

Developing graduate tracking at European level

SUMMARY

Adequate skills and competencies ensure that individuals can successfully navigate today's rapidly changing employment environment. Moreover, a skilled workforce enhances innovation and business competitiveness and, ultimately, the sustainable growth and resilience of the European economy.

Feedback on graduate education and career pathways can help to monitor policy-making and practice in education and training, and identify areas for transformation, thus enhancing the relevance of graduates' skills and competencies. This in turn can improve their integration into the job market and society, and the management of existing and potential skills gaps and mismatches.

The Council Recommendation of 20 November 2017 on tracking graduates invited the Member States and the European Commission to explore common approaches to collecting and analysing tracking data, and for increasing the comparability of information on graduates from higher and vocational education and training. By achieving coordinated and comprehensive data collection, tracking at European level would enrich the analysis of graduate outcomes made nationally with a comparative dimension.

To achieve the objectives of the 2017 Council Recommendation, a number of steps were taken within the context of the European Commission's European Graduate Tracking Initiative, which aims to obtain data comparability and enhance the quality of national graduate tracking measures across the European Education Area. A key milestone on the way to attaining the initiative's goals was the launch of the European Graduate Tracking Network in May 2022.

In 2023, the European Commission will provide a comprehensive overview on the progress made in implementing the 2017 Council Recommendation. It expects graduate tracking to be used at European level by 2025.



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Introduction

According to the definition used in the [Council Recommendation on tracking graduates](#), adopted on 20 November 2017 (hereinafter 2017 Council Recommendation), a graduate is a person who has completed any level of higher education or vocational education and training (VET), at levels four and above, as defined under the [European Qualifications Framework \(EQF\)](#).¹

Graduate tracking [refers to](#) gathering information from and about graduates after they complete their studies. This can happen at different points in time after graduation, for instance one, five and nine years afterwards, [often](#) through either surveying a representative sample of graduates or linking relevant administrative data, or through a combination of these two methods. The most commonly collected indicators [relate to](#) graduates' education history, employment status, remuneration, further education and training, and satisfaction with education and job. Information gathered can also [refer to](#) socio-biographical and socio-economic backgrounds.

According to a 2020 [study](#) on graduate tracking policies and practices in the EU and other [European Economic Area](#) (EEA) countries, graduate tracking is generally the responsibility of the national or regional authorities in charge of higher education or VET policies. The study also noted that while the majority of these countries have well-developed tracking systems, there are significant differences in the mechanisms for collecting information about graduates, as well as in the type and comparability of the information collected.

Background

The EU is facing skills shortages in [certain occupations](#), such as engineering and information technology (IT), with an increasing demand for both a high and low-skilled workforce. As a consequence of [structural evolutions](#) such as the ongoing green and digital transitions, [new skills shortages](#) are also arising. Moreover, skills and knowledge flows across European labour markets can bring about [regional](#) surpluses and deficits in skills. In this context, learning subjects where skills gaps and labour demand exist, and acquiring key competencies, such as digital skills, is crucial, all the more so that, over the years, [concerns](#) have been raised that higher education does not equip graduates with the skills and knowledge [needed](#) by the labour market.

Graduate tracking [can help](#) to improve the relevance of graduates' skills and competences against the demands of employers by enabling evidence-based decision-making in skills planning and improving curricula design. It also allows a better understanding of the characteristics of cross-border mobility and stronger career guidance. Moreover, by promoting the quality and relevance of higher education and VET, and by strengthening the [connection](#) between higher education systems across Europe, graduate tracking contributes to the expected achievement of the [European Education Area](#) by 2025.

Over the years, a number of documents have considered the issues of improving the follow-up on graduates and addressing skills mismatches. The [2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission](#) on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020) for instance, which called to enhance higher education's relevance to the job market and society, including through better understanding and forecasting labour market needs and outcomes. The [New Skills Agenda for Europe](#), adopted by the Commission in 2016, underlined the need to increase awareness of graduates' labour market outcomes and learning progression. The 2017 [Commission communication on a renewed EU agenda for higher education](#) set out the Commission objective to launch a European graduate tracking initiative to gain further knowledge at national and EU-level of graduate career and further learning performance.

European Graduate Tracking Initiative

The document setting the scene for a European graduate tracking mechanism was the 2017 Council Recommendation. The Council invited the Member States to improve the quality, availability and comparability of tracking data about higher education and VET graduates, including progress by 2020 on developing graduate tracking systems. The objective was to offer graduates stronger career guidance and to enhance the acquisition of relevant skills and improve employability through a better-informed curricula design, among other things. It put forward key dimensions for tracking measures, and recommended the broad dissemination and use of tracking data analysis results. The Council invited the Commission to create and support a network of experts, and encouraged Member States to collaborate and share knowledge on graduate monitoring. Moreover, it asked the Commission to provide an update within five years on Member States' progress. The recommendation stated that commitments to be made by Member States are of a voluntary nature.

Against this background, the [European Graduate Tracking Initiative](#) aims to obtain comparability of national graduate outcome analysis and achieve better quality tracking measures across the European Education Area. It is a useful instrument for countries and educational institutions to gain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their education systems, and enables them to identify, through analysis and comparison, the most effective teaching and learning practices that lead to sustainable employment and active citizenship. It also helps to improve knowledge of graduates who have gone abroad, which has generally been difficult under the current national measures. Moreover, the analysis of comparable tracking data can contribute to strengthening career guidance, improving the efficiency of investment in education and skills, and can help address inequalities in education. Within the context of the European Graduate Tracking Initiative, a number of actions have been undertaken:

Study on mapping VET graduate tracking measures in EU Member States

In 2018, a [mapping study](#) prepared for the Commission on VET graduate tracking measures in the EU Member States was published. In total, 85 measures were identified in 24 countries, with significant differences, for instance, in the type of measures, the robustness of the data collected, and whether these measures were implemented at the national or regional level. The Commission has ordered a new VET graduate tracking study to map data availability and comparability in national registers, and VET peer learning activities were also [organised](#).

Eurograduate pilot survey

The Eurograduate pilot survey [aims at](#) paving the way for a sustainable European-wide data collection on higher education graduates.

The first phase of the pilot survey, carried out between October 2018 and February 2019, covered approximately 21 000 bachelor-level and master-level graduates from eight countries (Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Malta, and Norway). The research examined how higher education prepared graduates for the labour market, for personal skills development, and active citizenship, and analysed their mobility experiences.

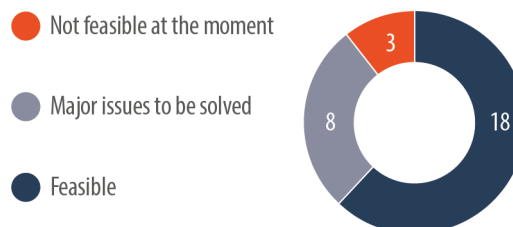
The pilot survey was complemented by in-depth interviews with Erasmus+ higher education system' representatives² regarding the interest in and conditions of collecting data in Erasmus+ countries, to assess the potential of a European graduate survey in the future.

The [results](#) were published in 2020, in the form of a comparative report, eight national reports focusing on specificities in these countries, and a technical report. The technical report included the lessons learned from the pilot survey and the recommendations for a potential European-wide survey, as well as a feasibility assessment.

The comparative report demonstrated that it was possible to gather comparable data on graduates in the participating eight countries, providing valuable [insight](#).

The feasibility assessment showed that joining a European-wide graduate survey was deemed feasible for a clear majority of those Erasmus+ higher education systems that provided information³. Most of the systems for which the removal of significant obstacles would facilitate participation identified the coordination of existing tracking systems with a potential European survey as the main problem. Three systems considered the feasibility of participation negatively because, for instance, they did not see much added value in joining as compared to existing tracking systems or considered the expected cost-benefit ratio not very good.

Figure 1 – Feasibility of participating in a European graduate survey



Source: [Eurograduate pilot study: technical assessment](#).

The second phase of the Eurograduate pilot survey, the Eurograduate 2022 survey, covering a total of [17 countries](#), was [launched](#) in December 2021 and runs until June 2024.

Study on mapping graduate tracking policies and practices in the EU and other EEA countries

A benchmarking [study](#), produced at the Commission's request, was published in 2020. In total, 31 countries were examined, including the EU-27, other EEA countries, and the United Kingdom.⁴ The study aimed to assess and describe graduate tracking approaches at system level in higher education and VET, and to survey tracking practices in higher education institutions. The study also looked at the countries' progress in meeting the 2017 Council Recommendation and how far the existing measures would allow for an EU-wide comparison.

In about two-thirds of the countries covered, it was found that system-level tracking existed for higher education and VET graduates. Altogether, 18 countries had an established practice of tracking in higher education and VET, including, Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Germany and Slovakia, for instance. Certain countries had system-level graduate tracking measures, either for higher education, such as Bulgaria, or for VET, such as Portugal. In general, while tracking was a well-established practice in higher education, the use of tracking was less common in VET.

Countries where the law requires tracking tended to have a well-developed tracking system. However, a legal basis was not a necessary condition for tracking on a regular basis. Countries, where tracking was both a legal obligation and a common practice, included Finland and France. Despite not being a legal obligation, tracking was a well-developed practice in countries such as Ireland.

A total of 123 system-level tracking measures were identified in the research across 29 countries. The measures gathered a wide range of data, with significant differences in the type and level of detail of the information collected. Only around a third of the measures tracked graduates multiple times to ensure longitudinal follow-up.⁵ For the purpose of their tracking measures, many countries used both surveys and administrative data collection, since these were complementary in terms of the required data. Countries most commonly used tracking data for system-level monitoring and evaluation of education policies and their development.

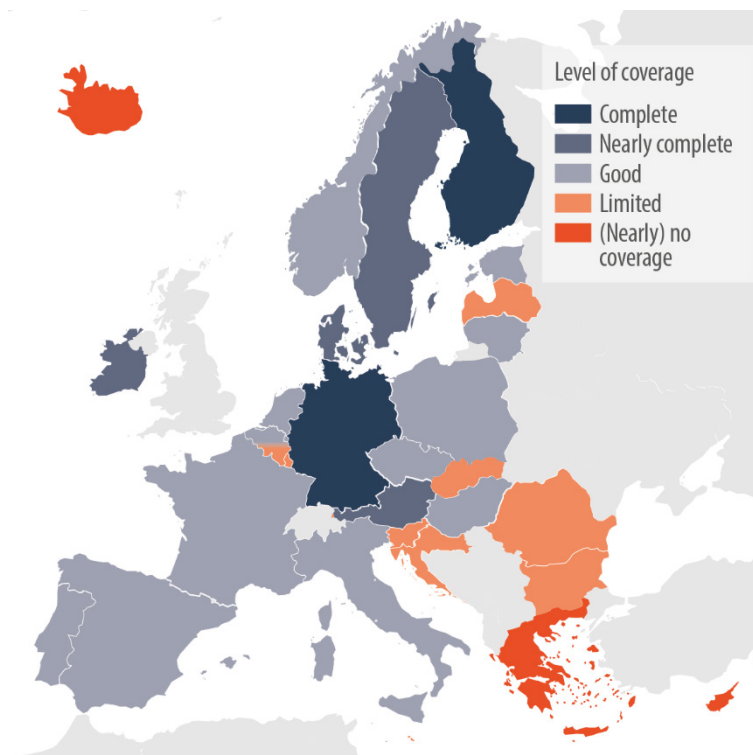
The study found that there was a potential for comparability in the results of the graduate tracking measures for many countries; however, further action would be needed to improve the comparability of data and the effectiveness of measures.

The study also stated that the majority of countries had to make improvements against all of the benchmarking criteria defined on the basis of the 2017 Council Recommendation, particularly in certain aspects of tracking, such as the coverage of continuing VET across nearly all benchmarking criteria, and the inclusion of early leavers and mobile graduates in surveys. A virtually complete coverage of the criteria was found for only two countries: Finland and Germany.

The survey among higher education institutions found that these generally have well-established tracking systems. However, institutional tracking quality varied considerably.

In addition to the study, the Commission put forward a ['how to do it well' guide](#) with practical advice to help national administrations develop and improve their tracking measures.

Map 1 – EU and other EEA countries' progress on the 2017 Council Recommendation on tracking graduates; 2020 situation



Source: [European Commission](#).

Expert group on graduate tracking

To support the Commission's work, an Expert Group on Graduate Tracking was set up in 2018. The group consisted of 66 members delegated by the EU and other EEA national governments, key European stakeholder organisations, and several EU bodies. The expert group, which provided a forum for cooperation and mutual exchange, monitored the development of tracking systems in the EU, explored different ways of acquiring national data comparable at EU-level, and formulated recommendations concerning the European Graduate Tracking Initiative. In carrying out its work, the expert group relied on the Eurograduate pilot survey and the 2020 mapping study.

In their [final report](#), published in 2021, the experts recommended a gradual approach to rolling out the European Graduate Tracking Initiative. They suggested that, in the short term, up to 50 % of EU and other EEA countries should participate in the European graduate survey by 2022, and in a second wave, up to 80 % of the countries by 2025. Participation in the survey would be voluntary. The expert group also recommended that countries improve the collection and linking of administrative data, leading in the medium term to the use of administrative data and a shorter survey questionnaire. In the long term, the group set a target for 80 % of the countries to implement the 2017 Council Recommendation by 2025, and 100 % by 2030, thus meeting the final goal of a European coordinated information system. It also suggested a regular monitoring of the implementation based on criteria defined in the 2020 mapping study.

In the report, the experts put forward a list of essential information and a list of recommended information to be collected. Moreover, the group proposed a modular approach, to [avoid](#) the

duplication of national graduate tracking efforts. There was an emphasis on the need for compliance with national data protection legislation and the [General Data Protection Regulation](#) (GDPR).

The report noted that, for reasons such as the smaller coverage of tracking in the VET sector, it seems that the European graduate tracking in VET will be achieved later than for higher education; however, a set of principles and standards that could be used for the development of VET graduate tracking was identified.

The creation of a coordination structure to help develop the European tracking system was also suggested. It would be based on national reference points covering higher and vocational education and training and creating a European network of experts. A secretariat would support the network and a steering committee would guide the implementation of the 2017 Council Recommendation.

Capacity-building activities

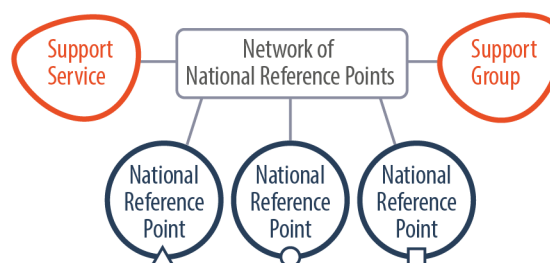
Based on the results of the pilot survey, the mapping study and the work of the expert group, the Commission [launched](#) capacity-building activities between 2020 and 2022. The aim was to support the countries to address their capacity shortages and thus to participate in the European graduate tracking mechanism. Member States have been involved in different activities, for instance, in developing information technology and statistical capacities. This has also contributed to an increase in the number of countries joining the second phase of the Eurograduate pilot survey. Initially planned to end in June 2022, the capacity-building activity continues to support the Eurograduate 2022 survey countries. A [Country Roadmaps Summary Report](#) is available on capacity building for a European Graduate Tracking Initiative.

European Network of Graduate Tracking

In line with the recommendations of the expert group on graduate tracking, and as a key milestone in the implementation of the initiative, the Commission set up the [European Network of Graduate Tracking](#). Officially [launched](#) in May 2022, at the first virtually held Annual Network Meeting, the network is voluntary. It consists of the national graduate tracking reference points appointed by the EU and other EEA countries, representatives of the Commission, as well as European-level stakeholders and social partners. It aims to assist the EU and other EEA countries in implementing the 2017 Council

Recommendation and foster cooperation and learning exchange between the countries participating in the European Graduate Tracking Initiative. The network's [first newsletter](#) was published in September 2022. The next Annual Network Meeting is planned for May 2023. The Commission also set up a Support Service to assist the Network's activities, and a Support Group was created to guide the Network's practical work towards the full roll out of the tracking initiative.

Figure 2 – Coordination of the European Network of Graduate Tracking



Source: [European Commission](#).

European level graduate tracking – Challenges and concerns

A webinar organised on behalf of the Commission for stakeholders in March 2021, included a presentation on [challenges](#) relating to the European tracking initiative. These included, on the one hand, the differences in the organisation, governance, quality assurance and qualifications offered by national higher education sectors, and, on the other hand, substantial concerns about the new initiative voiced by countries with established and existing tracking systems, regarding data

protection, cost-benefit and financing, among other things. Priority topics discussed at the [workshops](#) organised on the sidelines of the 2022 Annual Network Meeting, included the limitations of administrative data matching due to data protection legislation and data sharing across countries. A 2020 European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) [joint position](#) considered several aspects of the introduction of a European tracking system as problematic. For instance, they noted that a European tracking survey among students could impact negatively on higher education institutions' autonomy and academic freedom and that caution should be exercised if feedback on graduates' labour market achievement is to be used to make significant changes to the education curricula.

EU support for European graduate tracking-related activities

Regarding the funding of graduate tracking at European level, the 2017 Council Recommendation states that financing should:

... Ensure the sustainability of graduate tracking initiatives by allocating adequate and multi-annual resources, making use of national or European sources of funding, such as Erasmus+ or European Structural and Investment Funds, where appropriate and in line with existing resources, legal basis and priorities defined for the period 2014-2020, without any prejudice to negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Frameworks.

The EU has made financial resources available to the Member States [to contribute](#) to the implementation of the 2017 Council Recommendation.

The [Erasmus+ programme](#) has [financed](#), for instance, the establishment of the European graduate tracking coordination structure, the coordination of the Eurograduate pilot survey, as well as most of the participating countries' data collection.

As regards the 2021-2027 programming period for the [European Structural and Investment Funds](#), graduate tracking has become an [enabling condition](#) for specific objectives under the European Social Fund+ and the European Regional Development Fund. Should a Member State not meet this condition, the expenditure related to these specific objectives will not be eligible for funding until the condition is met. Member States must match these EU funds.

Moreover, [several](#) Member States' [national recovery and resilience plans \(RRPs\)](#) included measures to facilitate the transformation of higher education, including for initiatives such as the introduction of graduate tracking systems, for instance in [Cyprus](#).

What to expect?

In 2023, the Commission will provide a broad overview of the progress made in implementing the 2017 Council Recommendation, with an expected 80 % uptake among the Member States by the end of 2024. The 2023 overview will also consider the progress achieved through the Eurograduate 2022 survey and the results of the Network's work programme. Moreover, it expects graduate tracking to take place at European level by 2025.

European Parliament position

The European Parliament has addressed the follow-up of graduates in a number of documents. In its April 2012 [resolution](#) on modernising Europe's higher education systems for instance, the Parliament underlined the need to follow-up on graduates' career pathways to assess how well higher education meets labour market needs. Parliament therefore welcomed the Commission's commitment to improve the availability of such data. In its [resolution](#) of September 2017 on academic further and distance education, the Parliament called on the Member States to make more data available on graduates' progress in the labour market and in their social situation, including data referring to the VET sector. In the same month, in its [resolution](#) on a new skills agenda for Europe, the Parliament welcomed the initiative to create a tracking system which should ensure a

more evidence-based and relevant approach to the design of curricula and learning offers. Parliament requested the creation of a similar large-scale tracking system in the VET sector. In its [resolution](#) of June 2018 on modernisation of education in the EU, Parliament called for the New Skills Agenda commitments to be met, including support for Member States to improve availability of information on graduate employment outcomes. Parliament again welcomed the proposal to create a European tracking system, and underlined that tracking information and collecting accurate and relevant national and EU-level data is essential for the development of high-quality education.

MAIN REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The 2017 Council Recommendation stated that initiatives set up in some Member States also track school leavers.
- ² 'There are 33 Erasmus+ countries but the higher education systems of the French-speaking community of Belgium and of the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium are treated separately due to being managed independently by the administrations of the two communities.' Source: [Eurograduate Pilot Survey - Technical Assessment](#).
- ³ Verified information was received from 29 of the 34 Erasmus+ higher education systems.
- ⁴ On 31 January 2020, the United Kingdom [left](#) the European Union.
- ⁵ 'Participants are tracked and asked questions of interest at several time points. This is done to assess change over time within the same sample group at different points in time.' Source: [Graduate tracking: a 'how to do it well' guide](#).

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