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Practical guidelines: implementing digital Learning Agreements

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INTRODUCTION

These guidelines on implementing digital Learning Agreements are meant for practitioners in the field of Internationalisation who are involved in assessing and managing Erasmus+ Learning Agreements. They consist of a set of concrete steps, tips and hints that are applicable in the daily context of the International Relations Office and decentralised internationalisation services.

In the first part of the guidelines we focus on the Learning Agreement itself. In what context is it used and how does such a learning agreement come into being? It also touches upon common practices related to such Learning Agreements. The second part will zoom into the EWP functionality for supporting digital Learning Agreements. In the final part a set of critical success factors will be presented. The guidelines will be concluded with a link to good practices on EWP-implementation in the EWP Competence Centre.

The guidelines are a snapshot of the situation in early 2023. These practical guidelines are complementary to the [official guidelines on the use of Online Learning Agreements](#) issued by the European Commission.

ERASMUS+ LEARNING AGREEMENT: THE BASICS

The Learning Agreement is an agreement between the sending/home and receiving/host higher education institution and the participating individuals, defining the aims and content of the mobility period in order to ensure its relevance and quality. It is also the basis for recognition of the period abroad by the sending organisation (Erasmus+ Programme guide 2021).

Before the Learning Agreement comes into focus a selection and nomination process has taken place (out of scope for this document). In some cases, the intended courses

to be taken at the receiving/host institution is a selection criterion for the selection process but oftentimes the content of the exchange comes only at a later stage.

EWP-FUNCTIONALITY SUPPORTING DIGITAL LEARNING AGREEMENTS

In order to have a fully digital Learning Agreement, it is important that data from this document and approvals can be exchanged in a digital manner between all parties involved in the Learning Agreement. Therefore, systems in use at higher education institutions need to speak a common language and this language is defined by EWP at a central level. In the context of EWP a so-called “API-specification” allows systems in the network to communicate & understand each other. The EWP network itself is a middle layer solution that interconnects different nodes (systems that have successfully connected to the network). It functions on the basis of a peer-to-peer communication protocol, where no information exchanged among the parties is ever stored.

The local implementation is the system that HEIs use to connect to the EWP network and entails the functionality to manage Learning Agreements. The provider of your software needs to develop specific functionalities to be able to exchange the Learning Agreement via EWP. In doing so it is important that your input about the business processes is taken into account in order to make sure the system is adapted to your needs.

This local implementation can either be part of an in-house solution, 3rd-party mobility management software or the EWP Dashboard. This is part of the EWP basics, more info can be found [here](#).

Once both partners are using a system connected to EWP and have a local implementation providing the functionalities needed, they can exchange messages following the pre-defined protocols. In doing so, end users can see data shared by the

partner in their local system and can reject and comment on or approve a Learning Agreement shared by the partner.

To summarise, from an end-user perspective EWP consists of functionalities integrated in the software in use for managing student mobility. The software allows you to exchange Learning Agreements approved by the student and the sending higher education institution, as well as reject/approve agreements from the receiving higher education institution.

What does EWP cater for?

Share first version of Learning Agreement approved by student & sending HEI

Approve/reject Learning Agreement + comment by receiving HEI

Share updated versions of Learning Agreement approved by student & sending HEI

More transparent Learning Agreement processes

What does EWP not cater for?

Add comments when approving LA

Initiate Learning Agreement at receiving HEI

Currently it is not yet possible to list courses available at the receiving HEI. This functionality is already foreseen in the EWP ecosystem and a prototype API was successfully tested during the [Norm project](#) and in time this will also become available via EWP.

Introducing a clear approval process

With the new Learning Agreement template introduced as part of the Erasmus+ programme in 2021, a clear process and sequence of Learning Agreement approvals was introduced.

As a first step, the student should explore the course catalogue at the receiving institution and discuss with his/her “Responsible person at the Sending Institution” (terminology from the official template, terminology might differ at several higher education institutions) what courses to take at the receiving higher education institution and what courses (or a reference to a mobility window) will be replaced at the home institution. Once the content of the first Learning Agreement is agreed upon, the student will approve it and send it (oftentimes this is an automatic step) to the responsible person at the sending institution for approval. The responsible person can either approve or reject the Learning Agreement.

Automatic recognition is now also an integral part of the Learning Agreement template and the sending institution has to either confirm automatic recognition or justify the reason for awarding an alternative recognition. For each learning component there is a

checkbox that by default is set to “yes” for automatic recognition. By maintaining this default selection, the sending institutions confirms that all credits gained abroad - as agreed in the digital Learning Agreement and confirmed by the Transcript of Records - will be transferred without delay and counted towards the students' degree without any additional work or assessment of the student.

If the “no” check box is selected, a clear justification needs to be provided and an indication on what other type of formal recognition will be applied (e.g. registration in the students' diploma supplement or Europass Mobility Document). The sending institution changing the default “yes” value equals the rejection from the Learning Agreement. It is send back to the student and clarifications as to what alternative pathways of recognition would be applied need to be confirmed by the student.

When the Learning Agreement is rejected it is sent back to the student who should act upon the comments attached to such rejection. Afterwards it is sent again for validation to the sending coordinator. Upon approval of the sending coordinator, the Learning Agreement is sent to the receiving higher education institution which can either approve or reject with comments. When rejected the process starts over again with the introduction of any changes requested in the comments and approval of the student and the sending partner. When approved by all three parties, the Learning Agreement is considered finalized. Such Learning Agreement approved by 3 parties (student, sending institution, receiving institution), should be established before the mobility takes place and is the contractual basis for recognition.

STEP 1: Student initiates & approves LA at sending HEI

- Based on the course catalogue at the receiving HEI
- Content to be discussed with academic coordinator
- When finalised & approved → step 2

STEP 2: Sending HEI rejects/approves

- When rejected with comments → back to step 1
- When approved → step 3

STEP 3: Receiving rejects/approves

- When rejected with comments -> back to step 1/2
- When approved: first version of LA is approved

Exceptional changes to the approved version of the Learning Agreement

When the student arrives at the receiving institution it is often not possible to take all the courses indicated in the Learning Agreement because of timetable conflicts, courses not on offer for the given academic term, courses already full... The student can modify the Learning Agreement in the system of the sending higher education institution. A new version of the Learning Agreement is created based on the first version that was approved earlier and the student can clarify the removal of initially foreseen courses or addition of new ones via standardised answer options or open remarks (this is only the case for the so-called long-term mobility in the template referred to as mobility type "semesters"). The process starts all over again with approval by the student - sending higher education institution - receiving higher education institution. Both sending & receiving coordinators can reject the Learning Agreement with comments that should be acted upon by the student in order to establish a Learning Agreement approved by the three parties involved.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

- All higher education institutions implementing student mobility for studies are connected to EWP with a working EWP connection;
- All nodes in the network can exchange Learning Agreement versions in a seamless manner. Therefore they need to follow the technical specifications and take into account the [mandatory business requirements](#) (When not all nodes in the EWP network can exchange Learning Agreement data in a seamless manner, it should be clear which partners are using software leading to many interoperability issues so the EWP network operators can intervene and international officers can focus on what works);
- A common understanding amongst end users of what exactly is supported via EWP when it comes to Learning Agreements;
- Staff at the higher education institution need to rethink their business processes for dealing with Learning Agreements in this digital reality;
- An effective [support desk](#) (already operational) for addressing interoperability issues (issues in data exchanges);
- Restriction to sharing only one Learning Agreement per same mobility via EWP. This Learning Agreement can have many versions;
- Institutions using in-house solutions as well as 3rd party providers need IT-resources for supporting the EWP flow of data;
- Digital change is cultural change: staff members need time to embrace this digital reality and workflows.

BEST PRACTICES

Keep an eye on the “[implementing EWP](#)” series in the EWP Competence Centre.