



STRENGTHENING THE TRAINING  
**OPPORTUNITIES**  
FOR INTERNATIONAL YOUTH

**ESN**

INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE  
ERASMUS STUDENT NETWORK



 **STORY**  
RECOMMENDATIONS  
**BOOKLET**





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A free electronic version of this booklet is available at **[storyproject.eu/results](http://storyproject.eu/results)**

# BACKGROUND OF **STORY**



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**STORY** stands for Strengthening the Training Opportunities for International Youth and is an EU funded project carried out by the Erasmus Student Network. Part of the project is a comprehensive assessment of mobility for studies and mobility for traineeships in Europe. The research takes into account the perspective of the main actors involved in the process: Students, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), National Agencies and organisations receiving mobile trainees.

The results are based upon separate questionnaires for each target group (Students, HEIs, National Agencies and receiving organisations). All questionnaires were accessible online at [www.storyproject.eu](http://www.storyproject.eu) for a period of 3 months from the middle of March 2014 until middle of June 2014. The dissemination of individual questionnaire was streamlined according to the respective target group.

The following chapters give a short summary of the main results and recommendations of the research report. The interested reader is encouraged to consult the whole publication available online [storyproject.eu/results](http://storyproject.eu/results) at or directly inquire about a hard-copy at the headquarters of the Erasmus Student Network. The recommendations address all stakeholders involved; in particular Higher Education Institutions, National Agencies, student associations, receiving organisations and policy makers.

# MAIN RESULTS

## MOBILITY FOR STUDIES STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

### Information provision for mobility for studies

- 97% of students receive information about the Learning Agreement and 95% receive it prior to the exchange period.
- 95% of students receive information about the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) or other credit systems and 82% receive it prior to the exchange period while 14% receive it during their exchange.
- 69% of students receive information about grade transfer procedures. Only 53% receive the information before the exchange period, 26% obtain this information during their exchange and 20% after their exchange.
- 80% of students receive information about the Erasmus Student Charter: 80% receive the Charter before the exchange period and almost all of the remaining ones during their exchange (18%).
- Students use different sources such as websites (98%), newsletters (90%) or individual consultation from their Higher Education Institutions (HEI, 88%). Those sources are also considered to be the most useful tools.

### Learning Agreement

- Almost all students (98%) sign a Learning Agreement when they go on exchange and in 76% of cases they do so before their departure.
- 56% of students are able to freely choose their courses while in 38% of cases the sending and/or the receiving institutions play an active role in the course selection.
- 71% of students make changes to their Learning Agreements: the most frequent reason is that selected courses are not available upon arrival at the receiving institution (57%).
- The majority of Learning Agreements (88%) have course credits expressed in ECTS.



## Financial issues

- 91% of students receive a grant to fund their exchange periods: 38% of them receive it mostly during the period abroad, 33% mostly before the period abroad and 6% of students receive it mostly after their exchange period. A further 9% of students receive them in a non-periodic fashion.
- Students receive additional funding mainly from the sending HEI (32%), national authorities (28%), regional authorities (23%) or private foundations (8%).

## Recognition and grade transfer

- The percentage of students receiving full-recognition differs according to the sample and definition of full recognition. In tendency, figures move in the right direction comparing it to the previous PRIME studies. Full recognition for students who receive ECTS credits and who later on give more detailed information on the exact amount of credits is as high as 84% when asking a direct yes or no question. Taking into account the whole sample, the number is considerably lower and only 76% say they have received full recognition. Dividing the concept of recognition into conditional and unconditional recognition shows that 78% receive conditional recognition and only 62% say they have received unconditional recognition for the credits obtained in the final version of their Learning Agreement.
- Main reasons for non-recognition are that the course content is not accepted by the sending institution (29% of cases), problems with credit calculation (17%) and bureaucratic issues in the sending institution (10%).
- 9% of students claim that they have had to prolong their studies at the sending institution due to recognition issues, while 21% don't know if they might need to do so in the future.
- 22% of students feel that their grades are downgraded during the recognition process and 14.5% of students feel that their ECTS were also downgraded.



## General feedback on mobility for studies

- 49% would not have opted for a mobility for studies period, if they had known that they will face recognition or grade-transfer problems. A lower grant would have prevented 37% from going abroad and not receiving a grant at all would have discouraged 57% from going abroad.
- Almost 90% of students are very or rather satisfied with the overall experience of their academic exchange. However, only around 50% of students are very or rather satisfied with the actual recognition process, the actual grade transfer and the information provided on both issues.  
Higher Education Institution Perspective  
Information provision for mobility for studies
- Actors providing students with information about Erasmus mobility for studies are the international relations office (80%), the institutional Erasmus coordinator (73%) and faculty Erasmus coordinators. 59% of HEIs say the information comes from former exchange students and 45% report that students associations are additional information providers. The most common channels to provide this information to students are, respectively, information on the university home page (95%) and meetings, seminars and sessions (93%).
- Almost all HEIs (97%) provide their students with a signed copy of their Learning Agreement and a majority (86%) hands out a copy of the Erasmus Student Charter. About a third (32%) offers a conversion table for credits, a grade distribution (28%) and an Erasmus University Charter (28%).

# HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION PERSPECTIVE

## Learning Agreement

- The majority of HEIs (94%) use the official and centrally provided Learning Agreement. In most cases either the Erasmus coordinators at the faculty (30%) or the study programme director or advisor (22%) makes the final decision on courses in the Learning Agreement of an outgoing Erasmus student.
- The responsibility for the decision on the amount of credits a student has to obtain varies between HEIs. The faculty Erasmus coordinator (18%), the dean or head of department (17%), the institutional Erasmus coordinator (16%) or the study programme director or advisor (15%) are most often responsible for this decision.
- The majority of the HEIs (72%) experience modifications in the Learning Agreement from more than 50% of their students. The most common reason for these changes is that the initially chosen courses are not available. In addition, reasons such as the receiving institution requesting changes and an extension of the mobility period are considered important.

## Recognition and ECTS

- The majority (77%) of surveyed institutions use the ECTS as the one and only system, while 20% use it together with a national credit system. In 25% of the HEIs the faculty Erasmus coordinators are in charge of the credit recognition procedure. The study programme director or advisor (20%), the dean or head of the department (17%) and a special recognition committee (11%) are also responsible for the process.
- In approximately half of the responding HEIs (49%) all outgoing Erasmus students receive full recognition for their studies abroad, while 37% grant more than 80% of their students full recognition.

The most common reason (43%) why outgoing Erasmus students do not receive full recognition of their studies abroad is that the content or a part of the courses were not accepted by the sending institution. Students who do not provide the needed documents (34%), courses that are not included in the final version of the Learning Agreement (33%) or a lack of approval from the professor (31%) are also common reasons why students do not get recognition for their studies abroad. Some of the HEIs claim that problems with credit calculation (24%) occur through e.g. different credit systems at the sending and receiving institution.

## Grade Transfer

- The Faculty Erasmus coordinators (36%) and the international relations office (24%) are the ones who most often have the responsibility to provide students with information about the grade transfer. Study programme directors or advisors (12%) and institutional Erasmus coordinators (12%) are also important actors in some HEIs.
- The majority of HEIs (77%) provides students with information about grade transfer before the exchange. About 12% inform about the grade transfer after the exchange while 5% disseminate the information while the students are abroad.
- Grades are most often converted according to a grade distribution table created by the institution (34%). In some HEIs (17%) only credits are recorded, while grades are not. It is also common in several HEIs to convert grades individually, either by the faculty Erasmus coordinator (12%) or the institutional Erasmus coordinator (3%).
- In about a fourth of HEIs (24%) the faculty Erasmus coordinators are the ones in charge of the final grade transfer for outgoing students, followed by the study programme director or advisor (16%). The dean or head of department (12%), a special recognition committee (11%), the international relations office (8%) and institutional Erasmus coordinators (7%) are also responsible for the finalising of the grade transfer for outgoing exchange students.



## Payment and portability of Erasmus grants

- In most HEIs (72%) all outgoing Erasmus students receive an Erasmus grant while in some cases (22%) between 80 and 99% of the students receive the grant. 40% of HEIs provide additional financial help apart from the Erasmus grants, while most (59%) do not.
- Students are typically provided Erasmus grants either partially before and after the exchange (42%), or only before the exchange (28%). Some students receive the grant partially during the exchange and the rest later (19%), while a minor part obtains the whole amount during the exchange (9%).
- If some Erasmus funding is left at the end of the year, most HEIs send what is left back to the National Agency (46%) or redistribute the funds to the students who are already entitled to receive the Erasmus grant (41%). It is less common to use the remaining funding on staff training (8%), promotion for the upcoming year (8%) and providing support to organisations and projects (5%).
- The majority (80%) of students do not lose the right to national grants and other financial support when studying abroad. In some cases (6%) the students lose parts of their financial support while a few HEIs (13%) are not sure.
- In most cases students receive additional Erasmus grants if they decide to prolong their mobility period in case enough funding is available (67%). Some HEIs (22%) always offer more grants, while a minority (6%) never offer financial support if students extend their studies abroad.
- The majority of HEIs (63%) claim that between 1% and 19% of their students have to pay back some of their grants. In 32% of the HEIs no one is required to pay back the grant. The main reason why students have to return all or a part of their grant is related to too little time spent abroad, early return or not going at all (85%). Insufficient ECTS (31%) and failed exams (18%) are less common reasons.
- Most of the representatives at HEIs claim that the main reason (29%) that discourages students from going on exchange is not receiving sufficient funding. Other HEIs say that obstacles such as fear of not passing the exams abroad (17%), fear of not receiving full recognition (16%) and lack of language skills (15%) make students less encouraged to go on exchange.



## Information provision on mobility for traineeships

- The website of the HEI (66%), seminars or presentations (49%), meetings upon request (41%) brochures, booklets, flyers or posters (32%) are successful ways to reach students.
- Most trainees find a receiving organisation themselves (46%) or with the help of their HEI (37%). Family and friends help 7% of responding students to find a receiving organisation. When HEIs provide support, individual professors (55%) and the IRO (55%) are most often helping students to find traineeships abroad.
- A majority of 60% apply directly to the organisation of interest. Consulting specialised traineeship websites (36%) and directly checking relevant organisations' webpages (29%) are also common ways to look for a traineeship. Students also use personal contacts (19%) and word-of-mouth (12%) to look for traineeships.
- Private sector companies (36%), HEIs (22%) and research centres (12%) are the type of organisations that welcome mobile trainees most frequently. A huge majority of 84% states that their traineeship is in a field that matches with their studies.
- Most receiving organisations are small with less than 50 employees (64%). 21% of responding trainees state that their receiving organisation has between 50 and 1,000 employees. Only 7% of the private hosting companies have more than 1,000 employees.
- Traineeships mainly last between 3 and 6 months (83% of the entire sample).

# MOBILITY FOR TRAINEESHIPS

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

### Learning Agreement

- The majority of trainees sign a Learning Agreement for their traineeship (82%) and most of them sign it before the traineeship (87%).
- More than half of the sample evaluates the handling of the Learning Agreement as “very easy” or “easy”. However, 9% find it somewhat difficult to handle the Learning Agreement.
- Only 5% of students in the sample have to change their Learning Agreement. In 44% of those cases the receiving organisation requests changes to the Learning Agreement. Extending (25%) or shortening (8%) the traineeship are additional reasons for changes. Also, changing the tutor or contact person (4%) and the student not being satisfied with the traineeship conditions (4%) lead to changes in the Learning Agreement.

### Financial Issues

- The majority of students (81%) receives a grant. Grants are mainly provided by HEIs (61%). National, regional and local grants follow with 24% and only in 4% of the sample the receiving organisation provides a grant.
- Most students receive the payment before (43%) or during (31%) their traineeship abroad. While some receive the payment only after (8%), others receive it monthly (8%) or in different instalments (6%).  
71% of responding students cannot cover their living expenses during their traineeship with their grant. Only 26% receive additional financial compensation from the receiving organisation clearly showing that some students have to rely on other sources such as savings or family support to realise a traineeship abroad.

- Additional financial support from the receiving organisation is mainly provided through a salary (53%). Some organisations provide support through covering accommodation expenses (19%), local transportation (8%) and reimbursements of different costs (7%).

## Recognition of traineeships

- 64% of all responding students have already received recognition for their traineeship and for 29% the process is still ongoing. The remaining 7% have not received full recognition resulting in 11% without full recognition taking the ones with ongoing processes aside.
- As a reason for non-recognition, 76% say they do not require it as part of their degree. Problems with credit calculation (3%), part of the traineeship not being included in the Learning Agreement (2%), no approval from the professor (2%) and necessary documents not being provided (2%) are some of the more genuine causes of non-recognition. Putting these cases in relation to the number of students that claim they have received full recognition results in a number of non-recognition of around 2-3%. This result shows that non-recognition is not an extensively big problem for mobility for traineeships.
- Most students (58%) say that ECTS are used in the recognition process. The total amount of hours (39%) and the total amount of months (14%) are most often used as criteria to calculate ECTS.
- The study programme director or advisor (24%), the faculty or institutional Erasmus coordinator (20% and 19%, respectively), professors (19%), International Relations Offices (14%) and the dean or head of department (11%) are the actors in charge of the recognition procedure.



## General student feedback on mobility for traineeships

- Students consider personal experience and professional experience the most important reasons to participate in trainee mobility. Culture, language learning, visiting the country and job opportunities are also evaluated as important reasons.
- 88% are either very satisfied or satisfied with their overall experience abroad and 75% are either very satisfied or satisfied with their traineeship experience. Similar to the results for mobility for studies evaluation, this result demonstrates that next to the educational and professional value, the stay abroad provides an added value to students.
- 31% say they encountered obstacles or difficulties during their traineeship. Two major challenges are the grant not being sufficient (45%) and the working language (38%). Integrating into the culture of the organisation (17%), the administrative burden from the sending HEI (15%) and insufficient skills (13%) are also important obstacles and difficulties.
- 57% of students have a supervisor from their HEI. 87% receiving organisations provide a tutor to the trainee. 77% consider such a tutor “very useful” or “useful”.
- 60% of students that already have finished their degree programme consider their traineeship an advantage on the labour market. 24% consider the time abroad an important reason for getting hired. The time abroad was instrumental to finding the respective job say 20% and 19% believe that their international experience shortened their job search. Another 18% say that the respective job specifically required experience abroad. 79% of all responding students consider their traineeship possibly very advantageous or advantageous when applying for a job.



# HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION PERSPECTIVE

## Information provision on mobility for traineeships

- In around half of responding HEIs a traineeship is compulsory for some programmes, but not necessarily abroad. For 22% a traineeship is compulsory for all study programmes and another 22% say that a traineeship is not compulsory at all. Only around 7% say that a traineeship abroad is compulsory for some of their study programmes.
- Almost all of those institutions (83%) promote Erasmus traineeships. Private agreements (30%) and Leonardo Da Vinci traineeships (19%) are less often promoted.
- Individual consulting (69%), institutional or International Office webpages (68%) and seminars or open days (62%) are most often used to provide information about training opportunities. HEIs consider individual consulting also the most effective tool.
- Around three fourth of HEIs support students to find traineeship opportunities.

## Learning Agreement

- Faculty Erasmus coordinators (29%), study programme directors or advisors (22%) and institutional Erasmus coordinators (17%) are the ones that mainly take final decisions on the Learning Agreement and the Quality Commitment. Professors (8%), special recognition committees (6%), the International Relations Office (6%), the dean or head of department (4%), career centre office coordinators (3%) decide on the final documents in responding HEIs as well.
- Generally very few students make changes to the Learning Agreement. Most HEIs report no changes at all (38%) or less than 20% of all students make changes to the Learning Agreement (57%).



- The most frequent reason to change the Learning Agreement is an extension of the traineeship period (48%). Changes in the job profile (22%), the receiving organisation requesting changes (22%), shortening the traineeship period abroad (20%), the student not being satisfied (15%) and changing the tutor or contact person (11%) are additional reasons for changes.

## Recognition of traineeships

- Around 93% of all institutions claim that they usually grant full recognition of their students' traineeships abroad and a substantial part of responding HEIs say they believe recognition is working well.
- Most of the HEIs provide a supervisor for guidance through the learning process of their traineeship (65%).
- The majority of responding HEIs use ECTS as the only credit system for traineeship recognition (57%). 24% use both their national credit system and ECTS and 19% don't use ECTS at all in the process.

## Financial issues

- In 55% of all responding HEIs all students receive the Erasmus grant. Only few HEIs use the Leonardo grant to send students abroad and 73% don't use the Leonardo grant at all.
- Most HEIs split up the payment of the grant and pay a part before (46%) or during the exchange (15%). While 27% pay the whole grant before the exchange, 6% pay the grant during the exchange and only 1% after the exchange.

- If students prolong their traineeship, in 14% of responding HEIs students can rely on additional funding and in 65% they may receive an additional grant if there is enough funding. Only 13% of HEIs report that there is no additional funding for students that decide to prolong their traineeship.
- Only very few students have to return their grant or part of it and the reason why students have to return it is too little time spent abroad or not going abroad at all (85%). Insufficient ECTS (15%) and insufficient learning outcomes (4%) are less frequently mentioned reasons for returning money.
- In many HEIs students do not have the possibility to top up their traineeship grant (35%). In other HEIs income from the receiving organisation (28%), national grants (23%) and additional grants (17%) help students finance their traineeship abroad.

## Obstacles for mobility for traineeships

- According to HEIs, the fear of wasting an academic year (27%) and not receiving a grant (26%) are the most important obstacles discouraging students from going abroad for a traineeship. The fear of not getting full recognition is only considered an obstacle by 4% of responding HEIs.
- HEIs consider insufficient financial support (66%) the main problem that trainees may face during their actual traineeship abroad. The working language (39%), integration into the organisational culture (24%), lack of professional skills (24%) and the administrative burden (18%) are also potential issues during the period abroad



# RECEIVING ORGANISATION PERSPECTIVE

## Promotion of mobility for traineeships opportunities

- Organisations usually find their trainees when students apply on their own initiative (61%), with the help of schools or HEIs (57%), within their network contacts (53%) or through advertising a vacancy (45%).
- The most common reason not to have international students or trainees is the lack of contact with potential trainees abroad (37%) and the lack of financial capacity to pay trainees (31%).
- The average duration of a traineeship is 4.8 months. When asked about the ideal duration for the traineeships, the average answer was 6.4 months.
- Generally, organisations promote traineeships (60%) and the most common form of promotion is the organisation's website (77%) and through Higher Education Institutions (62%).

## Financial issues

- A third of organisations always offers some kind of financial benefits, a third of organisations never offer it and 21% sometimes offer compensation.
- The majority of organisations (63%) say that they sometimes offer a job opportunity in the same organisation for their trainee and 5% always offer a job afterwards. 28 % sometimes offer their trainees a job opportunity in another, related organisation, while around half of the organisations say they never offer such an opportunity.

## Learning Agreement and additional documentation

- 74% of the organisations say they usually sign a Learning Agreement and they do it before the traineeship starts (94%).
- The majority of organisations (88%) claim that the Learning Agreement does not undergo modifications after its signature.
- Almost half of the organisations say that the tutor assigned in the Learning Agreement is monitoring the student's work during the traineeship. Organisations say it is useful to provide students with a tutor.
- At the end of the traineeship, 49% of the organisations always offer a Letter of Recommendation and 42% offer it sometimes.
- 42% of surveyed organisations always offer a Training Certificate, 30% offer it sometimes, while 16% never offer it.

## Value of mobile trainees and organisational challenges

- Organisations that receive mobile trainees rate their experience with their trainees with an average of 4.4 on a scale from 1 (not valuable) to 5 (extremely valuable).
- Organisations say that having international trainees is valuable, mostly because trainees bring diversity and having people from different cultures and backgrounds creates a more dynamic professional environment (77%).
- For the integration of the international trainee, organisations assign a mentor to provide the trainee with enterprise-related background information (79%).
- The main problems that organisations encounter in the traineeship process are administrative burdens (47%), the insufficient finances of the organisation to cover trainees' expenses (37%) and the mismatch between the trainee's profile and the organisational requirements (35%). Suggestions for improving the overall traineeship process are: reducing the administrative burden (44%), creating clear monitoring procedures (33%) and making the recruitment process more thorough (30%).

## Non-Mobile and Future Mobile Students

- The issue of financial subsistence is a major reason (31%) why respondents who are planning to be mobile in the future haven't realised a mobility period yet. Lack of recognition (11%), administrative burden of the application (8%), the language barrier (6%) are additional obstacles for this group of students.
- Financial subsistence (44%) is by far the most important obstacle for respondents not interested in a mobility experience. The fear of lack of recognition (12%), the language barrier (10%), the administrative burden of the application (7%) and problems with the integration into a new culture (5%) are also significant obstacles.

## National Agencies

- According to National Agencies, the major issues with recognition occur mainly because the exact course catalogue and timetable of the receiving institution are not available when preparing the Learning Agreement prior to an exchange.
- National Agencies also report that modifications of the initially approved Learning Agreement between the student and the HEI are the main risk factor why courses are not approved by the home institution upon return.
- National Agencies say that they have tools and procedures in place to handle problems with recognition at HEIs. They, however, say such cases are generally rare.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recognition of studies and traineeships abroad

- The European grade transfer systems should be the only credit system. The calculation of ECTS should be unified and reviewed to avoid that students feel that their ECTS credits and their grades have been downgraded. HEIs should apply for the ECTS label.
- Students should know the exact grade transfer procedures before going on exchange. The process and the rules should be clear and transparent. Using the ECTS grading scale is recommended.
- Mobility windows, joint degrees and binding inter-institutional agreements are recommended to make curricula more flexible and avoid any problems with credit recognition.
- Timely information provision of the course schedule and descriptions is one of the keys to prevent later changes in a student's Learning Agreement and should be ensured. Further efforts should be made to ensure that students receive all necessary information regarding the Learning Agreement, the Erasmus Student Charter, the ECTS and grade transfer before the exchange and not during or after it.
- All students should sign a Learning Agreement prior to their departure. The Learning Agreement is a crucial document for both mobility for traineeships and mobility for studies.
- HEIs should recognise all courses approved in students' Learning Agreements with no further examinations or additional tests. Repeated violations of the Erasmus Higher Education Charter should lead to a withdrawal of the Charter to finally enforce full recognition of all credits approved in the final version of the Learning Agreement.



## Funding of mobility

- All students should receive their grants in a regular fashion and at least partly in advance. Paying out funds timely enables students to use the funds effectively and avoids additional obstacles for financially constrained students.
- Additional funding is needed to enable students from disadvantaged background to take part in a mobility experience. National and regional authorities should provide funding in addition to Erasmus grants in particular for less privileged groups. Private funding of mobility should be encouraged (e.g. through giving tax benefits to foundations and private sector organisations to provide grants for students).
- Organisations should offer a fair compensation for mobile trainees and not only rely on public money and students' own sources to fund living expenses abroad.

## Improving mobility for traineeships

- Generally, better dissemination and promotion of mobility for traineeships opportunities is needed. All actors in the process are encouraged to do more. HEIs, policy makers, national agencies and student associations need to develop effective tools to reach all students.
- HEIs should be more involved in the process of a traineeship. They should promote traineeships and funding opportunities and have more established agreements with receiving organisations.
- Further efforts should be made to have an easier process of application and clearer monitoring procedures. Organisations should have a tutor assigned in the Learning Agreement that will monitor the student's work during the traineeship.

- Organisations should always offer a Letter of Recommendation and a Training Certificate after the traineeship period.
- A still significant obstacle is insufficient language preparation. Greater efforts need to be made on all levels to improve foreign language learning across Europe.
- A major obstacle for increasing participation in mobility for traineeships is the difficulty to match potentially mobile trainees with interested receiving organisations. A comprehensive and well-known solution such as a matching platform is needed to facilitate the matching process.



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