

EUROGRADUATE - Feasibility study for a European graduate study

The social and political context

A severe economic and financial crisis has hit Europe and the world at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Although political measures seem to be taking effect and Europe is slowly emerging from the crisis, considerable challenges still lay ahead (European Commission 2012, 2014), e.g.:

- **Unemployment** has increased sharply during the crisis, especially for the young: levels of youth unemployment in the EU are more than twice as high as in the general population.
- **Skills mismatch** is a pertaining and in large parts of the EU growing problem with increases in both unemployment and job vacancies.
- An **ageing population** and **social inequality** have been identified as two main societal trends framing the political agenda. An ageing population further aggravates the risk of **skills shortages**. Rising levels of poverty and social inequality have brought to the fore the issue of **social inclusion** and a fair distribution of wealth.

The European Union and its member states have responded to these challenges and the crisis not only with short-term measures, but also by setting a strategy for renewing the European growth model and creating the conditions for “*smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*” – *Europe 2020* (European Commission 2010).

Higher education as a key to growth, innovation, and social inclusion

In this context higher education (HE) is seen as a major cornerstone of building a smart, knowledge-based economy and boosting innovation. By providing high skills to a broader cross-section of society, HE can contribute to growth and social inclusion alike (European Commission 2011). The potential of HE, however, has not been exploited to its full extent. Accordingly, decision makers of the EU (Council of the EU 2009, 2013) and the EHEA (EHEA Ministerial Conference 2012) have identified a number of developmental goals for higher education:

- **More HE:** At least 40% of people aged 30-34 years should attain higher education degrees, according to *Europe 2020*.
- **More flexible HE:** Flexible learning paths between work, vocational education and training, and HE are seen as crucial for making lifelong learning a reality.
- **More inclusive HE:** According to the Bucharest Communiqué, graduates of HE should reflect the diversity of the population to unleash the potential of HE for social advancement.
- **Better and more efficient HE:** High-quality, innovative teaching and learning is seen as critical for enhancing employability and reducing drop-out.
- **HE better matching demands:** Decision makers want HE to align more closely with labour market demands, thus avoiding mismatch and increasing employability. Especially transversal as well as entrepreneurial skills are thought to increase employability.
- **More international mobility during and after HE:** Students with mobility experience are expected to become more flexible, mobile and employable graduates. According to *Education and Training 2020*, 20% of all HE graduates should have spent some time studying abroad.

A European graduate study for evidence-based policy

A European graduate study can help policy makers monitor the progress towards the above-mentioned goals by providing research-based evidence on HE graduates. Further analyses can reveal whether and under which conditions HE has the envisaged positive effects. In this regard, comparative analyses can be particularly insightful by identifying facilitating and impeding factors and thus helping to assess policy measures. For this, **regular, comparable, and comprehensive data on Europe's higher education graduates** is required. The European Commission has committed to improve the evidence base for policy making and encourages EU member states to make use of graduate employment data (European Commission 2011). However, whereas countries and individual universities and colleges have been collecting data on their graduates and tracking their transition between HE and the labour market (Gaebel et al. 2012), there is a major gap regarding data on the European level. Comparisons and peer learning across countries are thus complicated, if not prevented entirely. There is no source of data focussing on HE graduates that covers a larger number of European countries. Previous studies, such as CHEERS, REFLEX, or HEGESCO, have not been developed into instruments of repeated data provision. The EUROGRADUATE feasibility study aims at preparing the ground for a sustainable European monitoring of HE graduates.

What is the EUROGRADUATE study?

The EUROGRADUATE feasibility study asks if and how a sustainable study on Europe's higher education graduates could be established. To this end it systematically explores:

- 1. The requirements for a European graduate study:** What would a European graduate study need to deliver in the eyes of the various stakeholders? What kind of questions should it be able to answer? How important is it to set up such a study? Key stakeholders' views on these issues will be investigated. Key stakeholders are:
 - national ministries responsible for HE,
 - decisions makers at the European level,
 - Europe's higher education institutions,
 - HE education students,
 - employers,
 - employees, and
 - HE researchers.
- 2. The existing capacities for monitoring European graduates:** A variety of European and international data sets regularly provide comparative information on European higher education graduates. To what extent are these data sets able to cover the needs for information of the stakeholders? What are their advantages and shortcomings? What information is lacking that a European graduate study would need to provide? How could a European graduate study and current data sources complement each other?
- 3. The point of departure at national level:** How are higher education graduates monitored and studied in the different European countries? What are the similarities and differences between the different national approaches? How could a European graduate study tie in with them? Are there common patterns a European graduate study could build on?
- 4. The options for organizing and financing a European graduate study:** How could a European graduate study be organized for an efficient and effective collaboration among the partners involved? How should it be set up to lead to a sustainable project and allow for a growing number of countries covered? What are suitable sources of funding and how can they be made accessible?

Who is involved?

The EUROGRADUATE consortium consists of four partners with substantial expertise in the field of HE policy analysis and research:

- Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung (German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies; DZHW; Germany, consortium coordination),
- Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS; Austria),
- Education Policy Centre, Charles University in Prague (EPC; Czech Republic),
- and the European Students' Union (ESU; Belgium).

The consortium is advised by a Scientific Board of renowned experts on European higher education. A Stakeholders' Board comprising several European level organizations ensures the relevance of the project results:

- the European University Association (EUA),
- the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE),
- the European Students' Union (ESU),
- BUSINESSEUROPE,
- EUROCHAMBRES, and
- the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE).

What will be the output?

The 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. The results of the project will be made available to the public online and free of charge in the form of short research digests and a project report. The report will bring together the results and thus provide a comprehensive overview on the feasibility of setting up a sustainable European graduate study.

What is the timeline?

Stakeholders will be approached in the first half of 2014 in order to investigate their demands for a European graduate study. In parallel, national and European data sets will be explored. Insights from the different work packages will be summarized in research digests at the beginning of 2015. These findings will be brought together and tied in with the development of a feasible model for a European graduate study in the final public report, which is expected to be completed by October 2015.

Whom can I contact?

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