

Recognizing student activism

Analyzing practices in recognizing informal learning in the EHEA

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Summary

This paper aims to answer the question of how recognition of student engagement as informal learning takes place in HEIs within the EHEA. It identifies best practices, challenges and learnings in order to perform the recognition of informal learning in the EHEA in general. Questions of transparency in recognition of informal learning in student activism, their legal basis and ways of implementation as well as student representatives experiences are discussed.

Analysis was undertaken based on two surveys in 10 countries in the EHEA. The first survey addressed student representatives at national level, aiming for insights in legal conditions and practices of higher education institutions' recognition of informal learning of student activists. The second survey focussed on student representatives at institutional level, sharing their experiences on formalities, barriers and practicalities within implemented policies of recognition of prior learning in student activism. Based on the collected data findings and recommendations are presented in the last part of the paper.

1. Introduction

The importance of recognition of non-formal and informal learning was first mentioned in the London Communiqué of 2007. The ministers of the EHEA countries agreed on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as an “essential component of the EHEA, both internally and in a global context” (EHEA, 2007, p. 3). The communique supports the idea of informal learning achievements being relevant to the area of formal learning and commits to a broader understanding of learning and education in general.

However, policies enabling the recognition of informal learning in higher education have not been successfully implemented in all European countries yet (ESU, 2018, p. 59). This paper aims to develop a better understanding on the implementation of policies and practices for recognition of informal learning in the EHEA. To gain insights into practices, challenges and barriers, the case of the recognition of informal learning from student activism within formal curricula was chosen as an example because of the already implemented practices and regulations of recognition of informal learning from student activism in several countries.

This paper will therefore answer the questions of how informal learning is recognized in different EHEA countries, how student's activism is recognized as informal learning and what can be learned from the experiences of student's representatives for recognition of informal learning in general. Students' representatives are chosen 1) on the national level as a source of information regarding the legal situation in their countries and 2) as a source for insights, experiences and practices within their institutions. The study is limited to students' representatives based on formal roles, despite student activism is a broad and diverse field of activities. Student activism can be considered a form of the broad field of student engagement, involving activism, but also examples as community outreach. Student activism takes place within formal representation and outside – involving various formats of self-organisation and protest. However, this research makes use of the well-defined group of student activists in a representative role, a focus, that might be broadened in future research.

The following chapters will discuss the recognition of informal learning in the EHEA, the understanding of student activism as informal learning and the results of a qualitative study undertaken in cooperation with national student unions. Two surveys – one on the system level and one on the institutional level – will provide insights in policies and practices of recognition in different countries and the experiences students' representatives are gaining. The paper will summarise identified best practices, barriers and challenges and will provide recommendations for the improvement of recognition practices in the EHEA.

2. Informal Learning policies in the EHEA

The relevance of informal learning has been growing over the last two decades. It is closely linked to the changing world of learning and working. Learning is considered an ongoing, lifelong process, careers and jobs are changing over life and so do trainings, along with fast changing technologies which require a steady learning process. However, learning cannot only be understood in relation to employability. Meeting social and environmental challenges at societal and individual level requires the development of new competences and therefore learning in diverse settings.

Learning processes can start, proceed and conclude outside formal institutions and non-formal provision of learning, they also take form informally - in learning on a daily and unintended basis.¹

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning achievements are on the European agenda for more than a decade, often linked to the recognition of prior learning, aiming for two main functions. First, making learning outcomes, competences and skills acquired in informal learning processes visible, transparent and comparable in- and outside the higher education systems. Second, broaden the access to higher education and to enhance the mobility with the vocational sector and the labour market. Following these goals, the European Commission 2001 articulated for the first time: "There is a clear need here for the formal sector to recognise and value non-formal and informal learning" (European Commission, 2001, p. 4). Also, to provide proposals focusing "on the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning as well as on the transfer and mutual recognition of formal certificates and diplomas" (ibid.) was formulated as a priority for action. In this light, the recognition of competences gained outside from formal learning is considered crucial for "building bridges between formal, non- formal and informal education" (Cedefop, 2019, p. 4) as an approach for providing high-quality formal education, without losing sight of other learning achievements. It is considered as a tool to "enhance access to education and training to a number of individuals that have acquired knowledge through formal, non-formal and informal learning but never had the chance to enrol in higher education" (ESU, 2009, p. 126).

The relevance of recognition of informal and non-formal learning became vivid in the light of the increasing youth unemployment resulting from the economic crisis in 2008 hoping that "the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can play an important role in enhancing employability [...]" (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012, p. 1). Moreover, the Bologna Working Group on Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning developed a "Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in

¹ Based on Cedefop definitions of 2008 the terms of different forms of learning will be used as follows:

Formal learning "occurs in an organised and structured environment [...] and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to validation and certification (Cedefop, 2008, p. 85).

Non-formal learning "is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view." (ibid., p. 133)

Informal learning is "resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective." (ibid., p. 93)

the European Higher Education Area to 2020”, considering recognition of prior learning as an opportunity to broaden access to higher education and stating the objective to “work towards the development of flexible and transparent progression routes into higher education and the introduction of clear mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning based on a learning-outcomes approach for qualifications and the implementation of qualifications frameworks.” .

Already 2009 the Leuven Communiqué explicitly demanded “basic principles and procedures for recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes regardless of whether the knowledge, skills and competences were acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning paths” (EHEA, 2009, p. 3) to be included into national policies. Also, the Modernisation Agenda published in 2011 aims for developing

„clear progression routes into higher education from vocational and other types of education, as well as mechanisms for recognising prior learning and experience gained outside formal education and training, especially by tackling challenges related to the implementation and use of national qualification frameworks linked to the European Qualification Framework“. (Council of the European Union, 2011, p. 7)

In 2012 the European Council recommended the member states to “have in place, no later than 2018 [...] arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning” (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012, p. 3), which was followed later by the “European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning” and the “European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning”, which states that “Member States are gradually placing validation of non-formal and informal learning higher on their policy agendas” (Cedefop, 2016, p. 18f).

Over the past years, the aim for recognition of prior learning, including informal learning, was reformulated various times in diverse policy documents. However, the results after one decade of initiatives are disenchanting. The Inventory in 2016 documented that the deadline in 2018 was not met (ibid.) and the European Students Union (ESU) criticized in “Bologna with Student Eyes”

“Only 63% (27 out of 43) of the respondents reported having established procedures for recognition of prior learning or that such procedures are in a mature stage of development. This means, that such procedures are effectively non-existent in almost 40% of the higher education systems [...]. It is even more worrisome that according to the perspective of student unions, the situation has not changed at all since 2015 [...]“. (ESU, 2018, p. 59)

The European Students Union identified several areas being challenging for the establishment of procedures for recognition of prior learning. The main concern is the lack of trust among institutions as well as stakeholders and validation procedures. This is closely linked to the lack of established procedures for recognition, but also deeply rooted in the lack of trust in other organisations and institutions as well as lack of trust in validation procedures, if there are any established. One could argue, that the lack of trust is also deeply rooted in academic traditions and the lack of interest of established institutions as well as policy makers to open up the academic ivory tower.



Fig 1: Main barriers to recognition of prior learning (ESU, 2018, p. 61)

3. Learning from (students') activism

Engagement, within social movements in general is broadly documented as a source of learning. Informal learning from civic engagement and voluntary is based on a high level of individual discretion of involvement in meaningful activities, and results mainly from “doing” activities. Given the diversity of activities, individual learning is broad ranging. Learning occurs by applying oneself, by engaging in collective experience, thereby creating new knowledge, skills and competences (Hefler et. al, 2017, p.57). They become empowered actors through participation and gain influence over their social environment (Benedicto, 2010).

Learning by participation is the most dominant form of informal learning in social movement organisations, as the student movement. Informal learning occurs as a by-product when striving for the particular goals of the civic organisations, at individual as well as collective level. By reflective practices, learning can be made explicit and passed within social movement organisations allowing for horizontal social movement learning. (Schugurensky et al., 2010). Learning in social movements is situated in the specific context and environment of a community, it is part of social interaction and the social world. Activists learn in spaces and places, in communities of practice in social processes through time and opportunities to observe and interact with others. Learning in social movements is a passionate and social process (Hefler et al. 2017, p.55).

Engagement in student movements can be considered being civic engagement, including both paid and unpaid forms of political activism (Michelsen, Zaff and Hair, 2002). Research on learning from student activism can be found in diverse fields, including voluntary work, civic engagement and youth work as well as research on social movements. Student engagement has been proven to be a driver of social change for decades and, therefore, needs to be seen as a specific social movement as well. This can be observed in students’ movements during the last decades as well as recent activism for environmental causes.

Student activism or student engagement in the context of this study is understood as the totality of activities carried out by students’ representatives formally elected or appointed on behalf of the student union. This includes not only committee work, lobbying and counselling but also campaigning, protest measures and internal organizational work to the same extent. Student activism within

student unions was chosen as an example because of a relative comparability of activities and learning achievements in student unions and the availability of research in learning from volunteering. Given the complex nature of learning in the students' movement as well as the diversity of competences acquired, the challenge of recognition has been met diverse in several countries. The following part of this paper will provide insights into current practices of recognition across 10 countries.

4. Method

This paper aims to answer the question of how recognition of student engagement as informal learning takes place in HEIs within the EHEA. It identifies best practices, challenges and learnings in order to perform the recognition of informal learning in the EHEA in general. Questions of transparency in recognition of informal learning in student activism, the legal basis of recognition and ways of implementation as well as student representatives' experiences are discussed.

Analysis was undertaken based on two surveys in 10 countries in the EHEA. The first survey addressed student representatives at national level, aiming for 10 country reports on legal conditions and practices of higher education institutions' recognition of informal learning of student activists. This basic overview was needed to get an overview about different starting positions in different countries, but also to find out more about the range of approaches student representatives are facing. The second survey focussed on individual student representatives at institutional level, sharing their experiences on formalities, barriers and practicalities within implemented policies of recognition of prior learning in student activism.

The countries participating in the first survey are **Austria, Belgium** (French community), **Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Montenegro** and **Romania**. The second survey for local institutional students representatives contains feedback from 81 respondents from **Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Montenegro, Malta, Poland** and **Romania**. This means that Israel, Belgium and Lithuania participated only on the national level, whereas Poland only on the institutional level.

5. Recognition of student engagement as informal learning in EHEA countries

This chapter presents the results of the survey based on the answers by 10 student unions on the national level. One student union per country participated in a qualitative survey, resulting in a brief country case study. Responses reflect mainly on already implemented policies on one hand and legal constraints and opportunities on the other hand. Within student unions, diverse people are involved in the topic of recognition of informal learning, this includes presidencies and executive committees, international officers and specialists on policy or legal counselling.

5.1 Legal regulations and policies on recognition of informal learning on national level

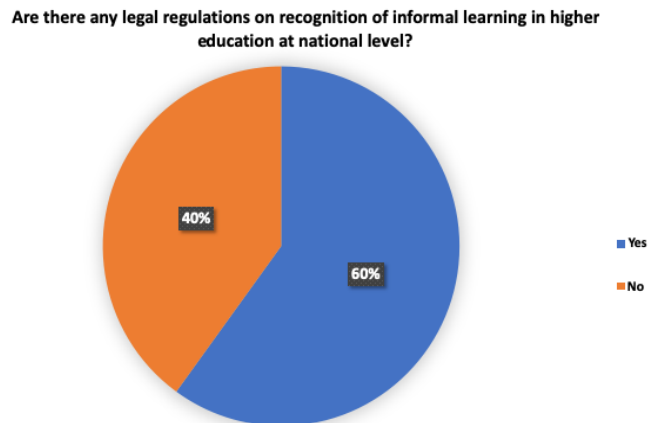


Fig 2

The recognition of informal learning at national level is based on legal regulations in the majority of the countries (6 countries, out of 10 answers). This aligns with the result from „Bologna with Student Eyes“ in 2018, where 63% of all EHEA countries had established a mature procedure regarding recognition of prior learning. Four countries have not implemented legal regulations for recognition procedures of informal learning yet, despite the many public declarations at European and national level. However, having no legal regulations at national level, does not necessarily result in no regulations at all, since there are regional or institutional regulations in place in some countries.

Are there any policies on recognition of informal learning in higher education at national level?

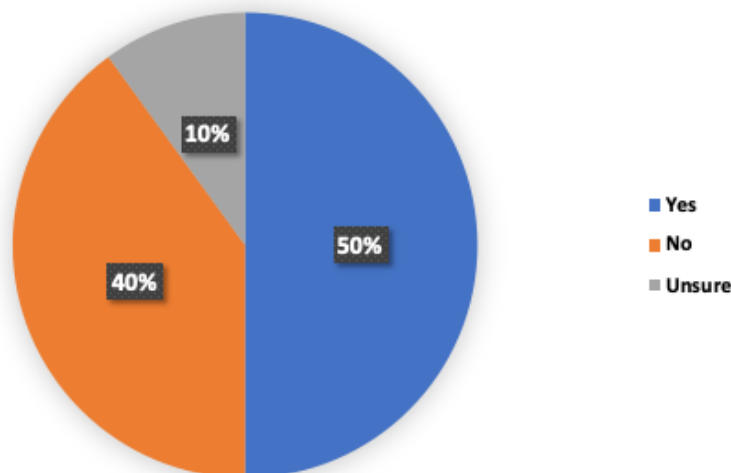


Fig 3

Legal regulations in theory should go hand in hand with implemented policies. This seems to be the case on the national level. However, there are still four countries participating in the survey which didn't implement policies regarding the recognition of informal learning. ~~go hand in hand with policies – the picture of still a big part of countries not having implemented nor regulations nor policies on recognition of informal learning remains the same.~~ In some countries this non-implementation is due to the division of responsibilities: Higher education and its legal basis is not a national responsibility but a regional one in some countries such as Germany, where regional Länder have autonomy in

regulating educational policies.. When the legal basis is missing completely, HEIs are dealing with the topic or on their own or not at all.

5.2 Legal regulations and policies on recognition of informal learning on university level

The poor legal situation at national level in several countries provides flexibility and opportunities for HEIs to recognize informal learning at the institutional level. At the same time, high flexibility leads to diversity of procedures and diverse requirements for recognition or dimensions of what is recognized.

Are there any legal regulations on recognition of informal learning at university level?

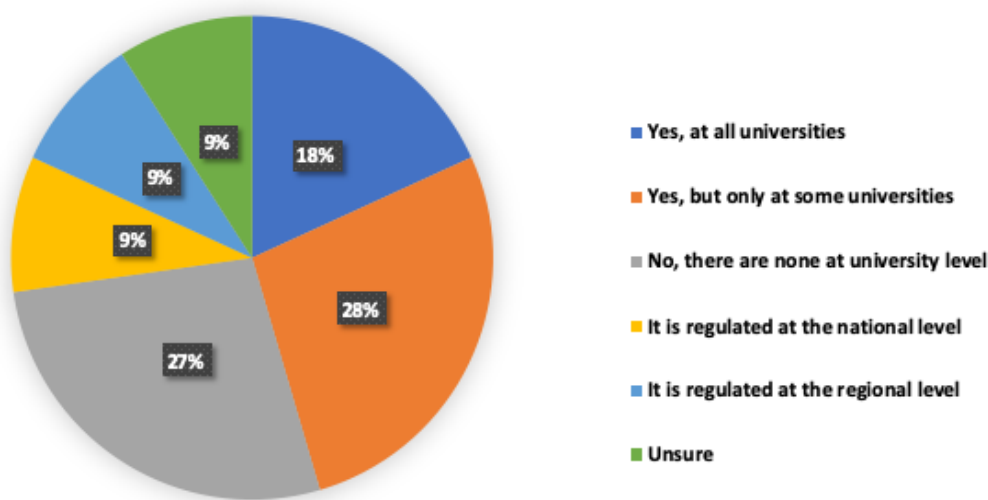


Fig 4

Legal regulations at university level include constitutions, statutes, standing orders or instructions. In many cases national and institutional legislation go hand in hand: Whereas national (or regional) laws establish a general legal framework for recognition, institutions themselves decide about concrete procedures, involved resources and responsibilities within the university. Often, institutions are required to transpose and implement national policies within their strategic documents. This is represented in figure 4: Although 60% said earlier that there are legal regulations on the national level, 46% (which is five countries) of the respondents answer that all or at least some universities have their own regulations. Nevertheless, in 27% of cases, no legal regulations are in place and in 18% of cases, recognition is regulated outside the institution at regional or national level. Non-existing legal regulations on the national/regional and institutional levels do equal no policies. However, it can lead to non-transparent procedures, which are not known by the student body (shown by one respondent who is not sure about it).

Are there any policies on recognition of informal learning at university level?

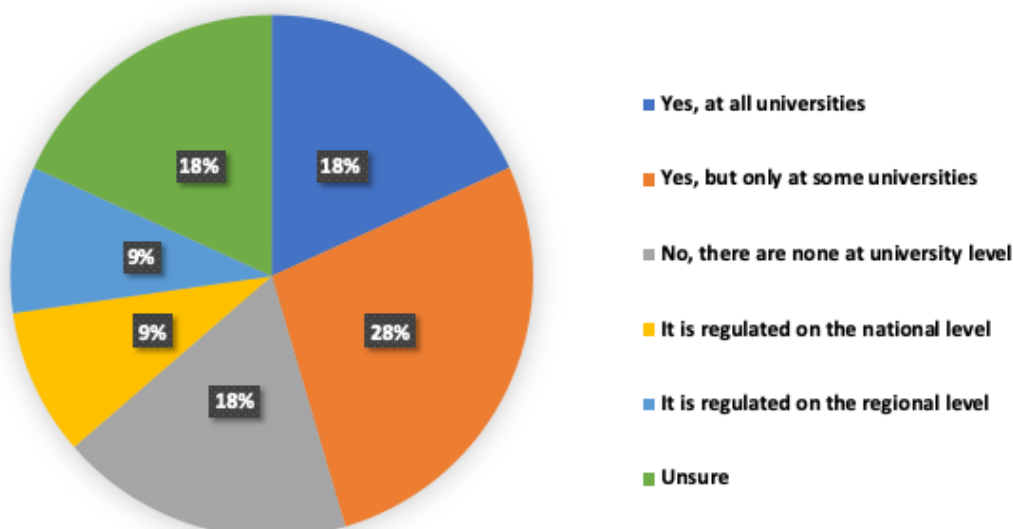


Fig 5

According to the responses countries where all or at least some universities have policies on recognition of informal learning are still the minority. In some cases the topic seems to be discussed exclusively on the national or regional level - which makes it hard for HEIs to adapt procedures to their own conditions (procedures may look differently at different universities, depending on their size, environment, students and their backgrounds and other factors).

5.3 Recognition of student activism as informal learning

Is student activism recognized?

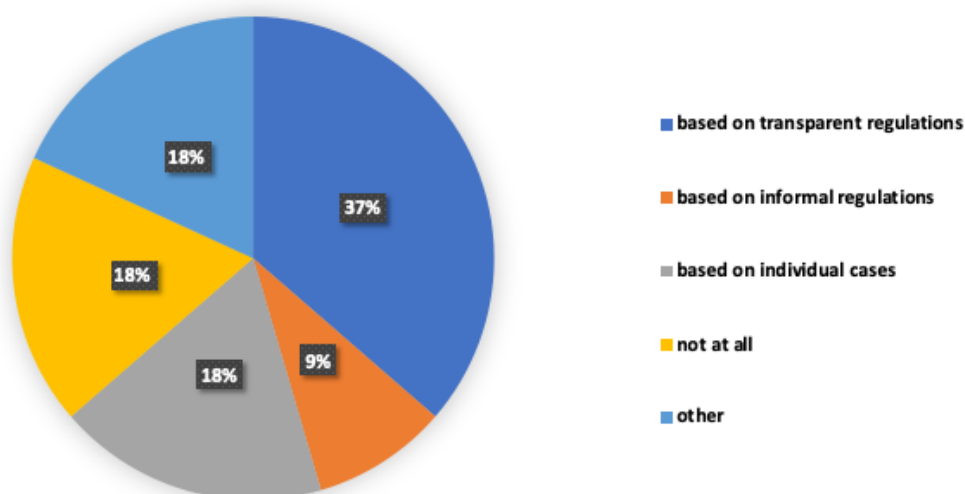


Fig 6

The recognition of student activism as informal learning based on transparent regulations is still not state of the art in most of the countries. In many cases it is based on individual cases or on informal regulations. Intransparency and incomprehensible decisions result in insecurity within the student body. Furthermore, student representatives are by their position and their responsibility of advocating for students exposed to possible arbitrariness. Especially this group needs to be capable to take up

their position without being afraid that future requests of recognition might be rejected or delayed. A certain distance is therefore needed if it comes to recognition of student activism. This can't be ensured as long as the procedure is founded on informal regulations or individual cases.

Student activism as informal learning is recognised in different ways among countries and institutions. While some countries have legal regulations for recognition in terms of providing a certain amount of ECTS in place, others do not recognise student activism at all. Sometimes the term "student activism" or "student representative" covers only a few positions within the student union (e.g. chair or member of the senate). If we consider student activism – as mentioned earlier – as the totality of activities carried out by formally elected or appointed representatives – it needs to be underlined, that this relatively open definition is not shared in some countries. Based on that, the recognition of student activism as informal learning is in many cases restricted to specific roles within the student union or its sub-units on the institutional level. In some cases the access to the recognition of student activism as informal learning is completely unregulated, sometimes activities need to be proven with a verification from the student union. The responsibility for providing evidence on the learning from activism is often directed to students - without guidance and transparency of what is expected. "It is difficult to prove what the student has learned from student activism," writes one respondent. There is, obviously, a broad variety of practices in recognition of student activism, only a few of them can be considered transparent and adequate.

5.4 Ways of recognition of student activism

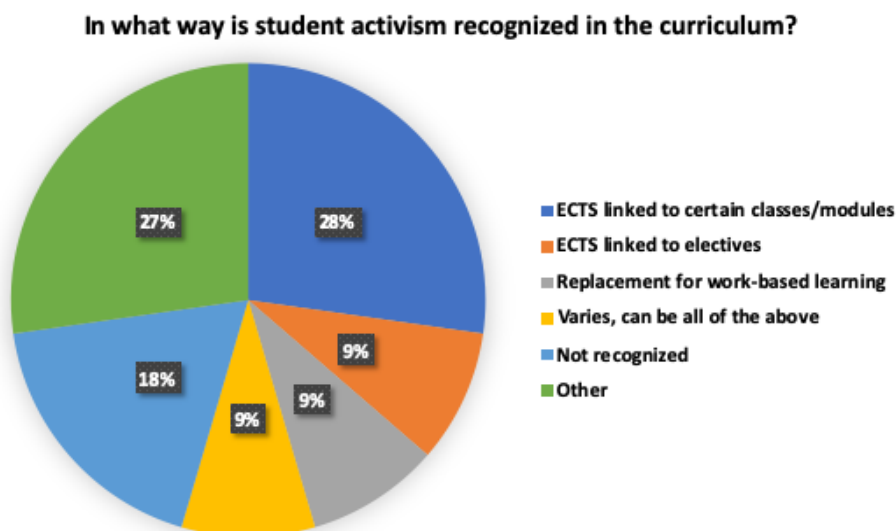


Fig 7

Figure 7 shows that different strategies within the EHEA exist in order to provide opportunities for student activism. Nevertheless, these opportunities are far from covering the broad spectrum of learning outcomes explained earlier in this paper.

Whereas in **Austria, Israel and Lithuania** the so acquired ECTS are linked to specific classes or modules in the curriculum, in **Germany** they are usually linked to electives, leading to difficulties in curricula with no or little opportunities for electives. In **Italy** student activism can be recognized as replacement for work-based learning (e.g. mandatory internships). There is no recognition within the curriculum for student representatives in **Montenegro, Belgium, Malta and Romania** - but in **Malta and Romania** a remark appears on the transcript and Diploma Supplement.

In **Estonia** several kinds of recognition are established, ECTS are or linked to classes or modules or recognition as work-based learning can be applied. **Denmark** has national regulations regarding mandatory ECTS to be completed within a certain period. These mandatory ECTS can be reduced for

certain positions within the student union and other members of the national youth council; however, activities are not recognised within the curriculum.

Limitations to the recognition of student activism are common in those countries where recognition is linked to acquired ECTS or from certain modules or from electives - this is the case in **Germany, Austria, Israel, Lithuania** and - as exception - also in **Romania**. Also in **Estonia** students representatives can only get a certain amount of ECTS through their activism. As there is no official or guaranteed recognition in **Malta, Montenegro, Belgium and Italy**, limitations are not a topic there. In **Denmark**, where recognition qualifies only for reduction of minimum study activity, there is no official limitation.

5.5 Student unions and their role in the recognition of informal learning and student activism

Student unions are important stakeholders advocating for the recognition of informal learning. Most student unions at national level are involved in the question of recognition of informal learning at policy level. In countries with established regulations for recognition of informal learning (at institutional, regional or national level), the topic is considered less relevant in everyday business for student unions, as for example in **Austria**. In **Estonia** mainly local students unions are dealing with recognition and in **Montenegro** Student union is currently striving for regulations and procedures regarding recognition of prior learning on the national and the institutional level.

Is recognition of informal learning an issue, the student union is dealing with?

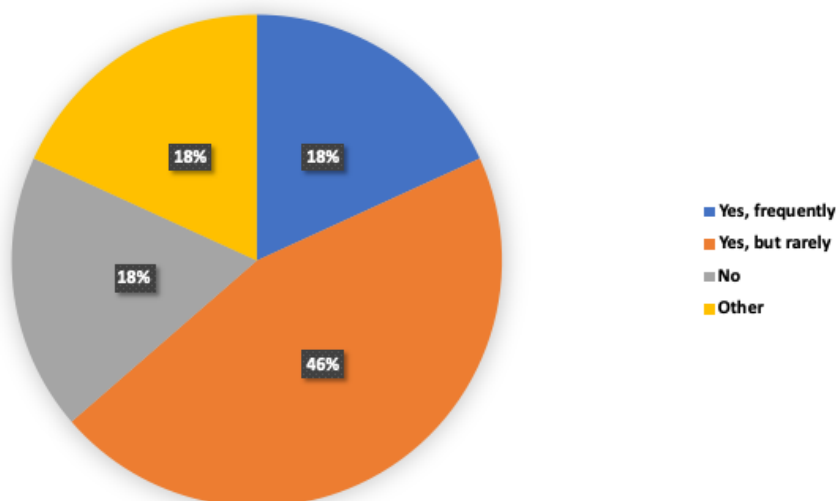


Fig 8

When it comes to student activism and its recognition, unions engagement is more frequent. With the exception of **Lithuania** and **Germany** all respondents are - at least rarely - dealing with the topic of recognition of student activism. In Germany the opportunities for the national student union to interfere are limited, because of the regional responsibility of higher education. ~~federal system.~~

Is the recognition of student activism an issue, the student union is dealing with?

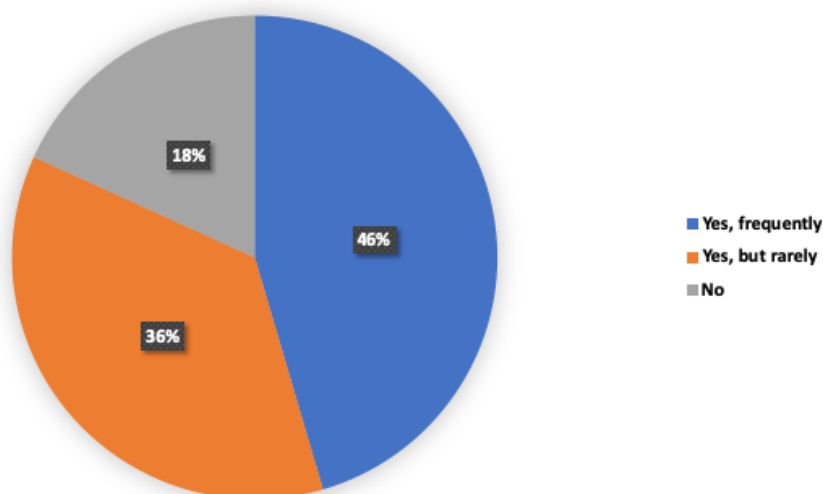


Fig 9

Activities taken up by students unions regarding the recognition of informal learning and recognition of student activism range from negotiations to support for local unions and activities as campaigning and protesting. These measures and strategies brought up by the national student unions are related to the general spheres of influence of student unions: In **Romania, Israel and Malta** student unions are involved in national policies (e.g. negotiating laws). In **Denmark** they are active not only in national policy negotiations but also on the institutional level. Another example is **Montenegro** - there the student union is only involved at the university level. The **Estonian** student union provides education and support for their local unions - as it was shown already earlier, they are dealing with the topic more on the institutional than on the national level. Legal support is provided by the **Austrian** student union, whereas in **Belgium** activism is more prevalent. Only in **Germany, Italy and Lithuania** student unions are not performing any activities regarding recognition of informal learning or recognition of student activism.

6. Practices and insights on the local level

This chapter presents the results of the survey filled in by local students' representatives at various institutions all over the EHEA. It shows barriers, challenges and best practices when it comes to procedures of recognition of student activism from a student perspective. The sample consists of 81 local students' representatives - as mentioned above from Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Malta, Montenegro, Poland and Romania. The survey includes representatives at Bachelor (65,8%), Master (26,6%) and PhD level or higher and also different study fields such as arts, humanities, technical programmes and social sciences. Most of the participants are involved in student activism for more than four years (36,7%) or two to three years (29,1%). The share of those active for one to two years (24,1%) or less than one year (6,3%) is significantly lower in the survey.

6.1 Recognition of activism at the institutional level

Regarding how student activism is recognized on the institutional level the variety of answers is broad. The largest share got student activism recognized as replacement for work-based learning, followed by ECTS linked to a specific class or module. A smaller percentage got student activism recognized as ECTS linked to electives, some respondents stated to have activism recognized for more than one element (e.g. a seminar and a mandatory internship).

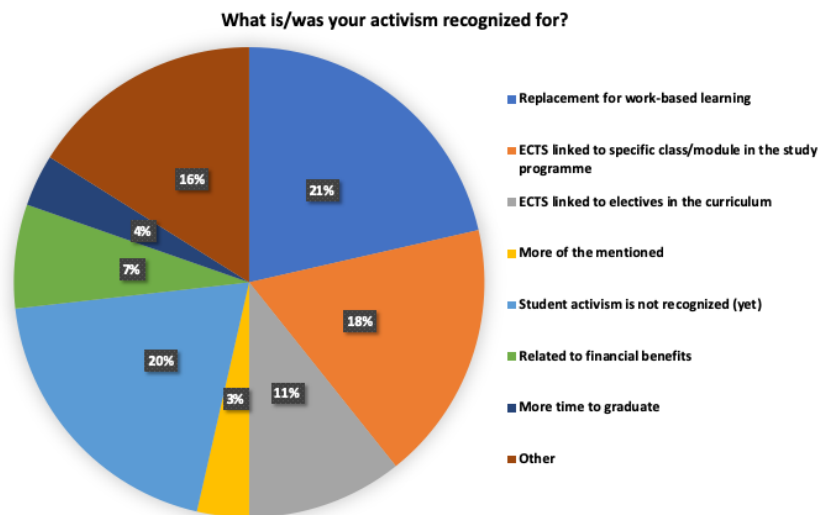


Fig 10

The collected data shows - as already on the national level - a broad variety of strategies to recognize student activism: Respondents also listed mentioning of activism in the transcript as a way of recognition. Nevertheless, there is still one fifth of the respondents who were not able to have their learning from activism recognized.

Do you have experience with recognition of your student activism?

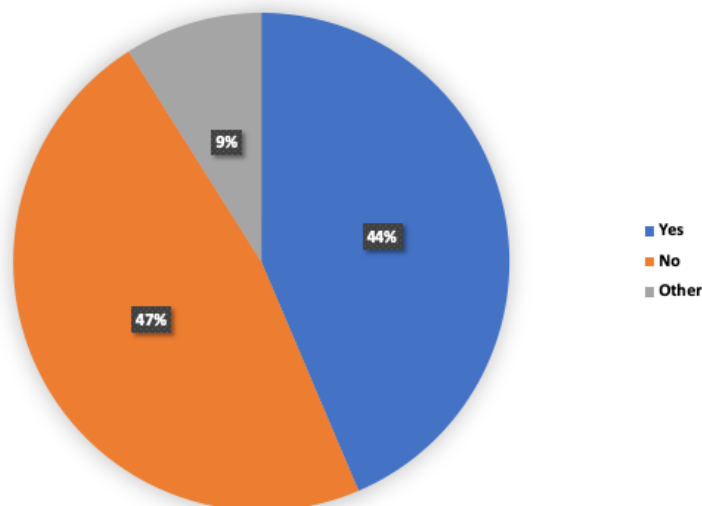


Fig 11

The number of representatives having experiences with recognition of activism at the institutional level nearly equals those not having dealt with it yet. This does not necessarily mean that it is not possible for them – only that they don't have any experiences with the topic. "Other" includes answers besides an official recognition from the institution: At some HEI it is just not possible to get student activism recognized, in some cases student activism is connected to limited financial benefits like paying less student fees after a certain time of being active in the students' representation or getting grants for a longer time – which is different from recognising student activism as (informal) learning.

6.2 Information and procedures at HEI

Students representatives describe a high level of uncertainty related to procedures and information about recognition of student activism or informal learning. The following figure shows the struggle for receiving reliable information on recognition procedures.

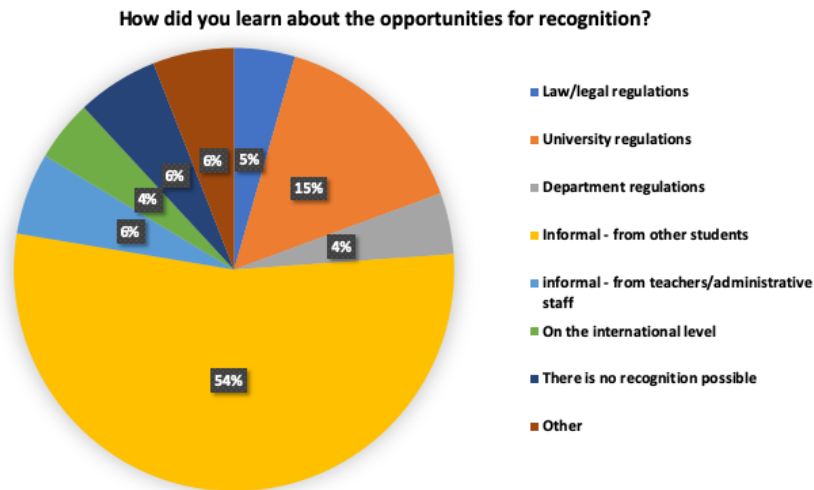


Fig 12

54% of the respondents gathered their knowledge from peers and colleagues in an informal way. Only 24% were able to retain information directly from the legal, university or department regulations. Informal information coming from peers or staff leads to legal uncertainty and intransparent procedures. However, in many cases, informal information is the only information available.

Is there information on recognition available (e.g. information on ways of recognition, previous decisions)?

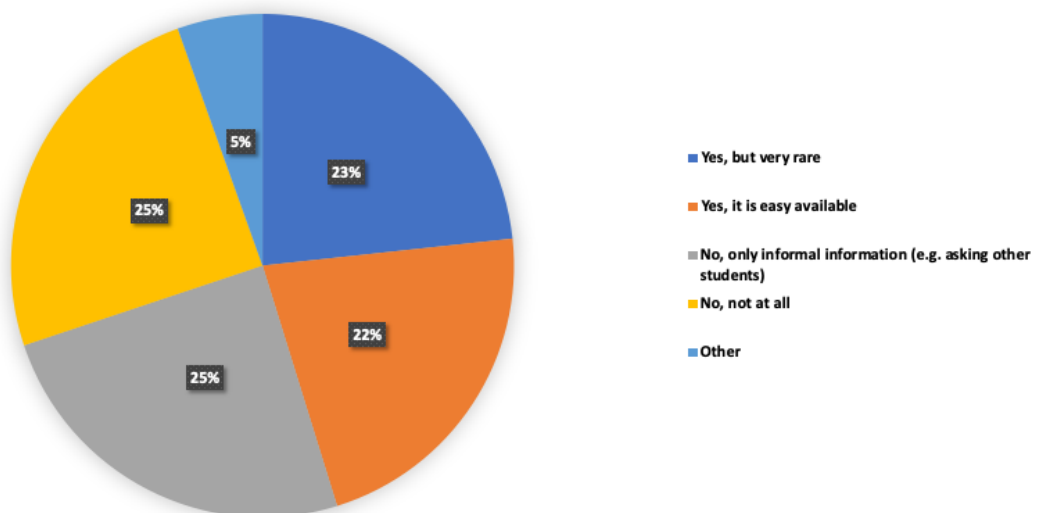


Fig 13

The high extent of intransparency related to recognition is worrisome. The advocacy of student representatives is limited due to the lack of fundamental knowledge on existing procedures and criteria. Only 22% find information regarding recognition easy available at their institution. This is often related to a lack of existing regulation for the recognition of student activism. While surveys provide information on the implementation of procedures of recognition of national level (63% according to ESU 2018 see 5.1), implementation at institutional level is even less (55%).

**Is there a specific procedure for recognition of student activism?
(e.g. forms, timelines, signatures,...)**

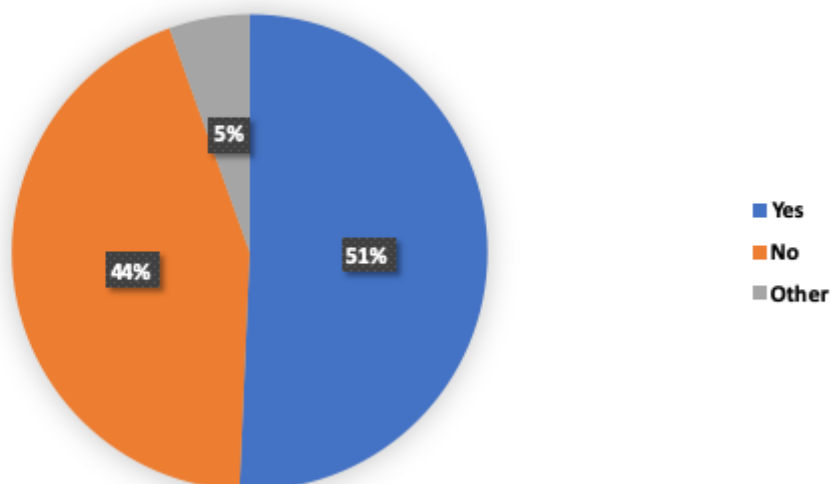


Fig 14

Procedures of recognition of student activities are diverse. In many cases, students' representatives apply for recognition using a standardised form at the beginning of their engagement or at the end of the semester. In some cases, reports or confirmations from the students union for their activities or projects are required. Formal procedures leading to recognition within the curriculum have similar structures among countries.

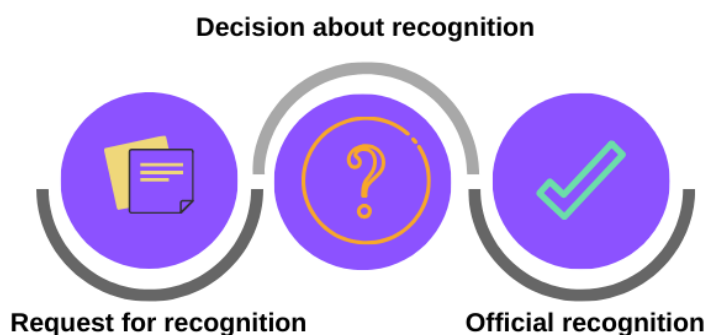


Fig 15

A formal request for recognition has to be stated by the student or the local student union. Documents required include confirmations from the local student union, activity reports, certificates or proof of accomplished projects. These documents are checked by the responsible unit at the institution and a decision is taken. Positive decisions directly lead to official recognition, ranging from certification of confirmation engagement, position or activities to recognition in the form of ECTS. The decision is mostly taken by individual staff members in an administrative position, this could be at departmental or faculty level, in some cases the study coordinator or the admission office are in charge. In one case a committee consisting of teachers and other students' representatives discussing and evaluating the request for recognition is described. Figure 15 doesn't include the most common informal procedures of recognition. Students' representatives are not only dependent on informal information coming from administrative staff (i.e. not publicly accessible or even not written information) but also on informal decision making procedures carried out by one individual.

6.3 Experiences with recognition procedures

Despite the diversity and intransparency of procedures, a majority of students consider their attempts for recognizing their learning from student activism as informal learning successful. Nevertheless, one third of the respondents was not successful in their attempts. Personal impressions from students' representatives collected in this survey show concerns of their institution not wanting them to get student activism recognized: *"The university is very strict on this thing (they don't really want us to have more credits for volunteering) and no local organisation on my university could get past the requests they made."*

Have your attempts for recognition of student activism been successful?

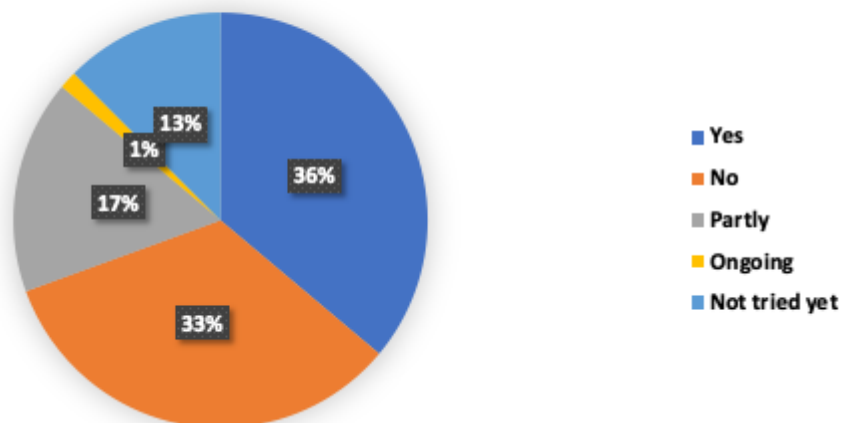


Fig 16

Further personal impressions point out that possibilities to get student activism recognized are very important to students' representatives who can't do it yet due to missing procedures and regulations. The procedure of recognition is described as positive only by 14% of the respondents, as easy by 20%, whereas nearly half of them claim it to be negative, complicated or stressful.

Would you describe the procedure of recognition...

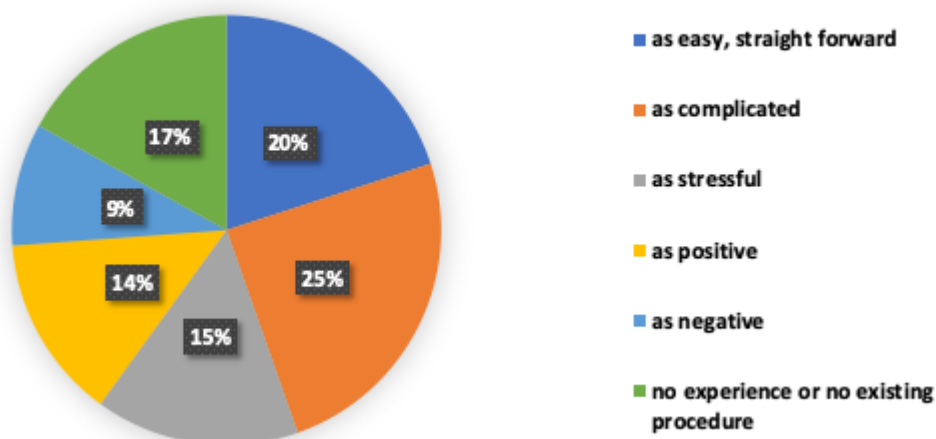


Fig 17

Further personal experiences and insights from students' representatives show the bureaucracy of the process is an issue for students' representatives as well as their dependency on the responsible

unit from the university. Some of them also mention that the recognition doesn't reflect the real workload done within the students' representation. Also strict deadlines, long waiting times and complex processes were mentioned as challenging.

Conclusions and findings

Within this paper, the recognition of representative student activism as informal learning in higher education is studied. Results draw on two qualitative surveys, conducted 2019 in more than 10 countries among student unions and individual activists.

At the national level, findings show a rare legal basis for recognition informal learning, resulting in highly diverse regulations at institutional levels. In some cases, regulations are formalized and transparent (e.g. standards for calculating ECTS from informal learning in student activism, clear processes and responsible units within the university body). In other cases, recognition is based on individualized decisions, especially when it comes to recognition of informal learning within specific courses (e.g. classes involving working experiences or internships). The lack of national or regional policies and regulations results in a variety hard to overlook by students. Only a few countries or institutions have transparent regulations, linking informal learning from student activism directly to the curriculum elements or offering additional certification or remarks in the transcript.

Experiences from individual representative student activists range from smooth and transparent procedures to informal and hardly understandable processes. One of the main challenges experienced, is the lack of understandable and accessible information. Often, students depend on informal networks, as other students or administrative personnel, to receive information related to application procedures and decision making. This results in negative experiences, understanding the recognition of informal learning as complicated and stressful processes. Also, students express their impression of institutional lack of interest in recognizing student activism as informal learning.

Three steps of recognition of student activism as informal learning can be identified from this survey: First documents or confirmations need to be handed in, second, a decision-taking body confirms or decides about the recognition. Decision-taking bodies, units or people differ a lot at various institutions and might include one or more persons, however, in nearly any cases students' representatives are mentioned as being involved in the process. As third step the decision proceeds to the official recognition.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the feedback from national student unions on one hand and on personal experiences from students' representatives within their institutions on the other hand. On the national level, legal regulations - as committed by the responsible ministers - need to be implemented in all EHEA countries. Non-existing regulations result in legal uncertainty and incomprehensible procedures for students' representatives. Student activism needs to be received not only as a learning process but also as an important contribution to higher education in general and to the specific institution in particular.

Understanding the recognition of student activism as informal learning in HE as an example of the recognition of informal learning in general, survey results shout out for the development of national policies and legal regulations. While representative student activism is a relatively clear field of activity to be recognized, informal learning and engagement involves an extensive diversity of learning outcomes to be recognised as informal learning. National policies and regulations need to take this diversity into account and ensure procedures to be embedded at institutional level, that are transparent and reliable. It is recommended to develop these regulations in the light of the National Qualifications Framework, but also in relation to quality assurance policies. The European Framework for Quality Assurance in Higher Education could be used as a starting point for these developments.

The survey shows highly diverse and often intransparent procedures at institutional levels, resulting in negative experiences with recognition of informal learning. Thus, recommendations for institutions focus on the development of transparent and reliable procedures for the recognition of informal learning. This includes the development of institutional policies as well as the training of staff and academics involved in the process of recognition. Moreover, exchange of best practices and collaboration among universities and departments of the same field at regional and national level are highly recommended, to avoid inter-institutional conflicts.

Moreover, a transparent information system on recognition of informal learning is recommended at institutional level. This should include representative student activism, as well as other forms of student engagement and ideally be linked to policies of recognition of prior learning. Information needs to be understandable and accessible, including counselling for understanding complex matters of recognition. Not only the decision-making process, but also the decision must be transparent and understandable, including a timely written decision and a structured process of appeal. Student representatives should be involved in the development of these institutional regulations and its execution.

The example of recognizing student activism makes the lack of regulations and transparency for recognition of informal learning in many countries and institutions visible. While policies at European level take a clear stand in favour of the recognition of prior learning for decades, policy implementation at national and institutional level still have a way to go. However, stakeholders in many countries are aware of their responsibility towards transparent and fair recognition of informal learning and have started to develop perspectives and policies, which could be used as a starting point for an enhanced dialogue at European and national level.

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