

Introducing the Mobility Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (MCTS): a step towards enhanced mobility in Europe

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This editorial introduces the rationale for the Mobility Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (MCTS) and discusses its potential contribution to strengthening mobility recognition within the European Higher Education Area and the European Universities Initiative. While mobility is widely recognized for its educational, professional, and social benefits, important challenges remain regarding its recognition, documentation, and integration into institutional frameworks. To address these gaps, the SEA-EU Alliance has piloted the Mobility Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (MCTS), an innovative framework proposed to track, quantify, and recognize physical, virtual, and blended mobility activities for both students and staff. Designed to complement the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), MCTS uses workload hours as a common metric to capture diverse, meaningful, and often short-duration mobility experiences that remain insufficiently recognized. The proposed framework aims to enhance inclusivity, flexibility, and transparency in mobility recognition while supporting evidence-based policymaking and institutional development. By outlining the rationale, potential applications, benefits, and implementation challenges of MCTS, this editorial aims to stimulate further discussion on how Europe can strengthen recognition of mobility activities and advance towards a more interconnected, inclusive, and resilient European Higher Education Area. We invite the higher education community to consider MCTS as a novel complementary framework for enhancing mobility recognition across European higher education.

Mobility of students and staff in Europe plays a pivotal role in advancing the goals of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), particularly in strengthening inclusivity, interconnectedness, and the global competitiveness of European higher education. In line with this vision, the European University Alliances were created to foster cross-border collaboration and transform how universities cooperate across Europe. One of their key objectives was to reach a 50% mobility rate among students, a target that reflects the EU's commitment to fostering international experience among students as an integral part of their degree (1).

This target represents more than numerical growth; it signifies a shift towards making mobility an accessible and integral component of higher education for all, both students and staff. However, recent data from the Erasmus+ Participant Survey showed that only 56% of respondents perceive mobility as being encouraged through institutional internationalisation strategies, while only 7% report that mobility is linked to mandatory professional development or career progression frameworks, highlighting the need for stronger institutional recognition mechanisms (2). Such approaches are particularly important given the well-documented benefits of mobility (3, 4).

Academic mobility contributes to students' personal development, broadens their worldviews, enhances language competences, and strengthens universities' international visibility (5). The benefits of mobility extend beyond institutional capacity building. To maximise these benefits and ensure their recognition across higher education institutions, European University Alliances are developing innovative solutions that address mobility barriers while promoting more inclusive and widely accessible international engagement (1).

Achieving a very ambitious target of 50% mobility rate requires a reliable and harmonised system for recognising, documenting, and valuing diverse mobility experiences across institutional and national boundaries. While existing frameworks provide a foundation, they require additional features to capture and measure the full diversity of mobility experiences. To address this gap, the team from the University of Split (UNIST) proposed the Mobility Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (MCTS) to the SEA-EU Alliance Rector's Council and Governing Board, which endorsed the piloting and implementation of the concept across the Alliance's nine member universities. Consequently, the SEA-EU Alliance MCTS Task Force was established and given the task to develop the necessary framework and implementation roadmap.

MCTS is an innovative, multidimensional framework designed to support the tracking and recognition of all types of mobility – physical, virtual, and blended initiatives of students, teaching staff, as well as administrative and technical staff (6).

By introducing a system specifically designed to measure, allocate credits and recognise various forms of mobility, MCTS addresses several gaps in current approaches to international mobility aligning better with the EU's ambitious goals for higher education. The MCTS system is based on workload hours as a measurement unit, complying fully with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) framework in which one ECTS credit corresponds to 25 – 30 hours of workload. This ensures compatibility between the two systems, enabling conversion of MCTS into ECTS credits. Consequently, using the same

common denominator (hours of workload) but with higher sensitivity due to the proposed ratio of 10:1 (10 MCTS credits $\approx$ 1 ECTS credit), MCTS system may capture smaller workload activities of shorter duration (e.g., 2.5 – 3 hours). It also allows students or staff members to accumulate credits obtained through diverse mobility activities within a single academic year.

As such, MCTS is complementary framework to ECTS, holding a significant promise for fostering mobility across Europe (7, 8). The proposed system also brings an additional value because it is not only applicable to students, but also to staff members at universities, both teaching, as well as administrative and technical, providing a comprehensive and uniform mobility recognition platform for all parties in the European academic environment.

Rationale for MCTS

Mobility in education has evolved beyond traditional semester-long academic exchanges. Short-term mobility, virtual exchanges, research visits and many more different mobility formats, are becoming increasingly common (9). However, measuring the impact and volume of mobility across various forms (physical, virtual, blended) has not been tackled in a structured way and it is crucial for tracking progress toward EU mobility goals. Particular attention was given to staff mobility. Although the European Framework of Key Competences provides a comprehensive reference for identifying and describing competences that may be developed through international experiences, it has not been systematically applied in staff mobility contexts (10). As a result, learning outcomes acquired through non-formal mobility activities often remain insufficiently documented, recognised, and transferable across institutions. This limitation hinders the consistent assessment of mobility impacts and restricts the ability of universities to capture the full educational and professional value generated by staff mobility.

In addition to what current ECTS system already encompasses, MCTS seeks to provide a complementary standardized and uniform comprehensive framework for monitoring and recognising all forms of mobility, including non-traditional and short-duration activities, serving as a unified metric for evaluating mobility and giving insights for policymaking at institutional, national, and regional levels.

Measuring mobility is not the sole objective of the proposed framework, it represents a necessary first step towards establishing a reliable and transparent system that institutions can integrate into their recognition frameworks. Given the considerable differences in higher education systems, national regulations, and institutional cultures across countries, the framework may also serve as an incentive mechanism, encouraging greater engagement in mobility activities and supporting the wider recognition of diverse forms of academic mobility.

Interdisciplinary and professional recognition

Recognition of mobility activities differs across institutions and groups. For students, the MCTS system is conceived as a complementary framework to the ECTS system, facilitating the recognition of mobility learning outcomes, irrespective of their format. For teaching, administrative and technical staff, MCTS could help bridge gaps in recognizing interdisciplinary and professional mobility activities such as conferences, industry placements, job shadowing, staff weeks or technical training, etc. In line with European policy recommendations (11), the framework could support the recognition of learning acquired in formal, non-formal, and informal settings while providing a common structure for documenting and validating mobility outcomes. Seamless recognition and valorisation of staff engagement is still underrepresented, in particular in relation to career progression. Therefore, MCTS could serve as a strategic monitoring tool to incentivize participation by ensuring all participants in the European academic environment receive measurable and transferable credits for their mobility experiences. Such tool would generate comparable evidence on participation, competences acquired, knowledge transfer, and institutional impact. Ultimately, MCTS would support universities and policymakers in assessing progress, identifying barriers, and developing more effective mobility policies. MCTS could contribute to making mobility achievements visible, measurable, and portable across institutions. For staff in particular, the framework has the potential to strengthen the integration of mobility into professional development and career progression pathways, thereby fostering a culture in which mobility becomes a recognised and valued element of academic and professional development rather than an exceptional activity.

Enhanced inclusivity, flexibility for institutions and alignment with digital tools

By valuing shorter and virtual exchanges, MCTS could make international exposure more accessible to students and staff with financial, personal, or health constraints, who might otherwise be excluded from traditional mobility programs (12). Recognition then remains primarily a policy-compliance issue rather than an outcome-based one.

Universities could integrate MCTS credits into their existing core activities, such as educational, research, quality assurance and other systems, offering a more flexible approach to designing mobility-rich curricula, research exchange or administrative staff promotion criteria, life-long learning, etc. It would help institutions to more easily align all their mobility and related initiatives with institutional strategic priorities.

The implementation of MCTS system could leverage and enhance digital platforms like the European Student Card and Erasmus+ Mobile App or the Mobility Scoreboard (12) and emerging European Digital Credentials for Learning (EDCL) (11). These tools could be adapted to include tracking and managing MCTS credits, streamlining processes for students, staff, and institutions, thereby supporting more transparent and transferable recognition practices.

Challenges and considerations

Introducing MCTS framework presents several interconnected challenges. Ensuring smooth integration with the existing ECTS system is crucial, as a poorly aligned dual structure could create significant administrative burden and complexity; the two systems would need to be harmonised, so they complement rather than compete with each other. At the same time, defining mobility credits would require a clear and standardised methodology, which would enable automatic recognition applicable to students, teaching, and administrative and technical staff. This would demand broad consensus among higher education institutions and member states. Widespread adoption would also be a challenge, requiring targeted awareness-raising, capacity-building, and potentially financial incentives to encourage institutional buy-in. The idea is to pilot this concept within the SEA-EU Alliance first, then to include similar EU university alliances and national agencies and finally disseminate this concept in the whole EHEA. Furthermore, while quantifying mobility is important, care must be taken to avoid over-quantification and over-reliance on numerical indicators, ensuring that the qualitative value of intercultural learning and professional exchange remains central.

Conclusion

Introducing a Mobility Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (MCTS) could contribute to more comprehensive recognition of mobility, provided it is carefully piloted, evaluated and refined. It holds the potential to support how Europe measures, values, and incentivises mobility in education and professional development. By recognizing diverse forms of mobility within a single system, MCTS would enhance inclusivity, flexibility, and data-driven policymaking. However, its success would hinge on its integration with the existing ECTS framework and the willingness of stakeholders to adopt and adapt to this complementary standard. With careful planning and collaboration, MCTS has the potential to become a transformative tool in fostering a more mobile, interconnected, and resilient European Higher Education Area.

The paper by the SEA-EU Alliance MCTS Task Force should be regarded as a position paper. It is not intended to address comprehensively all dimensions, applications, and implications of the MCTS framework. Instead, it introduces the concept, presents its rationale, and aims to encourage further discussion and scholarly inquiry (6).

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