

# FORUM

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MAGAZINE

*Discussing international education*

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# EQUITY THROUGH RECOGNITION



Study abroad is a valuable experience, but less so without a document that justly acknowledges it. The task of converting grades isn't a simple one. Erasmus and the ECTS grade scale are examined to understand whether equity through recognition is possible.

Student mobility is a well-established element around the world, either through independent bilateral agreements between partner institutions or through large programmes such as Erasmus+. The aims of a mobility period are manifold, including self-awareness, cultural awareness, and widening life experiences.

At the heart of the experience is an educational programme, planned before the period of mobility and solidified through a learning agreement. Within the Erasmus+ programme this document lists all the courses to be taken during the mobility period, including the credit value in ECTS<sup>1</sup> credits. Sixty credits are expected to be gained for a full academic semester. This agreement, signed by the

host institution, the home institution, and the student provides a useful starting point regarding academic recognition. But what lies beneath? What are the underlying recognition principles that will operate when the student returns home with the transcript of records, assuming the list of courses on the transcript are the same as those on the learning agreement, or any amended learning agreement that was duly agreed upon and signed by all three parties? It is here that one finds very great variance across the world, leading to a lack of equity in the recognition of the academic achievements of the mobility period.

#### EVIDENCE VERSUS EQUITY

From the student's perspective, the host

students at the home institution will also expect mobile students to be graded in an equitable manner such that the mobile students are neither penalised by studying abroad nor given undue advantage. This can be very important when grades lead to awards, bursaries, and even scholarships for future study. How can one arrive at equitable grading for all three parties?

#### A COMPLEX AFFAIR

Returning to the home transcript of records, one can look at two options for recording the courses taken at the host institution. One option is to copy exactly the course code, title, credit, and grade from the host institution. This provides the information precisely but it creates the problem that the grades will relate to the host grade scale and not to the home grade scale, so direct comparison with the host grades is not possible. Another option is to list the courses studied, exactly as they were listed on the host transcript, but to have a grade conversion procedure to convert grades from the host to the home grade scale. This was attempted through Erasmus and the ECTS grade scale. Unfortunately it was a rather complex system, and was introduced at a time when grade data was not regularly gathered and analysed by higher education institutions. Essentially the system required the host institution to issue a local grade and an ECTS grade. The ECTS grade was determined from a grade distribution so that, for example, an ECTS grade 'A' was awarded to the students in the top 10% of 'the population' of students in an aggregation group. The home institution would then convert the 'A' to the local home grade, again through knowledge of the grade distribution of the relevant aggregation group. Regrettably this methodology was not implemented using careful grade distribution analysis and was further complicated by the addition of a qualifying statement to the ECTS grades, such as 'outstanding performance with only minor errors', which was added

to the ECTS grade 'A'. The quality of the top 10% cannot be determined without other information.

The ECTS grade scale was withdrawn from the ECTS Users Guide in the 2009 edition. In the UK there are a number of higher education institutions that undertake grade conversion, for example the University of Essex, the University of St Andrews, the University of Edinburgh, and the University of Manchester. There are also grade conversion sites offered by international organisations such as World Education Services (WES). It has not been possible to verify the data sources used to generate these grade conversions and it is possible that many have been developed through historic knowledge and discussions between host and home institutions.

#### TRANSPARENCY

It is possible to convert grades from one system to another, as long as the grade distribution of both parties is known, and this is a relatively simple matter for most higher education institutions today, assuming they maintain databases of student grades. The EGRACONS project is currently developing a system to provide grade conversion between a host- and home institution. At present the system is being developed and tested using data from full and associate partners, but will, as a deliverable, provide a system open to all Erasmus+ institutions.

In conclusion, equity in mobility is enhanced through the full recognition of the study period and through a transparent process of grade conversion to demonstrate to students (mobile, host, and home), the partner institutions, and future employers that all parties have been treated equitably.

— ANTHONY VICKERS



Illustration: Nhu Nguyen

transcript is a valuable asset but the final transcript provided by the home institution, as a supplement to their degree certificate, is the most valuable educational asset. What evidence can be found on this document regarding their mobility period? How should it be included to provide the most equitable solution, and what do we mean by equitable in this instance?

There is a need for the student to be treated equitably, but so should the peer students at the host- and home institutions. Equity regarding the mobile student is clear. The peer students at the host institution will, quite rightly, demand that the grades awarded to mobile students be given using the same criteria as they themselves are judged by. The peer

1. ECTS credits are defined in the ECTS Users Guide, a new version of which is expected to be published in 2015.