Students with children and the openness of higher education

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EUROSTUDENT 8
Intelligence Brief

eurostudent.eu

Recently, approximately in the last two decades, the higher education system has undergone many changes, among others, the number of students studying at universities is much higher (e.g. IESALC 2020), and the student population is becoming increasingly diversified. The policy of widening participation has led to an increase in the number of mature students, including those with parental responsibilities (Moreau 2014, Brooks 2012). Being a student-parent means dealing with multiple roles (Haugas 2018, Briegel et al. 2023), facing the challenges of being both students and parents, often workers, which means that student-parents tend to be time constrained by family responsibilities and work activities. It is important to examine the situation of this diverse group of students with different needs to be able to support them (Briegel et al. 2023) and identify the differences between their needs and institutional and national policies (Moreau, 2014).

This Intelligence Brief gives a first glimpse overview of the student-parents population in 24 countries that participated in EUROSTUDENT 8 survey. We are interested in who the student-parents are and what are the differences between the countries. We will also raise the question to what extent the fertility rate and openness of higher education (form of study and transition to higher education) influence the situation.

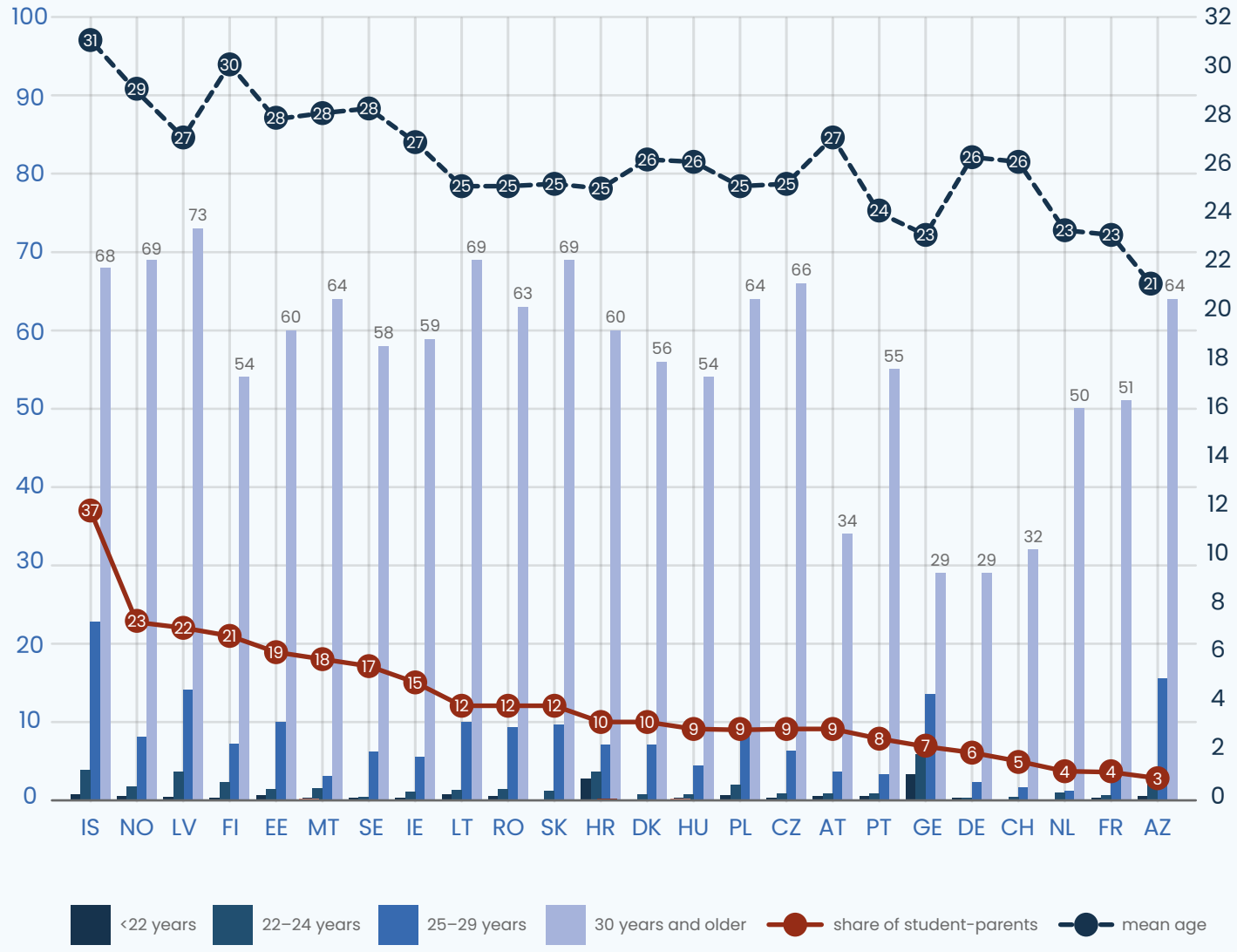
Demographic characteristics – who are the student-parents?

In this part we provide an overview of the student-parents population in EUROSTUDENT 8 countries based on selected demographic indicators, presenting students with children by age and gender and by the age of their youngest child.

In recent years, delayed parenthood and shifts in family behaviour have logically led to a gradual increase in the mean age of women on giving birth to their first child in all EU Member States, reaching an average age of 30 years in 2022 (Eurostat 2024). In the light of the above, students with children are most likely to be relatively older.

The highest share of student-parents in EUROSTUDENT 8 countries is in the age group 30 years of age and above (Figure 1). More than half of all students in this age group indicate having children. The share of students aged 30 and over having children was lowest in Germany and Georgia (both 29 %), Switzerland (32 %) and Austria (34 %). Slightly higher proportions of students with children are also in the age group of 24–29 years in Iceland, Latvia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (14–23 %). With regard to German-speaking countries, interesting findings emerge. They have a higher average age of students, but at the same time a low share of student-parents, both overall and in the oldest age category.

Figure 1. **Share of student-parents by age group and in total** (%) **and mean age at time of survey** (in years)



Source: *EUROSTUDENT 8, A.1., A.14.*

Data collection: *Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).*

EUROSTUDENT question(s): *6.1 When were you born? 6.9 Do you have any children?*

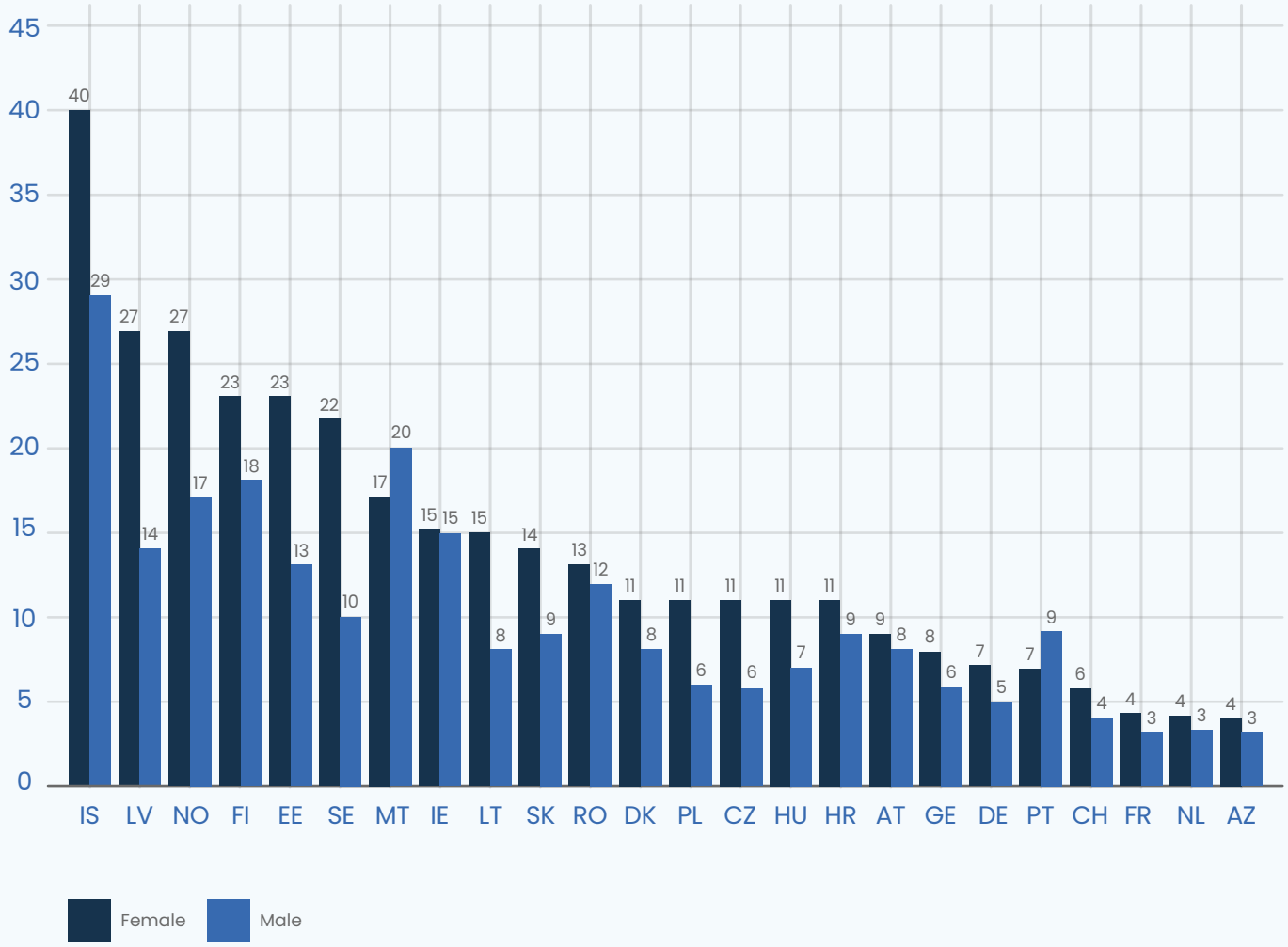
Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: *A1: question 6.1: CH, DK, IS, NO; A14: question 6.9: CH.*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: *IE, NL.*

Based on several studies, students with children at higher education institutions (HEIs) are predominantly women (Nichols et al. 2017, van Rhijn et al. 2011), as confirmed also by data in almost all EUROSTUDENT countries (Figure 2). The opposite is true only in Malta and Portugal.

The largest differences (more than 10 percentage points) between men and women are in the countries with the highest proportion of parents: Iceland, Latvia, Norway, Estonia and Sweden. However, it should be noted that the share of student-fathers in these countries is higher than in many other countries (Figure 2).

Figure 2. **Share of student-parents by gender** (%)



Source: *EUROSTUDENT 8, A.14.*

Data collection: *Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).*

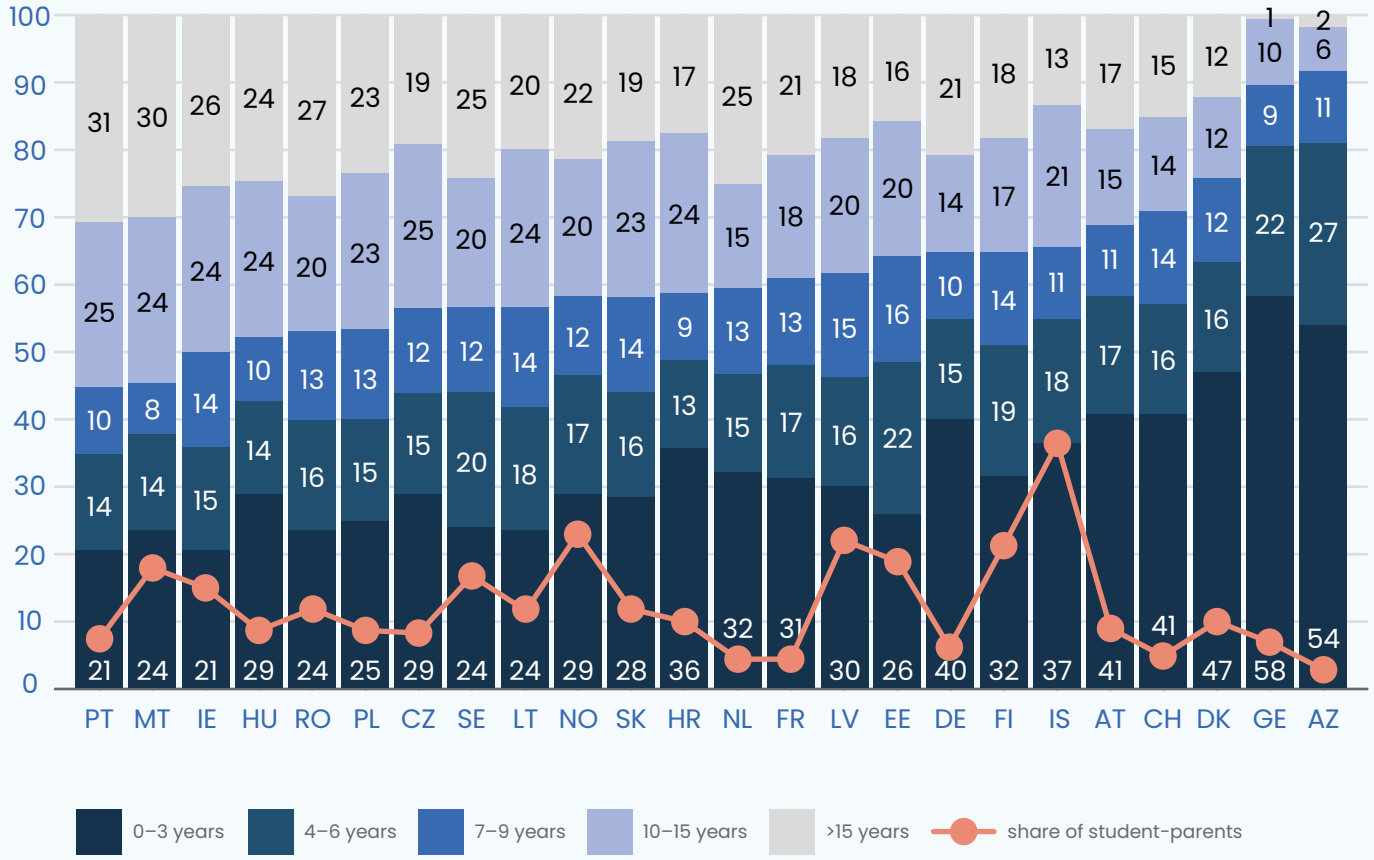
EUROSTUDENT question: *6.9 Do you have any children? 6.2 What is your gender?*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: *question 6.9: CH; A14: question 6.2: AT, CH, CZ, DK, GE, HU, LV, NO, PL, RO*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: *IE, NL.*

Across all EUROSTUDENT 8 countries, a third of students with children have a youngest child under the age of six (Figure 3). Most of the young children under the age of six can be found in Denmark, Germany, Finland, Iceland, Austria and Switzerland and particularly in Azerbaijan and Georgia, where the share is more than 80 %. On the contrary in Portugal, Malta and Ireland more than half of students´ children are older than ten years of age. A higher proportion of students with children aged 10 and over (more than 45%) is also registered in Sweden, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Hungary.

Figure 3. **Share of students with children by age group** (%)



Note: *The values in the chart refer to the age of youngest children.*

Source: *EUROSTUDENT 8, A.17.*

Data collection: *Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).*

EUROSTUDENT question(s): *6.9 Do you have any children? 6.10 How old is your youngest child?*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: *CH, AT, NO.*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: *IE, NL.*

Based on EUROSTUDENT 8 data, who are the students with children? They are usually aged 30 and over, and more often women. Regarding the age of the youngest child, in all countries a third of students with children have a youngest child under the age of six, while in almost half of the countries more than 40 % of student-parents have children over the age of ten.

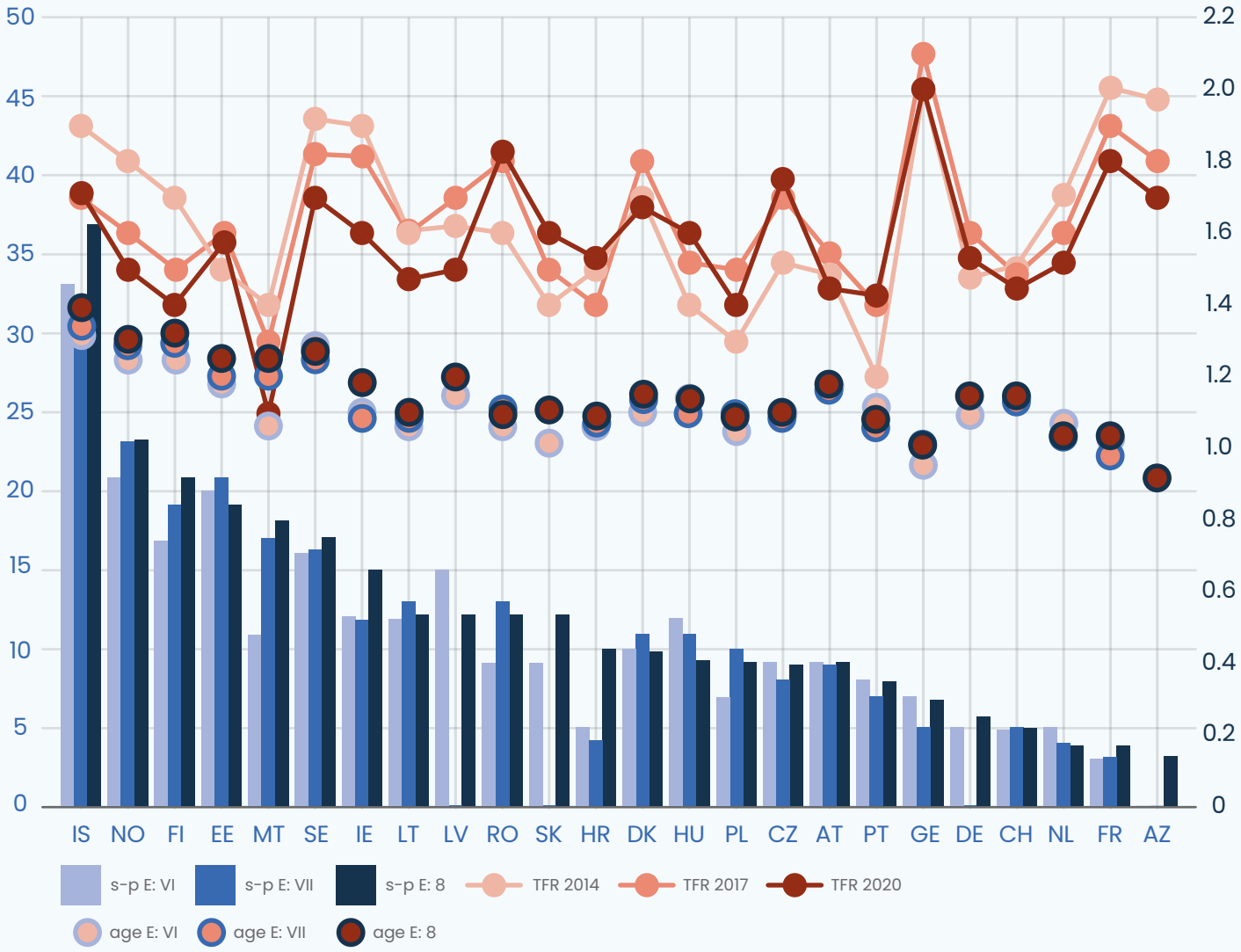
The relationship between the share of student-parents, fertility trends and age of students

The main focus of this part of the IB is on the relationship between the fertility rate (and its trends over time) and the share of student-parents in different countries. The development of the mean age of students was included in the analysis to provide a more comprehensive picture of the student population in each country. Figure 4 illustrates the share of student-parents and development of mean age at the time of survey in the last three rounds of EUROSTUDENT survey and fertility trends displayed by using the total fertility rate indicator (TFR) for selected years.

In all three last rounds of EUROSTUDENT survey, there are substantial differences between countries in the proportion of students who are parents. Specifically, in E:8 with the share ranging from less than 5 % in Switzerland, the Netherlands, France

and Azerbaijan to more than 15 % in Sweden, Malta, Estonia, Finland, Norway and 37 % in Iceland. The share of students with children did not change noticeably between E:VI and E:8 in most of the countries, a slight increase of more than 3 percentage points was observed in Iceland, Ireland, Slovakia, Finland, Romania, and especially in Croatia and Malta (difference of 5, resp. 8 percentage points), the opposite trend we find in Hungary, the Netherlands, Estonia and Latvia.

Figure 4. **Share of student-parents** (%)**, total fertility rate, mean age at time of survey** (in years)



Source: *EUROSTUDENT 6, 7, 8, A.1., A.14., Eurostat*

Data collection: *Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).*

EUROSTUDENT question(s): *6.1 When were you born? 6.9 Do you have any children?*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: *A1: question 6.1: CH, DK, IS, NO, RO; A14: question 6.9: CH.*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: *IE, NL.*

As for the fertility rate, differences in TFR among European countries have decreased in the second decade of the 21st century (Sobotka, Berghammer 2021). In 2020, TFRs in most of the selected countries ranged between 1.4 and 1.8, with the exception of Malta (1.1) on one side of the spectrum and Georgia (2.0) on the other. This reflects the convergence process that is taking place in European countries. In general, countries with higher total fertility rates in the first reference year 2014

(especially Nordic countries, Ireland, Malta, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, France and Georgia and Azerbaijan) reported sharp declines in fertility rates in last decades, while the opposite trend has been observed in countries such as Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Portugal.

However, not all countries with higher fertility rates have a higher proportion of students-parents. Higher TFR and higher share of student-parents is evident in some of the Nordic countries, Estonia and Ireland. Conversely, countries with one of the highest TFRs such as France (1.8), Georgia (2.0) and Azerbaijan (1.7) are among those where the share of parents with children in HEIs is very low. The higher TFR values (above 1.6) in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary and Romania and Slovakia do not fully translate into the high proportion of student-parents.

Generally speaking, there are no clear patterns regarding TFR and share of student-parents. We suppose, there are also differences between national policies. Family policies vary from one country to another, both in terms of the length of their development and their priorities (Thevenon 2008). It is very likely that conditions for students with children in HE are more favourable in countries with a long tradition of family-friendly policies in terms of family support through policies aimed at social and gender equality, work-life balance and reconciliation of work and family life (especially the Scandinavian model), but the fertility rate itself does not affect to any considerable extent the participation rate of students with children in higher education.

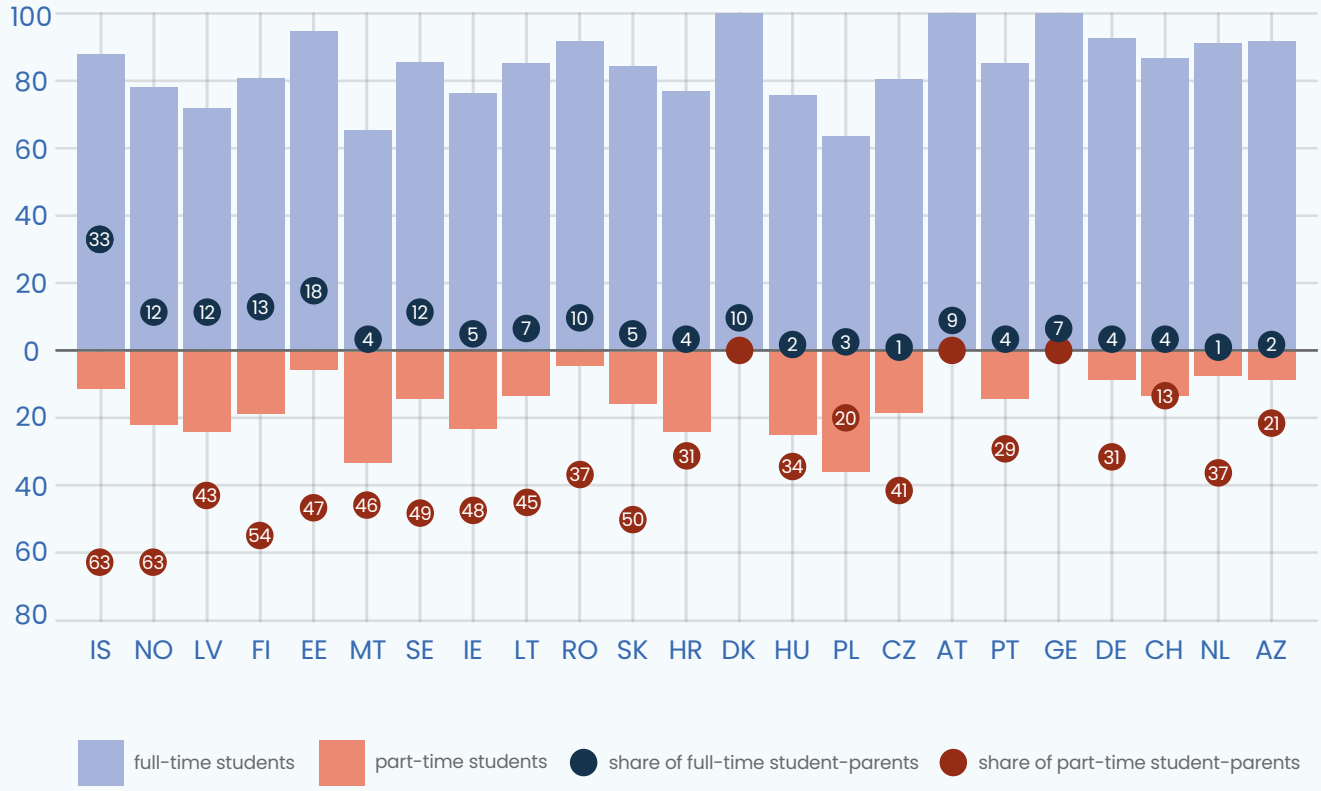
The mean age of students at the time of survey has risen in almost all countries (from E:VI to E:8), except Hungary (26.1–25.6), the Netherlands (23.9–23.4) and France (22.8–22.5), which are the only cases where it has decreased by approximately half a year. The student population has aged particularly in Finland (28.2–29.6), Latvia (25.5–26.9), Germany (24.7–26.3), Iceland (29.7–31.4), Slovakia (23.4–25.3) where the average age of students has increased by around a year and a half or more and especially in Malta where the mean age increased by almost three years (25–27.8). The slight increase in the share of student parents (3 %) in Iceland, Malta, Slovakia and Finland can be linked to the increasing mean age of students in these countries. However, in neither Romania nor Croatia is the substantially higher share of student-parents strongly related to student mean age.

Unlike the fertility rate, the average age of the student population is to some extent related to the proportion of students with children (based on comparison E:VI and E:8). In countries where the student population has aged, there are more students with children (Iceland, Norway, Finland, Malta, Sweden, Ireland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Croatia, Poland, Germany and Romania), while in countries where the mean age of students has not changed, the proportion of students with children has remained more or less the same (Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and Portugal). However, there is no clear linear relationship in all countries. An inverse relationship can be observed, for example, in France, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Denmark and in Georgia. In Hungary and the Netherlands, we find a decline in both indicators.

Flexibility and openness in higher education – students with children by form of study and transition to higher education

EUROSTUDENT survey collects data on formal status of enrolment and transition time from leaving school to first entering HE. In this context, part-time form of study is perceived as flexible form of education that allows a better balance between study, work and family activities and thus facilitate the participation of students with children in higher education. Delayed transition into the HE of more than two years after leaving secondary school is an indicator for measuring the openness of educational systems with regard to their accessibility (Hauschildt et al. 2021). Both the flexibility of the form of study and the flexibility of the time at which it is possible to enter higher education co-create good conditions to make study for non-traditional students, including those with children, more “normal” and manageable.

Figure 5. **Formal status of enrolment, share of student-parents by formal status of enrolment** (%)
(in descending order by share of student-parents in total)



Source: *EUROSTUDENT 8, A.14.*

Data collection: *Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).*

Note: *Since the question on formal status of enrolment was not asked in French survey, France is excluded from this chart.*

The chart shows results for full-time students only in Austria, Denmark and Georgia, as in Austria there is no legal distinction between full-time and distance learning students. In Georgia, there are only full-time students. Denmark included only full-time students in its survey.

EUROSTUDENT question: *6.9 Do you have any children? 1.8 What is your current formal status as a student?*

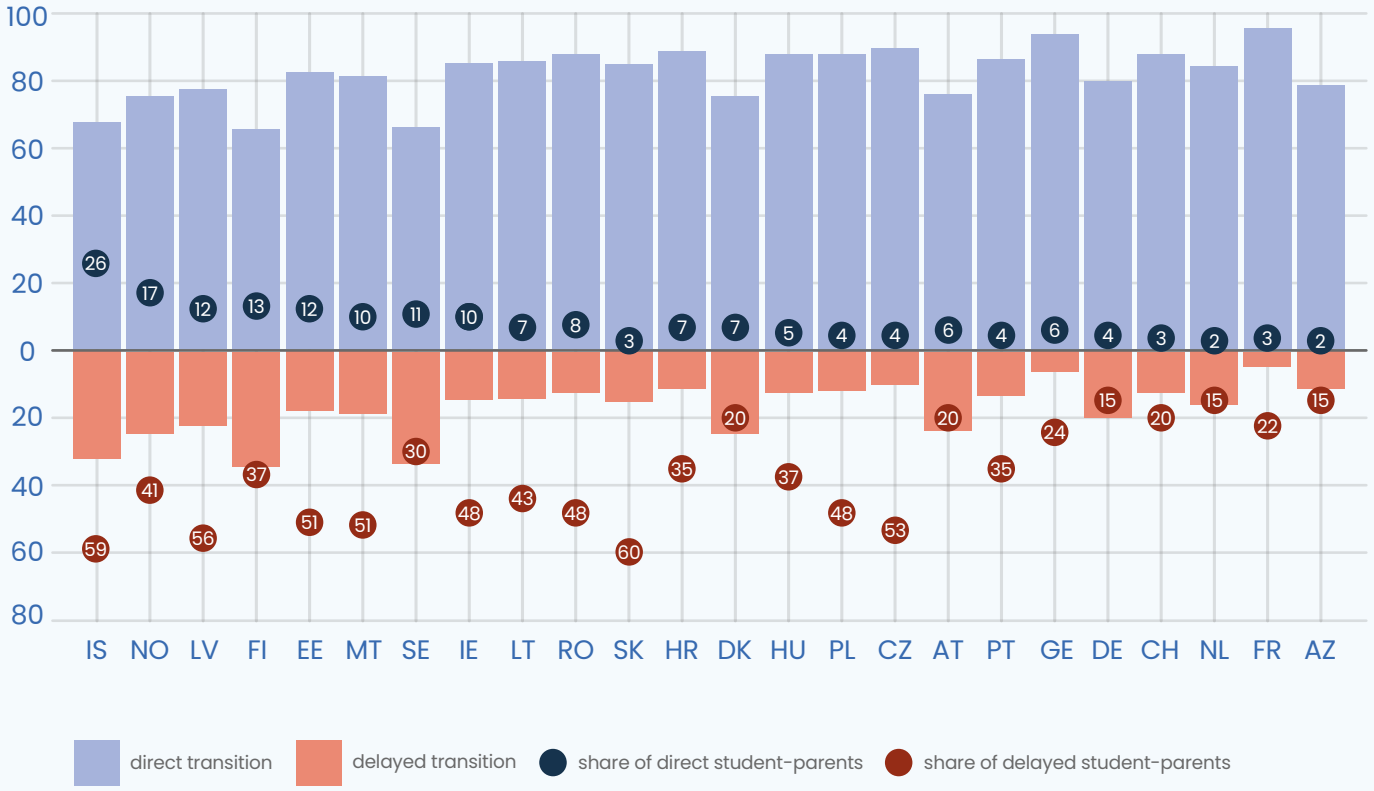
Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: *CH.*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: *IE, NL.*

More than 20 % of students are enrolled part-time in Poland, Malta, Hungary, Latvia, Ireland, Croatia and Norway, but not all of these countries have a high overall share of student-parents (Figure 5).

Countries with the highest share of student-parents in total (Figure 4) often have a higher share of part-time student and a high proportion of parents in this group (Malta 46 % and Ireland 48 %) or noticeably high share of full-time student-parents (Estonia 18 %) or both (Iceland, Norway, Latvia, Finland, Sweden). The Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Croatia are also among those with a higher proportion of part-time students (more than 19 %). These countries correspondingly have high share of parents in this group, but have a very low share of parents among full-time students (less than 4 %). Countries such as the Netherlands and Germany have higher share of parents in part-time programmes (more than 30 %), but the actual representation of part-time students is low (less than 8 %), as is the proportion of parents in full-time programmes (less than 4 %).

Figure 6. **Transition time from leaving school to entering higher education, share of student-parents by transition to higher education** (%) (in descending order by share of student-parents in total)



Source: *EUROSTUDENT 8, A.14.*

Data collection: *Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except CH (spring 2020), DE (summer 2021), AT, FR, PT, RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).*

EUROSTUDENT question: *6.9 Do you have any children? 2.5 How long after leaving the regular school system (secondary school) for the first time did you enter higher education for the first time?*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions: *question 6.9: CH; question 2.5: AT, CH, DK, FR, GE.*

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: *IE, NL.*

Delayed transition to HE is reported by one in three students in Finland (34 %), Sweden (33 %) and Iceland (32 %). About a fifth of students who enter HE with a delay are from Norway and Denmark (both 24 %), Austria (23 %), Latvia (22%), Germany (20 %), Malta (19 %) and Estonia (18 %).

All the countries mentioned (except Denmark, Germany and Austria) have a high share of parents in this group of late entrants (more than 30 %), and at the same time more than 10 % of students who take a direct route to HE are parents. In Denmark, Germany and Austria, the representation of delayed students with children (15–20 %) is lower than in the countries mentioned above.

The results also show a different group of countries, as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and partly Hungary and Portugal, where there is a very high proportion of student-parents among those with delayed entry to higher education (37–60 %), but a very low proportion of student-parents among those without interrupted studies (3–5 %).

Georgia and France have a very low proportion of students with a delayed transition (6 %, resp. 4 %) and very low share of students who are parents and take direct route to HE. However, this is consistent with the fact that these countries have one of the lowest mean age of students at the time of survey, 23 years of age (Figure 1), similar to the Netherlands and Azerbaijan, where the mean age is 23 years, resp. 21 years.

Conclusion and policy considerations

This Intelligence Brief focuses on one of the groups of non-traditional students, students with children. The data shows considerable differences of student-parents population in EUROSTUDENT 8 countries, ranging from 5 % in Switzerland, the Netherlands, France and Azerbaijan to more than 15 % in Sweden, Malta, Estonia, Finland and Norway and more than 30 % in Iceland. The share of parents with children did not change noticeably between E:VI and E:8 in most of the countries, the largest increase is evident in Croatia and Malta, while the opposite trend can be noticed in Hungary and Latvia.

At the beginning we raised a question whether the fertility rate and openness of higher education system relate to the share of students with children. Firstly, there is no clear pattern regarding TFR and share of student-parents. However, the ageing of student population is partly reflected in the share of students with children in some of the countries. Secondly, in countries with a high proportion of student-parents, part-time form of study and especially delayed transition are not uncommon and are also widely used by this group of students. Moreover, it is also common in these countries for student-parents to study in the traditional full-time mode without interrupting their educational path.

To sum up, it is not possible to place all countries into clear patterns. The only exception are probably the Nordic countries, which have long been known for their family-friendly policies. These countries have higher share of student-parents in HE, both in the less traditional forms of study (part-time) but they also seem to allow non-traditional students to study in a traditional setting (full-time, direct route). A different pattern can be observed in the countries of Central Europe. There is a visible effort to make higher education accessible to a wider range of students. As we can see from the results, approximately one fifth of students in these countries are in part-time form of study and it is widely used by students with children. On the other hand, HE is still very traditional. The provision of flexible learning methods should be further developed. Full-time form of study and direct route are not widely used by non-traditional students, in contrast to Lithuania and especially Romania, where the share of student-parents is higher than in central European countries (and very much increased compared to the last round of the survey) and equal access seems to be developed and successfully implemented (European Commission 2023). Quite ambiguous picture can be found in the countries mentioned below. German-speaking countries have on average older student population (mean age 26 years), but a small share of student-parents. Despite having one of the oldest student populations, the proportion of student-parents among the oldest students is low compared to other countries. In addition, students in these countries tend to have younger children under the age of six and less often children over the age of 15. In the case of Austria, this is a rather interesting finding as this country is perceived as one of the most flexible in terms of entry pathways to HE with large share of non-traditional students (Šaukeckienė et al., 2021). On the contrary, in France and the Netherlands students are very young (mean age 23 years), they mostly take the direct route and the share of student-parents is very low. In Georgia and Azerbaijan, countries that joined the Bologna process among the last ones, in 2005 (EHEA), there has been a lot of done in the approximation of higher education to European standards, but further public policy measures regarding study flexibility should be implemented (Mamadova, Valiyev 2020). Particular attention should be paid to Malta, with the highest increase in the share of students with children (by almost 8 pp.) and the highest increase in the average age of students during the period considered. In Malta flexible entry pathways for adult learners has been supported lately (NCHE 2009, Šaukeckienė et al., 2021) and their successful implementation is reflected in participating student-parents in HE.

In the last few years flexibility and broadened access possibilities in HE are widely discussed both at international and national level. As we can see from the data, flexible forms, both in terms of form of study and in the time to enter university vary quite a lot among EUROSTUDENT countries and the integration of new diverse groups of students has not been sufficiently developed. At the national level, more attention should be paid to development of the flexible study forms in HE. This includes, for example supporting alternative access routes, establishing more flexible study modes (online, short-courses, micro-credentials), but also promoting the transformation of the content of flexible forms of learning. One of the main efforts could be probably done at the institutional level. There is a need to develop institutional policies to create a safe and more open environment for non-traditional students with different needs that allows them to study in a more tailored way (seeing the schedule in advance, adjusting workload, flexible deadlines). And last but not least, not only the counselling centres, but also other additional infrastructure at campus (institutional nurseries etc.) should be improved.

Finally, we would like to mention an important factor that is discussed in the literature, besides the institutional support – the importance of the attitudes towards this group of students at HEIs (Brooks 2012, Moreau 2014). If we try to understand the needs of these different groups, it will be easier to create a more supportive environment for them. Non-traditional students, including those with children, are often more motivated and focused on studies (Hündlová, Šmídová 2020), and it would be unwise not to prepare the university environment for more such students.

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Methodological notes

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT survey conventions

Figure 1, Figure 4

Question 6.1 — CH: Register data from the Swiss Higher Education Information System. **DK, NO:** Register information used. **IS:** Information was taken from the sample.

Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6

Question 6.9 — CH: In the Swiss survey, the information on the number of children of students is collected in a separate question after a filtering question ("Do you have child/children? Yes/No").

Figure 2

Question 6.2 — AT: This variable is based on students' answers to the question "Which sex are you officially registered with at your HEI?". For students who did not choose "Female" or "Male", values were imputed. **CH:** Register data from the Swiss Higher Education Information System. **CZ:** Three response options ("Female," "Male," "I prefer not to assign myself to the above-mentioned categories") were given. **DK:** Register information was used. **GE, HU, LV, PL:** Only used the categories "Female" and "Male". **NO, RO:** Register information was used.

Figure 3

Question 6.10 — AT: For students who are living with their partner's child(ren), the question referred to their partner's children. **NO:** Two separate questions were asked depending on number of children.

Figure 4

Question 6.1 — RO: Data approximated with other items/data (not based on EUROSTUDENT questionnaire)

Figure 5

Question 1.8 — CH: Register data from the Swiss Higher Education Information System was used.

Figure 6

Question 2.5 — AT: Question was only answered by national students and it referred to entering higher education in Austria only. **CH:** Register data from the Swiss Higher Education Information System. The data is approximated (especially for international students). **DK:** The response option that the students started less than one year after they left upper secondary school for the first time was added. The question has been recoded so it only consists of the two response options. **FR:** Data approximated with other items/data (not based on EUROSTUDENT questionnaire). **GE:** Extra explanation which is usually provided was left out, since in Georgia it is impossible to enter higher education without completion of secondary (regular) school

About EUROSTUDENT

The EUROSTUDENT project collates comparable student survey data on the social dimension of European higher education, collecting data on a wide range of topics, e.g. the socio-economic background, living conditions, and temporary international mobility of students. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. The data presented here stem from the eighth round of the EUROSTUDENT project (2021–2024).

Countries participating in EUROSTUDENT

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- Czech Republic (CZ)
- Denmark (DK)
- Estonia (EE)
- Finland (FI)
- France (FR)
- Georgia (GE)
- Germany (DE)
- Hungary (HU)
- Iceland (IS)
- Ireland (IE)
- Latvia (LV)
- Lithuania (LT)
- Malta (MT)
- Norway (NO)
- Poland (PL)
- Portugal (PT)
- Romania (RO)
- Slovakia (SK)
- Spain (ES)
- Sweden (SE)
- Switzerland (CH)
- The Netherlands (NL)

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