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# Structural Indicators on Higher Education in Europe – 2016





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This publication is based on a chapter in the Eurydice report [Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe 2016](#). The report, which was published in November 2016, provides background information to the [Education and Training Monitor 2016](#). It examines education structures, policies and reforms in five key areas:

1. Early childhood education and care
2. Achievement in basic skills
3. Early leaving from education and training
4. Higher education
5. Graduate employability

The following chapter is re-printed as a separate publication to draw attention to the specific policy area of higher education and to reach those who are interested in policy issues in this field.

The information covers 40 European education and training systems. It has been collected through a questionnaire completed by national experts and representatives of the [Eurydice Network](#).

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## INTRODUCTION

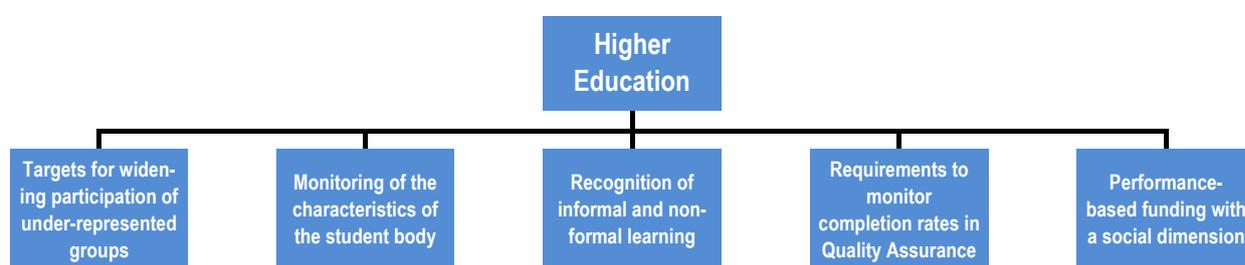
In 2008, the Council adopted an EU-wide benchmark on tertiary education, stating that by 2020 at least 40 % of 30-34 year-olds should have a tertiary or equivalent level qualification <sup>(1)</sup>. This benchmark has since become part of the double headline target on education within the Europe 2020 growth strategy.

The following structural indicators, as shown on the diagram below, have been developed in relation to this headline target, and guided by the Commission's communication, 'Supporting growth and jobs: An agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems' <sup>(2)</sup>. Among the Communication's main objectives are two key inter-linked policy goals: increasing and widening participation, and improving the quality and relevance of higher education.

In light of the widening participation agenda in higher education, the selected indicators seek to show how different countries are pursuing this goal in terms of target setting, the implementation of systematic monitoring procedures and the efforts made to broaden entry qualifications. The last two indicators look at both inputs (the social dimension of funding mechanisms) and outputs (the requirement to monitor completion rates). The latter is particularly important as the successful completion of programmes is a pre-requisite for meeting the national higher education attainment targets.

Some constraints need to be borne in mind when interpreting these structural indicators on higher education. National policies on the issues surrounding the social dimension of higher education need to be understood in context, as the same measure in different countries may have a different purpose, and consequently may lead to different outcomes. Any individual indicator therefore has limited power to shed light on reality. The structural indicators in this chapter are based on two Eurydice reports (EACEA/Eurydice, 2011; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). Within these reports, rather than providing stand-alone indicators, each one has been developed within a larger framework, with a view to providing a better understanding of the particular issues involved.

The structural indicators selected for the 2016 Eurydice data collection examine the following issues related to publicly funded higher education institutions and publicly subsidised private institutions with over 50 % public funding:



<sup>(1)</sup> Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), OJ C 119, 28.5.2009.

<sup>(2)</sup> Communication from the European Commission, 2011. 'Supporting Growth and Jobs: an Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe's Higher Education Systems'. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities [COM (2011) 567 final].

## 1. TARGETS FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION OF UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS

In a social and economic environment where the skills and competences acquired and refined through higher education are becoming increasingly important (European Commission, 2010), it is a societal imperative to widen participation in higher education as broadly as possible. Equitable education and training systems should aim to provide 'opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes that are independent of socio-economic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage' <sup>(3)</sup>.

In recent years, European policy has increasingly stressed the social dimension of higher education, with countries making commitments to develop strategies and define measurable targets through the Bologna Process, the modernisation agenda and the EU 2020 strategy. In order to achieve the EU-level 'headline' target mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, EU countries have set their own national participation and attainment targets to be reached by 2020.

This indicator encompasses quantitative targets which focus on **widening or increasing participation** among the groups currently under-represented in higher education. However, as mentioned above, equity in treatment is also important, so targets related to **improving completion rates** for these groups are also considered here. Examples of under-represented groups might include people with disabilities, migrants, ethnic groups, lower socio-economic status groups, women/men, etc.

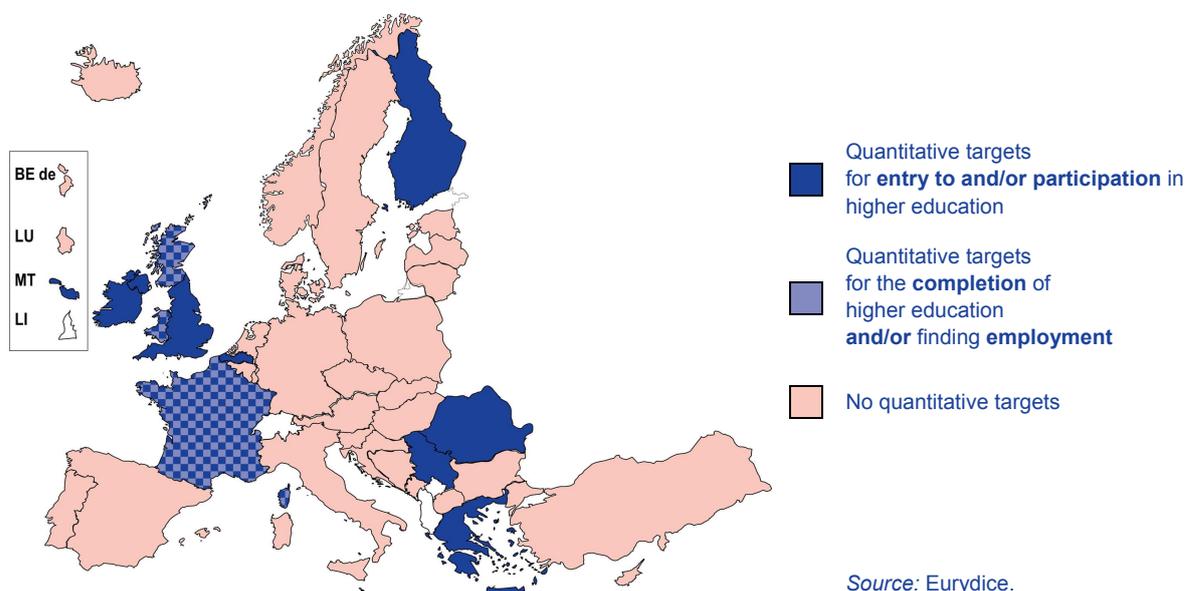
While this indicator focuses on the quantitative targets for increasing the number of students from under-represented groups, it must be underlined that many countries have other types of policy measures and financial support systems to support the widening participation agenda, as was reported in the 'Modernisation of higher education' report and Eurydice Brief (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014, 2015).

Figure 1 shows that less than a third of countries have quantitative targets related to under-represented groups. Where such quantitative targets do exist, they are aimed specifically at entry to or participation in higher education (Greece, Malta, Romania, Finland, the United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland) and Serbia), but in some countries these are combined with targets for the completion of higher education or finding employment (France, Ireland and United Kingdom (Wales and Scotland)).

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<sup>(3)</sup> Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training, OJ C 135, 26.05.2010, p. 2.

**Figure 1: Quantitative targets for widening participation in and/or completion of higher education by under-represented groups, 2015/16**



#### Recent policy developments:

In most countries, the targets have been in place for some time, but there have been some recent developments.

In **the United Kingdom (England)**, the higher education white paper 'Success as a knowledge economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice' <sup>(4)</sup> sets out the government's plans to reform the higher education and research system. It includes two targets, set by the Prime Minister: to double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university in 2020 compared to 2009, and to increase the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students going to university by 20 % by 2020.

## **2. MONITORING OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDENT BODY**

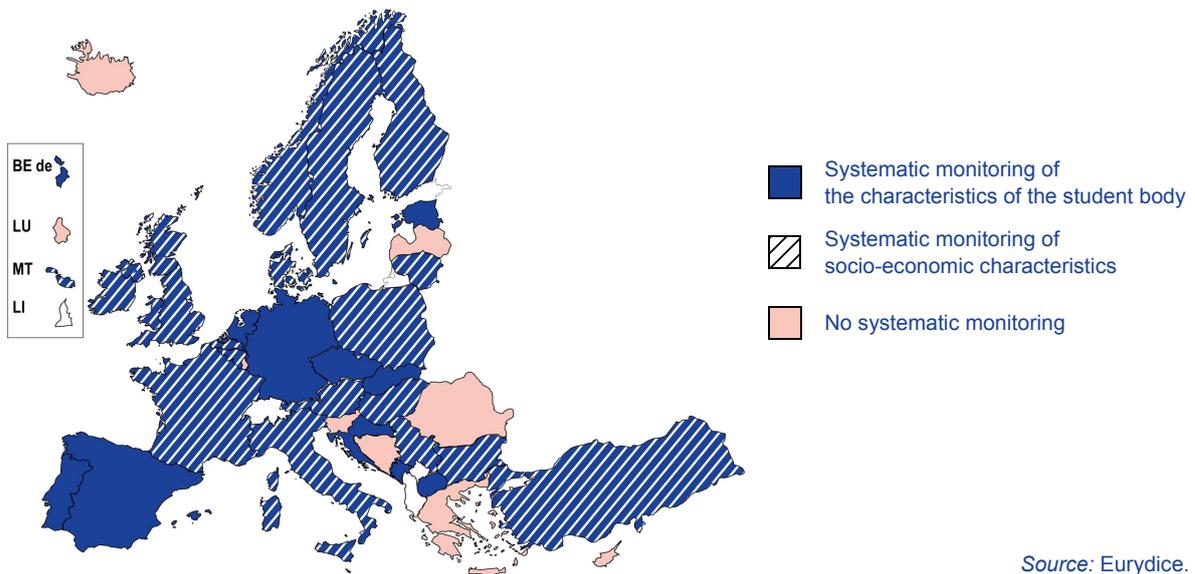
For this indicator, **systematic monitoring** refers to the process of systematic data gathering, analysis and use of data to inform policy. It aims to capture how the higher education system operates and whether it is reaching its objectives and targets. It can take place at various stages: on entry to higher education, during studies (refers to student retention), at graduation (refers to completion rates) and after graduation (refers to graduate destinations – employment or further study). Systematic monitoring must include mechanisms for cross-institutional data gathering and allow cross-institutional data comparability.

This indicator focuses on the systematic monitoring of the **socio-economic status of students**, defined as a combined measure of students' or their families' economic and social position relative to others, based on income, education, and occupation. When analysing a family's socio-economic status, the household income (combined and individual) is examined as well as the education and occupation of earners. Parents' educational attainment is often taken as a proxy measure for socio-economic status.

<sup>(4)</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-white-paper>

As can be seen in Figure 2, the systematic monitoring of some characteristics of the student body (for example, in terms of disability, ethnic status, and qualification achieved before entry to higher education) is very common in Europe.

**Figure 2: Monitoring the socio-economic characteristics of the student body, 2015/16**



However, systematically monitoring socio-economic characteristics is less common, and is carried out in slightly less than half of all higher education systems. Nevertheless, many countries should still have a considerable body of information and data to draw on with regard to the changing profile of higher education students. However, it was reported in the Eurydice Brief that this data is not necessarily always exploited (EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). In eight countries (Greece, Cyprus, Latvia, Luxembourg, Romania, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Iceland), there is no systematic monitoring.

### 3. RECOGNITION OF INFORMAL AND NON-FORMAL LEARNING FOR ENTRY TO HIGHER EDUCATION, 2015/16

The recognition of prior learning has been addressed in various policy documents on higher education, including the Bologna communiqués and the European Universities Charter on Lifelong Learning (EUA, 2008). According to these documents, prior learning refers to any type of learning – be it formal, non-formal or informal. However, while higher education institutions are relatively open to recognising prior formal learning, in particular studies at other higher education institutions, the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning remains underexploited.

In 2012, the EU institutions provided support for further developments in this field, adopting a recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>(5)</sup>. This recommendation covers all sectors of education and training, including the higher education sector, and invites Member States to 'have in place, no later than 2018, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning'<sup>(6)</sup>.

<sup>(5)</sup> Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

<sup>(6)</sup> Ibid.

This indicator focuses on prior informal and non-formal learning. **Informal learning** means learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure and is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner's perspective. Examples of informal learning outcomes are skills acquired through life and work experiences such as project management or ICT skills acquired at work; languages learned and intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country; ICT skills acquired outside work; skills acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports and youth work; and through home-based activities (e.g. taking care of a child).

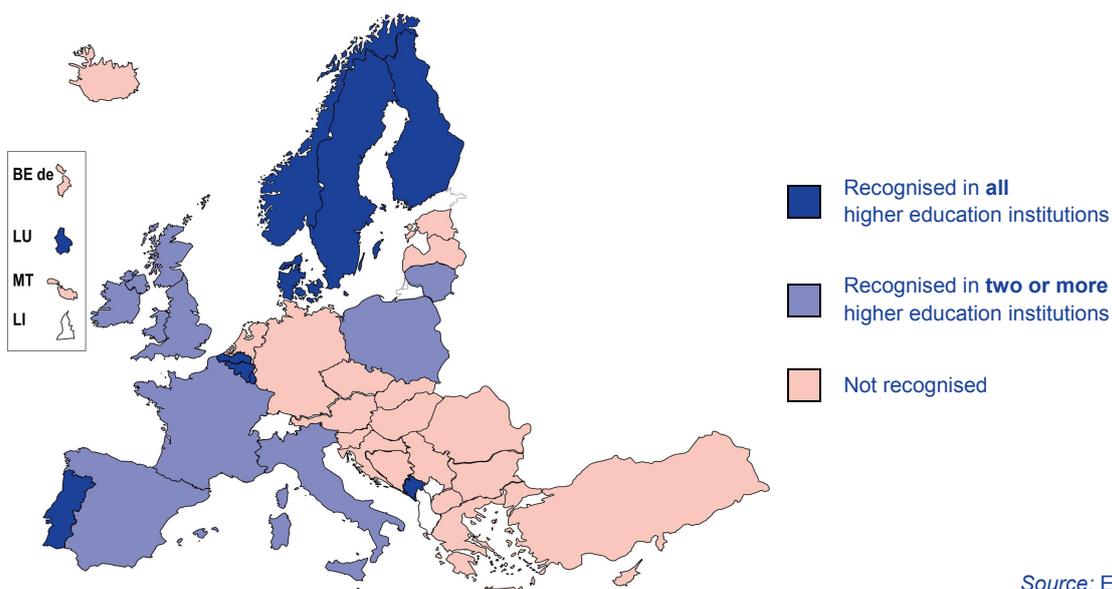
**Non-formal learning** means learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives and learning time), where some form of learning support is present (e.g. from a tutor); it may cover programmes to deliver work skills, adult literacy, and basic education for early school leavers. Very common examples of non-formal learning include in-company training, through which companies update and improve the skills of their workers such as ICT skills, structured on-line learning (e.g. by making use of open educational resources), and courses organised by civil society organisations for their members, their target groups or the general public.

As Figure 3 shows, informal and non-formal learning are recognised for entry in all institutions in nine education systems (Belgium (French and Flemish Communities), Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, Montenegro and Norway), and in some institutions (two or more) in seven countries (France, Spain, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and the United Kingdom).

In the **United Kingdom**, each individual institution has autonomy over the qualifications that it will accept for entry to its courses. Many institutions welcome applications from mature candidates who have had appropriate experience but may lack formal qualifications. Institutions may give credit for prior study and informal learning acquired through work or other experiences: Arrangements for assessment of prior learning vary between individual higher education institutions.

In the majority of countries, however, prior informal or non-formal learning is not recognised for entry to higher education, which is the case mostly in Eastern Europe. However, in most countries where recognition occurs in all or in some institutions, access to these procedures is a legal right.

**Figure 3: Recognition of informal and non-formal learning for entry to higher education, 2015/16**



Source: Eurydice.

#### **Explanatory note**

Access to recognition procedures is a legal right in all the countries that recognise prior learning, except in Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

#### 4. COMPLETION RATES AS A REQUIREMENT IN EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

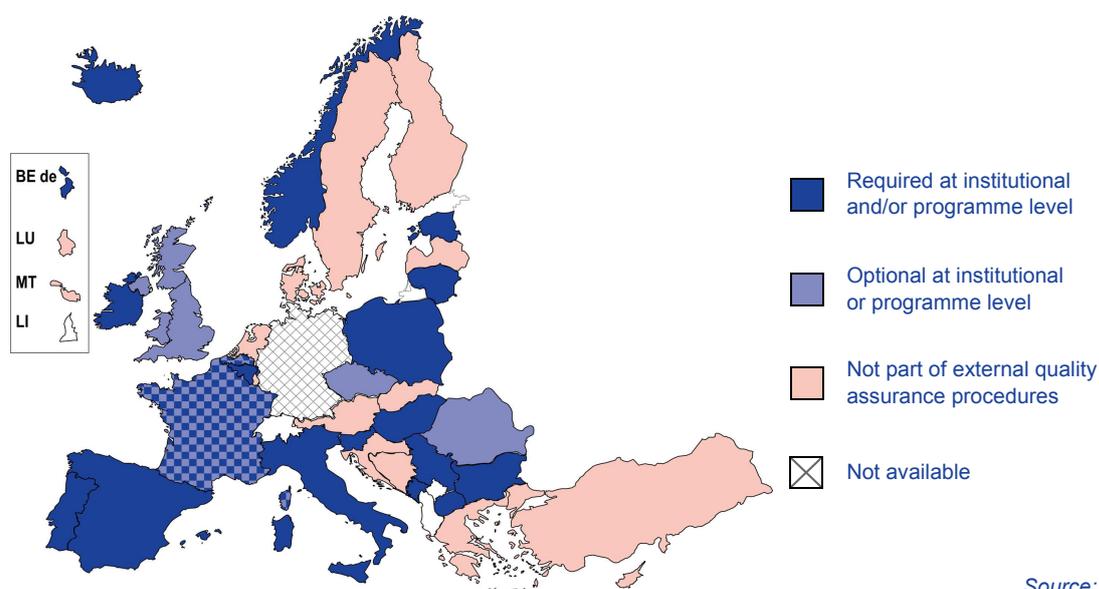
This indicator focuses on the use of completion rates as one of the criteria included in external quality assurance procedures for higher education institutions/programmes. Where the monitoring of completion rates is a requirement, it gives a good indication that they are measured in practice and that the information is likely to be used in policy making. The **completion rate** indicates the percentage of students who complete the higher education programme they have started.

Figure 4 shows that the monitoring of completion rates is a requirement either at institutional and/or programme level in about half of European countries. Furthermore, in Belgium (French Community), Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, monitoring completion rates is a requirement at both levels.

In **Belgium (French and German-speaking Communities)**, the evaluation framework of the independent quality assurance agency (QAA) includes a dimension related to the efficiency and equity of programmes. Through this dimension, the QAA evaluates the processes and mechanisms in place within programmes to monitor student progress, including whether they successfully complete their studies.

In France, the monitoring of completion rates is a requirement only at programme level but optional at institutional level. No data is available for Germany.

**Figure 4: Requirement to monitor completion rates as part of external quality assurance procedures, 2015/16**

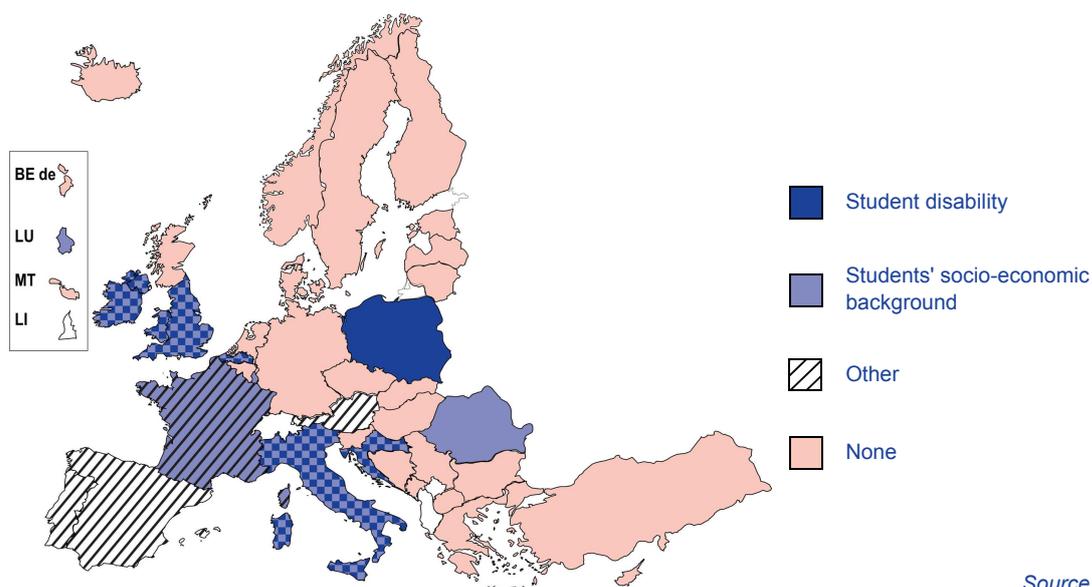


Source: Eurydice.

#### 5. PERFORMANCE-BASED FUNDING MECHANISMS WITH A SOCIAL DIMENSION

**Performance-based funding mechanisms with a social dimension** enable funding to be provided to higher education institutions if they meet a defined level of performance in relation to social objectives. The performance may refer to people – staff or students – with defined characteristics in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability, age, gender, migrant status, etc.

Figure 5 shows that performance-based funding mechanisms, which give institutions extra funding if certain targets are met, exist in only 13 countries.

**Figure 5: Performance-based funding mechanisms with a social dimension (students and staff), 2015/16**

Source: Eurydice.

The group which most commonly attracts extra funding is students with disabilities (Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)). Socio-economic background is also a common area of interest (Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Ireland, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Romania and the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)). Examples of other criteria on the basis of which extra funding is awarded (not necessarily shown on the map) are gender (Ireland, Spain and Austria), returning to study (Portugal), geographical location (Luxembourg) and age (Ireland). Few countries reported performance-based funding mechanisms related to staffing; those that do include France for staff with disabilities and Spain and Austria for the gender of staff.

## GLOSSARY

### Key definitions

**Completion rate** indicates the percentage of students who complete the higher education programme they have started.

**Disadvantaged students** (groups at risk or vulnerable groups) are defined at national level. Possible criteria are socio-economic status, ethnic origin, having a migrant background or others depending on the national context.

**Informal learning** means learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure and is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner's perspective.

**Non-formal learning** means learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives and learning time), where some form of learning support is present (e.g. from a tutor); it may cover programmes to deliver work skills, adult literacy, and basic education for early

school leavers. Very common examples of non-formal learning include in-company training, through which companies update and improve the skills of their workers such as ICT skills, structured on-line learning (e.g. by making use of open educational resources), and courses organised by civil society organisations for their members, their target groups or the general public.

**Performance-based funding mechanisms with a social dimension focus** enable funding to be provided to higher education institutions if they meet a defined level of performance in relation to social objectives. The performance may refer to people – staff or students – with defined characteristics in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability, age, gender, migrant status, etc.

**Socio-economic status of students** is defined as a combined measure of students' or their families' economic and social position relative to others, based on income, education, and occupation. When analysing a family's socio-economic status, the household income (combined and individual) is examined as well as the education and occupation of earners. Parents' educational attainment is often taken as a proxy measure for socio-economic status.

**Systematic monitoring** refers to the process of systematic data gathering, analysis and use of data to inform policy. It aims to capture how the higher education system operates and whether it is reaching its objectives and targets. It can take place at various stages: on entry to higher education, during studies (refers to student retention), at graduation (refers to completion rates) and after graduation (refers to graduate destinations – employment or further study). Systematic monitoring must include mechanisms for cross-institutional data gathering and allow cross-institutional data comparability.

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## Structural Indicators on Higher Education in Europe – 2016

This publication presents some structural indicators on higher education in 40 European education and training systems. It examines whether there are targets for widening participation of under-represented groups in higher education and whether countries monitor the characteristics of the student body. Moreover, it looks at whether, and to what extent atypical routes to higher education exist through the recognition of informal and non-formal learning in admission procedures. Also, there are indicators showing whether it is required to monitor completion rates in external Quality Assurance procedures, and whether there is a social dimension in performance-based funding mechanisms. The publication is based on a chapter in the Eurydice report [Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe 2016](#).

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The Eurydice Network's task is to understand and explain how Europe's different education systems are organised and how they work. The network provides descriptions of national education systems, comparative studies devoted to specific topics, indicators and statistics. All Eurydice publications are available free of charge on the Eurydice website or in print upon request. Through its work, Eurydice aims to promote understanding, cooperation, trust and mobility at European and international levels. The network consists of national units located in European countries and is co-ordinated by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. For more information about Eurydice, see <http://ec.europa.eu/eurydice>.

