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**Title** Admissions to Higher Education In Europe: Developing the Holistic Model  
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## **Admissions to Higher Education In Europe: Developing the Holistic Model**

### **Background**

This paper will draw upon a major European Commission funded project looking at the nature of higher education admissions systems. The study examined secondary data on HE admissions in 35 countries in Europe and undertook detailed case study analysis of 8 countries. The study took a holistic view of HE admissions interpreting admissions as a process that begins in late primary school and does not finish until early in HE. Some countries. It examined within this holistic approach three questions regarding HE admission:

***How do schools choose people that can become students?***

***How do students choose HEIs and study programmes?***

***How do HEIs choose the students they enrol?***

The study has an important role to play in the context of European higher education. The EU benchmark that 40% of people aged 30-34 will have completed some form of HE by 2020 appears to be on track with the rate having risen from 27% in 2004 to 39% in 2016.<sup>1</sup> The high level of quantitative expansion over the past decade has put stress on national higher education systems, but many are now in an era of consolidation, quality improvement and outreach to new student groups. Policymakers are re-analysing who is applying for and entering higher education with a view to widening access to non-traditional groups. The available evidence shows clearly that higher education participation continues to fall short in terms of social equity and social reproduction (Hauschildt, Gwosć, Netz, & Mishra, 2015),(van de Werfhorst & Shavit, 2015). This has led some countries to develop initiatives widening participation and improving attainment<sup>2</sup>. These interventions include government support for: work undertaken by schools and through outreach and support mechanisms by universities and colleges.

### **Methods**

*A system-level mapping of EU Member States, EEA/EFTA countries and candidate countries.* The individual country analysis started with a standard set of description dimensions about each educational system. Data and descriptions were collected from comparative data sources and then validated by national experts in each of the respective countries. All 28 EU states were included as were Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, Liechtenstein, Iceland and Norway.

*Eight qualitative case studies delivered by national experts.* The in-depth case studies provide a detailed view of the dynamics of higher education admissions systems and how they work in

<sup>1</sup>[http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/product?code=t2020\\_41&language=en&mode=view](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/product?code=t2020_41&language=en&mode=view)

<sup>2</sup>[http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/EDUCATION/EURYDICE/documents/thematic\\_reports/163EN.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/EDUCATION/EURYDICE/documents/thematic_reports/163EN.pdf)

practice. They consist of interviews with key stakeholders in each country from the higher education and policymaking fields, as well as focus groups with two different sets of students: those planning to enter higher education (last year of upper secondary) and those who have recently entered higher education (first year of tertiary). The focus groups deliver the most insightful information on the choice formation process, highlighting differences between countries and groups within them. The case study countries were: *France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania and Spain.*

## **Findings**

The main findings from the study are outlined below:

- Higher Education systems can be divided into 4 types dependent on the extent of selection in schools and autonomy of HEIs to select students.
- Streaming tends to reinforce social stratification
- Merit is often defined in a one-dimensional way
- Matriculation examinations may not be 'fit for purpose' for higher education entry
- The quality of Information, Advice and Guidance is a concern
- Second-chance to higher education route have a peripheral role
- Social inclusion is rarely a central goal for higher education institutions
- Higher education institutions can manage student pathways pre- and post-entry
- The link between distribution of study places and labour market demand is weak
- HEIs want more admissions autonomy, but are wary of challenges
- Increased choice for students should not mean increased complexity
- Young people are making decisions under great pressure

## **Implications for future research and practice**

This paper will discuss how the study has offered systematic insights into how HE admissions work in Europe. It will argue that it is a holistic process that will displaying some overall commonalities is characteristic by significant variations across the continent. There are however a number of potential changes in how admission systems are organised that merit further discussion and exploration. These include:

Improving the information, advice and guidance available on higher education across the continent drawing on innovatory practice in countries such as the Netherlands, but supported by significant increased investment here.

Linking admission policy to student and labour market demand. There is a clear need to think more strategically if HE is going to remain relevant to societies in Europe via the graduates that emerges from the sector, and admissions policies are crucial here.

Incentivise a commitment to social inclusion from HEIs within funding systems. They should be more clearly charged with a responsibility both to enable the participation in higher education of learners from under-represented backgrounds and to support the successful completion. of their participation.

Pilot changes to streaming, both into and after upper secondary level. In order to create the conditions for a more equitable higher education system, streaming into programmes not leading to higher education should be left as late as possible (as is found in Types 2 and 3). Systems where streaming occurs at an early age (especially Type 1) appear to embed social stratification into higher education entry and, as students get older, make further policy interventions related to equity harder to deliver.

The ideas above also need to be located within developing theoretical contexts where HE admissions systems are concerned. The paper will also seek to advance the holistic model in order to take such debates forward

## **References**

Hauschildt, K., Gwosć, C., Netz, N., & Mishra, S. (2015). *Social and economic conditions of student life in Europe (EUROSTUDENT V 2012-2015)*. W. Bertelsmann. <http://doi.org/10.3278/6001920bw>

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