

## Research digest: National-level capacities for studying HE graduates in Europe

Authors: Kai Mühleck, Kristina Hauschildt

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, this research digest presents a small selection of the project's findings on the national-level capacities for studying HE graduates in Europe (see Box 1). A more comprehensive treatment will be provided in the final project report.

### Graduate studies are common but a number of countries have no regular data collections

In 26 of the 33 EU+EFTA countries (counting the French and Flemish community of Belgium separately) at least one graduate study fulfilling the formulated criteria (see Box 1) has been conducted in the last 10 years. For seven countries no such study could be identified (Belgium/fr., Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Malta). In most countries, fairly recent studies exist and three quarters of the 36 studies covered in the EUROGRADUATE surveys are expected to be repeated in the future. Repetitions of 23 studies follow a regular rhythm, with yearly (9 studies) or biannual studies (10 studies) being the most frequent forms. Overall, 18 of the 23 countries covered by the EUROGRADUATE surveys have at least one national-level graduate study which is expected to be repeated in the future. No repeated studies were reported for five countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain); three countries are planning repetitions without a regular rhythm (Czech Republic, Romania, and Slovakia). No information was available for Belgium/fl., Greece, and Poland.

#### Box 1: The EUROGRADUATE survey of graduate researchers

In June 2014, questionnaires were sent to researchers having conducted national level graduate studies in the last 10 years. The questionnaire covered a range of information on these studies as well as wishes and recommendations regarding a potential European graduate study. Building on previous work (e.g. Gaebel et al. 2012; Hordosy 2014) and desk research, 48 researchers or research groups were identified who had conducted studies in the EU+EFTA countries fulfilling all of the following criteria:

- focussing on (higher) education (e.g. student or graduate studies but no general population studies),
- providing statistics on HE graduates at the national level,
- having collected new micro level data themselves, i.e. primary studies, or based on administrative micro level data, and
- having had their phase of data collection or field work no more than 10 years ago (i.e. 2004 or later).

All in all, 48 researchers were contacted, of whom 33 completed the questionnaire (gross response rate = 69%). This data was complemented by information gathered in the surveys of national ministries and NRCs. All in all, information on a total of 36 studies in 23 countries/regions was available.

The number of countries without ongoing studies cannot be determined with absolute certainty due to missing data and as studies may have been overlooked, despite considerable efforts to identify all studies. No evidence for ongoing studies was found for a total of 12 countries (including the seven countries without any national level graduate study). At least 15 EU+EFTA countries do not regularly conduct national-level graduate studies according to the information gathered in the EUROGRADUATE project. Although graduate studies can be said to be common in European countries, this is a noticeable lack of information at the national level.

## Research digest: National-level capacities for studying HE graduates in Europe

### Over 90% of studies rely at least partially on survey data

In most countries, surveys are used to study HE graduates. The surveys, on average, take about half an hour for graduates to complete. All in all, there are only three studies based solely on administrative data. Even though administrative data offers a relatively cost-efficient way of collecting data it does not seem to be a realistic option for studying graduates at the level of the EU or beyond. For a number of countries it has been reported that linking graduate (survey) data with administrative data is not possible (for legal or other reasons). Using administrative data for a European study would thus exclude a number of countries a priori.

### Studies are very diverse in the timing of their first survey

The vast majority of studies survey one defined cohort at some point after graduation from higher education. The exact timing varies, with no more than five studies in the sample reporting the same point in time. Roughly, three larger groups of studies can be distinguished. For the first group of 10 studies, the first survey is within the period of 6-18 months after graduation. All these studies are ongoing studies. This group accounts for 1/3 of all survey studies in the sample and nearly half of all ongoing survey studies. A second group of five studies contacts graduates for the first time at about five years after graduation and thus at a much later point in their career. Four of these studies are one-time studies that were part of the REFLEX project or its successor HEGESCO. A third group comprises five studies which do not define their target group in relation to the year of graduation, but survey all graduates of a certain previous period at once (e.g., all graduates of the last five years).

Besides these groups other designs exist: two studies survey respondents at around the time of graduation. Two further studies follow respondents from leaving school over HE to after graduation. Finally, two studies survey several cohorts defined in relation to graduation at once, both of them cover the cohorts one and five years after graduation and thus to some extent combine the design of the first two larger groups.

### Few graduate panels exist

Only 6 of 29 studies with available data are panel studies (i.e. ask the same respondents at several points in time). Three of the six studies approach graduates twice, two studies three times and one study four times. Most panel studies survey graduates for the last time 5 years after graduation, with two studies going beyond that scope (7 and 10 years after graduation). Conducting panel studies is relatively demanding regarding methods and resources which may explain why they are less common. At the same time, panel studies allow studying the mid- and long-term developments of graduates – which was seen as important for a potential European graduate study by many respondents (cf. EUROGRADUATE research digest on stakeholders' requirements).

### The size of studies differs greatly

The number of valid cases of the graduate studies ranges from 645 to about 500,000 (Median = 14,454). As can be expected, studies addressing the entire target population tend to have more cases (Median = 22,250) than studies using a sample (Median = 3,836). Four of the five largest studies with case numbers over 100,000 are surveys which contact all graduates in the country; one is a study using administrative data. Response rates differ greatly between studies, with a range from 10% to 92%.

## Research digest: National-level capacities for studying HE graduates in Europe

### Most studies are not part of an international project

The majority of studies have not been conducted in the framework of an international project. About a fifth of the respondents reported that their study was part of either the REFLEX study or the HEGESCO study. Another six research organisations reported having been involved in other international graduate projects such as CHEERS, PROFLEX, or the Nordic graduate survey. All in all, 13 research organisations indicated to have experience with participating in an international graduate study.

### 'Transition' and 'employment' are central research questions

Figure 1: Research questions - tag cloud



Note: Larger words signify more commonly named research question/topics

In general, the link between higher education and employment is the underlying question of most studies. Fig. 1 depicts the key research topics as coded from researchers' responses, with more often used codes appearing in larger font. The subject areas most often named in conjunction with relevant research questions were "transition into employment" and "employment" itself. Questions in this area range from basic employment rates (e.g., "labour market status within 2 years after graduation") to more differentiated analyses (e.g., "how labour market integration of the universities' graduates is influenced by higher educational attainment, work experience, social background, socio-demographic characteristics"). Specific aspects of employment that were named with some frequency include graduates' income and the adequacy of the attained position ("skills mismatch"). Another important topic seems to be mobility of graduates. Several studies named this as one of their research questions. "Mobility" here can refer to mobility during studies as well as regional, national, and international mobility after graduation. Competencies (e.g., "Which competencies [do] graduates acquire (and are they used and useful) and which competencies are missing?") have been investigated by several research groups. When looking at the contents covered in the questionnaires a similar thematic focus becomes apparent. Over 90 % of studies collect information on some aspect of "occupation and employment".



## Research digest: National-level capacities for studying HE graduates in Europe

European countries' approaches to studying graduates are very heterogeneous

In summary, the researchers' responses show that many countries have a living tradition of graduate studies but that these traditions are very diverse. Studies are similar in some respects. For example, most studies build on surveys as their source of data, take place for the first time after graduation, and are concerned with questions of graduates' transition into the labour market and their later employment. At the same time, studies vary greatly in other characteristics, such as the timing of the (first) survey, the use of samples vs. full population surveys, or the specific contents of the questionnaires. The vast differences with regard to the number of respondents and response rates may also indicate that studies differ in their quality. Different study designs will also be related to the different goals studies may have, e.g. whether their main end is supporting quality assurance within individual higher education institutions or rather providing system-level information to decision makers.

Involvement in international projects could foster homogeneity, but most studies are national-level projects. The current disparate situation prevents international comparisons and transparency with regard to the progression paths of Europe's higher education graduates.

### 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 "Stakeholders' requirements for a European graduate study" and "Mapping international data capacities for studying HE graduates" 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

Please contact the project coordinator for any questions:

Kai Mühleck  
Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung (DZHW)  
Goseriede 9  
30159 Hannover, Germany  
[eurograduate@dzhw.eu](mailto:eurograduate@dzhw.eu)  
[www.eurograduate.eu](http://www.eurograduate.eu)

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