

Automatic Recognition of Full Degrees

Erasmus Student Network AISBL*

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Introduction

In the Bucharest Communiqué of 2012 the ministers of higher education of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) state their determination to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and willingness to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA. Furthermore, the ministers commit to reviewing national legislation to comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. In addition, the commitment to support the work of a pathfinder group of countries exploring ways to achieve the automatic academic recognition of comparable degrees, is included in the Communiqué.

Automatic recognition of full degrees is in many ways an ultimate goal of the EHEA. Ideally, all degrees obtained within the area should reach a certain threshold level in terms of quality and scope. At the current state of the EHEA, thriving for automatic recognition of full degrees is not without controversy. The mutual trust in the quality of degrees is not a given in many cases. Setting up a pathfinder group that mainly focuses on automatic recognition within certain regions of the EHEA provides the opportunity to establish and test procedures that can be later extended to the whole EHEA. As a potential drawback the approach risks to create a two-speed integration process. Different regions might develop differing procedures that are in the end hard to harmonise across the whole EHEA.

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) works towards a more mobile and flexible education environment in Europe. To support this process ESN conducts its annual ESNSurvey that reaches up to 20,000 students per edition. Through its PRIME studies (cf. Erasmus Student Network, 2010), ESN has contributed to improving credit recognition, mainly through the Erasmus programme. The persisting obstacles in a comparatively well-structured programme such as the Erasmus programme already show that automatic recognition of full degree is a challenging venture. There is a clear lack of data from a student perspective on the challenges, obstacles and consequences of the recognition of full degrees. The following research provides closer insight from a student perspective based upon data from the current ESNSurvey.

Analysis

Data

All data is taken from the ESNSurvey 2014. The ESNSurvey is an online survey promoted via ESN and different other stakeholders such as National Agencies of the Lifelong Learning Programme, universities and other supporting associations. The research was launched on August 13, 2013 and was online until December 16, 2013. A more detailed description of the data follows.

Demographics

Figure 1 shows the full sample of students that have already studied abroad during their education. The majority of respondents have not done a full degree abroad (10,529) while 1,980 respondents have done a Bachelor degree abroad, 1,313 a Master and 135 a PhD.

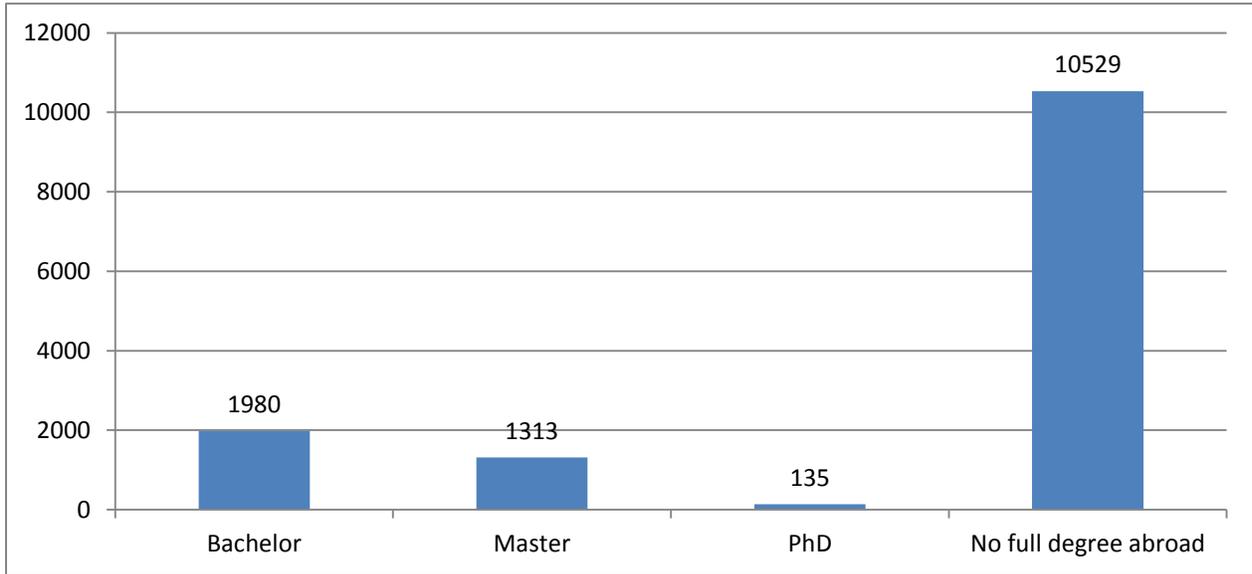


Figure 1 Have you ever studied abroad in a full degree programme?

Table 1 gives an overview where the respondents did their degree abroad. Spain (330), Denmark (328) and the Netherlands (314) are the most prominently featured countries in the sample.

Country	Number	Country	Number	Country	Number	Country	Number
Australia	22	Estonia	42	Lithuania	26	Spain	330
Austria	196	Finland	152	Luxembourg	6	Sweden	152
Belgium	112	France	165	Netherlands	314	Switzerland	84
Bulgaria	18	Germany	196	Norway	33	Turkey	44
Canada	17	Greece	26	Poland	165	United Kingdom	295
Czech Republic	65	Italy	176	Slovakia	10	Other	67
Denmark	328	Latvia	17	Slovenia	23		

Table 1 Countries in which respondents took their degree abroad.



Motivation and obstacles for doing a degree abroad

Asking those students, that have not done so, why they did not choose to study abroad, shows that more than half of the respondents state the high costs for studying abroad as an obstacle. Figure 2 shows that the loss of personal ties, named by around 27% of respondents, is also an important factor and consistent with our previous findings on more permanent mobility such as labour mobility (cf. Erasmus Student Network, 2012). Fear of not getting recognition deters around 15% of respondents from doing a full degree abroad. Insecurity about the quality of education is additionally connected with the fear of non-recognition. Considering that high costs and the fear of losing personal ties are already preventing students from further considering a full degree abroad, the number is substantial.

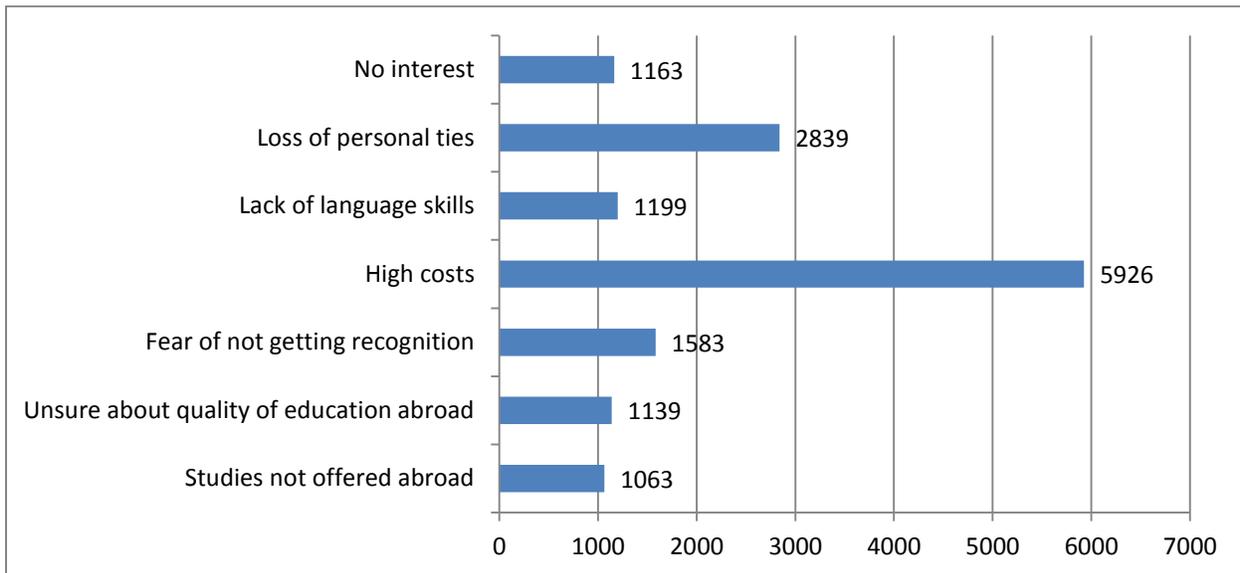


Figure 2 Why have you not studied abroad in a full degree programme so far?

Again in line with our previous findings, personal development motivations such as seeking a “personal challenge” (around 60% indicate this as a reason for doing their degree abroad), fun and travel (around 38%) and independence (around 30%) are often mentioned. Figure 3 further depicts that around 36% indicate better job opportunities and around 34% state better quality of education abroad as the driving force behind their decision. Also, learning languages is an often cited reason (around 43%).

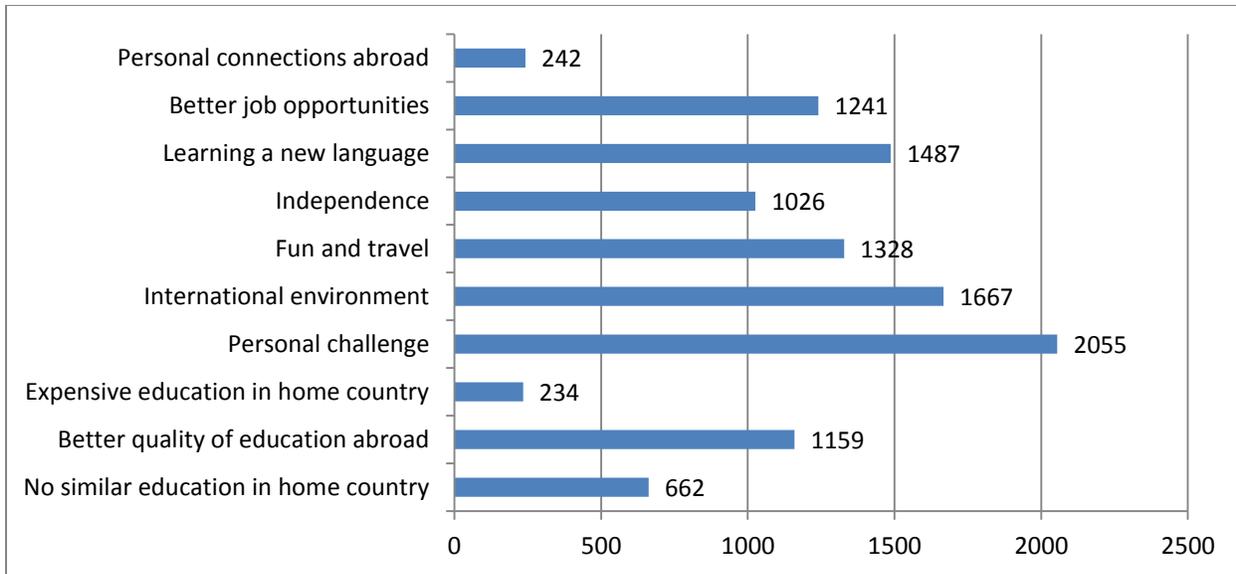


Figure 3 Why did you decide to study abroad in a full degree programme?

Figure 4 shows that 146 respondents had problems with recognition. Many cannot judge whether they will have problems with recognition in the future. Putting the figure in relation to the ones that report no problems with recognition shows that 9.0% report problems with recognition. As the survey reaches many current students and recent graduates, some might still encounter such difficulties in the future even if they answered “no” in the survey.

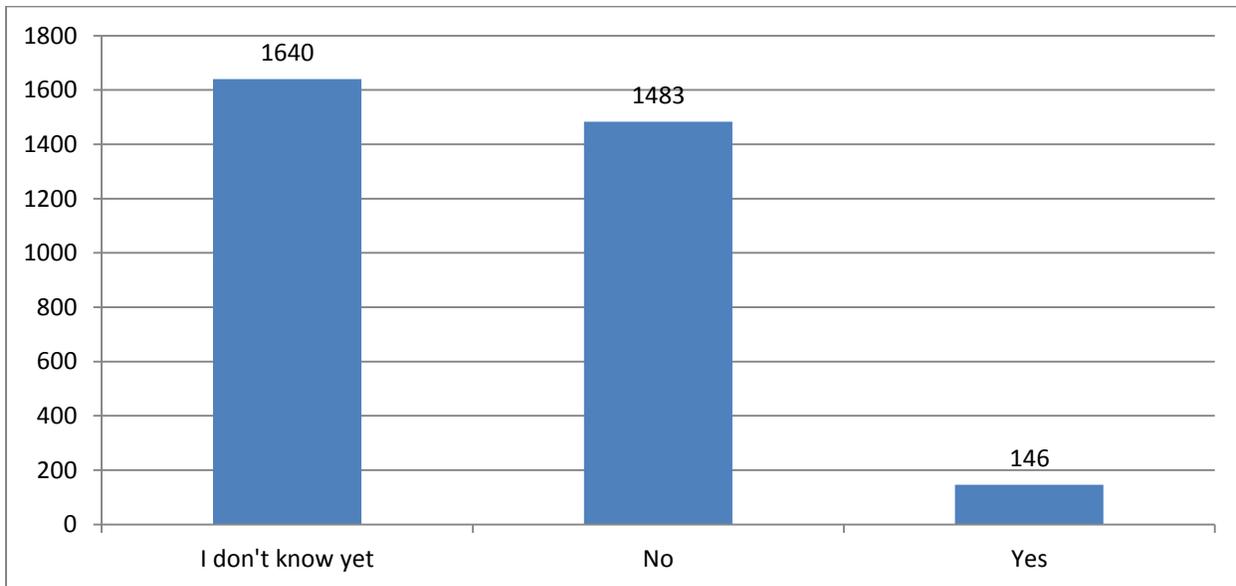


Figure 4 Have you had problems getting your higher education degree recognised after completing your studies?



Table 2 shows the countries in which respondents had problems getting their foreign degree recognised. The total number is not sufficiently high to draw conclusions concerning country differences in terms of recognition of foreign degrees.

Country	Number	Country	Number	Country	Number
Australia	2	France	15	Spain	18
Austria	5	Germany	22	Sweden	3
Belgium	6	Greece	4	Switzerland	6
Bulgaria	4	Italy	18	Turkey	4
Croatia	2	Norway	2	United Kingdom	2
Czech Republic	3	Poland	5	United States	9
Denmark	5	Portugal	3	Other	16

Table 2 Countries in which respondents had problems with getting their foreign degree recognised.

Subsequently those respondents that report difficulties with recognition were asked more in depth about these difficulties. Figure 5 illustrates that almost 50% state long administrative procedures as the source of their difficulties. Also, some say that the degree didn't meet all conditions required for recognition (46 respondents) while others report that the degree didn't exist in the respective country (28 respondents). High administrative costs seem to play a role for around 20% of the respondents that report problems with the recognition of their degree.

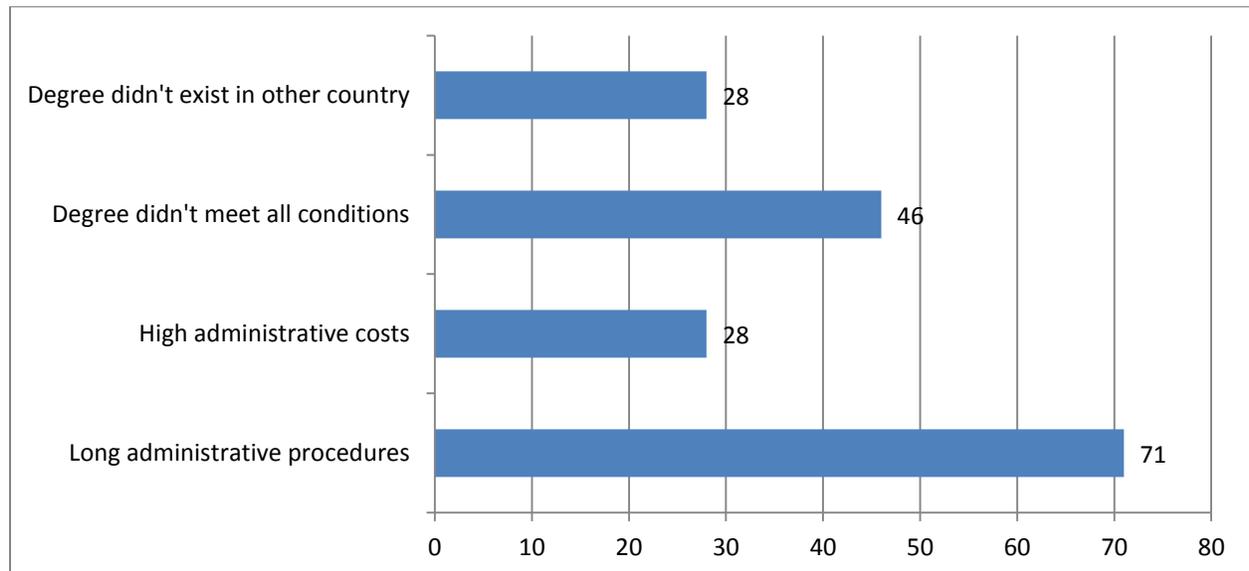


Figure 5 Which were the difficulties you encountered in degree recognition?

The results of further inquiring with students whose degree didn't meet all conditions of the respective country are shown in figure 6. The mismatch of study years and insufficient learning outcomes are most often cited as reasons. Not enough ECTS, missing compulsory courses and the degree being considered as completely different are also reported as reasons for the denial of further education.

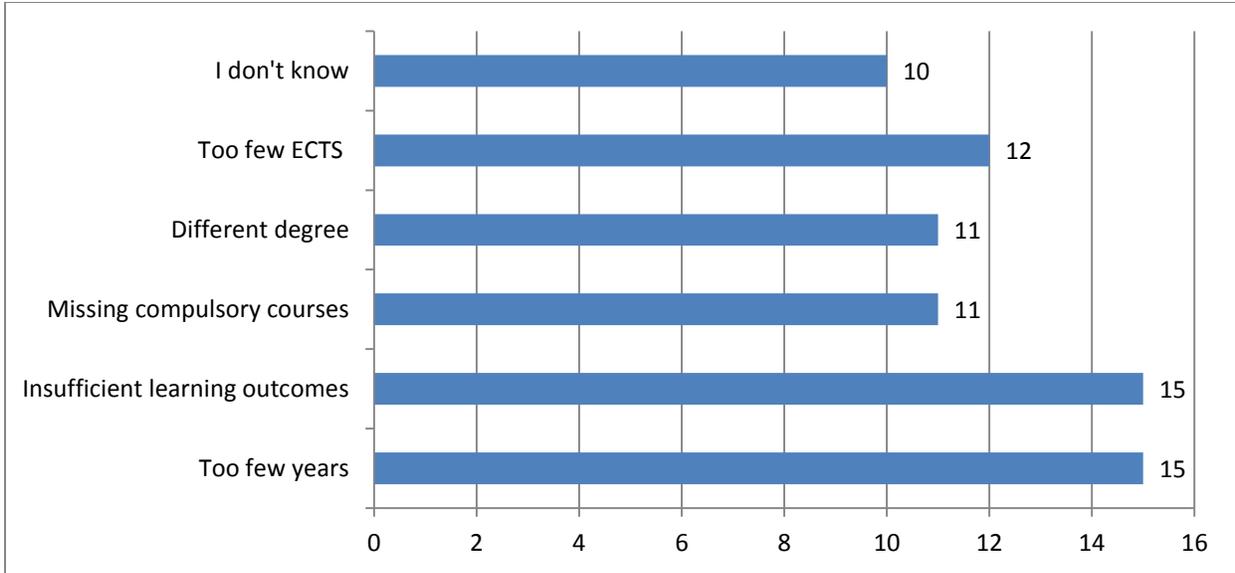


Figure 6 What were the reasons that your degree did not meet the conditions required for further education?

Figure 7 shows almost half of the respondents didn't take any action when told that their degree was not recognised. Those who took action appealed the decision (11 respondents), contacted the students' union (7), referred to the Lisbon Convention (5) and contacted the NARIC (4).

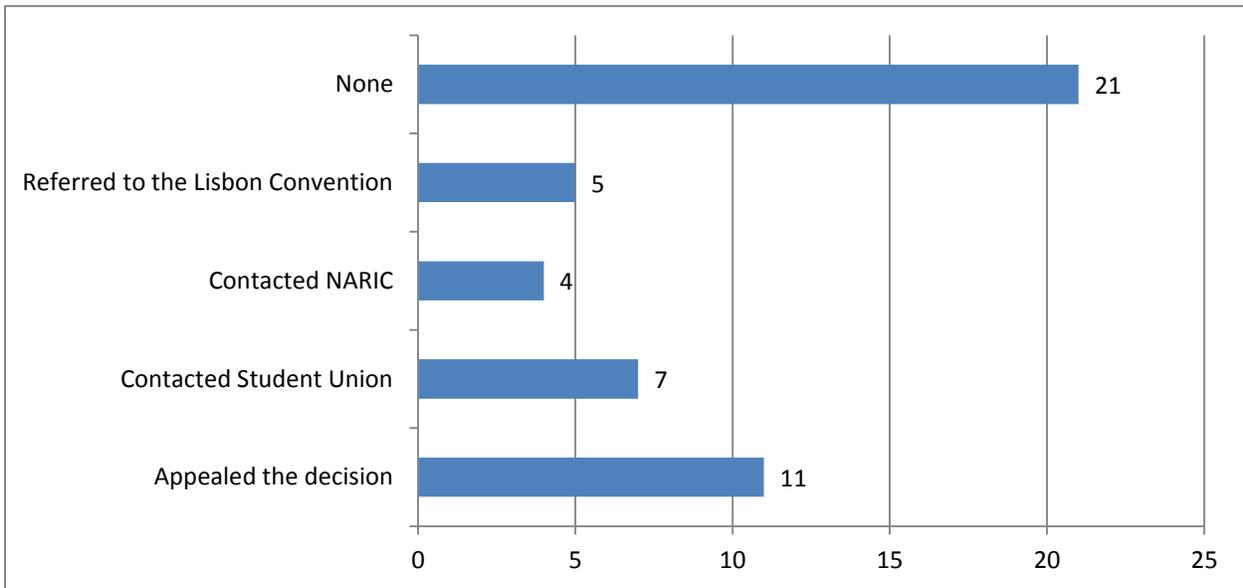


Figure 7 What steps did you take to remedy this situation?

All students with a full degree abroad evaluate whether such a degree is advantageous for them when seeking employment. Figure 8 confirms that the majority considers it an advantage (63%) and only 1.6%



think it is a disadvantage. The rest either doesn't know or feels it is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage.

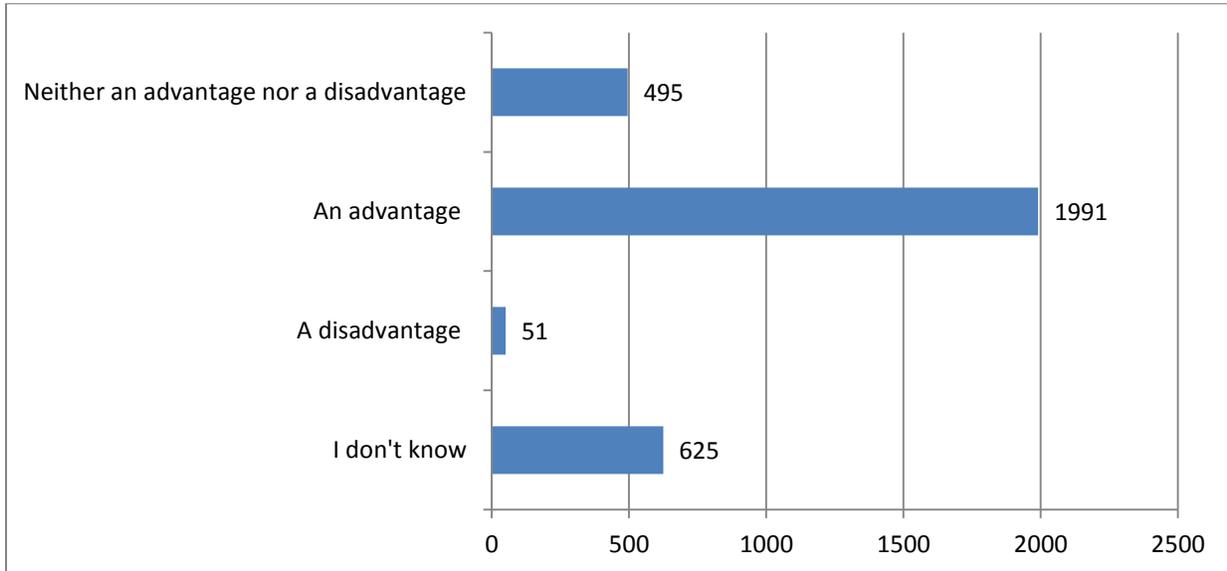


Figure 8 How do you feel about your foreign degree when it comes to finding employment in your home country?

As shown in figure 9, respondents that consider it a disadvantage report problems with requirements for regulated professions (15) and a lack of trust in the foreign degree from employers (23). Some respondents encounter problems because some subjects considered crucial by the employer were not covered in the degree.

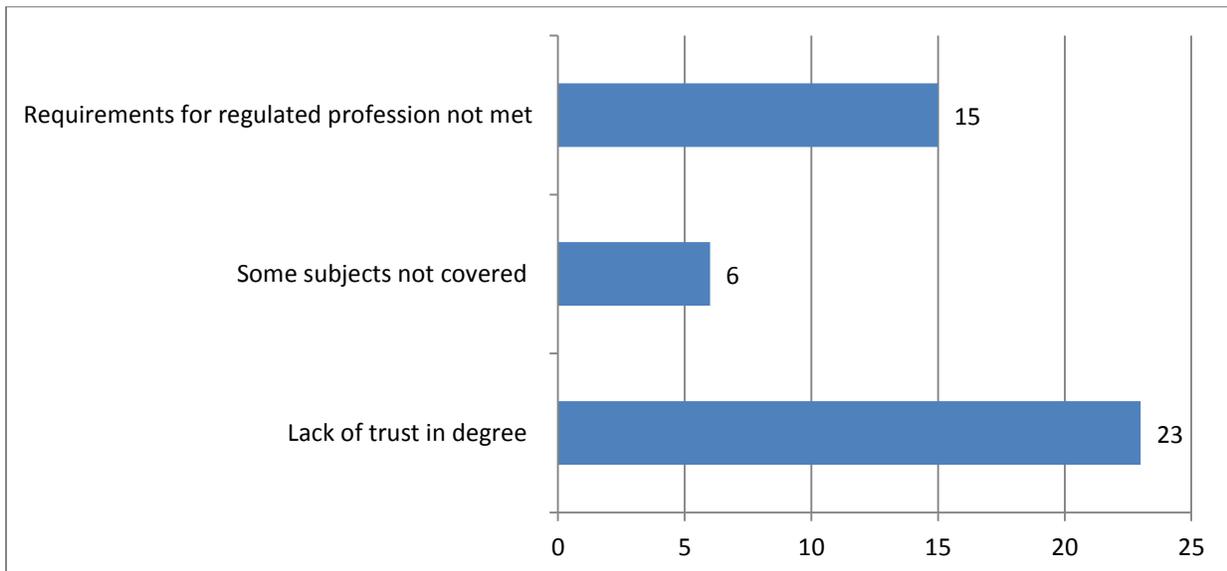


Figure 9 What kind of difficulties did you have finding employment because of your foreign degree?



Asking participants whether they think the Diploma Supplement facilitated the recognition in their home country shows that it is hard to evaluate for students. As displayed in figure 10, more than 50% of respondents do not know whether the Diploma supplement was helpful in the process (also possibly because they haven't tried to have their degree recognised). Only less than 8% think the Diploma Supplement did not facilitate the process, while around 40% think it was conducive to recognition. Taking aside those who do not feel able to judge the utility of the diploma supplement shows that more than 80% of all respondents think the diploma supplement facilitated the recognition process.

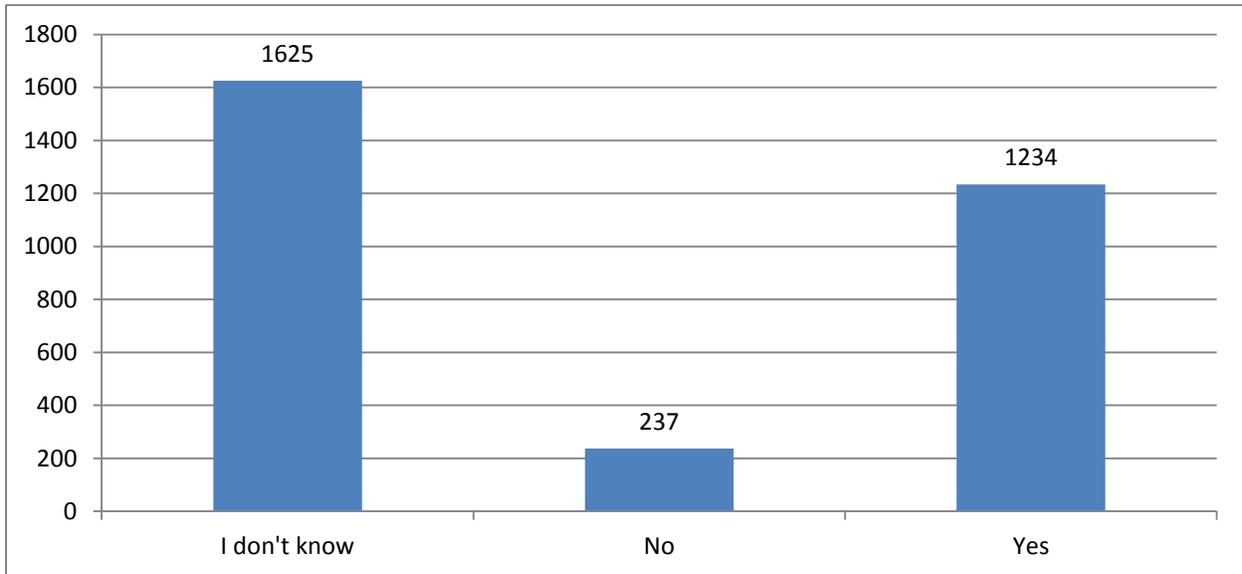


Figure 10 Do you think that the Diploma Supplement of your foreign degree facilitated the recognition process in your home country?

Most respondents are not familiar with the Lisbon Recognition Convention as shown in figure 11. Only around 19% of respondents report that they are familiar with the Convention.

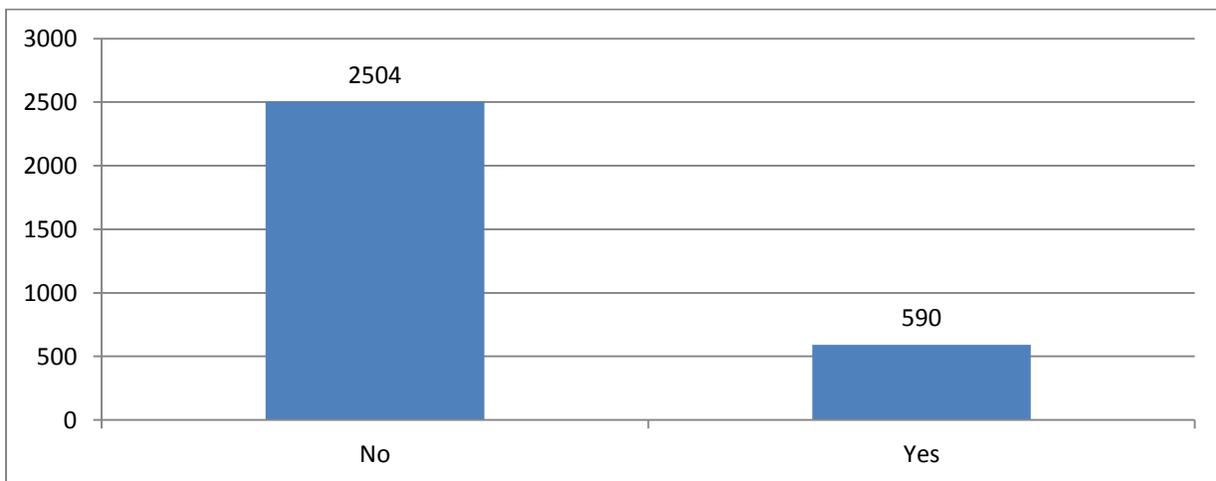


Figure 11 Are you familiar with the Lisbon Recognition Convention?



Those who are familiar with the Lisbon Recognition Convention are asked whether higher education institutions in their country use the Convention in their recognition practice. Figure 12 indicates that 61% of all universities involved in the sample use the Convention.

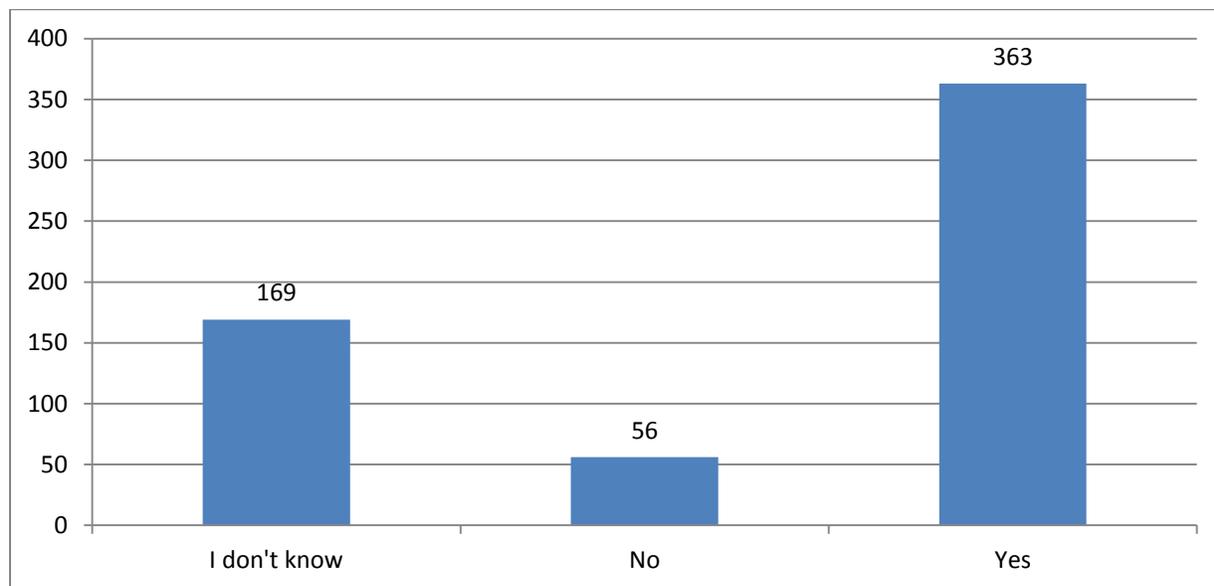


Figure 12 Do higher education institutions in your country use the Lisbon Recognition Convention in their recognition practices?

Figure 13 displays how useful respondents find the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Calculating a weighted average (1-Not useful at all – 5-Very useful) results in an average of 3.99. The result shows that respondents consider the Convention, on average, rather useful.

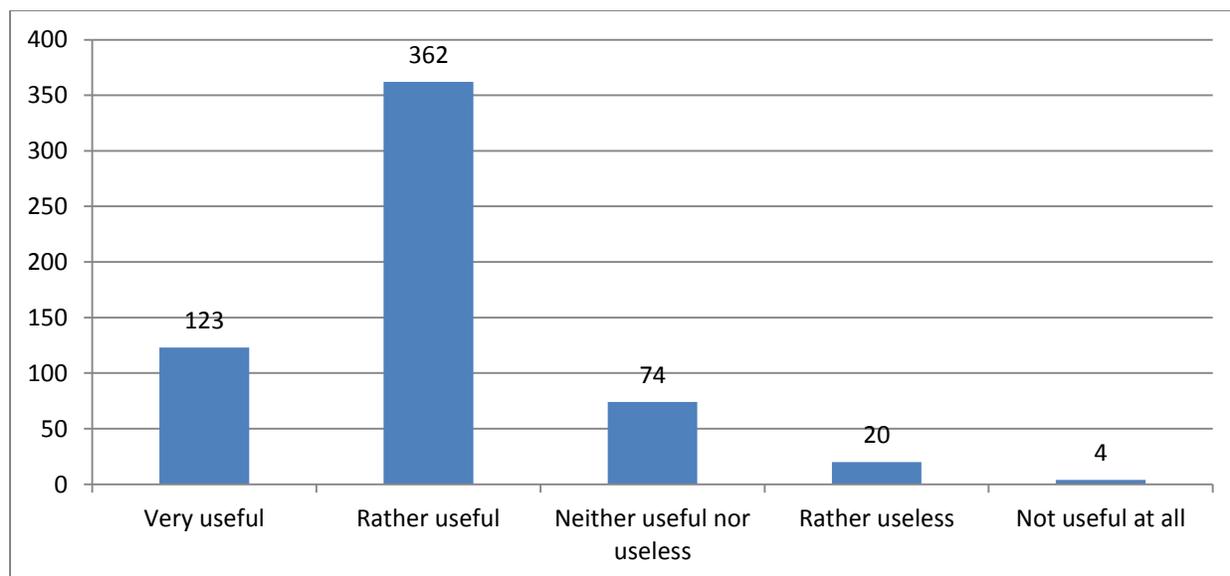


Figure 13 How useful do you think this Convention is for facilitating recognition of foreign degrees?

Quotes

In the following section, some insightful quotes from respondents with difficulties are presented.

Degree taken in Netherlands, problems with recognition in Greece

“Problems to have it recognised for the public sector only”

Degree taken in France, problems with recognition in Portugal

“The grades were not correctly changed into the Portuguese standard”

Degree taken in Germany, doesn't know yet whether it's going to be a problem with recognition

“If I want to become a teacher, I have to do 2 bachelors”

Degree taken in Australia, problems with recognition in Norway

“I went to Denmark to do my further education instead as they recognised my bachelor”

Degree taken in Sweden, problems with recognition in France

“The French grades were not matching the Swedish ones + France doesn't value a 1 year master program enough”

Degree taken in the UK, problems with recognition in Croatia

“Requirement of Nostrification by NARIC office in Croatia which doesn't make sense if Croatia is in the EU and I have EU degree”

Degree taken in Sweden, problems with recognition in Serbia

“The law for nostrification is not yet established in Serbia.”

Degree taken in Norway, problems with recognition in Switzerland

“Differences in ECTS-points-amount. My university degree was only recognised as Fachhochschule and not as university course.”

Degree taken in Switzerland, problems with recognition in Bulgaria

“In order to get my degree recognised, I needed to receive a very specific and difficult to obtain court stamp.”

Degree taken in Spain, problems with recognition in Germany

“The bologna process was put in practice in 2010/2011.”

Degree taken in Latvia, problems with recognition in Spain

“Problems with marks recognition”

Degree taken in United Kingdom, problems with recognition in Denmark

“Copenhagen University would not allow me to continue my studies there, as the degree i applied for was considered 5year in dk.”

Conclusions

The analysis shows that around 9.0% of students that have taken a full degree abroad encounter problems with the recognition of their degree. Comparing this result to the persistently challenging situation of credit recognition, the results draw a quantitatively less problematic picture. The consequences of non-recognition of a whole degree can, however, be far more severe for the individual. Likewise, the survey cannot capture all problems with recognition as many may still face recognition issues in the future.

Very few people consider a foreign degree a disadvantage on the labour market indicating high levels of acceptance and recognition from employers. Nonetheless, issues arise when it comes to recognition of degrees for the purpose of further education, state employment and for regulated professions. The

analysed sample shows that many complain about long (and sometimes costly) administrative procedures for recognition.

While not the main obstacle of not taking a full degree abroad, many fear not getting their degree abroad recognised or have general reservations about the quality of education abroad. Financial obstacles and personal preferences play a major role when deciding whether to take a full degree abroad. Tools such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention are not widely known amongst students and almost 50 % of individuals that did not get their degree recognised indicate not having turned to potentially supporting organisations (such as national students' unions or NARICs).

While further analysis with more data is needed to investigate the challenges around full degree recognition, it is clear that further efforts facilitating full degree recognition are needed to ensure the functioning of the EHEA.

References

Bucharest Communiqué, 2012. Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area, Bucharest.

Erasmus Student Network, 2010. Problems of Recognition In Making Erasmus (PRIME 2010), Erasmus Student Network AISBL, Brussels.

Erasmus Student Network, 2012. Exchange, employment and added value: Research Report of the ESNSurvey 2011, Erasmus Student Network AISBL, Brussels.

Questionnaire

Partial (only relevant questions displayed):

Dear participant,

We invite **all current and former students** to fill in this year's ESNSurvey on International Experience and Language Learning.

Answering the survey takes around 10 minutes, and you have the opportunity to win a new iPad with Retina display or a Panasonic Lumix DMC-SZ camera with 10x optical zoom and a Leica lens!

The ESNSurvey is based entirely on volunteer work of ESN members and we are grateful for your support of our research and your time to fill in the survey!

All answers will remain anonymous. The results will be used for internal and scientific purposes; no answer will ever be traced back to you personally.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the ESNSurvey Team: surveyteam@esn.org

Have you ever studied abroad in a full degree programme? (multiple choice possible): *

- Yes, I did my bachelor's degree (B.A.) abroad
- Yes, I did my master's degree (M.A.) abroad
- Yes, I did my Ph.D. studies abroad
- No

Why did you decide to study abroad in a full degree programme? (Please choose max. 3 main reasons):

- My home country didn't offer opportunities in the desired study field
- The quality of education was better (academic culture / teaching approach)
- Studying in my home country was more expensive
- Personal challenge (new culture, new people)
- I wanted to study in a more international environment
- Fun, travelling opportunities
- Independence



- Possibility to study and practice a different language
- Better job opportunities after completing studies: degree is "worth more" than from universities at home, bigger network of friends, international career
- Personal ties to the country (e.g. family, friends living there)
- Other (please specify)

Why have you not studied abroad in a full degree programme so far? (multiple choice possible):

- Specific field of studies not available abroad
- Unsure of the quality of foreign education
- Fear of not having the degree recognised after returning to my home country
- High costs involved
- Not enough language skills
- Personal connections (didn't want to/ couldn't leave family, friends)
- No interest
- Other (please specify)

Please choose the country of your most recent full degree abroad: *

Have you had problems getting your higher education degree recognised after completing your studies?: *

- Yes
- No
- I don't know yet

In which country did you have problems getting your degree recognised?: *

Which were the difficulties you encountered in degree recognition? (multiple choice possible):*

- Long administrative procedures
- High administrative costs
- The degree was considered not to have met all the conditions required for access to further education
- The degree attained didn't exist in the country I wanted it to be recognised

Other (please specify)

What were the reasons that your degree did not meet the conditions required for further education? (multiple choice possible):

- It showed a shorter number of study years than requested in the country of application
- The learning outcomes were found to be insufficient
- The compulsory courses required for access to a further course of study were not reflected in the degree
- The profile was deemed to be different than the one requested for access to the study programme
- The number of ECTS mentioned on the degree was lower than the one required in the country where the recognition request was submitted
- I do not know, I was just not admitted to the course programme
- Other (please specify:)

What steps did you take to remedy this situation? (multiple choice possible):

- I appealed the decision/ statement of non-recognition
- I went to my national student union and I asked for help
- I went to the national academic information and recognition centre (NARIC) and I asked for their opinion when the university refused to recognise my degree
- I referred to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and I asked to be explained what the substantial difference was
- None
- Other (please specify:)

How do you feel about your foreign degree when it comes to finding employment in your home country?: *

- I feel it is an advantage to have a foreign degree
- I feel it is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage to have a foreign degree
- I feel it is a disadvantage to have a foreign degree
- I don't know

What kind of difficulties did you have finding employment because of your foreign degree? (multiple choice possible):

- Employers did not trust my degree
- The employer saw from my Diploma Supplement (DS) that some subjects were not covered

I applied for a regulated profession and my qualification was not recognised by the specific competent authority because it did not correspond to the national requirements imposed for joining that particular profession

Other (please specify)

Do you think that the Diploma Supplement of your foreign degree facilitated the recognition process in your home country?: *

Yes

No

I don't know

Are you familiar with the Lisbon Recognition Convention?: *

Yes

No

Do higher education institutions in your country use the Lisbon Recognition Convention in their recognition practices?:

Yes

No

I don't know

How useful do you think this Convention is for facilitating recognition of foreign degrees? : *

Not useful at all	Rather useless	Neither useful nor useless	Rather useful	Very useful
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Choose on the scale

