

The European Graduate Tracking Initiative – State of play and plans for the future

Introduction:

The **Commission Expert group on graduate tracking** (2018-2020), composed of 66 graduate tracking experts from all EU and other EEA countries (2 per country) and 10 stakeholder organisations, held its final meeting on 21 and 22 September 2020. The group agreed on final recommendations to the Member States and the European Commission on how best to implement the Council Recommendation on graduate tracking and how to achieve comparable EU data on graduate outcomes.

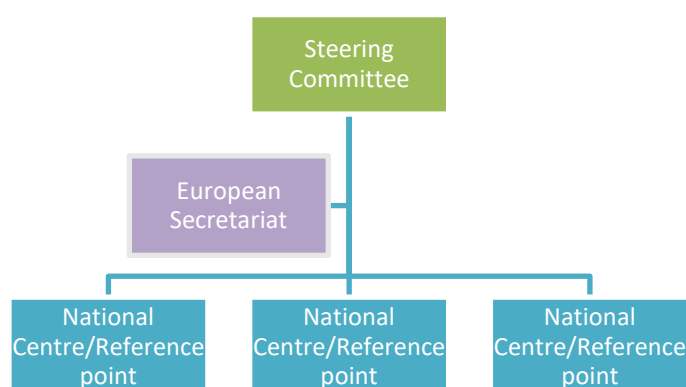
We are now at a turning point in the European graduate tracking initiative where the Commission needs to agree jointly with the Member States on the ways forward.

The group set ambitious yet realistic targets, such as **80% implementation of Council Recommendation by 2025 and 100% by 2030**. The group also recommended that half of EU countries take part in the first wave of the European graduate survey in 2022 and 80% in the second wave in 2025, while in parallel, the work should start on linking and harmonising administrative data from existing databases (tax, education, unemployment, social security) so that the survey questionnaire can be shortened in the medium term. The final report of the Expert group work, including four annexes prepared by the four group taskforces, is in the course of being published now and will be available publicly before the end of the year 2020.

Final recommendations of the Expert group on graduate tracking:

- The Expert Group proposed a ‘**gradual approach**’ for implementing the Council recommendation on graduate tracking.
 - In the short run, the only available option to have comparable data is to have a **European graduate survey**, building on the findings of the pilot Eurograduate survey.
 - An exchange of linked administrative data is recommended in the medium term although work on it should start immediately.
 - The development of European VET graduate tracking may follow a different timeline due to a different starting point, however, a set of principles and standards was produced to guide countries in the process of establishing or improving their systems of graduate tracking.
- Not to duplicate national efforts (in countries that have well established graduate surveys or administrative data collections), the group proposes a ‘**modular approach**’ to the European data collection, whereby countries can choose themselves which data to provide from existing national sources and which to collect additionally.
- The Expert Group agreed on a list of **essential background information (list A)** on socio-economic background, education, mobility and employment that have to be collected to satisfy the political goals set by the Council Recommendation. In addition, the group **recommended an additional set of information (list B)** to be collected – most likely through a survey - in order to have a more nuanced understanding of the graduates’ perception on the quality and relevance of their education & training, as well as on the reasons behind their labour market outcomes and mobility.

- These (essential + recommended) data should allow to answer **policy questions** such as: the relevance of education and training to employment or life-long learning; the job match with the graduates' field of study and their qualification level, social mobility and integration of under-represented groups; and patterns and impact of learning and labour mobility.
- Linking and harmonising anonymised administrative data on graduates at EU level and finding ways to track graduates across borders are complex issues with data privacy and other legal repercussions that will need to be further discussed in the future. Which is why it is important for the graduate tracking initiative to continue to provide a forum that can facilitate exchanges among experts and Member States representatives and set strategic direction. The Expert Group believes the sustainability of the initiative can be guaranteed only with the setup of a **governance structure** that can coordinate the development of graduate tracking in Europe. The proposal is depicted below:



- Member States are invited to nominate/set up a national centre/reference point covering both VET and higher education. The national centres will be involved in the coordination of the national data collection and will be tasked to form a network of expertise and to monitor and report the implementation of the Council Recommendation to the Commission.
- The network will be guided by a Steering Committee, where representatives of the Commission (EAC, EMPL, ESTAT, JRC, etc), the network's representatives, and stakeholders will sit. This Steering Committee will adopt a work plan to help the implementation of the Council Recommendation.
- The Steering Committee should be assisted by a Secretariat, set up by the Commission through a tendering procedure in early 2021. This secretariat will help the implementation of the work plan of the Steering Group, coordinate the European graduate survey and compile the report on the implementation of the Council Recommendation using a 'traffic light' system¹ over five dimension (graduate HE & VET programmes; graduate cohorts, incl. mobile ones; longitudinal dimension; data quality; dissemination & data use).

¹ The Expert Group took as basis the recent study on Mapping Graduate Tracking Practices (ICF, 2020).

Planned actions by the European Commission to take the recommendations forward:

The European Commission recently launched the “**Capacity building for graduate tracking**” project (2020-2021) for which we commissioned Ecorys to work with the teams in the Member States on building various types of capacities (administrative, technical, capacities in the higher education institutions) with the objective of bringing countries up to speed on graduate tracking. This instrument is designed to be steered by the countries themselves and to address those capacity shortages that the countries themselves identify as problematic.

After a baseline analysis of capacity shortages drafted by nationally-based consultants in cooperation with Ministry-nominated contact points, a **tailor-made “strategic roadmap”** is being devised in conjunction with DGHE’s. The roadmap will then be kicked off in individual or group workshops (groups of countries with similar capacity issues) and executed in the course of 2021 with the help of a broader set of stakeholders. Finally, the project will culminate with an assessment of the overall state of readiness for a European graduate tracking mechanism, or in other words, a new monitoring of progress made on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on tracking graduates.

The EC has set aside funds in the Erasmus+2020 Work Programme to support the **set-up of a governance structure with national coordination centres on graduate tracking** in all participating countries, a steering committee and a secretariat.

The same budget line will be used to support the roll out of the **first wave of the European graduate survey in 2022** covering the cohort of 2020/2021, based on the lessons learned from the pilot Eurograduate survey. This wave should cover at least 16 Member states, of which the 8 pilot countries will have the priority in order to ensure the longitudinality of research. The call for participation will be launched in early 2021. The survey will be primarily targeted at higher education graduates 1 and 5 years after graduation, but should conditions in countries be in place for VET graduates and PhD graduates, these may be added to the survey respondents as an opt-in choice by the countries.

Finally, the programming of the **Cohesion funds** for the period 2021-2027 has a strong link to graduate tracking, which is an “enabling condition” for European Social Fund specific objectives 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3, and European Regional Development Fund specific objective 4.2. This means that Member States will not be able to declare expenditure related to these specific objectives until the enabling condition is fulfilled. An exception to the fulfilment of this criterion is if countries are intending to use the funds for operations that contribute to the fulfilment of the corresponding enabling condition.

Therefore, the EU will put a range of financial resources at disposal of Member states to give the necessary boost to the implementation of the Council Recommendation. However, Member States will also need to match that with the necessary resources on their end.

Resources:

To align the graduate tracking systems, a whole range of **useful resources** have been published that can guide the development and enhancement of graduate tracking measures in the Member States:

- **Results of the pilot European graduate survey:** Comparative report; 8 national reports for Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Malta and Norway; and a Technical assessment with recommendations for similar future surveys.
- **Mapping the state of graduate tracking policies in the EU and EEA countries:** Executive summary and Full report, mapping system-level and institutional approaches in HE & VET. The report also provides a benchmarking of Member States along five dimensions of the Council Recommendation on graduate tracking, visually represented with a “traffic light” system.
- **A guide on how to do graduate tracking well**, aiming to support country officials to develop or strengthen their measures for tracking their graduates (through surveys or administrative data). This may be all the more useful since effective graduate tracking mechanisms have now become an enabling condition under European Structural and Investment funds.