

Highlights from EUROSTUDENT VIII in the Czech Republic

Target groups:	BA and MA national and foreign students at colleges and universities who are enrolled to study program (not mobile student)
Data collection:	June and July 2022
Method:	census, online questionnaire
Response rate:	6.2 %
Valid cases for analysis:	14 798
Weighted by (raking method):	gender, age category, type and form of study, type of higher education institution and study fields.

In terms of their dynamics, the results of the EUROSTUDENT survey in the Czech Republic can be divided into two main parts. Many of the themes that characterise the Czech situation in higher education do not change much over time, which is also reflected in the "stable" results. On the other hand, there are areas where the results have visibly changed compared to previous years or are areas that appear for the first time in the survey and are therefore worth highlighting. Both will be further specified in this summary. As this is primarily a systemic survey, it is also the case that in this summary we will focus on areas that are significant in terms of the strategic framework within which higher education in the Czech Republic operates. This means that we are building on the priorities of the Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2021+ (SP 2021+).

The survey is traditionally designed as a census, but the response rate is low: 6.2 %. Nevertheless, the participation of universities was broad and included all public HEIs as well as a considerable proportion of private universities. The data were weighted by raking method on six indications, i.e. sex, four age categories, type of study (BA, MA, long MA), type of institution (university and non-university, form of study (full and part time), and study field (18 categories, ISCED F-2013).

Socio-economic conditions of students are the main focus of the survey. In the Czech context, some of the important indicators that are repeated in each wave of the EUROSTUDENT survey remain similar (stable) and at the same time represent "outliers" in the international context. We will start with these stable and, from an international perspective, extreme indicators.

The level of public financial support targeted at needy individuals in study is consistently low. This is accompanied by an increased need for parental support or self-support in the form of paid job while studying. This is a long-term phenomenon and has a strong international dimension. In the Czech Republic 52 % of students depend on their parents and 39 % on their own income. Public support of this type represents a marginal source of student's income. In some respects, it is both very general and low: it applies to the accommodation scholarship. In other respects, it is drastically limited in terms of availability and at the same time not strong: the case of the means tested scholarship. The results also do not show that the means tested scholarship significantly targets learners who declare financial difficulties.

Paid job during studies is "stagnant" at a prominent level, which is true for its prevalence and intensity: 70 % of all students work on average (i.e. median) 10 hours per week during the semester.

The Czech Republic has long been one of the countries with the highest share of students who have paid work during their studies. Therefore, the proportion of working students (especially full-time students) no longer has much potential for growth. It is increasingly confirmed that work intensity does not necessarily have a negative impact on studies. This applies both to part-time students and to full-time students.

Although housing in the Czech Republic is unaffordable according to many indicators, the latest wave of EUROSTUDENT shows a stagnation to a slight decrease in the share of students spending 40 % or more of their total costs on housing (on average, 38 % of students). We do not yet know the international data for the current wave, but in the long term **the Czech Republic is one of the countries with an above-average share of students who are burdened by housing costs to such an extent. In this respect, the group of students with financial problems (42 % of them spend more than 40 % of their total costs on housing) is one of the most vulnerable.** Co-housing is an increasingly usual form of housing: 41 % of all students, 5 % more than in the data from the seventh wave of the survey.

Next, we come to the results, which show a clear shift compared to the last wave of the survey. **In the area of socio-economic conditions, there has been an increase from 20 % to 26 % of students with financial difficulties.** These problems are most acute for those who live in halls of residence or who have health limitation. The current society-wide economic difficulties are also reflected in a slight increase in the motivation to work while studying due to pure economic necessity (i.e. an increase in agreement with the statement 'If I didn't work, I wouldn't be able to study'). The increase in the proportion of students with financial problems is probably not attributable to the increasing openness of the university system, but rather to the data on the transition from secondary to higher education, which is outside the scope of this survey.

In the EUROSTUDENT survey, the degree of openness of the higher education system with regard to equal and fair access is measured in terms of interrupted or uninterrupted educational pathways. **The Czech Republic is one of the countries where more than 90 % of students enter university within two years of finishing secondary school** (EUROSTUDENT VII and VIII results). EUROSTUDENT speaks in this context about an uninterrupted educational pathway. And in this respect, the situation remains rather static. **In the Czech environment, the non-traditional pathway has long been represented mainly by male and female students in the combined form of study (42 % have an interrupted educational pathway), which represents one of the flexible forms of education.** Diverse educational pathways are more common among students with lower socio-economic status (SES), who often enter the higher education system at a later age.

The alternative educational path (i.e. admission to university without the standard entry qualification - *maturita* or its foreign equivalent) is not possible in the Czech education system and its later acquisition (more than six months after high school graduation) is practically non-existent. Thus, for almost all students in EUROSTUDENT VII (97 %) and VIII (99 %), entry to university was quite standard. Meanwhile, in the last wave of the survey, on average across all countries, 8 % of students in the Czech Republic were enrolled as having used an alternative access route.

One stable fact can be highlighted when speaking of study conditions, **it is still true that students want to spend more time on paid work and do not want to change their time allocation, especially in the field of taught studies.** The average median study time budget (taught studies + personal study time) of a student is 33 hours per week, which is similar to the previous round of the survey. For the *Medicine* and *Dentistry* and *Architecture and Urban Planning* fields of study, the figures are 50 and 53 hours per week respectively and their study load is thus significantly the highest among all study fields.

In the eighth wave of the survey, the area of study conditions was quite broadly supplemented by a **reflection on the experience of the pandemic situation and specifically impacts on online learning and the digitalization of studies**. The development of distance learning methods is one of the priorities of the SP 2021+ and it seems that, at least at the beginning of its validity, it was the aforementioned pandemic distance (online) learning that was the driving force behind its development. In this context, it is quite a new finding that **students have different ideas about the extent to which online learning in the post-pandemic era should be part of mainstream learning: there is a significant mismatch between the real and the ideal situation**. While the experience of full online teaching may not have been entirely comfortable for students, it has undoubtedly influenced students' expectations of conventional teaching without pandemic measures as well. At the same time, the majority of students are not interested in full online teaching, but ideally want a higher degree of combining both forms. While 14 % of students now experience a combination of face-to-face and online learning, ideally 32 % would like to see it.

We observe a **slight increase** (i.e. compared to EUROSTUDENT VII) **in the proportion of those who rate their study performance as worse compared to other students**. At the same time, this poorer self-assessment is associated with an overall poorer evaluation of lecturers and also with a weaker attachment to studies. In particular, those with health limitations and students with financial problems rate themselves worse. While this indicator has no clear anchorage in relation to 'real' learning outcomes, it may be an indicator of a generally poorer self-perception, perhaps related to the significantly higher incidence of psychological problems observed (see below).

Wellbeing, particularly in relation to physical and mental health problems, has been part of the inquiry for a very long time. In the last wave, however, the scope of this area has expanded considerably and in the Czech context it can undoubtedly contribute to a more open discussion especially in the area of mental health and also discrimination. In fact, **in the eighth wave of the EUROSTUDENT survey, the prevalence of problems related to mental health more than doubled** (i.e. compared to EUROSTUDENT VII). **Depression and anxiety disorders are the most prevalent**, with more than two thirds of students reporting mental health problems (15 % of students). It is these disorders that are linked to a higher frequency of dropping out of studies (up to 25 % of students with depression compared to 12 % in the whole sample)!

Most students generally well rate health status and wellbeing index (i.e. current mental wellbeing according to WHO). However, in cross-sectional terms against selected groups of students, the biggest drop in health satisfaction and also the increase in the 'poor' wellbeing index is seen among students falling into categories with health limitations, with financial problems and also coming from families with poorer socio-economic status.

In the eighth wave of the survey, a new and often taboo or downplayed topic of discrimination emerged, focusing not only on general experiences of discrimination, but also on experiences of discrimination in the context of study. **Less than a quarter of students had personally experienced particular type of discrimination during their studies. The most common type of discrimination in the context of study is gender discrimination**. In terms of inappropriate behaviour, this includes teasing, asking inappropriate/insulting questions and patronising behaviour.

The situation of students' psychological problems and discrimination needs to be addressed. HEIs are already aware of this to a greater or lesser extent. This of course requires a response, among others in the field of counselling, but also in how psychological problems are approached by system players (not only the Ministry of Education, but also e.g. the Ministry of Health). The counselling in the framework of Strategic Plan 2021+ focuses explicitly on career counselling (specifically point 2.G PROMOTE A

LIFETIME EDUCATION OFFERING THROUGH CAREER COUNSELING PROVIDED TO STUDENTS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC AND IN COOPERATION WITH THE LABOUR OFFICE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC), but practice and the results of the EUROSTUDENT VIII survey show that the needs are (also) elsewhere. This may be a pandemic-induced fluctuation, but given the global (climate crisis, security situation, etc.) and local uncertainties, an update of the SP 2021+ is probably necessary in terms of the increased need to support students' psychological wellbeing.

Last but not least, we mention the topic of (foreign) mobility, which in the Czech questionnaire is traditionally supplemented by the language skills of students. During the study 7 % of students participated in a study abroad (comparable to the EUROSTUDENT VII average for all participating countries). The interest of students in short-term study abroad has not changed over the years. **Less than two thirds of male and female students (EUROSTUDENT VII and VIII) are not planning any such trip. Financial costs, separation from partner and children and loss of employment remain the biggest obstacles to travel.** A positive change compared to previous waves of EUROSTUDENT is the decreasing share of students who cite lack of foreign language skills as a problem for travelling.

However, the language proficiency of EUROSTUDENT students has not changed significantly over the years. More than half of the students have a good or very good level of proficiency in one foreign language, most often English (consistent with the results of EUROSTUDENT VII). Two or more foreign languages at a good or very good level are most often spoken by students studying *Languages, Medicine and Dentistry, Pharmacy, Social Sciences* (one third of them). The socio-economic background of the parents has an influence on language proficiency: 32% of male and female students with parents with a tertiary education background have two or more foreign languages, but only 20 % of those with parents without a tertiary education background. Language skills are most often unchanged during studies (50 %) and deterioration is most often reported (17 %) by those studying long master's programmes.

In addition to the results themselves, it is necessary to briefly mention the challenges that the Inquiry has faced over the long term and with increasing urgency. First and foremost, the low response rate, which is not only a problem in the Czech Republic. However, there are examples of good practice from countries where the return rate is higher in the long term (e.g. Sweden, France) or is increasing (e.g. Estonia). The low return rate is also linked to the (lack of) promotion of the survey, both prior to data collection and the presentation of the results with examples of their use in practice. This is what is often mentioned by the EUROSTUDENT consortium as crucial for its success not only on a public policy level, by the use of universities, but also for its acceptance by students.