

JOINT FRAMEWORK FOR RECOGNITION

December 2021

Circle U. Joint Framework for Recognition

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1. Introduction

When entering into international university collaborations, one of the challenges is dealing with the recognition of student status, courses, credits and results. The challenges of recognition apply even on a small scale in, for example, a joint programme, and these do not become less complicated in a broad university collaboration with many universities involved in numerous diverse activities. Our goal in dealing with recognition in Circle U. is that we must build on already existing principles of recognition. Principles that are established on the basis of existing European guidelines for the area, and which the universities make use of today in relation to other international university collaborations. Thus, we should not establish a parallel system of recognition in Circle U., but where possible, the goal should be to streamline administrative processes to support the goal of seamless mobility. However, we acknowledge that the new Erasmus+ Programme, with new Blended Intensive Programmes and other initiatives, challenges some of our current systems for recognition, and that we must anticipate the need for development of recognition systems for new, digital, blended, and shorter learning activities.

The document is based on formulations of our common understanding of the underlying principles for relevant student relations and for recognition. Thereafter, the recognition conditions for the relevant teaching and tender forms are tightened, in order to finally shed light on the handling of recognition of results and conversion, where necessary.

The sections will, as far as possible, try to delimit the areas where recognition is relevant, but the delimitations must be expected to be re-evaluated in the further work across the work packages in relation to the development of Circle U.

2. Principles

The seven European universities, sharing similar ideas for their further development, focused on the same goals and striving to shape the future of the European Education and Research Areas to the benefit of our students, staff and society at large, have come together to form the Circle U. alliance. Following the ideas developed within the Joint Policy Framework for mobility in order to “strengthen all types of mobility between the Alliance partners”^[1], this document will endeavour to provide a framework for recognition of credits and courses at Circle U. partner universities.

Based on the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, and using the ECTS Users’ Guide as a specific tool for not only transferring credits, but also as a means of facilitating the mobility of students as it eases the process of transferring credits and recognizing their period of study abroad, the Framework will help partner universities identify the specific aspects of one another’s recognition system in order to make the transfer and recognition seamless and smooth. The system will be applied to all programs, regardless of their actual mode of delivery— physical, virtual or blended.

Institutional support to students with respect to ECTS transfer and recognition procedures prior to and following mobility will be organized in accordance with the regulations of the student’s home institution but will be based on the most relevant documents for transfer and recognition to take place, namely the Learning Agreement and the Transcript of Records, with the basic criteria for ECTS transfer and recognition being the learning outcome defined by the relevant study programme. This document will therefore provide links to information on grades and grade conversion at the Circle U. partners for immediate reference when a document requiring recognition is submitted. All submitted

requests will be processed in a timely manner, ensuring that students do not miss out on lessons at their home universities after having completed their mobility abroad.

3. Recognition of student status

Each member of Circle U. has several student statuses that a student can be assigned. The most common of these are degree students and exchange students.

Each University or Circle U. undertakes to recognize the status of a student from their home university and to grant them, if necessary, a student status specific to the host university with all the advantages that this status provides.

a. A Circle U. student status

At present there is no distinct Circle U. student status. However, in the future, the Circle U. partners may wish to consider that a Circle U. student status may offer certain unique advantages. Each member, within its institution, will be able to grant facilities to students from Circle U. universities.

b. PhD students

The issue of recognition of the status of PhD students is very complex. Indeed, each institution attributes several statuses to these students and each status has its own specific characteristics.

We have identified that our universities consider the PhD. candidates as either employees, or students. Some universities award credits, fully or partially, as a part of their PhD-programmes, while others do not.

Circle U. encourages doctoral mobility, and PhD students should be given equal opportunities regardless of their status in the home institutions. We thereby lean on the The Erasmus+ programme 2021 stating that “(...) *doctoral mobility is encouraged to better meet the diverse learning and training needs of doctoral candidates and to ensure equal opportunities with those that have the status of higher education staff*”. Employed PhD students may also be included in staff mobility.

4. Procedures and principles for recognition of study periods

This section outlines the principles and practices for mutual recognition of study periods within the alliance. It will address recognition procedures associated with all mobility activities, not including recognition for the purpose of access to degree programmes or recognition within the context of joint programmes, although some of the outlined principles might also be applicable and relevant to those areas of recognition.

a. 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. Students should know what they can study and that their study periods will be recognized

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.

b. Fundamental principles of recognition

The members of the alliance have substantial experience with recognition within the Erasmus charter mobility programmes, and the Circle U. alliance universities will build on the existing structures in place for recognition and credit transfer. While acknowledging that these procedures might be organized differently at each university, we recognize that they are founded on the main principle of the Lisbon convention's section on recognition of study periods, which is that "Each Party shall recognise periods of study completed within the framework of a higher education programme in another Party (...) unless substantial differences can be shown between the periods of study completed in another Party and the part of the higher education programme which they would replace in the Party in which recognition is sought."

In addition, the alliance members' recognition procedures within the Circle U. build on the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), whereby participating institutions commit to automatically recognizing learning activities as specified in the agreed-upon learning agreement, upon successful completion of the learning activity.

It should be the goal of the alliance members to ensure that local regulations, policy and norms affecting their university's recognition practices, are in accordance with the principles in the Lisbon convention and the commitments in the ECHE. Members are encouraged to use [The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions - Third edition 2020 \(nuffic.nl\)](#) and the [ECTS user guide](#) as tools and guidelines for best practice recognition principles and procedures.

To aid the practical implementation of the principle of mutual recognition of study periods, the partners agree on the following:

i. Credits

All partners use ECTS credits (although local terms are applied, they correspond in value), except King's, whose 2 UK credits equal 1 ECTS credit. The value of credits from a partner will as a general rule be fully recognized as equivalent in value by another partner and credits will be transferred in accordance with the mutually agreed upon learning agreement after the successful completion of the learning activity has been documented.

ii. Level and quality

All partners will recognize credits awarded from a partner as equal in quality as their own, and accept first, second or third cycle level as equivalent to their own corresponding study levels.

c. 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
- advise students before their exchange on how their proposed study period will be recognized in their degrees
- accept applications for recognition free of charge
- inform students of their right to appeal the recognition decision.

d. Safe and efficient transfer of student 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 [EMREX](#), 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.

e. 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](#)" – 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.
2. Students are guaranteed a place in their desired course(s) and will find specific information on how courses can be recognized in the course catalogue.

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 Circle U. students are given priority access to specific courses.

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 mobility window and plan on keeping their mobility activities to that window. However, this still provides a limited degree of flexibility for the student and academic integration in the Circle U. alliance compared to regular exchange partnerships. Therefore, we envision a potential future in Circle U. where specific courses are pre-approved at system level as specific parts of the student's degrees, and this information is available in the course catalogue.

f. 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, seamless mobility can be achieved by incorporating flexible windows for mobility, implementing tools for digital exchange of results, and by developing pre-approved learning activities where Circle U. students are given priority access.

5. Modes of teaching (blended learning, online, physical)

The mobility activities developed by Circle U. will require special consideration when it comes to recognition, as we acknowledge the strong intention to enable seamless recognition of Circle U. activities in students' degrees. It will be a priority of the task force to map the steps we need to take in order to achieve that goal as soon as possible.

a. Physical teaching

We refer to physical teaching as the classic mobility, where students can go to a university to study for a period of one or two semesters. We would also like to consider the possibility that in the future, a student with a Circle U. student status may be able to go to a Circle U. partner university to follow a single course. However, for traditional physical teaching, the partner universities will keep using the traditional mobility process.

b. Online teaching

The nine Circle U. universities will offer several courses and programmes online. The host university can offer credits for these courses. In order to prepare the summer schools, there may be the need to develop online units to complement these activities.

Another project will be the development of MOOCs and virtual courses to complete the course offering on the three Circle U. main themes: Global Health, Democracy and Climate.

c. Blended Learning

The new Erasmus+ Programme has the intention to increase the student mobility in Europe with the support of European Universities.

Blended mobility is a combination of physical mobility with a virtual component facilitating a collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork^[1]. Circle U. has created the Task Force on Blended Learning that is dedicated to developing blended learning courses. We have identified several activities that require recognition of credits and results:

- Joint extra-curricular, virtual programme on sustainable innovation and entrepreneurship
- Seminars and summer schools on Climate, Democracy and Global Health
- Developing additional courses to meet the shortfall on the Circle U. themes.

To develop these activities, we intend to use Blended Intensive Programmes. Blended intensive programmes for students and staff must comprise a short-term physical mobility abroad combined with a compulsory virtual component facilitating a collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork. The virtual component must bring the learners together online to work collectively and simultaneously on specific assignments that are integrated within the blended intensive programme and count towards the overall learning outcomes. Blended intensive programmes must award at least 3 ECTS credits for students^[2].

If we use this programme for blended mobility within Circle U., we need to develop a strategy that allows the Circle U. partners to award at least 3 ECTS. These amount of ECTS is the minimum required to access to the Blended Intensive Programmes. On the other hand, we should make a proposition on how to integrate these credits within the students' programmes.

It is acknowledged that some Circle U. partners face legislative or regulatory obstacles regarding the Alliance's aspirations for blended learning. These exceptions will require further discussion as the proposals develop.^[3]

d. Solutions to recognize credits from the teaching activities

It seems important that every university includes within students' programmes the possibility to include a certain number of credits from the activities available to students via Circle U. (online courses, blended learning courses, summer schools, seminars, etc.) where transferring credits is not possible, Circle U. should be able to provide a participation certificate.

The universities should also develop a calendar to outline the dates by which results should be received and integrated in students' programmes.

e. Micro-credentials

The Circle U. partner universities embrace the opportunity to deliver lifelong learning through the offering of micro-credentials. We acknowledge that the definition of micro-credentials in the higher education landscape is currently neither clear nor universal. The term “micro” does not necessarily refer to a small credit value, but to the notion that these courses are not studied as part of a larger whole (or degree), even if they are, for example, a module which might sit within an approved degree programme. We therefore propose the following definition, which we understand may need to be revisited according to developments within the sector^[4]:

A microcredential is a unit of assessed learning that is additional, alternate, complementary to, or a component part of a formal qualification.

In terms of their operation within the Alliance, we recommend the following principles concerning micro-credentials:

1. they are subject to the standard quality assurance mechanisms of the host partner
2. while there are no upper or lower limits on the amount of credit that a micro-credential carries, it should not normally constitute an award in its own right

We further recommend that whilst we develop our capability to offer portable, stand-alone *units* with appropriate accreditation documentation, we aspire to build them into a more substantive single entity or group award, to greater enable flexible and inclusive educational pathways to new and diverse learners.

6. Summer schools

Summer schools for students at all levels will be developed and run every year in Circle U. The aim is to empower students and staff to challenge and move knowledge boundaries and design discipline-wide answers to today's complex problems.

At every University and at faculty level the summer school can award credits or not. We have identified two categories of how we run summer schools at our universities.

The first category includes the universities who have well-established summer schools and award and accept credits from courses presented during the summer schools.

The second category includes those universities who award or do not award credits to the courses taken during the summer schools. For these universities, the credit recognition awarded during the summer school depends on several factors and the decisions are taken before the academic year starts.

Circle U. is planning to develop three summer schools every year about the three main themes of the Alliance: Global Health (Paris), Climate (Humboldt) and Democracy (Oslo). We acknowledge that Circle U. intends to award from 3-5 ECTS for every summer school, as well as a Circle U. certification.

Circle U. and the partner universities should agree on an internal plan to award and to include these credits into the students' programmes.

7. Recognition of results given at partner universities and grade conversion

In a collaboration like Circle U., it is crucial that we have confidence in the grading that takes place at the individual universities.

This trust is based on the fact that all are part of the European Cooperation in Higher Education (EHEA). In addition, they all have existing principles and procedures for recognition of results when students participate in educational activities at other universities, see section 4.d

EHEA is characterized by diversity in approaches to external quality assurance, including accreditation, evaluation or audit at institutional or programme level, respectively. These approaches to external quality assurance have their common point of reference in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. In addition to the fact that participation in the EHEA is of great importance for quality assurance at the partner institutions, it is also an expression of the framework for grading, and the incorporation of the ECTS Users Guide. Based on these key considerations, it is recommended that Circle U. work with mutual trust on already existing procedures for recognizing results achieved at partner universities. This trust must support flexible co-operation in relation to existing procedures, but it should also be pointed out that the procedure must be subject to ongoing evaluation.

Grade conversion in ECTS is the translation of a grade obtained abroad (host grade) to the local grade scale of the student (home grade). The majority of the Circle U. partners are required by national law to make grade conversion when a result obtained abroad is recognized. Therefore, it is relevant to look at the framework for grade conversion.

There are several calculation methods for grade conversion. All contain challenges in relation to the Circle U. partners, as there are very few common denominators in relation to the calculation basis and methods, legal limitations, timeliness and practical issues at the individual institutions. However, all partners operate in accordance with the ECTS User Guide as a common denominator, and therefore there is a mutual obligation to assign grades, as well as to convert them in accordance to the ECTS Users guide, if conversion takes place. This joint commitment forms the basis of the Common Guidelines for Degree Conversion between Circle U. Partners.

Circle U. has chosen to lean on the fact that the grade conversion takes place on the basis of a principle of trust in institution-specific procedures for conversion because the institutions involved already have extensive experience with grade conversion, and because it is unnecessarily complex to establish common calculation models for conversion for all the institutions.

Information on grades and grade conversion at the Circle U. partners

UP	https://u-paris.fr/en/higher-education-in-france/
UCLouvain	UCLouvain has been using a single ECTS grade distribution table up to now. Starting from the academic year 2021-2022, the ECTS grade distribution will be made available for each study cycle and each of the 14 faculties (with each faculty using one or more ISCED subject areas). The grade distribution will be updated in the EGRACONS grade conversion tool, allowing for smooth grade conversion with partners using EGRACONS: https://uclouvain.be/en/study/gerer-votre-programme-de-formation.html

Aarhus University	In Denmark grade conversion is not allowed, but the Danish authorities have made a conversion table for Danish grades in relation to the ECTS scale: https://ufm.dk/en/education/the-danish-education-system/grading-system?set_language=en&cl=en
University of Oslo	University of Oslo does not convert grades, but information on the grading system at University of Oslo can be found here: https://www.uio.no/english/studies/examinations/grades/
Kings College London	The process of marks translation at King's is supported by the policy on the translation of credits and the regulations on mark translation and transfer of credits (which note that in most cases it is only credit being brought back to King's – not marks): T24-26 .
University of Belgrade	https://www.bg.ac.rs/en/study-in-belgrade/grading-scale.php
Humboldt University Berlin	https://www.hu-berlin.de/en/studies/pservice-en/conversion/basics_en?set_language=en

^[1] Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2022 (Version 1 of 24/11/2021) page 46. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/erasmusplus-programme-guide>

^[2] Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2022 (Version 1 of 24/11/2021) page 58

^[3] Aarhus University is particularly challenged in relation to agreements on virtual elements, as there is no provision in national legislation for Danish universities to enter into virtual exchange agreements. Regulations in the Republic of Serbia prohibit HE institutions from accrediting blended format courses accredited. The University of Belgrade is therefore unable to award credit for a non-accredited programmes, including blended learning. Summer programmes are exempt from this, since they are accredited following internal procedures at the University of Belgrade.

^[4] Mindful of that the [outcomes](#) of the [European Commission's Micro-Credentials Higher Education Consultation](#), Circle U.'s approach will continue to be informed by the implementation of the actions within its roadmap, including a those related to the development and adoption of a common and transparent definition and a EU standard for micro-credentials.



UiO : University of Oslo

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN



Aarhus University (Denmark), Humboldt University of Berlin (Germany), King's College London (United Kingdom), Université de Paris (France), University of Belgrade (Serbia), University of Louvain (Belgium) and University of Oslo (Norway)

