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Erasmus Student Network

Shaping a Better Learning Mobility Experience for Students

ESN's Recommendations for the Revision of the ECTS Users' Guide

Shaping a Better Learning Mobility Experience for Students: ESN's Recommendations for the Revision of the ECTS Users' Guide

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1. Introduction

The ECTS Users' Guide is the primary reference for the implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). It offers clear guidance on how to apply and monitor ECTS for credit transfer, accumulation, recognition, and academic transparency across Europe. Since its last update in 2015, the landscape of higher education has undergone major transformations. These include the growth of the introduction of the European University Initiative and the European Degree, which are demanding higher levels of flexibility of learning pathways, the expansion of lifelong learning, and the persistent demand for consistent recognition of study periods abroad.

These developments call for a comprehensive revision of the ECTS Users' Guide to ensure it reflects current educational practices and student needs. The revision process, carried out under the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) through the dedicated Advisory Group, should be informed by structured feedback from student-led organisations with expertise on the topic, such as the Erasmus Student Network (ESN).

This position paper aligns with the objectives of the Advisory Group as outlined in the Terms of Reference and the broader goals of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), including digitalisation, transnational cooperation, and recognition reform.

The revised Guide must focus on improving the implementation of core ECTS principles across key areas: recognition of credits, credit allocation based on real workload and learning outcomes, mobility support, recognition of non-formal and informal learning, application to lifelong learning and modular education, grading fairness, and robust quality assurance. Each section of this paper follows the corresponding structure and key functional areas of the ECTS system, presenting student insights, systemic challenges, and actionable recommendations in line with the ESN's vision for a learner-focused European Higher Education Area.

2. ESN's Recommendations

2.1. Recognition of Credits Earned During a Period of Study Abroad

Students continue to face systemic barriers to the full and automatic recognition of credits obtained during mobility, despite long-standing policy commitments by European and national policymakers. According to the XV edition of the ESNsurvey, the largest student-led research project on student mobility, only 71.37% of respondents received full academic recognition after studying abroad. This figure reveals a troubling gap between policy and implementation (Dias, Buseyne, et al., 2024).

One of the most pressing challenges remains the inconsistent application of Learning Agreements. Many students report that, even when these agreements are approved prior to their mobility period, they are not fully honoured by their home institutions upon return. Data from the XV edition of the ESNsurvey highlights this issue clearly: before their mobility, students apply on average for 33 ECTS credits, successfully pass an average of 30 ECTS credits during their stay abroad, but only 28 ECTS credits are recognised upon their return (Dias, Buseyne, et al., 2024). While this evidence does not necessarily indicate a negative average of ECTS recognition relative to the number of credits initially applied for, it nonetheless reveals **a clear discrepancy with the principle of automatic recognition of learning outcomes**. This is especially concerning in light of the 2018 Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad, which calls for transparent and consistent recognition procedures across Europe.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that students are often **required to modify their Learning Agreement due to circumstances beyond their control**, such as changes in course availability or the language of instruction, sometimes resulting in students being placed in courses taught in a language they do not understand. These unforeseen changes can be particularly problematic and highlight a lack of institutional flexibility and mutual trust between sending and receiving institutions.

A closer look at course changes reveals the **persistent challenge of matching course catalogues when selecting mobility destinations**. Students often feel pressured to find exact course equivalents, despite the fact that the ECTS Users' Guide explicitly states that mobility should not rely on a strict one-to-one course matching approach. In reality, however, many students face significant difficulties due to the lack of comprehensive and regularly updated online course catalogues provided by higher education institutions.

This lack of transparency complicates the preparation of Learning Agreements and creates uncertainty around the recognition process. The situation is further worsened by the absence of reliable, accessible, and student-friendly mechanisms to support necessary adjustments, ultimately undermining the principle of automatic recognition and the quality of the mobility experience.

Such inconsistencies violate not only the spirit of automatic recognition enshrined in the EHEA framework but also the principles of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education, which ultimately hinder students' ability to fully benefit from international learning experiences. They also undermine the objectives of flagship initiatives such as the Erasmus+ programme and the European Strategy for Universities.

Recommendations:

1. **Students should be given comprehensive information about the accessibility of courses and the ECTS system**. Erasmus+ coordinators should play a key role in guiding students to select a host institution that aligns with their learning needs and in assisting with the preparation of their learning agreement, with a focus on prioritising learning outcomes and ensuring an impactful academic experience (XIV ESNsurvey, 2022).
2. **National Governments and Higher Education Institutions must intensify their efforts to ensure the automatic recognition of learning outcomes from Erasmus+ mobility.** This lack of automatic recognition creates significant challenges, including mistrust among students considering participation in Erasmus+ and difficulties in continuing their academic journeys upon returning to their home institutions
3. **More capacity building and guidance should be provided to Higher Education Institutions and National Authorities** to ensure the full implementation of the Bologna Tools, the ECTS Users' Guide, and the 2018 Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition.

4. **The European Commission should strengthen the monitoring, accountability, and cooperation mechanisms:** include recognition of compliance in ECHE reporting and quality assurance reviews. Promote the use of digital tools like Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) for traceability, encourage proactive recognition mapping, and support inter-institutional cooperation through frameworks like European University Alliances.

2.2. Inflexible Programme Structures and Limited Mobility Windows

Programme rigidity remains a significant barrier to student mobility across Europe. According to the SIEM report, which refers to findings from the **Social Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility (SIEM)** project, 45% of non-mobile students cited inflexible curricula as one of the main reasons for not participating in exchange programmes (Allinson K., Gabriels W, 2021). These rigid structures often make it difficult or impossible for students to go abroad without delaying their graduation or compromising core academic requirements. This disproportionately affects those enrolled in programmes that rely on linear, semester-by-semester progression or offer limited course selection flexibility, such as STEM.

Additionally, the strict reliance on course title matching rather than learning outcomes impedes recognition and discourages mobility. Students are frequently required to identify exact course equivalents, even when intended learning outcomes and academic levels are compatible. This technical barrier, often enforced by programme directors or faculty boards, reflects a deep-rooted lack of institutional trust and systemic reluctance to embrace mobility as a core educational principle.

Recommendations:

1. **Integrate mobility windows and outcome-based recognition:** The ECTS Users' Guide should promote that institutions embed mobility windows. Recognition of academic work should be based on learning outcomes rather than course titles, ensuring greater curricular flexibility and alignment with actual competencies gained: the revised Guide should explicitly promote learning outcomes as the primary criterion for recognising academic work completed abroad.

2. **Higher Education Institutions with a strong track record of enhancing mobility should be recognised in evaluations** and, where possible, prioritised in funding calls related to internationalisation in higher education.
3. **National ministries for Higher Education and quality assurance bodies should incentivise mobility-friendly design of academic programmes** by involving students in the design process and promoting successful models—such as those from European University Alliances—as best practices for internationalised curricula.
4. **Higher Education Institutions and Erasmus coordinators should adopt the principle that ECTS credits earned abroad are to be recognised unless substantial differences can be demonstrated**. While this principle currently applies to qualifications under the UNESCO Global Convention, the revised ECTS Users' Guide should explicitly promote its translation into the credit recognition context. Institutions should be encouraged to justify any recognition refusal based on clear, pre-established academic criteria, and not on procedural or administrative grounds. This approach would reinforce mutual trust, simplify mobility procedures, and align with international best practices in recognition.

2.3. Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning

Despite broad recognition of its importance at the European level, the validation and academic recognition of non-formal and informal learning remains underdeveloped in most higher education institutions. Many students engage in significant learning activities outside the classroom, such as volunteering, peer mentoring, student representation, and civic engagement. These experiences often lead to the acquisition of valuable transversal skills – such as teamwork, communication, leadership, and intercultural awareness – that directly support academic and professional growth. However, these contributions are frequently left out of formal curricula and rarely translated into academic credits, even when they align with institutional learning outcomes.

This gap contradicts the principle of student-centred education and the growing importance of lifelong learning. It also fails to acknowledge the social and civic dimensions of higher education, which are central to the mission of European universities. While some institutions

have implemented Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) frameworks, these systems often lack transparency, accessibility, or clear procedures, making them ineffective for most students.

Recommendations:

1. **The revised ECTS Users' Guide should provide clear guidance and practical examples for awarding credits to structured non-formal and informal learning based on defined learning outcomes**. All institutions should implement transparent and accessible Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) procedures and should not only recognise the only professional or academic experience, but needs to also include civic, social, and peer learning, aligned with quality assurance standards. RPL and informal learning validation should be explicitly tied to the learning outcomes of degree programmes. The Guide should recommend that institutions develop flexible pathways within programmes where informal learning can contribute to elective components or transversal skill modules.
2. **Institutions must ensure students are informed and supported throughout the validation process, with clear guidelines, documentation standards, and appeal mechanisms**. The use of digital credentials (e.g., microcredentials or badges) should be promoted, and recognition of student engagement—such as peer mentoring or representation—should be encouraged where learning outcomes are assessed. National authorities and QA bodies should include recognition of non-formal and informal learning in their institutional audits. European University Alliances can lead by piloting recognition schemes and sharing successful models across borders.

2.4 Administrative Delays in Providing Academic Transcripts

The timely delivery of Transcripts of Records is essential for ensuring smooth academic progression after a study mobility period. However, delays in issuing these documents remain widespread. According to ESNsurvey XV, 23% of students reported delays in receiving their Transcript of Records, and 26% indicated that such delays negatively impacted their academic or professional trajectory (Dias, Buseyne, et al., 2024). These delays not only compromise students' ability to graduate on time but also interfere with their applications for further studies, scholarships, or job opportunities.

Several factors contribute to delays in the recognition process, including miscommunication between institutions, the absence of adequate digital tools, and administrative bottlenecks at both national and institutional levels. In addition, many students report a lack of clear timelines, escalation procedures, or designated contact points to assist them when delays occur. This creates considerable uncertainty and places undue stress on students, particularly when they depend on official documentation, such as the Transcript of Records, for their academic progression or entry into the labour market.

The lack of accountability and institutional transparency in issuing Transcripts of Records ultimately undermines the integrity of the ECTS system and the credibility of the Erasmus+ programme.

Furthermore, concerns have also been raised regarding the role of faculty or coordinators in supporting students during the mobility process. While coordinators are expected to assist in selecting appropriate mobility destinations, the boundary between the responsibilities of sending and receiving institutions is often unclear. In practice, faculty coordinators are sometimes required to mediate between students and receiving institutions, yet this role is not always fulfilled effectively, causing even more administrative delays.

Addressing these issues requires the implementation of enforceable standards, clear institutional responsibilities, and robust commitments to ensure that students are adequately supported throughout the mobility lifecycle.

Recommendations:

1. **Set and monitor a deadline for issuing Transcripts of Records**: The ECTS Users' Guide should establish that all institutions should issue the transcripts within a short time after the academic term ends. This standard must apply across all sending and receiving institutions. Compliance must be tracked through the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) and national quality assurance frameworks, with institutions required to submit improvement plans if they fail to meet the deadline.
2. **Enhance transparency, digitalisation, and student support in the transcript process**: Institutions must publish clear timelines, contact points, and escalation procedures for transcript issuance. The ECTS Users' Guide should strongly encourage institutions to digitalise transcript generation and sharing via Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) and the

Erasmus Dashboard. This process will reduce administrative error, ensure timely communication, and enhance student access. Additionally, students should receive proactive communication on transcript status, be protected from delays affecting their progression, and have opportunities to provide feedback that informs quality assurance. Institutions should create contingency plans, such as issuing provisional documents, to prevent delays from harming students' progress, while regularly collecting student feedback on transcript timing and involving student representatives in quality assurance processes.

2.5. Recognition Issues in Joint and Double Degrees

Students enrolled in joint and double degree programmes often encounter a higher academic workload, even when participating in curricula that have been jointly designed and mutually recognised by partner institutions. While the intention of such programmes is to streamline academic pathways across borders, **legal and regulatory requirements in some European countries** introduce constraints that may unintentionally increase the student burden.

For example, **Spain's Royal Decree 822/2021** stipulates that in order for a Spanish institution to award an official degree within a joint programme, the student must complete **at least 60 ECTS credits** at that institution. Similarly, the **French Code de l'éducation** requires that a substantial portion of the academic programme, typically **the equivalent of one academic year**, must be completed in France for a diploma to be validly issued by a French university. These national safeguards are rooted in quality assurance and institutional accountability, but when applied to transnational programmes, they can create **structural mismatches** in credit distribution and curriculum design.

Such discrepancies may not always result in outright duplication of coursework, but they often lead to **limited flexibility in recognising learning across borders**, and can require students to extend their study periods or engage in additional academic activities that go beyond the jointly agreed learning outcomes. This reality stands in contrast to the aspirations of the **European Higher Education Area (EHEA)** and the emerging **European Degree** framework, which promote **seamless cooperation, mutual trust, and automatic recognition** within transnational education.

Recommendations:

1. **National authorities should introduce credit recognition flexibilities or waivers for joint and double degree programmes** that have been jointly accredited, externally evaluated, and structured under the principles of the ECTS Users' Guide. In particular, countries should allow the recognition of learning outcomes achieved abroad as equivalent to national credit thresholds when supported by a shared curriculum and transparent assessment methods.
2. **The ECTS Users' Guide should be revised to include specific guidance for joint and double degree programmes affected by national legal credit minimums.** It should:
    a. Reaffirm that students should not be required to repeat learning already achieved and validated in the joint curriculum.
    b. Recommend that legal credit thresholds be interpreted through the lens of achieved learning outcomes, not strictly physical presence or administrative enrollment.
    c. Encourage joint curriculum governance and transparent workload planning to ensure compliance with national rules without violating the spirit of mutual recognition.

2.6. ECTS and Lifelong Learning

The transformation of the education landscape calls for a learner-centred ECTS framework that supports flexible, modular, and lifelong learning. As career paths diversify and upskilling becomes a necessity across life stages, learners increasingly turn to microcredentials, short learning programmes, and continuous education modules to enhance their skills. Yet, these pathways often operate in parallel to traditional education and struggle to be integrated or recognised within formal degree programmes. Many institutions still lack the structures, policies, or guidance needed to translate these experiences into ECTS credits.

Moreover, there is significant ambiguity across Europe on how to assign ECTS to microcredentials, especially when these are offered by non-university providers or delivered online. Learners who pursue stackable modules across borders or institutions often encounter

difficulties transferring and accumulating credits. This lack of integration not only undermines the value of lifelong learning but also restricts access to recognised education for non-traditional students. To unlock the full potential of modular education, ECTS must evolve from a system focused on full-time degrees to one that recognises progressive credit accumulation and validates learning across formats, providers, and life stages.

Recommendations:

1. **The revised ECTS Users' Guide should provide clear guidance on assigning credits to microcredentials and short learning experiences**, emphasising that learning outcomes and workload remain the basis for credit allocation. It should also explain how these modular components can be recognised within formal qualifications. European University Alliances and national platforms should be incentivised to co-develop modular programmes that are pre-recognised across institutions.
2. **The ECTS User Guide should define how ECTS credits from microcredentials can be accumulated over time and across institutions, including through progressive pathways**. Institutions must establish frameworks to integrate these credits into formal programmes, ensuring quality assurance and clear communication with learners. Institutions' approaches to recognising lifelong learning and microcredentials should be evaluated through national quality assurance processes and ECHE reviews, with a focus on including adult learners, working professionals, and underrepresented groups.

3. Conclusion

The ECTS Users' Guide must be revised to address real-world implementation barriers and restore student trust in mobility and recognition processes. While the current Guide outlines clear principles, evidence from student experience shows that those principles are too often not realised in practice.

A modernised ECTS Users' Guide, co-created with the involvement of students, will help ensure mobility is smooth, learning is recognised, and educational systems remain adaptable to future needs. ESN recommends that pan-European student consultation instruments, such as the ESNsurvey, be used as input to the planned research on ECTS implementation. This will ensure the revised Guide is evidence-based and responsive to learner realities. ESN stands ready to contribute to a revised Guide that truly works for all learners and supports the strategic goals of the EHEA.

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