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## Academic recognition enhancing flexibility in a European University



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Higher education institutions meet increasing expectations towards flexibility of study pathways across the European Higher Education Area. Although definitions of “flexibility” are not clear-cut and they also depend on the viewpoints of stakeholders, it is undeniable that functional academic recognition is a core element of flexible study processes. Finnish universities of applied sciences (UAS) have a lot to give in this evolution. The article provides insights into the first steps of the development work on academic recognition in a European University Alliance, from the standing point of its Finnish partner institution Haaga-Helia UAS.

## Academic and automatic recognition

The concept of academic recognition signifies two processes: in the first one, qualifications obtained are considered as giving access to further studies, whereas in the second one, study credits and other learning achievements are considered in a degree programme as mandatory, optional or elective parts. In the case of streamlined processes based on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) such as the access to level 7 studies after a Bachelor’s degree, one uses the term “automatic recognition.”

The Bologna process, the ECTS system and the European Qualifications Framework have paved the way for more effective academic recognition, and the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) provides solid guidelines for recognition of qualifications in European higher education institutions. It aims at more transparent and equal recognition with definition of concepts, recommendations on practices, and implementation of mechanisms. The institutional autonomy being mentioned in the Convention preamble as a principle to be “upheld and protected”, it is not surprising however that recognition practices in Europe still vary – not to mention those in the other parts of the world. Despite attempts, there are substantial challenges in finding functional recognition processes that would not compromise national and institutional regulations or jeopardise academic traditions.

## The challenges for European University Alliances

Creating accessible learning environments that would genuinely boost students’ motivation to conduct studies in several institutions, obtaining full recognition of their studies, is a fundamental objective also for the recently established European Universities, where inter-



institutional and transnational cooperation constitute the core mission. Ulysseus (2022) is a network of six European universities and UAS institutions, established in 2020 in the second wave of European University Alliances. Haaga-Helia UAS is the Finnish partner in Ulysseus.

Like most European University Alliances, Ulysseus is a constellation of organisations with divergent histories, backgrounds, institutional frameworks and steering policies. This diversity, stemming from the rich European heritage of higher education traditions, reflects the very mission of the European University initiative. It provides a lot of potential, and yet at the same time, it entails a variety of hindrances for process development. Upon the experiences from Ulysseus, constant dialogue and openness seem to be key drivers to reach mutual consent. Apparent divergences should not be intimidating but motivate stakeholders to constructive openings.

In Ulysseus, the objective to delineate functional recognition has been on the agenda from the very beginning. It is perceived as one of the most important factors in enhancing flexibility of study pathways and furthermore, in increasing flexibility of academic practices. One of the official deliverables of the first funding period is to design a framework agreement for recognition, to facilitate smooth mobility of students and to ensure uncomplicated transitions from one partner institution to another. A working group with one member of each partner institution was established for this purpose, the author of this article acting as the chairperson.

## Insights for recognition from Ulysseus European University

During its first year of operation, the working group has identified challenges and provided recommendations, designed documents and initiated debates. The latter also draw on other fields of alliance cooperation than recognition, such as the curriculum development for European Joint Degrees, quality assurance, or student mobility. The work started with a thorough screening of concept definitions, which turned out to be a very fruitful exercise – in the academia, we may use the same terms, but assign different definitions to them. “Learning outcome” is one example of concepts where viewpoints diverge, despite a shared understanding of the importance of the notion; results should be prioritised, rather than the process.

After the official approval of the framework agreement in all partner institutions, the group will be organised more solidly as the Board of Academic Recognition, with the mission to document recognition decisions, monitor practices, provide recommendations, and cooperate with the



General Committee of Ulysseus. The Board will also deal with possible appeals from students regarding recognition decisions. The overarching mission is to facilitate more flexible study pathways for students in all Ulysseus institutions, and to ensure equal treatment of students. Moreover, agile and functional practices will reduce the workload of experts working with recognition and mobility and consolidate their networks. Embracing the spirit of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, alliance partners will be able to act according to their institutional (and national) guidelines. Yet, alliance-level recommendations and shared practices are sought after, to advance a genuine learning ecosystem instead of a mere cluster of cooperating institutions. Learning from each other is a mindset to nurture in this type of progress.

The first steps taken in Ulysseus in the matter of academic recognition have received positive feedback, e.g. in the conference Spotlight on Recognition (2022) organised by the European University Association in May 2022. The process of the Ulysseus working group was selected as a good European practice – one of the three presented – to showcase functional approaches in academic recognition. It is based on the fundamental European policy papers that provide the framework for academic recognition for Ulysseus, as well as for all European higher education institutions: Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997), Council Recommendation on Automatic Recognition (2018), and ECTS Users' Guide (European Commission 2009). The overarching goal is to enhance flexibility in study pathways.

Establishing a collegial forum for recognition experts at an early stage of cooperation was one important measure. Introducing a Ulysseus Learning Agreement, designed on the model of the corresponding Erasmus+ document, is another step forward: it will facilitate processing of learning achievements stemming from mobility in study options that are not financed by Erasmus+. Piloting started in September 2022. Obtaining full recognition of studies conducted either virtually, in a hybrid mode or on site in another institution is the right of the student, and the objective is to increase the percentage of studies recognised in mandatory studies. This is a long-term aspiration, given the variation across hundreds of curricula. Co-creation of joint degrees facilitates this process, since curricular synergies can be dealt with at an early stage. To generalise: the more flexible, equal and transparent recognition becomes, the more appealing it will be to study in several institutions, gaining new experiences.



## A joint effort

Recognition of studies is naturally only one constituent of flexible studies, but it is linked to many others: clearly defined responsibilities of faculty members and other staff, transparent quality assurance, accessible and precise documentation, motivating study options, up-to-date and modifiable curricula, insightful academic leadership, data-protected digital transmission of documents, and efficient student support systems. All this means that different working groups and committees need to nurture ongoing dialogue and moreover, take interest in each other's tasks.

Finnish UASs could positively contribute to European Universities in this context. Despite challenges and ingrained practices, recognition of formal learning appears relatively straightforward, when comparing to recognition of non-formal and informal learning in higher education institutions. The last two trigger frequent debates, well-known to all who have experience in validation in contexts of higher education. European policies promote recognition of all forms of learning, but institutions may have very traditional perceptions and processes. UAS institutions are forerunners in this respect, with established practices of mandatory internships, recognition of work-integrated learning and above all, pedagogical philosophies where well-defined learning outcomes constitute a functional reference point to recognition and validation. Since several Finnish UAS institutions have recently joined European Universities, there are good opportunities to disseminate functional practices in our own alliances. Academic recognition is a field of higher education that calls for profound development work, for the benefit of students and for the credibility of institutions.

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