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The EUROGRADUATE feasibility study asks if and how a sustainable study on Europe’s higher education (HE) graduates could be established. The project involves systematically exploring stakeholders’ interest in a European graduate study, their requirements for such a study, the current practice of national-level graduate research, as well as existing international data capacities. The study’s goal is presenting options for setting up, organising, and funding a sustainable European graduate study.

Without foreclosing any options or recommendations regarding a European graduate study (EGS), this research digest presents a small selection of the project’s findings on international data capacities for studying HE graduates. A more comprehensive treatment will be provided in the final project report.

### Mapping international data capacities for studying HE graduates

One task of the EUROGRADUATE feasibility study is to evaluate existing European data sets (including international data sets comprising Europe) for their capacity to comparatively analyse graduates of European HE (see Box 1). This task has two reasons: Firstly, existing capacities need to be mapped to prevent a future European graduate study from collecting information already at hand. Secondly, a critical evaluation will reveal the shortcomings of existing data sets and thus help to identify any current lack of data. The evaluation aims to answer the following questions: Which data sets could give comparative statistics on European HE graduates? How reliable would these statistics be? In how far could the data sets be used for a European graduate study (or parts of it)? To what extent could the informational demands of stakeholders be covered by existing data?

#### **Box 1: Examining international data capacities**

International data capacities for monitoring and analysing HE graduates have been assessed by calculating a broad range of indicators as well as by studying publicly available questionnaires, methodological guides, and technical reports (e.g. European Social Survey, 2012, European Social Survey, 2014, Eurostat, 2003, Eurostat, 2013 and OECD, 2013).

For each data set or study the following information was collected: Purpose and general characteristics, history and future, target population, number of respondents by educational attainment, breakdowns to national/regional/institutional levels and number of respondents by educational attainment at these levels, definition of graduates, further variables of key importance to a graduate study, and definitions of these variables.

The following data sets have been covered:

- the European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS),
- the European Social Survey (ESS),
- the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC),
- the Adult Education Survey (AES),
- the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP),
- the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS),
- Eurobarometer, and
- the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS).

### No recent study specifically addresses HE graduates

Looking at the international data capacities for monitoring and analysing HE graduates, the first observation is that there is in fact no recent or ongoing comparative study focussing on HE graduates in Europe. The interconnected projects REFLEX (surveys done in 2005) and HEGESCO (surveys done in 2008) are the latest HE graduate studies covering a considerable number of European countries. Thus for mapping current data capacities for studying HE graduates one needs to turn to international studies that were not originally designed to analyse HE graduates. All in all, eight large-scale international studies were considered (see Box 1 for list of studies). All of them are based on general population surveys or surveys directed at specific age groups within the general population (e.g. the working-age population). None of them has HE as a focus, rather, they are either

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devoted to other topics (e.g. employment or education in general) or cover a large range of topics (as does, e.g., the ESS). For monitoring and analysing HE graduates, these studies are limited in several respects when compared to designated studies of HE graduates. These limitations can be categorized into: (1) difficulties in the identification of HE graduates, (2) difficulties with regard to number of cases and (3) difficulties regarding availability of key variables. Further limitations relate to the number of countries covered or the availability of longitudinal data on HE graduates.

### Identification of graduates in existing data sets difficult

*Definition of graduates:* In all examined data sets, there are difficulties concerning the definition of graduates. For example, to identify a certain cohort of graduates they are usually defined in terms of time elapsed since graduation. Only PIAAC and the EU-LFS allow, however, calculating the number of years after the completion of education. For the publicly available EU-LFS this is not possible either, as its basic file that can be currently obtained from the EUROSTAT contains only five-year groups. Thus in terms of a satisfactory definition of graduates new variables would need to be included in most surveys.

### Number of cases limits the analysis of HE graduates

*Number of respondents:* this is a problem in all examined data sets. In case of the EU-LFS, PIAAC, and, to some extent also the ESS (for merged data based on two or more rounds), it is possible to obtain reliable results for countries as a whole as well as for different types of education, but only when HE graduates are defined in a broad way to accumulate larger numbers of respondents (e.g. the age group 20 to 34). Even when using such a broad definition, reliable results may only be available for those countries in the data sets with relatively large numbers of respondents. Any further breakdown of the data or the analysis of specific groups of HE graduates (e.g. graduates with a migration background) is problematic and/or further reduces the number of countries for which reliable results can be obtained (cf. Mühleck 2013). Breakdowns to the institutional level prove to be outright impossible, unless the number of graduates were to be increased and the definition of graduates somewhat modified.

### For answering key questions regarding HE graduates necessary variables are missing

*Limited number of variables:* HE graduate studies are mostly concerned with the transition from HE to employment and how the education received relates to employment (cf. EUROGRADUATE research digest on “National-level capacities for studying HE graduates in Europe”). For this, they ask for characteristics such as: work experience before or during HE studies, mobility, educational career, assessment of HE studies, transition from education to work, characteristics of the first job after graduation, characteristics of the current job, or competencies (e.g. acquired in education, required by a job). The data sets that have been evaluated do not include assessments of education, questions about the first job, or (with the exception of the EU-LFS) information about transition from education to the labour market. In the EUROGRADUATE feasibility surveys, stakeholders have indicated that such issues are of high importance for a potential European graduate study (cf. EUROGRADUATE research digest on “Stakeholders’ requirements for a European graduate study”), but they could not be treated with existing data.

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### Some of the existing data sets have only limited geographical coverage

*Coverage of countries:* Stakeholders see all EU countries as the minimum geographical scope a European graduate study should aim to cover, and many respondents of the EUROGRADUATE surveys have even suggested going beyond this scope. The EU-LFS, the EWCS and the AES would mostly comply with this minimum goal. For the ESS this is true to a lesser extent, as not all countries have taken part in all rounds. The data of PIAAC covers only 18 EU countries. Even though data sets such as the EU-LFS do cover all or nearly all EU countries, reliable statistics would not always be available for all countries as the numbers of respondents needed for analyses would drop below minimum thresholds for countries with smaller samples.

### Long-term observation of graduates not possible with existing data sets

*Coverage of the mid- and long-term perspective:* Allowing for a mid- and long-term perspective on graduates careers has been seen as one of the most important features of a potential European graduate study (cf. EUROGRADUATE research digest on “Stakeholders’ requirements for a European graduate study”). However, none of the analysed data sets is organized in such a way that would easily meet this requirement. Substantial methodological changes would be needed for long-term observations of graduates.

### Existing data allows comparison with working population

It should however be noted that the analysed data sets also have certain advantages over typical graduate studies. PIAAC includes tests and measures of competencies yielding more valid results than the self-assessments often used in graduate studies. A future European graduate study should consider the possibility of adopting some of the measures developed by PIAAC. Furthermore, most data sets cover the whole working population. Thus indicators on HE graduates can be compared to other age groups or to graduates of other types of education. Given the limitations of the existing data sets, they could hardly serve as an alternative to a study specifically designed to monitor and analyse graduates of European HE. However, they could be used in a complementary manner and thus shed more light on the position of graduates of HE within the whole working population.

### References

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### Further results of the EUROGRADUATE study

The EUROGRADUATE feasibility project aims at taking substantial steps towards setting up a European graduate study and will work as a platform for people and organisations interested in such a study. This research digest presents insights into the results of the study's work package 4, in which a survey among European higher education researchers on national-level capacities for studying HE graduates in Europe was carried out. Research digests on the topics "National-level capacities for studying HE graduates in Europe" and "Stakeholders' requirements for a European graduate study" are available for download free of charge at [www.eurograduate.eu](http://www.eurograduate.eu). The final project report, expected at the end of 2015, will bring together the project results and provide a comprehensive overview on the feasibility of setting up a sustainable European graduate study.

### Contact

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