

For most of the countries that provide education by distance learning, most of the programmes are offering academically-related courses, but for example, in Greece and Finland there is also the opportunity to study vocationally-related courses through distance learning. In Greece, from 1992, the Organisation for Vocational Education and Training (OEEK) launched an effort to provide distance vocational training. At present, work has begun under the Second Community Support Framework on creating a separate agency, a Distance Training Institute, with cooperation between the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs and OEEK. Open university education in Finland is provided by continuing education centres, other university organisations and various adult education institutions. Vocational specialisation studies are large-scale programs for further education training, based on polytechnic degrees. Open polytechnics have been around since 1997, and all polytechnics present this opportunity. The studies conducted there are the same studies that are included in the polytechnic degree programme. In 2004 approximately 11,000 students attended open polytechnics.

Countries that have little provision of distance learning include Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. For example, there is a lack of alternative training institutions, such as an open university system, in Hungarian higher education. The development of non-traditional training programmes within state institutions began after 1995, mostly through PHARE support, and from the late 1990s, several internet-based 'universities' began to be organised, yet they are still at a too early stage of development to impact upon the delivery of traditional higher education.

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, continuing education is another way to deliver tertiary education. Two countries that have dedicated systems for this type of delivery include the UK and Finland. In the UK, University for Industry (UfI) is an initiative launched by the Government to play a key role in its strategy for lifelong learning. The UfI acts as a broker helping people and businesses to identify their learning needs and to access this learning in the appropriate form. It aims to break down barriers to learning by making provision more flexible and accessible. It promotes learning ranging from basic skills of literacy and numeracy to specialised technological skills and business management. Many higher education institutions offer extra-mural courses that are specifically intended to meet the needs of local communities. Consequently, they may offer part-time courses providing professional updating, which people attend on day-release from work or attend in the evening, or leisure courses on subjects such as local history or geography, or language or literature classes. In Finland, adult education provided by universities is mainly arranged at universities' continuing education centres. The main aim of continuing education is to provide academically educated people with an opportunity to update their knowledge and skills or to acquire new professional skills or qualifications¹⁴⁵.

We have seen therefore that tertiary education distance learning has the potential to increase access, and there are hopes that it helps to reach people from less privileged backgrounds and with lower previous educational attainment, rural areas and working people but we also see

¹⁴⁵ Spain also has a strong Open University system (made of two Open Universities), which is described in more detail in the project's case-studies.

that in practice it has also increased educational inequalities –since it is being accessed to a relatively large extent by people who already has tertiary education qualifications.

2.5. Entitlements and obligations

Admission requirements

Within Europe there is considerable variation in the requirements for access to higher education. In most countries a school leaving diploma forms the basic requirement for entry into higher education but many states have systems to restrict the numbers of students admitted by imposing quotas usually termed a *numerus clausus*. If demand exceeds the number of places available, places are allocated by means of a draw or, if the institution so wishes, it may select students itself. The UK is regarded as being at one end of this spectrum having a highly selective system with fixed numbers for every course and different levels of additional selection procedures¹⁴⁶. Sweden also has a *numerus clausus* for all higher education with selection for admission. However, both the UK and Sweden have well-developed alternative routes into higher education. At the other extreme are countries in which the secondary school leaving certificate guarantees admission to higher/tertiary education institutions (though not necessarily to a specific institution for a specific course). This right, which is enshrined in law, is based on the concept that maturity implies academic aptitude. Such countries include, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy (with some restrictions) and the Netherlands. France, however, also has the highly selective *grandes écoles*, which admit students only on the basis of highly competitive examinations. In France there is also a separate examination for admission to medicine. In some countries, too, (for instance, Germany and the Netherlands) there are different types of high school and some certificates may provide admission to university and others only to non-university tertiary education institutions. In several countries where there is non-selective entry (such as France and Italy) a high proportion of students fail to complete successfully the first stage of their study in tertiary education. Whereas drop-outs are normally considered a sign of inefficiency of the education and training system, at the same time they mean that those who have dropped out have had access to some kind of tertiary education, which is better than them having had no access at all to it.

In between, there are countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain (and many Central and Eastern European countries) where, in addition to the possession of the secondary school leaving certificate, students traditionally had to take either a national university entrance examination or examinations conducted by individual universities. The university place offered may be determined by the state on the basis of the student's performance in the national examination. In Spain there a number of private universities, the oldest being those associated with the roma Catholic Church. Admission to these is by competitive examination and selection is more intense than in the state universities. In Greece only one in three successful students in the university entrance exam is offered a place, which accounts for the great mobility of Greek students within the EU. In Portugal the places available for entrance

¹⁴⁶ See also: Higher education in the learning society, National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), 1997.

to public HEI (ensino superior course) are controlled exclusively by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and are fixed and published annually by the authorities of the institutions involved, accompanied by the respective justification. Each school of ensino superior sets the tests it demands for entrance to each of its courses, for which it may use national secondary education exams (a procedure adapted in the 2001/02 school year) or other tests expressly designed for this purpose.

In the 1990s there has been a rapid growth in the number of commercially run private tertiary education establishments in many Central and Eastern European countries, and indeed, in Greece and Spain. This has taken place in response to a high level of demand for access to higher education in general, or for higher education of a particular type

Tuition fees

In Europe there is large variation in the organisation and levels of tuition fees in higher education. Table 5 provides a summary of this variety, based on data from 1999-2000, which questions the impact of tuition fees at their current level on access to tertiary education in Europe¹⁴⁷. Also the average grant is shown. The only country where tuition fees are at a considerable level and students on average could pay these tuition fees from the public grant subsidies they receive is the Netherlands. In the UK with even more substantial levels of tuition fees, the average grants given to students fall far below the level given to Dutch students.

Table 5: Annual average grant per student, average tuition fees (1999-2001, in €)

Country	Student grants	Tuition fees
Denmark	3750	0
Flanders	342	100-600
France	494	200-850
Germany	374	0
Netherlands	1750	1300
Sweden	2150	0
United Kingdom	700	1700

Source: CHEPS calculations, 2001.

Recently a Dutch study has been published on Perceptions of student price responsiveness¹⁴⁸. The study states that “many studies across a wide range of countries have come to the conclusion that financial incentives like tuition fees, grants and loans hardly impact students’ choices and their enrolment patterns (Leslie and Brinkman, 1987, Heller, 1997, De Jong et al., 2001). Only a small number of studies indicate that developments towards cost sharing

¹⁴⁷ Kaiser, F., H. Vossensteyn, J. Koelman, Public funding of higher education. A comparative study of funding mechanisms in ten countries. CHEPS-Higher education monitor. Center for Higher Education Policy Studies. Enschede, november 2001.

¹⁴⁸ Vossensteyn, J.J., Perceptions of student price responsiveness. A behavioural economics exploration of the relationships between socio-economic status, perceptions of financial incentives and student choice. University of Twente, the Netherlands, 2005.

through tuition and student support policies may have harmed access for students from lower socio-economic groups (McPherson and Schapiro, 1998; Heller, 2001). The studies that do report an impact of tuition and student support on access particularly show that lower-SES students choose shorter, cheaper, less prestigious, and less risky educational opportunities (Heller, 1997; McPherson and Schapiro, 1997)". This would locate debates on the impact of tuition fees in the domain of studies of social justice, rather than in the domain of access studies.

Based on data for the Netherlands the findings in the above mentioned study correspond well to the general picture from the literature that students are not very responsive to financial incentives. Nevertheless, trends toward (further) cost sharing often encounter opposition and are argued to have negative effects on access to higher education, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In view of this study's major findings, this opposition can be explained by students' strong perceptions of financial incentives and differences for students from various SES-backgrounds. However, the results also show that differences in perceptions do not automatically lead to different choices. Maybe therefore, no single Dutch study to date has been able to show that increased cost sharing has harmed access for disadvantaged students. Student numbers have steadily increased irrespective of demographic developments and the socio-economic composition of the student body has not changed over time (De Jong et al., 1991; Hofman et al., 2003). The major finding that different price perceptions do not necessarily lead to different choices is also consistent with international student choice literature.

Also other empirical studies give ample opportunities to consider the impact of tuition policy on enrolment in higher education — but they fall short of permitting a summary conclusion that freezing, reducing or introducing tuition fees will have a predictable effect. The fact is, there are many complex social issues that influence a decision to attend university; tuition is just one of them¹⁴⁹. This suggests that variation and trends in enrolment are the result of a complex interaction of factors, as illustrated in our theoretical framework, only some of them based on price. As well, some argue that tuition fees have a relatively small effect on enrolment because they typically represent the smaller cost of attending a post-secondary educational institution. Other costs, such as the opportunity costs associated with foregone earnings, housing costs and other costs of living, are much higher than direct costs for tuition fees.

2.6. *Barriers to take-up of educational opportunities*

One of the barriers to the take up educational opportunities often highlighted, relate to the financial contributions that students have to make while attending higher education –although we have seen that the effect of tuition fees on access is not as strong as often presumed. To compensate for these contributions students can apply for grants (which do not have to be repaid by students) or make use of loans (which do, after their period of study). The financial support for students in the Member States of the European Union and the EFTA/EEA

¹⁴⁹ Swail, W.S., Heller, D.E., Changes in tuition policy. Natural policy experiments in five countries. Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2004.

countries may be regarded as a continuum ranging from exclusively grants-based systems to exclusively loans-based systems such as the one in Iceland. According to the EURYDICE grants are the most widespread form of support, but many countries also offer loans that are guaranteed and/or subsidised by the State¹⁵⁰.

In most countries in which loans are obtainable, they form an integral part of support and, together with grants, constitute a combined system of financial support. The two components are usually awarded depending on similar requirements, and only students entitled to a measure of support in the form of a grant may acquire a loan in order to supplement it. In most combined systems, students are generally free to decide whether they will accept the supplementary loan entitlement. An exception to this is in Germany where students eligible for financial assistance were obliged to receive a non-repayable grant and an interest free loan in equivalent proportions regarded as an integral support package. Repayment terms for this state loan depends on social considerations and income. Since 2001, a maximum of 10.000 Euro had to be repaid. Once the maximum period during which assistance is payable has been exceeded, students, as a rule, only receive funding in the form of a bank loan, which is subject to payment of interests.

In some countries, however, the systems of grants and loans are separate and operate independently of each other. The conditions governing their award may also be different. Students not entitled to a grant may be eligible for a loan. In France, where the loans system is separate, students entitled to a grant cannot obtain the loan known as a prêt d'honneur. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, Greece, Spain, Ireland, Austria and Portugal, only grants were available in the 1990s. In general it can be stated that countries in the north-west of Europe have a mix of grants and loans, whereas the financial support for students in the south-western countries of Europe mainly or exclusively rely on grants. In eastern Europe participation in higher education is financially supported by scholarships and various forms of social allowances, although this is often limited to enrolment in public funded institutions. In Poland, in order to make higher education accessible to higher number of young people, the system of financial support to students from the state budget has been introduced. In Hungary the most general form of support is an academic scholarship that differentiates and allocates state support essentially on the basis of the academic performance of the individual student.

In general financial support systems for students can be said to enhance the access to higher education by securing equality of (financial) opportunities regarding the right to education. For instance, in Spain the State has established a general scholarship and aid system charged to its General Budget in order to remove the socio-economic obstacles. Economic requirements tend to secure that these benefits will be granted to those students who do not have enough family income in order to meet the education expenses of their members. In Finland the purpose of the student financial aid is to guarantee equal opportunities in education by securing the students' income. In Ireland the universities are working with so called "access" schemes explicitly meant to promote educational opportunity for students

¹⁵⁰ Key topics in education. Volume 1: Financial support for students in higher education in Europe, EURYDICE, 1999.