✳ ESN

Erasmus Student Network

How to ensure Automatic Mutual Recognition of Learning Periods Abroad for all students?

Policy brief by the Erasmus Student Network

Introduction

Automatic recognition of learning outcomes from a period of study abroad is one of the core elements that will encompass the achievement of the [European Education Area](#) by 2025. Moreover, automatic mutual recognition is a key flagship of the [European Strategy for Universities](#), and it is one of the major requirements in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) that higher education institutions (HEIs) commit to. A number of steps have been taken to put this into practice ever since the [Council Recommendation on automatic recognition of learning periods abroad from 2018](#)[1] has been adopted, but there are still significant national differences that hinder seamless learning mobility and make the 2025 goal seem harder to achieve.

This short piece condenses ESN's perspective on the recognition of learning periods abroad, reflecting on data from the [SIEM research report (2021)](#) and the [ESNsurvey - XIV edition (2022)](#), as well as preliminary data from the [ESNsurvey XV,](#) which at the time of writing already had more than 5000 answers from students. The policy proposals in this piece are based on some of ESN's last publications, listed at the end of the document.

In order to get the latest data from the students, ESN is currently conducting the XV edition of the ESNsurvey, which is open for responses by mobile and non mobile students until the 1st of August 2023. The ESNsurvey XV is gathering both quantitative and qualitative data on recognition of learning outcomes of a study period abroad, which will help ESN to monitor the implementation of the recognition commitment half way through the Erasmus+programme period. The survey analyses Credit recognition from different perspectives, both in terms of the results obtained by exchange students and the perceptions of mobile and non mobile students. Some preliminary considerations are included in this piece.

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[1] Council Recommendation 2018/C 444/01

Automatic recognition and ECTS

The Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018[2] defines automatic mutual recognition of the outcomes of a learning period abroad as *"the right to have the learning outcomes of a learning period recognised: as agreed beforehand in a learning agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records, in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)."* This right further entails all credits gained through the learning period abroad to be transferred without delay, and counted into the student's degree, without causing any additional work or assessment of the student.

The use of ECTS by countries in the European Higher Education Area facilitates recognition by placing the focus on learning outcomes rather than specific courses, thus making the recognition of periods of study abroad simple and transparent, and allowing students a better understanding of their learning paths. A correct use of the [ECTS Users Guide](#)[3] is key to ensure proper implementation of ECTS.

## Recognition and flexibility in degree programmes: a grounded fear among students

The correct use of ECTS is supposed to make education more flexible and student-centred, removing administrative barriers and facilitating seamless mobility. However, **data from non-mobile learners point to the role which the lack of proper implementation of the 2018 Council Recommendation has on their perceptions of blocking factors to go on mobility**. In that sense, **45% of students considered that the lack of flexibility in their degree programmes** was blocking their participation, especially in the case of students from fewer opportunities backgrounds. Besides the broader perception of the level of flexibility, **lack of recognition for the time spent abroad is considered a barrier to participation in mobility** by 30% of non-mobile student respondents in the SIEM research report (2021). Students also feared that participation in mobility would lead to extension of their studies, usually because of difficulties

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[2] Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad
[3] European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *ECTS users' guide 2015 – ,* Publications Office, 2017, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/87192

with the recognition of learning outcomes which would lead to repeating the year at the home university.[4]

Chart: blocking factors to participate in a mobility programme among non-mobile students. SIEM Research Report (2021)
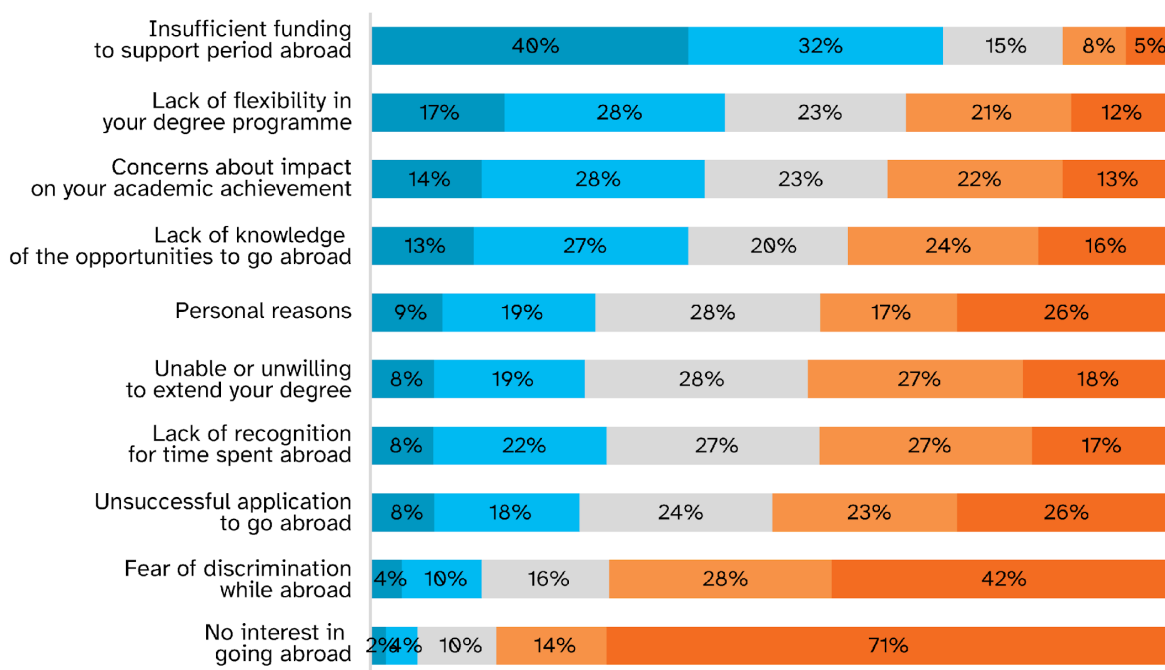
Preliminary results of the ongoing [ESNsurvey XV](#) [5]show that credit recognition also matters as a source of motivation to go abroad. With more than 3000 answers from current and former exchange students, 39% of respondents considered "Matching courses which can be recognised by my home institution" as a very important factor to choose their exchange destination, and 28% considered it important. With a weighted average of 3.8, this recognition aspect was considered the second most important one, only behind the affordability of the hosting city.
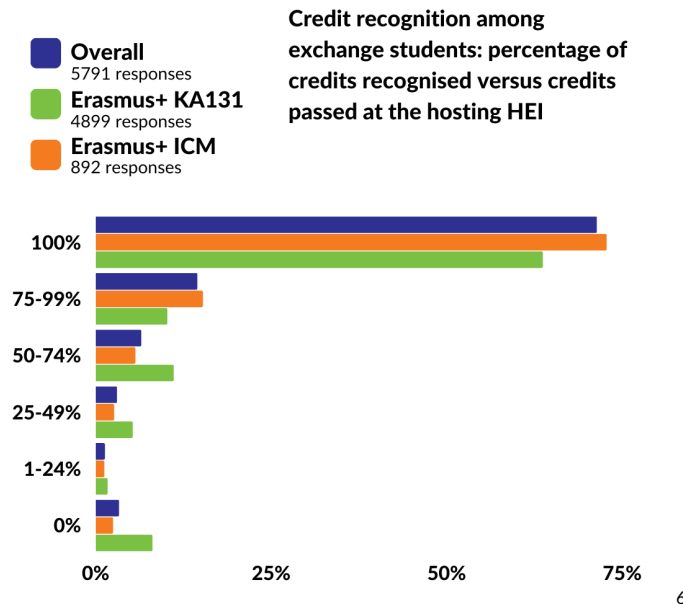
ESNsurvey data points to considerable challenges in full credit recognition, in line with the progress report of the Council Recommendation

Unfortunately, the fears reported by non-mobile students in the SIEM survey do not seem to be groundless. Data from ESNsurvey - XIV edition (2022) shows that **only 71.37% of respondents**

report receiving full credit recognition of their mobility period, although considerable differences exist.

Credit recognition among exchange students: percentage of credits recognised versus credits passed at the hosting HEI

Legend:
- **Overall** — 5791 responses
- **Erasmus+ KA131** — 4899 responses
- **Erasmus+ ICM** — 892 responses

[6]

The recent progress report by the European Commission on the implementation of the 2018 Council Recommendation on automatic recognition states that the European average level of automatic recognition of learning periods abroad in 2020 was 84.4%.[7] This number is significantly higher than the one reported in the ESNsurvey - XIV edition (2022). On the one hand, the difference can be explained by the fact that the ESNsurvey compiles data not only from EU Member States, which is the case of the Commission report. On the other hand, it further highlights the necessity of providing various data sources related to the ECHE monitoring, such as administrative data on recognition collected by HEIs, in order to build the full picture of the recognition situation.

Chart: percentage of students reporting full credit recognition. Based on ESNsurvey XIV (2022) data [8]

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[6] Graph: Percentage of credits recognised compared to credits included in the Learning Agreement. ESNsurvey XIV (2022)

[7] European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the Council on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad*, Brussels, 23.2.2023

[8] Chart: percentage of students reporting full credit recognition. Based on ESNsurvey XIV (2022) data
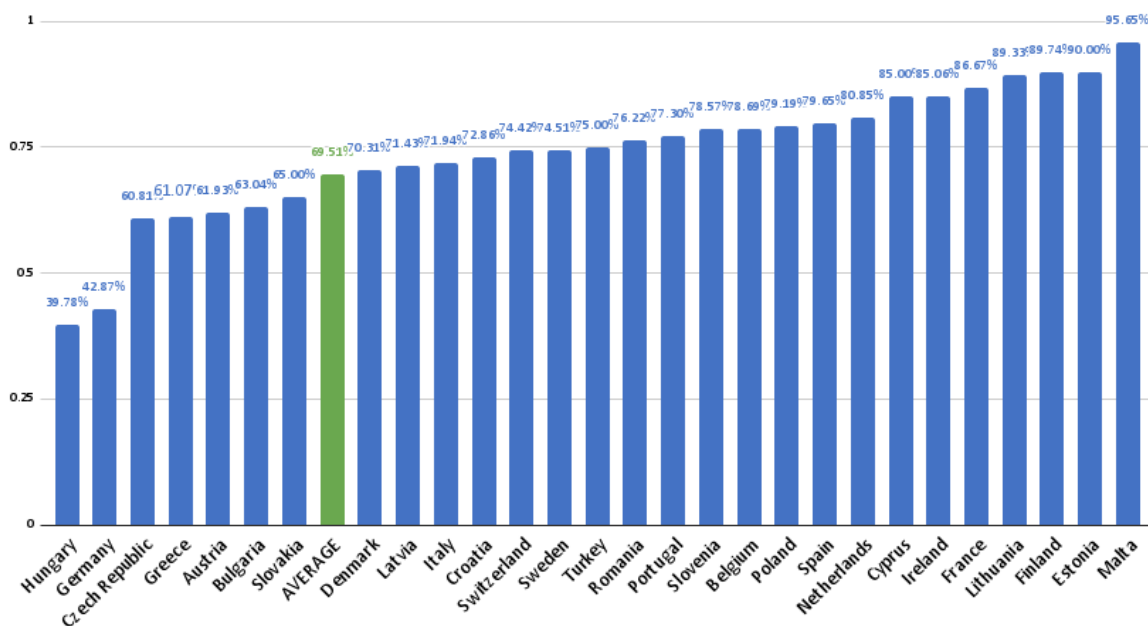
In order to avoid biases or challenges related to the lack of understanding of "full automatic credit recognition" the ESNsurvey does not ask students whether they got automatic recognition or not, but instead asks them to include the number of credits they passed abroad and the number of credits that were recognised, and provides an open box answer option for further elaboration on why their credits were partially or not fully recognised. In that sense, **qualitative data**[9] from the ESNsurvey already points to some of the main challenges:

- **Flexibility of degree programmes.** One of the most predominant experiences students have with recognition is that it was not possible for them due to "lack of courses that fit the curriculum", or "because there are no similar courses at my home university". Unless there is flexibility in the degree programme and internationalisation culture, recognition remains a challenge that many cannot overcome.

- **Trust issues between partnering institutions.** A number of students report that they had to do additional work or assessment after their mobility because their professors did not find the courses taken abroad satisfactory enough for the degree programme.

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[9] The ESNsurvey XIV included the open box question: "If there was no recognition or some ECTS were not recognised, why was this the case? ". There were more than 1000 answers to the open box question, and the information included here is based on a qualitative analysis of those.

Inter-instituional agreements should be based on trust, which should be a prerequisite to establish exchange possibilities.

- **Lack of understanding of how credit recognition works among students,** which poses a debate about the quality of support provided by home institutions, such as providing comprehensive information and guidance about recognition by academic staff. Students shared in the ESNsurvey XIV that "[I was] told before my mobility that I would probably not be able to get any ECTS recognised. So I never tried", or that they could not reach an "agreement" with their professors when asking for recognition.

- **Access to information about available courses and general support in the preparation of the Learning Agreement is not as successful as it is desirable to be**. Overall, students report lower satisfaction rates with their sending institutions, whose responsibility is to provide this type of support. On the other hand, when the hosting institutions do not maintain up-to-date course catalogues, this creates a new set of challenges, related to the constant back-and-forth changing and adapting the Learning Agreement, contributing to a stressful experience for students.

The importance of access to information on available courses

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The way forward: ideas and recommendations to ensure recognition for all

This final section includes a set of ideas and recommendations for European institutions, national authorities and Higher Education Institutions on how to increase progress in the achievement of full automatic recognition of periods of learning abroad.

The ideas combine short, medium and long-term elements with responsibilities laying with different actors. ESN acknowledges the complexity of the topic and understands that there is no silver bullet to solve all the existing issues, but believes that recognition should remain at the very core of the European and national policy agenda in the Higher Education field.

Ideas and recommendations

The European University Alliances (EUAs) have a key role to play in advancing automatic recognition and making education more flexible. EUAs are in a unique position to **gather administrative data from mobilites taking place between their HEIs**, and to involve academics in identifying potential challenges and bottlenecks. ESN believes that these aspects should be considered as part of the ongoing discussions on a monitoring framework for the European University Alliances.

HEIs should provide better support when choosing the mobility destination and when preparing the learning agreement. There is a general lack of knowledge and information among students of how the Bologna process and tools work, which prevents them from being able to address their challenges properly. HEIs should provide information on how credits and grades are transferred. At the time of application students should be provided with comprehensive information about the grading systems of the host institutions and how the ECTS system works in practice. Universities should be **transparent about the criteria for recognition** that they apply, keeping a track record of the decisions made for recognition, and applying them with an ambition to advance the internationalisation of higher education.

Furthermore, in line with the ECHE commitments and the 2018 Council Recommendation, **HEIs should make the information about offered courses fully accessible and maintain an up-to-date Course Catalogue, which would simplify the preparation of the learning agreement.** At the same time, the selection of courses should be based on the added value of the mobility experience, and not on the search for identical or matching subjects. Having the opportunity to experience a new learning environment and subjects that are in line with the study programme, but are not available at the sending institution, is the biggest benefit of learning abroad and it should not be at the expense of recognition. **Recognition should be based on learning outcomes over specific courses.** Moreover, the learning process should be adapted to the needs of students, especially those from fewer opportunities backgrounds, as problems related to lack of flexibility affect those students more directly.

Universities should cherish the diversity of study programmes across their partners, as exchange of knowledge and teaching practices are among the key values of learning mobility. The **decision making process** on whether or not the learning outcomes should be recognised lies at the discretion of the HEI, and in most cases, in the faculties and Erasmus+ coordinators in particular. As the progress report by the Commission suggests, many times the recognition process is blocked because of quality concerns on faculty level raised by professors. This kind of lack of trust between partnering institutions is very problematic and it hinders participation in mobility. If HEIs are not fully committed to full academic recognition within the framework of existing inter-institutional agreements, those should not be continued as they dismiss the value of international experience in academic terms.

Credits successfully obtained during the study period abroad should automatically be counted towards the student's degree, while the Diploma Supplement should only act as an explanatory document, providing additional information on the learning outcomes acquired during the mobility period. As the Council Recommendation states, full automatic recognition should not create further actions for students, such as taking additional courses or examinations in disciplines they did not attend while studying abroad. Therefore, the recognition of credits should not be swept away in the Diploma Supplement, and the latter should not be treated as an addition to the degree diploma.

Embedding mobility windows in the learning programmes will not only contribute to the internationalisation of higher education by allowing more flexibility, but it will also significantly

improve credit recognition of learning outcomes and would lead to safer and easier credit transfer processes, making the mobility experience much less stressful for students. Courses should be designed with an international approach, focusing on the learning outcomes. Higher education institutions should be more ambitious and when developing or adapting degree programmes, mobility windows should be part of the learning path, meeting the needs of students and catching up with fast-paced trends in a globalised world with a constantly changing labour market.

A revamped discussion on mobility windows and their particularities should be launched, building on the **new possibilities provided by the European University Alliances.**

Stronger monitoring, evaluation and capacity building will be needed to overcome lack of recognition

The new Erasmus+ programme for 2021-2027 has been set in place to achieve full automatic recognition of learning periods abroad. **Therefore, the ECHE monitoring should become stricter to ensure that the recognition procedures are implemented. Since more than 5000 HEIs across Europe hold an ECHE, increasing its role as a real roadmap towards better education through internationalisation is the way forward.**

Stricter monitoring does not have to imply stronger penalties for the beginning, but rather a **bigger focus on capacity building and the progress achieved over the programming period**. Erasmus Policy Statements should include clear references to the efforts done by HEIs to ensure this progress, while there should also be a **commitment to gather more administrative data on automatic recognition.**

The best way to create momentum at the European level is **to launch a new co-creation process of the ECTS User's Guide, supported by an accompanying framework.** The ECTS Guide has served an extremely important purpose since its launch in 2015, but the developments in internationalisation have made its revision a priority. The new guide should take into account recent developments in the field of competence acquisition and teaching and

learning, technological innovations and other relevant aspects that are being currently discussed at the European level.

Student associations and representatives should be involved in the monitoring process, especially in countries with lower rates of recognition and satisfaction with the academic experience. This can be done by adapting the ECHE monitoring mechanisms at the national level to make them more inclusive, and creating more support structures including stakeholders such as the "Circle Erasmus", implemented by the French National Agency for Erasmus+.

National legislation is a key condition to achieve full automatic recognition of learning periods abroad in Europe. Data from both the ESNsurvey XIV (2022) and the Commission report illustrates that the current state of play of automatic mutual recognition varies from country to country. To a large extent this is due to the different pace at which national legislation regarding recognition is being adopted. It is alarming that there is national legislation for automatic recognition in only 12 EU Member States, while the rest are either applying automatic recognition only to a subset of countries, or not at all. It is clear that the analysis of the challenges should start with bottom up processes where Higher Education Institutions gather evidence on the challenges they are encountering and test different solutions depending on their needs, but in order to achieve systemic progress, **a top-down approach, where European commitments are followed by national legislation and proper guidance on institutional level also needs to be considered.**

In that sense, it is clear that the declared ambition on European level to create synergies between national education systems, should be supported by appropriate efforts at national level. In countries, where mobility participation rates are generally lower, lack of progress in recognition, alongside other pressing challenges in learning mobility, maintains problematic trends that put at risk the internationalisation of higher education in these countries.

Besides monitoring of the ECHE commitments, **there should be monitoring at national level to ensure that recognition decisions are implemented in a transparent and effective way**. Lack of such monitoring makes evaluating the automatic recognition implementation more difficult, and it is an obstacle to identifying pressing issues and designing measures to overcome them.

Other relevant publications:

- Erasmus Student Network (2022). Understanding the experience and needs of exchange students in challenging times. ESNsurvey - XIV edition. Accessible at: https://esn.org/news/esnsurvey-xiv
- Erasmus Student Network (2022). SIEM Recommendations for the implementation of more inclusive and engaging Erasmus+ mobilities. Accessible at: https://www.esn.org/siem-technical-recommendations
- Erasmus Student Network (2023). More mobility, better mobility, more accessible mobility. *The Contribution of the Erasmus Student Network to the Council Recommendation on a new Learning Mobility for all.* Accessible at: https://www.esn.org/news/contribution-esn-council-recommendation-new-learning-mobility-all
- Erasmus Student Network (2023). NEW MONITORING FRAMEWORK OF THE ERASMUS CHARTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: An opportunity to boost institutional transformation through student mobility. Accessible at: https://www.esn.org/news/new-monitoring-framework-erasmus-charter-higher-education

Erasmus Student Network, June of 2023.
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