

Recognition of school study periods abroad

Towards a European Educational Area

The relevance of recognition of study periods abroad

Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that the Union shall be aimed at “encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study”.

Nevertheless, **the school period spent abroad is not recognised in many Member States**, especially if this does not result in a school diploma corresponding to an EQF level. As a result, the large majority of pupils who go to study in another EU country need to attend one or more additional years of school, once back in their home country.

About **200.000** school-age individuals are mobile within the EU because of family relocation, according to official statistics¹. In addition to this, pupils between 15 and 18 years old are increasingly mobile thanks to exchange programmes (+3% every year). To the knowledge of AFS Intercultural Programs, every year more than **40.000** pupils are coming on an exchange in an EU country and about **150.000** pupils from EU countries are going abroad, most of them via exchange programmes offered by specialised organisations².

A fragmented and poorly enabling legal environment

Recognition through a learning agreement is foreseen for long-term pupil mobility happening in the framework of the Erasmus+ Programme, but this kind of mobility represents only a very small portion of the total. Between 2014 and 2016 only 800 pupils went on individual pupil mobility with Erasmus+³, with a 54% decrease in comparison with the Individual Pupil Mobility strand of the Comenius Programme. Moreover, among these, only few spend abroad a full academic year. From the study conducted, it is clear that for students spending abroad less than 10 months, most of the time they are re-integrated in their class and pass the yearly exam together with the other students, therefore the studies followed abroad are not really taken into account.

The school period spent abroad is not recognised in many Member States (*Belgium Flemish Community, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary,, Finland, Lithuania, Sweden, and the Netherlands*). In the EU countries where recognition of studies abroad is regulated (*Austria, Belgium French Community, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia and Spain*), **not only recognition systems are very different, but in some countries their application is not effective**, and most students opt for a “gap year” instead (*Belgium French speaking, France, Poland, Portugal, Spain*).

For example, in Italy and Austria, national laws provide frameworks for effective recognition to the study period abroad if done via exchange programmes: the year abroad is validated by the school as a ‘passed year’ given the transversal skills students gain through this experience, no grades are provided and students are enrolled in the next class.

¹ European Commission, Annual Report on intra-EU Labour Mobility, Final Report December 2016.

² Estimated data by AFS Intercultural Programs according to a market research study.

³ Data provided by the European Commission, DG EAC.

In Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Latvia students can receive partial recognition of the academic year abroad and upon return they need to take exams for the subjects not studied in the hosting school. This kind of recognition system is applied with different levels of success.

In Ireland, students can spend abroad the transition year between the junior and the senior cycle of secondary school, and upon return enrol in the first year of the senior cycle, however there is no recognition of grades.

In Romania, study periods abroad up to 10 months can be recognised if the students attended the same school grade they would have attended in Romania and they can provide official documentation that they successfully passed all the school year's exams in the hosting country, however these conditions cannot always be met and students might need to repeat the year. A similar procedure for recognition exists in Spain, but with a very low rate of success: the validation of the year abroad by the Ministry of education is based on a transcript of grades but depends mostly on where the students have been on exchange.

In the French speaking community of Belgium and in France, recognition is made possible via a learning agreement between schools on the study programme prior to the student's departure; however in neither of these countries this complex procedure is actually used by the many students going abroad in the framework of exchange programmes.

In Portugal and Poland the law on recognition clashes with the culture and the school system. In Portugal students are culturally used to go on exchange on the last year of high school and this clashes with recognition procedures and the timing of the entry exams for university, which means that they have their studies recognised but they take a gap year between high school and university. In Poland due to the short duration of the last cycle of secondary school, students do not feel like going to exchange and then entering the next and last class and pass the final exam.

The importance of recognition of study periods abroad

Learning mobility at a young age helps young people obtain **basic life skills and transversal competences**, such as problem-solving, creativity and initiative, necessary for their personal development, future employment and active citizenship.

With student's mobility being promoted in political discourse but study periods abroad not being officially recognised by national law, **schools are not supported enough by policy in their internationalisation**. Moreover, with increasing school autonomy, headmasters and teachers are often required to decide upon the recognition of an exchange year, without any support or guidelines to enable them to do this.

While mobility in higher education is supported by concrete policies, this is not the case for pupil mobility. However, **schools are the most inclusive environment** since studying is compulsory until 18 years old in most EU countries. Therefore when mobility opportunities are offered at a young age there are higher chances that all people, despite any potential exclusion factor, have the opportunity to benefit from them. At the moment many students postpone mobility to the time when they will be enrolled in higher education, but they then might decide not to enroll in university.

Potential policy solutions

We commend the intention of the European Commission to address the issue of "recognition of higher education and school leaving diplomas/study periods abroad", as indicated in the Communication "Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture" (November 2017) and in view of creating a **European Educational area, where learning mobility is adequately promoted and supported**.

It is crucial to ensure that the foreseen Council Recommendation covers **also recognition of study periods abroad that do not result in school diplomas**. In fact, generally pupils are mobile during secondary school for periods ranging from 3 to 10 months because they are enrolled in exchange programmes. This is an enriching and transformative learning experience which is also promoted within the Erasmus+ programme, therefore Member States should ensure that their national school systems enable and promote this possibility.

Mirroring the Bologna Process in primary and secondary education would not be advisable. It would imply entering the sensitive and difficult area of comparability of curricula and subjects, thus slowing down and hampering significantly the process, and creating additional bureaucratic burden on the school system. In the countries where a system of learning agreements is in place to ensure recognition, this has showed not to be effective.

The European Union should encourage and guide Member States to adopt measures towards recognition based on appreciation of diverse school systems, yet recognising the specificities of national educational systems and cultures. While considering and valuing successful examples (for example the Italian and the Austrian systems of automatic recognition), **the Council Recommendation should set guidelines and standards, and allow certain discretion in the implementation via national laws**.

The recognition of the school year abroad implies that education systems shift from a “traditional” content-based curricula to a competence-based approach, which recognises “real-world learning” through non formal and informal learning, and promotes the development of attitudes and skills, in addition to subject knowledge. Policies for the recognition of the school year abroad should **align with the objectives and reinforce the implementation of the European of Key Competences Framework**, currently under revision as part of the European Educational Area’s agenda.

Finally, it is advisable that none of the laws on recognition of study abroads are only applicable to studies in other EU countries, since the existing effective laws on recognition are applicable in the same way to study abroad periods in EU countries or anywhere else in the world.

Who we are



EFIL is the umbrella of 30 national organisations running AFS Intercultural programmes in Europe, providing intercultural learning opportunities for school pupils, schools and volunteers. With its experience of over one century in pupil exchanges, reaching 12.000 pupils and 40.000 volunteers worldwide, AFS is a non-profit world-class intercultural education organisation which has given a significant contribution to help the world learn to live together.



EEE-YFU is the umbrella organisation for national YFU organisations in Europe and currently has 29 member organisations. Youth For Understanding is a non-profit youth exchange organisation, providing exchange programmes for 15 to 18 year old students in more than 50 countries worldwide. EEE-YFU works to support its member organisations to grow as quality and sustainable organisations.