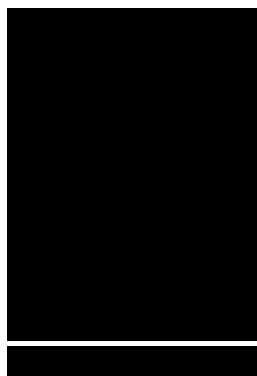
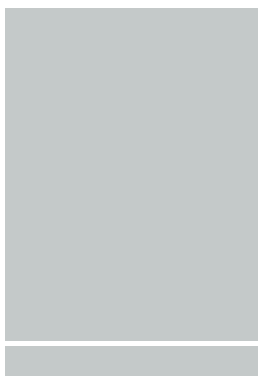
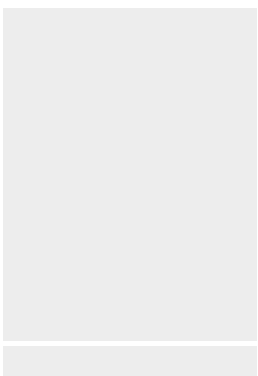


Automatic recognition and credit mobility

Policy paper
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About this paper

The European University Foundation has a rich history of contributing to the advancement of European Higher Education through its policy innovation activities. This policy paper is the latest in a long series of studies and analysis dealing with the betterment of student mobility and is informed by in-depth discussions and consultations with 50 universities from 25 countries.

Abstract

This paper discusses how recognition issues in the context of credit mobility could be superseded by automatic recognition mechanisms. Key recommendations are informed by recent technological and political developments and comprise workflow, documental support and quality assurance elements.

Credit mobility and recognition – an introduction

In this document, “recognition of credits earned abroad” means credits that are counted fully towards the student’s degree, without the need for exchange students to retake exams or carry out extra work at their home university. Students undertaking their thesis abroad, doing a traineeship or earning more ECTS than those required for the completion of their degree are concerned by specific recognition procedures that transcend the definition used in this paper.

Recognition of credits earned abroad is both a cornerstone of the Erasmus+ programme since its inception and an elusive goal, in that it has never been achieved to the desired extent over the more than 30 years of existence of Erasmus. The lack of complete academic recognition generates considerable costs. Students taking part in an exchange risk having to retake courses and exams upon their return, which amounts to both wasted time and economic loss. At a systemic level, the awareness of such risks deters many from participating.

The last midterm assessment of the Erasmus+ programme¹ (2018) suggests that 80% of higher education (HE) students receive full recognition of their academic achievements upon return to their home institution. While the report reviews this as a positive development, it is to be noted that this percentage has barely improved since the organisation of the PRIME II² study (2010), where over 21% of students indicated that they had to retake examinations upon their return to their home institutions. This shows that the Erasmus+

programme is hitting a glass ceiling in its current design for guaranteeing full recognition of academic achievements gained by studying abroad. The ESNSurvey 2014³ also confirms that the fear of lack of academic recognition remains one of the obstacles faced by students who consider the option of studying abroad⁴.

Automatic recognition – recommendations for HEIs

Over the past years, several EUF universities have successfully implemented automatic recognition processes by improving and streamlining their internal procedures. Changes need not be complicated or expensive; the biggest challenge is oftentimes cultural.

The simplest way to make automatic recognition happen is to consider all ECTS stated in the transcript of records (ToR) as counting towards the degrees of outgoing students, provided that the courses listed match those indicated in the learning agreement (LA). Universities that require a committee or mobility coordinator to corroborate that the courses indicated in table B of the LA will indeed be recognised upon the return of exchange students end up duplicating the work that takes place before the signature of the document. This essentially adds uncertainty to the process from a student’s viewpoint, while also posing a significant - and arguably unnecessary - additional cost.

Seeing how this simple change in the procedures implemented in universities could have significant effects, we call upon all new European Universities to render their recognition procedures simpler, more efficient and more transparent. We

¹ <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/3d783015-228d-11e8-ac73-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> (p. 8)

² <https://esn.org/prime/2010>

³ <https://esn.org/ESNSurvey/2014>

⁴ While this paper is scoped to the implementation of the Erasmus programme, the recommendations contained herein should eventually apply to exchange arrangements in the EHEA and beyond.

also call on national authorities to support all universities who are currently striving to upgrade their processes and workflows, as well as upon the European Commission to ensure that the next programme guidelines assert the need for such recognition procedures to be mainstreamed.

Automatic recognition – an argument for stricter enforcement at the European level

The EUF is aware that many universities across Europe are improving their procedures, but it would be naïve to assume that a transition to a more modern recognition landscape will be swift, universal and would happen without any external influences – something confirmed by the very slow progress measured between 2010 and 2018. Accordingly, we contend that more efficient quality assurance mechanisms need to be deployed, and there are two concurrent developments that can positively impact the way academic recognition works in the setting of credit mobility.

The first development concerns the way **technology** has started to impact the management of exchange programmes in general and the Erasmus programme in particular. Projects led by the EUF, such as Erasmus without Paper (EWP)⁴ and the Online Learning Agreement (OLA)⁵, are already reshaping the way student mobility works in Europe. In early 2019, the European Commission announced that they will become integral to the architecture of the Erasmus programme from 2021. The EGRACONS project, which was originally led by Ghent University, already addresses the matter of grade conversion and is

being integrated in the EWP ecosystem, while the eQuATIC project⁶ (also led by Ghent University) aims to improve the quality of partnerships by further informing the strategic development of mobility programmes with partner institutions.

The second development is the **Proposal for a Council Recommendation** on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad⁷, which asserts the need for automatic recognition of both diplomas and credits. However, implementing automatic recognition in the context of credit mobility is far from straightforward, insofar as academic recognition is a process that takes place entirely within the structures that exist in each Higher Education Institution (HEI).

Automatic recognition – policy recommendations

The authors of this paper contend that the next Erasmus programme (2021-2028) should aim to eradicate recognition problems once and for all, in line with the recent Council Recommendation. They believe this can be achieved through the combined effect of the following recommendations:

1) An enforceable LA for recognition purposes

The biggest improvement that could be bestowed upon the LA template is to make it truly enforceable. This could be achieved by distinguishing which of the courses/modules/learning outcomes/credits to be taken abroad will be counted towards the degree upon successful completion, and which ones are learning components

⁴ <https://www.erasmuswithoutpaper.eu>

⁵ [ibid](#)

⁶ <http://www.equatic.ugent.be>

⁷ COM/2018/270 final - 2018/0126 (NLE)

that will only be added to the Diploma Supplement. This does not mean the latter are less important, since there are several valid reasons why exchange students might choose to take part in courses that will not count towards their degree.

A document that is more transparent and in which learning components that fall under an iron-clad recognition guarantee are clearly indicated will be far more enforceable than what currently exists.

2) A more robust approach to quality assurance (QA)

Students dealing with recognition issues oftentimes face an uphill battle. HEIs may or may not have suitable mechanisms in place to settle such disputes; students may or may not find effective support in their unions or ESN sections; as a last resort, appeals to national authorities or national Erasmus agencies may or may not yield adequate results, given that in more than 30 years only two HEIs have seen their Erasmus Charters withdrawn due to quality issues – a drop of water in an ocean of known infringements.

If recognition issues are to be eradicated, we need to take an important leap forward and redesign the Erasmus QA in a student-centred way. The proposal below borrows partially from the example of Austria, where outgoing exchange students are legally entitled to lodge a complaint if their home university fails to appropriately handle their recognition process, and comprises three key components:

- A) An easy to find (and use) appeal mechanism: Erasmus students whose recognition guarantees have not been fully respected should be able to lodge a formal appeal, to be reviewed by a party external to their HEI;
- B) Any appeal should be reviewed by an Erasmus Ombudsperson;
- C) The Erasmus Ombudsperson will have

instant access to all versions of the LA, through a connection to an OLA repository. In this way, analysis and action can start at once, increasing efficiency (and decreasing costs) compared to a situation in which such complaints would require a manual exchange of data with the HEI, or even an on-site inspection.

Meanwhile the ownership of the LA should be assigned to the European Commission. This conveys an important symbolic message: that the sending university is committing to guarantee the recognition of credits earned abroad to the European Commission itself. Such a decision could be enshrined in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education, while the responsibility of recognising the credits earned abroad would continue to belong to the sending higher education.

3) Strengthened role for NAs

The success of a better approach to QA hinges on strengthening the role of National Agencies (NAs) and their capacity to take action. For example, the Erasmus Ombudsperson office could be composed of a representative from each NA, as well as representatives from relevant student organisations and DG EAC; this would make it possible to process complaints according to the subsidiarity principle and in the language of the students in question. Operating under such a jointly developed framework would also pave the way for a more integrated and coherent approach to QA across all programme countries. Countries where systems comparable to what has been outlined above are already in place should be able to maintain them, but their expertise would nonetheless be valuable to ensure the success of a new and more ambitious European approach.

4) A closed and transparent loop

A Learning Agreement will always generate a Transcript of Records (ToR),

which is issued by the host HEI and states how many ECTS have been earned by the exchange student. Rather less well known, a few universities also issue a different ToR that essentially gives proof of how many ECTS were indeed recognised upon the return of their student, rendering the process more transparent and building trust towards their partner HEIs. The issuing of such proofs of recognition could be supported by EWP and is a best practice that should be mainstreamed. The widespread availability of such documents could lend itself to an automated QA review, aimed to ascertain that there are no discrepancies between the ECTS included in the LA recognition table, the ToR issued by the host HEI and the amount of ECTS that the sending HEI has confirmed being recognised.

In order to ensure that the issuance of proofs of recognition does not add administrative burden to HEIs, it is proposed to do this automatically from 2023 onwards – the date when all ToR used in the context of the Erasmus programme are themselves supposed to be circulated in an electronic format through EWP.

Feasibility and chances of success

Recommendation number 1 would be straightforward to implement, particularly in the context of the revision of the LA template that will take place before the new programme starts in 2021; technical adjustments on the OLA platform would also be straightforward.

Key elements of recommendation number 2 have been successfully tested by EUF universities in the past. From 2007 to 2014, more than 1000 students exchanged among EUF universities under the aegis of the Campus Europae programme benefited from a personalised monitoring

of their academic recognition; from 2010 onwards the same cohort of students also benefited from the oversight and support of a Mobility Ombudsperson. The combined effect of these measures saw the incidence of recognitions problems decrease to less than 1% across the cohort of mobile students. The biggest obstacle to mainstreaming such a QA architecture was the fact that this was a very resource-intensive policy experiment, but 10 years onwards technological advancements would now render such a deployment not just possible, but arguably more cost-efficient than current arrangements. On this evidence we feel this to be the perfect time to enact it on a larger scale, while acknowledging that 2 C) would require further development of certain aspects of EWP and OLA.

Recommendation number 3 would also be straightforward to implement, in that it builds on existing structures and requires no technical deployment.

Recommendation number 4 has not yet been tested at large scale but it is scoped to the abilities of contemporary IT systems. There is considerable time to investigate how to best implement such solutions, given the earliest it could be rolled out would probably be 2023.

As noted above, the suggestion made in this paper also borrows from the Austrian experience of creating formal mechanisms to handle recognition complaints, which has been favourably reviewed by the leading universities of the country.



The future of recognition

An alternative to issuing proofs of recognition would be to turn the LA into a “smart contract”. In this scenario, an outcome (credit recognition) would be an automatic result of fulfilling certain conditions (such as obtaining the foreseen credits). This scenario could afford an ideal balance of administrative simplicity, transparency and enforceability; however, it would also amount to a significant cultural change regarding how academic recognition is usually handled. It would thus be important to field-trial such an idea across different organisational cultures in order to assess how it would work in practice and the suitability of a large-scale deployment. This means that the earliest such a solution could be deployed would be well after the start of the new programme in 2021.

Conclusions

There has never been a better moment to eradicate recognition issues in the Erasmus programme: the combined impact of new technological solutions with clear political leadership could very well mean the next generation of the programme will be its best yet, rising to the challenge set out by the Council to render recognition automatic once and for all.

Reaching this goal is well within the reach of the academic community, and the recommendations contained in this paper go to show small doses of pragmatism and creativity are key to taking the right steps forward.

A successful and well-functioning Erasmus programme plays a key role in sustaining the European project, and it is simply unacceptable that Erasmus students have to embark on such a life-changing experience not knowing whether their studies abroad will count fully towards their degrees. We call upon the European and national authorities to take decisive action that ensures this will no longer be the case from 2021 onwards.

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