Executive Summary

1. Too many students in the EU drop out before the end of their higher education course. This is a problem across the EU, as success in higher edu-cation is vital for jobs, social justice and economic growth.

2. The most successful EU countries in terms of completion are Denmark, the UK and Germany. However even Denmark as most successful only has around 80% completion.

3. The least successful countries are Italy, Hungary and Poland (they have the lowest proportion of students completing their degrees). Only 46% finish in Italy.

Who drops out?

4. **Students from a low socio-economic back-ground are the most likely to drop out**. Also, students with dependants, women in particular, struggle to balance caring responsibilities with their studies.

5. **Men** are more at risk of drop-out than women. They are more likely to study science and engineering, disciplines that have the highest drop-out rates. Men from a working-class background and from poor provincial areas are particularly vulnerable.

6. **Minority ethnic students** are more at risk of dropping-out as a result of factors such as racism or poverty. Here too, socio-economic background is a key factor: a refugee from a middle-class background is much more likely to graduate than one from a working-class back-ground.

7. Students with **disabilities** face physical problems of access and other barriers in terms of attitudes of staff and other students. Again, socio-eco-nomic status has a strong impact: a disabled student from a middle-class family is much more likely to graduate than a disabled student from a working-class background.

8. **Part-time students** are at greater risk of dropping-out than full-time ones, often as a result of caring responsibilities or of working long hours in a job unrelated to their studies.

Why do students drop out?

9. Six key factors (socio-cultural, structural, policy, institutional, personal and learning factors –see page 71) lie behind students' decision to drop out. It is often a combination of these factors that leads to drop-out.

10. **Coming from a poor socio-economic background is the most significant factor leading a student to drop-out.** This dominates all other factors, including gender and ethnicity, in leading to drop-out.

11. **It is not widening participation per se that causes drop-out.** Denmark, which is recognised as being highly successful in widening participation, has the lowest rate of drop-out in the EU. The problem is rather a lack of attention to the needs of a more diverse student population and a lack of a student-centred approach in designing and delivering higher education programmes.

12. Not all countries face the same challenges, or the same combination of challenges, with regard to dropping out. In Italy, for example, the educational background of parents is especially significant.

What can be done to reduce dropping out?

13. Much remains to be done to help students in the EU, especially the most vulnerable, finish their degrees. What is being done is inconsistent and patchy.

14. A holistic approach to retention is necessary: one which acknowledges all the six factors leading to drop-out and their inter-relationships. Nationally, higher education policy must be supported by policies to tackle wider socio-economic and cultural inequalities.

15. Policies that are shown to be successful include the following factors:

    - recognition that factors leading to drop-out from higher education start much earlier in life and need to be tackled early;
    - financial support to the students;
    - targeted outreach programmes;
    - improved monitoring and tracking of drop-out and completion, not only at national level but also at the level of individual institutions and disciplines;
    - including measures to prevent drop-out in widening participation plans;
    - recognising and accrediting the life skills students have already acquired;
    - extra academic support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

16. Many higher education institutions already work hard to retain their students. Good examples of action include:
    - preparing students for higher education through pre-induction activities
    - tracking their progress
    - offering a relevant and supportive curriculum
    - ensuring teaching is responsive to diverse needs
    - fostering positive approaches to learning
    - improving formative assessment
    - improving students' study skills
    - offering financial support to students
    - offering counselling and personal support
    - helping students make friends and networks
    - supporting specific disciplines that register high drop-out rates
    - supporting specific groups of students
    - proving that a higher education qualification is useful.

17. Putting potential and current students in touch with successful alumni as well as providing good careers advice can help increase completion rates.

18. Regional and local contexts have an impact on drop-out. Regional partnerships of higher education institutions, employers and other actors can help develop curricula which foster local employment and completion.

19. Building measures to monitor and reward completion into national systems of funding higher education can have a positive impact on reducing drop-out, in particular when linked to success in widening participation. Higher education institutions with a high intake of dis-advantaged students could receive more re-sources, indexed on the share of disadvantaged students they register and take to graduation.

20. Dropping out can be a positive decision when students realise that the time, place or degree is not right for them. However, even though most of those who withdraw from an initial course of study want to transfer to another course or to return to study at a later date, currently most Member States do not help them sufficiently with flexible arrangements. Also, employers look negatively upon students who did not finish their degrees.

21. Many students do triumph against the odds. More research on resilience and success is needed.

The problem with data

22. Only Denmark, Austria, Finland, the UK and Norway make statistics on completion openly available online.

23. There is no coherent set of data on access or on completion and drop-out in the EU. The extent to which individual countries collect data on this issue is variable. More reliable and comparable data, quantitative and qualitative, about how many students do not complete, who they are and why they drop-out is needed. Also, shared definitions on drop-out and completion would help to make comparisons across countries more effective.