced in the majority of EU countries.

Table 3



Why is it, then, that access and widening participation have not improved significantly despite the increase in student numbers in higher education (18% on average according to OECD in the past decade) and the high priority that access has had in both the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Agenda? Indeed, many countries have anti-discrimination policies in place that seem to have had little effect since the difficulties for the students in question appear to be so deep-rooted in societal structures that access is too restricted for them to be able to work their way through the education system successfully.

One possible explanation could be the restricted autonomy in addressing widening participation and access as highlighted in the EUA Trends V Report¹². The report shows how difficult it can be for universities to actively support the widening participation agenda by attracting a diverse student body, if they do not have the institutional autonomy to do so. This finding is supported by the recent EUA Autonomy study¹³ that concludes that only in very few countries do higher education institutions feel that they have true latitude to choose their own students. One recent example of problems caused by widening access has been in Austria, where free access is being practised and, as a result, students are

¹¹ See Appendix 2, pg.27

¹² Since 1999, EUA has been following the introduction of the Bologna Process from a higher education institutional point of view in the Trends reports.

¹³ EUA, University Autonomy in Europe I, exploratory study (2009, forthcoming)

now on strike because the lecture halls have to cater for nearly double the number of students that they were designed for. HEIs have had no opportunity to select and support the students as they would have liked. Free access does not seem to solve the problem of widening participation.

Table A¹⁴, indicates how diverse the rules for selection procedures are in Europe. Higher education institutions in continental Europe are rarely able to pro-actively select their students, because the admission systems do not allow this. One exception is students who are admitted on the basis of recognition of prior learning; individual selection policies are generally in place for this group. Another exception is the international students, where the selection is commonly done at the institutional level, and not through a centralised national admission procedure.

Apart from this, most ministries of education have developed and set rules for student enrolment (in cooperation with higher education institutions) which increasingly promote anonymity and are thus inevitably less focused on the individual. Centralised admission systems in massified or universalised higher education systems are formally intended to ensure equal opportunities, but, as a result, HEIs may lose the opportunity to identify at an early stage those students who, for various reasons, might need encouragement and support.

The introduction of (fair) rules and regulations or free access are meant to ensure equal access irrespective of background, but in fact they have made it difficult or, in some countries, almost impossible for universities to be actively inclusive and responsive. This may be at the heart of widening participation. Widening access from an institutional perspective is certainly about access, accessibility and raising aspirations, but, if HEIs cannot select their student body proactively, the whole student success cycle: access, retention and graduation/employability is at risk.

This point is supported in the EUA study on diversity (Reichert: 2009: 130):

“The relative indifference to diversity of the student body, at least on average, which contrasts sharply with the highly visible and often charged “institutional diversity” debates and policies in the USA, reflects the limited leeway which institutions have in many parts of continental Europe in this respect. While other aspects of institutional autonomy have increased considerably in all of the continental countries visited, student selection is still the realm where government regulation plays a decisive role in the majority of continental European systems.”

Another possible explanation for the lack of success in increasing and widening participation is the role that the **primary and secondary education** system plays when it comes to preparing potential students. The transitions between the different levels of education are more challenging to navigate for the non-traditional students. A recent OECD study indicates that there is a correlation between inclusive primary and secondary school systems and widening participation at tertiary level. If the primary and secondary school systems are highly selective then it is virtually impossible for the non-traditional groups to be able to live up to even the best intention of free access – they will never reach the level of formal qualifications needed.

¹⁴ See Appendix 2, pg.27

One of the Dutch universities surveyed highlighted this problem:

“The structure of (the) Dutch secondary school system causes major problems. Children at the age of 12 are sent to/advised for pre-university college or “lower” levels of secondary school. Several scientific publications have shown that ethnic minority schoolchildren are relatively (...) much more often excluded from pre-university college, and most of the time directed towards the “lowest” next level, which is a sort of vocational education (even if their test scores at 12 prove they are capable of pre-university college!). From that level there is hardly or no way up (leading to higher education...). This problem can only be solved by the government.”

The rapid massification and even universalisation of higher education over the last decade and centralised admission systems or free access in the majority of European countries has potentially caused students from a non-academic or non-traditional background to feel less encouraged and supported in taking a step outside their comfort zones. In the past, teachers and professors, the church and other local dignitaries made it their social responsibility to spot and support the aspirations of young talent. In today’s society we tend to forego this responsibility for the sake of “fairness”. The old system, of course, had severe drawbacks when it came to “democracy” and was rightly replaced by much more anonymous systems that are perceived as being fair. Centralised admission systems in a massified or universalised higher education system were intended to limit the dependency on human intervention and support in admission and selection procedures. However, in this process HEIs have lost their ability to identify at an early stage students who, for various reasons, might need encouragement and support in accessing education and during their studies. Selection systems that attempt “fairness” by looking only at measurable indicators tend to fail when it comes to enrolling non-traditional students, and anti-discrimination laws make it impossible or almost impossible for continental European institutions to identify non-traditional students from the outset and thus be able to support their introduction into higher education, their retention and even their passage into employment. In some countries the data protection act even prevents HEIs from identifying underrepresented groups (unless a student identifies her/himself) who might benefit from a targeted support system to ensure retention, graduation and employment, as can be seen e.g. in Denmark, Germany and France.

Thus, European HEIs have, in practice, limited chances to create a diversified student portfolio proactively, when it comes to gender, race and social background. And, even if they can, their work is not finished. With a strong student portfolio containing full-time students from diverse backgrounds, mature students, junior and senior students, part-time students and lifelong learners, HEIs need to build support systems that will retain them and make them readily employable whether as future researchers or in society at large. The Access to Success project identifies a number of good practices in the form of tracking systems and support programmes for the non-traditional student to enhance their retention and graduation rates.

The institutional experience

The data from this small study of 37 HEIs in 19 countries¹⁵ can only give an indication of the challenges of the widening access and participation agenda. The data indicates, not surprisingly, that while gender issues have been addressed, there is still some way to go before the student population can be said to reflect society as a whole:

¹⁵ Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, UK (Scotland + England + Wales)

Table 4

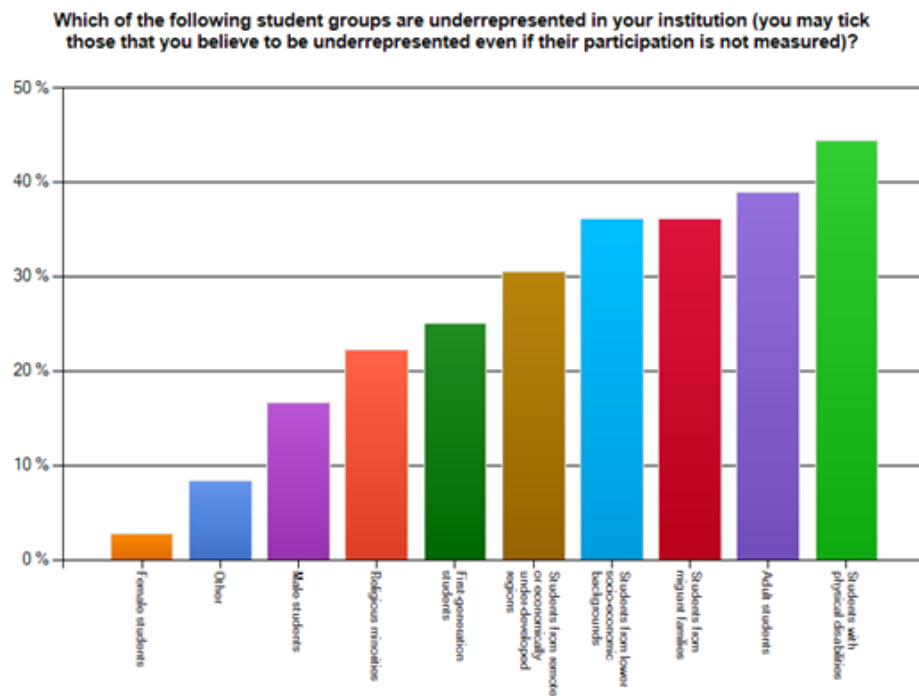


Table 4 gives an indication of the groups that European HEIs indicate have been particularly difficult to reach or where, to a certain extent, there has been little political will to make progress. Surprisingly, considering the European legislation for students with disabilities and the fact that 83% of European universities (Trends 2010), nearly 50% of the HEIs in this sample, consider that students with disabilities are underrepresented. Two groups stand out both in this survey and in the much larger Trends 2010 sample; students from ethnic minorities and refugees. There are a number of other groups including students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, first generation students and adult students, that have been targeted but still find it difficult not only to access but also to graduate. Gathering data on the make-up of the institutions' student population can be very difficult: the survey indicates that there are very diverging possibilities for collecting data in the different EU countries. In some countries it is not legally possible for historic reasons and often information can only be collected on a voluntary basis. Reflecting the difficulties that have been highlighted by the BFUG¹⁶, the only data that all European HEIs can collect themselves are about age and gender. Only the UK institutions indicate that they can collect data on the individual student's background.

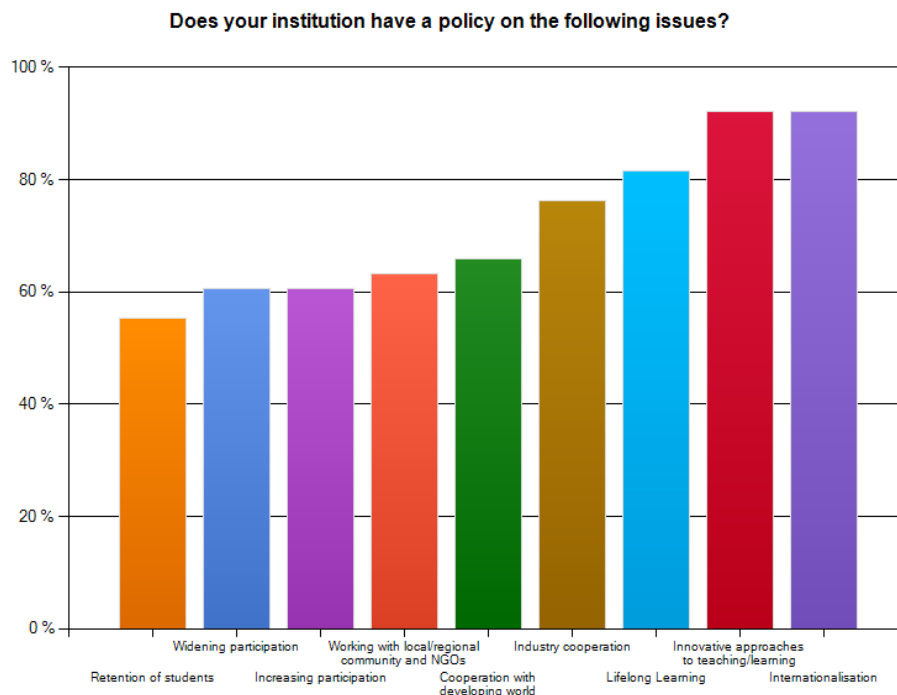
The data indicate that the universities feel committed to the widening participation agenda, but feel that they do not have enough time (81%) and that 84% consider that there are financial obstacles to address the issue.

¹⁶ BFUG (Bologna Follow Up Group, established to support and monitor the progress of the implementation of the Bologna Process)

New institutional policies for widening participation: retention

As discussed, internationalisation has been identified in this survey and in Trends 2010 as the key policy area for the future, and the data collected within the Access to Success project show that 94% have a policy in place for internationalisation. It is closely followed by innovative approaches to teaching/learning (92%) and lifelong learning (86%) as opposed to other areas. Increasing participation and widening participation come much further down the list with 61% indicating that these two issues are considered as parts of the same policy, but also that European HEIs do not necessarily share the European level policy of closely interlinking lifelong learning and widening participation.

Table 5



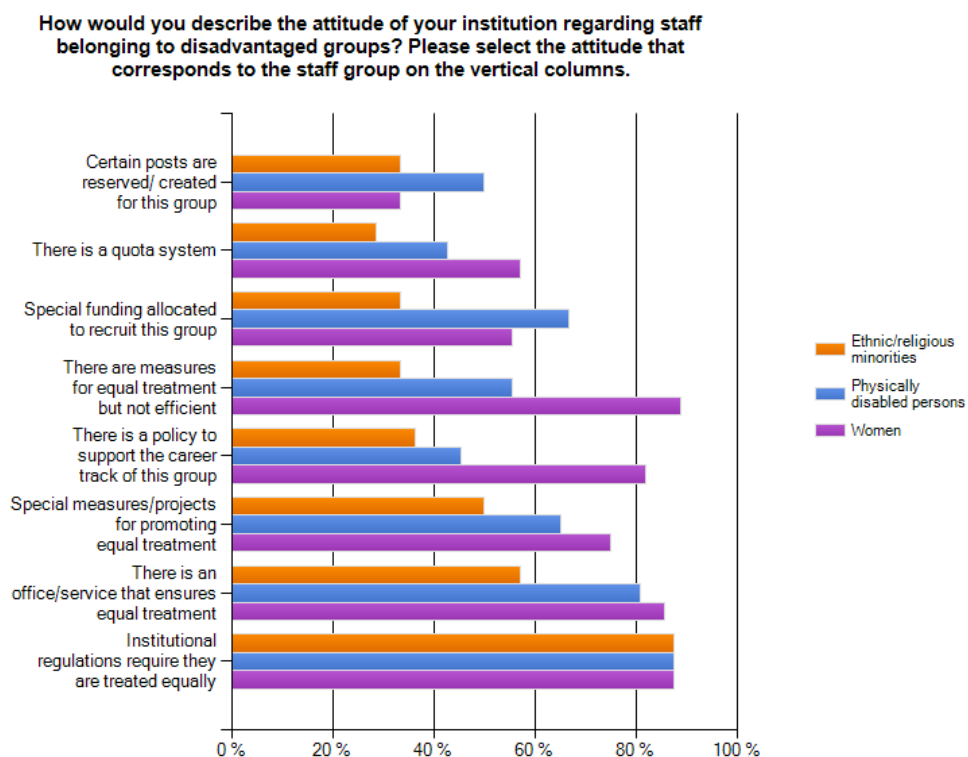
The emphasis on internationalisation, innovative approaches to teaching and learning, and lifelong learning indicate that the focus may be changing towards a diversified student population, but that the use and understanding of terminology may cause difficulties. The three top issues on this list can be seen as an institutional acknowledgement of the necessity to develop new teaching methods in order to support not only a diversified student population, but also a rapidly growing student population, as pointed out above. The survey found an inconsistency between the above table which indicates that 60% of the institutions have policies for widening participation in place and the recent reports on the social dimension of the Bologna Process that indicate that policies may be in place, but have so far not had the intended effect.

When asked about objectives directly related to increasing/widening participation, more than 70% of institutions indicate that their priority is to improve retention rates in general and remove possible

barriers for success, before increasing the overall numbers of students. Retention and retention rates are thus not only considered in relation to non-traditional students. The increased focus on retention rates in the Bologna decade relates to changes in funding of education that have moved towards output funding. Retention therefore has become increasingly essential, and European HEIs can no longer afford to support students who progress slowly through their studies; a clear example of this can be found in Denmark, where changes in government funding has encouraged the HEIs to closely track the progress of their students. The result of the survey also gave an indication of the traditional support system used for the retention of students. The focus is on cooperation with the student council, targeted academic support and student counselling, 96% of the HEIs in the sample use these, while the more Bologna-inspired student-centred learning initiatives (introducing responsive pedagogic strategies, implementing student-centred learning and a student conductive environment) score less highly.

Another obstacle was found when the survey addressed the attitude of staff. The table indicates how slow attitudes and practices change, with the responses to the questions on women as a clear indication. Regulations for equal treatment are in place at nearly 90% of the HEIs in the survey, but equally many indicate that the measures for equal treatment are not efficient for women. The responses indicate that there is a time-lag between creating policies and changes in attitude.

Table 6

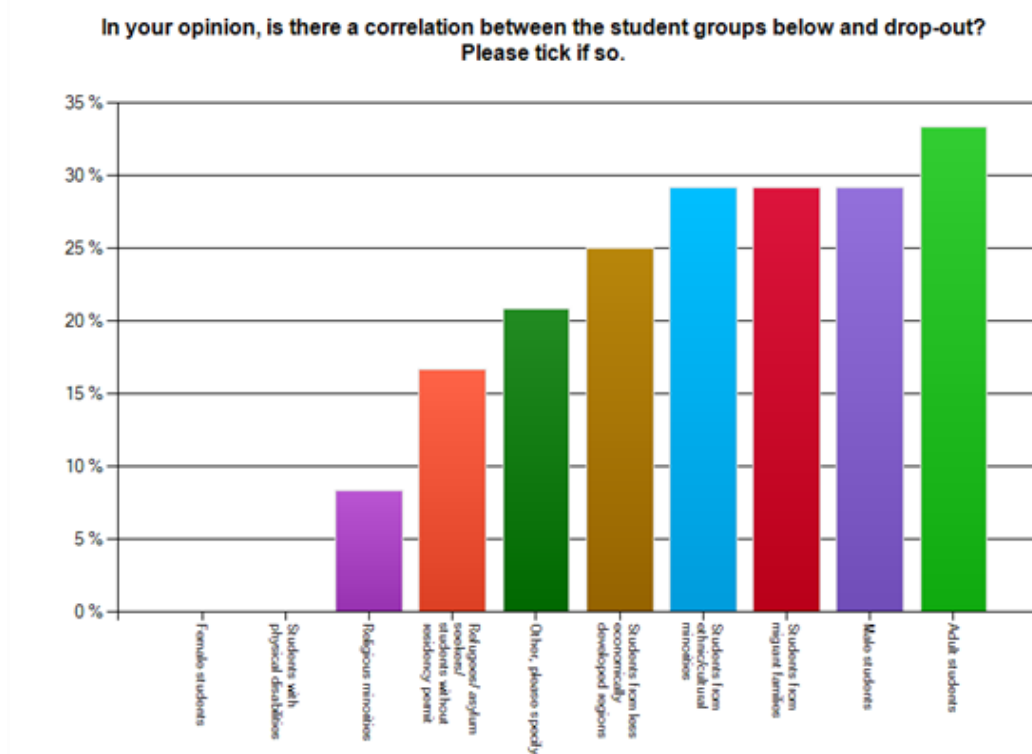


Changes in the way university education is funded could be identified as a third obstacle for HEIs to widen participation. Non-traditional students demand more “investment” initially to be successful, and thus a more focused policy. The survey identified a number of reasons for the difficulties HEIs are facing

in reflecting the social make-up of society in their student body. They are related to funding and support both for students and institutions, and to policies and attitudes.

This small survey of European HEIs suggests that one way to tackle a more diversified student body is to develop new approaches to teaching/learning, even if it scores lower than more traditional measures. Changes in the make-up of the student body (not least a more multi-cultural student body) has promoted new attitudes to changing teaching methods and practices. The changes have not only been prompted by students but also by technological developments and the introduction of the Bologna tools: the definition of learning outcomes and the relationship between learning outcomes and examination methods.

Table 7



The survey also tried to explore the relationship between student background and drop-out, and while it is not based on figures (as pointed out earlier, hard facts are only collected by the universities in a few countries), but rather on perceptions of the HEIs, it still points to a couple of interesting outcomes. The first is that there no longer seems to be a correlation between female gender and drop-out, but, according to the survey, there is one for male students as can be seen in the table 8. The second correlation is not surprising given all the reports published recently on the social dimension: there is still a high correlation between socially and economically disadvantaged students and a high drop-out rate. When it comes to institutional perception on why non-traditional students drop-out, financial problems is the single most recurring answer.

Conclusions

The European survey of the Access to Success project indicates that European higher education institutions are increasingly engaged in diversifying their student portfolio, including both international and non-traditional students, but also that there are a number of obstacles of a more fundamental kind to be overcome outside the realm of higher education institutions themselves. The first relates to the way the primary and secondary education systems support social inclusion. The second obstacle concerns the admission procedures and whether they promote social inclusion and the third is linked to current funding formulae and whether they encourage European higher education institutions to be inclusive and responsive. Potentially, there is a fourth obstacle concerning the attitude of staff.

European higher education institutions in general have the legal framework to address the widening participation agenda as has been called for in the “European universities’ charter on lifelong learning”, and the survey indicates many do, but that access in itself is not sufficient. European HEIs need to address retention and graduation for all the students in higher education. It is thus too early to claim that all potential European students, regardless of race, age and gender, have access to success. It can only be hoped that the Bologna reforms will facilitate the ability and the responsibility of European higher education institutions to be more inclusive and responsive.

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Appendix 1

Country-by-country overview of access to higher education, universities’ possibilities to select their students, legislation and policies for widening participation, recognition of prior learning, and of national and institutional LLL strategies in 2007/2008

Adapted from material contained in:

- Trends 2010 National Rector Conferences’ Questionnaire (**NRC**)
- Trends 2010 Institutional Questionnaire (**T2010**)
- Key Data on Higher Education in Europe, EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2009 Edition (**KD**),
- Draft 2008 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the “Education & Training 2010” work programme “Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation” 2008 based on 2007 data (**JPR**),
- University Autonomy in Europe, EUA (2009) (**A**)
- Bologna Process Stocktaking report 2009 (**SR**)
- Access to success, EUA questionnaire 2009 (**AS**)

National Access/student selection systems as defined in Key data on higher education in Europe:

1. Limitation of places/selection of students at national/regional level for all or almost all fields of study (numerus clausus)
2. Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level for all or almost all fields of study

3. Free Access = with regulations for prior qualifications: secondary school leaving certificate, entrance exam (?) to almost all fields
4. Free access combined with institutional input depending on field

EUA Autonomy Report:

1. Access, free access, numerus clausus
2. HEI set add. selection criteria = Basic requirements set by government (secondary school leaving certificate) + additional criteria defined by HEI
3. Special quotas = No quotas, state sets quotas, university sets quotas

Appendix 2

Table A - Country-by-country overview, as it was in 2007/2008

Country	National Access/student selection system/determination of number of students = autonomy of institutions to select students	National /Institutional Policy for Recognition of Prior Learning as access Average: T2010 = 30%	National strategy/legislation for widening participation	National strategy for Lifelong Learning	HEI strategy for Lifelong Learning Average: T2010 = 39%
Austria	NRC: Free Access A: Free access, No quotas for specific groups of students KD: Open access combined with complex regulations	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No, because of open access T2010 = 48% SR: Yellow	NRC: Open Access by law AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: No, problems with the relationship between institutional autonomy and LLL strategy	NRC: Yes T2010 = 16% of institutions have strategy
Belgium	A: Free Access, No quotas for specific groups of students T2010: Incentives for WP	JPR: Yes T2010 = 22% SR: Green	NRC: Legislation and activities T2010: Plan for WP	JPR: Yes T2010: Yes	NRC: Yes T2010 = 30% of institutions have strategy
Belgium	A: Free Access, No quotas for specific groups of students T2010: Incentives for WP	JPR: Yes T2010 = 86% SR: Green	NRC: Yes, strategy for WP T2010: Plan for WP AS: regional legislation + funding	NRC: Yes JPR: Yes	NRC: No info T2010 = 36% of institutions have strategy
Bulgaria	A: Student numbers decided by state, HEI set add. selection criteria, HEI sets quotas KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level	JPR: Developing strategy T2010 = 0% SR: Light green	NRC: No info	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No info	NRC: No info T2010 = 75% of institutions have strategy
Switzerland	A. Free Access, state set quota for specific groups	NRC: No national regulations, but institutional practices T2010 = 44 % SR: Yellow	NRC: No info	NRC: No	NRC: Yes T2010 = 19% of institutions have strategy
Cyprus	A: HEI negotiate student numbers with government, state set quotas for specific groups KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at national/regional level for all or almost all fields of study (numerus clausus)	JPR: Developing strategy T2010 = 0% SR: Red	No info	JPR: Yes	NRC: No info T2010 = 33% of institutions have strategy
Czech Republic	A: HEI can decide on number of fee-paying students, HEI set add. selection criteria KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level for all or almost all fields of study	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No T2010 = 10% SR: orange	NRC: Yes AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes	NRC: No T2010 = 67% of institutions have strategy
Germany	A: Limited open access, HEI negotiate student numbers with government, HEI sets quotas KD: Open access combined with complex regulations	JPR: No general validation system NRC: Yes, in ANKOM project T2010 = 40% SR: Light green	NRC: Yes AS: Reform of access regulations to HEIs, social dimension action plan + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: No – not for HEI and not for all	NRC: No T2010 = 12% of institutions have strategy
Denmark	A: HEIs can decide on student numbers, no quotas for specific groups of students, to some extent HEIs can set add. selection criteria, KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes T2010 = 25% SR: Green	NRC: No T2010 site-visit: Yes AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes T2010 = 50% of institutions have strategy
Estonia	A: HEI can decide on student numbers, HEI set add. selection criteria No quotas for specific groups of students KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level for all or almost all fields of study	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No info T2010 = 40% SR: Light green	NRC: No info AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: No info	NRC: No info T2010 = 40% of institutions have strategy

Country	National Access/student selection system/determination of number of students = autonomy of institutions to select students	National /Institutional Policy for Recognition of Prior Learning as access Average: T2010 = 30%	National strategy/legislation for widening participation	National strategy for Lifelong Learning	HEI strategy for Lifelong Learning Average: T2010 = 39%
Greece	A: HEI negotiate student numbers with government, state set quotas for specific groups KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at national/regional level	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No, but planned discussions T2010 = 0% SR: Orange	NRC: Yes, but HEI don't want WP because of a great number of inactive students	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes T2010 = 36% of institutions have strategy
Spain	A: Free Access, university sets quotas in certain fields HEI sets quotas KD Limitation of places/selection of students at national/regional level for all or almost all fields of study (numerus clausus)	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No but planned for the non-university sector T2010 = 20% SR: Green	NRC: No policy AS: regional legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: No	NRC: Yes T2010 = 40% of institutions have strategy
Finland	A: HEI negotiate student numbers with government, university sets quotas, HEI set add. selection criteria, HEI sets quotas KD: Combination of limitation of places/selection of students at national and institutional level	JPR: Yes NRC: No, but planned. Recommendations made T2010 = 33% SR: Green	NRC: Yes WP concerns both incentives to attract younger students, immigrants and foreign students AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes T2010 = 58% of institutions have strategy
France	NRC: Free access for universities A: Free access, No quotas for specific groups of students KD: Open access combined with complex regulations	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes, part of the LLL agenda T2010 = 34% SR: Green	NRC: Yes, possibilities to improve financial conditions	JPR: Policy in place, but considered a strategy NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes T2010 = 60% of institutions have strategy
Croatia	A: University can decide on student numbers, HEI set add. selection criteria, HEI sets quotas	JPR: No validation system T2010 = 0% SR: Yellow	No info	JPR: Yes	No info
Hungary	A: HEI negotiate student numbers with government, HEI sets quotas KD: Government limitation of places/	JPR: No validation system, but one in progress NRC: Yes, formal, employment and life experiences T2010 = 10%	NRC: Yes, mentor programme and financial support system AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes T2010 = 35% of institutions have strategy
Ireland	A: HEI can decide on student numbers, university sets quotas, HEI set add. selection criteria KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes T2010 = 85% SR: Green	NRC: Yes, 4 target groups: soc.-eco disadvantaged, students with disabilities, mature students, ethnic minorities	JPR: Updating the LLL strategy NRC: Yes, the strategy is being updated to make better use of the LLL tools	NRC: Yes, all HEIs involved in LLL T2010 = 60% of institutions have strategy
Iceland	A: Free Access, HEI negotiate student numbers with government, HEI set add. selection criteria, No quotas for specific groups of students KD: Free Access = with regulations for prior qualifications: secondary school leaving certificate, entrance exam (?) to almost all fields	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: Will be included in strategy T2010 = 67% SR: Green	NRC: Yes, linked to RPL	JPR: Policy in place, but considered a strategy NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes T2010 = 33% of institutions have strategy
Italy	A: Free Access, HEI sets quotas KD: Open access combined with complex regulations	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No T2010 = 3% SR: Light green	NRC: No	JPR: Policy in place, but considered a strategy NRC: No strategy	NRC: No T2010 = 43% of institutions have strategy

Country	National Access/student selection system/determination of number of students = autonomy of institutions to select students	National /Institutional Policy for Recognition of Prior Learning as access Average: T2010 = 30%	National strategy/legislation for widening participation	National strategy for Lifelong Learning	HEI strategy for Lifelong Learning Average: T2010 = 39%
Latvia	A: HEI can decide on number of fee-paying students, HEI sets quotas KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level for all or almost all fields of study	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: Will be included in strategy T2010 = 13% SR: Yellow	NRC: Yes, but it only marginally mentions higher education	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes, but it only marginally mentions higher education	NRC: Yes, HEI interested in developing LLL even without a policy T2010 = 38% of institutions have strategy
Lithuania	A: HEI can decide on number of fee-paying students, state set quotas for specific groups KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level for all or almost all fields of study	JRC: No validation system NRC: HEI have their own system T2010 = 39% SR: Orange	NRC: No	JPR: Yes NRC: In principle the strategy covers both	NRC: No T2010 = 61% of institutions have strategy
Luxembourg	A: HEI can decide on student numbers, university sets quotas, HEI set add. selection criteria KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at national/regional level for all or almost all fields of study (numerus clausus)	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: Yes T2010 = 0% SR: Green	NRC: No	JPR: Policy in place, but considered a strategy NRC: No strategy	NRC: No – too early T2010 = 0% of institutions have strategy
Malta	A: Free Access, no quotas for specific groups of students KD: Free Access = with regulations for prior qualifications: secondary school leaving certificate, entrance exam (?) to almost all fields	JPR: Validation system = The Malta Qualifications Council T2010 = 100 %	+ WP, WP for equity	JPR: Policy in place, but considered a strategy	No info
Netherlands	A: Free Access, No quotas for specific groups of students KD: Free Access to almost all fields of study	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes T2010 = 53% SR: Green	NRC: New incentives to attract/include disabled students and non-Western immigrants AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Policy in place, but considered a strategy NRC: Yes, but universities not really involved except for OU	NRC: No, except OU T2010 = 17% of institutions have strategy
Norway	A: Student number decided by state, HEI set add. selection criteria, state set quotas for specific groups KD: Cannot decide on number of students, state sets quotas	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes T2010 = 75% SR: Green	NRC: Student loans and grants gives possibilities for WP. New legislation for setting up agency for WP AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: White paper. Open University set up in 1998. LLL is defined as core activity in law of 2005.	NRC: HEIs in Norway supports the Open University (appoint board members) and many institutions have a lot of LLL activities. T2010 = 40% of institutions have strategy
Poland	A: HEI can decide on student numbers, no quotas for specific groups of students KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No T2010 = 4 % SR: Yellow	NRC: Yes, creating HEIs in remote areas to bring education to non-urban areas and incentives to admit disabled students AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: Is expected to be developed in 2010	NRC: Yes, in 60% of university-level HEIs T2010 = 47% of institutions have strategy
Portugal	A: HEI can decide on number of fee-paying students, HEI set add. selection criteria, state sets quotas for specific groups KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at national/regional level for all or almost all fields of study (numerus clausus)	JPR: Yes NRC: No info T2010 = 80% SR: Green	NRC: No info AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Policy in place, but considered a strategy NRC: No info	NRC: No info T2010 = 40% of institutions have strategy

Country	National Access/student selection system/determination of number of students = autonomy of institutions to select students	National /Institutional Policy for Recognition of Prior Learning as access Average: T2010 = 30%	National strategy/legislation for widening participation	National strategy for Lifelong Learning	HEI strategy for Lifelong Learning Average: T2010 = 39%
Romania	A: HEI can decide on number of fee-paying students, HEI set add. selection criteria, state set quota for specific groups KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at institutional level for all or almost all fields of study	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No info T2010 = 3% SR: Green	NRC: No info	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No info	NRC: No info T2010 = 42% of institutions have strategy
Serbia	A: HEI can decide on number of fee-paying students, state set quota for specific groups	No info SR: Orange	No info	No info	No info
Russia	No info, HEI set add. selection criteria	No info T2010 = 25 % SR: Orange	No info	No info	No info T2010 = 63% of institutions have strategy
Sweden	A: HEI negotiate student numbers with government, HEI set add. selection criteria, no quotas for specific groups of students KD: Combination of limitation of places/selection of students at national and institutional level	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: Yes, is widely used by HEIs T2010 = 35% SR: Green	NRC: A policy, requiring each HEI to work and report on widening participation AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: The system is already an LLL system, no need for a strategy	NRC: Yes T2010 = 35% of institutions have strategy
Slovenia	A: HEI negotiate student numbers with government, university propose quotas, HEI set add. selection criteria KD: Combination of limitation of places/selection of students at national and institutional level	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: Yes T2010 = 0% SR: Green	NRC: NA AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Strategy NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes T2010 = 25% of institutions have strategy
Slovakia	A: HEI negotiate student numbers with government, HEI set quotas, HEI set add. selection criteria	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: Developing strategy T2010 = 7% SR: Red	NRC: Included in LLL strategy AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes T2010 = 50% of institutions have strategy
Turkey	A: Student numbers decided on by state and selection done by state KD: Limitation of places/selection of students at national/regional level for all or almost all fields of study (numerus clausus)	JPR: No validation system NRC: No info T2010 = 18% SR: Red	NRC: No info	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: No info	NRC: No info T2010 = 44% of institutions have strategy
England, Wales and Northern Ireland	A: HEI negotiate student numbers with government, HEI set add. selection criteria, no quotas for specific groups of students KD: Overall numbers determined by government, but selection of students at institutional level	JPR: Developing strategy NRC: HEIs can set different criteria for recognition of prior learning to gain access T2010 = 75% SR: Green	NRC: Aim higher AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes, for most institutions T2010 = 64% of institutions have strategy
Scotland	No info	JPR: No info NRC: Yes, developed and published guidelines for RPL T2010 = 92% SR: Green	NRC: Yes, well developed and has been extended to soc.-eco- disadvantaged students Will include financial incentives AS: legislation + funding	JPR: Yes NRC: Yes	NRC: Yes LLL is a priority for all HEIs T2010 = 69% of institutions have strategy

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