



Circle U.
European University Alliance

Updated Joint Framework for Recognition

Version two

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Introduction

The Recognition Task Force wrote its first framework on recognition in December 2021. This document established the main guidelines for the topic of recognition.

The Alliance has continued to grow in particular through a wider offering of learning activities via Open Campus, which implicitly increased student mobility within Circle U, and recognition is a major issue for students. Being able to recognise these credits easily is an attractive factor for students and encourages them to discover the learning activities offered by the Alliance. It is with this vision that the Recognition Task Force is proposing a second version of the framework, to further advance the question of credit recognition within the Alliance, in the context of the varied educational landscape Circle U envisages.

This document is divided into three distinct parts. Part 1 will be devoted to a reminder of the general principles of recognition. The concept of automatic recognition will be the focus the second part of the document. We felt it was important to take a closer look at this concept by defining it precisely and defining its scope. We will also look at the challenges it poses, as well as the advantages offered by automatic recognition. Finally, Part 3 will be dedicated to joint degrees, as they relate to recognition.

1 General Principles of Recognition

1.1 Seamless recognition

A goal for the alliance is that students can study, digitally or physically, seamlessly between the partner universities. In order for this to succeed, the following elements of recognition should be in place:

1. A common set of principles for recognition
2. Infrastructure aiding efficient flow of student data
3. Transparency for students on what activities are available, and that these will be recognised

Within the scope of this document, our main task will be to outline our common principles for recognition, however, we will also indicate how we can move forward with goals 2 and 3.

1.2 Fair and transparent recognition procedures

It is pertinent that recognition procedures are fair and transparent. Alliance members should therefore commit to:

- provide students with user-friendly information on how to obtain recognition, and which documents they need to provide
- accept applications for recognition free of charge
- inform students of their right to appeal the recognition decision.

1.3 Safe and efficient transfer of student's results

Current procedures for transferring student results are based on physical or digital transcript of records, provided by the student and/or sent directly from the partner university. These procedures do not allow us to obtain results in an efficient and safe way, and might entail:

- slow and lengthy procedures for students obtaining correct documentation
- documents being sent digitally causing privacy concerns
- digital documents provided by the students having limited safety features and thus raising cause for concern over potential acceptance of fraudulent documents.

The recognition task force therefore highly recommend that the alliance implement digital transfer of student results through a quality-assured digital transfer system, which will enable member universities to safely exchange electronic student data.

While awaiting a new digital infrastructure for exchanging results, alliance members should:

- in a timely manner, provide students with an official transcript of records after their exchange, indicating the number of awarded credits and final grades
- be flexible and forthcoming when dealing with students' and partners' needs for documentation of results

1.4 Meeting students' expectations of predictable recognition outcomes

In order to meet the goal of seamless mobility, students need to know what they can study and how their planned mobility activity will be recognized in their degrees. The learning agreement intends to resolve this task; however, it does not solve underlying structural issues such as lack of access to desired courses, and how the composition and structure of the degree programme might affect recognition outcomes.

The level of predictability and seamlessness can be divided into two levels, where each level marks a higher degree of seamless and predictable recognition:

1. Students have a "mobility window" (see below) – an opportunity to undertake a period of mobility during which their choice of courses is flexible. Courses taken outside of this mobility window will be recognized according to individual agreements, as detailed in the Learning agreement. Circle U. students are not guaranteed priority access to courses. For short term or part term offerings in Circle U., the traditional semester mobility window might not be sufficient. It might be useful to consider flexibility in the degree for smaller credit Circle U. activities as well.
2. Students have exchange tracks where they are guaranteed a place in their desired course(s) and will easily find specific information on how courses can be recognized.

As a minimum, the alliance should pursue level 1, entailing that all partners who do not already have a mobility window, establish such a window or equivalent flexibility in their degree programmes if possible. However, in order to reach level 2, the following problems would need to be resolved:

i. Lack of information about courses

Information on courses might not be readily available before the semester starts. Students need to find information on which courses they can take well before their exchange starts. We therefore recommend that alliance member universities publish the list of available courses and their respective syllabi in the course catalogue in a timely manner.

ii. Lack of access to courses

Currently, Erasmus exchange students are not prioritized for entrance to courses and might end up taking other courses than those agreed upon in the learning agreement before the exchange. We therefore recommend that some of the course offerings in Circle U. target students from specific subject fields, and that students from these fields are given priority.

iii. Lack of information on recognition of courses

The task of electing courses and applying for pre-approval of those courses might seem daunting and could discourage students from pursuing mobility activities. This step might not be necessary if students have a flexible mobility window and plan on keeping their mobility activities to that window. However, this still provides a limited degree of predictability for the student, and mobility windows with free electives might not be an option for all students. Exchange tracks with pre-approved courses would allow for predictable recognition outcomes.

2 Automatic Recognition

Despite the many existing tools in Europe (ECTS, Lisbon Recognition Convention, learning agreements, etc.), recognition of credits, degrees or qualifications, and prior (informal or non-formal) learning remains generally a challenge in higher education.

With the [Recommendation adopted by the Council of the European Union in November 2018 on the automatic mutual recognition](#) of qualifications and learning periods, the idea of automatic recognition was formally introduced in the European and national (or regional) policy discussions. With the support of the European Commission, Member States have committed to improve procedures for the mutual recognition of qualifications, and take the necessary steps to introduce automatic recognition. Automatic recognition is to be achieved by promoting the further use of existing tools mentioned above and by benefiting of the progress made in the Bologna Process but also through bilateral agreements (e.g. the Benelux decision, the agreement of Baltic countries, etc.).

With the launch of the European University initiative, there is an expectation (from policy-makers, students as well as employers) that the new formats of transnational cooperation developed by the alliances will open new avenues to overcome the remaining hurdles and ensure smooth and fair recognition, and eventually automatic recognition. This perspective – and commitment – has been guiding the ongoing work on recognition within Circle U. And therefore, with the revised joint framework for recognition, we address automatic recognition by promoting a common understanding and potential ways for its “operationalisation”.

2.1 Definition

Automatic recognition: Before proposing a definition, a few preliminary remarks about automatic recognition:

- Automatic recognition is a void concept if only self-declared;
- Automatic recognition is a reciprocal process and requires trust;
- There will never be automatic recognition *per se*, as any recognition requires a voluntary process. This requires the commitment of a department/Faculty/institution to respect the competence of the person responsible for recognition.

Definition:

The sending institution confirms that all credits gained abroad – as agreed in the [pre-approval process] and confirmed by the transcript of records – will be transferred without delay and counted towards the students' degree without any additional [course] work or assessment of the student.¹

Pre-Approval:

Pre-Approval refers to a formal approval of learning outcomes and corresponding ECTS before participation in a credit bearing mobility activity. This approval ensures that the courses will be recognized as a part of the student's degree after successfully completing the activity. It is understood that the approval of virtual/online courses may be different to that which is traditionally practised.

Key Aspects:

- **Student Responsibility:** Unlike predefined exchange tracks set by faculties, pre-approval is an individual process where the student selects courses and seeks confirmation of recognition from their home institution.
- **Approval Process:** The approval can take different forms and may involve a committee or individuals from academic and/or administrative staff. It does not always require a formal Learning Agreement before mobility, it can also be an official document / forms, or written email confirmations.
- **Funding Implications:** Pre-approval is often linked to eligibility for funding, including Erasmus+ and other national grants.

2.2 Scope of automatic recognition

Automatic recognition is well established in the following circumstances:

- Recognition of learning outcomes and corresponding credits acquired during a "traditional" semester mobility period in another CU partner university (for example, via Erasmus);
- Recognition of previous degree/qualification awarded by a CU partner to potentially enter a new programme in another CU partner.

¹ Source: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/mobility-and-learning-agreements/learning-agreements/studies-agreement-guidelines-ka131>

These types of automatic recognition already have ongoing processes and are therefore outside of the scope of this note.

However, Circle U. aims to achieve automatic recognition of learning outcomes and corresponding credits acquired after completion of the “new” CU educational offerings; short-term mobility and virtual mobility.

2.3 Challenges and recommendations

There are mainly two types of challenges limiting automatic recognition within our alliance:

- Procedural issues with the recognition process itself
- The learning outcomes or credits from the mobility activity don't fit within the student's programme

The procedural issues are unique to each institution, but might include:

- Internal deadlines by which credited activities proposed for inclusion into students' academic programmes must be approved
- Recognition procedures that are not standardized, which may lead to a lack of equity between students of the same institution and across the alliance
- Institutional and national regulations

The challenge of misaligned learning outcomes and credits from the mobility activity and the student's programme can be mitigated by:

- Building flexibility into the degree with free electives/mobility windows²
- Embedding mobility in the programmes with pre-approved joint activities targeted towards specific student groups

Mobility windows help facilitate recognition for large student groups, but will not be feasible for every programme, such as professional degrees, and are also limited by national regulations in some countries. Students might also “use up” the mobility window for semester mobility, not leaving room for additional elective credits from virtual or short-term mobility. Free electives are usually more common in bachelor's degrees than in master's and PhD programmes, as the degrees progress towards specialization.

² <https://arqus-alliance.eu/call/mobility-windows/>: Mobility window is understood as “a period of time reserved for international student mobility that is embedded into the curriculum of a study programme”. Mobility Windows aim to enhance the attractiveness and excellence of both study programmes and virtual and physical mobility. Students benefit from a complementary offer and additional international study paths which will also increase the overall quality of the academic offer.

As opposed to offers open to all student groups, embedded mobility through close academic cooperation within specific subject fields or programmes, creating joint activities to targeted groups of students, will increase mobility while promoting automatic recognition. This could be in the form of exchange tracks or COIL, as recommended within the [Circle U. Joint Policy Framework for Mobility](#).

The taskforce acknowledges that while the alliance works towards achieving automatic recognition, we should also accept activities that cannot be recognized as counting towards the student's degree; participation can still be valuable to the student as an additional learning experience. For example, a law student might benefit from completing a language learning course, even though the learning outcomes are not in line with the profile of the student's programme.

3 Joint Degrees

3.1 Definition/scope

Joint degrees are a particular form of co-organisation of joint studies in which the learning activities are organised, managed and delivered jointly, and the successful completion of which is sanctioned collegially and leads to the award of a single diploma or diplomas issued in accordance with the legislation specific to of each partner.

3.2 Recognition within joint degrees

The partner institutions describe the profile, objectives and purposes of the joint programme. They set the detailed study programme, specify the learning activities, the corresponding credits and their respective numerical value, the expected learning outcomes, the teaching language(s), and they define the responsibility of each partner institution for these activities.

Each partner institution recognises the learning activities organised by the other partner(s) institution(s) in the framework of this joint programme. The learning activities successfully completed by students, as well as the corresponding credits, are recognised by partner institutions.

The partner institutions define the mobility scheme(s) offered to the students enrolled in the joint programme. This/These mobility scheme(s) detailed the number of credits followed in each partner institution, the mobility period(s) and the duration of the mobility. Automatic recognition is thereby inherently achieved through the design of each joint programme.

Conclusion

The Circle U. partner universities agree on basic principles for recognition and will use their existing systems for recognition and transfer of credits.

Going forward, it is essential to integrate mobility windows within degree programmes to allow students to participate in international mobility activities without disrupting their academic progress. Establishing a formal process for pre-approving courses and activities will provide clarity and assurance to students that their credits will be recognized upon their return. Ensuring that detailed information about available courses and recognition policies is readily accessible to students will build trust and confidence in the recognition process. Prioritising certain student groups and/or creating targeted mobility activities will better enable our students to fulfil the learning outcomes of their home programmes. Adopting secure and efficient digital tools for the exchange of student data will streamline the transfer process and

ensure the privacy and integrity of student records. Creating standardized recognition procedures across all partner institutions will ensure consistency and fairness.

By implementing these recommendations, Circle U. partner universities can create a more cohesive and supportive environment for student mobility, ultimately enhancing the academic experience and fostering greater collaboration within the alliance. This comprehensive approach will not only benefit students but also strengthen the overall quality and attractiveness of the academic offerings within Circle U.