
RECOGNITION OF SCHOOL STUDY PERIODS ABROAD IN EUROPE

AN OVERVIEW AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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AFS organisations



- AFS Austauschprogramme für interkulturelles Lernen (Austria)
- AFS Interculturele Programma's vzw (Belgium-Flemish speaking)
- AFS Programmes Interculturels asbl (Belgium – French speaking)
- Globus Association for Intercultural Learning (Croatia)
- AFS Mezikulturni Programy, o.p.s. (Czech Republic)
- AFS Interkultur (Denmark)
- AFS Intercultural Programs Finland ry (Finland)
- AFS Vivre Sans Frontière (France)
- AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V. (Germany)
- AFS Magyarország Nemzetközi Csereprogram Alapítvány (Hungary)
- AFS á Islandi – Alþjóðleg fræðsla og samskipti (Iceland)
- EIL Intercultural Learning (Ireland)
- Intercultura (Italy)
- Stichting AFS Nederland (Netherlands)
- AFS Norge Internasjonal Utveksling (Norway)
- AFS Polska Programy Międzykulturowe (Poland)
- Interkultura (Serbia)
- Intercultura Slovakia (Slovakia)
- Educational Association Interkultura (Slovenia)
- AFS Intercultura España (Spain)
- AFS Interkulturell Utbildning (Sweden)
- AFS Interkulturelle Programme (Switzerland)

YFU organisations



- Sdruzhenie Mladezh za razbiratelstvo Bulgaria (Bulgaria)
- YFU Eesti MTÜ (Estonia)
- YFU Latvija (Latvia)
- YFU Lietuva (Lithuania)
- Youth for Understanding Romania (Romania)



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¹ "AFS Intercultural Programs", <https://afs.org>

² The federation of AFS organisations in European and the Mediterranean, <https://efil.afs.org/>

³ "Youth for Understanding", <https://yfu.org/>

⁴ The federation of YFU organisations in Europe, <https://about.yfu.org/eee-yfu>

⁵ "Intercultural Learning for Pupils and Teachers", www.intercultural-learning.eu

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Historical context

Individual long-term pupil exchange programmes, namely stays abroad of 3 to 10 months for pupils aged 15-18 years old in a host family, have been introduced by non-profit civil society and educational organisations in the 1930s⁶. They were conceived as a tool to **foster peace and intercultural understanding** between people of different countries. Following the end of the Second World War many exchange programmes were initiated by organisations in the USA, being seen as a main tool of cultural diplomacy and reconciliation among the new generations. The programmes initially started as summer programmes, not involving school attendance, and then evolved in a full-year exchange which involved school attendance. The programmes were run thanks to the cooperation between national and local branches of the same international organisation⁷ committed to finding host families for the incoming students, and recruiting pupils to go abroad. Even though schools were a stakeholder in the scheme, the programme was not envisioned as an exchange between sending and hosting schools. Moreover these programmes did not develop specifically with a European focus but allowed for exchanges between countries all over the world. The educational impact of these programmes has been subject of research, such as the ones conducted by AFS Intercultural Programs, which show the long-term effect of the mobility experience in foreign language fluency and cultural competence⁸.

Language exchange programmes, especially run by companies, have developed as from the 1960s⁹ based on a market demand, mostly offering short and long stays in English speaking destinations, and now in countries where the main foreign languages are spoken. These programmes are mostly run with the principle that few hosting countries receive students from all over the world willing to learn the host country language. Therefore, it is rare that companies are both sending and hosting in the same country.

More recently, individual pupil exchange programmes based on bilateral agreements between countries were developed, such as the Voltaire programme (1998) run by the French-German Youth Office¹⁰, or the Nordic agreement on pupil exchanges (2004)¹¹, and these foresee recognition of the school study period abroad. At the same time, also schools and local authorities have started running similar programmes based on mutual agreements with respective institutions in other countries.

⁶ "The Experiment in International Living, History and Mission", <https://www.experiment.org/about-the-experiment/history-mission/>, and Donald B. Watt, *Intelligence is Not Enough* (Experiment Press, 1967)

⁷ International organisations running pupil exchange programmes such as AFS Intercultural Programs since 1947, Youth for Understanding as from 1951, Rotary International as from 1958.

⁸ "AFS Intercultural Programs, AFS Exchange Program Research", <https://afs.org/education/education-research/>

⁹ "Education First – EF, About EF, Our History", <https://www.ef.com/about-us/our-history/?mc=we>

¹⁰ "OFAJ, Programme d'échange Voltaire", <https://www.ofaj.org/programmes-formations/programme-d-echange-voltaire.html>

¹¹ Nordic Agreement on Co-operation on Upper Secondary School Education, 3 November 2004.

From 1997 to 2001 the Council of Europe run, together with EFIL, the pilot trimester exchange programme ESSSE (European Secondary School Student Exchange) which aimed to contribute to European integration through East-West exchange after the fall of the Berlin wall¹².

Since 2008, following the pilot action 'Individual Pupil Mobility'¹³ run by EFIL, the European Union has offered funding for such programmes for the purpose of promoting the development of European citizenship among students, and internationalisation of schools. From 2008 to 2013 this action involved 1000 pupils per year¹⁴, while it reached a total of 797 pupils between January 2014 and April 2017¹⁵. Among these, only few spent a full academic year abroad, and almost all of them got recognition of the studies abroad thanks to the learning agreement which is a mandatory feature of the programme.

As outlined above, the **sector is very scattered** with many organisations offering exchange programmes, therefore gathering complete numbers of the phenomenon is difficult. A market study conducted by AFS Intercultural Programs in 2014 shows that today pupils between 15 and 18 years old are increasingly mobile thanks to exchange programmes lasting between 6 and 10 months (+2.9% every year worldwide). Every year about **60.000 to 70.000 pupils from Europe are going abroad**, and about 35.000 pupils are coming to Europe on an exchange, **most of them via exchange programmes offered by specialised organisations**¹⁶. A study released in 2013 by the European Commission¹⁷ partly confirms these figures and estimates that 200.000 pupils a year take part in 'school stays': however the term 'school stays' comprises both long-term pupil mobility and so-called class exchanges, namely short term group mobilities, with the latter being a wider phenomenon than the first.

From the historical development of individual pupil exchange programmes we learn that the original purpose for which these programmes were created explains the main characteristics of the majority of pupil exchange programmes run today: they are not based on learning agreements between sending and hosting school because the **main focus of the exchange is the development of transversal competences and intercultural understanding through cultural immersion and friendship building**.

Moreover, the genesis of the programme format also explains two characteristics of existing recognition systems for secondary school periods abroad 1) there are recognition systems in Italy and Austria that have been working successfully for more than 20 years which value the exchange programme for the transversal competences it develops, rather than for the subject-related knowledge gained through the experience abroad¹⁸ 2) generally there is no difference

¹² Joseph Huber, *Intercultural competence for all Preparation for living in a heterogeneous world* (Council of Europe Publishing, 2012), page 67

¹³ European Federation for Intercultural Learning, *Individual Pupil Mobility Pilot Action – final report* (October 2008).

¹⁴ Data provided by the European Commission on 10/09/2015 through the answer to a Parliamentary question E-008744/2015.

¹⁵ Data provided by the European Commission DGEAC on 24/04/2017.

¹⁶ Estimated data by AFS Intercultural Programs according to an internal market research study, November 2014.

¹⁷ European Commission and ICON-INSTITUTE GmbH, *Study on mobility developments in school education, vocational education and training, adult education and youth exchanges* (EU publications, 2012).

¹⁸ See the country overview of Italy, page 28, and especially the content of the communication of the Italian Ministry of Education on the recognition of school study periods abroad, Nota 843/10, 2013. See also the country overview of Austria, page 10, and the effort of the Ministry of Education and Culture to actively promote pupil exchanges in schools as 'contributing to international and democratic education', Roberto Ruffino, *Mobility of Secondary School Pupils and Recognition of Study Periods Spent Abroad-A Survey*, (EFIL,2004), page 31.

in recognition procedures whether the learning period abroad is in a EU country or anywhere else in the world.

Recognition systems

Recognition systems applied to individual long-term pupil exchanges can be mainly divided in two types:

- **Based on certificate of attendance:** the exchange student upon return is admitted to the next class, upon presentation of documents certifying the completion of the previous academic year in another country. No matching of subjects between the sending and hosting school is foreseen and no additional exams are required. This recognition procedure can include a learning agreement based not only on subject-related knowledge, but especially on transversal competences gained through non formal and informal learning¹⁹. This system is used in Italy and Austria, and within the Nordic Agreement on Co-operation on Upper Secondary School Education²⁰ which applies to exchanges between Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Finland.
- **Based on transcript of grades:** the exchange student upon return can be admitted to the next class based on the correspondence of subjects between the sending and hosting school curricula, which is evaluated by the competent authority. The main document used for this procedure is the transcript of grades, namely a list of grades obtained for each school subject followed during the period abroad. Additional documents which can be asked are a learning agreement (drafted before or during the mobility experience), an official translations of the transcript of grades with apostille from the host country, an overview of the curriculum of studies in the host country including a detailed description of each subject. This system is implemented in Belgium-French speaking Community, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Spain and Switzerland. However, this system is applied with very different levels of success, and in several countries there is no national legislation on the topic and the decision on recognition is taken by each school, case by case. The authority responsible for recognition might require the student to take additional exams.

As explained, both systems can include a **learning agreement**, which is a formalised agreement aimed at outlining the learning plan of the pupil during the mobility experience. Depending on the recognition system, the learning agreement can be based on correspondence of subjects between curricula, or rather on competences, especially transversal ones. The learning agreement always involves at least two parties: the student and the sending school. In case the recognition procedure is based on a partnership with the hosting school, the latter is involved as third party. Also the family of the student can be included, as it happens in Italy²¹.

¹⁹ See the country overview of Italy, page 28, and especially the content of the communication of the Italian Ministry of Education on the recognition of school study periods abroad, Nota 843/10, 2013.

²⁰ Nordic Agreement on Co-operation on Upper Secondary School Education, 3 November 2004.

²¹ See the country overview of Italy, page 28.

In general, no recognition system apart the one applied in Italy²², includes an assessment of the transversal skills and the competences developed through non-formal and informal learning.

Recognition systems can be managed by:

- The sending school
- The sending school together with a national or regional public authority
- a national or regional public authority

In several cases, **pupils who move to a new country and enrol in school** (e.g. for reason of family relocation) might be **treated differently** in terms of recognition of their previous education, compared to students originally enrolled in the school system of that country and who have spent a learning period abroad as part of an exchange programme. Moreover recognition procedures for this target group might also depend on whether pupils have the nationality and/or speak the language of the country. A comparison between the recognition procedures applied for the two target groups (exchange students/non exchange students) have not been yet the subject of any study.

An interesting point of reflection is whether recognition procedures should be the same, in case a student has been abroad for a pupil exchange programme, or for different reasons. In fact, the learning which occurs within an organised pupil mobility is not necessarily comparable to a period of study done abroad for different reasons, which might lack preparation before and support during the programme. Therefore it might be justifiable that a different recognition system applies, based on the value of the transversal competences developed during the exchange programme.

In some countries schools allow for taking an exam on the content of the full missed school year once back, however this is not considered a recognition procedure as none of the learning acquired abroad is validated.

European political context

Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union²³ states that the Union shall aim at “encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study”. Nevertheless, a school period spent abroad is still not recognised in many Member States, especially if this does not result in a school diploma corresponding to a European Quality Framework²⁴ level.

In November 2017, the European Commission has launched the initiative European Education Area by 2025²⁵ which calls for “a Europe in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders. A continent, where spending time in another Member State – to study, to learn, or to work – has become the standard and where, in addition to one's mother tongue, speaking two other languages has become the norm; a continent in which people have a

²² *ibid*

²³ Consolidated version of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union, 2012.

²⁴ “Learning Opportunities and Qualifications in Europe - Find information on the EQF, NQF”, https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/search/site?f%5B0%5D=im_field_entity_type%3A97

²⁵ Communication from the Commission, Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies, COM(2018) 268 final

strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity"²⁶. As part of this ambitious objective, the European Commission released in May 2018 a Proposal for Council recommendation on the automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes learning periods abroad²⁷. The proposal defines automatic recognition of the outcomes of a learning period abroad during secondary education as "the outcomes from a learning periods of up to one year abroad during secondary education and training in one Member State are fully recognised in any other, with the learner not being required to repeat the programme year in the country of origin, provided that the competences acquired are broadly in line with the competences defined in the national curricula"²⁸. In order to achieve automatic recognition, the Commission calls on Member states to foster transparency and build trust in each other's secondary education. The proposal focuses on periods abroad during secondary school of up to one year, clearly looking at the phenomenon of organised pupil exchanges, rather than mobility due to family relocation, which can last for periods longer than one year.

Moreover both the **European Education Area** and the European Commission proposal for the **Erasmus programme as from 2021**²⁹ aim at **boosting pupil mobility**, and recognition of learning periods abroad during secondary school is key to reach the ambitious objective of 500.000 pupils mobile every year³⁰. One might argue that pupil exchanges within the Erasmus+ programme are already granted recognition through a learning agreement between sending and hosting school. However, as explained in the chapter 'Historical context', the phenomenon of pupil exchanges is much wider than the pupil mobility action of the Erasmus+ programme. If the European Union aims at the policy objective of internationalisation of schools through pupil mobility, **all mobility schemes need to access recognition, as schools and pupils engage with a variety of them**. Therefore the characteristics of existing pupil mobility schemes should be taken into account when elaborating recognition procedures.

In this policy effort for finding solutions for recognition of school study periods abroad, three other EU legislative documents should guide the way. Recognition is enshrined as a quality criteria within the **European Charter of Quality Learning Mobility** adopted in 2006³¹ which is now being enriched by the work of the EU-CoE Youth Partnership on Quality indicators and a Handbook³² to support organisers of all mobilities involving young people. Also, as pupil mobility programmes do not only foster subject-related knowledge, but especially enhance transversal skills through non-formal and informal learning, the **Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning**³³ should be seen as a tool to ensure that

²⁶ Ibid, page 11

²⁷ Proposal for a Council recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, COM(2018) 270 final.

²⁸ Ibid, page 13

²⁹ Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and the Council establishing 'Erasmus': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013.

³⁰ This figure relates to pupil mobility through short term group exchanges and individual long term exchanges together. No break-down of the targets per type of school mobility is yet available, however the European Commission aims at increasing individual pupil mobility significantly.

³¹ Council Recommendation (EC) No. 2006/961 of 18 December 2006 on transnational mobility within the Community for education and training purposes: European Quality Charter for Mobility.

³² "Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, Principles for Quality in Learning Mobility in the Youth Field, Documentation", <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/charter-learning-mobility>

³³ Council Recommendation (EC) No. 2012/C 398/01 of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

competences of students are assessed holistically upon return from the exchange programme. Finally, the **Council recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning**³⁴ could be helpful in defining the competences which could be assessed upon return from a school study period abroad.

Scope of the study

This study focuses on the **recognition of studies abroad** conducted within **long-term pupil mobility programmes run by non-profit exchange organisations** with the **main purpose of intercultural learning**, where students are assigned to host families before finding a placement in a school, therefore there is no drafting of learning agreement between sending and hosting school prior departure.

This study does not focus on the procedure that pupils need to follow to have their previous education recognised when moving to a different country for different reasons than an exchange programme (e.g. family relocation). However, in some countries the procedure applied is the same for both target groups³⁵.

The data on which the study is based comes from the **direct experience of the two main non-profit pupil exchange organisations in Europe**, AFS Intercultural Programs sending 4500 students every year, and Youth for Understanding sending 2100 students every year. The two organisations represent 5% of the overall number of pupil exchange programmes³⁶. Although 5% might look like a low percentage, as the sector is highly scattered, this still represents a significant part of the phenomenon. The scale of AFS and YFU organisations in the countries analysed by this study is diverse: from a minimum of 10 exchange students to a maximum of 1200 students a year.

The pupil exchange programmes offered by AFS and YFU organisations involve students who mainly attend general upper secondary education and not vocational education and training (VET). Therefore the study does **not** touch upon recognition systems in the **VET sector**.

The study concerns recognition procedures applied for learning periods spent in a secondary school abroad in any part of the world, whether in the EU or outside. In the case of bilateral agreements between countries, such as the Nordic agreement on Co-operation on Upper Secondary School Education or the French-German pupil exchange programmes, specific recognitions practices are foreseen. This study does not cover the latter cases.

The study is structured in **country overviews**. In each overview there is a reference to the specific secondary school system, which might influence the recognition procedure. For a better insight on school systems in Europe, other sources, such as the online portal Eurydice³⁷, need to be consulted. Each country overview provides an explanation of the recognition procedure for the **10 month exchange** and for the **semester and trimester exchange** (if applicable), from the perspective of the sending country. However, hosting schools also have a

³⁴ Council Recommendation (EC) No. 2018/C 189/01 of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning.

³⁵ See chapter 'Recognition systems', page 4.

³⁶ 6.600 students out of 150.000 exchange students (see page 3)

³⁷ "Eurydice, National Education Systems, Secondary and post-Secondary non-Tertiary Education", https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/general/6-secondary-and-post-secondary-non-tertiary-education_en

role in recognition of school study period abroad, therefore we have dedicated a small chapter to this aspect at the end of the study³⁸.

For each country we provide a series of **policy recommendations** aimed at improving the current legislation or providing suggestions for guidelines and/or legislative framework if there is none. These policy recommendations have been drafted together with the pupil exchange organisation interviewed and they are **tailored to each specific situation** and sometimes suggest at short-term solutions in order to enhance the existing procedure. For almost all countries **the long-term objective** should be recognition based on certificate of attendance³⁹ as it is successfully implemented in Italy and Austria, adapted for each secondary school system, focusing on **assessment of key competences and validation of transversal competences developed through non-formal and informal learning**.

The last study conducted on recognition of school study periods abroad dates back to 2007⁴⁰ and it was conducted by the European Federation for Intercultural Learning as part of the EU pilot action 'Individual Pupil Mobility'⁴¹. The study at the time focused more on legislation existing in Member States rather than on practice. The current study aims at providing an update on the situation of recognition of school study periods abroad as the legislation has changed considerably in the last 10 years. Yet it focuses on the practice of validation procedures and their interaction with pupil mobility programmes in order to provide **concrete examples of implementation** and therefore formulate suggestions for improving the current regulations.

Finally, this study also aims at contributing to the process of drafting the Council recommendation on the automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes learning periods abroad⁴² and the information gathered has been submitted to the European Commission in the framework of the public consultation launched in February 2018 to gather input.

Method

This study is the result of **structured interviews** with representatives of 22 AFS and 5 YFU organisations in Europe⁴³ which took place in the month of January 2018. Each interview followed a set of pre-defined open questions⁴⁴ and involved an interviewer and a respondent. The interviews were conducted via an online video call of approximately one hour. Each video call was recorded, to allow the interviewer to retrieve details ex post.

Terminology

The word 'school study period abroad' is shortened several times by using the words study or learning or academic period abroad. Long-term individual pupil mobility is referred to also as

³⁸ See 'A perspective from hosting', page 49.

³⁹ See chapter 'Recognition systems', page 4.

⁴⁰ European Federation for Intercultural Learning, *Individual Pupil Mobility Pilot Action, Country Profiles, Legislative Framework* (April 2017).

⁴¹ European Federation for Intercultural Learning, *Individual Pupil Mobility Pilot Action – final report*.

⁴² See 'European political context', page 5.

⁴³ See list in 'Acknowledgments', page 1.

⁴⁴ See 'Interview questions' in Appendix, page 58.

pupil exchange and pupil mobility. Student and pupil are used as synonyms, as well as the words validation and recognition, and next year and next grade. The term 'exchange student' stands for pupil enrolled in a mobility programme.

When mentioning the pupil exchange organisations interviewed in each country, these are referred to as AFS or YFU organisations and the name of the country.

COUNTRY OVERVIEWS

Austria

Overview of recognition procedure

In Austria, recognition of school study periods abroad is regulated by the **Austrian law on education issued in 1996**⁴⁵ which states that the certified attendance of minimum 5 months and maximum one year in a foreign school equals successful school attendance in Austria. Therefore, every student who goes abroad for a period from 5 months to a whole school year gets full recognition of the study period abroad and needs to be reintegrated in the school after the period abroad. The recognition procedure is the same, whether the period abroad has been spent in an EU or non-EU country.

It is quite common for Austrian students to spend a year abroad. Usually students go abroad for a full academic year during 6th or 7th grade (third or second last year). Students do not go abroad in 8th grade (last year) because the final exam starts in April. Because of the continuous school reform related to the last years of secondary school (17 and 18 years old) it is becoming more popular to go abroad on the second semester of 7th grade. However, going abroad during 7th grade might be challenging for some students because during this year they need to prepare a scientific paper to present at the final exam, to be handed in by the end of the first semester of 8th grade. It is difficult for pupils to draft this paper and meet this deadline, therefore parents would prefer students to go abroad after they pass the final exam, and take a gap year or go abroad during their university studies.

Before departure students and parents need to discuss with the teachers the possibility of enrolling in an exchange, and teachers are usually not encouraging students with low grades to go on a school year abroad.

The **validation of the academic period abroad is decided by the school** and the student needs to provide to the school a confirmation of attendance. Generally, all students are admitted to the next year. No transcript of grades or list of school subjects of the hosting school is required and the validation of the year abroad means that in the final school report the academic year will result as 'passed' without any grade stated. This recognition procedure without transcript of grades is possible because the grades of the last years of school are not taken into account for the final exam to obtain a secondary school diploma.

For the students going abroad for a winter semester, it is enough for them to pass the first exams of the 2nd semester once back in school in the home country. For the ones who leave for the summer semester it is "easier" as they officially end their school year successfully and start in the autumn the new school year with their classmates.

Students going abroad for shorter periods of time (from several weeks to 5 months) **are facing difficulties for recognition.** They are discouraged by the school principal and teachers to enrol in the exchange and once back, teachers require that the students take exams for each subject missed or get a good grade at the next exams foreseen (usually just after the Christmas break).

⁴⁵ Government of the Republic of Austria, IdF BGB 1996/797, paragraph 33.

This happens because students need to get official grades at the end of the 1st semester, although these do not count for the final exam.

Over the years, this law has been actively promoted by the Ministry of Education and Culture by sending a letter to the schools underlining the benefits of exchange programmes and recognising how these contribute to international political and democratic education⁴⁶. When the law was issued, school principals were reluctant. After successful implementation in the past 20 years, school heads are now in favour of the law and they can attest how **it helps school to open up and being internationally oriented**. They also appreciate that recognition of learning abroad means a **low administrative burden** on the schools.

Policy recommendations

Although the recognition of school study periods abroad in Austria should be taken as a **best practice**, some aspects of implementation can still be improved by:

- ensuring that also exchanges between several weeks and 5 months are recognised,
- ensuring that the school reforms will still allow students to spend an academic year abroad,
- encouraging schools to support also less performing students to enrol in a long-term mobility during upper secondary school.

Belgium Flemish speaking community

Overview of recognition procedure

In the Flemish speaking part of Belgium there is **no recognition** of school study periods abroad.

Usually students would go abroad on the last year of secondary school (6th grade).

Before enrolling in a pupil exchange programme, students need to get the permission of their school to go abroad if they want to enrol back in the same school when they come back. Upon return in August, they can take an **exam or fulfil assignments** provided by the school (it depends from school to school) which allows them to enter the next school year. This is the same procedure applied for students who do not pass the school year in June.

The **school board** composed by teachers **gives advice** on whether the student can go abroad, based on school results and how they know the student. Teachers do not encourage students with lower grades to undertake this experience, moreover they prefer to send students to countries where German or French is the language of teaching. For example, AFS Belgium Flanders has a 6.7% drop out rate because of the school advising against the student going abroad.

All the students going abroad with AFS Belgium Flanders are requested to submit to AFS a **school contract** where it is stated that the student will be re-admitted in the same school, otherwise upon return they might need to look for another school and AFS does not want to put in danger the academic career of the students. Applications which lack the school contract are not accepted.

⁴⁶ Roberto Ruffino, *Mobility of Secondary School Pupils and Recognition of Study Periods Spent Abroad-A Survey*, (EFIL,2004), page 31.

Once the contract between the student and the school has been made before departure, students are registered in the school in the home country while they are abroad. However every school receives funding for the following year on the basis of the number of students present on 1st February, and since the students enrolled on an exchange are not present in the sending school while being abroad, the school can lose its funding.

Students who receive the permission from their school to go abroad can also access an online learning platform while being on exchange, where teachers upload materials of classes and information, so they can stay up to date. This is particularly important for those students who, upon return, want to take the final year exam/assignment in August. Since most of the students go abroad during the last year of secondary school, they might decide to take the exam for the secondary school diploma upon return.

Students going abroad for shorter periods of time are usually those in 4th and 5th grade: they are enrolled in the school year and they reintegrate back in class. Semester exchange students are admitted back in their class and they need to pass the final exam. Trimester exchange students going abroad from September to November need to take some exams just before Christmas and then they need to pass the exam at the end of the school year.

Going abroad during secondary school is still seen as an exception by pupils and families because it entails the risk of not graduating in time. Pupils rather think to go abroad during their university studies.

Policy recommendations

As there is no recognition of school study periods abroad, but only a procedure to allow students who take a gap year to re-enter school, policy reform would be encouraged. The **recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁴⁷ can be taken as example. While this might not be possible right away, all students should at least get partial recognition of subjects based on a transcript of grades, and be supported by teachers in taking the additional exam once back, to be admitted to the next class.

Moreover:

- all students, despite their grades, should be encouraged to take part in a long-term mobility experience,
- the government should ensure that the funding provided to schools for the following year is calculated taking into account also the number of exchange students that will come back after the period abroad,
- it should be ensured that teachers do not favour some countries over others as destination of the long-term exchange.

⁴⁷ See chapter 'Recognition systems', page 4

Belgium French speaking community

Overview of recognition procedure

In the French speaking community of Belgium, recognition of study periods abroad is regulated by a **law issued in 2014**⁴⁸ which foresees the validation of the learning period abroad so long as it fits into the framework of the '**Expedis programme**'. The law is an evolution of a law already in existence since 2003. The recognition procedure is the same, whether the period abroad has been spent in an EU or non-EU country.

The Expedis programme concerns:

- stays **between one month and a full academic year abroad**, that take place during the Belgian academic year, between 1st September and 30th June.
- students who attend the **3rd, 4th, 5th or 6th year of secondary school** during the programme. A study period in the 6th year is always limited to 3 months maximum and must end before the 30th of March as this is the last school year.

For study periods up to 3 months, students can choose to organise their stay by themselves or with an accredited exchange organisation. For study periods above 3 months, they need to enrol in an exchange programme run by an accredited coordination organisation (like AFS). Only in this case, they are allowed to leave for a full academic year.

The main conditions of the Expedis programme are:

- The students must attend full time courses of the **same level** of study they would attend in French speaking Belgium. The equivalence is determined by the Service des Equivalences of the Federation Wallonie Bruxelles (service of equivalence of studies of the Federation Wallonie Bruxelles).
- The **same subjects** must be studied in the sending and hosting country.
- The student's weekly schedule must have a minimum of 1400 minutes (23 to 24 hours) of class time.
- The student must attend school regularly. Any day of absence must be duly justified (e.g. a doctor's note)

At least 4 months before departure the student must ask permission to study abroad by submitting an official document to the sending school. The school then provides written permission or refusal. Sending schools may refuse permission to recognise the study period abroad when they believe it will be hard for the student to follow successfully the subjects upon return. In addition, schools may limit the number of students going abroad because they are afraid of the burden of following up on them upon return.

If the request is approved, the student, the parents, the coordinating organisation (if applicable), and the sending school sign an **educational agreement**, which is mandatory for stays over 3 months, but is recommended for shorter periods as well. The education agreement includes:

⁴⁸ Ministère de l'Éducation de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Circulaire 5039, 24 October 2014, organisation des séjours scolaires individuels dans le cadre du programme EXPEDIS, and "Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Enseignement.be, Mobilités scolaires – séjours scolaires individuels – Expedis – Expérience éducative d'immersion scolaire", <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=26399>

- the academic courses that students have to study abroad. In cases where some courses are not available in the hosting school, they will study by themselves with the help of sending school;
- how they will be assessed by the sending school after the programme;
- how the sending school plans to support the student reintegration.

Non-academic learning goals, such as intercultural learning and other transversal skills, are not included in this agreement.

After return in order to recognise the study period, the sending school needs to verify that the main conditions of the studies were met:

- Regular school attendance of the student which is certified by the attendance certificate filled in by the host school with days of presence and absence of the student. The non-academic activities which are part of the exchange programme are considered as absence from school and cannot be included. These include the days of acclimatisation in the host family at the start of the programme and non-formal education activities - including residential camps over several days - organised by the accredited organisation throughout the whole stay abroad to support the students in their intercultural learning and integration in the host country.
- Same level of study, same orientation of studies (similar courses) and minimum time of classes certified by the weekly schedule filled in by hosting school.
- Transcript of grades, copies of tests or exams, copy of the curriculum of courses for the students that stay abroad for more than 3 months.

The school assesses only academic knowledge. If one of the criteria is not met, the recognition must be refused.

In case of refusal, if the student left for a period up to 3 months, the sending school needs to apply for a special exception, so that the student can continue the academic year normally. If the stay was longer than 3 months and recognition is denied, the student has to repeat the academic year. To avoid this, most of the time, exchange students who are back in Belgium before the final year exams will take them as the other Belgian students of their class. If they are back after the exams and the school is not sure the student has gained all the necessary skills/knowledge to be admitted to the next grade, the school may organise an individual exam session in late August/early September.

Finally, the *Direction Générale de l'Enseignement Obligatoire* (Directorate General of compulsory schooling) can verify that the whole procedure was respected. They can request from the sending school the whole file with all documents that prove that all the conditions for recognition were met.

In practice, it is **nearly impossible to meet all these conditions** since the hosting country has usually a different educational system. In the last years, no full academic year abroad has been recognised for any student going on exchange with the AFS organisation operating in the French-speaking part of Belgium, which is the major sender in the region of Wallonia and Brussels. Only semester and trimester students have been able to be reintegrated in the same grade and class as their peers, however not because their studies abroad get recognised, rather because they study the subjects they have missed while abroad and pass the exams at the end

of the school year. Many **students** actually **decide not to participate in mobility programmes** because they know it will not be recognised since the educational systems abroad are too different from the Belgian one.

It is uncommon for students to go abroad during upper secondary school and they rather wait until after the secondary school diploma and repeat abroad the last year of school because they do not want to interrupt their studies. This is an issue for finding hosting schools because in many countries students that have already obtained a secondary school diploma or are 18+ are not authorised to be hosted within the framework of an exchange programme. If they were sure to have their studies abroad recognised, they would probably leave more easily before graduation.

Policy recommendations

Although the French speaking community of Belgium has a clear law on the recognition of school study periods abroad during upper secondary school, the regulation is far from ideal in promoting mobility of pupils and opening up their minds to diverse realities, including a different school system. The recognition system does not reflect the reality of pupil exchanges, namely the fact that most of the exchange programmes do not foresee to place students in the exact type of school as the sending one, and therefore there are not the conditions to draft a learning agreement based on correspondence of subjects. Moreover, the rigid requirements for recognition put a burden on the student, on the accredited exchange organisation, and especially on the schools: the hosting school needs to provide an enormous quantity of documents, and the sending school needs to check them. **Implementation shows that pupils are discouraged from using the Expedis programme**, since de facto no full academic year abroad is recognised.

A reformed Expedis programme should move towards a **recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁴⁹:

- foresee more flexible criteria related to the hours of lesson and the content of courses, shifting to a learning agreement based on competences and transversal skills (as it is done in Italy⁵⁰), showing an appreciation for different school systems,
- not consider as days of absence from school the days spent by the students in non-formal education activities organised by the accredited exchange organisation as a part of the exchange programme.

In the transition to a recognition system which does not foresee a transcript of grades, a first step towards improvement would be to allow for partial recognition and additional exams for subjects that were not followed abroad.

⁴⁹ See chapter 'Recognition systems', page 4

⁵⁰ See country overview of Italy, page 28

Bulgaria

Overview of recognition procedure

In Bulgaria, recognition of learning periods abroad within upper secondary school is regulated by a **national legislation issued in 2016**⁵¹. The recognition procedure is the same, whether the period abroad has been spent in an EU or non-EU country.

Students usually go on exchange when they are 16 years old. Upon return from the exchange they have to provide a **transcript of academic** results with all subjects taken during the study period abroad. This official transcript has to be submitted to the competent Regional Inspectorate of Education, according to the residence of the student in Bulgaria. The Regional Inspectorate is responsible for making a decision regarding the recognition of the study period abroad and decides whether the student needs to pass additional exams within the school year. In general, Bulgarian students who go through the recognition procedure need to pass at least two exams (Bulgarian literature and Geography).

Taking additional exams represents an obstacle for many students and has a negative impact on their motivation to study abroad.

Policy recommendations

The current legislation allows for recognition of school study periods abroad in most cases, but with additional exams. It would be recommended to provide **recognition of the academic period abroad without additional exams**, namely on the basis of certificate of attendance⁵².

Croatia

Overview of recognition procedure

In Croatia, recognition of study periods is possible for learning periods abroad spent in any country (EU or non-EU) and is **decided by the sending school**. The Ministry of Education recognises the pupil exchange programme and provides the possibility of leaving the school for one academic year, however schools are autonomous and decide whether to give permission to the student to leave, and recognition is under the responsibility of the school council and the teachers' board.

Usually students go on exchange during the 4th year of upper secondary school (second last year), and they come back for the final year. However, in general it is not common for Croatian students to go one year abroad during secondary school; families and teachers prefer them to finish their studies in Croatia and often believe students are not yet ready for such an experience during secondary school.

If a student wishes to go abroad, the parents and a representative of the pupil exchange organisation meet the school principal, who needs to grant permission to the student to go abroad and keeps the place in the school for the student when s/he will come back. There is no

⁵¹ Ministry of Education of Bulgaria, ordinance 11, 1 September 2016, assessing the learning outcomes of the students,

⁵² see 'Recognition system', page 4

learning agreement needed, however when the student goes abroad s/he needs to try to attend a similar type of school.

Upon return, the school needs to receive from the student a **certificate of attendance** issued by the hosting school, **the transcript of grades** from the school abroad translated into Croatian by an official translator and with the apostille of the hosting country. The school council and the teachers' board evaluate these documents and decide which **additional exams** the student needs to take to be admitted to the next year. Usually they need to take the exams for the subjects they were not able to study abroad, for example Croatian language. The upper secondary school in Croatia foresees a high number of subjects (15-17) therefore students need to take a number of additional exams to have their academic year abroad validated. If the documents are correct, the school period abroad is validated easily.

All students that have been abroad with AFS Croatia so far have received recognition of their study period abroad; however the exams once back home are perceived by them as a huge challenge and stress.

Students going abroad for three or six months are reintegrated back in their class and need to pass the exams at the end of the semester or at the end of the school year.

Policy recommendations

Schools allow for recognition of school study periods abroad in most cases, but with additional exams which are decided by the sending school. It would be easier for the schools to adopt a **recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁵³. In the process of transition to a new recognition system, in order to improve the current procedure based on transcript of grades, it would be important to:

- provide guidelines to schools on how to recognise study periods abroad so that all students receive recognition of the subjects followed abroad, and need to take additional exams only for the subjects that are really needed.
- ensure that all school principals and teachers are committed to recognise study abroad and organise extra exams for students over the summer on the subjects needed.

Czech Republic

Overview of recognition procedure

In the Czech Republic there is **no recognition** of school study periods abroad.

Students go on a school year abroad in 11th grade or 12th grade (third and second last year of *gymnasium*-secondary general school). If they go on exchange for a full academic year, when they come back they can study to pass an exam and enter directly in the next grade. This is done by approximately 50% of the students enrolling in a pupil exchange programme.

When students go abroad and decide to take the exam once back, they agree with the sending schools on what homework they will need to do and which exams to take online. It is the students' responsibility to arrange this **individual study plan** based on the curriculum of their

⁵³ see 'Recognition system', page 4

grade, however this is not an official learning agreement but only an informal contract. From the experience of AFS Czech Republic, very few schools (2-3) ask to the exchange students a transcript of grades to grant partial recognition of subjects.

School principals are extremely influential in this process being the ones deciding whether the students are allowed to take this exam or not. Most school principals are flexible but they can still forbid students to take the exam and therefore the students need to repeat the academic year. The procedure for taking this exam can change every year and **there are no guidelines** provided by the Ministry of Education.

When the students spend abroad a period between 3 and 6 months, they agree with the teachers on an individual study plan to fulfil during the exchange programme or upon return, and once back from the exchange, they are reintegrated in their class and need to take some exams.

Policy recommendations

Since there is no procedure for the recognition of the school study period abroad, **legislation would be recommended**. Given the school autonomy and the fact that schools depend on the regional authorities, school principals would still play an important role in the validation of the period abroad, however **common guidelines should be provided by the Ministry of Education** to ensure that all students would access the same procedures. It would be recommended to opt for a recognition system based on certificate of attendance⁵⁴. In a transition phase, it would be suggested to at least allow all students to take the exams to access the next grade upon return and allow for partial recognition of the subjects studied abroad, according to a transcript of grades.

Denmark

Overview of recognition procedure

In Denmark there is **no recognition** of school study periods abroad, except for the exchanges in the framework of the Nordic agreement on pupil exchanges⁵⁵. Upon return from the exchange, the students need to repeat the academic year and there is no partial recognition of any subjects they have taken abroad.

Students go on a study period abroad taking a **gap year** between elementary and secondary school, before entering in 10th grade, namely when they are 16 years old. It is common practice in Denmark to take this gap year and 50% of the students do it. Some students go on exchange, some others attend a boarding school where they follow subjects related to a specific interest they have. In Denmark it is socially accepted to take a gap year in any moment of life. Some students go on exchange in 11th grade and the school would keep the spot for them so that they can repeat the year once back. However, the government is encouraging students to go through their education fast, and this impacts pupil mobility programmes.

⁵⁴ see 'Recognition system', page 4

⁵⁵ Nordic Agreement on Co-operation on Upper Secondary School Education, 3 November 2004.

Although there is no recognition of the academic year abroad, teachers do recognise and appreciate the transversal skills that students develop during the exchange experience.

Students who go abroad for a trimester could be admitted back in school but teachers advise against this and students see it as difficult to come back and study the lessons they have missed while abroad, and at the same time keep following the programme with their peers.

Policy recommendations

The situation in Denmark is very peculiar as the gap year at 16 year old is socially accepted, therefore **recognition of the academic year abroad would not necessarily be needed** as the lack of recognition is not an obstacle for pupil mobility. However, since recognition works in other countries it could be investigated how it could work in the Danish context. For example it would be recommended to **allow students who study abroad for periods between 3 and 6 months to be reintegrated in their class** and supported and make up for the lessons they have missed, as it happens successfully in the majority of the other countries in Europe.

Moreover, should the Danish government start pushing students not to take a gap year during their initial education and rather finish their studies as soon as possible, then it would be very important to have a law on recognition of study periods abroad in place. In fact young people need to be provided with the possibility for this transformative and enriching learning opportunity, either through a gap year, or through recognition of studies. Provided that the situation remains the same and the gap year continues to be socially accepted, it would still be important to ensure that the experience abroad of the students is valued in their CV and academic career by giving **visibility to all the competences gained**, through formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Estonia

Overview of recognition procedure

In Estonia there is **no recognition** of school study periods abroad.

Students usually go on exchange when they are 17 years old and upon return they can enter the next school grade only if they **take and pass all exams foreseen in the Estonian curriculum** and which they did not take when they were abroad. This is very challenging for students, because it implies taking all exams during the summer period, once back from the exchange. Only 1 or 2 students per year, the best performing ones, decide to go through this procedure in order to be accepted to the next grade and not repeat the year.

The lack of recognition of school study periods abroad is perceived as an **obstacle** for young people willing to enrol in a pupil mobility programme. For example, over a period of 2 years (June 2016 - June 2018) YFU Estonia has lost $\frac{3}{4}$ of applicants in the process going from the initial application to the signature of the contracts and for 130 of them (50%) the motivation for withdrawal was the lack of recognition of the study period abroad.

In Estonia pupils have a great interest in being mobile and more students would go abroad if there was a procedure in place for recognition.

Policy recommendations

Since there is no procedure for the recognition of school study periods abroad, a legislation introducing a **recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁵⁶, would be recommend.

Finland

Overview of recognition procedure

In Finland there is **no recognition** of school study periods abroad, except for the exchanges in the framework of the Nordic agreement on pupil exchanges⁵⁷.

Usually students go abroad for a full academic year during 11th grade, namely during the 2nd year of upper secondary school. 12th grade is the last year, the final exams start in February and the exam for entering university is in May/June. The education system in Finland is structured in 5 periods in an academic year and at the end of each period the students need to take exams for the subjects they followed during the period. The grades that students get for each subject or at the end of the year do not count for the final exam. At the moment of writing a school reform is under discussion and the system might change.

The student needs to inform the school and the study counsellor about the intention to go abroad, and the school keeps a spot for the student upon return, however while the student is away the school will not receive funds for that student.

Upon return from the exchange, the students can get some subjects recognised (foreign languages, maths) thanks to a statement or a transcript of grades from the hosting school, but they **need to repeat the academic year**. The decision on the subjects to validate, depends on the study counsellor who supports the student in the choices of the academic path.

When students decide to go on a year abroad, they know they will lose a year because there has never been any recognition of studies abroad within secondary school. Since there is recognition for university studies abroad in the framework of Erasmus, **students prefer to wait and spend a period abroad during their higher education**. They would choose short programmes (e.g. over summer) during the secondary school period in order to avoid the problem of lack of recognition.

Students do not go abroad for a trimester exchange (usually from beginning of September to beginning of December) because they would come back to school just before the end of the second period (out of 5) and therefore lose two set of exams. It would not be possible for them to make up for the lessons and exams they lost and they would lose a full academic year.

Policy recommendations

In Finland the educational system makes recognition of school study periods abroad harder than in other countries. However a solution could be **recognition based on certificate of attendance**⁵⁸ **and a system of learning agreements**. After the period of study abroad, students could have the series of subjects taken in the hosting school validated as an academic year. Given that the final exam for obtaining a secondary school diploma in Finland does not take

⁵⁶ see 'Recognition system', page 4

⁵⁷ Nordic Agreement on Co-operation on Upper Secondary School Education, 3 November 2004

⁵⁸ see 'Recognition system', page 4

into account the grades taken on each subject over the years, it would be fine if students could get the year validated, without grades, on the basis of a document of school attendance and a list of subjects.

Moreover, a school reform could allow students to take exams on subjects in a more flexible way than 5 times a year. In this way students who go abroad for a trimester would be able to re-enter school and not lose the academic year.

Moreover, since school counsellors play an important role in defining the choices of students for their academic path, it would be important to train them on the functioning of pupil mobility programmes and the impact they have on the development of competences of students. Teachers should also be provided with a flexible framework they can refer to for validating subjects of students upon return.

France

Overview of recognition procedure

In France, recognition of study periods abroad is regulated by a **circulaire issued in June 2016**⁵⁹ which foresees that there can be recognition only if there is a special partnership between the sending and the hosting school and a learning agreement. Moreover, France recognises a year abroad in Germany in 10th or 11th grade for all French pupils in the 1st year of upper secondary school (10th grade) provided this year is also recognised by the German host institution⁶⁰. Recognition is managed by the sending school.

Usually students go abroad for a full academic year during 11th or 12th grade. However, during 11th and 12th grade they need to take exams for the *baccalauréat*, the final exam of upper secondary school. The fact that students need to take these exams during the two last years of school, is the main reason for repeating the year once back from a study period abroad. Some students go on exchange in 10th grade, or take a gap year between lower secondary and upper secondary school, but this is rare.

When going abroad to study the student needs to communicate the decision to the head of school, who then asks to the *inspecteurs d'académie-directeurs académiques des services de l'éducation nationale - IA-Dasen* (the persons in charge of the school curriculum at regional level) to keep a spot for the student in the school for the next academic year.

In case students go abroad within a **special partnership agreement** between sending and hosting schools, when they come back they can be enrolled in the next year if they have respected the school agreement and they provide 1) a **transcript of records** and 2) an **overall evaluation** from the school abroad. This procedure applies for periods abroad within the EU or beyond.

However, the programmes offered by most pupil exchange organisations are not based on a school-to-school agreement, but on a network of host families in different countries, where

⁵⁹ Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, Circulaire 2016-091, 15 June 2016, Ouverture européenne et internationale des établissements du second degré, Mobilité des élèves de collège et de lycée en Europe et dans le monde.

⁶⁰ Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, Note de service 2006-184, 21 November 2006, Coopération Franco-Allemande, Validation de l'année de seconde passée dans un établissement scolaire allemand en Allemagne

students are placed and then enrolled in a school nearby. Therefore very **few of the mobile pupils can access this recognition procedure.**

When there is no special agreement between sending and hosting school, if students want to be admitted into the next grade, they **need to take an exam** in the sending school on contents which are agreed between the school and the IA-Dasen. Much depends on the willingness of the school principal to organise this exam, since the exam is administered and validated by the head of the school. Many families and students do not know about this possibility, which is available since 1981 and is applied to any student who wants to be re-admitted in the public school system. However, this procedure is not a validation of the year abroad.

Generally, no student going abroad with the major pupil exchange organisation in France, AFS Vivre Sans Frontière, go through the procedure set in the *circulaire* of 2016, and very few decide to embark in the exam organised by IA- Dasen (4 out of 1200 in the last three years), namely the highly performing students who are supported in this process by their family and by the school.

Students going abroad for shorter periods of time are enrolled in the school year and they are usually reintegrated back in class upon return. For trimester exchanges there is a special agreement with the head of school. For semester exchanges, it depends on each school and there are agreements done case by case. Some semester exchange students prefer to repeat the year, while some go directly to next grade because they keep in touch with the sending school while being abroad and follow the courses and access the materials.

A **'certificate of international experience'** is received by all students spending a school period abroad even if they do not have a learning agreement between sending and hosting schools, and can be issued also by a pupil exchange organisation. Overall, it is very much appreciated and is useful to value their experience. It is often added to the school report issued by the upper secondary schools and students add it to their applications to universities.

It is not common for French students to go on a study period abroad during secondary school because they rather wait to have such an experience when they are at university since the academic period abroad is recognised in that framework. In fact, repeating a class is considered a shame in France. Therefore the lack of recognition is the main reason for students not to enrol in a pupil exchange programme; when they do enrol, they are either already aware that they will lose the year, or this is the first thing they enquire about at the information meetings and their main concern. This is also why some students choose the trimester exchange programme rather than the 10-month exchange programme.

Policy recommendations

Although in France a law on recognition of school study periods abroad has been recently adopted, it is quite restrictive and does not reflect the reality of pupil exchanges, namely the fact that most of the exchange programmes do not foresee to place students in the exact type of school as the sending one, and therefore there are not the conditions to draft a learning agreement based on correspondence of subjects. Therefore a change of the current legislation, towards **recognition based on certificate of attendance**⁶¹ would be recommended. Moreover, it would be useful if the school administration allowed exchange students to **take the exams**

⁶¹ See 'Recognition systems' page 4

for the **baccalauréat** foreseen in 11th grade and 12th grade upon the return of the exchange student, namely **in September**.

Germany

Overview of recognition procedure

Recognition of study periods is regulated by each federal state of Germany (16) with a **different procedure**, however the procedure does not differ whether the period abroad is spent within the EU or beyond. For more information on the legislation of each federal state, the umbrella organisation of non-profit pupil exchange organisations in Germany, AJA, provides an overview⁶².

The **Kultus Minister Konferenz** (the standing conference of Ministers of Cultural Affairs of the federal states of Germany) **gives indications to the federal states**, and on this topic it invites them to promote the period of studies abroad during upper secondary school and provides recommendations on how to proceed for their academic recognition.

A possibility of recognition exists in all federal states, upon the request of the students, if the academic year abroad is done in 10th grade (15-16 year olds) which is the last year of the 'introductory period' of secondary school. The last two years of secondary school are meant for 'qualification for the final diploma' and the grades collected in these years count for the *Abitur* (final exam). These last years can either be 11th and 12th grade or 12th and 13th grade depending on whether students are enrolled in a *Gymnasium* (general secondary school) lasting 8 or 9 years, so-called G8 and G9. For this reason, only in 5 federal states students can get recognition if they spend a semester abroad during the qualification period. In terms of documents required for the recognition of the year abroad during 10th grade, it varies between federal states. Students need to talk with their school, which will then inform them about the procedure to follow.

In general students need to **show that they attended** the school abroad for one year and **demonstrate that they can keep up with the school work** when they are admitted to the next grade. Some federal states require students to pass an exam for the subjects that are assessed in the *Abitur*.

Students willing to spend **periods abroad between 3 and 6 months** can do it **only during 10th grade**, namely before the qualification period, unless students come from one of the five federal states where they can stay abroad for up to a semester in 11th grade.

Most pupils that decide to study abroad enrol in an exchange programme after 10th grade because most teachers recommend an exchange after the introductory period, therefore very few access the recognition procedure. Students tend not to apply if the year abroad is not recognised and when asking for information about exchange programmes, their first questions are about recognition. Students start feeling more pressure about finishing school and entering university, and therefore they **prefer to spend a period abroad during their higher education** since it is recognised. More students would participate in a pupil exchange programme if they

⁶² "Arbeitskreis gemeinnütziger Jugendaustausch gGmbH, AJA-Information flyer zu den Richtlinien der Bundesländer für die Anerkennung eines Auslandsschuljahrs bei 12-jährigem Abitur", <http://aja-org.de/downloadcenter/>

had the opportunity for recognition during the so-called qualification period (two last years of secondary school).

Most schools do not actively promote pupil mobility and believe this is a personal decision of the students and the family. Few schools promote mobility and have guidelines and procedures to support the exchange students.

Policy recommendations

In Germany there is a procedure for recognition of school study period abroad in all the federal states, however the fact that it is possible only for 10th grade conflicts with the reality of pupil exchange programmes. In fact most of the students decide to go on a study period abroad when they are 16-17 years old, and not before. Therefore **recognition should be possible also if the exchange takes place during 11th grade**. As the subjects studies in the 11th grade count for the final exam, recognition could be arranged with a **learning agreement** and therefore allow for partial recognition and additional exams for key subjects that were not followed abroad.

Moreover, federal states should ensure that recognition for 10th grade abroad is always granted. In fact, though theoretically recognition is possible, in many cases it is complicated because a school attendance certificate is not enough and other documents such as transcript of grades need to be provided. In this case the issue of matching subjects and school performance arise, and are an obstacle for recognition. Therefore, it is suggested that **all federal states opt of a recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁶³

Hungary

Overview of recognition procedure

There is **no recognition** of study periods abroad in Hungary.

Students usually go abroad in 2nd year of upper secondary school, when they are 16 years old. When going on exchange need to disenrol from school and then enrol again once back, but they are likely to find a spot in the same school upon return.

Students coming back from the year abroad can study over the summer and take the exams organised by the school, and therefore pass the year and be entitled to be admitted to the next year. This is done by approximately 30% of the exchange students. **Most of the students take a gap year.**

The students who do not take the gap year and take the exams usually decide about it during the hosting period. In fact they need to communicate to the sending school three months in advance if they want to take a **reparatory exam** at the end of July-August. If they decide to take the exams, then they will need to come back a few weeks before the scheduled end of the exchange programme, namely at the beginning of July. They study the content of the school curriculum of the year they have been abroad and take the exams about each subject. The students who go through this procedure are the ones who go abroad on the 1st and 2nd year of upper secondary school. Students going abroad on the 3rd and 4th year of upper secondary

⁶³ See 'Recognition systems' page 4

school do not choose to take the exams upon return since the grades of the exams at the end of these two years count for the final exam to obtain the secondary school diploma, and since they have a short time to prepare they do not want to risk getting a low mark.

When students go abroad for a shorter period of time, they are reintegrated in their class.

Trimester exchange students come back just before Christmas break and then discuss with their teacher what extra tests they need to take. In fact for each subject the student needs to get three different grades in each semester, therefore before January for the winter semester. The decision on the tests to take very much depends on individual cases and school by school.

When students go abroad for a **semester** it is usually the spring semester (January-June). In this case they take an exam either before or after the period abroad: they can either 1) study the content of the spring semester while attending the winter semester in Hungary and take an exam on both before departure, 2) or take a reparatory exam for the spring semester once back. In case they are away for the winter semester they take an exam on the subjects of the missed semester when they are back at the end of January.

Families take for granted that the year abroad is a gap year, but at the same time they are worried about the consequences that losing a year of school will have for their children. Schools are not familiar with long-term pupil mobility and might discourage it and rather suggest enrolling in the Erasmus programme while at university.

Policy recommendations

As in Hungary there is no recognition of school study periods abroad, a legislation introducing a **recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁶⁴, would be recommend. This system could be successfully implemented for the first and second year of upper secondary school. Since the grades of some subjects in 3th and 4th grade of upper secondary school count for the final qualification exam, the possibility of taking **reparation exams in September** only for these specific subjects could be foreseen.

Iceland

Overview of recognition procedure

There is **no procedure for recognition** of school study periods abroad in Iceland, except for the exchanges in the framework of the Nordic agreement on pupil exchanges⁶⁵.

Usually students go on exchange during the 2nd year of upper secondary school, when they are 17 years old. The secondary school system is based on credits and each subject has a number of credits. There are different types of upper secondary schools: those where the curriculum is composed by pre-defined subjects, and those where students can choose the subjects they will follow.

From the knowledge of AFS á Íslandi which is the only non-profit pupil exchange organisation in the country, the 10-month exchange programme has never been fully recognised by any school. However **some schools recognise single subjects** taken during the year abroad on the

⁶⁴ see 'Recognition system', page 4

⁶⁵ Nordic Agreement on Co-operation on Upper Secondary School Education, 3 November 2004.

basis of a **transcript of grades** from the host school, and on the basis of an **agreement between the student and the school**. The latter is not a learning agreement, but the result of a negotiation between the student and the school, of which the student is responsible.

Usually the language of the host country is recognised as third language and students take a test upon return. Some schools also recognise subjects taken abroad, especially those related to soft skills (e.g. communication class). If students attend a school where they can choose their classes, they have more chances to get subjects recognised for the total of the credits of one semester out of two. Very seldom and very exceptionally students can do separate exams and enter the next grade once back from the exchange, and students need to negotiate this arrangement with their school.

Recognition for trimester exchange is easier, and usually students can receive it on the basis of a negotiation between the student and the school and the information that the student provides about the school and subjects attended abroad.

Lack of recognition is not a main reason for not enrolling in a long-term study abroad experience, even if students check with their schools before applying for the exchange programme. However, since the school systems recently changed from 4 to 3 years of secondary school, students want to finish secondary school as soon as possible and rather take a gap year afterwards. Therefore trimester exchange programmes are becoming more popular as they allow for not repeating the year and not interrupting studies between cycles of education with a gap year.

Policy recommendations

As in Iceland there is no practice of recognition of school study periods abroad, adopting a **recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁶⁶ would be recommended.

In case this would not be possible, the Ministry of Education could provide **guidelines to schools for recognition of credits and subjects**, in order for students to be able to access the same recognition procedures, despite the fact they attend different schools.

Ireland

Overview of recognition procedure

In Ireland, there is **no recognition** system for secondary school study abroad periods. There are no clear Department of Education guidelines or policy on studying abroad at secondary school level. However, the Department of Education has a 2017-2026 strategy for Foreign Languages in Education, which describes diversity and provision of foreign language learning opportunities.

Each secondary **school can decide their own policy** on student study abroad experiences. The most common period to study abroad is **Transition Year (TY)**, 15-16 years of age, between the junior and senior state examination cycles. Transition year is an optional year for students and schools. It is the most flexible period to explore wider educational options, subjects and non-

⁶⁶ see 'Recognition system', page 4

formal learning experiences. If a school chooses to run a Transition Year programme, they can decide the class size and scope of their programme. There may be competition for limited places. Where a school has a study abroad policy, they can decide their own requirements regarding duration, required subjects, school reports, examinations etc.

Generally, there is no strong tradition in schools or families of long-term (3 months +) secondary school study abroad experiences. Shorter language courses (2 - 4 weeks) appear more popular. These are often during the summer months.

Policy recommendations

Although in Ireland there is no formal recognition of school study periods abroad, students have the possibility to study abroad during the 4th year of secondary school, namely the optional Transition Year.

As part of Irish government's Foreign Language in Education Strategy, **secondary school abroad periods** could be actively **promoted in schools during the Transition Year** in the provision of language learning opportunities and life-long learning.

Regarding the possibility of spending a period abroad during the senior cycle of secondary school since this is not common practice currently, the Irish government could look into recognition of study periods abroad also during this last senior cycle, taking inspiration from successful practices in other countries.

Italy

Overview of recognition procedure

Recognition of school study periods abroad in Italy has been regulated since 1925 by a law created for children of Italian citizens who worked in the Italian colonies at the time of the wars. The 1925 article of law related to mobility was included in the Consolidation Act of the current legislative provisions on education in 1994, and further clarified in 1997⁶⁷. Following the 2000's law on school's autonomy which provided more and more responsibility to school heads, the Ministry issued a clarification in 2013⁶⁸. The current legislation foresees a **recognition system based on certificate of attendance** which **values transversal competences** developed through the mobility programme. In fact, according to the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education in 2013 'a correct learning plan - for the exchange student - should put the pupil at the centre and therefore consider the development of knowledge related to subjects, but above all the development of new competences, transversal skills and new attitudes'⁶⁹.

The recognition system has always applied in the same way whether the period abroad was spent in an EU or non-EU country.

⁶⁷ Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, Circolare ministeriale 181, 17 March 1997, Mobilità studentesca internazionale.

⁶⁸ Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, Nota 843/10, 10 April 2013, Linee di indirizzo sulla mobilità studentesca internazionale individuale.

⁶⁹ Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, Nota 843/10, 10 April 2013, Linee di indirizzo sulla mobilità studentesca internazionale individuale, page 4

As in Italy the recent school reform foresees a mandatory internship during upper secondary school, the Ministry of Education, in order to keep promoting pupil mobility and recognising the transversal skills developed through such exchange programmes, has issued a document explaining that the period of study abroad counts as the mandatory internship⁷⁰.

In Italy the upper secondary school is a 5 year cycle, and usually students go abroad for a full academic year during the 4th year, and some during the 3rd year. Students going on exchange do not want to spend abroad the last year of secondary school as they prefer to obtain the *Maturità* (upper secondary school diploma) in Italy.

Before the departure of the student, teachers are invited to define an **essential study path** focused on the **basic contents necessary for the year following the return**, without asking the student for the full range of topics covered by the Italian school curriculum during his/her absence for the study experience abroad. The learning plan should ensure that the student will be easily reintegrated once back, and at the same time allow for the student to live the experience abroad in full immersion in the foreign school⁷¹.

The regulation encourages schools to organise reparation exams in the summer for the students who did not pass some subjects at the end of the school year, in order to allow them to start their exchange experience. This shows a willingness to provide the opportunity for this meaningful experience of high education value also to the less performing students.

The validation of the academic period abroad is decided by the council of the teachers of the student, on the basis of the **documentation released by the hosting school** stating that the exchange student **completed the school year abroad**. If a transcript of grades is available, this should be provided. Moreover, upon return teachers are asked to proceed to an interview with the student for a 'global assessment of the competences gained while abroad, focusing on the strongest learning points'. Some teachers ask for the curriculum of the subjects studied abroad and some schools still ask students to pass exams for some specific subjects, although this is not required by the legislation.

Some schools however do not plan the assessment and the re-adjustment phase before departure and this causes stress to the students who find themselves in the position of catching up without any educational plan. Generally, all students are admitted to the next year and manage to follow the curriculum together with their peers. For example, among the 1200 students sent by Intercultura (AFS Italy) every year on long-term exchanges, only 2 or 3 may have issues with the recognition of the study period abroad.

For students going abroad for shorter periods of time, namely from several weeks to 6 months, they are reintegrated in their class and follow the curriculum with their peers.

Usually, exchange students manage to pass the final exam to obtain the upper secondary school diploma with a good grade, and this shows that they do not miss on the development of

⁷⁰ Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, March 2017, Attività di alternanza scuola lavoro-chiarimenti interpretativi.

⁷¹ Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, Nota 843/10, 10 April 2013, Linee di indirizzo sulla mobilità studentesca internazionale individuale, page 4

key competences while abroad. Actually, 47% of the students who have been on exchange with Intercultura pass the final exam with an excellent grade⁷².

In Italy **pupil exchange programmes are very popular** and it is estimated that in 2016, 7400 students have been on an individual long-term mobility, 57% more than in 2011⁷³. The fact that there is a successful practice of recognition of study periods abroad does not discourage pupils and their families in considering this opportunity.

Recognition of school study period abroad in Italy is successful also thanks to **good practices put in place by the AFS organisation Intercultura**, the largest non-profit exchange organisation in Italy, which has actively supported schools in implementing the legislation on recognition of school study periods abroad, therefore ensuring a common approach of schools to this matter. Intercultura has worked closely with the National Association of School Principals (ANP) and published a **Guide to support school principals in managing pupil mobility and its recognition**⁷⁴. Intercultura has also drafted a **model learning agreement**⁷⁵ for sending schools (also available in English⁷⁶) which takes into account the assessment of transversal competences and makes sure that pupils and teachers agree on what is expected from each other, and where also the family of the student is involved. This relates in particular to the content areas of the national curriculum that the student needs to focus on by the time s/he is readmitted in the sending school. For what concerns the assessment of transversal competences, Fondazione Intercultura⁷⁷ is coordinating the **'Intercultura assessment protocol project'**⁷⁸ aimed at supporting teachers in this exercise upon return of the students from the exchange. Assessment of intercultural competence⁷⁹ is challenging, however since this is the main competence developed through a long-term individual pupil mobility, it could be taken into account within a recognition procedure based on valuing the transversal competences. Intercultura also sends a **monthly newsletter to 'tutors'**⁸⁰ namely the teachers that have been assigned to supervise the exchange students sent abroad. Moreover Fondazione Intercultura provides **trainings to 1700 teachers a year**⁸¹ on how to value the competences of the pupils after an experience abroad.

Policy recommendations

Recognition of school study periods abroad in Italy is the **best practice in the field** and shows how automatic validation of the academic year abroad is possible if schools are open to internationalisation and ready to provide adequate support to teachers, students and families. However, there are still aspects that can be improved. Some schools still ask students to take exams on specific subjects upon return and tend to assess subject-related knowledge instead of assessing competences. Therefore all schools should **agree with exchange students**

⁷² Data from annual questionnaire sent to exchange students by AFS Intercultura (370 answers out of 1200 students).

⁷³ "Osservatorio nazionale sull'internazionalizzazione delle scuole e la mobilità studentesca, Infografica 3, mobilità individuale", <http://www.scuoleinternazionali.org/Infografica.03/>

⁷⁴ Intercultura Onlus (2017), *Guida Operativa per Dirigenti Scolastici - Educazione Intercultura e Mobilità Studentesca*.

⁷⁵ Intercultura Onlus, *Accordo formativo per le esperienze di mobilità studentesca individuale*.

⁷⁶ Intercultura Onlus, *Learning agreement-Individual pupil mobility*.

⁷⁷ Fondazione Intercultura has been created in 2007 by AFS Intercultura, <http://www.fondazioneintercultura.org>

⁷⁸ "Fondazione Intercultura Onlus, Intercultura Assessment Protocol", <http://www.fondazioneintercultura.org/en/Studies-and-researches/Intercultura-Assessment-Protocol/>

⁷⁹ Mattia Baiutti, *Fostering assessment of student mobility in secondary schools: indicators of intercultural competence*, (Intercultural Education, 2018)

⁸⁰ "Intercultura Onlus, Strumenti per i tutor", <https://www.intercultura.it/mobilita-individuale/strumenti-per-i-tutor/>

⁸¹ "Intercultura Onlus, Formazione e laboratori", <https://www.intercultura.it/scuole/formazione-e-laboratori/>

beforehand on what are the 2-3 basic contents of the curriculum that are absolutely necessary to be able to successfully attend the following year without losing fundamental knowledge. It is unfair towards students having to negotiate this with the school upon return or after having started the next school year. The Ministry of Education's indications ask the schools to provide assessment, if needed considering some kind of test, in order to reach a 'global assessment' and clarifies that under no circumstances the school may require the student to take reparatory tests and examinations meant for those who have lost the year or have insufficient grades in some subjects. Finally, the Ministry should encourage schools to have a **policy on internationalisation** ensuring that all councils of teachers within the same school apply the same procedure for validating the study period abroad. In a similar effort of standardising procedures aiming at offering students equal treatment, the Ministry should support the creation of **networks of schools focused on internationalisation**, in order to ensure practices for the validation of the year abroad are similar among schools.

Latvia

Overview of recognition procedure

In Latvia recognition of study periods abroad during upper secondary school is **ruled by a legislation issued in 2015**⁸², although this text is not very detailed and allows margins for interpretation.

Students usually go on exchange in 10th grade when they are 16 years old (60%)⁸³.

According to the law, students who take part in a long-term pupil exchange programme are **automatically admitted into the next grade**, once they come back to Latvia. However, they have one year time to complete all subjects that are foreseen in the Latvian curriculum and that they did not take while being abroad. Therefore, **students need to pass additional courses**, most commonly Latvian language and literature, depending on the documentation provided by the hosting school, which indicates all the subjects taken and relative marks. The decision on what courses the student needs to take upon return is taken by the principal or vice-principal of the school.

Policy recommendations

Although in Latvia there is a national legislation on recognition of school study periods abroad based on transcript of grades, at the moment schools decide with a high level of autonomy what subjects the student has to study upon return from the exchange year. As a result, pupils are overloaded with tasks related to the previous school year, while they try to follow the subjects of the current year.

It would be recommended to adopt a more detailed legislation which gives **less margin of interpretation to schools**. A solution could be a **recognition system based on certificate of**

⁸² Government of the Republic of Latvia, Rule of the Cabinet of Ministers 591, 13 October 2015, Procedures for Enrolling Students in and Discharging from General Educational Institutions and Special Pre-school Educational Groups, and also for Moving Them up into the Next Grade.

⁸³ Data from YFU Latvia, January 2018

attendance⁸⁴, potentially including a learning agreement based on competence, without asking pupils to take additional exams upon return.

Lithuania

Overview of recognition procedure

In Lithuania recognition of study periods abroad is decided by each school on its own, case-by-case, and there is **no national regulation**.

Students usually go on exchange when they are 16-17 years old (first year of upper secondary school). Upon return, the students need to provide the school with the **documents showing** what **subjects** they took during the exchange abroad and also the grades they received, if available. The chances to get the period abroad recognised are quite low and the procedure is long. Therefore, **most of the students** decide to go for the “easiest” way and **repeat the school year**.

The lack of recognition of school study periods abroad is an **obstacle to pupil mobility**. For example, according to a small study conducted by YFU Lithuania in 2017, 40% of students interested in enrolling on an exchange programme decided to decline this opportunity because of the uncertainty around recognition. Many of those who are interested in studying abroad during secondary school prefer to opt for short-term and/or summer programmes.

Policy recommendations

As in Lithuania recognition of school study periods abroad is the responsibility of single schools which apply very different criteria, a **legal framework for recognition at national level** would be needed in order to provide guidance to school heads and teachers. The current practice does not provide an equal treatment to students, it creates uncertainty and discourages studying abroad.

Netherlands

Overview of recognition procedure

In the Netherlands there is **no recognition** of school study periods abroad. Upon return from the exchange, the students need to repeat the academic year and there is no partial recognition of any subjects they have taken abroad.

In the Netherlands the highest level of secondary school consists of 6 years of studies. Students usually go on exchange when they are 16, namely after 4th grade, and they repeat 5th grade. The lower level of schooling consists of 4 or 5 years and students attending this type of schools do not usually go on exchange.

Students who go abroad for a trimester are enrolled back in their class and follow the curriculum with their peers.

⁸⁴ see ‘Recognition system’, page 3

Students prefer to finish secondary school as soon as possible and then go on exchange as a **gap year after the final exam**. The lack of recognition of study periods abroad is seen as an obstacle by parents and pupils, and most of the students do not enrol in exchange programmes because they know in advance that it means taking a gap year. Parents are also concerned that after a gap year the students would not be motivated to continue school and study, as they are not committed to studying while abroad since their learning is not recognised upon return.

Policy recommendations

In the Netherlands there is no recognition of school study periods abroad and this fact clearly hinders pupil mobility, therefore a legal framework on this matter would be needed, possibly a **recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁸⁵. In fact, this validation system would work quite well in the Dutch school system since the grades that count for the final exam are only the ones of the last year of secondary school. Students could get the year abroad recognised with no grades, and upon return they could enrol in the next and final grade, as it is done commonly in Italy. Since schools are financed on the basis of the performance of their students, school principals might be concerned that students that have been on exchange would perform less well at the final exam. However, research in Italy shows the contrary⁸⁶.

Norway

Overview of recognition procedure

In Norway there is an **official framework for recognising the learning period abroad** during upper secondary school⁸⁷. Moreover, Norway is signatory of the Nordic agreement on pupil exchanges⁸⁸.

The Ministry of Education has delegated the responsibility for recognition to the county administration and allowed each county administration to determine if they would like to keep the recognition procedure at centralized level in the county or delegate this task to each school principal. Most counties in Norway have delegated the responsibility for recognition to the individual schools.

Schools in Norway receive funding for each student, therefore they **lose funds when a student goes on exchange**.

The student needs to get a general preapproval from the school listing the conditions for validating the school year abroad. Each school can specify their own conditions, however the following criteria are generally valid for all:

- The student has to complete the school year and pass the exams and/or qualify to be moved up to the next level in the education system in the host country.

⁸⁵ see 'Recognition system', page 4

⁸⁶ See page 30, footnote 72

⁸⁷ Ministry of Education of Norway, Circular, 9 January 2015, Approval of previously passed upper secondary education in Norway and abroad, <https://www.udir.no/regelverk-og-tilsyn/finn-regelverk/etter-tema/Vitnemal/Udir-6-2012/>, and Ministry of Education of Norway, 14 March 2016, Regulation on the approval of educational support by exchange organizations and cooperation programs between Norwegian high school and foreign school, <https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2013-07-08-897>

⁸⁸ Nordic Agreement on Co-operation on Upper Secondary School Education, 3 November 2004.

- The school year abroad has to be considered equivalent to or more extensive than year 12 in Norway.

The education year abroad must have the "main emphasis" on the same range of subjects as the curriculum that the student would have followed in Norway. Schools interpret this requirement very differently. Students attending general studies in Norway would be required to follow the courses of the same foreign language as they have started in Norway and match a specific level, and they would have to choose two subjects abroad that they will be able to continue in Norway in 13th grade.

The students have to ask permission to their school to spend a period abroad by submitting the necessary documentation as determined by their school. The main document is the '**forhåndsgodkjenning**', namely the preapproval listing the conditions for recognition. Each school has its own template, however a group of pupil exchange organisations is working at the moment on a common template.

The students are then responsible for following up on this agreement. If the hosting school does not offer the required subjects or sufficient hours, they will have to take **extra courses or exams after returning** to Norway or turn in assignments to their school if this has been agreed beforehand.

As from 2015, the pre-approval is granted only if the pupil exchange organisation is able to provide information on the educational system of the hosting country, the different schools available, curricula and subjects before departure. Pupil exchange organisations are also responsible for making sure that the student can document what they have done academically while abroad.

In order to get the final approval after returning to Norway and being able to continue at the next level in school, students need a **school certificate** from their host school as proof that they have completed their school year, **including an attendance letter listing subjects and hours per week**. The document has to be on school letterhead with signature and stamp.

Upon return the school counsellor together with the teacher responsible for each subject assesses the documentation the student brings back from the host school. Each school has freedom in this process and the outcome thus depends on the willingness of the teachers and counsellors to accept the documentation at hand. There are no specific guidelines or templates for this work and many schools find this process time consuming and difficult.

There are several possible outcomes after the documentation has been presented:

- Recognition of the full school year abroad and the student can continue to the next grade.
- Recognition of some subjects and the student can continue at the next level, but at the same time has to follow classes and/or take exams in certain subjects of 12th grade.
- No recognition and the student has to repeat 12th grade, but can apply for exemption in certain subjects.

Since 1999 the Norwegian government offers a scholarship of 50.000 NOK (5300 euros) from the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund to students who spend the 12th grade abroad with an accredited exchange organisation, however the grant is provided only if the year abroad is

validated. The preapproval from the school for enrolling in an exchange year triggers the scholarship. All students getting the preapproval and applying for the grant, receive it.

Given the fact that there is a recognition procedure and a grant scheme only for the 10-month exchange programme, **students do not go abroad for a shorter programme** run by a pupil exchange organisation. However, they can go abroad for shorter periods of time within the framework of exchange programmes organised by the school or the government.

The difficulties related to the recognition procedure are an obstacle for pupils who want to enrol in a long-term mobility programme, in fact pupil exchange organisation cannot guarantee to the students that they will be able to follow specific subjects abroad, and cannot provide much information on the academic content they will follow in the host school, as students are first placed in host families. Numbers of young people applying for the mobility programmes have declined in the last years for this reason: for example AFS Norway has registered a decline of 100 applicants in total from 2013 to 2017, (starting from 380 applicants in 2013). Out of the students who apply, 35% of them withdraw because of not receiving the pre-approval, after talking with their teachers and school counsellors.

Since Norwegian students are now used to receive recognition of the study period abroad and a grant from the Ministry, they are not ready to enrol in the exchange programme without the school's preapproval and therefore take a gap year.

Policy recommendations

Although Norway has a legislation on recognition of school study periods abroad, the law gives autonomy to schools therefore very different criteria are applied by teachers and school counsellors to implement the recognition procedure. The Ministry should provide **common guidelines** and offer trainings on how the students – and the documents they hand in- are assessed upon return. Taking inspiration from the recognition system based on certificate of attendance⁸⁹, the matching of subjects should be less of a fundamental criterion for validation and **students should be assessed on the basis of their key competences**. Moreover, teachers and school counsellors should promote mobility programmes as a transformative learning experience even when these do not match the criteria required for the validation of the study period abroad and therefore for accessing the grant.

In addition, the recognition procedure should apply also to 11th and 13th grade, and for shorter periods abroad, such as trimester and semester exchanges.

Finally, the Ministry of Education should ensure that the fact that school do not receive funding for the students going on exchange, would never be a reason for the school to limit the number of students allowed to enrol in an exchange programme.

⁸⁹ see 'Recognition system', page 4

Poland

Overview of recognition procedure

Recognition of study periods abroad is **regulated by a law of 2015**⁹⁰, applicable to any study abroad in the EU or in non-EU country, which foresees that the school needs to admit the student again into the next grade, upon provision of a series of documents. Recognition is the responsibility of the school principal and there are no guidelines from the Ministry of Education.

In Poland the upper secondary school cycle which lasts three years and students enrol in a long-term pupil exchange programme in the 1st or 2nd year, but mostly in the 2nd year when they are 16-17 years old. However this is likely to change as from 2019/2020 when the school reform will apply.

The student needs to get the permission from the school principal to go abroad, in order to ensure that he/she will be admitted back to the school upon return, either to repeat the year or access the next class. For example AFS Poland encourages students to have this stated in a **written agreement**.

While being abroad students need to be enrolled in the sending school not only to ensure that there will be a spot for the student in the school upon return, but also because being enrolled in education is a duty in Poland. This is not without challenges because as long as the student is enrolled, the Polish school is legally accountable should issues arise while the student is abroad. However, school principals tend to remove exchange students from the list of school pupils because when students are enrolled in the Polish school, the school receives a subsidy for the student, and the school is not supposed to get a subsidy for a student who is not present. Unfortunately, removing students from the list of pupils of a school has also unfortunate consequences.

The students that want to go on exchange during the 1st year of upper secondary school, when enrolling in the programme in January of the previous year (before starting secondary school) do so without knowing if the principal of the school will give them the permission to go abroad. To overcome this issue, for example AFS Poland always suggests students to communicate their plan to go abroad to the principal of the chosen school and have a signed agreement which will allow the student to be enrolled in the upper secondary school upon return and either be admitted to 2nd grade, or repeat 1st grade.

If the students want to have the year validated, they need to provide to their school a **certificate of attendance** with apostille from the host country, **a transcript of grades**, a list of subjects attended. Students can also decide to take exams for all the subjects they missed while being abroad.

For students going abroad for shorter periods of time (three or six months), they are enrolled back in their class, follow the curriculum with their peers and need to pass the exams their classmates took while they were not there.

⁹⁰ Ministry of National Education of Poland, 30 October 2015, Recognition of foreign school certificates and diplomas in Poland, amended in 2016.

It is not common for Polish students to think about going abroad for a year and school principals see this opportunity as very new, and they do not know how to manage it. Even if there is a law on recognition, in the experience of AFS Poland, which sends almost 40 exchange students a year, the reality is that **students prefer to take a gap year** rather than following the validation procedure. This is mainly due to the fact that students feel that upon returning they do not have adequate time to make up for the subjects they have not studied while abroad and prepare for the final exam during their final year of school. Students prefer to do an additional year of school because they believe this way they will be more mature when they take the final exam and choose university. Moreover, the school curriculum has been changing almost every year in the last period, therefore it is difficult for students to catch up with the continuous school reforms.

The school reform which has just been introduced in Poland foresees 4 years of upper secondary school and this might mean that it will be easier for students to choose to go abroad during 2nd or 3rd grade of this cycle when they are 15-16 years old, and then enter 3rd or 4th grade after the period abroad and have enough time to prepare for the final exam in 4th grade. In general, parents do not want their children to lose a year of school and prefer that they graduate as soon as possible.

Policy recommendations

Although in Poland there is a law which foresees recognition of the school study period abroad, this regulation does not work in practice as the students decide to rather take a gap year than catch up with the studies during the 3rd and last year of upper secondary school. The legislation also foresees that the student needs to provide a transcript of grades upon return, while it would be recommended to adopt a **recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁹¹.

However, although the law could be improved as mentioned above, the fact remains that pupils do not feel ready to be admitted to the next grade upon return. In Italy, students go abroad on the second last year of high school and then catch up and pass the final exam of secondary school with no problem. However in Italy upper secondary school consists of 5 years and probably the length of the school cycle has an impact on the ability of students to catch up. It would be beneficial to investigate what are the measures put in practice in Italy for enabling students to make up with the time spent abroad, and see whether the Polish school system can learn from it. It will also be interesting to see if students will use the opportunity for recognition of the learning period abroad now that the upper secondary school cycle is extended to 4 years.

Portugal

Overview of recognition procedure

In Portugal recognition of school study periods abroad is **regulated by a law issued in 2005**⁹² which is applied in the same way whether the study period is spent in the EU or outside the EU. It is the Ministry's responsibility to validate the year abroad.

⁹¹ see 'Recognition system', page 3

⁹² Ministério da Educação, Decreto-Lei 227/2005, 28 December 2005, Define o novo regime de concessão de equivalência de habilitações estrangeiras dos ensinos básico e secundário.

Most students tend not to go on exchange during 10th or 11th grade, namely the second and third last year of upper secondary school, because they are afraid of not being able to reintegrate their sending school after the transformative experience of the year abroad. Some students do go abroad on 10th or 11th grade and in that case parents are advised to contact the school, discuss this possibility with them and see if there will be a place reserved for the students upon return.

In order to access the recognition procedure, students need to be **enrolled in the equivalent year abroad** and bring to the sending school an **official certificate** issued by the host school with reference to the year of upper secondary school, the **list of subjects attended**, the **transcript of grades** translated including the apostille from the host country. The sending school then presents the documents to the Ministry of Education which converts the transcript of grades according to a standard table for the conversion of the different grading systems. There is no learning agreement drafted with the sending school. The Ministry has 30 days to reply and by law students can enrol in the next school year while the papers are still under revision.

Often sending schools are not prepared to follow the procedure for recognition and see this as an **administrative burden**. Pupil exchange organisations can support the student and for example AFS Portugal acts as mediator between the students and the Ministry of Education.

As the majority of the students spends one year abroad during the last year of upper secondary school, considerable issues arise for those who would like to enter university upon return. In fact, they need an answer from the Ministry about validation of the year abroad by August 7th because this is the deadline for enrolling in higher education. As a consequence, their requests for validation are analysed first.

Despite the fact that they will get an answer in time, they still need to take the exams for entering university between 17 and 27 June which means that they need to return earlier from the exchange to and take the exam in a hurry. Therefore more and more pupils and their families decide not to rush and opt for entering university a year later because it is too stressful to prepare an entry exam in such a short time.

In addition to this, very few countries in Europe are open to host exchange students that are in their last year of upper secondary school as this often corresponds to the last year of school in the host country and the fellow classmates follow specific subjects and grading system linked to the final exam. Therefore **recognition depends on the country where students go on exchange**, e.g. in Germany, Denmark, Finland France school can issue an attendance certificate but do not have a grading system for the last year. For example, if Portuguese students want to have a school study period recognised in Germany, then they need to attend the 2 last years of upper secondary school in Germany and take there the final exam (*Abitur*). The USA accepts more easily students in their last year.

For students going abroad for shorter periods of time, they are enrolled in the school year and upon return they are evaluated by teachers and they can go on with their studies.

Even though going on exchange during the last year of upper secondary school poses several issues and culturally it is important not to lose a year of formal education, most of the students keep choosing this option and prefer to take a gap year after in order to have enough time to study for the exams to enter university. The widespread opinion is that future employers will

value the experience abroad more than the number of years needed to finish upper secondary school.

In Portugal it is not common for students to spend a period of studies abroad, however public schools generally like this opportunity and promote it. The practice of taking gap year is now becoming more familiar but it is not common yet. The difficult procedure for the recognition of the academic year spent abroad, and the uncertainty of obtaining it, is the main reason for not being interested in the programme or dropping out. For example, AFS Portugal, the largest non-profit pupil exchange organisation in the country, sends 50% of their participants to an exchange in the USA and 40% to European countries. Almost 100% of the students who go on exchange to the USA get recognition, while for those that spend a period abroad in a European countries it is often not possible to fulfil the criteria the Portuguese law requires, namely the enrolment in the last year of secondary school, which is mandatory for those students who want recognition to the Portuguese last year of secondary school. Therefore preference of students and families for the USA as a destination is also due to the fact that there is a significantly higher probability of fulfilling the requirements established by the Portuguese law for recognition. The pupils who enrol in a 10 month exchange programme are the ones who are mainly **attracted by the intercultural learning component** and are willing to lose a year. The number of families and students who consider this acceptable is increasing, because they understand the benefit of the programme in terms of non formal learning.

Policy recommendations

In Portugal there is a procedure for recognition of school study periods abroad however it is bureaucratic and learning periods abroad in the USA are more likely to be recognised than those spent in a European country. The possibility for pupils of having a learning period abroad recognised should not depend on the hosting country. It would be recommended to adopt a **recognition procedure based on certificate of attendance**⁹³, which would be less time-consuming for the schools and the Ministry.

Moreover, the procedure does not match with the fact that culturally students tend to go on exchange during the last year of upper secondary school. A solution could be to **allow students** that have been on exchange during the last year of upper secondary school **to take the exams to enter university at a later stage** (e.g. September). Finally, in order to encourage pupil mobility, agreements with hosting countries could foresee special measures to accept exchange students in their last year of upper secondary school.

Romania

Overview of recognition procedure

In Romania recognition of school study periods abroad is **regulated by a law of 2011**⁹⁴. The law foresees that if students attend the same or upper school grade they would have attended in Romania and they come back with official documentation that proves that they successfully

⁹³ see 'Recognition system', page 4

⁹⁴ Government of the Republic of Romania, Law of Education 1/2011, which was updated with the Ministry of Education and Research, Decision 5268/2015, 1 October 2015, Methodology for recognition and the method to validate the year abroad.

passed all the school year exams in the hosting country with a mark, they are admitted to the next school grade.

Pupils usually go on exchange when they are 15 or 16 years old, namely during the first two years of upper secondary school, which lasts 4 or 5 years in total.

On the website of the Ministry of Education there is a list of documents that the students need to include in their file. The most important document to provide is the duly **translated transcript of subjects taken abroad and related marks obtained**. The students need to send all requested document to the Decentralised Unit of the Ministry of Education which is present in each of the 40 territories of the state. In general, **no additional exams** are requested.

For students who go abroad for semester or trimester programmes, the competent institution for recognition is not the Decentralised Unit of the Ministry of Education, but the Romanian school. The student has to show to the school proof of subjects and marks taken. If documentation meets the criteria, the student is readmitted to the class, but the school may decide to ask the student to take additional tests or exams.

As every recognition procedure based on transcript of grades and without a prior learning agreement, validation of the academic year cannot be guaranteed before the departure of students as it very much depends on the performance of the student during the school period abroad.

According to YFU Romania, every year 85% of students obtain recognition for their study periods abroad and the **uncertainty on the validation discourages many students** from enrolling in exchange programmes.

Policy recommendations

In Romania there is a procedure for recognition of school study periods abroad which works quite well. However, it is based on transcript of grades and school performance, therefore it encourages students to enrol in mobility programme with countries where students can succeed in studying subjects, de facto excluding exchanges with countries where the language of instruction is not a language totally new to the student. The system could be improved by adopting a **recognition system based on certificate of attendance**⁹⁵.

Serbia

Overview of recognition procedure

In Serbia, recognition of study periods abroad in the context of a long term exchange is **based on transcript of grades** and it follows the same procedure as recognition of any other type of study abroad stay. The authority responsible for recognition is the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological development, which includes a specific department for recognition of foreign school documents.

Usually the **documents to be submitted** by the students to the Ministry are 1) the transcript of grades of the last year of school completed in Serbia 2) a certificate testifying that the student

⁹⁵ see 'Recognition system', page 4

has completed the school year abroad 3) the transcript of grades of the school abroad. This transcript of grades needs to have a signature and a stamp from the hosting school, and needs to have the apostille from the host country. Moreover, the transcript needs to be translated in Serbian by a certified translator and both the copy of the original and the translation need to be submitted. Finally, when submitting these documents, the pupils need to fill in a form and pay a tax.

If a student is placed in a class different than the one corresponding to the school year in Serbia, the period abroad is still recognised, given that a transcript of grades is provided.

Students going abroad for shorter periods of time than a year are enrolled in the school year and they are usually reintegrated back in class upon return.

The recognition system works quite well. For example, AFS Serbia, the main non-profit exchange organisation in the country, sends and hosts 20 pupils a year on mobility programmes, and so far, in 10 years of operations, all pupils have been granted recognition of their study period abroad, also in the case they have been on exchange in countries where the language of instruction was totally new to them. The information about the documents to provide in order to get the study period abroad recognised is public, **however the criteria used to evaluate the documents are not mentioned, therefore students have no guarantee** that their study period abroad will be recognised even if they submit all documentation required.

When students apply for spending a learning period abroad, they do it for the purpose of language learning and to pave their way for their further education (e.g. university in Germany). Parents invest quite a lot of their income to provide such an opportunity to their children, therefore students are usually good at school and very committed to succeed in their studies abroad and therefore receive good grades and do not repeat the year. Parents are very worried about the possibility their children might lose a year of school since in Serbia this is a great humiliation. Moreover it is also important to students to finish school with their original classmates. Since recognition is not automatic even if students provide all documents required, parents are still resistant to enrol their children in an exchange programme.

Policy recommendations

Although in Serbia recognition of school study periods abroad works quite well, information about the criteria for the evaluation of the documents required is not public. In order to provide everyone with the same opportunities, it would be useful to **publish the list of criteria for validation of the academic year abroad**. It could also be considered to **adopt a recognition system based on certificate of attendance** in order to avoid the uncertainty regarding validation of the school year abroad ⁹⁶.

⁹⁶ see 'Recognition system', page 4

Slovakia

Overview of recognition procedure

Recognition of school study periods abroad in Slovakia is **regulated by a law issued in 2008**⁹⁷ and it applies for periods spent in the EU and outside the EU. Recognition is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and the sending school.

Students usually go abroad when they are 16, 17 or 18, namely in 10th, 11th or 12th grade in a school system where there can be a total of 12 or 14 years of school and students get their secondary school diploma at the age of 20 the latest.

Before spending a study period abroad, the student needs to have the approval of the headmaster and while being on exchange, students are still enrolled in the sending school.

For periods abroad between 5 and 10 months, recognition is based on a transcript of grades, therefore before departure students communicate with the host family to see what will be the school subjects offered in the hosting school, and when they are abroad they decide on the subjects to study, trying to match them with the national curriculum in Slovakia.

Upon return, the student gets in touch with the headmaster to start discussing about additional exams to take, and at the same time they send to the Ministry of Education the **certificate of school attendance and the transcript of grades** issued by the school abroad. An office of the Ministry of Education is in charge of converting the transcript of grades, and sometimes they ask the students to provide a detailed description of the subjects attended abroad. However often the Ministry of Education is not aware of how the grading systems are used in practice in the different countries. For example, it is very difficult in Germany to get high grades, therefore the conversion of a transcript of grades issued by a German school tends to be quite low.

If the documents are correct, the period abroad is validated easily by the Ministry. The student then shows to the headmaster of the sending school the converted transcript of grades, and the headmaster decides which additional exams the student needs to take (e.g. Slovak language).

When going on exchange for periods shorter than 5 months, namely between 2 and 3 months, students do not need to provide any transcript of grade of the school abroad: they just have to pass the exams of the first semester, and they usually have an additional month to take them, therefore they get their final report in February instead of January.

This recognition procedure works quite well as, for example, most students going on exchange with AFS Slovakia get the year abroad recognised. Attending an additional year of school is not an acceptable option for students and parents as the school cycle is already quite long and students finish secondary education when they are 20 years old.

Policy recommendations

Although in Slovakia recognition of school study periods abroad works quite well, the fact that the procedure is done in two phases by two different authorities is a **bureaucratic burden**. The

⁹⁷ Government of the Slovak Republic, Act 245/2008, Education Act, and “Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of Slovakia, Slovakia, Academic recognition of educational documents”, <https://www.minedu.sk/akademické-uznavanie-dokladov-o-vzdelani/>

procedure could be smoother if the sending school would be in charge of the recognition, on the basis of **guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education**.

Moreover, **the table of conversion of grades is a rigid tool** that does not take into consideration the way grading systems are used in different countries. Therefore it should be ensured that the conversion takes into consideration these differences. In order to avoid this complicated procedure, it would be recommended to adopt a recognition system based on certificate of attendance⁹⁸.

Slovenia

Overview of recognition procedure

In Slovenia recognition of school study periods abroad is the **responsibility of the sending school**, namely the school council and the teachers' board, and it follows the same procedure whether it concerns a stay within the EU or outside the EU.

Usually students go on exchange when they are 17 years old, during the 3rd year of upper secondary school (second last year), and they come back for the final year of school.

When students decide to spend a year abroad the school makes an **academic contract** with them. The document is legally binding and it states that the student will be allowed to **take exams upon return** over the summer and be allowed to be admitted back in the school. The contract is done both in case of recognition of studies or gap year, so that also in this last case the student has a spot ensured in the school.

Upon return, the school council and teachers' board receives from the student the **host school curriculum**, the specific **content of the subjects followed abroad**, the **transcript of grades**. If these documents are in German, French, Italian, English no legal translation in Slovenian is required. They then evaluate these documents and decide which additional exams the student needs to take to be admitted to the next year. In fact, unless the curriculum of the hosting school perfectly aligns with the content of the five subjects foreseen for the *Matura*, the final exam for the upper secondary school diploma, the student needs to take a separate exam at least on these subjects. This is because the grade received during the cycle of studies for each of these subjects counts for the final exam. Moreover, since the curriculum of the upper secondary school in Slovenia is quite rigorous including between 14 and 16 subjects it is very difficult for exchange students to follow the same programme abroad. Some schools recognise every subject while some only recognised subjects that were exactly the same.

Students going abroad for three or six months are reintegrated back in their class and need to pass the exams at the end of the school year together with their peers.

Going on a long-term pupil exchange is not popular in Slovenia: AFS Slovenia is the only non-profit exchange organisation offering this opportunity and **a system of recognition based on correspondence between the curricula of hosting and sending school is an obstacle** for most students who would like to enrol in the exchange programme. For example, out of the 12 students that have been on exchange with AFS Slovenia in 2016/2017, eight took a gap year

⁹⁸ see 'Recognition system', page 4

and only four received recognition of the subjects taken abroad and made some additional exams.

Moreover, recognition of study periods abroad is seen as a burden by the sending school because they need to assess the transcript of records and organise additional exams for the student.

Policy recommendations

Although in Slovenia there is a procedure for recognition of school study periods abroad, sending schools have no common rules to follow, which results in using different standards. Therefore the Ministry of Education should provide **common guidelines** to support to school in the process of recognition of study periods abroad and ensure that all students who have been on an exchange programme receive the same treatment. The guidelines could be **inspired to a recognition system based on certification of attendance**⁹⁹, **complemented by a learning agreement** where students commit to catch up with the content of the subjects whose grade is required for the final exam to obtain the qualification of upper secondary school. School should then provide to pupils the opportunity to take additional exams over the summer, only on the subjects of the final exam.

Spain

Overview of recognition procedure

In Spain recognition of study periods abroad is **regulated by a law issued originally in 1988 and included in the Law of Education of 2006**¹⁰⁰ and it is managed by the Ministry of Education on the basis of a 'recognition table' which allows for correspondence between the Spanish curriculum and the school curricula of different countries. This procedure applies for studies abroad in EU and non-EU countries. However in Spain there is not a single upper secondary school curriculum as there are 17 different educational systems, one for each autonomous community of the country; the Ministry of Education provides some guidelines for the content of the curriculum but the final decision lies with the autonomous communities.

The majority of students (60%) go abroad for a full academic year during the 11th year of upper secondary school, when they are 16 years old, however some go on 10th and 12th grade, and also after finishing upper secondary school.

Upon return, the student needs to provide to the Ministry of Education a **transcript of grades** from the school abroad, translated in Spanish by an official translator with and apostille of hosting country, and then the personnel analyses the papers in comparison of the school curricula of the student, based on a correspondence table¹⁰¹. The recognition procedure also takes into account a learning agreement which is drafted while the students are already abroad

⁹⁹ see 'Recognition system', page 4

¹⁰⁰ The law dates from 1988, there are different amendments to this law through "Reales Decretos" and a reference to recognition in the 2006's Law of Education: Gobierno de España, Ley Orgánica de Educación 2/2006, 3 May 2006, Disposición adicional trigésima tercera.

¹⁰¹ "Gobierno de España, Ministerio de Educación y formación profesional, Homologación y convalidación de títulos y estudios extranjeros no universitarios", <https://www.mecd.gob.es/servicios-al-ciudadano-mecd/catalogo/educacion/gestion-titulos/estudios-no-universitarios/titulos-extranjeros/homologacion-convalidacion-no-universitarios.html#fondo>

and is provided to the Ministry with the documents mentioned above. If the student gets the year abroad validated, the transcript of grades is transposed and the grades count for their grade average and the final secondary school exam, moreover the final grades of the last three years of secondary school count for the entry exam at university.

There is **no partial recognition**: either the transcript of record provides all the elements to validate the year, or the student needs to repeat the year. The student can also take an end of the school year exam for all subjects in September to be admitted to the next class but exchange students do it rarely.

Students who spend abroad their last year of upper secondary school, can still access the recognition procedure, however if they would like to enrol in university and need to take an entry exam (EvAU), they have two chances to pass it, either June and September, or beginning of June and July depending on the community. Students need to study to pass the entry exam and might not be yet back in Spain to take it. Some students can take the EvAU through the Cervantes Institute and the UNED (*Universidad a distancia*). **Therefore the timing of the entry exam at university is an obstacle for pupils going on exchange in their last year of general schooling.**

For students going abroad for shorter periods of time, are reintegrated back in their class and they need to take exams once back. There is no learning agreement drafted before they go on exchange. In order to promote trimester exchanges, for example AFS Spain is piloting the use of a learning agreement within this programme to see if at least students can avoid taking exams to continue the academic year in the home country.

Sending and hosting schools feel this procedure as a burden. Very few students are granted the validation of the year and this depends mostly on the hosting country where they spend their exchange. In fact 90% of the students who go on exchange in the USA get the period abroad recognised: the few who do not obtain the recognition are not enrolled in the right school year or do not select the right subjects in the hosting school. The exchange year in the USA is not only popular because of the higher chances of recognition, but also because it allows for good grades which count for the final exam and the entry at university. For students going abroad in other hosting countries the possibility for recognition of their study period are low: about 30% of students going on exchange to a European country receive recognition, while those going to a non-EU country which is not the USA, have even lower possibilities. There is even a company¹⁰² which offers the service of accompanying students through the recognition procedure, but they cannot guarantee that the period abroad will be recognised.

It is not common for Spanish students to go on a year abroad and the **lack of certainty of recognition is the main cause for students dropping out of the exchange programme**, after having filled an application to enrol. Culturally, for parents and students it is not acceptable to repeat a year of school. Moreover, classes are crowded and if students go abroad they lose the spot in the school: the school cannot guarantee that the students will be readmitted in the same school. As a result, **students rather wait for university** since the academic period abroad is recognised in that framework.

¹⁰² “CES numen, Centro de Estudios Superiores”, <http://www.cesnumen.com/>

Policy recommendations

Although in Spain there is a procedure for recognition of school study periods abroad, it does not encourage pupil mobility as validation is very rare and uncertain and its implementation results in a very different treatment of students depending on where they have been on exchange. Therefore the procedure should be revised in order to shift from a rigid system based on transcript of grades and correspondence of subjects according to a 'recognition table' to a **recognition based on certificate of attendance**¹⁰³. A first step towards the improvement of the current system would be to **recognise all subjects taken abroad** based on transcript of grades and offer the **possibility to take additional exams** on the subjects that were not followed by the student while on exchange. Moreover, all students enrolling in an exchange programme should be able to be re-admitted in their sending school upon return.

Sweden

Overview of recognition procedure

In Sweden there is **no recognition** of school study periods abroad, except for the exchanges in the framework of the Nordic agreement on pupil exchanges¹⁰⁴.

Most of the students go abroad for a full academic year when they are 16-17 years old, namely after their first year of secondary school, which is a 3 year cycle.

Upon return from the exchange, students **need to repeat the academic year**, however they can get **some subjects recognised**, such as foreign languages, if they take a test.

Students who go abroad for a **trimester or semester** are not admitted back in the school and **also need to repeat the full year**.

The lack of recognition is a **huge obstacle for pupil mobility**, moreover sending schools sometimes are not in favour of students going abroad because they lose the funding that each student brings to the school, and which is provided by the state.

In the last years, Swedish schools abroad have been growing and have attracted many Swedish students wishing to spend a year abroad. This has two benefits in the eyes of students and families: the funding that the state provides to the school for each Swedish student is re-invested in Swedish schools abroad, and the students do not lose a year of school while being abroad. However, the experience of spending an academic year abroad in a Swedish school in a campus, mostly with Swedish classmates, cannot be compared in any way with the pupil exchange programme where students are immersed in the local community by being hosted by a host family and attending a local school.

Policy recommendations

As in Sweden there is not a framework for recognition of school study periods abroad, a **legislation which foresees recognition based on certificate of attendance**¹⁰⁵ would be recommended. The implementation of this recognition system would allow to truly **promote**

¹⁰³ see 'Recognition system', page 4

¹⁰⁴ Nordic Agreement on Co-operation on Upper Secondary School Education, 3 November 2004.

¹⁰⁵ see 'Recognition system', page 4

internationalisation of Swedish schools through pupil mobility programmes where students discover a different school system and are immersed in the host country culture.

Switzerland

Overview of recognition process

There is **no federal legislation on recognition** of school study periods abroad in Switzerland, and the matter is dealt differently by every school (regulated by the cantons and not the federal government) given the high independency of cantons and of schools within the cantons. Some schools will recognise studying abroad, but then most schools set a minimum average of grades prior to the exchange.

Recognition is important for the students enrolling in **3 or 6 month programmes**, who then want to re-enter their class. In these cases, **schools only allow very good students to re-enter the school** as they will have to catch up all the subjects they have missed during the time abroad. Additionally, there are many schools that do not even allow for these shorter interruptions.

Many Swiss secondary schools seem to assume that the time students spend abroad is academic time lost, as the Swiss education system is regarded as highly academic. Therefore when Swiss students decide to enrol in a 10 month exchange, most take into account that they would **lose the school year**.

Low performing students who do not seek recognition face the possibility that their school will not allow them to enrol in an exchange, and this is the main reason why they choose not to spend a school period abroad.

Moreover, more and more schools are under **financial constraints**: they have more than 25 students per class, so that they would not be able to guarantee a place for the student after the return from the exchange year.

Despite the lack of recognition, Swiss students are prepared to lose a year- if their schools allow it – as it has no negative implications for their further education.

Policy recommendations

Although in Switzerland there is no federal law on recognition of school study periods abroad and the schools are highly autonomous within the cantons, **common guidelines** to schools on how to deal with recognition would still be needed to ensure equal opportunities for and treatment of students. These common guidelines should also **allow for not highly performing students to go on an exchange**, even if their period abroad might not be recognised afterwards. Since at the moment schools focus on correspondence of subjects and academic performance to grant validation of the period abroad, it would be recommended to shift to a system valuing the key competences developed through the mobility experience.

A perspective from hosting

From the country overviews it is evident that different recognition procedures of sending countries have also an impact on the hosting schools, making pupil exchanges and therefore internationalisation more difficult as not all hosting countries are able to meet the criteria for recognition required by the sending.

Some recognition procedures are extremely cumbersome for hosting schools, therefore these might not be prepared to meet the requirements, such as detailed descriptions in English of subjects studied by the pupils, or timetables that indicate all the hours spent by the students in school. Moreover, not all hosting schools are ready to provide grades to exchange students because the pupils might not have a proficiency in the language of instruction which allows for testing knowledge on subjects, or because the grading system of the last years of secondary school is centred around the final exam, which the exchange students will not take.

Some recognition procedures favour some hosting countries over others, therefore some countries host very few exchange students and therefore have less opportunities for internationalisation of schools.

However, **if the sending country foresees recognition** of the study period abroad, hosting schools benefit from it because exchange **students are more likely to be committed and engaged in learning**.

Moreover pupil exchanges are possible if there are hosting schools. However, not in all countries there is space for foreign students in classrooms, due to the fact that classrooms are very crowded or the school does not receive funding from the state for the exchange student. In some countries there is the need to pay a school fee to attend public schools, therefore some host countries are less accessible for students with a lower income. Some host countries do not accept exchange students in their last years of school or older than 18, again discriminating students from certain sending countries where the school cycle is longer or the culture does not encourage to take a study period abroad at a younger age.

Finally, **not all schools are prepared to support the students** and ensure the maximum of their learning, despite the language barrier.

CONCLUSIONS

This overview on recognition systems in 27 countries in Europe shows the **great diversity of: procedures** put in place, their effectiveness which is closely intertwined with the secondary school education system, and the culture/habits of pupils and families in relation to education and studying abroad.

In different countries recognition procedures are dealt with by **different institutions**. The study shows that so far there is **no solution** which **works successfully in every context**. In general, what looks reasonable is to have a common legal framework provided by the Ministry of Education and provide autonomy to schools for dealing with assessment of learning and the practical aspects of recognition, while following guidelines and training in order to ensure an equal treatment of all students. In any case, the procedures to be followed by the sending and hosting school should not be a bureaucratic burden.

In different countries, recognition is dealt with a **different legislative tool**, and in some cases schools enjoy a level of autonomy which allows them to decide on validation of the learning period abroad without any law being issued by the Ministry of Education on this topic. Every country should choose the most appropriate type and level of regulation, however it should be ensured that it is effective and that the legislation on the matter of recognition of pupil mobility is coherent with other laws in the field of education.

The country overviews also show the different treatment of the student by the sending school for what concerns enrolment in the school when abroad. In many cases this factor is linked to access of funding for the school (Norway, Belgium Flanders, Sweden, Poland...), legal issues of responsibility (Poland), or the possibility for the student to find a place in the sending school upon return as the schools are overcrowded (Spain, Switzerland).

In general, most of the students go on exchange when they are 16 or 17 years old, and usually do not opt for an exchange programme during their last year of secondary school (except Portugal and Belgium-Flemish speaking community).

In the case of **periods abroad shorter than a year**, students are usually **reintegrated** in their class and catch up on the programme (except for Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Austria for trimester exchange), however they **do not receive recognition for the learning outcomes** of their mobility experience. Therefore we cannot truly talk about a recognition procedure for most of the practices applied for re-integration of pupils after periods abroad shorter than one academic year.

It emerges clearly that in several countries recognition is possible only in case of students' strong school performance, and often the latter is also a condition for the sending school to allow the student to enrol in a mobility programme. This is a clear obstacle to pupil mobility as **only highly performing students are supported in their choice to study abroad**. In some cases, even if recognition is not granted, only the well performing students are the ones given permission to leave (Switzerland, Belgium Flemish speaking community). It is proven that mobility boosts self-confidence of students and therefore can support the less performing students; they would gain awareness of their success in dealing with new situations and uncertainty, and at the same time in the host country they would have the opportunity to discover their talents while experimenting in a completely new environment.

Moreover, recognition systems based on transcript of grades and school performance encourage students to enrol in mobility programmes with countries where they can succeed in subjects studied, de facto excluding exchanges with countries where the language of instruction is a language totally new to the student. In addition, some teachers see pupil exchanges only as a means to improve skills in one of the major foreign languages, and do not support mobility programmes in countries where a minor language is spoken.

Culture plays a strong factor in relation to recognition, as in some countries recognition procedures have not developed due to the fact that a gap year is socially acceptable (Denmark). In countries where it is a stigma to repeat a school year (Italy) recognition has been necessary to encourage pupil mobility. In the countries where a form of recognition based on certificate of attendance¹⁰⁶ is implemented successfully (Austria, Italy), students believe they can catch up with the subjects they have missed, while in other countries this is considered impossible (Denmark, Poland).

These different perceptions have to do not only with culture related to schooling but also with the school system. **School systems** that foresee a short upper secondary school cycle have a bigger problem with recognition compared to longer cycles because students have less time to catch up. Moreover school systems based on credits and which foresee exams at the end of short terms, have more difficulties in allowing mobility and recognition (Finland). Finally, school systems which foresee exams in the last years of upper secondary school which count for the final exam of the school cycle and the qualification (France, Germany, Hungary) also hinder pupil mobility as recognition of the learning period abroad might not match with the requirements of the national legislation on education.

We notice also that once there is a **possibility of recognition** but it is **very complicated, it demotivates young people** from going abroad. They would wish to have their learning validated, as they feel it as a right and are not prepared to take a gap year if they do not meet the conditions for recognition (Belgium-French speaking community, Norway). In some countries, the recognition procedure based on transcript of grades does not allow for additional exams to be taken upon return (Belgium-French speaking community, Spain) and the year abroad is either validated or the students need to repeat the academic year: this creates an additional uncertainty and frustration for pupils.

Because of the lack of recognition of school study periods abroad, **pupils and their families in several countries prefer to wait** for university studies and/or to first finish secondary school for enrolling in a long-term learning mobility programme. Although in some countries it is acceptable to take a gap year because the value of the experience abroad is socially recognised (Denmark, Portugal, Switzerland), this does not mean that recognition is not needed. If society places a great importance to learning from diversity through a mobility experience, also the school system should do so, and therefore put in place mechanisms that encourage pupil mobility.

In conclusion, **most of the existing recognition procedures are based on transcript of grades which include formal or informal learning agreements** where recognition highly depends on the matching of subjects with the hosting school, however these regulations do not reflect the

¹⁰⁶ See 'recognition systems, page 4

reality of the majority of pupil exchange programmes where the main objective is to learn from diversity. This happens because in several of the countries where the recognition procedure is based on transcript of grades, this have been put in place to validate documents issued by foreign educational institutions and make them compliant with the national education systems, rather than to promote pupil mobility. Therefore, in order **for a recognition procedure to be effective, it should start from the objective of supporting internationalisation of schools**, encouraging schools to foster pupil exchanges, and enable students and their families to take the decision to undertake a mobility experience.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Countries should develop automatic recognition systems¹⁰⁷ for learning periods abroad during upper secondary school based on certificate of attendance (Italy, Austria) valuing the key competences pupils develop. In fact the main learning outcome of long-term pupil mobility originates from dealing with diversity. Therefore recognition should be based on the principle of appreciation of different school systems, and national education systems should shift from a “traditional” content-based curricula to a competence-based approach, which values “real-world learning” through non-formal and informal learning, and promotes the development of pupils’ attitudes and skills, in addition to subject-knowledge. The recognition system can include a learning agreement like the one used in Italy by Intercultura¹⁰⁸, based on competences, especially transversal ones, and outline what are the ‘basic contents’ necessary to follow the lessons of the next class, upon return. However, no additional exam would be required.

This type of recognition system has worked successfully for 20 years in two very different countries, and have considerably helped in supporting internationalisation of schools.

Students going abroad for shorter periods of time than a year should also receive proper recognition of their learning, be re-integrated in their class and supported in catching up with the curriculum.

Each country should tailor the recognition procedure to the specificities of its school systems and school culture, and foresee a continuous evaluation of the procedure to ensure that it successfully promotes pupil mobility. In fact, **a legislation for recognition should have the fostering of pupil mobility and internationalisation of schools as its main objective.**

A recognition system strictly based on matching of subjects and conversion of transcript of grades collides with the main purpose and impact of pupil mobility, namely learning from diversity. In fact, in order to meet these criteria, pupils have a very limited choice of countries of destination, and in order to ensure a good school performance to obtain a transcript of grades they need to choose a destination where they speak fluently the language of instruction.

The European Union, through a **Council recommendation** promoting the automatic recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad, could play a key role in intensifying cooperation among Member states, by supporting the exchange of practice and the building of

¹⁰⁷ See ‘European political context’, page 6, definition of automatic recognition.

¹⁰⁸ Intercultura Onlus, Learning agreement-Individual pupil mobility

trust between each other's education systems for the purpose of appreciation of diversity. The proposal for Council recommendation suggests a procedure for automatic recognition which requires '*competences acquired to be broadly in line with the competences defined in the national curricula*'. The proposal clearly suggests a recognition procedure based on certificate of school attendance complemented by a learning agreement outlining the key competences to be developed by the student during the experience abroad.

Although each country should choose the legislative instrument to use to regulate recognition of school study periods abroad, **guidelines for the authority in charge** and the criteria used to validate the mobility experience should be provided and made public. A reflection should be opened on whether the same legislation should apply for validating documents related to a learning period abroad coming from a foreign educational institution, and for validating a period abroad spent within the framework of an organised pupil exchange programme.

All schools should be empowered to promote mobility and its recognition through appropriate training and support. Equal treatment should be guaranteed to students of the same country for what concerns their access to mobility opportunities and recognition procedures, therefore school performance or the country of destination of the exchange should not be factors for allowing students to enrol in a mobility programme.

In addition, national governments should **ensure that specificities of their school system**, such as length of cycles, financing of schools, size of classrooms, **do not constitute an obstacle to pupil mobility**. All students enrolling in a mobility programme should be ensured to be re-admitted in their sending school upon return.

Finally, laws on recognition of study abroad should keep being applicable in the same way to study abroad periods in EU countries or anywhere else in the world, since this is the existing practice in countries with successful recognition policies.

APPENDIX

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Interview questions

RECOGNITION: HOW DOES IT WORK?

- How are secondary school study periods abroad recognised in your country?

Please include:

1. What is the institution in charge?
2. What is the actual procedure?
3. Is there any national, federal, regional legislation? If yes, which one (provide links)

LACK OF RECOGNITION AS OBSTACLE

- Do you perceive that the lack of recognition of the period of studies abroad is a big obstacle for enrolling students in school exchange programmes?
- What are the concrete reasons - related to the schooling system - for students not to engage in an exchange programme?
- What is the estimate yearly number of participants that drop out after having applied to take part in an exchange programme, who do so because the period abroad is not recognised?

LEARNING AGREEMENT

- Do students fill in a learning agreement with the sending and/or hosting school? Please provide the template
- In case of recognition, how are students assessed once back in the home country?

For more information please contact efil@afs.org
www.efil.afs.org