



Erasmus Mundus Programme

Project UNIQUE

University Quality Exchange

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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Frequently asked Questions (FAQs)

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1. What are the Bologna Declaration and the Bologna Process and why are they relevant for students?

The **Bologna Declaration**¹ is the main guiding document of the Bologna process. It was adopted by the Ministers of Education of 29 European countries in Bologna/Italy in 1999. The Bologna Declaration aims to foster competitiveness of the European system of Higher Education as well as mobility and employability in the European area. Main objectives to reach these goals include:

- a system of **comparable degrees**, including the implementation of the Diploma Supplement;
- a system essentially based on **two main cycles (undergraduate/graduate)** including a first cycle relevant to the labour market and a second cycle requiring the completion of the first cycle;
- a system of **accumulation and transfer of credits**;
- the **mobility** of students, teachers, researchers, etc;
- the co-operation in **quality assurance**.

The **Bologna Process**², launched with the Bologna Declaration 1999, is one of the main processes at European level, as it is nowadays implemented in 47 states, which define the **European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**³. During the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference in March 2010, the EHEA was launched along with the Bologna Process' decade anniversary.

The three **overarching objectives of the Bologna process** have been from the start:

- Introduction of the **three cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate)**,
- **Quality assurance** and
- **Recognition of qualifications and periods of study**.

2. What is the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) and why is it important to have such a framework in place?

The **European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)**⁴ provides a common reference framework which assists in comparing the national qualifications systems, frameworks and their levels.

In order to make the EQF work, European countries participating in "Education and Training 2020" should relate their national qualifications levels to the appropriate levels of the EQF, indicating in all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents the relevant EQF level.

The core of the EQF consists of **eight reference levels** describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do – i.e. '**learning outcomes**', using knowledge, skills and competences as descriptors for each level. Levels of national qualifications will be based on one of the central reference levels, ranging from basic (Level 1) to advanced (Level 8):

- Level 6 describes the level of Bachelor,
- Level 7 Master level and
- Level 8 Doctorate level.

¹ See http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/mdc/bologna_declaration1.pdf

² See <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=5>

³ See <http://www.ehea.info/>

⁴ See http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/news/EQF_EN.pdf

3. What are Learning Outcomes?

Learning outcomes⁵ are skills, knowledge and competences which a student has obtained in a specific educational programme. Learning Outcomes are usually described in a taxonomy that shows which skills and competences a student has obtained. It is most common in the EHEA to use a **taxonomy introduced by Mr. Bloom**.⁶

4. What is Europass and what purpose does it have?

Europass⁷ is a portfolio of five documents, designed to make skills and qualifications clearly and easily understood across Europe. It consists of the CV, a Language Passport, the Certificate Supplement (describing the content of training programmes), Europass Mobility and the Diploma Supplement.

5. What is Europass Mobility?

Europass mobility⁸ is a document to record knowledge and skills acquired in another European country, e.g. during a work placement in a company, an academic term as part of an exchange programme or a voluntary placement in an NGO.

6. What is the Diploma Supplement?

The **Diploma Supplement**⁹ contains detailed information on higher education degrees, offering a clear and internationally comparable description of individual study processes and the specific core competences which students should obtain during their studies.

7. What are ECTS?

ECTS points¹⁰ makes teaching and learning in higher education more transparent across Europe and facilitates the recognition of all studies. ECTS points reflect the entire workload of a student in a course. One ECTS point equals between 25 and 30 hours of workload (depending on the EHEA member state). The student workload in ECTS includes hours spent in class and self-study. Course descriptions contain 'learning outcomes' (i.e. what students are expected to know, understand and be able to do after course completion) and workload (i.e. the time students typically need to achieve these outcomes).

⁵ See <https://lib.sandiego.edu/cas/documents/assessment/UsingBloomsTaxonomyforLearningOutcomes.pdf>

⁶ **Bloom's taxonomy** is a classification system used to define and distinguish different levels of human cognition—i.e., thinking, learning, and understanding. Educators have typically used Bloom's taxonomy to inform or guide the development of assessments (tests and other evaluations of student learning), curriculum (units, lessons, projects, and other learning activities), and instructional methods such as questioning strategies.

⁷ See <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/about>

⁸ See <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/documents/european-skills-passport/europass-mobility>

⁹ See http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ds/ds_en.pdf

¹⁰ See http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide_en.pdf

8. How many ECTS do I need for my studies?

Each learning outcome is expressed in terms of credits, with a student workload ranging from **1 500 to 1 800 hours per year** (full time).

- A Bachelor's degree (first cycle) corresponds to 180 – 240 ECTS (3 to 4 years);
- A Master's program (second cycle) corresponds to 60 - 120 ECTS (1 to 2 years);
- PhD studies (third cycle) have no ECTS range.

9. What is the Erasmus programme and which opportunities does it offer?

The **Erasmus programme**¹¹ is a European student exchange programme established in 1987 offering university students a possibility of studying or working abroad in another European country for a period of at least 3 months and maximum 12 months. Each student receives a grant which covers partly the costs of the stay abroad. Students going on exchange under the ERASMUS programme do not pay any university tuition fees. The full recognition of courses passed successfully abroad is guaranteed by the home university.

10. What is an Erasmus Charter?

The **Erasmus Charter**¹² for Higher Education (ECHE) provides the general quality framework for European and international co-operation activities a higher education institution (HEI) may carry out within the Programme. The award of an Erasmus Charter for Higher Education is a pre-requisite for all HEIs located in an eligible country and willing to participate in learning mobility of individuals and/or co-operation.

11. What is an Erasmus Mobility?

Erasmus Mobility¹³: The status of 'Erasmus student' applies to students who satisfy the Erasmus eligibility criteria and who were selected by their university to spend an Erasmus period abroad – either studying at an eligible partner university or carrying out a placement in an enterprise or other appropriate organisation. For study mobility, both universities must have an Erasmus University Charter awarded by the European Commission.

12. What supporting programmes do exist for incoming and outgoing students?

Departments for international relations deal with the **incoming and outgoing** students; organise special programmes for incomings and outgoings, including buddy programmes which means that a local student takes care of the incoming student; organise introductory courses about the visiting country and administrative issues; organise orientation programmes as well as language courses.

¹¹ See <http://www.erasmusprogramme.com/>

¹² See http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/erasmus/erasmus_university_charter_en.php

¹³ See <http://www.erasmusprogramme.com/>

13. What are joint studies?

Joint Studies¹⁴ are developed or approved jointly by two or more institutions. Students from each participating institution spend part of the programme at the other institution(s) and periods of study and exams passed at the partner institution(s) are fully recognised. Teaching staff from each participating institution devise the curriculum together, form joint admissions and examinations bodies and participate in mobility for teaching purposes. Students who have completed the full program ideally obtain a degree awarded jointly by the participating institutions. The degree is fully recognised in all participating countries.

14. What can university rankings tell me?

Rankings can provide guidance in informing students' choices on where to study. What exactly they can tell depends on the ranking and the indicators chosen for a specific ranking.

- **U-Multirank**¹⁵

U-Multirank comprises more than 850 higher education institutions of various types from 70 countries worldwide with a focus on European institutions. 5,000 study programmes and 60,000 students were surveyed and **over 30 indicators** are used to compare the different universities and programmes. The wide range of new indicators of performance **cover five broad dimensions: teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, international orientation, and regional engagement**. The data is drawn from a number of sources: information supplied by higher education institutions themselves; data from bibliometric and patent data bases, as well as data from student surveys. U-Multirank is not a typical ranking since it takes a user-driven, multi-dimensional approach comparing university performance across a range of different activities. It allows users to decide themselves which indicators are important for them and to produce their own **personalised rankings**.

- **Times Higher Education World University Rankings**¹⁶

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings (or THE World University Rankings) are published annually by the British magazine Times Higher Education (THE) with data supplied by Thomson Reuters that provides citation database information. The top 400 global research-led universities are presented in a league table. The ranking employs **13 performance indicators** which are **grouped into five categories: teaching, research, citations, industry income, and international outlook**. An emphasis is put on research and citations which together make up 62,5% of the final score.

- **Academic Ranking of World Universities, Shanghai Ranking**¹⁷

The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as the Shanghai Ranking, is compiled by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University on an annual basis. The ranking compares about 1,200 higher education institutions worldwide and the best 500 universities are published in a league table. ARWU uses **six indicators** to rank universities: **alumni winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals** (10

¹⁴ See <http://www.jointdegree.eu/>

¹⁵ See <http://www.u-multirank.eu>

¹⁶ See <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/>

¹⁷ See <http://www.shanghairanking.com/>

percent), **staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals** (20 percent), **highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories** (20 percent), **articles published in the journals Nature and Science** (20 percent), **the Science Citation Index and Social Sciences Citation Index** (20 percent) and **the per capita academic performance (on the indicators above) of an institution** (10 percent).

- **QS World University Rankings**¹⁸

The QS World University Rankings are annual university rankings published by British Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). The ranking currently considers over 2,000 and evaluates over 700 universities worldwide, ranking the top 400. **Six indicators** are drawn together to form an international ranking of universities: **academic reputation** (40 percent), **employer reputation** (10 percent), **citations per faculty member** (20 percent), **faculty student ratio** (20 percent), **international students** (5 percent), and **international faculty** (5 percent). The world's top universities can be sorted by region and subject, and users can create their own personalized rankings based on what matters most to them.

- **Webometrics Ranking of World Universities**¹⁹

The Webometrics Ranking of World Universities is published by the Cybermetrics Lab (Spanish National Research Council, CSIC) twice a year and covers more than 20,000 higher education institutions worldwide. The purpose of the ranking is to promote global access to academic knowledge produced by universities. The ranking is based on a **composite indicator** that takes into account **information about the performance of universities based on their impact** (number of links to the university's website), **web presence** (number of web pages published by the university), **openness** (number of academic publications on the internet) and **excellence** (number of academic publications on the internet that are cited often).

15. Why is it important for higher education standards to be comparable?

Comparability of HE standards is considered very relevant for the following reasons:

- Comparability can enhance **competitiveness and recognition** at the global level.
- It can help to define **equal quality standards** and provides essential parameters for **international co-operation and joint/exchange programmes**.
- Comparability is also essential for **benchmarking purposes** – e.g. in terms of curricula development, staff and student exchange programmes, research, credit and grading systems or the award of degrees.
- Comparability **impacts on credit transfer and recognition of grades/degrees** obtained abroad and is in the very **interest of students**.
- Comparability is mainly guaranteed through **agreements between host and sending institutions**, outlining standards such as selection criteria for exchange students, courses to be attended and credits to be gained.

¹⁸ See <http://www.topuniversities.com/>

¹⁹ See <http://www.webometrics.info/>

16. What factors can influence higher education standards?

- **Policy frameworks and institutional set ups** in the area of HE strongly impact on the formulation and implementation of HE standards.
- **Support from key stakeholders** remains of utmost importance.
- **Contextual problems** that influence HE standards include challenges in a given country/society, co-operation with the industry and business as well as labour market connections and employability of graduates.
- **Educational criteria** – defined as the accreditation criteria, or external standards, from a national or international perspective – strongly influence HE systems and vary from country to country.
- The **quality of students and secondary education** is of concern in some countries which also impacts on standards for higher education.
- Overall, the **quality of university/faculty** remains essential. This includes areas such as the quality of courses, the commitment and ability to teach as well as professionalism in general, research output, organisational culture as well as available infrastructure and equipment.
- Last but not least, **budget constraints** heavily impact on HE systems.

17. Why is international cooperation important for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)?

- International co-operation is **essential** for PCUs which is reflected in the vision/mission statements of HEIs as well as in the establishment of international offices.
- It strengthens **visibility, branding, global recognition and competitiveness** of HEIs.
- It is relevant for international accreditations and rankings and also enhances the overall **quality of education as well as employability of students**.
- Students strongly profit from opportunities to compare and **learn best practices in a multicultural setting** which strongly impacts on cultural sensitivity and awareness.
- **Key areas of international programmes** include the involvement of faculty and students in exchange programmes, joint global research projects, joint global consulting projects, joint seminars, scientific and educational co-operation, international double degree programmes and international agreements.
- Effective **management of HEIs** is a major prerequisite for the functioning of international co-operation.

18. I wish to study at University X in country Y. What do I have to consider when going on a study period abroad?

Going on a study period abroad gives you the ability to become independent and the first independent step for you is to do your own research on your destination. The potential of an experience abroad will be maximised when your expectations are well managed based on research:

- Review the home university's exchange websites regarding available exchange programmes;
- Research the partner university's websites for instructions regarding admission requirements, academic calendar, available courses for exchange students, language of instruction, number of ECTS and contact hours;
- Browse through students handbooks, course catalogues or special lists of courses available for exchange students;

- Attend all briefings offered by the international relations office at home and abroad;
- Visit university fairs and/or recruitment offices;
- Discuss the chosen courses with the office responsible for accreditation at the home university;
- Consult senior students at the home university who spent a period of study abroad, read reviews of students who participated in the past in exchange programmes;
- Consider the costs of an exchange period abroad, inform yourself about potential bursary/scholarship schemes;
- Consult the global world university rankings to compare different universities/faculties/programmes (see also Question 14).

19. What are some of the major challenges in aligning quality standards for international mobility?

Major challenges	Description
Cultural differences	Responding to culture differences is a challenge. Existing differences also stem from the fact that Western cultures focus more on the individual, while Asian culture, for example, is more context-oriented. The ability to adapt to change and to learn from it is of utmost importance which is also promoted by international exchange programmes.
Teaching/learning processes	One of the major challenges identified are the different methodologies of learning which stem from different work and study cultures. While some systems are outcome oriented (e.g. Namibia, Mexico); some are more teacher-oriented (e.g. China). Individual performances in courses are different as well: while in some systems students are acquainted with tutorial methodologies and case study-based, pro-active problem solving (e.g. India, Mexico), students in other systems are less pro-active and not used to raise many questions as interrupting lecturers is considered impolite (e.g. China, partly Russia). The availability of courses taught in English is at some HEIs limited which creates considerable language barriers .
Quality indicators	In many cases, quality indicators are not known which results in different approaches for meeting the targets of the various HEIs. No common quality indicators have been defined. Comparing HEIs internationally – e.g. through rankings - is also seen as a challenge (for more information, see UNIQUE paper on KPIs).
Evaluation and credit systems	There are no unified rules for credit transfer and the system of evaluation of foreign students. At some institutions, there is a lack of recognition of credits, degrees and qualifications gained abroad (e.g. engineering degrees from Germany are not recognised in Namibia).
Programmes duration and calendar	A major difference in the educational model is in the duration of programmes. In Mexico, for example, the programme duration is longer. In addition, the school calendars are different.

Standards for incoming students	Standards for incoming students are not unified. This stretches from financial requirements (e.g. fees, funding), legal requirements (e.g. visa, health insurance) to programme specific requirements.
Gap between public and private HEIs	There are considerable gaps between public and private HEIs in terms of funding, mobility and quality (e.g. Latin America, India) which contributes to a notable heterogeneity of HEIs in PCU countries.
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20. Where can I find guidelines/recommendations that can help our HEI to bridge existing gaps in terms of comparability of higher education standards and internationalization?

Government and competent national bodies need to establish, modify and implement HE policies and measures that serve their cultural, social and economic needs. It remains a key priority to ensure sustainability of domestic HE systems through public funding and to promote access and equity for domestic students.²⁰

At the same time it is essential for HEIs and other stakeholders to further deepen and establish new **cross-border partnerships to enhance comparability and recognition** of study programmes across countries.

This has been also acknowledged by Member States to the Bologna Process in the strategy "**The European Higher Education Area in a Global Setting**"²¹ which was adopted at the Ministerial conference in May 2007 in London. Key priorities of the strategy include an intensified policy dialogue, strengthened co-operation based on partnership and furthering the recognition of qualifications. Each of the priorities identified in the strategy come with a detailed set of suggested measures and recommendations which are also of relevance for this project.

At the level of the **OECD/UNESCO**, detailed policies and conventions provide important guidance to foster comparability and transparency of cross border higher education. Most importantly, the "**UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Education**"²² provide a detailed set of recommendations which are of critical importance to this project. The guidelines encourage governments and other stakeholders – including HEIs, student bodies, and organisations responsible for quality assurance, accreditation, and academic and professional recognition – to take action based on three main principles:

- Mutual trust and respect among countries and recognition of the **importance of international collaboration in higher education**.
- Recognition of the **importance of national authority and the diversity** of higher education systems.
- Recognition of the **importance of higher education** as a means for expressing a country's linguistic and cultural diversity and also **for nurturing its economic development and social cohesion**.

The guidelines are **designed to help students getting easy access to reliable information on higher education offered outside their home country** or by foreign providers in their home country. They **call on governments**

²⁰ *International Association of Universities (IAU)*, [Sharing Quality Higher Education Across Borders: A Statement on Behalf of HEIs Worldwide](#) (2004).

²¹ http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/WGR2007/Strategy_plus_possible_actions.pdf

²² http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/recognition/code%20of%20good%20practice_EN.asp.

and other stakeholders to make qualifications more transparent and to provide greater clarity on procedures for their recognition internationally.

Specific recommendations include:

- An invitation to **governments to establish comprehensive systems of quality assurance and accreditation for cross-border higher education**, recognising that this involves both sending and receiving countries.
- An invitation to **higher education institutions and providers to ensure that the programmes that they deliver across borders and in their home country are of comparable quality** and that they also take into account the cultural and linguistic sensitivities of the receiving country.
- An invitation to **student bodies to get involved as active partners at international, national and institutional levels** in the development, monitoring and maintenance of the quality provision of cross-border higher education.

In addition to the "UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Education", other important sources from the OECD include the **OECD Regional Conventions on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education**²³ (e.g. for Latin America and the Caribbean/Africa/Europe/Asia Pacific).

²³http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/WGR2007/Strategy_plus_possible_actions.pdf