



A Qualitative study: Crossed perspectives on student engagement and its recognition in European Higher Education Institutions

European

Student Engagement Project

European STEP - Study Report

January 2021



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TABLE OF CONTENT

Abbreviations	5
About European STEP	6
What is European STEP?	9
Introduction	10
The European STEP interviews	11
Part I - A plurality of student engagements in Europe	12
The concept of student engagement in Europe	12
Students engagements: proposition of a typology	13
Engagement as a bandage	14
Engagement for a cause	14
The “Christian charity” engagement	15
Engagement to professionalisation - engagement for personal-development	15
Engagement to take part in a collective project	16
An engaged student profile?	17
Engaged students from all levels of study	17
Engaged students from all fields of study	18
From a one-off engagement to an engagement path	19
Part II - The institutions and students’ perceptions on student engagement recognition	20
What is student engagement recognition in higher education?	21
Formal recognition linked to the diploma	21
Recognition as a form of a facilitation of students' academic life	22
Recognition in the form of non-academic awards for students and as a community building tool	23
Recognition of the skills acquired through student engagement activities	24
Recognition through financial support for student engagement	26
Recognition linked to the national legislation and reglementation framework	26
A third mission: HEIs, “citizen factories”?	27
Universities’ perception on its role and its place in society	28
Students’ perception of university	30
Cultural, generational and societal reasons explaining the different point of views on this issue	31
The influence of the labour market and skills-based approach on the perception of the role of universities	34
Isn’t everyone ready?	36
Part III – The effects of student engagement recognition on students’ paths	37
From an academic perspective	38



From a student's perspective	38
Encouraging more students to get involved?	39
Is recognition affecting the meaning of student engagement?	40
From an academic perspective	40
From a student's perspective	40
Is a co-construction process an answer?	41
Does recognition lead to different engagement paths?	42
Recognition allows engagement path	43
Recognition is not necessary for student engagement	43
Conclusion	45
Sources	47



Abbreviations

1. **CGE** – Conférence des Grandes Écoles (EN: "Conference of Grandes Écoles")
2. **COMUE** – Communauté d'universités et établissements (EN: Community of Universities and Higher Education Institutions)
3. **CNESER** – Le Conseil national de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche (EN: Communities of universities and institutions)
4. **CPU** – La Conférence des présidents d'université (EN: the French Conference of University Presidents)
5. **CROUS** - Centre régional des oeuvres universitaires et scolaires (EN: The Crous are the affiliates of the French national student service agency)
6. **CSR** – Corporate Social Responsibility
7. **ECTS** – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
8. **EU** – European Union
9. **EUA** – the European University Association
10. **European STEP** – European STudent Engagement Project
11. **HEI** – Higher Education Institution
12. **Höög** – Hungarian name of the Student Unions
13. **NGO** - Non-government organisation
14. **ÖH** – Österreichische Hochschülerinnenschaft Austrian name for the Student Unions



About European STEP

European STEP is a European project that questions the role of youth engagement in Europe. In the current European context where the active participation of young people in society is highlighted through the EU's Youth Strategy for 2019-2027¹ and mechanisms such as the European Solidarity Corps², the question of recognising young people's engagement arises.

Since September 2018, the French student associations network, Animafac³, has been coordinating the Erasmus + European Student Engagement Project (European STEP⁴), in cooperation with six European partners: the European University Foundation (EUF) in Luxembourg⁵, the Office of Student Life of Dublin City University in Ireland⁶, the CY Cergy Paris University in France⁷, the University of Valladolid in Spain⁸, the University of Vienna in Austria⁹ and the Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw in Poland¹⁰.

Moreover, four associated partners are involved in the project to ensure the dissemination of the project and its results: the French Conference of Grandes Ecoles (CGE)¹¹, the French Conference of University Presidents (CPU)¹², the Crous¹³ and the European University Association (EUA)¹⁴.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en

² https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity_en

³ <https://www.animafac.net/>

⁴ The European STEP project is an Erasmus+ co-funded strategic partnership project, for the period of September 2018 to June 2021

⁵ <https://uni-foundation.eu/>

⁶ <https://www.dcu.ie/studentlife/office-of-student-life>

⁷ <https://www.u-cergy.fr/en/index.html>

⁸ <https://www.observal.es/es/>

⁹ <https://www.univie.ac.at/en/>

¹⁰ <https://wolontariat.uw.edu.pl/volunteers/>

¹¹ <https://www.cge.asso.fr/>

¹² <http://www.cpu.fr/presentation/presentation-of-the-cpu/>

¹³ <https://www.etudiant.gouv.fr/pid33797/cnous-crous.html>

¹⁴ <https://eua.eu/>



Partners of the project

* ANIMAFAC



universität
wien



OFFICE OF
STUDENT LIFE



UNIVERSITÉ
de Cergy-Pontoise



Volunteer Centre
University of Warsaw



EUUF EUROPEAN
UNIVERSITY
FOUNDATION

Associated partners



CONFÉRENCE DES
GRANDES
ÉCOLES

eua

EUROPEAN
UNIVERSITY
ASSOCIATION



CONFÉRENCE
DES PRÉSIDENTS
D'UNIVERSITÉ





What is European STEP?

This project focuses on the recognition of young people's active participation in student academic curricula. It will provide an overview of practices in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of the European Union (EU)¹⁵. In the long term, the project aims to contribute to the recognition and enhancement of student engagement in Europe, in particular as a factor in the development of transversal skills complementary to the academic path.

In order to carry out the project, the consortium is leading a major study on student engagement recognition in three steps.

1. The first step was the mapping of legislative frameworks for student engagement recognition in Europe. The results allowed for the creation of a map and classification of the countries into three categories: countries with a policy framework on the recognition of student engagement for higher education in particular; countries with other policy frameworks on the recognition of engagement independent from higher education; and countries without any policy framework on the recognition of engagement. The results are available on the project website of European STEP¹⁶.
2. The second step consisted of the identification of HEIs policies and practices for the recognition of student engagement. To this end, a survey intended for European HEIs was disseminated, with an online questionnaire on their recognition measures and policies. The results of the Preliminary Report can be found on the dedicated website¹⁷.
3. The third step is a qualitative study including interviews with students, teaching and administrative staff in European HEIs to acquire a precise knowledge of the recognition issue and understand how the place of student engagement varies from one institution to another and from one country to another.

¹⁵ The mapping of legislative frameworks for student engagement recognition in Europe, the online survey and the preliminary report on measures of student engagement recognition in HEI

¹⁶ <https://www.animafac.net/minisite/european-step/european-step-en/>

¹⁷ https://www.animafac.net/media/2019.10.29-O2_Preliminary_Report_Final_compressed.pdfReport



Introduction

What does student engagement mean in Europe? How do students, professors and administrative staff perceive student engagement? How do they perceive the role of the skills acquired through engagement in extra-academic activities in different higher education institutions (HEIs)? And in European countries? What are the impacts of the recognition of these engagements on student career paths but also on their lives and professional paths?

The first steps of the project, including the Preliminary Report¹⁸, demonstrated that there is no single definition of student engagement in Europe, either in legislative or regulatory frameworks of the different countries or among institutions. Likewise, there is no single strategy for the recognition of student engagement in European HEIs. The modalities of recognition vary from one institution to another. However, similar modalities can be found in several countries. Furthermore, the results of the mapping and the preliminary report¹⁹ showed that despite the lack of national legislation or regulatory framework in their countries, HEIs are choosing to develop measures for the recognition of student engagement.

In order to better understand the concept of student engagement in Europe and how its place varies across institutions and countries, the European STEP project partners conducted 90 interviews. They were done across 34 HEIs in 11 different countries: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain. Engaged students, professors, staff members involved in engagement issues, and representatives of student organisations participated in the interviews.

This report is an overview of this third step of the study on the recognition of student engagement. The first part examines the notion of student engagement in Europe. It also presents a typology of student engagements based on the analysis of the interviews. The second part shows the different perceptions of the institutions on their role in this process. Finally, the last part examines the effect of recognition on student engagement and on their academic and life paths.

¹⁸ The mapping of legislative frameworks for student engagement recognition in Europe, the online survey and the preliminary report on measures of student engagement recognition in HEI:

https://www.animafac.net/media/2019.10.29-O2_Preliminary_Report_Final_compressed.pdf

¹⁹ *ibid*



The European STEP interviews

Between July 2019 and January 2020, the European STEP partners, Animafac, CY Cergy Paris University, Dublin City University, the University of Valladolid, the Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw and the University of Vienna, conducted:

- **90 interviews** with:
 - 46 engaged students
 - 28 members of the administrative staff of the institutions
 - 14 teachers
 - 1 representative of a host organisation of engaged students, the Éco-Charlie in Nice
 - 1 representative of a national university association, the Irish Universities Association (IUA)

- **in 34 higher education institutions (HEIs) in 11 countries:**
 - **Austria:** University of Vienna
 - **Belgium:** Université Libre de Bruxelles, Hogent University College
 - **Czech Republic:** Charles University
 - **France:** CY Cergy Paris University, ENSEA, Clermont-Auvergne University, Côte d'Azur University, Lille University, Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne University, Strasbourg University, Tours University
 - **Hungary:** University of Budapest, National University of Public Services
 - **Ireland:** Dublin City University, Maynooth University, Ulster University
 - **Lithuania:** Mykolas Romeris University
 - **The Netherlands:** University of Maastricht, the Royal Academy of Arts, University of Utrecht
 - **Poland:** SGH Warsaw School of Economics, University of Łódź, Medical University of Warsaw, University of Warsaw
 - **Portugal:** Polytechnic Institute of Leiria
 - **Spain:** University of Cantabria, University of Coruña, University Fabra De Pompeu, University of La Rioja, University Miguel Hernández el Elche, University Oberta de Catalunya, University of Valencia, University of Valladolid.

It should be noted that the rate of French respondents is higher in this study, although the number of HEIs represented is the same as in Spain.



Part I - A plurality of student engagements in Europe

This section proposes to question the notion of student engagement in Europe. What is student engagement? Can we talk about student engagement in general or about several types of student engagement?

The concept of student engagement in Europe

The European STEP project allowed us to approach the notion of student engagement at three different levels²⁰:

- **At the national level:** we obtained an overview of the legislative and regulatory frameworks in the European Union countries with the elaboration of the mapping between September and December 2018.
- **At the institutional level:** we obtained an overview of HEI's' strategies, policies and mechanisms related to the recognition of student engagement in twenty-six EU countries with the online questionnaire conducted between February and April 2019.
- **At the individual level:** we obtained an overview of how student engagement is perceived by engaged students, professors and administrators involved in engagement issues from thirty-three institutions with the interviews conducted between July 2019 and January 2020.

At each of these levels, it appeared that there was no single terminology or unanimous definition of student engagement. It can be explained by the differences between the languages as the same term does not necessarily have the same meaning depending on the language and/or the culture. But it can also be explained by the fact that the different actors mentioned above (legislators, administrative staff and students) do not interpret the term student engagement in the same way.

At the national or regional legislation and regulations level, some countries will refer to "volunteering", "civic engagement" or "social engagement". At the European level, we find the notion of "participation in democratic life" highlighted in the EU Strategy for Youth for the 2019-2027 period²¹. As a result, the partners of the European STEP project presented student engagement in a variety of ways to those participating in the survey²²: *the dynamic participation of students in citizenship, solidarity, sports and cultural activities, in volunteering, political, social, associative and extra-academic engagement, as well as their engagement in their universities and on their campuses.*

²⁰ <https://www.animafac.net/minisite/european-step/european-step-en/>

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en

²² Here we mean the people who answered the online questionnaire and those who participated in the interviews.



At the HEIs level, different types of activities can be considered as student engagement. It can cover engagement with associations or student organisations, engagement with solidarity or citizenship activities in different types of structures such as NGOs (volunteering/civic engagement), extra-curricular, cultural or sporting activities, student representation, tutoring, professional activity and political engagement. The online survey also underlines that institutions do not consider student engagement only within the institution: student engagement can take place outside the university.

At the engaged students, professors and administrative staff level, student engagement is also plural. It can take many forms. Indeed the interviews conducted for the European STEP project showed that the contexts of engagement, the aspirations, the place given to studies in a student's life, the vision of the role of the university, the environment, the personal situation of individuals, and so on, can produce different types of engagement. How can they be qualified? What criteria should be used to define the term 'engagement': the time invested in an activity (episodic, periodic or regular)? The nature of the engagement? Where the engagement takes place? The cause carried? But also what is the place of engagement? For some, student engagement is a path, for others, engagement is a stage.

Finally, the concept of student engagement in Europe covers many forms of engagement. The following section proposes to deal with this issue in depth through a typology of student engagements.

Student engagements : proposition of a typology

We have elaborated a typology of engagements, based on our interviews with the forty-six engaged students. We also used the typology proposed by Claire Thoury in her thesis "*Student engagement in a world of individualisation: identity construction and political careers*"²³. In the study we could see that students can recognise themselves in several types of engagement at the same time. Thus, we propose the following types of engagement.

Engagement as a bandage

Engagement as a bandage refers to engagement: "as a space for building identity in order to better face problems or doubts"²⁴. For instance, in our sample, we found students who, through engagement, have managed to overcome their shyness for example by joining a group, or meeting others and to become more comfortable in society.

²³ Claire Thoury, *Student engagement in a world of individualisation: identity construction and political careers.*, Sociology. Université Sorbonne Paris Cité, 2017. In her thesis, Claire Thoury presents the following typology: commitment as a bandage, commitment to Christian charity, commitment with a professionalising vocation, commitment as a response "to identity trials" (Dubet, François, Martuccelli, Danilo, *Dans quelle société vivons-nous*, Editions du Seuil, 1998). Based on our sample, we have identified certain similar types of commitment and adapted the typology accordingly. We did not find the last two types of commitment in this typology.

²⁴ Ibid



"I overcame my shyness. I was a facilitator, so I had to speak in public. I learnt a lot." (Engaged Student
- University of Strasbourg, France)

We have noted that it concerns students who, by getting involved in a collective project important to them, are also making their way towards socialisation. They may involve whether in student or non-student organisations, or as student representatives. We can find this type of engagement in France, Spain and Poland.

Engagement for a cause

In this type of engagement, students choose to join a specific cause. It is this specific cause that motivates and animates them, often in accordance with their visions of the world and society. These engagements may be political in nature, but that does not necessarily mean that the students are politically engaged. They can be environmental, social, activist, conviction-based, in favor of equal opportunities or anti-poverty engagements, for example. This engagement for a cause can be found among students from multiple countries: Belgium, France, Spain, Ireland, Poland and the Czech Republic.

For some of them, their engagement is linked to the subject of their studies (social career, sociology, medicine, law, political science). This engagement with a cause may appear in voluntary work but also in their professional choices, in parallel with their studies or after their studies.

"I see myself working with non-profit organisations or associations. I'd never noticed before now but, choosing to study law was already an engagement. When I made this decision, there were already things I didn't like, I wanted to change laws. And now, I want to change things with my future job. Currently, the environment is the topic I'm interested in, so I'd like to have a job linked to this subject."
(Engaged Student - University of Strasbourg, France)

The "Christian charity" engagement

Here we are not necessarily referring to a religious engagement (none of the people interviewed did so), but to the idea of helping others, of serving, of giving time to be useful. We find this type of engagement among students in Austria, France, Hungary, Ireland, Poland and Spain. For example, they are helping their fellow students, cleaning their city, or helping animal protection organisations.

"I just wanted to serve." (Engaged Student - Höög, Hungary)



Engagement to professionalisation - engagement for personal-development

In this type of engagement students get engaged to broaden their curricula, to develop practical and technical skills that they can use later on. We have associated this type of engagement with commitment to personal development because these students insist on the individual qualities they develop at the same time. Indeed, they acquire skills they can use later on: human qualities, *soft skills*²⁵, etc. The students concerned here are in medical studies, law and engineering from Austria, Spain, France and Poland.

“The skills I've learned [during the engagement] help with work, relationships and general day to day life. It has also helped me to grow as a person and has benefitted me personally in so many ways. It has helped me to figure out what kind of career path I would like to take also.” (Engaged Student - Dublin City University, Ireland)

Also, they mention engagement as a way to create a network and sometimes to enter the professional environment in which they want to work. Besides acquiring skills, it is also a way to create a network for students' future careers. For instance, a Polish student representative from the Medical University of Warsaw, mentioned the idea of creating social capital through engagement, "the resources that result from taking part in networks of relationships that are more or less institutionalised"²⁶.

"It's good for networking.” (Engaged Student - The Medical University of Warsaw, Poland)

Thus, skill acquisition and the importance of professional experiment become reasons to get engaged. More precisely, we can see that there are some students who engage more to develop skills than to be involved in a cause they believe in. Skill acquisition has become an end in itself.

“Students now are searching for a different kind of engagement. Engagement that will help them to build skills that they won't get during traditional academic classes” (Administrative Staff member - the Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw, Poland)

²⁵ Definition of soft skills according to the European project elen4work <http://elene4work.eu/el4w-project/>: a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills. They help people to adapt and behave in a positive way in order to be able to meet the challenges of their professional and daily life

²⁶ Dominique Méda, « Le capital social : un point de vue critique », *L'Économie politique*, 2002/2 (no 14), p. 36-47



Engagement to take part in a collective project

Here we find students who are involved in different causes but whose goal is to participate in the construction or development of a common project. For this type of engagement we can find testimonies from students, representatives, volunteers from Austria, Belgium, Spain, France and Poland.

"In fact, it was when I arrived at my Social Studies degree that I realised that the collective dynamic that I had in the OTC of Social Career was no longer present at all in Social Studies. I saw different student paths. People were completely individualistic, they didn't necessarily care about each person's career path, there was no common project, there were no things that brought students together and thus I took the initiative of creating an association at the time." (Former student involved in student associations and associations in general – University of Tours, France)

To conclude, this typology therefore presents several types of engagements for a sample of forty-six students. There may, of course, be others. For example, some students engaged because of their friends or family.

"I used to have mates who took part in these work groups and that is how I started to participate in them. Moreover, I already knew about the experience because my brother participated in these groups before I did." (Student Representative – University of Valladolid, Spain)

Finally, it is interesting to remark that there is no country trend here. We find similar types of engagements in different countries and, similarly, in different institutions.

An engaged student profile?

After discussing the notion of student engagement through the different types of engagement represented in our study, we will now look at the question of the profile of students who are engaged. This will be based on the answers given by professors and administrative staff from the institutions interviewed in this study.

Engaged students from all levels of study

Is there an engaged student profile based on the level of study? Are incoming students more engaged than almost graduated students?



According to an Irish student representative working on the topic of student engagement, students who are the most engaged are the first-year, undergraduate and newcomer students. It can be explained by the fact that they would have more time due to less demanding academic programs. They are also the ones who live closer to the campus and can get there more easily.

“Typically, students living on or close to campus are more likely to engage than commuting students. First and second year undergraduate students tend to be more engaged than students further into their course, and postgraduate students.” (Student representative - Dublin City University, Ireland)

In France and Belgium, this is the opposite. The interviewees from both countries consider that students are engaging at a later stage of their academic path. They mention maturity in two ways. First, maturity regarding what they want and secondly maturity regarding their knowledge and their adaptation to student life, which gained stability with time. When reaching this stage, students choose their engagement(s), and as we have seen, several factors can be taken into account.

In Spain, both tendencies coexist and coexist equally. For example, an administrative staff member at the University of Valladolid told us that *“there is a higher proportion of [engaged students] between 18-20 years”*, whereas one at the University of Cantabria stated that *“most of the students belong to the last years of their degrees”*.

Thus, according to our respondents there does not seem to be a student profile based on the age or the level of study as it may depend on the country or the region of the country concerned.

Engaged students from all fields of study

Is there an engaged student profile based on the field of study?

In all university courses there are engaged students. According to members of volunteer centres, to services dedicated to engagement and to associations, we find engaged students in natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, administration, management, and so on. However, they may not have the same commitment to the same cause and may not necessarily get involved for the same reasons. Some explain that it is sometimes easier or more obvious for a social science student to get engaged and to know in which area to get engaged. For example, in the Czech Republic, a member of administrative staff does see a link between engagement and students in political science, history and humanities. For the administrator: *“those fields that are naturally inclined to study and try to understand society”*. Moreover, a member of administrative staff in CY Cergy Paris University in France noted that



the most engaged students were law students. Nevertheless, this does not mean that students from other fields do not want to get involved outside their academic path.

“I can’t imagine just studying now. It would be boring and not enough to study only for tests and exams, especially such material that is not necessarily useful. Here I can do something for myself, for the future [...]. Well, I can’t imagine going to university and just studying because then you graduate and don’t know what to do.” (Engaged Student - Medical University of Warsaw, Poland)

From a one-off engagement to an engagement path

Is there a student profile based on the duration of the engagement? Does student engagement last for their whole university curriculum or not?

A Spanish administrative staff member observes that engagement has well developed, but that it has changed. It seems to be more episodic, more intermittent than before, when it was more in a long-term period. The interviewee also notes that there are new conceptions of civic engagement, of citizen participation and of mobilisation for a cause among young people. Students will do one activity over a relatively short period of time and then switch to another activity afterwards.

“In my opinion it has not risen, but it has risen. It is true that there are more students who participate, but in more specific activities. In addition, it has changed in the concept that we have of volunteering, in citizen participation, and mobilisation for a concrete cause.” (Administrative staff – Cooperation and Volunteering office of the University of Coruña, Spain)

In Poland, despite shorter academic paths, the interviewees seem to agree that there is a new trend in Polish society. Young people are becoming more involved and aware of active engagement in civil society. The interviewees highlight that a few years ago, engaged students were mostly older students who were involved in extra-academic activities to gain experience. Indeed, engagement was not properly understood. Engaged students had to justify themselves to their families and their peers in the way they had to explain that this would be valuable in finding a job. Nowadays, interviewed administrative staff members see students arriving at university with an experience of engagement from high school. They are wishing to continue their engagement, meet new people, gain experience, and be involved in concrete action. Their engagement is, today, better understood by people around them and also is given more media coverage.



“I guess that if we have something cool to share with others we should definitely share it. I can be just a student, go to the university and so on, but I think that it is very cool that I have this strength to help someone. Even on the very local level, because I adhere to the “think global, act local” principle.”
(Engaged student – University of Warsaw, Poland)

Based on this overview of student engagement, we could get closer to the idea of a path of engagement. It means that an engagement is leading to another, a common thread that links different engagements together or guides the academic paths. This is especially true for the engaged students who participated in the European STEP survey.

For example, the French respondents have been involved in associations or on their campus since the beginning of their curriculum and have never stopped. For instance, we can cite this student from the University of Lille: from a first engagement in a University association, this student founded a federation of student associations and became its first vice president before being elected as a student representative, and then as a student vice president at the University.

A similar situation exists in Austria, Hungary or Poland, where elected representatives with responsibilities seem to climb the ladder and levels of representation over the years. Some have continued or wish to continue in their personal and professional life.

Finally, it seems that there is no typical profile of engaged students. Moreover, there are several factors that can explain and qualify student engagement.

Part II - The institutions and students' perceptions on student engagement recognition²⁷

The online questionnaire, to which 104 European institutions responded between February and April 2019, and the following Preliminary Report²⁸ showed that there are different ways of taking into account student engagement in European HEIs. For example, we can find centralised or decentralised strategies for student engagement, dedicated services, institutional communication on the subject, promotion of the associative life of the institution. Some HEIs also take into account engagements into the academic curricula: attendance exemptions, less evaluations and examinations. Some also propose skills portfolios linked to engagement, and so on. Moreover, as we have seen, student

²⁷ You can find more information in the Preliminary Report, available here:
https://www.animafac.net/media/2019.10.29-O2_Preliminary_Report_Final_compressed.pdf

²⁸ *ibid*



engagement is not homogenous. Different modalities of recognition may apply for different types of engagement or for the same type of engagement according to institutions, faculties and countries. Thanks to the interviews conducted as part of the qualitative study, we were able to analyse what do institutions mean by recognition of student engagement. Is it their role to recognise student engagement? To what extent? How does this translate into the implementation of policies on recognition of engagement?

What is student engagement recognition in higher education ?

What do we mean by "recognition of student engagement"? What does it mean to recognise engagement: to name it, to admit it, to acknowledge it²⁹, to give it a value, to validate it? When we talk about recognition of student engagement, the notions of valuation, validation and accreditation come into play. In the interviews, the idea of reward is mentioned as well. Although it is difficult to distinguish precisely between each of these terms, they all participate in a better understanding of what recognition of student engagement is. In this section, we present the different modalities of recognition identified in our study. It is based on the typology of recognition established in the Preliminary Report³⁰.

Formal recognition linked to the diploma

What is formal recognition linked to the diploma? It means that student engagement is taken into account in the university curriculum. For instance, this might include ECTS credits for student engagement activities, the integration of student engagement in the study programs of some or all of the institution's courses; the possibility of having student engagement recognised through an optional module (and validating this module with ECTS credits or bonus points in the semester grade or in a course average, for example). All these examples are from the institutions interviewed in Austria, Belgium, Spain, France, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania and Poland. They all have implemented formal recognition in a way.

For example, at Dublin City University (DCU) in Ireland, the Uaneen module³¹ allows students engaged in extra-curricular activities to validate 5 ECTS credits either as part of an integrated module within the curriculum (credits are integrated into the degree) or as part of a non-contributory module (additional credits to the degree). An administrative staff member explained why it is important for the University to recognise student engagement:

²⁹ For example extra-sup on the recognition and guarantee of students' prior learning and extra-curricular skills: <http://www.extrasup.eu/>

³⁰ Preliminary Report available here: https://www.animafac.net/media/2019.10.29-O2_Preliminary_Report_Final_compressed.pdf

³¹ More information on the website: <https://www.dcu.ie/uaneen/home-uaneen-module>



“[Formal recognition is] vital for young people's self-worth and students in general to be recognised for their efforts in building skill-sets, personal growth and development as this assists with emotional resilience which is an ever expanding issue for the youth of Ireland and their mental health.”

(Administrative staff - Dublin City University, Ireland)

In some French institutions like CY Cergy Paris University, there are "student engagement" courses which make it possible to validate between 3 and 6 ECTS credits, generally according to certain modalities and for certain types of activities.

The Faculty of Economics at the University of Vienna validates 15 ECTS in one semester for elected members of the ÖH Students' Union with positions of responsibility, or for students doing writing mentoring.

Recognition as a form of a facilitation of students' academic life

The aim of this type of recognition is to help students to benefit from accommodations to enable them to combine their studies with engagements. For example, it can consist in adapting their timetables, granting attendance exemptions at some courses or final exams, giving the possibility of having a gap year as part of their studies, and so on. Sometimes this form of recognition is formalised in the HEIs represented in the study and sometimes not.

“On some occasion, you can make the schedule more flexible. For example, for the signature of the volunteer contract between the entity and the student, it is done conveniently for both parties. In the organization of congresses, the schedules can be matched. Alternatively, after the return of a volunteer in another country, at exam period you can change the schedules in order to have the same possibilities.” (Administrative staff - Miguel Hernández University in Elche, Spain)

For instance, at Mykolas Romeris University in Lithuania where the programs are flexible enough to allow students to engage, this is not formalised. Students make agreements with their professors or the director of the department. Indeed, some academics explain that: *“it's done by itself”*, without this being enshrined in the university curriculum.

“But in Lithuania in general each of the students, for one or another reason, are being engaged in the university, outside of the university, or for personal reasons they can ask for individual learning plan anyway.” (Administrative staff - Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania)



In some other institutions, such as the National University of Public Administration in Hungary, the accommodations are this time formalised. For example, elected representatives receive a "personal syllabus" which may give them permission to take the exams in a final examination (*a la carte*).

In Spain, it is notable that the majority of the staff interviewed stressed that it is students themselves who have to choose volunteering activities adequate to their academic curricula.

"The schedules do not need to be adapted, because it is the students who organise themselves according to their availability." (Member of the Volunteer Association - University of Valladolid, Spain)

Recognition in the form of non-academic awards for students and as a community building tool

This type of recognition includes for example a prize to engaged students and certificates of engagement mentioning the activities and sometimes the skills acquired. It can also be the creation of spaces dedicated to associations and student organisations, by allowing the organisation of events within the institution or the elaboration of special communication campaigns by the institution on student activities, and so on.

"If we want to promote our actions somehow, we can also talk to the Information and Promotion Office. They can post information about us on MUW Facebook fan page." (Engaged Student - Medical University of Warsaw, Poland)

Several institutions give awards for student engagement: the "Engage Award" at DCU in Ireland, or the "Daróczy Ágnes Award" at the University of Budapest which is a recognised award in the professional world. The Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw can award a certificate of activities and learning to students. This type of certificate is also awarded by the volunteer services or volunteer associations of Spanish universities.

Finally, in the vast majority of institutions there are dedicated areas for student organisations and many modalities of recognition of student engagement. Most of the time, it seems to be important to have some kind of recognition:

"I think recognition of any effort is important, if the effort goes unrecognised and unrewarded, it likely will not continue. If you want to increase student participation in engagement it needs to be incentivised, and a reward is a good start." (Staff - Irish Universities Association, Ireland)



Recognition of the skills acquired through student engagement activities

This type of recognition includes the validation of engagement experience such as a mandatory internship that requires validation of some specific competences. It can also be the issuance of a diploma supplement mentioning the competences acquired through student engagement; or training sessions for engaged students (e.g. to help them identify the skills they have acquired during their experiences). The certificates mentioned above may also be included in this category.

Formal recognition of skills is not very common among the participating HEIs although the interviews show that both students and academics are aware of the contribution that student engagement can have in terms of developing skills.

“Generally speaking, in order to complete what we can do at the university, to recognise and value student engagement and especially skills developed during engagement, I think that we miss references. (...) We miss references adapted to the French system. For now, I think that we are not ready to recognise skills. It could be thought at a national level.” (Academic Staff - CY Cergy Paris University, France)

Indeed, there are many examples of skills that can be acquired in student engagement: soft skills³² as problem solving, negotiation, networking, to more practical skills such as communication, teamwork, decision-making and initiative taking, project management, management and organisational skills.

As mentioned above, this practice is not often mentioned in the interviews. Nevertheless, it is relevant to mention a few examples. At the Faculty of Law of the University of Łódź in Poland, it is possible to do an internship in addition to the required internship and have it recognised as an optional module. Also, the Mykolas Romeris University in Lithuania offers the possibility to have volunteering experience recognised instead of an internship.

Specific status for engaged students

Engaged students may benefit from specific status in several institutions depending on their engagement: status of a student who has responsibilities in a student organisation, or "engaged student". This practice does not seem to be very widespread or known to the interviewees. But it has been noted by some interviewees. For instance, at the University of Clermont Auvergne, in France,

³² Definition of soft skills according to the European project elen4work <http://elene4work.eu/el4w-project/>: a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills. They help people to adapt and behave in a positive way in order to be able to meet the challenges of their professional and daily life



there are different specific statuses: student artist, student responsible for an association, student volunteer fireman, student engaged in serving in the reserve and sportsman of high and good level. The university tested the status of “Responsible associatif·ve” before its implementation in the French legislation³³

“We tested the status of ‘Responsible associatif·ve’ in one of the two universities, and in the other there were the equivalent, but it was not formalised.” (Student Representative - University of Clermont-Auvergne, France)

For association responsables, this status gives them access to various rights: Registration in the descriptive appendix of the diploma, mentioning the status, the associative engagement and the skills acquired, training on the identification and development of skills; possible access to the Special Study Regime (RSE); punctual authorisation to be absent; possibility of validating the associative engagement and the corresponding activity within the framework of a "Engaged student in a student association" (...) ³⁴.

Recognition through financial support for student engagement

Finally, one other obvious support and way of recognising student engagement is financial support. We can see that these are two different types of financial support.

The first way is when the HEI provides direct financial support to students: at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands elected representatives can be paid; at the University of Vienna their tuition fees can be covered for a certain period of time, as well as at Mykolas Romeris University in Lithuania; Charles University in the Czech Republic can also provide financial support to students involved in humanitarian activities.

“Students can apply for financial support to represent the university at conferences abroad.” (Engaged Student - Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania)

The second way is when the HEI finances associative and student projects through its own funds or partnerships with the city, community, and so on. For example, in France, we can mention the Fonds

³³ Animafac has promoted the creation of a status of association leader and encouraged its experimentation at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 and the Université Clermont Auvergne. The Equality and Citizenship Law promulgated in 2017, without formalising the status, provides a framework for the adjustments that engaged students can benefit from. In French, it is known as “responsable associatif·ve”

³⁴ Website of the University of Clermont-Auvergne.

<https://www.uca.fr/campus/statuts-specifiques-d-etudiant/responsable-associatif/statut-d-etudiant-responsable-associatif-18477.kjsp>



de solidarité et de développement des initiatives étudiante (FSDIE), provided by the French legislation³⁵, or in Belgium the "engagefonds" of the Collège Universitaire Hogent, or the grant for solidarity projects of the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

"We are lucky to have a big budget from the FSDIE which supports student organisations. In general everyone has the amount asked, which is not the case everywhere I guess." (Student Representative - CY Cergy Paris University, France).

Recognition linked to the national legislation and reglementation framework

Finally, we note that there are different types of more or less formal recognition of student engagement. They might be part of the university curriculum or a way to facilitate student engagement. As a consequence, it is difficult to establish a typology of recognition depending on the countries according to the interviews. However we noticed that in institutions in Spain, France, Ireland and Lithuania, four countries where there is legislation on the recognition of student engagement in higher education³⁶, HEIs adopted several types of recognition and sometimes depending on the type of engagement³⁷. In general, institutions from these countries offer several options from academic validation to financial support to curriculum development and student support, while others focus only on ECTS.

In countries where there is a legislative framework on engagement independent from higher education, the institutions represented in the study have nevertheless introduced two types of recognition modalities. First, ECTS credits validated in one semester in some faculties exist, for example in the University of Vienna. Second, support to associations and student projects exists in both Belgian institutions interviewed, which are the Collège Universitaire Hogent and the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

At Charles University in the Czech Republic, recognition measures do not seem to be formalised, but certificates, prizes, or financial support directly for students may be awarded.

According to the interviews, in countries where there is no legislative framework, there are certificates for certain types of activities at the University of Maastricht and financial support for certain types of engagement at the University of Utrecht.

In Poland, in the majority of the institutions represented in the interviews, there are no measures for the recognition of engagement, except at the Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw. The Centre

³⁵ The solidarity and development fund for students' initiatives implemented in 2001: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/2001/32/sup.htm>

³⁶ The 2011 Law on Volunteering in Lithuania, the National Strategy for Higher Education for 2030 in Ireland, the 2015 Law on Volunteering in Spain, the 2017 Law on Equality and Citizenship in France.

³⁷ We do not have enough information on Hungary, a country with the same type of legislation, to establish the same link.



recognises voluntary activities with a certificate of engagement. In some programs, student engagement can be recognised with ECTS. In this case, they can choose between ECTS or a certificate.

This indicates that institutions are addressing the issue of student engagement recognition in different ways, whether or not there is legislation or a regulatory framework.

A third mission: HEIs, “citizen factories”³⁸?

We are aware that student engagement is not a new topic in higher education. Some students have always been engaged in one way or another, others have not. The interviews arose the question of HEIs’ role toward student engagement and its recognition. They allowed us to identify two trends.

The first trend concerns the social dimension of the university. In our contemporary society, where ecological, social, political and cultural challenges are multifaceted, we can question the role that HEIs have to play. The social dimension of the university is being highlighted in the European Higher Education area. Furthermore, the active participation of young people appears to be the main challenge of the European Union's Youth Strategy for the 2019-2027 period. Therefore the university is being considered not only as a place dedicated to theoretical learning and research, but also as a place to train citizens.

“We want our students to have social skills, to be informed citizens, to be critical, to be aware of the world's problems and act to change them. Volunteering contributes to social transformation.”
(Administrative staff - University of Cantabria, Spain)

Indeed, in the interviews, when the issue of the recognition of student engagement is raised the idea of a university committed to contributing to societies’ contemporary challenges appears. According to this vision, the university would support students in the construction of their identity and as citizens. For some of the interviewees, this mission is not new. For HEIs from Austria, Belgium, France, Poland and Czech Republic this is the new mission or the third mission of the university. The university has to endorse a societal role, turned towards the community and society.

The second trend would be the opposite view, which means that some, for example administrative staff, think that it’s not the role of university. HEI would only be a place to learn academic knowledge.

³⁸ This expression can be found in the interview of a French engaged student.



Universities' perception on its role and its place in society

On the one hand, it seems that according to this social dimension of higher education, the university plays a primordial role in training engaged citizens.

"The today university from the 21st century, in the context of the social framework of the European space, indicated in its origins that there is a social dimension in the university, and that social dimension is not only to train in terms of teaching and research, which are the two main ones, but also to train citizen." (Administrative Staff – University of Valladolid, Spain)

In Ireland, this idea can also be found in the "Campus Engage"³⁹ initiative, which brings together the seven Irish universities and the Dublin University of Technology. Its aim is to support Irish HEIs in integrating and promoting civic, citizenship and community engagement among students and academics. To support this initiative the volunteer platform, Studentvolunteer.ie, has been created.

In France, the Equality and Citizenship Act has been promulgated in 2017. The Article 29 of Chapter 1 "Encouraging the republican engagement of all citizens to foster fraternity"⁴⁰, invites institutions to recognise, among other things, the learning acquired in the frame of student engagement. The administrative staff and the student Vice-Presidents interviewed encouraged institutions to "provide fresh momentum for" contributing to build a society of engagement⁴¹, as spaces shared between civil society and associations.

According to the interviews, this will to work with society and to train engaged citizens is reflected in the missions of the services dedicated to engagement like the Office of Cooperation and Volunteering at the University of Coruña⁴² in Spain, the Office of Engagement of Maynooth University⁴³ in Ireland, the Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw in Poland⁴⁴, the Engagement Centre of the University of the Côte d'Azur⁴⁵ in France.

At the Volunteer Centre of Warsaw University, the aim is to prepare students to "enter adult life", to "create opportunities for students":

³⁹ <http://www.campusengage.ie/>

⁴⁰ Article 29 LOI n° 2017-86 du 27 janvier 2017 relative à l'égalité et à la citoyenneté

⁴¹ The phrase "third place" was coined by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place* to refer to public spaces where people can meet in informal gatherings, discuss or just relax. The "third place" is opposed to the "first place", being where you live, and the "second place", being the workplace.

⁴² More information on the Office of Cooperation and Volunteering at the University of Coruña website: <https://www.udc.es/en/ocv/>

⁴³ More information on the Maynooth University Office of Student Engagement website: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/student-engagement>

⁴⁴ More information on the The Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw website: <https://wolontariat.uw.edu.pl/volunteers/>

⁴⁵ More information on the Engagement Center of the University of Côte d'Azur website: <https://univ-cotedazur.eu/developing-your-career/social-engagement>



“Because /as the Volunteer Centre/ we appear in such form of non-formal education. And it gives them a visible sense that this university is not strictly and only formal education, that they have known from previous years in high school, primary school or junior high school. Developing their /students/ own passions, interests, testing themselves in various forms and various social roles - it seems to me that it is also very good for them.” (Administrative staff – Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw, Poland)

Non-profit organisations integrated into the institutions (but which remain independent) are also good examples. We can mention the non-profit organisation ULB Engagement at the Université Libre de Bruxelles⁴⁶ in Belgium and the Voluntary Association of the University of Valladolid UvaVOL⁴⁷ in Spain.

These services and organisations generally aim to promote solidarity and citizen engagement activities and volunteering projects. They also offer themselves activities, training, or even enable individuals to meet each other (students but also sometimes academics) and organisations offering voluntary work. They can also sign partnerships with external organisations to universities (NGOs, associations, etc.) in order to facilitate engagement.

“The role of the university is to shape a conscious and socially engaged citizen.” (Administrative Staff – University of Lodz, Poland)

Students' perception of university

On the other hand, we find the idea that the university plays the role of transition to adult life for students. Indeed, in the higher education ecosystem they will follow academic courses and develop their knowledge in a specific field. They will also experiment, test, work and confront themselves with others, evolve with their peers, make professional choices, etc. Here are a few examples to illustrate our point. The administrative staff of the services and associations mentioned above insist on supporting students. At Maynooth University, the Student Engagement Office aims to "promote a lively student life, which means helping students to experience things outside the classroom".

“I think that's very much their role [recognition by HEIs]. (...) It is very formative for the spirit of citizenship. It's good for oneself but generally it's good for others as well, so I think it's part of the university's societal mission to promote engagement and recognition.” (Student Vice-President – University of Clermont Auvergne, France)

⁴⁶ More information on the ULB engagée website (in French): <https://engagee.ulb.be/>

⁴⁷ More information on the UvaVOL website (in Spanish): <http://voluntariado.uva.es/quienes-somos/>



We can thus observe the trend that HEIs are there to transmit much more than academic knowledge to students. They are also there to train engaged citizens and contribute to the life of the community. Through engagement, students build their history, experiment, while getting involved in projects and causes.

“University is not necessarily a place where you prepare for a career, it's more a place of openness to knowledge, critical thinking and socialisation, [a place] of construction of an individual in society, a citizen. Ideally, it is a citizens' factory.” (Former Engaged Student - University of Tours, France)

In this context and according to the interviews the recognition of student engagement seems to be one of the roles of the institutions. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that it is debated by staff members and students. Indeed, they do not have the same view and perception because of different reasons and depending on the country.

Cultural, generational and societal reasons explaining the different point of views on this issue

The interviewees explain that the cultural dimension, generational differences and societal changes can be a ground for explaining different points of view on student engagement, its recognition by the university.

> Cultural reasons: The example of the University of Vienna in Austria

In this respect, it is interesting to mention the case of the University of Vienna, the largest university in Austria with more than 93,000 students and 15 faculties. The administrative staff and professors interviewed attribute the different points of view on universities' roles on cultural factors. Indeed, they explain that there is no such thing as a culture of encouragement, of "patting one's shoulder" for voluntary and social activities.

“We just don't have that kind of “shoulder patting culture. (...) It is not our job to smuggle people into areas of civil society engagement. (...) If people want to work voluntarily, they can. It is not the job of the university to set up an agency.” (Academic Staff – University of Vienna)

Thus, the policy of recognition is not the same from one faculty to another and focuses on certain types of engagement. For instance, the Faculty of Economics validates up to 15 ECTS for student representation activities, while apparently the Faculty of Mathematics does not validate any. It is also possible to validate ECTS for "writing mentoring" activities, recognized in academic curricula (extension modules). In the field of practice in a student union, recognition of such activity is legally possible up to a max. of 15 ECTS points. In the field of practice of mentoring, students can receive ECTS points twice but must attend an accompanying course.



This can also be explained by the legislation. Indeed, In recent years, the Bologna curricula reform has often been criticized with regard to its effects on higher education and has influenced the possibilities of student engagement recognition as it seems to have left only a marginal space for formal validation of student engagement. This is especially relevant for curricula in social sciences as they focus on social, civic or community-related content and can only to a limited extent offer students practical opportunities for engagement. However, the Bologna architecture promotes the concept of employability and practicability of curricula. Restructuring curricula and identifying gaps, for example by implementing an elective module in which activities of student engagement find their place, is one option for the future.

“And we wrote a project proposal back then, and that was stamped down by the university headquarters again, with the instruction that the students should study and should not volunteer, and if they do it voluntarily, then they shouldn't have to do less , So, the basic attitude at the university is rather negative, I think about it.” (Administrative Staff – University of Vienna, Austria)

The interviews reveal an opposition between the institution as a whole (its presidency, institutes and for professors) and as an academic institution (the university is made for studies and academic knowledge). For instance, university curricula do not seem to provide enough flexibility to integrate non-academic activities and volunteering is not the institution's responsibility.

> Generational gap and society changes: Some examples from Poland and the Czech Republic.

- *The example of Poland*

The interviews from administrative staff, professors and students in Poland suggest that there is a generational gap on the perception of student engagement, but also on the representations of civil society. They state the older generation does not understand the idea of civil society. Nevertheless awareness is constantly increasing in today's Polish society and there are more and more young people engaged and involved in changing civil society. The interviewees grounded this opinion in the sense that there is less need for students to justify their extra-academic engagement to this older generation, for who the factor of professional experience was stronger.

“When I think of the times when I was a student, about 10 years ago, I guess that more important was the factor of professional experience. Now it is also important but there is also another factor of real action that the activity is important for a person who is doing it.(...) It's obvious that they can engage into something, help in something, whenever they have time to do so. It is some kind of natural impulse for them. But this is a different generation, when I started 10 years ago; I really needed to explain a lot to my mother and grandmother of what exactly am I doing, whereas now it is more understandable for everyone.” (Administrative staff - The Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw, Poland)



In Poland, there is no national policy framework regarding the recognition of volunteering experiences. However, since 2011, the country has been looking for options to encourage volunteering recognition within the frame of the "Long-Term Policy for the Development of Volunteering in Poland".

"I think that the general awareness of the importance of the civic society in Poland helps a lot, not only in terms of volunteering but in general social activities." (Administrative staff - The Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw, Poland)

- *The example of Czech Republic*

In the Czech Republic, an administrative staff member mentions the influence of the end of the communist bloc on the perception of the youth. If the latter was previously perceived as committed and activist, he explains that nowadays the youth is considered "as good-for-nothing youngsters who party all the time".

"Well, I'd say, the situation would be specific Czech Republic because students were involved in the collapse of the communist regime so it started all very well. (...) I was a child at that time, but you know they broke the regime, they were very much venerated and slowly but surely from that time on, students were more and more seen as good-for-nothing youngsters who party all the time, and basically just if they do an activism, it's usually very leftist activism which is sort of Neo Marxist stuff. And basically, the message from the political representation to students, I would say, is mostly: 'you are supposed to study. That's it'. And so there seems to be a kind of schizophrenia between the historical role of the students and the perception of students within the administration." (Academic Staff - University of Charles University, Czech Republic)

The influence of the labour market and skills-based approach on the perception of the role of universities

Based on the interviews, another emerging trend that appears to be influencing the reflection on the role of institutions in recognising student engagement is the skills-based approach⁴⁸. This one can be linked to the increased demands of the labour market. Indeed, the idea that students need to differentiate themselves on the labour market by extending their resume with internships and

⁴⁸ Christian Chauvigné and Jean-Claude Coulet, « *L'approche par compétences : un nouveau paradigme pour la pédagogie universitaire?* », Revue française de pédagogie, 172 | july-september 2010



extra-academic experiences is omnipresent. This trend is well known by the administrative staff members interviewed.

“The Uaneen module is strongly endorsed by the Irish Business and employers’ Confederation (IBEC) and in their publication in 2018⁴⁹, McCoy discussed the importance of the transferable skills the employment market is looking for at the moment from graduates. He emphasised how the learning students achieve outside the classroom (extracurricular) is as, if not more, significant than academic learning.” (Administrative staff – University of Dublin, Ireland)

In addition, recruiters' requirements in terms of skills are changing. Transversal skills, or soft skills⁵⁰ are being emphasised: candidates are expected to demonstrate their professional and personal qualities and aptitudes at the same time, to have knowledge, know-how and interpersonal skills.

There are a lot of publications, theories and references about this subject of skills. It is interesting to establish the connection with EU policy strategies for investment in skills, such as Life Long Learning or Key Competencies⁵¹. This topic leads to a triple challenge⁵² of identifying the skills by stakeholders, formalising them and finally validating them in order to prove their existence.

In the interviews, we note that students can acquire different types of skills during their engagements. They depend on the activities and responsibilities that will serve them in life and particularly in the professional context. For example, we can identify soft skills as defined in the previous part, interpersonal and relational qualities, social skills but also hard skills. In summary it can range from project management to organisation, methodology and decision-making ability; from resilience and adaptability to personal development. Therefore engagement as a factor in the acquisition of transversal skills becomes complementary to the academic path.

“Students now are searching for a different kind of engagement. Engagement that will help them to build skills that they won’t get during traditional academic classes.” (Academic Staff - University of Warsaw, Poland)

⁴⁹ More information on the McCoy report:

<https://www.ibec.ie/influencing-for-business/labour-market-and-skills/future-ready-improving-graduate-employability-skills>

⁵⁰ Definition of soft skills according to the European project elen4work: a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills. They help people to adapt and behave in a positive way in order to be able to meet the challenges of their professional and daily life

⁵¹ More information on the European Commission website:

https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/council-recommendation-on-key-competences-for-lifelong-learning_en

⁵² French report of the “Europass day” on « the development of cross-disciplinary skills: a must for employability », Strasbourg – Ecole européenne, 24 september 2019



Engagement can be valued from an employability perspective which may explain the role of the institution in its recognition. It is more about recognising the skills acquired than recognising the experience of engagement in itself.

Thus, what do the institutions recognise: experience or skills? If they recognise skills, on what grounds and in what way? What should be the link between the skills acquired and a student's degree? The institutions interviewed do not seem to have settled this question yet. As we have seen before, there are skills certificates or attestations, the possibility of having one's internship validated by one's engagement experience, skills portfolios in digital format, or digital badges or open badges. Open badges take the form of icons that are stored on a personal digital platform (similar to a skills portfolio). The technology used to make them is free of copyright. The badges often include a description, and indicate to whom and by whom they are issued. They are tested at different universities such as Tours in France and before that, the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands.

This idea of recognising skills rather than experiences is interesting when for the engaged students interviewed the validation of ECTS credits is not a recognition of their engagement.

Moreover students sometimes end up with more credits than they need, and sometimes they do not even ask for this recognition, which often requires them to do extra work (writing a report for example).

"I think that's very much their role [recognition by HEIs]. (...) During each engagement, young people develop skills and, currently, there are not many people who are capable of recognising them. The university knows how to do it, [it] has the tools to and should go further: it must work on this notion of identifying skills according to the type of engagement, then work on the recognition of engagement in the broad sense. Even if it could be done by law, it is not enough: one must recognise an engagement.

Now we need to go further: identify one's skills and establish different levels of skill acquisition."

(Student Vice-President – University of Clermont Auvergne, France)

Nevertheless, it is notable that this view is not unanimous either. Furthermore, universities' staff and students are aware that student engagement is not always well perceived especially on the labour market.

"Well, the thing is, unlike in some other countries, in the Czech Republic there's still a limited number of employers who would, when they see a CV from a prospective employee, would ask about, say, volunteer work or social work or that kind of thing." (Academic Staff - Charles University, Czech

Republic)



For example, a law student at the University of Vienna, elected as a representative, does not mention it on her resume. She explained that it could be seen as a recreational activity and thus badly seen by law firms.

Isn't everyone ready?

Thus, some people remain reluctant to see universities academically recognise extra-curricular activities. The main reason given is that it is not their role. It also raises a lot of questions: what should be recognised: the experience, the activity or the skills acquired?

The question then arises what is preferable in terms of recognising engagement: a top-down approach, from the state to institutions and then from institutions to individuals; or a bottom-up approach, from individuals to institutions and then from institutions to the state; or a combination of the two?

At the level of the institution, it is noticeable in the interviews that the two are linked. Political support within the institution is important and necessary to drive a trend. At the Université Libre de Bruxelles, the strategy of the administrators is first to prove to the presidency that engagement is important for students ("look, a lot of students are engaged!"). This advocacy is meant to ensure political support from the rectorship. When the support is granted, the administrators can then adopt a more qualitative approach to recognition. They can better include the students' needs for support. At the University of Strasbourg, the support of the administrative staff has been essential in implementing political will.

At the University of Vienna, student engagement can be implemented into study programmes. For example, we can find the practice of Service Learning⁵³, which is integrated into some of the university's curricula. The university co-organised it with a student organisation. Students will then have pre-defined roles and responsibilities, with a mentor. The institution guarantees the quality of the action and its location by making sure of the "educational" dimension of the service.

This example of the Service Learning allows us to draw a parallel with the question of evaluation, which is often blamed when it comes to the recognition of engagement. Indeed several questions arise: who will evaluate the mechanisms and how? How can universities ensure that students have actually done and learnt something during their engagement experience? In particular, it raises the question of using an external evaluator to recognise engagement in organisations external to the institution.

⁵³ In her 1996 book *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, Barbara Jacoby defines service-learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes."



Part III – The effects of student engagement recognition on students' paths

In this last part, we will examine the effect of student engagement's recognition. Does it influence students? Does it influence engagement pathways? More generally does it influence the academic and life paths of young people? Does recognition lead to different paths of engagement?

The majority of the academics interviewed were engaged when they were younger, or students⁵⁴, and a large part of them now work directly on student engagement issues for administrators, or work alongside them for professors.

The recognition: a form of legitimation by the institution

We previously saw that the recognition of student engagement can be part of the training process for young citizens with transversal skills. The interviews also showed us that the recognition of student engagement by the institutions has an impact in terms of legitimation of student engagement.

From an academic perspective

From an academic perspective, there is a need for institutions to legitimate, encourage and promote student engagement. By recognising engagement, the institution sends a positive message to students: "yes you can do it, it's good for you". It also shows that universities are not just "ivory towers"⁵⁵ and that students can acquire skills outside the university. This way the institution recognises that there is something else outside the university.

"The university finds it important that we understand students do more than learning at the university. We wanna say, look, if you're doing it, we understand that it's important for your life, your learning and your growing up." (Administrative Staff – Maastricht University, The Netherlands)

From a student's perspective

From a student's perspective institutional recognition is important too. Some students invoke the fact that recognition gives them self-esteem and gives worth to their engagement.

⁵⁴ Indeed, out of the 44 academics interviewed, the question "were you involved when you were a student" was asked to 36 participants, 27 answered yes.

⁵⁵ Administrative staff from the University of Maastricht, The Netherlands



“[University supports my engagement very badly]. It should improve a lot. Sometimes we wonder if what we are doing is worth it or if it is just to keep us distracted and not to bother them.” (Engaged Student - University of Valladolid, Spain)

Other students point out that in contexts where engagement is frowned upon, institutional legitimisation is a strong argument to justify their investment outside the academic path.

Encouraging more students to get involved?

It appears that recognition and especially legitimisation encourage student engagement. Moreover, to a certain extent, it seems important to make the engagement's possibilities more visible. Indeed, institutions communicate about the mechanisms to make them accessible, which represents a major challenge by the way. In large institutions, scattered over several campuses, it is not easy. A similar situation exists in institutions where recognition policies are decentralised and depend on faculties or departments. On one hand, the interviews show that students hear more often about opportunities for engagement from their peers in informal discussions than from the institution. On the other hand, members of the administration but also students deplore the lack of dissemination of information on the different mechanisms of recognition.

“There is not enough information, and not everyone knows about the Volunteer Center [of the University of Warsaw]. They should work on it. What works, is when your friend tells you something, or takes him – it works really well. Maybe we get some mails, but we don't pay attention or have time. But when someone, like face to face, tells his or her experience, it works really well.” (Former engaged student – University of Warsaw, Poland)

Moreover, according to the interviews, recognition allows students who would not otherwise be able to afford it to engage. For example, some explain that if engagement is part of the university curriculum, it would be easier for a student to fit it into their timetable if they have a job or other responsibilities besides. In some institutions such as the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands and the University of Vienna in Austria, financial support for student engagement, increases the opportunities for people in precarious situations. In Austria, a representative of the Students' Union ÖH even raised the idea of a basic income for students to increase the active participation of young people:

“ Why not approach federal politics and say we want to have a basic income for students or something along those lines?” [referring to university]. (Students' Union Representative – University of Vienna, Austria)



Finally, we note that if some universities want to encourage engagement, sometimes it is not necessary as students get engaged without the university, who only acknowledges their engagement.

“Suddenly we discovered that all of the students are already engaged in something, and we just legitimized these activities in a form of paperwork at the faculty. (...) They are so active on their own hand that they don’t need us to push them in this process anymore. The need to recognise this in a formal way was no longer necessary.” (Administrative staff - University of Warsaw, Poland)

Is recognition affecting the meaning of student engagement?

When it comes to the recognition of engagement by HEIs, administrative staff but also students, question the loss of the meaning of engagement. Recognising student engagement in a way that people who are engaged get something out of it may seem to run counter to a certain vision of engagement.

From an academic perspective

“Although I consider this recognition important for volunteers, the concept of volunteering can be confused with the sole interest of obtaining that recognition and leaving social action aside, which is the true essence of volunteering.” (Administrative staff – University of La Rioja, Spain)

Indeed there is a vision of: one doesn't make an engagement in order to get something in return, credits, bonus points, skills to enter the job market, a line on your resume, one engages in the activity, the cause, out of passion. This idea can be found in several interviews. Some staff members report that many do not even ask for the ECTS for example, and many are already accumulating extra-credits

“They could choose whether they wanted to receive a certificate of contribution, certificate about internship or the ECTS. And the lowest number chose the recognition in the form of ECTS” (Academic Staff – University of Warsaw, Poland)

From a student’s perspective

From the students point of view, they wonder about the meaning of these credits which are added to the diploma, or even bonus points in the average. In some cases, getting recognition for the engagement requires writing a report and therefore requires time, which many engaged students do not have. In such cases, recognition appears to be an additional burden and represents more work.



"I don't feel the need for recognition because I consider that the only fact to do that [to be engaged as a representative] is already a form of recognition." (Student Representative – CY Cergy Paris University, France)

Some interviewees even see it as binding: to be engaged would become obligatory in the diploma and in the labour market. In Spain, Poland, Belgium and France, students explain that they do not need recognition in the diploma in order to get engaged; they do not seek it, but on the other hand, they feel that accommodation, awareness-raising, support and facilitation measures are necessary.

Is a co-construction process an answer?

Thus, there is sometimes a lack of understanding of the mechanisms proposed by institutions in which students don't feel represented. In such a case, isn't it important to take into account all stakeholders? Moreover can't it be useful to adopt a co-construction approach involving students, student organisations and associations and all members of the institution? Including the different stakeholders will allow the systems to be adapted to the needs of students and the realities of the institution. Here we are talking about an internal co-construction within the institution.

"A lot of information and then an appropriation. At the moment I am the only one who embodies the enhancement of student engagement, as you can imagine. The contract, the follow-up, the commissions, and son on. At some point, the other players who are really in the field will have to act as intermediaries." (Academic Staff – University of Lille, France)

One can also imagine a more global co-construction that includes partners from the civil society, the cities, external organisations and associations. It is then interesting to mention the responsibility of the institution which comes into play in the question of the recognition of engagement. If it is the institution which supervises the activities and sends its students to organisations, the concern for the place and the quality of the action comes up.

At the University of the Côte d'Azur's Engagement Centre and at the Volunteer Centre of the University of Warsaw, a formal partnership with these entities is carried out to ensure that they correspond to the values of the universities. For example, agreements can be established. It is also a question of checking that they are not hidden jobs, exploitation, and so on. The institutional nature of recognition seems to imply responsibilities and a certain framing of activities.

However, as we saw in the first part, engagement is plural. There are various types of student engagement. Therefore, we may wonder about the effects of the framework implied by institutional recognition. Is there a risk of limiting engagement and the spaces for engagement? Students could only



benefit from recognition in organisations recognised by the institution. Or is there a risk of defining "good" and "not so good" engagements? The interviews show that it is not easy to determine criteria for allocating types of recognition according to types of engagement. Is it the number of hours invested, the subject, the skills acquired that must count in order to receive recognition? Sometimes, it is necessary to adapt the criteria.

For example, at the University of Warsaw, a faculty tried to recognise engagement in a form of obligatory internships to motivate the students. However, after some time the administration realised that students were already very engaged in various organisations and that they didn't need motivation from the faculty. Thus, the recognition process came to an end.

"We decided to drop this [obligatory internships] as students started to bring the certificates from their job or organisations they are involved in. So they came to me and asked: 'I'm doing this and that, can it be recognised as an obligatory internship?' And this is the proof that the change has come." (Academic Staff - University of Warsaw, Poland)

Finally, recognition implies resources. It needs some people to carry the mechanisms, develop them and provide training. It also requires financial and material resources and tools. If not all institutions can do this, does this mean that recognition will be worse? These are all questions that arise when it comes to the implementation of recognition of student engagement.

Does recognition lead to different engagement paths?

In the institutions interviewed, recognition measures are often recent or not very formalised. The staff members interviewed feel that they do not have enough hindsight on the effects of recognition mechanisms that exist.

Recognition allows engagement path

Nevertheless, some of them note, in Spanish institutions for example, that thanks to the recognition system, students are more regular in their engagement. In the case of institutions offering different types of recognition from the teaching unit on engagement, to the civic service system and the possibility to take a gap year⁵⁶, some students experiment with them all. They discover how the recognition system works and no longer stop. Thus they start a path of engagement. It means that one activity leads to another, one thing leads to another. Recognition can make this possible.

⁵⁶ The gap year allows students to take a year or a semester during their academic career to do something other than their studies



We can also give the example of a French student who has been involved in the voluntary sector since the beginning of his studies. As a student volunteer, he set up a sector association of which he has been president for two years. Starting from a social and solidarity grocery shop to the campus radio station and to an association organising a festival. At the same time he was involved in sport associations, he was supporting a theatre, and also developing a local currency. Although his engagement was not recognised as part of the diploma, today he is still involved in the festival and elsewhere. He works with the student associations of his university, notably on a mechanism for the recognition of engagement.

For the administrative staff, the Bologna Process and the acceleration of the standardisation of systems at a European level may have had an impact on the degree of engagement. The 3+2 trend, which in some countries is shortening curricula from 5 years to 4 or 3 years, does not facilitate long-term engagement.

Recognition is not necessary for student engagement

Despite the undeniable positive effect of recognition on some students who feel more legitimate to engage, it is not an indispensable prerequisite for engagement. Recognition can sometimes be counterproductive or even dangerous if it crosses the porous boundary of institutionalisation. The efficiency of recognition depends on this fine balance. HEIs are expected to facilitate, encourage and recognise engagement. Thus, they are not expected to impose a binding framework or to set specific expectations and objectives that would go against the very notion of engagement.

For some, student engagement should remain a students' matter, as it is one of the few spaces without institutional restraints: *"We are our own voice"* as a student representative from a Spanish university puts it.

Nevertheless, when recognition takes the form of a specific support for those who are engaged, it can help students to reflect on their engagement and to question what it has brought them at different levels. Finally, carrying out an engagement gives a different flavour to studies and makes it possible to break with a linear educational system.

"When I was in high school I only studied, I didn't have any additional classes or anything. So it's nice to finally break away from this continuous learning... Well, I can't imagine going to university and just



studying because then you graduate and don't know what to do." (Student representative – University of Warsaw, Poland)

Being involved helps you to break with the established order and to live your life as a student in a different way, as being a student is not just about studying anymore. Recognition takes on its full meaning here because it removes the brakes on engagement and thus allows a greater number of students to feel legitimate to engage.



Conclusion

The third step of the study of the European STEP made it possible to approach the concept of student engagement and its recognition by the institution through the crossed glance of young engaged students, professors and administrative staff of different European higher education institutions.

The notion of student engagement refers to a plurality of engagements. There are different types of engagements, from "bandage"⁵⁷ engagement to engagement to a cause or for personal and professional development, the spaces of participation, motivations and profiles of the corresponding students are very diverse. Student engagement also seems to have a singular impact on students' lives, whether in terms of learning, development, or the role it occupies in their lives.

Consequently, we have noticed that institutions are approaching the issue of recognition of engagement differently. We thus find several forms of recognition, from the formal academic validation of ECTS credits for the activity carried out or the recognition of the transversal competences acquired during the engagement, to less formal and non-study-related recognition through certificates or engagement prizes, and the design of curricula to facilitate the possibilities of engagement.

The interviews highlighted three visions that come into play when it comes to question the matter of recognition by the institution. On the one hand, it appears that engagement provides a space to experiment, to develop one's critical spirit, to confront oneself with others and the world, and to train engaged citizens. In this context, and in order to respond to the third mission of the university, which covers a social and societal dimension, recognition by the institution seems to have its place. It also provides legitimacy.

"We're trying to really find out what we can do in terms of the 'third role' [of universities], of popularization, but also applying it to sciences, trying to learn how to better target our projects, seminars for example" (Staff - Charles University, Czech Republic)

On the other hand, the experience of engagement is complementary to studies because it allows the development of transversal skills, soft skills and hard skills, useful for academic and professional life. In this sense, its recognition by the institution makes it possible to prove these skills and to value them in different spheres of life.

Finally, we find the vision that engagement and its recognition are not the business of the institution, it takes place outside. Several reasons can intervene: academic requirements, institutional responsibility, engagement has a bad reputation, etc.

⁵⁷ Op. Cit, Claire Thoury



These three visions are present in the different countries and institutions represented in the interviews. Nevertheless, each one can be interpreted in different ways and therefore converted into different practices. It may be interesting to consider an approach that combines and takes into account these three perceptions so that recognition becomes possible.

Further activities of European STEP will aim to develop tools to support both students and institutions in this recognition process: a guide of good practices and self-diagnosis, an “engagement and skills” platform, a training kit adapted for each audience. It will also involve advocacy with public authorities to promote engagement and its recognition through a booklet of recommendations.



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