



**DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES**  
**POLICY DEPARTMENT B:**  
**STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES**  
**CULTURE AND EDUCATION**

# **HIGHER EDUCATION ENTRANCE QUALIFICATIONS AND EXAMS IN EUROPE: A COMPARISON**

**STUDY**

## **Abstract**

The study analyses admission systems to higher education across ten countries, covering some countries of the European Union (France, Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Sweden and the United Kingdom), a candidate country (Turkey) as well as commonly used international comparators (Australia, Japan and the US). These countries are compared on three axes: the equity of admissions, their quality and their ability to encourage students' mobility. On this basis, recommendations are provided with regard to admission to higher education in Europe.

**IP/B/CULT/IC/2013\_007**

**May 2014**

**PE 529.057**

**EN**

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education.

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Original: EN  
Translation: DE, FR

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Manuscript completed in May 2014  
Brussels © European Union, 2014

This document is available on the Internet at:  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The study analyses admission systems to higher education across ten countries, covering some countries of the European Union (France, Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Sweden and the United Kingdom), a candidate country (Turkey) as well as three countries commonly used for international comparison (Australia, Japan and the US). The analysis is structured along three axes, assessing the **equity** of admission systems, their **quality** and their ability to encourage students' **mobility**.

The research design relies on multiple methods, including a review of the academic and policy literature, interviews with stakeholders, and descriptive analysis of statistical datasets. Reliance on relatively unstructured data and a case study approach causes the researchers to be cautious regarding the generalisability of the claims presented, in particular considering the great diversity in processes and requirements observed across the ten admission systems analysed through the case studies.

Given these limitations, the study opened several avenues for further research, including a systematic and in-depth analysis of the relationship between equity and quality in admission systems across countries, focussing on how different admission systems define and comply with the notion of 'fair' treatment as well as how recent trends in higher education (e.g. e-learning) may impact admission requirements.

The study suggests that the European Parliament considers the policy recommendations listed in Chapter 7, and tests the feasibility of these options through a stakeholder workshop in Brussels, as well as through further analysis, particularly regarding application patterns among mobile students.

The study is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides the introduction, setting out the context and defining the key concepts employed in the study. Chapter 2 presents the method used to compile the findings. Chapter 3 provides a descriptive overview of admission systems in the ten selected countries. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 assess these systems based on the three dimensions of analysis, namely equity (Chapter 4), quality (Chapter 5) and mobility (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 provides conclusions, including policy recommendations for the European Parliament and Member States to consider.

These chapters lead to the following main findings on equity, quality and mobility.

### Main findings on equity

- **Admission systems are an important component of equity in access to higher education.** However, admission systems are limited in what they can achieve, and policy needs to take processes unfolding before the point of admissions and after enrolment in higher education into account.
- **Admissions systems are not just limited to entry to higher education.** They should also contribute to helping students have a successful academic career and graduate by matching them to relevant courses of degree.

- **Providing students with accurate information prior to their enrolment in university improves their ability to select suitable study routes.** High quality information for applications can ensure stronger retention and higher graduation rates, which is in turn a central policy objective on both equity and quality grounds.
- **Improving equality of opportunity for all higher education is complex** and does not automatically imply open access higher education. A particular challenge remains regarding the recognition and equivalence of skills, competencies and qualifications for non-traditional learners.

### Main findings on quality

- **The adoption of autonomy laws implies changes to admission systems.** The adoption of autonomy laws mean that the traditionally centralised forms of governance in some European countries, including France and Germany, currently coexist with a system which gives universities greater freedom of choice over many aspects of their admissions policies.
- The **centralised management of applications** is perceived as a way to ensure uniform standards, but increasingly co-exists with some space for autonomous university input.
- **Supporting higher education institutions with the creation of specialised networks or agencies to promote the exchange of best practices** would help universities to develop their own admission policies. Specialised networks or agencies which promote an exchange of best practices regarding admissions tend to be developed only in countries with a long tradition of autonomous institutional decision-making.
- **Providing more autonomy to universities in admissions could facilitate better matching of students and courses, but may lead to administrative failures if universities do not have the capacity to administer the process.** In this respect, the skills and preparation of the administrative personnel of universities processing the applications should be an important concern.
- **Operating admissions procedures earlier in the academic year would prevent adverse consequences** for both students and universities.
- International evidence suggests that **secondary school grades are a better predictor of student achievement than standardised scores.** However, secondary school leaving examinations tend to be reflective of test scores in high school. Additional information on students, including application forms and interviews, may help to assess the student's likelihood to graduate.
- Multiple **admission criteria and increased information to prospective students under certain conditions ensures the higher predictive capacity of students' future academic success.** Multiple admission criteria can be used to increase the selectivity of the system, and in this respect may act as a deterrent. But using such procedures does not necessarily translate into increasing the selectivity of the process. It can be achieved by introducing non-selective entry tests and strengthening pre-university orientation.

### Main findings on mobility<sup>1</sup>

- **The numbers of mobile students, both within the EU and internationally, are increasing.** Some countries have set up barriers for the mobility of students, for example through quotas or different regimes of tuition fees and financial aid.
- Although the equivalence of qualifications and diplomas acquired in the European Union is relatively well recognised, **transaction costs may be high for students and higher education institutions/admissions agencies in processing multiple country applications.**
- However, the **evidence for these transaction costs remains qualitative.** Comparable European-wide data should be compiled regarding the mobility patterns of first entrants to higher education.

### Policy recommendations for greater cooperation in admissions across the European Union

There is scope for much more exchange of information on admission requirements across Europe. Measures to facilitate the exchange of information and support national admissions' agencies in managing the applications of mobile students would reduce the transaction costs related to mobile applications, as well as increase the attractiveness of each of the European higher education systems to non-national applicants.

These suggestions do not necessarily imply a greater harmonisation of admissions systems, a move which would be contrary to the provisions of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).<sup>2</sup>

### Three possible courses of action for the European Union

The study proposes three possible courses of action to improve the equity and quality of admission systems, and to promote mobility. Two of the recommendations would require a proactive initiative of the European Union institutions.

- **Option 1: Maintaining the baseline.** Maintaining the baseline would imply that students continue to find information in the country of destination or the country of origin. Maintaining the baseline would be cost-neutral to European institutions, but it would result in relatively high transaction costs especially if students submit multiple applications.
- **Option 2: A registry of admission agencies in order to exchange best practices.** The European Union could facilitate the exchange of information regarding admissions through a European registry of national admissions' agencies. The European registry would imply some minimal set-up costs but bear many benefits: the exchange of information would help to promote mobility, quality and equity in admissions, as well as the recognition of qualifications.
- **Option 3: A support system for national agencies regarding multiple applications across states.** European institutions could also conceive a platform which would support national admission systems for mobile students and would concentrate on the particular issue of those who wish to submit several applications.

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<sup>1</sup> The study concentrated on intra-European mobility, in other words the mobility of EU applicants between EU member states.

<sup>2</sup> Article 165 Treaty of the European Union.

Options 2 and 3 would imply some set up costs, but reduce the transaction costs of applications across Member States for students, administrators and universities.

The study recommends that the European Parliament considers these three possible courses of action and tests their feasibility through a stakeholders' workshop in Brussels.

### **Recommendations for the national governments of EU Member States**

Given the great diversity of national admission systems, the study does not provide a rigid set of recommendations to national governments, but it rather develops a toolkit of sensible policy options that do not necessarily apply across Europe, but that need to be critically assessed against specific contextual features at the country-level.

Recommendations are clustered around the three main dimensions of the analysis and include the following:

Regarding equity, the study recommends that Member States:

- Design, in accordance with the respective national traditions, admission systems that provide as much information as possible to prospective applicants to increase graduation rate: a central objective on both quality and equity grounds;
- Capture through the admission systems the ability of students to progress towards a successful completion of degrees rather than only the fulfilment of the criteria for entry;
- Evaluate current practices with regards to admission, especially regarding non-traditional learners, and consider measures such as introducing (or increasing) opportunities for recognition of prior learning beyond secondary school qualifications; or the impact of the hidden costs of higher education applications and their effects on admission.

Regarding quality, the study recommends that Member States:

- Encourage universities to employ sufficient and high-skilled personnel to administer admissions, to ensure that the process is homogenous across higher education institutions;
- Encourage relevant admission bodies to think critically of the timing of application, and consider – where applicable – to launch and finalise the application process in the academic year prior to the beginning of the degree;
- Strengthen cooperation between universities and secondary schools to ensure that students make well-informed choices, a recommendation that bears relevance on equity grounds as well, as pointed out above.

Regarding mobility, the study recommends that Member States:

- Commit to exchanging information on application and enrolment data by country of origin across EU member states;
- Remove barriers to student mobility at any stage of higher education, including entry to the first year of university.