D7.4, O2: Joint ECIU housing and logistics platform

"ECIU Learners Service Centre"

Symbols, abbreviations and acronyms

ECIU   European Consortium of Innovative Universities

UiS   University of Stavanger, Norway

UT   University of Twente, Netherlands

WP7   Work Package 7

CHAD   ECIU Challenges Database

COT   Challenges Operational Team

FAQ   Frequently Asked Questions

Table of contents

A7.4, O2: Joint ECIU housing and logistics platform (7.4.2): *ECIU Learners Service Centre*

Abstract

The present report is a description of the work carried out in Activity 7.4, **task 7.4.2** (*Joint ECIU housing and logistics platform*), in **developing an ECIU Learners Service Centre**. In the first part, the report describes the background for the work, the objectives and the work methods applied. The need to ensure services of high quality for learners participating in ECIU University learning activities, both in the ongoing pilots and in the future ECIU University ecosystem, forms the background. Task 7.4.2 aims to create a framework for flexible, need-based, and user-friendly support structures that, in an efficient, transparent, and inclusive manner, provides learners with all necessary information, services, and support to ensure smooth participation in ECIU University activities. The work methods applied to reach this objective are detailed in the report in three main categories: phased development, learners' journey perspective and broad involvement and cooperation. In the second part of the report, the framework and content for the ECIU Learners Service Centre phase 1 (in place as of October 2021) is described. The framework consists of two main elements: the joint digital platform and the virtual service office. The last part of the report describes the next steps Activity 7.4 will explore to create a more sustainable long-term structure for learners' services in ECIU University. Two main steps are highlighted in this respect: the need to strengthen the virtual office with dedicated resources and the need to develop the digital platform to cater for more individualized services. Activity 7.4 also recommends this work to be seen in a broader perspective of developing an organisational strategy for ECIU University.

Corrections

The following corrections were made after the internal quality review:

- Additional abbreviations were added to the section *Symbols, abbreviations and acronyms*.
- Language and grammatical corrections were done in the text, including refining of certain definitions.
- More information on the role of the network of Admission Officers was included in part 2.
- Separate paragraph on the e-mail inbox *challenges@eciu.org* was added in part 2.
- Distinction between the use of the two e-mail inboxes was explained in more detail in part 3.
- The description in part 4 of the need to set aside dedicated resources at the institutional level was further detailed by adding the options of extending the Admission Officer role or creating small teams around the Admission Officers.
- More details on the results from the student survey and the link between these results and the next steps in Activity 7.4 were added in part 4.

1. Introduction

Work Package 7 (WP7) is developing joint structures and support systems necessary to ensure the functioning of the ECIU University ecosystem. An important part of this infrastructure are the services and support structures for learners participating in ECIU University learning activities. This part is covered by Activity 7.4 on student and staff support, and the present report presents the work undertaken in **task 7.4.2 in developing a joint ECIU Learners Service Centre**. The ECIU University educational offer is diverse consisting of *challenges* and *micro modules* of different duration and format (1 day vs. 6 months, virtual vs. physical or blended etc.) which are open to a large and diverse group of students enrolled at ECIU partner institutions and life-long learners. To successfully manage

the extensive educational offer and the diverse learner population, inclusive support structures and services of high quality are crucial.

2. Objectives and working methods

To ensure smooth participation in ECIU University activities for the learners, the following administrative services need to be in place:

- Good information on educational offers and efficient communication between learners and organizers
- Transparent and efficient admission procedures
- Accessible and inclusive health and welfare services
- Support and information on travel and accommodation
- Support and information on grants and financial support of mobility
- Transparent and efficient procedures related to certification and recognition

WP7 is transversal and its deliverables and activities are closely tied with those of other work packages. This is particularly true for Activity 7.4 on learners' services: several of the points listed above are covered by or related to other work packages (such as Work Packages 6 *Mobility* and 9 *Communication*), or other activities within WP7 (such as Activity 7.2 *Admission and Inclusion*). It is the responsibility of Activity 7.4 to take a holistic view with regards to services to learners and to cooperate broadly across work packages and activities. The objective of task 7.4.2 is to create a framework for support structures in ECIU University that, in an efficient, transparent, and inclusive manner, **provide learners with all necessary information, services, and support to ensure smooth participation in ECIU University activities**. The support structure needs to be **flexible, need-based, and user-friendly** to cater for the variety of educational offers and a diverse learner population.

To reach these objectives, Activity 7.4 has adopted the following working methods:

Phased development

ECIU University is a pilot project, and within this 3-year project the educational offer of *challenges* and *micro-modules* are piloted in several rounds. A first round was carried out in Autumn 2020, a second in Spring 2021, there is an ongoing cycle 3 in Autumn 2021, and there will be a 4th cycle in spring 2022. At the same time, ECIU University is more than a 3-year project, with ambitions far beyond 2022 and hence the need of long-term and sustainable solutions. In this context, Activity 7.4 has adopted a phased working method of two steps when setting up an ECIU Learners Service Centre to ensure both short- and long-term needs:

- ➢ Phase 1 (-2022): A support structure operative during the first piloting rounds of challenges that provides the participating learners with the services they need.
- ➢ Phase 2 (2022-): Experiences and phase 1 structure as a foundation upon which to build more extensive services, following the up-scaling of activities in ECIU University.

One specific issue to raise in relation to the two phases is that of mobility. Since the ECIU University first pilots of *challenges* have all been carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic there has been close to zero physical mobility involved. The ECIU University educational offer in 2020 and 2021 has been almost 100% virtual. Several of the services are closely related to mobility (travel, accommodation, grants) and have so far in the pilot not been needed. However, virtual students also need support, but of a different kind. This means that in phase 1, the support structure needs to cater for the needs of

learners participating digitally in challenges across Europe, but at the same time be ready for mobility once society opens up for traveling, which seems (as of October 2021) to be the case for the Spring 2022 semester.

Learners' journey perspective

When developing the support structures, focus needs to be on the user experience. Task 7.4.2 has taken the perspective of a learner's journey in the ECIU ecosystem while working on the content and set-up for the webpages. The guiding questions in the work were: 'What do the learners need at what time in the process?', and 'How to best meet these needs?'

Broad involvement and cooperation

Since WP7 is a transversal work package, it is crucial that the work of building new support structures is done in close cooperation across work packages and involving different actors. Broad involvement and co-creation are necessary to ensure success of new joint alliance-wide structures. Hence, the work in Activity 7.4 has been carried out in several different forums including different actors:

- An **ad-hoc working group on learners' services** was established in Spring 2021. The group was initiated by WP7 and the background for the first meeting was the need to have a joint learners' journey perspective on the ongoing activities in the pilots. This group is led by **7.4 Activity Lead** and composed by the following members:
    o **WP7** *Joint Support Services and Structures* (WP Lead)
    o **WP7 Activity 7.2** *Admission and Inclusion* (Activity Lead)
    o **WP6** *Mobility* (WP Lead)
    o **WP9** *Communication* (Activity Lead)
    o **Project Office/Challenges Operations Coordinator**
    o **Student Engagement Manager**
    o **Working Group on Life-Long Learners**

    This group has been the main forum for developing the structures for learners' services in a collaborative way. It proved to be a very good forum for working on these issues. Its composition enabled different perspectives, viewpoints, and expertise to be taken into the work. Furthermore, this cooperation was efficient and by joining forces in this way, we avoided a lot of overlapping and double work since many of the members were working on different activities and deliverables that are very closely related. Examples are the task in Work Package 6 on setting up a Student Travel Website and the Activity 7.2 work on admission procedures that are both closely related to the work in Activity 7.4.

- **Challenges Operational Team (COT)**: The 7.4 Activity Lead is a permanent member of the COT who meets once a week. The Activity Lead has updated this group on ongoing work on learners' services, and on several occasions held presentations and been given feedback on the work.

- **Work Package 7 meetings** of Activity Leads and Points of Contact: these meetings are held on a bi-weekly basis and are an important forum for updating, discussions and experience sharing on the work.

- **Network of Admission Officers**: In the first cycles of piloting *challenges*, the network of Admission Officers has been carrying out an important part of services to learners. The inclusion of services in the admission procedures, and the role of the Admission Officers in this

have been discussed in several meetings of this network. The 7.4 Lead has held presentations and given updates on the topic, and valuable feedback from this group who has hands-on experience from the piloting of *challenges* and contact with the students has been taken into the developments. The network of Admission Officers also provided the information and links to institutional webpages to go on the central digital platform for services.

- **Students from the pilots**: Activity 7.4 coordinated a joint survey to the students in pilot 2 (Spring 2021) where questions on services were included. 40 students replied to the survey and provided valuable input that has been taken into the work[1]. There is ongoing work on a similar survey for students in pilot 3 (Autumn 2021).

- **Temporary front desk inbox (*challenges@eciu.org*):** A first attempt to answer general questions from interested learners on a central ECIU University level has been carried out via the creation of a main inbox for *challenges* (since November 2020). This inbox was a first attempt towards an ECIU University contact point and addresses general questions learners have about the *challenges* offered, possibilities to participate in ECIU University learning offerings and other questions not covered in the existing Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section in the ECIU Challenges Database (CHAD) website.

3. ECIU University Learners Service Centre – phase 1

In the pilot, the educational offers of ECIU University are managed by each individual partner institution, and in the first phase of the ECIU Learners Service Centre, most services are carried out by the institution hosting the *challenge* or *micro module*. The partner institutions are managing the first piloting rounds of ECIU University challenges and micro modules in different ways: Some are concentrating on challenges, some on micro modules; some are focusing on nano and mini challenges others standard challenges; some are hosting challenges as non-formal learning activities and others provide ECTS through formal learning; some have offers open for professional learners, some only for students etc. To ensure that the learners get the best service possible from day 1, the actual services are provided by each institution. However, it can be challenging for learners to navigate in a system with 12 different institutions providing services. Focus on user experience is key from the very first pilots as success of the project depends to a high degree on how these first learners experience the ECIU University offer. It is therefore essential in this first phase to ensure coherence and user friendliness by creating a **joint digital platform** serving as a common 'window' of services and support and including a **common ECIU contact point**. A common 'window' and contact point makes it easier for the learners to navigate in the system and ensures that they to the largest extent possible feel that they are part of a European wide ECIU University rather than following a course at one of the partner institutions. The ECIU Challenges Database (CHAD) gathers all ECIU University educational offers, and the learners get information on available challenges and micro modules. The admission process is organised centrally via CHAD, but the actual admission takes place at the host institution: learners apply via CHAD and their applications are handled by admission officers at each partner institution (cf. Activity 7.2). The same logic applies to other services learners need such as health, welfare, travel, and accommodation. Information on the services available at each institution is available in this common platform, and common contact points are set up in form of e-mail inboxes to handle requests in a

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[1] See summary of WP7 results in attachment 2

A7.4, O2: Joint ECIU housing and logistics platform (7.4.2): *ECIU Learners Service Centre*

common and coordinated way. The set-up is two-fold consisting of a joint digital platform and a virtual ECIU office for learners' services.

Joint digital platform

We decided to use the digital platforms already existing in the ECIU network to ensure that services are available from the start of the pilots and to enhance user-friendliness by avoiding that learners have to use several different platforms: the ECIU Foundation webpage (eciu.org) and the ECIU challenge database (CHAD). It was decided to use both since the services offered would apply not only to learners in ECIU University activities, but also to regular mobility of students and staff within the ECIU network. For reasons of resources and maintenance, it was decided that the main part of the content will be added to the ECIU Foundation webpage and linked to CHAD. A separate entry page for services is created in CHAD to ensure targeted information and services related to ECIU University activities.

At the ECIU Foundation webpage, a new section has been created under the tab *Learners*, called **Practical information to learners**. Similarly, a section is created in CHAD under the tab *For learners* called **Learners' services**. The information on the webpages is sorted in different categories:

- ***Mobility and exchange***

The learner gets general information on possible ways of funding mobility within ECIU and is directed towards his or her home institution or the common ECIU learners support contact point. The learners also get information on mobility schemes already existing in ECIU prior to ECIU University such as mobility minors and summer schools.

- ***Travel and accommodation***

The learner is invited to choose the institution he or she is travelling to and will be directed to information on accommodation offers and general travel information at the relevant institutional webpages. The learner is also directed to information pages on the city or region they are visiting.

- ***Student community***

The learner is invited to join the *ECIU Learners Community* on Facebook to get to know their fellow learners. This is a forum for social contact and student-to-student assistance. Furthermore, the learner gets information on the student engagement activities and events organised in ECIU such as the Student Agora and the Students' Representatives Meetings. The social media learners community and the student engagement activities are first steps towards building a community of learners in the ECIU ecosystem.

The learner also gets the opportunity here to choose the institution he or she is traveling to and be directed towards information on relevant student activities, events, and student associations at the relevant institution.

- ***Professional learners***

The learner gets information on participation in ECIU University learning activities for professional learners. The professional learner will see which *challenges* and *micro modules* are open to professional learners in the ongoing cycle, and is directed to a dedicated contact point at the institution hosting the *challenge* or *micro module* he or she is participating in.

- ***Contact and support***

The learner is directed to the common ECIU learners' support contact point *learnersupport@eciu.org* for any inquiries. The learner will also get the opportunity to contact a dedicated contact point for ECIU

University activities at the institution hosting the *challenge* or *micro module* he or she is participating in. A revised FAQ for participation in ECIU University activities will be added to this section *[work in progress as of 29.10.2021]*.

See the full set-up for the digital platforms in attachment 1, and on the following links *[update of webpages in progress as of 29.10.21]*:

- CHAD: https://challenges.eciu.org/for_learners/Learners_services/
- ECIU web: https://www.eciu.org/for-learners/info/practicalinformation#health

Virtual ECIU office for learners' services

The management of services to learners in the alliance is the responsibility of a virtual ECIU office for learners' services. In phase one of the service centre, the virtual office is built up around common e-mail inboxes and the network of admission officers from all partner institutions. The two common e-mail inboxes, *learnersupport@eciu.org* and *challenges@eciu.org*, are monitored by WP7 (UiS) and by the Project Office (UT) who are replying to all requests that can be handled at central level. The inbox *challenges@eciu.org* answers questions related to the pre-application phase, and *learnersupport@eciu.org* handles requests regarding post-application services. Requests related to services at a specific institution are forwarded to the relevant admission officer who will respond to the learner. In this way, contact is made easily available for the learner who is contacting a central contact point, and anything that can be dealt with at a central level is done so in a coherent way. This also ensures transparency and inspires trust in the system. Any request related to a specific institution will then be handled by the relevant admission officer and since the request goes via a central contact point this enables the alliance level to have an overview of all activities in the alliance. The institutional Admission Officers were appointed during the first round of piloting of *challenges* in Autumn 2020 and is today (October 2021) an established and well-functioning network with hands-on experience from 3 rounds of piloting *challenges*. In the ECIU support system as of October 2021, the Admission Officers are the persons who have the closest connection to the learners and were therefore the choice for this function.

4. Next steps: phase 2 of the ECIU Learners Service Centre

As of October 2021 it is important to continue developing these services for the alliance to be ready for upscaling activities and deepened integration. This point in time will also most likely coincide with the increase of physical mobility since in Autumn 2021 European countries are gradually reopening for traveling as the COVID-19 pandemic is receding. The student survey from pilot 2 (Spring 2021)[2] showed the need for more individualized services and support, more efficient communication, and better expectation management for participation in *challenges*. For the support structures to be ready for up-scaling of activity and integration of mobility, and to reply to the needs of the students as expressed in the survey, the next steps for Activity 7.4 to explore are the following:

- **Staffing and resources: Strengthening the virtual ECIU office for services to learners**

As described above, the operations of the service centre are handled centrally by Project Office (UT) and WP7 (UiS) and locally by the network of Admission Officers. This set-up works well with the current level of activities that ECIU University has in the first rounds of piloting *challenges* and *micro modules*. However, once activity scales up, and in particular when more physical mobility is involved, this set-up is not sustainable. The possibilities of setting aside dedicated resources/personnel for managing

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[2] See attachment 2

A7.4, O2: Joint ECIU housing and logistics platform (7.4.2): *ECIU Learners Service Centre*

learners support and guidance, both at alliance and institutional levels, will be explored. One solution is to extend the Admission Officer role and/or creation of a team around the Admission Officers at each institution. To ensure the best services possible to all learners, the dedicated resources should be distinguished between students and professional learners. This will lead to a strengthened virtual office which can then become a more permanent structure and offer services of higher quality to the learners in an ecosystem where level of activity increases.

- **Development of more individualized services**

More individualized support systems will increase the quality and user-friendliness of the services offered. Activity 7.4 will explore how the digital platform could allow for the actual services to be provided through it (not only acting as a 'window') and how each learner could be followed up individually to a higher degree than today. A chat box could for instance gradually replace the e-mail inbox to increase efficiency and to further individualise the support. This is closely related to and dependent on the ongoing work on developing a new common ECIU IT infrastructure, and Activity 7.4 will ensure the link between this work and further development of the ECIU Learners Service Centre.

Activity 7.4 will continue developing the ECIU Learners Service Centre and explore with particular attention the two elements listed above. At the same time, Activity 7.4 recommends this work to be seen in a broader perspective of developing an organisational strategy for ECIU University.

5. Attachments

Attachment 1: *Set-up of information on learners' services at the ECIU Foundation webpage and the ECIU Challenge Database (working document as of 29.10.2021)*

Web content learners
services CHAD and EC

Attachment 2: *Summary of results on WP7 learners' services from Student Survey Spring 2021*

ECIU University
Student Survey Spring

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A7.4, O2: Joint ECIU housing and logistics platform (7.4.2): *ECIU Learners Service Centre*