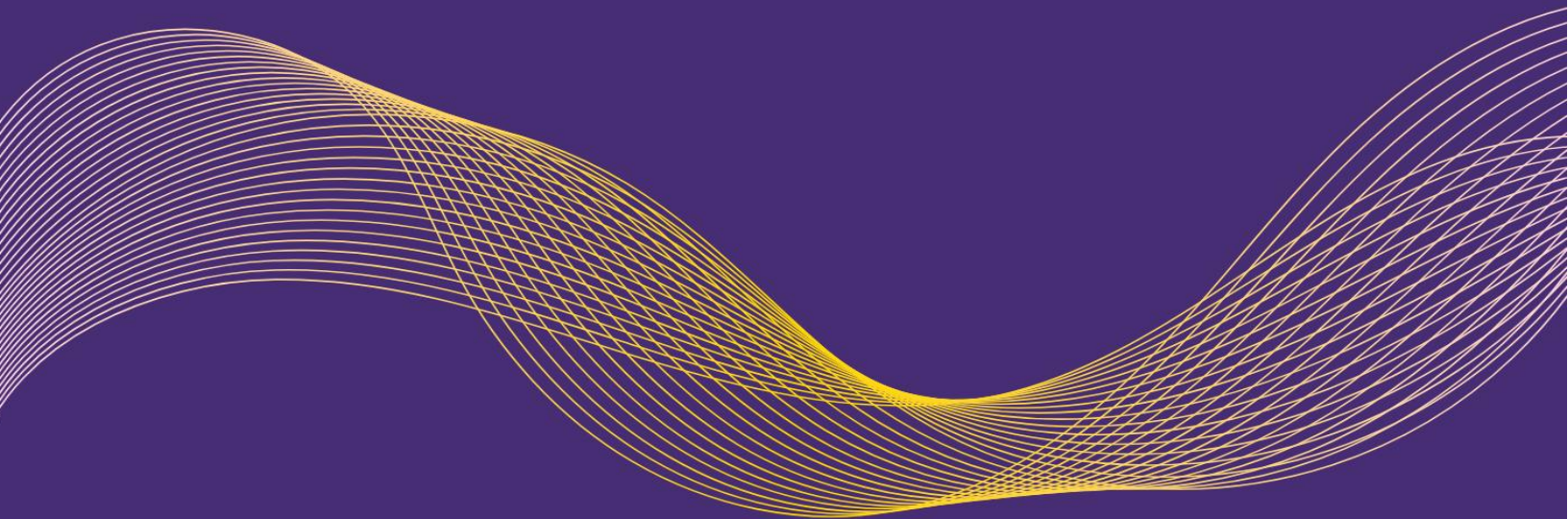




Report on the Current State of Automatic Credit Recognition



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Report on the Current State of Automatic Credit Recognition (D2.1)

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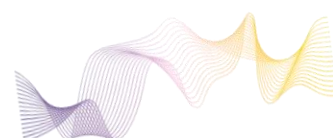
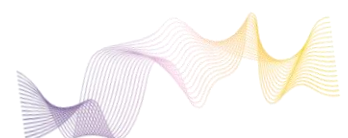
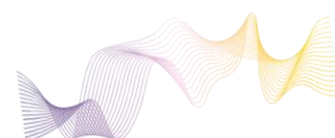


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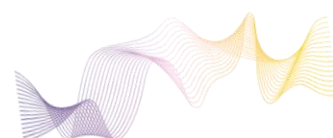
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1. Introduction

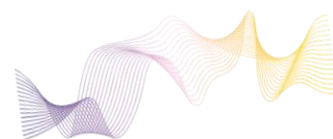
The academic recognition of diplomas and study periods abroad is a key objective of European cooperation in the field of education, as outlined in Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)¹. Automatic mutual recognition (AMR) for the purpose of further learning is also a cornerstone of the European Education Area (EEA), which EU Member States have pledged to establish by 2025. It is further highlighted as a priority in the Council Resolution on the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training for 2021–2030.

Recognition in mobility programs is a significant issue: nearly 20% of mobile students must retake exams or complete additional studies after returning to their home university (European Commission, 2023). This creates a burden for students, increases workload for academics, and may deter students from pursuing mobility opportunities. Efforts to address this issue have intensified since the 2018 EU Council Recommendation (CR) on automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad. The Erasmus+ Learning Agreements now include an "automatic recognition" checkbox, signalling its importance. However, uneven implementation of the Council Recommendation persists among member states.

Recognition is still an unsolved problem, due to the need for certified evidence of prior learning, lack of harmonization in national and institutional frameworks and curricular incompatibilities, gaps in the proper execution of Learning Agreements (LA), and ongoing difficulties in assessing equivalence in knowledge and competence. These difficulties hinder the seamless mobility and fair evaluation of students across different systems. Nevertheless, since the early 2000s, significant developments have taken place; yet regulatory frameworks and individual recognition decisions continue to be influenced by a sense of national pride in domestic systems and a desire to shield national students from international competition (Teichler, 2003).

The Automatic Recognition Assessment Project (AUREA) aims to support automatic recognition for credit mobility students by identifying barriers, analysing existing options, and providing policy recommendations for the future of automatic recognition. By assessing the state of play in recognition for mobile students undergoing credit mobility, creating a shared understanding of (full) automatic credit recognition on a European level,

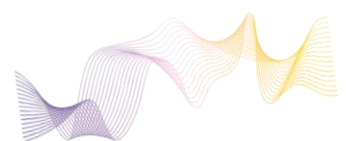
¹ Article 165 of the TFEU became legally binding when the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force on December 1, 2009.



providing higher education institutions with the necessary tools and information to assess their readiness for implementation of automatic credit recognition and fostering evidence-based policy making, AUREA seeks to address challenges and promote unobstructed mobility within the Erasmus+ community, thereby advancing the goal of automatic recognition.

One of the aims of the AUREA project is to achieve a better understanding of the current state of automatic recognition of the credits acquired during learning periods abroad, what bottlenecks emerge and what practices related to recognition of international credit mobility are conducive or restrictive in the path to seamless and full recognition of credits, respectively automatic recognition. In order to answer these questions, desk research based on available data and experiences were conducted. The analysis encompasses a holistic view on the (automatic) credit recognition procedures, combining the current state of play data from students, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and Higher Education (HE) practitioners.

This publication thus contains a literature review containing a legal framework analysis, quantitative and qualitative student and HEI data analysis, including focus group reports and the outcomes of case studies.



2. Literature review and legal framework analysis

Automatic credit recognition is central to the success of student mobility programmes like the Erasmus+ programme, as it ensures that students' academic achievements abroad are fully acknowledged by their home institutions.

Full automatic recognition in the Erasmus+ programme refers to the guaranteed acceptance, by a student's home institution, of the credits, courses, and learning outcomes achieved during an approved period of study or traineeship abroad - as agreed beforehand in a Learning Agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records, in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) - as fully equivalent to those that would have been completed at the home institution. Automatic recognition thus encompasses the formal validation of ECTS credits, grades, and learning outcomes agreed upon in advance and during the mobility via LAs. Automatic recognition is not only an administrative issue but a key position of trust and transparency in European Higher Education, closely tied to the principles of the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.

The literature review is based on a desk research approach and includes a range of sources: policy documents, official reports and academic papers.

2.1. A Short Historical Overview

The Council of Europe played a leading role in developing conventions to support academic recognition in democratic (non-Communist) European countries in the early post-WWII years. Three key conventions were adopted in the 1950s:

1. 1953: The European Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas, which required signatory states to recognize secondary school diplomas for university admission across borders (Council of Europe 1953).
2. 1956: The European Convention on the Equivalence of Periods of Study, which focused on recognizing study periods abroad (initially for modern languages, later extended to other disciplines) (Council of Europe 1956).
3. 1959: The European Convention on the Academic Recognition of University Qualifications, which ensured academic recognition of degrees between universities for further study or degree equivalency (Council of Europe 1959).

The practical influence of these conventions declined, as countries developed more specific bilateral agreements and newer multilateral conventions emerged. The Warsaw Pact



countries also worked out bilateral treaties and the 1972 Prague Convention. Meanwhile, the Nordic countries signed a regional cooperation treaty in 1962.

In the 1970s, UNESCO began working on regional conventions instead of global ones, leading to the 1979 Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in the Europe Region. This convention built upon earlier Council of Europe efforts and introduced more flexible criteria, promoted better information exchange, and encouraged professional recognition of credentials, though not always explicitly.

The Helsinki Final Act of 1975, part of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, also emphasized academic mobility and mutual recognition of qualifications as tools for reducing Cold War tensions and promoting cooperation across the political divide.

In 1997, the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region was signed under the Council of Europe and UNESCO. It aimed to improve and standardize recognition of higher education qualifications across countries, requiring recognition of foreign qualifications unless substantial differences exist. The convention covers recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education, qualifications awarded by higher education institutions and study periods. It has been ratified by 55 states, including several non-European countries (such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Israel), and organizations like the European Union as a party.

The European Union's early predecessors played little role in higher education cooperation or recognition. This changed in the 1970s, when the European Community began actively promoting student mobility and cross-border academic recognition. Initial efforts included the 1976 Joint Study Programmes (JSP), which supported collaborative networks among universities. These programs emphasized cultural diversity and study recognition across institutions.

The turning point came in 1987 with the launch of the ERASMUS programme, providing scholarships and institutional support to encourage student exchange and curricular coordination. In the 1990s, following the Maastricht Treaty (1992), ERASMUS was integrated into the broader SOCRATES programme, while support for vocational training fell under LEONARDO DA VINCI. ERASMUS expanded to support not only students but also faculty exchange and curricular innovation, focusing on a stronger "European Dimension" in education. Additionally, the EU initiated the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System from 1989, first as a pilot and later as a standard for recognizing study abroad.

Since the early 1980s, the EU has supported various initiatives to improve the recognition of academic qualifications across Europe. These include funding handbooks, creating the NARIC network (National Academic Recognition Information Centres, 1984) for academic recognition, and, with UNESCO and the Council of Europe, forming the ENIC network



(European Network of Information Centres in the European Region, 1994). In 1998, the Diploma Supplement was promoted to help international recognition of graduates' achievements.

The EU issues legally binding directives for professional recognition across member states. Over 60 such directives have been issued, mainly for regulated professions like medicine and architecture. A key 1988 directive guaranteed recognition of higher education diplomas (3+ years), shifting from harmonization to mutual trust among member states. However, full implementation of some directives has been delayed. From the 1950s to the late 1990s, European intergovernmental bodies promoted mutual trust and flexible recognition of student qualifications to support mobility, despite national differences in higher education systems. However, globalisation introduced new pressures, leading to a shift away from this trust-based model. Countries like the UK, Greece, and Germany expressed scepticism about EU-led harmonization. The 1999 Bologna Declaration marked a turning point, emphasizing structural convergence in response to global competition and placing more scrutiny on recognition standards across Europe (Teichler, 2003).

The European Commission has taken several steps to strengthen implementation, and the current EU and Bologna policies point toward greater harmonization, digitalization, and student-centred practices, such as digital tools like Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) and the Online Learning Agreement (OLA) aiming to streamline the process and reduce administrative barriers and errors. Institutions are encouraged to adopt a culture of automatic recognition with the help of capacity-building initiatives and policy recommendations supported by EU institutions.

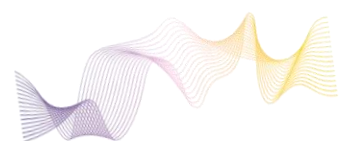
2.2. Conceptual Background and Current Practices

Credit recognition is a cornerstone of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the heart of student mobility. It enables students to receive formal acknowledgment of learning outcomes they complete abroad. This process also facilitates educational innovation and contributes to institutional trust among higher education systems and partner universities.

Formal and Full Recognition

The concept of credit recognition is officially defined by several international legal and policy instruments, particularly under the frameworks of EHEA and the Erasmus+ programme.

The legal backbone of credit recognition in the EHEA is the **Lisbon Recognition Convention** (Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region) in the year of 1997.



Article I stipulate that recognition is “a formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign educational qualification with a view to access to educational and/or employment activities.” Article V.1 says that “each Party shall recognize periods of study completed within the framework of a higher education programme in another Party”.

The **ECTS Users’ Guide of the European Commission** underlines in Section 4.2 of the document, specifically under "Credit mobility" and "The golden rule of recognition of credit mobility within the framework of interinstitutional agreements": all credits gained during the study abroad period, as agreed in the Learning Agreement and confirmed by the Transcript of Records, should be transferred without delay and counted towards the student's degree without requiring additional work or assessment (European Commission, 2015).

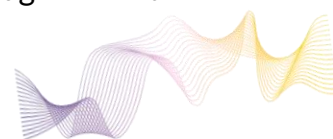
The **Council Recommendation on Automatic Recognition** defines automatic recognition as the acceptance of a qualification, or its level, without requiring the individual to undergo a separate recognition procedure. It also outlines the automatic recognition of learning outcomes from a period abroad—commonly referred to as automatic credit recognition—as the right to have those outcomes recognised, provided they were agreed upon in advance through a learning agreement and validated in the Transcript of Records (ToR) using ECTS credits (Council of the European Union, 2018).

In the **Rome Ministerial Communiqué** (2020) we can read: "We will ensure automatic recognition of academic qualifications and periods of study within the EHEA so that students, staff and graduates are able to move freely to study, teach and do research. We will make the necessary legislative changes to guarantee automatic recognition at system level for qualifications delivered in EHEA countries where quality assurance operates in compliance with the ESG and where a fully operational national qualifications framework has been established."

The **Erasmus+ Programme Guide** (2023) underlines that automatic recognition means that the sending institution recognises studies (including exams or other forms of assessment) undertaken at the partner institution abroad as counting towards the degree, as previously agreed in the Learning Agreement (European Commission, 2023).

The term **formal recognition** refers to any official acknowledgment of studies or qualifications, whether full or partial, and may include recognition for the purposes of further study, or employment.

Full automatic recognition is a central commitment within the Erasmus+ programme and is explicitly required of all higher education institutions holding the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). As the European Commission defines: The sending institution recognises studies (including exams or other forms of assessment) undertaken at the partner institution abroad as counting towards the degree, as previously agreed in the



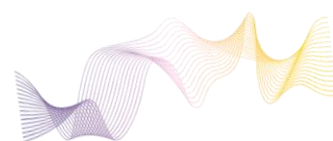
Learning Agreement (European Commission, 2023). It means that all credits and learning outcomes achieved during a mobility period (as agreed in advance through a Learning Agreement) are accepted automatically and without modification by the home institution as counting fully toward the student's degree.

Full academic recognition is not merely a technical requirement, it is a student right and a structural foundation of quality mobility.

The distinction between formal and full recognition is important: while formal recognition merely refers to the implementation of formal recognition procedures, only full recognition implies that no additional coursework or assessments are required upon return. It is an institutional commitment embedded in the ECHE and supported by EU-level guidance and policy frameworks (European Commission 2018, 2020).

2.3. Mechanisms and Key Elements of Recognition

- **Learning Agreement:** The contract between the student, sending institution, and receiving institution that defines the courses or learning activities to be undertaken and ensures alignment of academic expectations. It also should be the basis of automatic recognition. Learning Agreements outline the proposed study or training programme and serve as a formal guarantee that the credits earned abroad will be recognized (European Commission, 2022).
- **European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System:** The ECTS is the primary tool for enabling transparent and consistent credit recognition across Europe. It provides a standardized measurement of student workload and learning outcomes, where 30 ECTS credits represent the workload of a full-time student over one semester. ECTS is designed to be outcome-oriented, rather than only hours of instruction (European Commission, 2015).
- **Learning Outcomes and Competency-Based Recognition:** Learning outcomes refer to the knowledge, skills, and competences students are expected to acquire after completing a particular course or programme.
- **Transcript of Records:** The receiving institution provides a transcript confirming the student's performance. The home institution is obliged to incorporate this into the student's academic record without delay.
- **Diploma Supplement:** Standardized documents that accompany diplomas, offering comparable information on qualifications (European Commission, 2021b).
- **European Qualifications Framework (EQF):** Though not unique to Erasmus+, the EQF underpins the recognition of learning outcomes by providing a translation grid between national qualification systems (European Union, 2017).



The ECTS User's Guide and Bologna Process communiqués emphasize the shift toward competency-based education and recognition frameworks built around learning outcomes.

2.4. Review of EU-Level Policy and Legal Frameworks

The Erasmus+ Programme 2021–2027 cycle is the European Union's leading initiative to support European higher education mobility. It is based on previous programme periods, such as the original Erasmus (1987) and the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007–2013). The main aim of Erasmus+ is fostering mobility, improving educational quality, and supporting the European Education Area, which unlike the EHEA is limited to EU member states. One of its key pillars is the facilitation of academic credit recognition and the comparability of qualifications across member states (European Commission, 2021a).

2.4.1. Legal Foundations

The legal framework for the current Erasmus+ period is established by **Regulation (EU) 2021/817** of the European Parliament and of the Council, adopted May 2021.

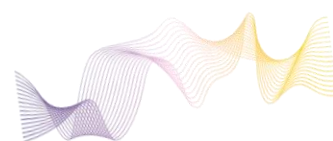
According to **Article 1** of the Regulation, one of the programme's principal objectives is to support learning mobility and enhance the international dimension of education and training systems.

Erasmus+ 2021–2027 focuses on promoting inclusive and high-quality education, fostering European identity, and supporting digital and green transitions. It seeks to empower individuals through lifelong learning opportunities, facilitate transnational partnerships, and contribute to building cohesive and resilient societies.

2.4.2. EU Policy Objectives

Erasmus+ is strongly aligned with the objectives of the **Bologna Process** (1999), which aims to create an EHEA through harmonization of degree structures, quality assurance, and credit recognition.

The European Commission contributed ideas to the European Union leaders' meeting at the Social Summit in Gothenburg, to stimulate discussion on the future of education and culture. The document **“Strengthening European identity through education and culture”** (European Commission, 2017) was presented as part of its vision for a more united and resilient European Union by 2025. It emphasizes the central role of education and culture in building a shared sense of European identity, fostering social cohesion, and preparing citizens for the challenges of the future.



The European Education Area focuses on three main strands: boosting cross-border mobility, investing in people and their education, and strengthening European identity and cultural heritage awareness. It supports the development of multilingualism, mutual recognition of diplomas, and the strengthening of European universities through joint programs and cooperation.

The Council Recommendation on the Automatic Mutual Recognition of Qualifications and Learning Periods Abroad encourages member states toward automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad, especially in the context of building the European Education Area by 2025, reducing the administrative burden on students spending an Erasmus+ semester in one of the partner universities of their home institutions (Council of the European Union, 2018).

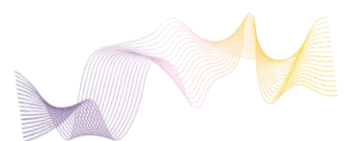
The document addresses two levels of education (higher education and upper secondary education and training) and focuses on the recognition of two key aspects: qualifications obtained and the learning outcomes of study periods abroad. It defines automatic recognition as the right of individuals holding a qualification awarded in an EU Member State, which grants access to higher education or progression to the next educational level in their home country, to have that qualification recognized in any other Member State without the need for a separate recognition procedure (Implementation Report of the 2018 Council Recommendation, 2023).

The Recommendation aims to support:

- student mobility and the idea that students can move freely with their qualifications automatically recognized,
- transparency and trust between national education systems,
- the Bologna Process and ECTS-based learning mobility.

The 2018 Council Recommendation defined 10 key principles for implementation. The main goal is to achieve automatic mutual recognition for the purpose of further learning without having to go through a separate recognition procedure which is supported by the other key principles, such as:

- Fostering transparency and trust
- National guidance transparency tools
- Expert support to HEIs
- Facilitate mobility and recognition
- Develop capacity
- Collecting and disseminating good practices
- Improve evidence base
- Reporting and evaluating.



Institutions have the autonomy to set their own admission criteria. The qualification and the learning outcome itself should be accepted as equivalent in terms of level and content. It recommends the member states to work out implementation plans, to promote them among their institutions and to use the EU wide developed policy tools and support the idea of a European Education Area by 2025.

The European Area of Recognition Manual (EAR) has been developed as part of the European Area of Recognition Project. It contains standards and guidelines on all aspects of the recognition of foreign qualifications and aims to provide credential evaluators with a practical tool to assist in several recognition procedures.

The Manual was first published in 2012, later updated in 2016 and 2023. It is a comprehensive practical guide supporting fair and consistent recognition of foreign qualifications in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997). It provides standardized procedures, principles, and best practices to ensure transparency, comparability, and reliability in academic recognition processes. The use of the EAR manual was already encouraged by the European Ministers for Education in the EHEA Communiqué.

The EAR Manual outlines principles, criteria, and procedures that should guide recognition processes, such as

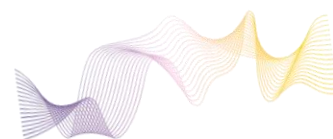
- Recognition decisions must be transparent, timely, and based on clear criteria.
- Recognition decisions should also consider learning outcomes and the level of the qualification within national or European frameworks.
- Use of ECTS and Diploma Supplement are essential for understanding the context and content of a qualification.

The EAR Manual plays a vital role for mobile students participating in Erasmus+ or other international programmes. It emphasizes the recognition of periods of study abroad as part of a complete qualification, underlining that credit transfer should be based on learning outcomes rather than strictly on input measures (e.g., contact hours).

The Council Recommendation on Automatic Recognition and the EAR Manual are complementary instruments:

- The Recommendation sets policy-level goals for automatic recognition across Member States.
- The EAR Manual provides the operational and procedural guidance needed to implement those goals effectively at the institutional and national level.

Additionally, the **Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027** is an EU policy initiative that sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of



Member States to the digital age. It promotes the digital transformation of Erasmus+ tools, including the introduction of digital learning agreements and transcripts, further facilitating timely and accurate credit recognition (European Commission, 2021c).

The **Guidelines on how to use the Erasmus+ Learning Agreement for Studies** provides guidance to ensure transparency, efficiency, and full academic recognition for students undertaking study mobility abroad. By 2027, all higher education institutions must implement digital learning agreements using systems connected to the Erasmus Without Paper Network. Students are required to fill in general information and specify whether their mobility is long-term (2–12 months) or short-term (5–30 days with a mandatory virtual component). They must also meet or work toward the recommended language proficiency for their host institution. The agreement must be digitally approved by the student, sending and receiving institutions before departure, with digital signatures encouraged to support paperless processes (European Commission, n.d.).

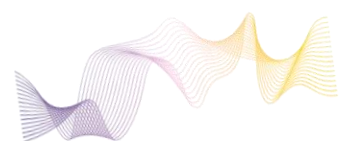
2.5. Comprehensive Analysis of Current Practices

The analysis of Erasmus+ implementation and academic recognition practices provide critical insights into how effectively the programme supports student mobility across Europe. It evaluates policies, tools, and institutional behaviours that influence the recognition of learning outcomes acquired abroad. By examining national frameworks, institutional practices and the experiences of participants, the analysis highlights both the progress made and the persistent challenges.

2.5.1. Erasmus+ Implementation Reports

The Erasmus+ Implementation Reports provide detailed assessments of the Erasmus+ programme's performance, focusing on both the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 cycles. These reports evaluate the programme's effectiveness in promoting mobility, cooperation, inclusion, and innovation in education, training, youth, and sport across Europe.

Mid-Term Evaluation of Erasmus+ 2014–2020 (2018): It assesses the programme's effectiveness, relevance, coherence, efficiency, and European added value, based on extensive data collection, stakeholder consultations, and analysis. The report recognizes strong performance of the programme, calls for simplification and better data tracking, and addresses automatic credit recognition as a key component of the objectives related to student mobility and the Bologna Process principles. The report emphasizes the need to enforce existing rules on credit recognition, encourages further support and guidance for higher education institutions to streamline recognition processes and calls for monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms to ensure compliance with credit recognition commitments.



The **Report on the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027** underlines that “according to a survey of the Erasmus Student Network, almost a third of respondents reported they did not receive full credit recognition, which is far from the objectives laid out in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education. The Rapporteur, therefore, asks the Commission to work towards greater recognition of credits earned during mobility periods, making it easier for students to transfer credits between institutions and ensuring the academic value of their experiences. In addition, the feasibility of and need for a ‘Joint European Degree’ should be explored” (European Parliament 2023).

Annual Reports published by the European Commission provide a comprehensive overview of the implementation, achievements, and challenges of the Erasmus+ programme each year. Covering areas such as education, training, youth, and sport, the reports highlight key statistics, success stories, and policy developments related to mobility, cooperation projects, and inclusion.

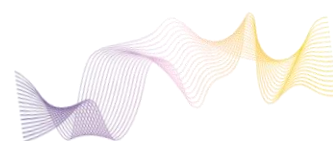
The **2023 Erasmus+ Annual Report** showcases the programme's achievements in supporting lifelong learning and cooperation, with a strong focus on social inclusion, green and digital transitions, and the promotion of EU values. The document confirms the programme's dedication to facilitating learning mobility and highlights the need to make learning mobility an integral part of all education pathways, in order to boost the share of people in the EU benefiting from a learning period abroad. According to the findings of the report, 86% of mobile individuals obtained academic recognition for their mobility experience.

2.5.2. EUF policy paper on Automatic Recognition in Credit Mobility

This paper by the European University Foundation (2019) discusses how recognition issues in the context of credit mobility could be superseded by automatic recognition mechanisms. Key recommendations are informed by recent technological and political developments and comprise workflow, documental support and quality assurance elements.

The four key recommendations put forward in the paper address: an enforceable Learning Agreement for recognition purposes; a more robust approach to quality assurance (QA); a strengthened role for Erasmus+ national agencies (NAs) and establishing a closed and transparent information loop.

According to the EUF policy paper the current non-enforceability of the Learning Agreement is one of the key issues hampering full academic recognition of credits earned abroad. The LA currently serves as a document detailing the courses a student plans to take



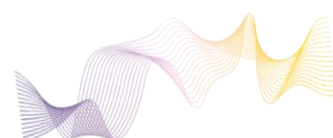
abroad, but it lacks a legally binding guarantee that these courses will be recognized upon return. The report proposes making the LA truly enforceable by clearly distinguishing which credits will definitely count towards the degree upon successful completion, and which components are additional and only added to the Diploma Supplement. This transparent distinction would serve as an iron-clad recognition guarantee and the document would become enforceable as it explicitly states what is guaranteed for recognition purposes. Moreover, the paper suggests that ownership of the LA should be assigned to the European Commission, symbolizing a commitment at the highest level that universities promise to honour the recognition of credits earned abroad.

2.5.3. Resolution on the Development of Automatic Recognition Processes in Europe

In this report (2022) the European Students' Union asserts that the recognition of qualifications and study periods is a fundamental student right essential to achieving a fully functional EHEA. Despite progress such as regional treaties, and Council recommendations on automatic recognition, implementation remains inconsistent and often bureaucratic. ESU calls for ratification of the Global Convention, stronger links between recognition and quality assurance, adaptation of procedures to current developments like micro-credentials and digitalisation, and the evaluation of overlapping recognition frameworks from a student-centred perspective. They stress that recognition processes must be fair, transparent, free of charge, and accessible in multiple languages to ensure mobility, social inclusion, and access to education, especially in times of crisis.

2.5.4. Implementation Report on the 2018 Council Recommendation

The Implementation report on the 2018 Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad of the European Commission (2023) provides a comparative analysis of the implementation of the Council Recommendation across the 27 EU Member States and concludes with suggestions on how to improve the processes and practices for automatic recognition. It also analyses the progress in the use of EU tools and common standards for transparency and trust to facilitate automatic recognition, such as the implementation of legislative changes in the Member States since the introduction of the Council Recommendation, the understanding of the concept of automatic recognition and the challenges to progress in the practical application.



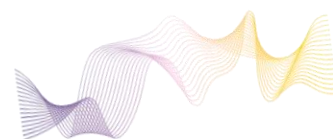
One of the most significant findings of the report is the need of defining automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and its understanding by stakeholders: The Lisbon Recognition Convention laid the foundation for recognizing higher education qualifications in the UNESCO European Area; however, it is more limited than the Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition: the Lisbon Recognition Convention focuses on recognising qualifications but does not include automatic recognition or place equal emphasis on recognising learning outcomes from study periods abroad. Its goal is to simplify and make recognition fair and timely, but it allows for refusal if a qualification is deemed "substantially different"—a concept that is not further defined by the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

“Stakeholders in various countries reported confusion with regards to the meaning of AMR as defined in the CR, an issue that is posing a challenge to its correct interpretation and implementation. This resulted in stakeholders in some Member States believing that the country is in compliance with the CR even when the characteristics of AMR described in the CR are not in place, as noted later on in this report, and negatively impacts the extent to which the implementation of the CR can be effective.”

Lack of a clear understanding of automatic mutual recognition as it is defined in the Council Recommendation is a recurrent challenge in several Member States. It is also visible from the results of the survey whereby educational institutions within the same Member State gave different responses regarding the extent and conditions of application of automatic mutual recognition. Various stakeholders representing educational institutions also reported in focus groups to be unclear about automatic mutual recognition under the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Council Recommendation, and how they relate to and differ from each other.

Results of the report show that almost half of all institutions (49%) give automatic recognition to credits and learning outcomes obtained in any other EU Member State. A further 14% give automatic recognition to those when they were obtained in any other Bologna Process country, 4% when they were obtained in a specific set of countries, and 11% when they were obtained in a specific set of partner institutions. 64% of HEIs give automatic recognition to credits and learning outcomes obtained in any other EU Member State or Bologna process country. On the other side of the scale, 19% of respondents reported that their HEI does not give automatic recognition to learning outcomes achieved abroad at all.

Most transfers of credits relating to learning periods abroad are recognised within the framework of Erasmus+ mobilities. The use of learning agreements prior to the departure of the learner should ensure the recognition of the learning outcomes acquired during the period abroad. The recognition rate of higher education student mobility for studies under



the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020 is high on average, although still far from universal (82%), and significant differences among countries remain. The data refer to Programme Countries, including those outside of the EU.

The report's recommendations are:

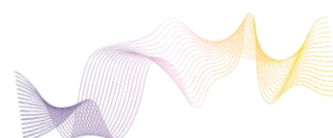
- More effort is needed to clarify the meaning and legal implications of automatic mutual recognition, and connection to other recognition policies – especially at the institutional level.
- Transparency tools and national guidance should be developed to raise awareness and trust of automatic mutual recognition.
- Strengthen the link between recognition and quality assurance.
- Ensure proper use of ECTS.
- Develop efficient and fast verification systems and provide guidance on how to develop and use these systems.
- Centralizing automatic mutual recognition processes and develop National Recognition Centres
- Improve data collection, working toward centralized national data systems and agree on EU-wide indicators for monitoring.

2.5.5. Quality Assurance Fit for the Future – Students' Perspective

The European Students' Union study (2023) highlights students' evolving expectations and critical role in shaping the future of quality assurance in higher education. The report emphasizes that QA systems must adapt to changing learning environments, digitalization, and increasing diversity among students. It argues that while existing frameworks like the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) have provided a solid foundation, they must be updated to ensure greater student engagement, transparency, and responsiveness to contemporary challenges. The study advocates for QA processes that go beyond compliance and instead foster meaningful learning experiences, student-centred education, and inclusive governance. Ultimately, the ESU calls for a forward-thinking, flexible QA system that upholds quality while remaining relevant to students' needs and the dynamic higher education landscape.

2.5.6. Mobility Scoreboard

The Mobility Scoreboard, developed by Eurydice, is a monitoring tool that evaluates and compares the progress of European countries in promoting and supporting student mobility across higher education. One of its primary focuses is on the recognition of



academic achievements gained abroad, including the legal frameworks, policy commitments, and institutional practices that influence recognition. The scoreboard assesses whether countries have clear legal obligations for automatic recognition, whether national qualifications frameworks are in place, and to what extent the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System is implemented and used effectively.

The Mobility Scoreboard highlights significant differences between countries. While some have advanced legal guarantees ensuring the automatic recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad, others still rely on case-by-case decisions by individual institutions. The scoreboard emphasizes the importance of transparent, fair, and timely recognition procedures that are aligned with the Bologna Process and European standards, such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

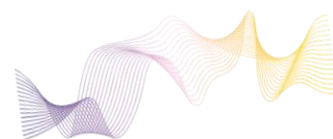
The legal frameworks across Europe vary in maturity and scope. Countries with solid legislation tend to have better recognition outcomes, especially where recognition is mandated by law and supported by national agencies. However, even where legal provisions are established, comprehensive and strategic implementation at the institutional level is crucial as institutional autonomy, limited resources, and lack of awareness frequently constitute implementation challenges. This often causes a gap between formal policy and actual practice, which have crucial effects on the success of credit recognition.

The Mobility Scoreboard underscores the importance of institutional practices. While many institutions claim to use ECTS and learning agreements, the practical interpretation of these tools can differ widely. The scoreboard serves as both a diagnostic tool and a call to action for countries to strengthen legal and institutional mechanisms to support student mobility and academic recognition.

“The Mobility Scoreboard: Higher education background report 2022/2023” (2023) is the third edition of its kind and it invited member states to implement structural reforms to remove obstacles to learning mobility, and to monitor the progress made by European countries in facilitating learning mobility. The most recent study tracks the advancements European countries have made in enhancing and eliminating obstacles to mobility in higher education studies, feeding into a new European learning mobility framework. The report is based on qualitative data gathered by the Eurydice Network on top-level policies and measures, mainly in tertiary education.

2.5.7. ESNsurveys

The ESNsurvey conducted by the Erasmus Student Network represents the voice of Erasmus+ and international students and supports them before, during and after their mobility period. Above all, it represents the experiences and challenges of the hundreds of



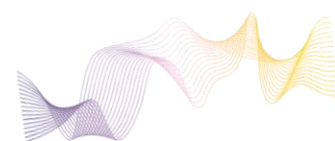
thousands of students that every year undertake an international mobility. Its first edition was launched in 2005, and thirteen more editions have been published since. The ESNsurvey has become one of the most relevant research publications in the field of student mobilities and the Erasmus+ programme, and over the 20 years of its existence, ESNsurveys have gathered more than 200,000 responses.

The XV edition titled “Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All” (2023), is a pivotal resource for understanding and enhancing international student mobility within the Erasmus+ programme. This survey gathered insights from approximately 23,000 students across Europe, including exchange students, full-degree students, and non-mobile students. The report evaluates preparation, institutional support, financial concerns, and recognition of credits after mobility, moreover inclusion, sustainability, civic engagement, and digitalisation. This edition is particularly important, considering the current mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme and the beginning of negotiations related to the Erasmus+ programme 2028-2034.

15 key findings were explored regarding participation rates, duration of mobility experiences, knowledge and pull factors for exchange students; information and support given by HEIs; grants distribution and credit recognition; sustainability and digitalisation during exchange programmes; and, finally, Erasmus+ students’ citizenship.

Over half (52.8%) of the students reported automatic recognition of their qualifications, while 37% underwent formal procedures and 10% used other recognition methods. Among those requiring recognition, timelines varied: 44.2% received immediate recognition, 24% within a month, 23% in one to three months, 5.1% up to six months, and 3.7% waited over six months.

According to one key finding in the report, upon returning to their home university, students had an average of 28 ECTS credits out of 30 recognised, reflecting a discrepancy of 2 credits from their total earned credits. 2.6% of respondents reported that none of their credits were recognised upon their return. Only 22.45% of respondents indicated that procedures for the management of their mobility experience were conducted digitally and 22.25% reported that the recognition process was handled digitally.



Recommendations:

- National Agencies should strengthen monitoring of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education to ensure that:
 - Course catalogues are published in advance
 - Recognition procedures fully align with ECHE commitments

This would support smoother student reintegration after mobility and preserve trust in the Erasmus+ Programme. Additionally, targeted support should be provided to underperforming institutions to help them improve the academic experience and meet their ECHE objectives.

A revamp of the Learning Agreement is recommended for Erasmus+ 2028–2034 to reduce bureaucracy and better integrate recognition of informal learning, fostering more innovative and student-centred mobility experiences.

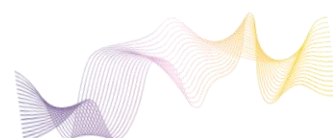
National governments and Higher Education Institutions must enhance efforts to ensure automatic recognition of learning outcomes from Erasmus+ mobility. Despite EU-level recommendations from 2018 and 2022, recognition remains inconsistent, leading to student mistrust and academic disruptions post-mobility. To address this, national authorities should:

- Provide clearer guidance to institutions
- Conduct assessments to identify recognition gaps
- Align improvements with the revised ECTS Users' Guide adopted by the Bologna Follow-up Group

2.5.8. Bologna with Student Eyes

Bologna with Student Eyes (BWSE) is the flagship publication of the European Students' Union (ESU) reflecting students' views and perceptions on the implementation of the Bologna Process. It gathers input from ESU's members, i.e. national unions of students (NUSes), to highlight student priorities and offer recommendations. The 2024 edition of the Bologna with Student Eyes report was developed in the context of the Erasmus+ co-funded project BWSEFOR2030. The core data comes from nine extensive surveys on topics such as student participation in higher education governance, academic freedom, social dimension, quality assurance, mobility and internationalisation, and public responsibility and financing of higher education. Input was collected from 37 NUSes across 33 EHEA countries, with some non-EHEA participants included for continuity. The publication also compares results with the 2020 edition and draft 2024 Bologna Implementation Report.

The report offers a critical reflection on the implementation of the Bologna Process from the student perspective, highlighting areas of progress and persistent challenges. It calls for



concerted efforts by policymakers, institutions, and stakeholders to address issues in academic recognition, ensuring that the goals of the Bologna Process are fully realized for all students across Europe.

The document argues that the Bologna Process must prioritize effective and transparent implementation of Bologna key commitments with stronger oversight, stakeholder engagement, and accountability at both national and institutional levels to realize its full potential. Despite progress in embedding the principles of the EHEA into national systems, the full and meaningful implementation of the key commitments remains inconsistent. Given the time and support already provided, further delays by countries are no longer justifiable.

Although normative integration—such as the use of ECTS or national qualifications frameworks—has improved, implementation is often superficial or misaligned with EHEA guidelines. For instance, the ECTS system is widely used but often calculated in ways that do not align with actual student workload. Similarly, national adaptations of degree structures or recognition processes may not fully reflect EHEA principles, leading to rigid programs and unreliable recognition of qualifications.

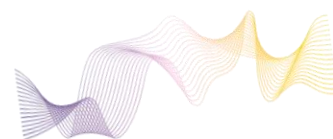
According to the report the most urgent issues for improvement are:

- Incomplete or poorly translated implementation of commitments.
- Lack of trust between systems, shown by reluctance toward automatic recognition and the growth of regional agreements.
- Insufficient stakeholder engagement and weak accountability in implementation mechanisms (e.g., Thematic Peer Groups, Bologna Implementation Coordination Group).
- Recognition processes remain overly strict and inconsistent.

Key recommendations include:

Degree Structure: It is essential to ensure that bachelor's and master's programmes are coherent and provide flexibility to support diverse student learning pathways. Short-cycle programmes should be better integrated into the overall degree structure, with improved information provided to students regarding their purpose and value. Additionally, the timelines for completing degrees should be reassessed.

Qualifications Frameworks & Learning Outcomes: Stakeholders should be actively involved in the design and application of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) to ensure their relevance and usability. Higher education institutions should receive support in formulating learning outcomes that align with NQF descriptors and are effectively used for assessment; emerging tools such as artificial intelligence may help improve consistency and efficiency in this process. Furthermore, systems should better recognize informal and



prior learning, and micro credentials should be more fully embedded into the qualifications framework.

ECTS & Diploma Supplement:

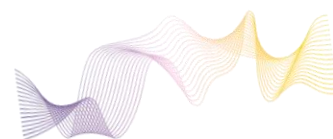
The ECTS User's Guide should be updated to incorporate practical experiences and accommodate emerging trends, including the use of micro credentials. ECTS credits must be calculated based on actual student workload, with enhanced monitoring through external quality assurance and tools like the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education. Diploma Supplements should be standardized across countries to reflect both formal and non-formal learning and be implemented in accordance with European Higher Education commitments.

Recognition:

Recognition procedures should be simplified and made more transparent, including the provision of information in widely spoken European languages. Efforts should be made to promote automatic recognition and generic, system-level recognition of qualifications. Authorities should collect and analyse more data on recognition practices, including the reasons for denied recognition and the outcomes of appeals. The use of tools such as the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees should be expanded to support displaced learners and facilitate their access to higher education.

2.5.9. EUA's Trends 2024 report

Based on survey responses from 489 higher education institutions in 46 higher education systems of the EHEA, the European University Association's Trends 2024 report provides a comprehensive analysis of how institutions across Europe are implementing Bologna Process reforms. It examines the adoption of key Bologna objectives such as the three-cycle degree structure (bachelor's, master's, doctorate), the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and quality assurance mechanisms. The report also covers institutions' evolving practices in areas like learning and teaching, institutional autonomy, and the social dimension of higher education. The report notes that issues such as inconsistent recognition of qualifications, varying levels of student and staff participation in governance, and disparities in resources continue to affect the uniformity of implementation across institutions and countries. Finally, **Trends 2024** provides an overview of how European higher education institutions experienced changes over the past five years, due to higher education reforms, and in the wider context of societal, political, economic and technological changes, marked among others by the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine.



In Chapter 6.2 on student mobility, the report indicates that 81% of surveyed institutions identify financial barriers—such as the absence of scholarships or insufficient funding—as a major obstacle preventing students from participating in mobility programs. Additionally, discipline-specific constraints (69%) and mismatched academic calendars (68%) are frequently mentioned as significant challenges. Credit recognition is a problem in 45% of surveyed institutions.

It is also worth highlighting that few institutions (6%) appear to face significant challenges with credit recognition, affecting a substantial number of students, i.e. more than 10%. In contrast, at half of the surveyed institutions, such issues impact no more than 10% of students. However, the report also highlights that over a quarter of institutions (26%) lack data on this matter, making it uncertain whether this reflects a lack of institutional monitoring or simply limited access to information by the respondent.

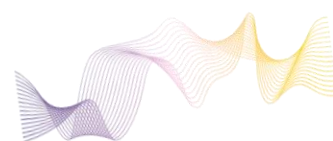
Moreover, many institutions face challenges in integrating credit mobility periods into specific study programmes. This is reported by:

- 53% of institutions for master's programmes (41% to some extent),
- 49% of institutions for bachelor's programmes (40% to some extent), and
- 69% of institutions for specific disciplines, such as those leading to regulated professions (46% to some extent).

The report suggests that, while these issues may appear structural or organisational in nature, they may also reflect a deeper problem: the principles of credit recognition are not being fully implemented, with the study period abroad not being accepted—or only with difficulty—as a valid substitute for the corresponding period at the home institution. Consequently, students in certain programmes may be either discouraged from participating in credit mobility or excluded altogether.

The report recommends several key actions that could help to address the identified challenges with credit recognition:

- Institutions must strengthen their organisational frameworks and ensure they have adequate capacity to support student exchanges. This includes improving student services and guidance, as well as investing in international offices and related infrastructure. Moreover, functional Erasmus+ tools and procedures are essential, yet currently lacking in effectiveness.
- Credit recognition must become a greater priority, both within institutions and across national systems. Although the Lisbon Recognition Convention and Erasmus+ guidelines are widely understood, they are not consistently implemented. This inconsistency negatively affects students and contributes to staff frustration, as long-standing problems persist despite years of effort.



2.5.10. Critical Review of Implementation Practices

The analyses and reports outlined above show that there are obvious discrepancies between countries and institutions in areas such as academic recognition, quality assurance, and student support.

The gap between policy and implementation in the Bologna Process is one of the most determined challenges. Although most countries have formally adopted the Bologna tools (the three-cycle degree structure, ECTS, diploma supplements, and commitments to automatic recognition) the effective application at the institutional level often remains underdeveloped. This discrepancy is particularly visible in academic recognition, where policies intended to ensure smooth credit transfer and qualification recognition are undermined by inconsistent practices, unclear procedures, or lack of enforcement.

This gap is largely due to a combination of institutional autonomy, varying levels of resources, and differing national interpretations of Bologna commitments. Universities may struggle with adapting internal processes, providing adequate staff training, or aligning curricula with mobility requirements. Bridging the gap between high-level policy and ground-level implementation requires stronger monitoring, better coordination between national authorities and institutions, and a genuine commitment to putting student mobility and recognition at the heart of institutional strategies.

2.6. Conclusions and Gaps in the Literature

2.6.1. Key Gaps in the Literature

Lack of Longitudinal Data on Recognition Outcomes

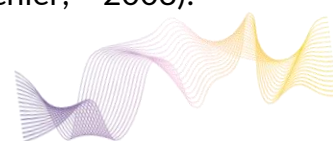
While short-term satisfaction surveys are common, detailed mobility statistics should be improved. Only few studies track recognition outcomes over time or measure the academic and professional impact of partial or failed credit recognition. This absence makes it difficult to evaluate the systemic effects, institutional accountability or regional tendencies.

Insufficient Focus on Non-EU Programmes

Much of the literature focuses on Erasmus+ and the Bologna Process, leaving limited comparative analysis with non-EU schemes.

Underexplored Institutional Practices

Institutional-level practices are rarely documented systematically. Most studies rely on student self-reports or national policy summaries, rather than in-depth analysis of how universities interpret and implement recognition principles (Teichler, 2003).



Understanding these practices is crucial because universities exercise significant discretion in recognition decisions. Factors such as internal governance structures, faculty autonomy, and institutional culture can produce wide variations in recognition outcomes even when Learning Agreements or national guidelines exist. This under exploration constrains the development of evidence-based recommendations for improving consistency, transparency, and fairness in credit recognition.

2.6.2. Challenges

Despite the strong legal and policy framework, credit recognition remains an area with notable implementation challenges. These include discrepancies in ECTS application across institutions, variations in grading systems, and administrative delays in credit transfer (Bracht, 2006; Huisman & van der Wende, 2004). Nonetheless, Erasmus+ has significantly enhanced the consistency, transparency, and trust needed for effective recognition of academic achievements within the EU.

Inconsistent practices across countries and partner universities:

- Varying interpretations of recommendations and guides
- Differences in grading systems, curricular content, or course duration
- Uneven application of ECTS

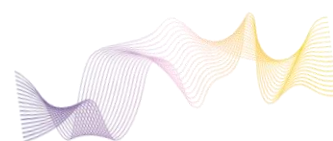
Administrative and Procedural Barriers

- Recognition processes may be opaque, slow, or under-documented
- Learning Agreements are often ignored or re-negotiated upon return
- Fragmentation of responsibilities between international offices and academic departments causes misunderstanding among students
- Students are often not informed of their rights regarding recognition
- Recognition decisions may lack justification or documentation

Legal Ambiguity: The non-binding nature of Council recommendations leads to slow implementation, and many national systems lack enforcement or penalties for non-compliance.

Autonomy vs. Accountability: Higher Education Institutions often prioritize curricular integrity over harmonized credit recognition, creating inconsistent practices even when Learning Agreements are signed.

Digital Integration Gaps: While tools like Erasmus Without Paper and Online Learning Agreements exist, their uptake is uneven, and technical issues persist (European Commission, 2024).

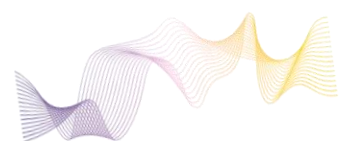


2.6.3. Recommendations

Comparative Research: More funded collaboration between research centres (e.g., INCHER-Kassel) could address this.

Intensive Digital Interoperability: Accelerate the integration of digital platforms across all partner institutions through Erasmus Without Paper.

Improve Institutional Training and Accountability: Develop standardized training modules for academic staff and mobility officers, emphasizing the legal obligations related to recognition and the role of digital tools.



3. Quantitative Student Data and Focus Group Analysis with Focus on Credit Recognition Procedures

3.1. Introduction

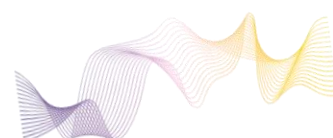
This analysis explores the role of automatic credit recognition as a key structural element supporting student mobility within the European Higher Education Area from the students' perspective. It presents European-level comparisons based on data collected by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), in collaboration with the European Students' Union (ESU). These insights are complemented with findings from earlier surveys and official data published by the European Commission and Bologna Process follow-up reports.

The structure follows a logical progression and order of the student mobility cycle, i.e. the phases of before, during and after mobility. The analysis begins with a detailed explanation of the methodology used for data collection and analysis, including a description of the student sample. The next chapter examines the impact of automatic recognition on students' mobility decisions, focusing on factors such as the importance of recognition when selecting a destination, the role of pre-departure support, and students' satisfaction with services provided by both sending and host institutions before departure. Then the focus shifts to the challenges students encounter during their mobility period, while the next part addresses the recognition process after mobility. This includes post-mobility support, the academic consequences of credit non-recognition, and the barriers that persist in institutional or national systems. The analysis concludes by summarising key findings and offering recommendations for improving automatic recognition practices, intending to make student mobility more equitable, reliable, and seamless across Europe.

By offering a comparative, student-centred perspective grounded in empirical data and policy frameworks, this analysis contributes to ongoing discussions on strengthening recognition systems as a core component of a truly integrated European Higher Education Area.

3.2. Methodology

This analysis integrates both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive overview of student experiences in international mobility and higher education policy. It draws on three key sources of data: the 15th edition of the ESN survey,



the Bologna with Student Eyes 2024 report², and a series of targeted Focus Groups (FG). Together, these sources explore a wide range of topics concerning the learning experience of mobile students, including the preparation for mobility, institutional support, financial challenges, credit recognition, as well as broader themes such as inclusion, sustainability, digitalisation, and civic engagement.

3.2.1. Quantitative Data

ESN Survey XV

The quantitative component is primarily represented by the ESNsurvey XV (Dias et al., 2024.), the largest student-led research project on student mobility in Europe. Conducted between 18th May and 31st July 2023, the survey used a comprehensive online questionnaire to gather insights from students across three key groups: exchange students, international full-degree students, and non-mobile students.

The 2023 edition consisted of 145 questions, many of which were optional, enabling participants to skip sections they were not comfortable answering. The questionnaire included a mix of established themes—allowing for longitudinal comparisons—and new topics reflecting current priorities in higher education, such as sustainability, digitalisation, and civic engagement. A mandatory filtering question at the beginning asked students to specify their mobility status, which then directed them to targeted sets of questions relevant to their experience.

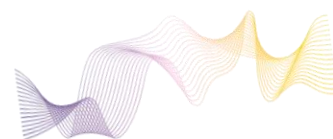
In total, approximately 23,000 responses across Europe and beyond were collected via the ESNsurvey XV, with 22,775 retained after data cleaning. The sample consisted of:

- 78.40% (N = 17,855) exchange students
- 8.15% (N = 1,856) full-degree international students
- 13.45% (N = 3,064) non-mobile students

The analysed data in this report includes only mobile students, namely, exchange students participating in the Erasmus+ programme and international full-degree students. Responses from non-mobile students, exchange students from non-Erasmus+ programmes and invalid submissions were excluded, resulting in a total of 12,100 valid responses. In particular, the vast majority (86%) participated as exchange students, with 14% as full-degree international students.

Out of 10,418 valid answers, excluding full-degree students, the majority of exchange students were at the Bachelor's (64%) or Master's (35%) level of education during their

² Detailed description and more information about these documents can be found in chapter 2. Literature review and legal framework analysis.



mobility; only a very few (1%) were pursuing PhDs. For exchange students, the most common fields of study were: engineering (23%), social sciences (20%), humanities (20%), and economic and business sciences (19%). Countries of sending and host institutions were widely distributed across the globe. Notable host countries included Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. The duration of the exchange varied, with 14% of students staying abroad for 4 months, 40% for 5 months, 16% for 6 months, and the remainder for 7-12 months.

Bologna with Student Eyes 2024

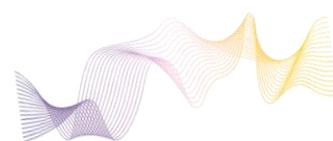
While primarily a qualitative and policy-focused publication, the Bologna with Student Eyes 2024 report is underpinned by a robust set of nine thematic surveys completed by 37 National Student Unions (NSUs) from 33 countries within the European Higher Education Area. These surveys were distributed in early 2023 and formed the core empirical base of the report, which was presented at the Tirana Ministerial Conference in May 2024.

The 2024 edition builds on the legacy of past reports and reflects developments since the previous Bologna Ministerial Conference. The surveys were co-designed by ESU and EURASHE, refined through preliminary focus groups, and focused on nine core areas: student participation; academic freedom, integrity, and institutional autonomy; the social dimension of higher education; quality assurance; internationalisation and mobility; implementation of key Bologna Process commitments; learning and teaching; public responsibility and financing; general perceptions of the Bologna Process.

Data collection was completed by July 2023, with further triangulation from focus group inputs, Eurydice, and Eurostudent sources. Some countries submitted multiple responses due to different educational jurisdictions, such as Belgium (FEF and VVS), the United Kingdom (NUS UK and NUS Scotland), and Finland (SYL and SAMOK). The analysis phase, conducted from August to October 2023, integrated these survey findings with focus group feedback and comparative insights from Eurydice, Eurostudent, and the draft 2024 Bologna Implementation Report. Together, this rich body of data informed a comprehensive, student-driven assessment of the current state and future direction of European higher education. The sample reflects national-level student perspectives, offering a macro-level view of how Bologna reforms are experienced across different systems.

3.2.2. Qualitative Data: Focus Groups

Complementing these large-scale surveys, three Focus Groups were conducted in Spring 2025 in the framework of the AUREA project, to gather in-depth qualitative insights. These sessions targeted students with and without international mobility experience, with a particular emphasis on the Learning Agreement and automatic credit recognition.



The first focus group was held on 4th April 2025, at the Erasmus Generation Meeting in Ancona, Italy, facilitated by Erasmus Student Network (ESN) and European Students' Union (ESU). The second and third focus groups took place on 13th May 2025, during the ESU Board Meeting in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The focus groups involved 24 participants, selected to ensure diversity in mobility experience, academic background, institutional context, mobility destination, and country of origin or study. This wide range of profiles offers valuable reflections on structural strengths and gaps in the mobility process. For example, participants included Spaniards, Austrians, Estonians, Croatians, Bulgarians, Bosnians, Turks, Italians, Czechs, Luxembourgish and French nationals, etc., who had been on mobility programs in the United Kingdom, Italy or Korea. The discussions explored:

- The process and challenges of completing the Learning Agreement.
- Institutional support for mobility and its perceived quality.
- The effectiveness and fairness of academic credit recognition.
- Broader reflections on improving the mobility experience.

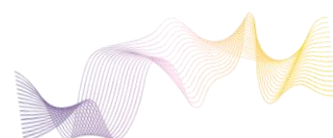
Most of the respondents had taken part in Erasmus+ mobility within programme countries, though some were also involved in European University Alliance mobility schemes or bilateral faculty-level exchanges, all falling under the broader Erasmus+ framework. A few participants had experienced more than one mobility, sometimes across different institutions and countries. Most mobilities lasted for one semester (typically 4–6 months), though some extended to a full academic year, and a smaller number were short-term. The students came from diverse academic backgrounds such as political science, European project engineering, economics, business, and law. Mobility periods generally took place within the past one to two academic years, including both winter and spring semesters.³

3.3. Automatic Credit Recognition as a Defining Factor for participation in Student mobility

3.3.1. Importance of pull factors in choosing the exchange destination

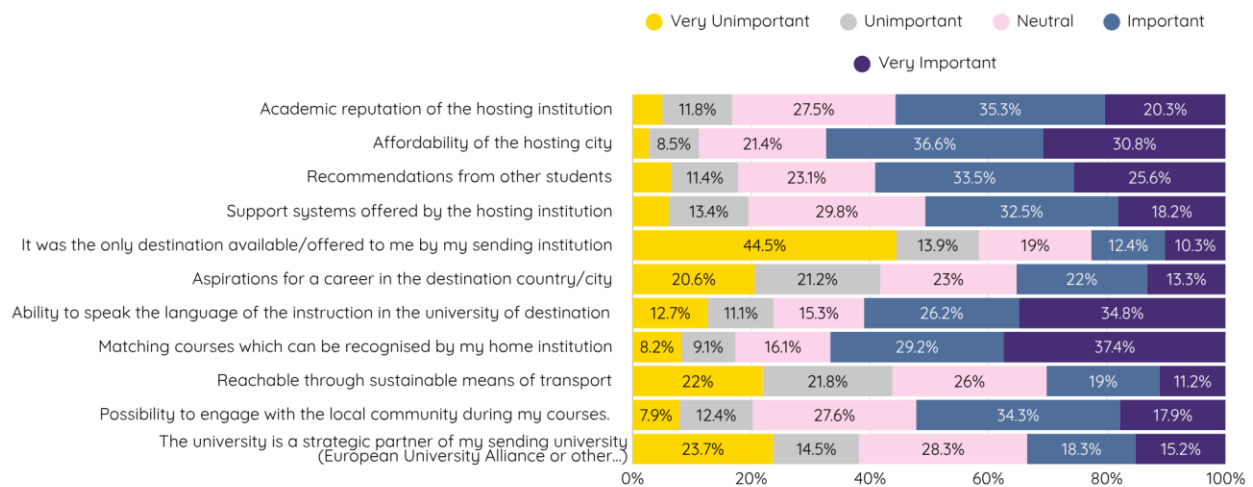
The ESNsurvey XV explores the role of various factors in students' decision-making for participation in student mobility. Attractors—or pull factors—are the positive characteristics of a destination country, city, or institution that motivate students to study abroad. To assess their influence, students were asked to rate the importance of various

³ More information about the student case studies can be found in Annexes 1-3.



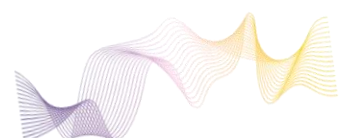
pull factors on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "very unimportant" (1) to "very important" (5). The question posed was: "How important were the following factors when choosing your exchange destination?"

How important were the following factors when choosing your exchange destination?



Graph n.1 – Q: "How important were the following factors when choosing your exchange destination?", source: ESNsurvey XV, n = 10,421

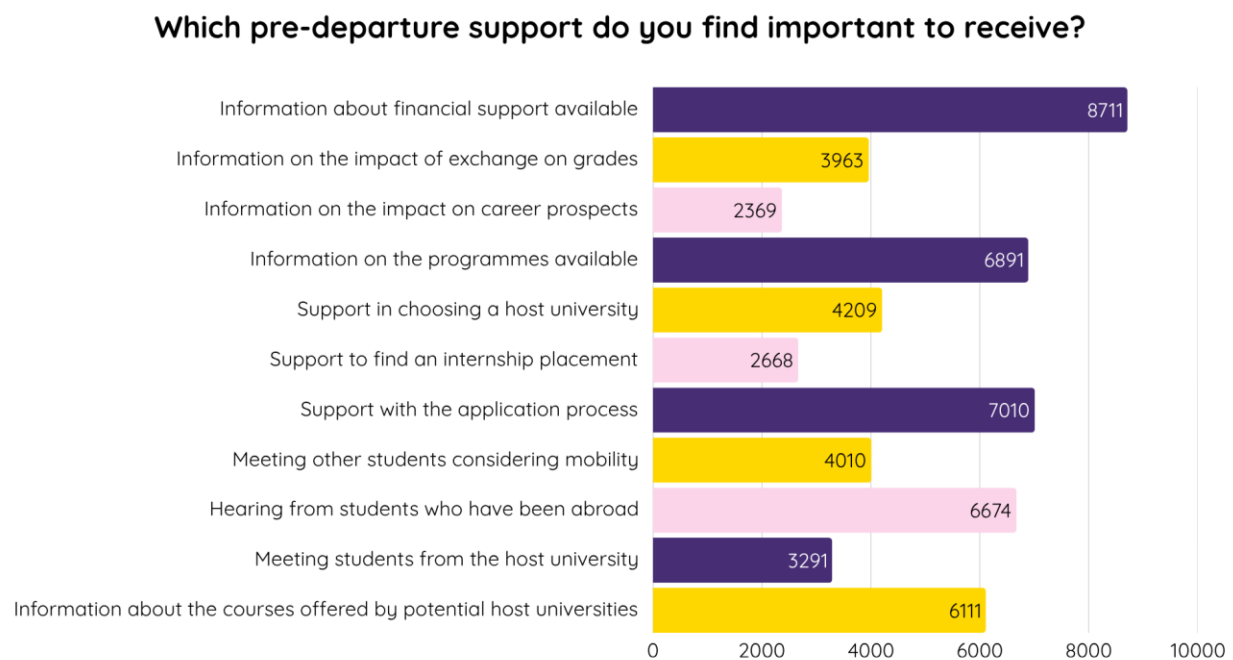
As an outcome, the affordability of the host city was the most important factor, cited by 36.6% of respondents, followed closely by the academic reputation of the host institution at 35.3%. The ability to match courses that would be recognised by the home institution was also an important factor for 29.2% of students when choosing a study abroad destination. This reflects a clear concern among students about maintaining academic progress and ensuring that their time abroad contributes meaningfully toward their degree. Although factors such as affordability and the academic reputation of the host institution ranked higher, nearly a third of respondents highlighted course recognition as a key consideration. This points to the need for stronger coordination between home and host institutions and the provision of up-to-date online course catalogues, giving students clarity and confidence in their academic planning. This concern becomes even more significant in light of the 44.5% of students who reported having no choice in their destination, as it was the only option provided by their home institution. For these students, ensuring that courses taken abroad align with their degree requirements is essential and highlights the importance of quality inter-institutional agreements.



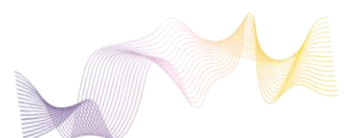
One of the most commonly reported concerns affecting participation in mobility was the potential fear of credit non-recognition. In response to the Bologna with Students Eyes' question "According to your NUS, what are the major obstacles preventing domestic students in your country from going abroad to study?", 48.6% of national student unions identified the fear of non-recognition of credits or diplomas after returning from mobility as a major barrier. This anxiety can serve as a deterrent for student participation and suggests systemic uncertainty about how well recognition functions after mobility periods.

3.3.2. Importance of Pre-Departure Support in Securing a Successful Learning Experience Abroad

The ESNsurvey XV explored which forms of pre-departure support by sending institutions students consider most important when preparing for their mobility experience. When exchange students were asked to respond to the question: "Which pre-departure support do you find important to receive? From the most important to the least important" and select types of support from a list, they highlighted several key areas.



Graph n.1 – Q: "Which pre-departure support did you find important to receive?" source: ESNsurvey XV, Information about financial support available (n=8711), Information on the impact of exchange on grades (n=3963), Information on the impact on career prospects (n=2369), Information on the programmes available (n=6891), Support in choosing a host university (n=4209), Support to find an internship placement (n=2668), Support with the application process (n=7010), Meeting other students considering mobility (n=4010), Hearing from students who have been abroad (n=6674), Meeting students from the host university (n=3291), Information about the courses offered by potential host universities (n=6111)



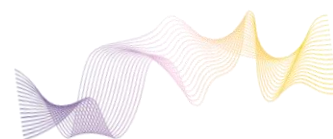
While financial information emerged as the most important support overall, with 83.6% of respondents citing that, academic-related support also featured prominently in students' priorities. Notably, 58.6% of students emphasised the importance of receiving detailed information about courses at potential host universities. This reflects a clear need for transparency in academic offerings abroad, allowing students to make informed choices that align with their degree requirements at home. Additionally, 38% of respondents highlighted the need for information on the impact of mobility on academic grades, indicating a strong concern with how their performance abroad will be assessed and integrated into their academic record. This points to a broader issue of credit recognition and the academic implications of study mobility. Support in navigating the application process, reported as important by 67.2% of students, can also be seen as tied to the preparation of the learning agreement, particularly when this guidance includes help understanding institutional requirements, credit transfer mechanisms, and course compatibility.

Participants in all three Focus Groups confirmed substantial difficulties in accessing clear, comprehensive information necessary to prepare their Learning Agreement. In the first focus group interview, students recalled having to rely largely on their initiative to research host universities' curricula, often with little help from their International Relations Offices (IROs). Some even admitted they did not fully understand what ECTS meant until well into their preparation. In the second focus group, the process of selecting a host university and matching courses was often shaped by informal factors such as peer recommendations, due to a lack of institutional support and limited access to course details. Participants in the third focus group shared similar experiences but offered additional insights into the challenges of students in joint or non-European programmes. While a few participants benefited from databases listing previously recognised courses, most still struggled with outdated websites and course catalogues, language barriers, or non-responsive coordinators.

Across all focus groups, it became evident that inconsistent communication practices of universities placed an undue burden on students, leaving them to navigate complex academic systems without adequate institutional support.

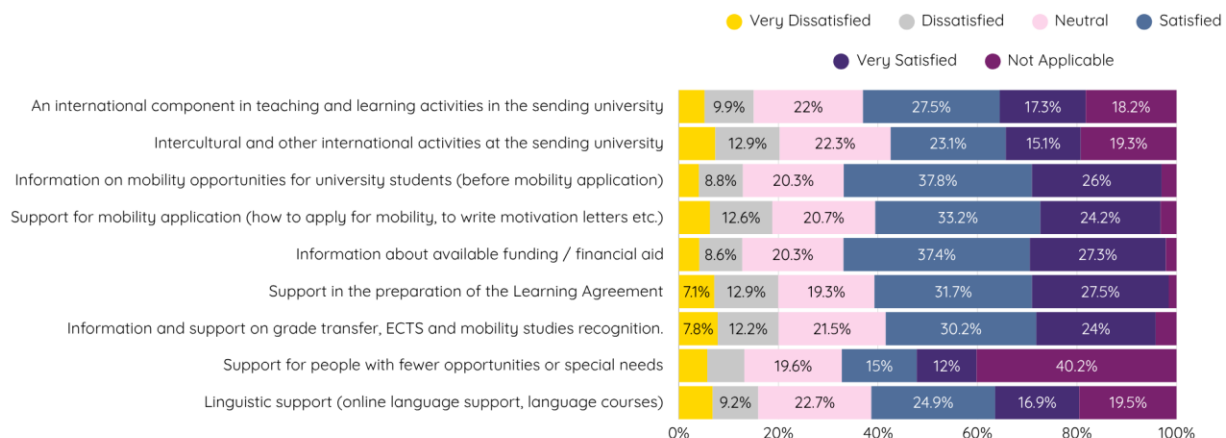
3.3.3. Satisfaction with services and support provided by the sending institution before departure

The ESNsurvey XV examined student satisfaction with various forms of pre-departure support provided by their sending institutions. Specifically, students were asked: "How satisfied were you with the following services and support provided by your sending



institution before departure?” Responses were rated on a Likert scale ranging from very dissatisfied (1) to very satisfied (5).

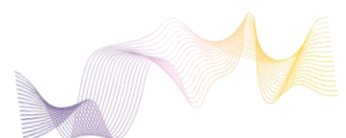
How satisfied were you with the following services and support provided by your SENDING institution before departure?



Graph n.3 – Q: “How satisfied were you with the following services and support provided by your SENDING institution before departure?”, source: ESNsurvey XV, (n=10,421)

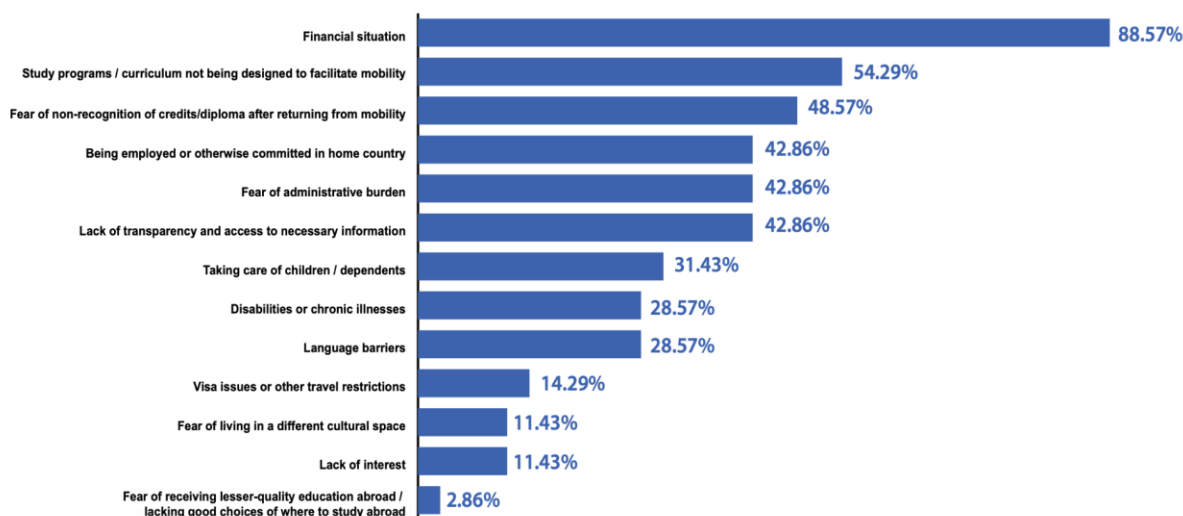
Among the services evaluated, 31% of students reported being satisfied and 27% reported very high satisfaction with the support provided in preparing their learning agreement – a key element related to academic planning and credit recognition. Around 20% of students reported total dissatisfaction with this type of support, suggesting that for many students, assistance in structuring their academic programme abroad and aligning it with home university requirements was a well-supported aspect of their preparation. In addition, a total of 57% of respondents expressed satisfaction with support in writing motivation letters and completing applications, a service that often overlaps with academic guidance, especially when it involves programme selection and explaining academic goals. However, satisfaction levels were lower in other critical support areas such as linguistic support, which can indirectly affect academic success and confidence in following coursework abroad.

The Bologna with Student Eyes 2024 report data further demonstrates that, before departure, the support offered by sending institutions is crucial in preparing students for their mobility experience. National student unions were asked: “To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The recognition procedures are simple.” Only 17% of NUSes perceived in 2024 recognition procedures to be simple and easy to understand,



while 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed, reflecting that many students likely face difficulties related to these processes before leaving. Additionally, financial aspects were raised as a concern: “To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The recognition procedures are free of charge.” Eighteen NUSes disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating that hidden costs may reduce the effectiveness of pre-departure support. These findings suggest that sending institutions need to enhance clarity and reduce financial barriers in their preparatory services to better equip students for mobility. Recognition procedures for credits and diplomas obtained abroad remain a significant concern for students and their representatives. A persistent anxiety among students is the fear of non-recognition of their academic achievements after mobility, reported by 48.6% of National Student Unions. This fear was captured by the question: “Do you fear non-recognition of credits or diplomas after returning from mobility?” Such concerns can deter students from engaging in international exchanges and may negatively affect their academic progress. The perceived effectiveness of recognition procedures varies widely across Europe. Data from the BWSE 2024 survey highlights several key issues:

11.7. Main obstacles preventing domestic students from participating in mobility programmes



Graph n.4 – Q: “Main obstacles preventing domestic students from participating in mobility programmes”, source: *Bologna with Student Eyes 2024 report*

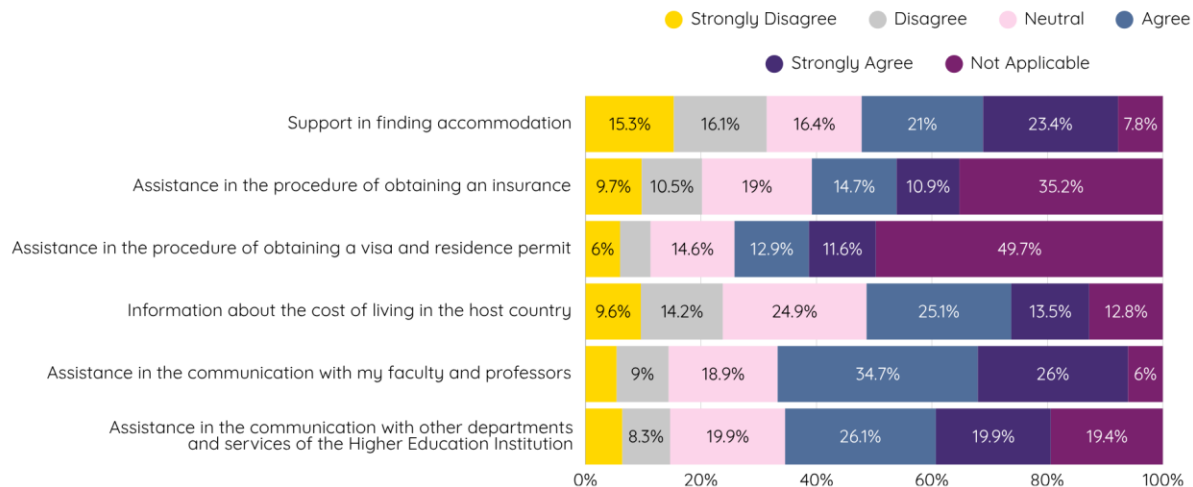
3.3.4. Satisfaction with services and support provided by the host institution before arrival

The ESNsurvey XV assessed how satisfied students were with the support and services provided by their host institutions before arrival. Students responded to the question: “How satisfied were you with the following services and support provided by your host



institution before arrival?”. Participants were asked to rate various services on a Likert scale ranging from 'very dissatisfied' (1) to 'very satisfied' (5).

How satisfied were you with the following services and support provided by your HOST institution before arrival?



Graph n.5 – Q: “How satisfied were you with the following services and support provided by your HOST institution before arrival?” Source: ESNsurvey, (n=9817)

When looking at satisfaction levels across different support areas, the highest-rated category was assistance in communication with faculty and professors, with about 60% of students reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied. This indicates that host institutions often play a meaningful role in helping students establish early academic contact, an important factor in understanding course content, requirements, and credit expectations before the start of the mobility period. A lower share of students, a total of 46% expressed satisfaction or higher satisfaction with assistance in the communication with other departments and services of the Higher Education Institution, suggesting ongoing challenges with navigating administrative procedures such as Learning Agreements, course registration, or enrolment—areas where clearer and more proactive support may be needed.

The focus groups revealed that across all stages of the mobility process—before, during, and after—students consistently highlighted a significant lack of clear, timely, and accessible information. For example, many faced uncertainty when preparing their Learning Agreements, especially when course catalogues were published late or in a language they did not speak. Some students only learned informally, or too late, that the Learning Agreement could be modified during their stay, which led to informal course substitutions that complicated recognition. Communication from universities, particularly

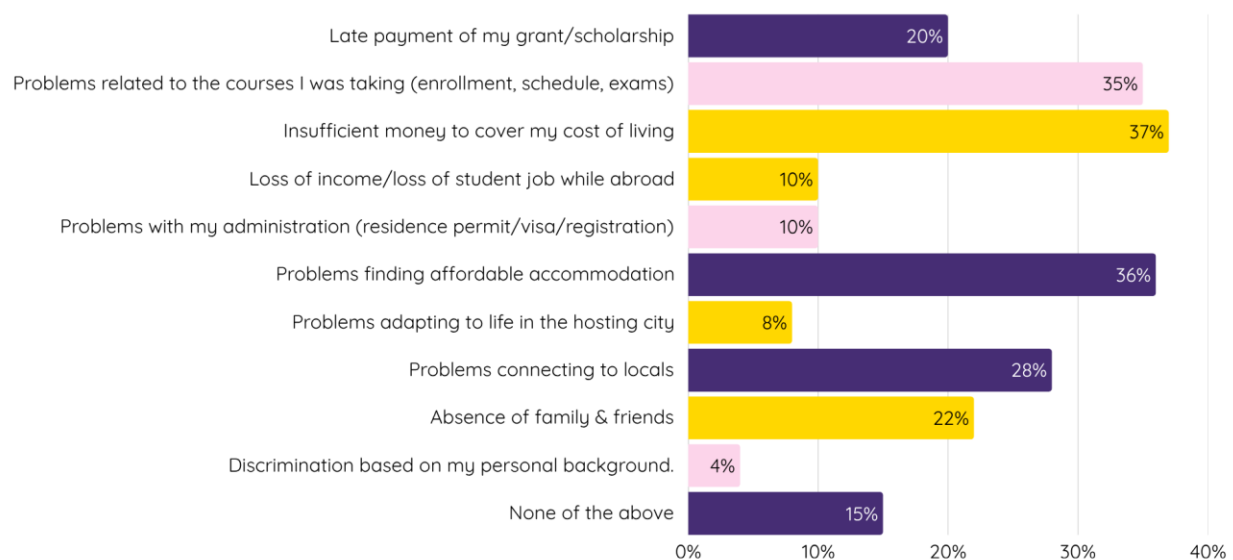


international offices or Erasmus+ coordinators, was described as inconsistent and often minimal, leaving students to rely on unofficial peer support or personal initiative. Students strongly emphasised the need for better communication strategies, transparent recognition criteria, clearer digital systems, and the inclusion of student support services at all levels to bridge the information gap and reduce the burden placed on individuals navigating complex mobility processes.

3.4. Issues experienced during mobility

The ESNsurvey XV investigated the challenges students encountered during their study abroad period, asking: “Did you experience any of the following issues during your study abroad?” Respondents could select from a range of common difficulties related to finances, academia, and logistics.

Did you experience any of the following issues during your study abroad?



Graph n.6 – Q: “Did you experience any of the following issues during your study abroad?”, source: ESNsurvey XV, Late payment of my grant/scholarship (n=2174), Problems related to the courses I was taking (enrollment, schedule, exams) (n=3656), Insufficient money to cover my cost of living (n=3869), Loss of income/loss of student job while abroad (n=1076), Problems with my administration (residence permit/visa/registration) (n=1038), Problems finding affordable accommodation (n=3772), Problems adapting to life in the hosting city (n=928), Problems connecting to locals (n=3001), Absence of family & friends (n=2361), Discrimination based on my personal background (n=429), None of the above (n=1634)

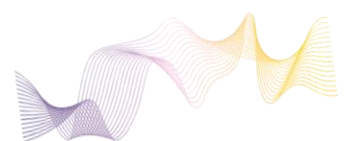
Among the most frequently reported issues were academic challenges, with 35% of students indicating they faced problems related to course enrolment, scheduling, or exams. These challenges are closely tied to the broader concern of academic integration,



suggesting that many students struggled to navigate unfamiliar academic systems or to align their coursework with expectations from their home institutions. These issues can have significant implications—not only for students’ academic performance during the exchange but also for the recognition of their studies upon return. Problems such as difficulty enrolling in required courses, unclear exam procedures, or scheduling conflicts can disrupt learning and lead to complications in completing the learning agreement, fulfilling degree requirements, or securing full credit transfer. The high number of students facing course-related issues highlights a need for stronger academic coordination between host and home institutions and continuous support by Erasmus+ coordinators especially at the beginning of the semester.

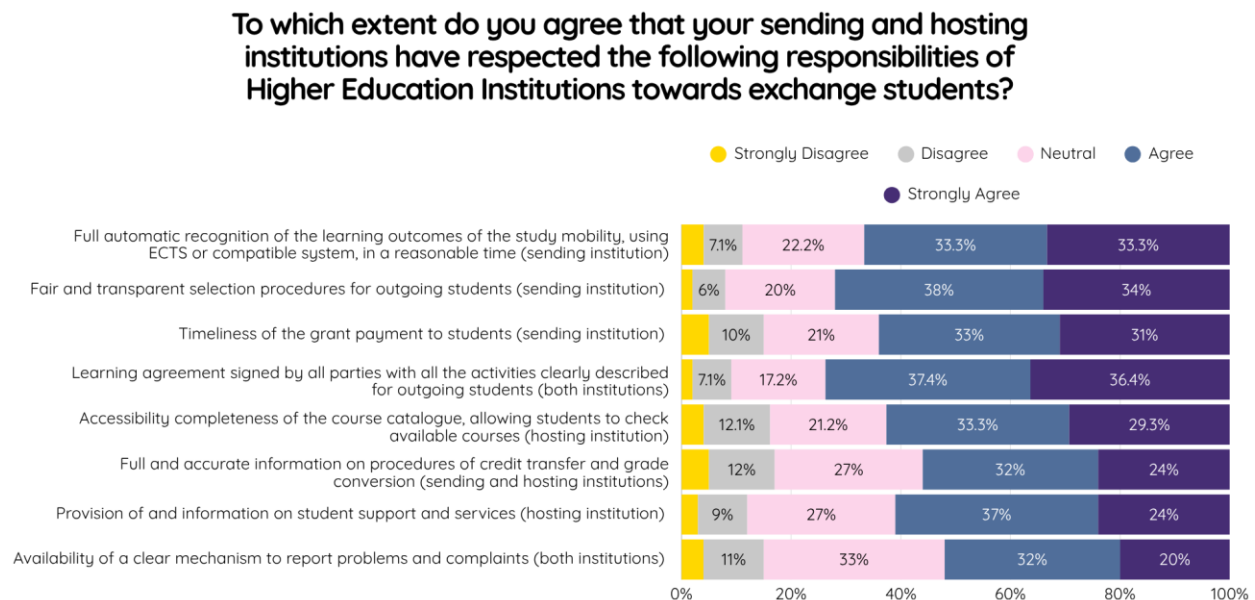
Focus group discussions highlighted the widespread difficulties students faced in managing their Learning Agreements throughout the mobility process. Upon arrival at host institutions, many encountered significant obstacles in adjusting their agreements, often due to course cancellations, scheduling conflicts, or limited availability. The process was frequently described as confusing and administratively taxing, with inconsistent communication between sending and receiving institutions. Students often did not know who was responsible for approving changes, and some reported that recognition decisions were applied inconsistently or seemed subject to individual professors’ discretion rather than transparent institutional policies. Although a few institutions offered supportive tools—such as online portals or structured registration systems—these were exceptions. Most students had to follow up repeatedly with various staff members to make even minor changes, revealing a lack of streamlined procedures. A consistent theme across all groups was the heavy reliance on student initiative throughout the entire process, rather than more balanced experiences. Rather than being guided by a coordinated system, students were often left to bridge institutional gaps themselves, at a time when clear guidance and timely academic support were most needed.

Students also reported challenges in the initial preparation and final recognition of their Learning Agreements. Unclear or incomplete course catalogues at host universities made it difficult to plan accurately, often forcing students to rely on assumptions or submit provisional course lists. While some institutions provided helpful resources—like databases of previously recognised courses—support remained inconsistent and often hinged on the availability and engagement of individual Erasmus+ coordinators. In many cases, students received little guidance and were left to navigate complex administrative systems on their own.



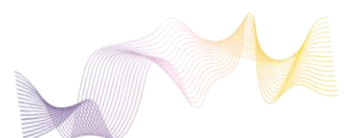
3.5. Challenges with recognition after mobility

The ESNsurvey XV also assessed to which degree students felt that higher education institutions fulfilled their responsibilities in supporting exchange students. Following the question “To which extent do you agree that your sending and hosting institutions have respected the following responsibilities of Higher Education Institutions towards exchange students?”, students were asked to select from a list the responsibilities they thought were respected by the institutions.



Graph n.7 – Q: “To which extent do you agree that your sending and hosting institutions have respected the following responsibilities of Higher Education Institutions towards exchange students?”, source: ESNsurvey XV, (n=9975)

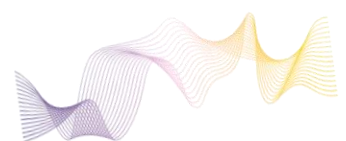
Academic and credit-related responsibilities were a strong focus in the survey findings. A total of 73% of students stated that their Learning Agreements were signed by all parties with all activities clearly described, a critical tool for aligning courses and ensuring smooth credit transfer. This suggests that over two-thirds of respondents felt supported in planning their academic pathway abroad. Credit recognition procedures were acknowledged positively by a total of 55% of students, who agreed or strongly agreed that their HEIs respected their responsibilities in this area. While this points to some progress, it also means that the rest of the students did not select this option, highlighting ongoing concerns about the consistency and transparency of credit recognition processes.



Similarly, about 62% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the course catalogue at their host institution was accessible, underlining the importance of timely, detailed information to help students make informed academic choices before and during their mobility period. The area receiving the highest level of agreement was the fairness and transparency of selection procedures for outgoing students, with a total of 72% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that HEIs fulfilled their responsibilities here. Still, the emphasis placed by students on Learning Agreements, course accessibility, and credit recognition makes clear that academic coherence remains a central expectation of the mobility experience.

Recognition of academic achievements earned abroad remains uneven and complex across the EHEA, particularly after students return home. In the Bologna with Student Eyes report, in response to the question “Does your country automatically recognise degrees from other EHEA countries?”, 62% of student unions reported that some form of automatic recognition is in place. However, when asked “If you selected ‘yes’ to the previous question, in which way is recognition applied?”, most systems indicated unilateral recognition (13 NUSs), with only a few relying on bilateral (3) or regional agreements (4). This unilateral model, while practical, offers limited guarantees of reciprocity and can lead to mismatched expectations. Furthermore, when student unions were asked “How important is automatic recognition to your NUS?”, 23% answered that it is essential, 40% rated it of high importance, and 29% viewed it as moderately important. Only 9% believed it was of low or no importance. These results indicate that recognition is not merely a technical process, but a core concern for the student community when planning and experiencing mobility.

Following the completion of their mobility periods, many students encountered a new and often more complex challenge: the recognition of their academic credits. Although the principle of “automatic recognition” is enshrined in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), students’ actual experiences frequently fall short of this ideal. Feedback gathered through focus group discussions with mobile students revealed recurring inconsistencies in how credits were recognised across institutions. Despite being a formal document meant to guarantee credit recognition, the Learning Agreement did not always ensure that mobility-related coursework was accepted upon return. Some students saw previously agreed-upon courses rejected or replaced without consent, while others were forced to extend their studies due to misaligned recognition criteria. The lack of a consistent, transparent framework—especially regarding how ECTS are calculated and transferred—further exacerbated the issue. Students expressed frustration at the opaque decision-making and called for clearer guidelines and student representation in recognition processes. Ultimately, the discussion underlined a systemic gap between policy and



practice, suggesting the need for better harmonisation, digitalisation, and support mechanisms to ensure Learning Agreements truly facilitate automatic recognition.

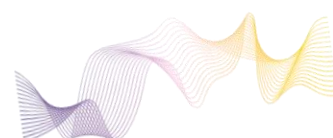
Other focus group participants highlighted even more severe repercussions. Some students faced financial penalties, such as being asked to repay part of their mobility grant due to unrecognised ECTS. Others were compelled to take on additional coursework to meet graduation requirements, effectively extending their studies. These academic and financial burdens were often made worse by a widespread lack of awareness regarding available appeal procedures or support mechanisms.

While a few students reported receiving full recognition for their coursework, such outcomes were typically achieved only after considerable personal effort. These cases often involved gathering extensive documentation and navigating complex institutional procedures. Even in systems that functioned relatively well, delays were common, often due to limited use of digital tools, misalignment in grading scales, or reliance on physical document exchange. In many instances, the lack of clear accountability within institutions further hindered the process.

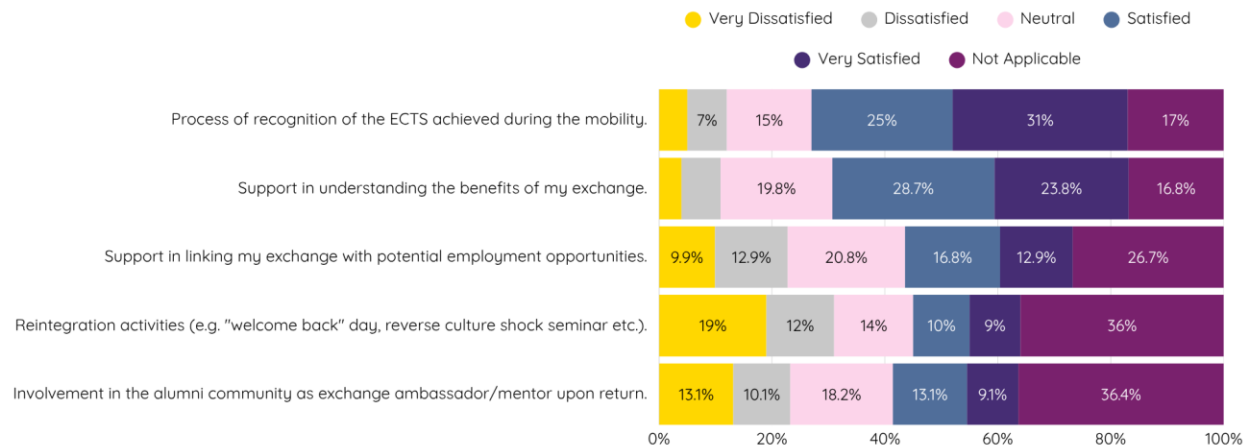
These accounts demonstrate that, despite policy commitments to automatic recognition, its practical implementation at the institutional and faculty level remains uneven. The findings from the focus groups underscore the urgent need for greater transparency, institutional coordination, and student support in credit recognition practices across the EHEA.

3.5.1. Satisfaction with Post-Mobility Support from Sending Institutions

The ESNsurvey XV asked students: “How satisfied were you with the following services and support provided by your sending institution after the end of your exchange?” Responses were given on a Likert scale ranging from 'very dissatisfied' (1) to 'very satisfied' (5). In this section, a large number of responses indicate that some of these services were not applicable, i.e. they did not receive such services.



How satisfied were you with the following services and support provided by your SENDING institution after the end of your exchange?

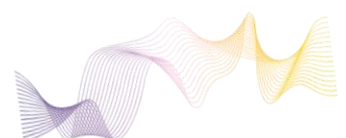


Graph n.8 – Q: “How satisfied were you with the following services and support provided by your SENDING institution after the end of your exchange?”, source: ESNsurvey XV, (n=10,418)

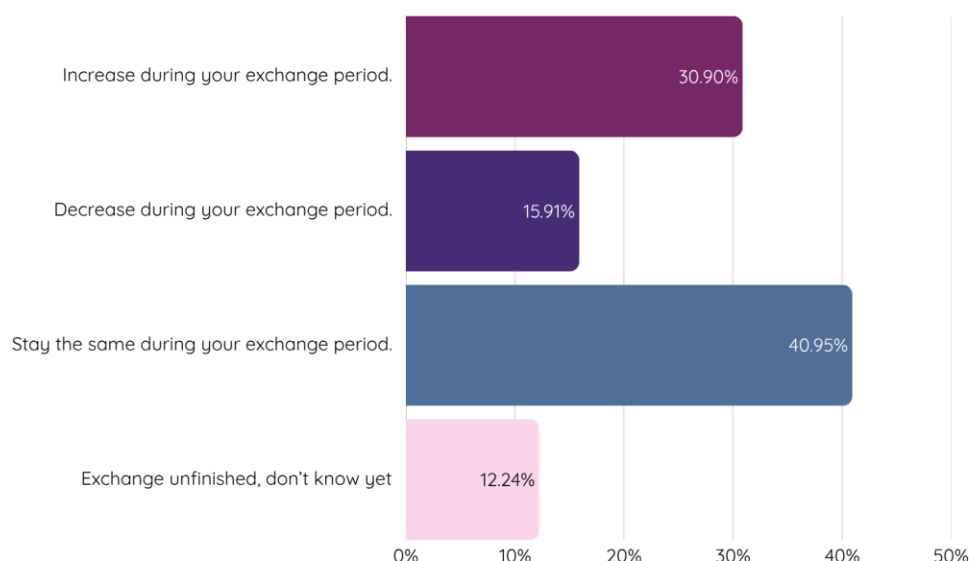
In terms of academic outcomes, 25% of students expressed satisfaction and 31% of students reported higher satisfaction with the recognition of ECTS credits earned during their exchange. This indicates that while half of the students were content with the process, a significant share may have faced delays, confusion, or uncertainty in how their academic work abroad was formally validated by their home institution. Additionally, 29% of respondents appreciated support in understanding the benefits of the exchange, with 24% of students expressing higher satisfaction, suggesting that academic reflection and integration into students’ broader educational goals were somewhat addressed. However, moderate and higher satisfaction with other forms of post-exchange support remained low: career guidance (29%), reintegration activities (19%), and opportunities to stay involved through ambassador roles (22%) received relatively low ratings.

3.5.2. Academic Impact of Mobility on Grades

To understand the academic outcomes of mobility, the ESNsurvey XV asked: “Did your grades increase, decrease or stay par during your mobility period?”



Did your grades increase, decrease or stay on par during your mobility period?



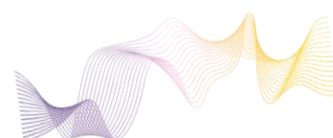
Graph n.9 – Q: “Did your grades increase, decrease or stay on par during your mobility period?”, source: ESNsurvey XV, (n=10,418)

Among all respondents, 41% indicated that their academic performance stayed the same during their exchange period, while 30.9% reported that their performance increased, suggesting that for many students, the mobility experience had a positive or stable academic impact. In contrast, 15.9% stated that their academic performance decreased, and 12.2% selected "exchange unfinished, don't know yet", reflecting either ongoing mobility periods or uncertainty about academic outcomes.

3.5.3. Recognition of Credits

When asked “How many credits did you take and how many did your university recognise?”, students participating in the ESNsurvey provide detailed insights into their credit recognition experiences. On average, students applied for around 32 ECTS before their exchange, which aligns with the typical 30 ECTS expected for a semester abroad. However, upon arrival, they reported having to change an average of 20 ECTS in their Learning Agreement, with a high standard deviation (15) indicating considerable variation among students. Such large discrepancies are consistent with previously reported challenges faced by exchange students, including course availability, enrolment issues, and scheduling conflicts.

By the end of their mobility, students reported passing an average of 30 ECTS at the host university, with approximately 29 ECTS recognised by their home institutions. This



suggests an overall high rate of recognition. Nevertheless, the relatively large standard deviation (14) points to uneven recognition practices, meaning that while many students had most of their credits recognised, others faced partial or limited recognition.

Challenges become especially evident when breaking down recognition procedures. From the Bologna with Student Eyes report, in response to the question “To what extent does your NUS agree that recognition procedures are simple?”, 15 student unions expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, suggesting that complexity remains an issue.

Further clarity emerges from the question “To what extent does your NUS agree that recognition procedures are easy for students to go through?”, with high levels of dissatisfaction across all recognition types:

- Degree recognition: 11 out of 32 NUSs disagreed,
- Short-cycle recognition: 14 out of 32 disagreed,
- Credit recognition within mobility: 11 out of 32 disagreed,
- Credit recognition outside mobility: 19 out of 32 disagreed.

This last category—credit recognition outside mobility—was viewed most negatively, reflecting widespread student uncertainty and frustration.

When asked, “Does the recognition procedure in your country have a fixed time limit for the issuing of a recognition decision?”, only half of the student unions reported that a deadline exists. Among those:

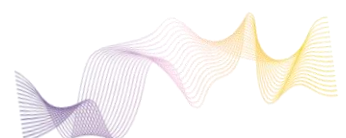
- 5 reported decisions were made within one month,
- 1 reported up to three months,
- 3 indicated up to six months,
- 1 said decisions could take between six and twelve months.

This wide variance undermines predictability and contributes to missed enrolment deadlines or delayed progression, as many NUSes highlighted in follow-up commentary.

When asked “Who makes the final legally binding decision on the recognition of foreign qualifications (partial)?”, responses revealed a division of responsibility:

- In 10 countries, the responsibility lies with a top-level authority (e.g., a Ministry or an ENIC/NARIC centre).
- In 17 countries, decisions are made by higher education institutions.
- Several NUSes noted overlapping responsibilities, further complicating the process and sometimes confusing students about where to seek redress.

Focus group participants revealed that institutional responsibility for credit recognition after completing a mobility programme abroad varied widely and was often opaque. In cases of disagreement with the recognition outcome, students sought help from



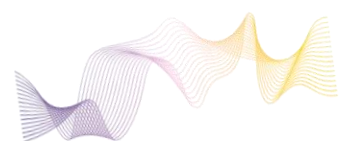
international offices, academic coordinators, faculty staff, or administration, depending on their institution's internal structure. However, the quality and availability of support were inconsistent. While some institutions had formal appeal mechanisms, students frequently found them inaccessible, under-publicised, or ineffective. The general sentiment was that students bore the burden of managing their credit recognition processes, often without adequate support or recourse when issues arose. These systemic shortcomings often resulted in students being required to complete additional academic tasks upon their return. Whether because of course mismatches, institutional scepticism about foreign curricula, or rigid degree structures, some students had to take extra exams, retake previously approved subjects, or even attend courses simultaneously at home and abroad. In several cases, institutional mistrust of host universities led professors to disregard the validity of previously agreed-upon coursework. This practice undermines the core principles of learning mobility and exposes students to academic duplication and unnecessary stress.

3.5.4. Barriers to Recognition

To get a better understanding of the barriers to recognition, the XV ESNsurvey asked students in an open end question to explain “If there was no recognition or some ECTS were not recognised, why was this the case?”. Students’ responses reveal a variety of reasons behind partial or missing credit recognition. One frequently mentioned factor is the **ECTS mismatch** between host and home institutions, where the same course abroad is often allocated **more credits than its equivalent at home**, leading to partial recognition (e.g., 7.5 → 5 ECTS). Other reported barriers include **institutional or procedural constraints**, such as limits on the number of ECTS that can be recognised per semester, delays or errors in the Learning Agreement or transcript processing, and **non-equivalent courses** that could not be matched within the home curriculum. Students also referred to **field-specific or legal limitations**, particularly in structured programmes like law, medicine, or engineering, as well as the **exclusion of voluntary or extracurricular courses**, such as language or cultural classes, from degree recognition. Overall, the responses suggest that recognition outcomes depend on a combination of **curricular alignment, administrative efficiency, and institutional policy**, rather than a single dominant factor.

In the Bologna with Student Eyes report, on the question “What are the barriers to automatic recognition in your country?”, the following challenges were reported:

- Concerns over regulated professions (16 student unions),
- Lack of interest from government authorities (13),
- Inconsistency in applying Bologna Process tools (12),
- Lack of trust between EHEA countries (9),



- Lack of transparency or information (7),
- Cultural differences affecting decision-making (5),
- And notably, 6 student unions said they simply don't understand why automatic recognition is not yet in place.

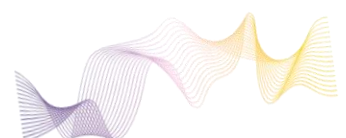
This feedback points to both technical and political hurdles in implementing full recognition across borders. The question “Do higher education institutions have an appeals system to deal with problems of credit recognition?” sheds light on accountability and student protection:

- 14 national systems reported that appeals mechanisms are mandated by law.
- In 3 countries, no appeals system exists at the institutional level.
- Some NUSes reported that appeals exist voluntarily, without legal obligation, indicating strong institutional cultures of fairness.
- However, 4 NUSes responded “I don't know”, which reveals persistent issues around transparency and student involvement in the appeals process.

These mixed responses reflect a recognition landscape still in flux, where automatic systems are emerging, but student confidence is not always secured.

The testimonies from all three focus groups point to a significant gap between the ideals and the practical realities of automatic credit recognition of periods of study abroad in Europe. While the opportunity to study abroad remains deeply valued, the surrounding systems for Learning Agreement preparation and credit recognition continue to function unevenly. Students require greater transparency, better-prepared institutional staff, and harmonised digital tools to navigate these systems effectively. Until then, the notion of automatic recognition will remain more aspirational than actual, and students will continue to face disproportionate administrative burdens to access the benefits of international education.

Despite the prevalence of negative experiences, the focus groups also identified examples of good institutional practice. When universities invested in structured information systems, engaged and knowledgeable staff, and streamlined administrative procedures, the student experience improved markedly. In such cases, mobility was not only enriching but also academically seamless. Unfortunately, these positive cases remained exceptions rather than the rule.

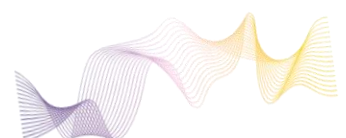


3.6. Conclusion

The students' feedback detailed above highlights that while automatic credit recognition is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of student mobility in the European Higher Education Area, its implementation remains inconsistent and often burdensome for students. Despite clear policy commitments, students continue to face major obstacles at every stage of their mobility experience—from unclear course information and fragmented support in preparing Learning Agreements to opaque and delayed post-mobility recognition processes.

Qualitative insights from focus groups revealed that many students are left to navigate these complexities alone, often with limited institutional support. Although examples of good practice exist—where proactive communication, digital tools, and transparent systems are in place—they remain the exception rather than the norm.

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, there is a pressing need for better coordination between institutions, clearer recognition procedures, stronger digital infrastructure, and more student-centred support systems. Until these systemic issues are addressed, automatic recognition will continue to fall short of its potential, putting at risk the quality, inclusiveness, and attractiveness of student mobility in Europe.



4. Qualitative Analysis: Focus Groups with higher education institutions on Credit Recognition Procedures

4.1. Introduction

In May 2025, EUA and EUF organised three online focus groups for representatives of higher education institutions in order to obtain insights into current approaches and challenges in credit mobility from the university perspective. The three focus groups gathered a total of 15 participants from 13 countries across the EHEA, from both Erasmus+ programme and non-programme countries. In this context it is important to note that exchanges in the focus groups suggest that experiences and practices in credit recognition are in fact very similar across the EHEA, regardless of whether a country is part of the Erasmus+ programme or not, due to the application of common transparency tools and frameworks, such as the ECTS User's Guide.

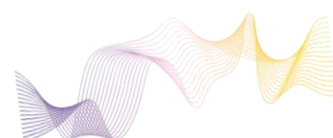
4.2. Success factors in implementing automatic credit recognition

Focus group participants generally reported positive experiences with credit recognition and ever smoother processes thanks to tools such as online learning agreements, ECTS credits and the accompanying User's Guide. According to the Higher Education Institutes, with automatic credit recognition, the whole procedure became less bureaucratic. It was also mentioned that they now have more experiences and knowledge about mobilities, which also helps to make the process smoother. ECTS Users Guide was highlighted as a very helpful tool. Those Institutes, which recently introduced online Learning Agreements, reported that it has helped a lot to get positive experiences and easier automatic credit recognition.

4.3. Challenges

Focus group participants partially echoed reports from students, confirming that when issues with credit recognition occur, they typically have to do with

- the number of ECTS credits to be obtained/recognised, as well as grade conversion across systems, both of which are not always entirely clear to students before they start their mobility;



- administrative steps to be taken before, during and after the mobility, which can be considered overly bureaucratic by some students.

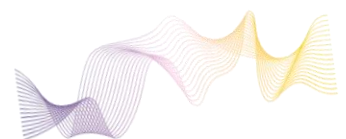
However, focus group participants reported these as minor issues, as the institutions focus on informing students and support them throughout the mobility experience. Regarding the bureaucratic burden reported by some students, HEI focus group participants highlighted that the administration surrounding mobility could indeed be perceived as a burden by students, but that it was inevitable in order to ensure smooth recognition with predictable outcomes. On this latter point, some participants also expressed concern that students were not always studying the information material provided by the HEI, which is why some institutions put in place mobility alumni that support outgoing students. This practice has yielded good experiences in the past.

In addition, whereas some participants in the student focus groups had reported lacking transparency on the side of HEIs with regard to appeals procedures, participants in the HEI focus group reported this as a non-issue, as in their experience very few appeals had taken place in the past years and students had in these cases been informed about the steps to take.

From the perspective of HEIs, the greatest challenges in credit recognition appeared to result from patchy transparency and information provision between partner HEIs, e.g. on the different grading systems or through delayed issuance of transcripts of records. However, even this seemed to be a minor issue in the eyes of focus group participants since, as they reported, they would always “make it work”. Another issue reported by focus group participants is that Erasmus Without Paper, even where it was already introduced several years ago, was not facilitating processes as much as hoped since its use was not yet streamlined across all partner institutions. In this context, it is also worth highlighting that focus group participants from countries that are not part of the Erasmus+ programme cautioned against a two-tier system, by which some countries have access to Erasmus Without Paper and others do not, as it could indeed hinder streamlined and smooth recognition processes throughout the EHEA.

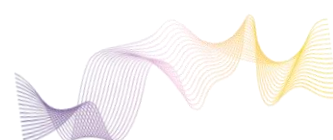
4.4. Experience of European Universities alliances

Focus group participants whose HEI was in an alliance reported that recognition was not necessarily automatic within the same alliance, nor did alliances increase mobility numbers as such. However, some participants reported that their alliance had positively affected the variety of mobility offers, for example in the form of virtual and short-term mobilities. Others reported the development of good practices within the same alliance, in one case for example the creation of an academic recognition board as a Forum to exchange experience and streamline recognition practices.



4.5. Automatic credit recognition

Conversations with focus group participants generally rendered the impression that automatic credit recognition was being practiced and that it helped increase the number of recognized credits, thus offering students more predictable mobility outcomes. It is extremely useful as it gives predictable outcomes even for the students.



5. In-depth case studies on credit recognition procedures in HEIs

This comparative study investigates the credit recognition procedures at four European universities: Marburg University (Germany), Ghent University (Belgium), Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary), and Kadri Zeka University (Kosovo). The analysis is structured around ten key categories, including institutional frameworks, workflows, roles and responsibilities, decision-making criteria, digital tools, student experience, cooperation, quality assurance, and ongoing developments.⁴ The aim is to identify patterns of convergence and divergence, highlight best practices, and support the design of equitable, transparent, and efficient recognition systems across Europe. While some institutions operate within highly standardized and digitized frameworks, others are in the process of establishing foundational practices. This report offers detailed comparisons, context-specific recommendations, and a roadmap for advancing institutional strategies aligned with the Bologna Process and Lisbon Recognition Convention.

5.1. Institutional Framework

Marburg University (MU) bases its credit recognition system on the Lisbon Convention, implemented through both federal and Hessian state laws. Decisions are guided by department-specific examination regulations, with considerable autonomy at the faculty level. Ghent University (UGent) operates within a centralized structure under the Education and Examination Code, which codifies Learning Agreement procedures and credit recognition rules across the university. Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) revised its institutional framework in 2022, creating a standardized, centrally enforced process grounded in national higher education regulations and the report of the Hungarian Rectors' Conference (MRK report, 2019). Kadri Zeka University (UKZ), a newer institution in Kosovo, is still establishing its formal framework. Its credit recognition relies primarily on curriculum alignment, internal regulations, and guidance from the national accreditation body.

Across all institutions, alignment with the Bologna Process and Lisbon Recognition Convention is evident. While UGent and ELTE represent more centralized systems, Marburg and UKZ highlight the challenges and opportunities of decentralized and emerging frameworks.

⁴ More information about the case studies of AUREA consortium member HEIs can be found in Annex 4.



5.2. Process & Workflow

UGent uses a robust student information system (OASIS) and DESERT module fully integrated with the Erasmus Without Paper platform. Students follow a clear digital workflow from course selection to final recognition. ELTE's Mobility Online and Neptun systems similarly streamline mobility administration. Students submit all documents, including Learning Agreements (Before, During Mobility) and equivalence form through the Mobility Online System, with automatic credit recording once having verified closing documents. Marburg's processes are decentralized; each department manages its recognition workflows, though all use the Mobility Online System. Marburg navigates the tension of challenges and opportunities within a decentralized recognition system.

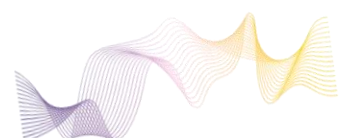
UKZ's workflow is semi-structured, relying on administrative staff, faculty votes, and manual document submission. While Learning Agreements are in place, digital integration is minimal, and delays are common.

The presence of Learning Agreements is a common denominator in credit recognition. However, only UGent and ELTE have succeeded in embedding these into a digitized end-to-end process, resulting in greater efficiency and predictability. For long-term semester mobilities, Marburg also uses digital Learning Agreements as the default administrative process.

5.3. Roles & Responsibilities

At Marburg, the departmental examination boards oversee recognition but may delegate authority to ECTS officers. These officers (who are often also Erasmus+ coordinators) handle both academic evaluations and administrative tasks. UGent's responsibilities are faculty-led, with academic advisors and programme committees making recognition decisions based on standardized procedures. ELTE distinguishes between central, faculty, and academic coordinators. This layered structure ensures that guidance, evaluation, and implementation are distributed logically and efficiently. UKZ involves multiple stakeholders: Vice Rectors, Deans, the International Relations Office, and academic departments all contribute. However, no formal recognition committee exists yet, although one is planned.

Across institutions, academic coordinators play a vital role in determining equivalency. The more digitalized systems (UGent and ELTE) have clearly delineated responsibilities, which facilitates consistency and accountability.



5.4. Decision-Making Criteria

Marburg uses the “no substantial difference” principle, as per the Lisbon Convention, though implementation varies by department. Learning outcomes, workload, and module title/description are evaluated. In regulated fields like medicine and psychology, strict national rules limit flexibility. UGent evaluates course sets rather than one-to-one equivalence. Positive deviations in credit load are allowed; negative ones must not exceed 2 ECTS. Recognition must align with programme outcomes, but flexibility in credit volume and content is built-in. At ELTE recognition is mandatory when 75% of course content overlaps. If less, the recognition decision is based on the decision of the academic coordinator. ELTE tries to increase the recognition of credits to compulsory subjects. Minimum mobility requirement is 20 ECTS, set to ease pressure on students and avoid reimbursement. All obtained credits must be recognized. An equivalency database supports transparency, while faculties also implement mandatory mobility windows. It also uses equivalency databases to aid decisions. UKZ lacks standardized criteria; decisions are made by faculty members based on perceived content alignment and credit value. Planned reforms aim to standardize and document these decisions.

In summary, while each institution considers learning outcomes, only UGent and ELTE provide systematic methods to evaluate equivalency and deviation.

5.5. Use of Digital Tools

Ghent University exemplifies digital integration, using EWP, OASIS, and templates to facilitate Learning Agreement workflows. Challenges remain only in obtaining grade distribution data from partner institutions. ELTE uses Mobility Online to manage applications and their study system, Neptun for credit recording. Marburg uses Mobility Online, the ILIAS platform, and various department-specific solutions. Full integration across systems is lacking, leading to duplicated efforts. UKZ operates SMIL for student records but lacks a dedicated system for credit recognition. Most workflows are still manual or email-based.

Each institution acknowledges that full digitalization is essential. UGent and ELTE are closest to this goal; MU and UKZ are in transition phases.

5.6. Outgoing Student Experience & Support

ELTE and UGent provide extensive support through orientation sessions, recorded webinars, and dedicated staff. Students can seek guidance from both International Offices and academic departments. UGent has a formal appeals system via ombuds offices. Marburg offers decentralized yet responsive and active support via departmental



coordinators. While Marburg is actively looking to digitalize the recognition process through a new platform at this very moment, the current system(s) do not lead to unfair treatment across the board. In fact, departments work very closely with their students to recognize the credits fairly. Complaints often involve paperwork redundancy or unclear grade conversions. UKZ provides general information sessions and advising but lacks structured appeal processes or formalized student guides.

Despite structural differences, all institutions recognize the importance of continuous communication and early guidance to ensure student success during mobility.

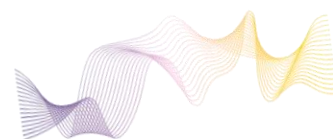
5.7. Incoming Student Experience & Support

Incoming students at ELTE and UGent benefit from structured orientation, timely communication, and Faculty centralized transcript issuance. Marburg accommodates students through the MIX course repository and departmental advisors. However, collecting grades from multiple departments is burdensome. UKZ supports incoming students case-by-case. While students generally participate in exams and classes, minor inconsistencies in Learning Agreements can cause confusion. Transcripts are manually prepared, causing delays.

Support for incoming students is directly linked to system maturity. Institutions with integrated information systems and an adequate number of staff provide smoother experiences.

5.8. Institutional Cooperation

At Marburg University, recognition is guided by internal regulations, not the type or quality of partnerships. However, structured collaborations like joint degrees (e.g., M.Sc. International Business Management with INSEEC Grande École) ensure automatic recognition. General disagreements on course listings or communication style do not affect recognition outcomes. Ghent University holds partners accountable to ECTS and ECHE principles. Problems with incomplete Learning Agreements or non-recognition affect agreement renewal. Grade distribution tables are often missing from partners, complicating conversion. Feedback from both outgoing and incoming mobility is used to evaluate partnerships. AT ELTE, credit recognition is not predefined in institutional agreements. It is based on the transcript and equivalence form and adherence to Hungary's ECTS-compatible system. Ambiguities in partner grading systems, especially pass/fail scales, create conflicts. ELTE uses conversion tables and internal regulations for evaluation. UKZ's Erasmus+ agreements include general recognition guidelines. Most disputes are handled through informal communication between IROs. A formal credit recognition policy



is being developed. UKZ applies consistent criteria regardless of partnership quality, with oversight by the Office for Academic Development.

UGent and ELTE actively monitor partnerships and use academic documentation for recognition, MU emphasizes internal autonomy, even in international programs and UKZ is formalizing agreements and policies to promote consistency.

5.9. Quality Assurance & Improvements

ELTE's automation reforms in 2022 greatly improved efficiency and student outcomes, increasing recognized credits from 50% to 80-90%. It continues to refine equivalency databases and inter-faculty consistency. UGent monitors recognition through participant surveys and internal audits, with minor revisions to workflows as needed. Marburg's working group on standardization represents a recent but promising development. There is also a dedicated website with a Marburg-specific recognition manual for departments to utilize. Feedback is gathered via EU surveys and internal tools, though action on this feedback is uneven. UKZ collects informal feedback and plans to establish formal QA procedures and performance metrics.

A mature feedback loop involving student surveys, staff audits, and process revisions remains a key differentiator between more and less developed systems.

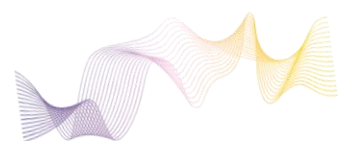
5.10. Current Developments, Achievements & Challenges

ELTE's automated recognition is its greatest achievement, followed by a push for greater compulsory course equivalency. This means to recognize their mobility credits for their curriculum courses, which are mandatory to complete in order to graduate. UGent maintains a stable system with no major upgrades required. Its challenge lies in obtaining consistent grading distribution information from partners. Marburg's role in the EUPeace alliance and its container module innovations highlight structural innovation. However, vague learning outcomes and incomplete digitalization remain problematic. UKZ is actively developing its framework via the AUREA project, with goals of full digitalization and formal policy implementation.

Overall, all institutions are responding to the evolving demands of international student mobility, albeit at different speeds and scales.

5.11. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of credit recognition procedures across Marburg University (Germany), Ghent University (Belgium), Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary), and Kadri



Zeka University (Kosovo) reveals a diverse landscape shaped by national regulations, institutional autonomy, and varying stages of policy and technological development.

Ghent University represents a model of mature, fully integrated recognition practices, where digital systems, institutional procedures, and academic decision-making are closely aligned. Its consistency and automation offer a strong reference point for other institutions.

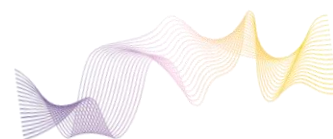
Eötvös Loránd University stands out for its recent and impactful reforms. The transition to automatic credit recognition has significantly improved outcomes, increasing both the volume and efficiency of recognized credits. However, the challenge remains to convert a larger proportion of elective credit recognitions into compulsory subject ones—essential for maintaining academic coherence and reducing delays in student graduation.

Marburg University reflects an actively evolving system. They are trying to build central support for decentralized decision-making via e.g. the acquisition of a digital recognition platform. Despite departmental variation, recent initiatives like the MarSkills module and the EUPeace alliance demonstrate a clear institutional commitment to improving credit recognition. MarSkills module houses future and interdisciplinary skills. These are must-selected import modules which are opportunities from other degree programs or subjects that allow students to expand their professional profile and get a taste of other degree programs or subjects. At the moment credits for this module cannot be earned abroad, but MU actively plans to change this in the near future. Continued standardization, digitalization, and curriculum alignment will be essential for long-term coherence.

Kadri Zeka University, while currently less formalized, is making rapid progress through structured reforms, capacity-building, and involvement in international projects such as AUREA. Though it lacks robust digital tools and formal policies, its growing awareness, strategic planning, and investment in training suggest strong future potential.

5.11.1. Across all institutions, three key themes emerge:

- Digitalization is central to improving speed, transparency, and reliability. The integration of Learning Agreements, grade conversion, and transcript management into unified systems is an urgent priority.
- Clarity in learning outcomes and course equivalencies is essential to reduce ambiguity and facilitate smooth recognition. Tools like equivalency databases and harmonized syllabi can play a pivotal role.
- Student-centred communication and support through orientation, guidance materials, and accessible staff builds trust and encourages participation in mobility programs.

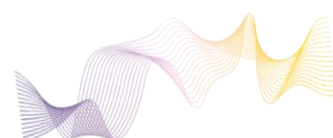


The findings affirm the importance of sustained institutional commitment, cross-functional collaboration, and adaptive policymaking. As higher education becomes increasingly internationalized, the creation of robust, fair, and transparent credit recognition systems is not merely a bureaucratic task but a fundamental enabler of academic mobility, lifelong learning, and educational equity.

5.11.2. Recommendations for further improvement in credit recognition:

- Develop university-wide standards - streamlining administrative processes, data-driven analysis is inevitable
- Expand digital systems with interoperability between student information systems and mobility platforms.
- Formalize institutional recognition policies, especially for emerging institutions like UKZ.
- Strengthen feedback loops using student surveys and performance data.
- Prioritize compulsory course recognition over recognizing the credits as free elective ones, supported by equivalency databases and faculty engagement. This is inevitable so that the students could easily go on with their home curriculum courses, preventing them from needing a plus semester or year to graduate.

Institutional characteristics significantly influence the outcomes of individual case studies, shaping the results accordingly. These outcomes are not confined to specific national contexts. This comparative framework can be replicated to assess other institutions, offering a pathway towards more unified credit recognition practices across Europe and beyond.



6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusions

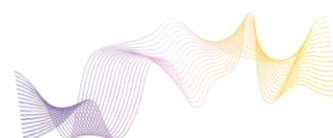
The analysis carried out within the AUREA project demonstrates that while substantial progress has been made at the policy level over the past two decades, persistent and systemic challenges continue to hinder the consistent, transparent, and fair implementation of automatic credit recognition across the EHEA. A strong policy foundation exists through the Bologna Process and the 2018 EU Council Recommendation on Automatic Mutual Recognition. However, translation into practice remains uneven and fragmented, with major implications for students, institutions, and the overall credibility of mobility programmes.

Persistent Policy–Practice Gap

The analysis reveals a persistent gap between policy and practice. Although nearly all European countries have formally adopted the key Bologna tools—such as the ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, and the three-cycle degree structure—and endorsed the principle of automatic recognition, the reality on the ground is less consistent. Institutional implementation often remains incomplete, shaped by varying degrees of autonomy, differences in resources, and diverse national interpretations. As a result, recognition practices vary widely both within and across countries, and students continue to face inconsistent procedures, unclear requirements, and discretionary decisions that undermine predictability and fairness.

Student Experience

Students frequently encounter opaque procedures, administrative delays, and unclear learning outcomes, while some are surprised by additional requirements upon their return. Support for them is often fragmented: the preparation of Learning Agreements, the conversion of grades, and the final recognition of courses after mobility are all processes marked by uncertainty. These obstacles undermine trust in the recognition system and risk discouraging participation in mobility programmes. Moreover, generational changes—especially among the post-COVID cohort—highlight the need for more adaptive, digital-friendly information and communication strategies.



Institutional Perspectives

Institutions, for their part, acknowledge the bureaucratic burdens but frequently justify them as safeguards to ensure the quality and fairness of procedures and the predictability of outcomes. Staff point to persistent challenges, including inconsistent grading practices, delays in issuing transcripts, and uneven uptake of digital tools such as Erasmus Without Paper. At the same time, examples of good practice do exist. Some institutions have introduced institutional policies, alumni mentors, comprehensive digital systems, or structured reforms, but to which degree these practices are widespread and effect systemic positive change remains to be seen.

The case studies illustrate the wide variation in institutional maturity. Ghent University demonstrates a highly integrated and automated recognition system, while Eötvös Loránd University has advanced through reforms but still struggles with moving from elective to compulsory course recognition. Marburg University reflects decentralized yet evolving practices, including innovative approaches like the MarSkills module. Kadri Zeka University, though at an early stage, shows strong potential for rapid reform through international cooperation and training. Across these cases, common success factors include robust digitalization, clear learning outcomes, and strong student-centred support mechanisms.

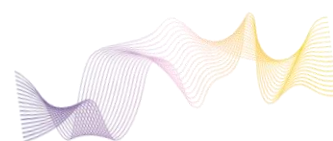
Gaps in Knowledge and Research

Significant gaps in knowledge and research remain. Much of the literature continues to focus on policy-level analysis, with little longitudinal data on actual recognition outcomes and scarce systematic documentation of institutional practices. Non-EU mobility schemes are particularly underexplored, limiting opportunities for broader comparative perspectives. This lack of evidence undermines accountability and restricts the development of sound, evidence-based policy.

Common Enabling Factors

Despite these challenges, certain enabling factors consistently emerge as central to effective recognition. These include digitalization, transparent equivalency frameworks, compulsory course recognition, and comprehensive student support. Institutions with more mature systems share three key characteristics: systematic reforms, active engagement of faculty, and the integration of recognition principles into institutional strategies.

Overall, the findings confirm that automatic recognition remains more of an aspiration than an overall lived reality. While political will is clearly present, decisive progress will require stronger institutional practices, enforceable frameworks, the full integration of digital solutions, and closer alignment between stakeholders at all levels.



6.2. Recommendations

To transform automatic recognition from principle into practice and advance the goal of a seamless European Education Area, the following actions are recommended:

Strengthen Policy Implementation and Accountability

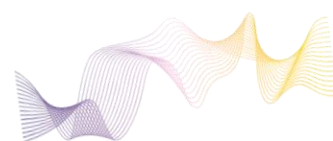
Policy implementation and accountability must be strengthened. Recognition can only become predictable and reliable if supported by enforceable guidelines, transparent monitoring, and regular audits at both European and national levels. The principles of automatic mutual recognition should be embedded in binding national legislation, with clearly defined responsibilities for compliance. At the same time, institutional autonomy must be balanced with accountability through transparent and standardized frameworks. Stronger coordination between ministries, quality assurance agencies, and higher education institutions is essential to close the gap between policy ambitions and practical outcomes.

Invest in Digital Integration and Interoperability

Sustained investment in digital integration and interoperability is crucial. Full adoption and streamlined use of Erasmus Without Paper, Online Learning Agreements, and related platforms should be prioritized across Europe and in associated countries. Institutional student information systems need to be fully interoperable with EWP and national frameworks, ensuring smooth and reliable data exchange. To prevent the emergence of a two-tier mobility system, financial and technical support should be made available for emerging institutions and non-EU partners. The long-term goal should be the creation of integrated digital recognition systems that cover all stages of the process, from Learning Agreements to grade conversion and transcript management.

Enhance Transparency and Student-Centred Support

Transparency and student-centred support must be enhanced. Recognition procedures should be standardised, with clear documentation of student rights, timelines, and institutional responsibilities. Accessible learning outcome databases and harmonised syllabi would reduce ambiguity in course matching, while better communication—through pre-mobility briefings, post-mobility follow-up, and peer-to-peer mentoring by mobility alumni—would improve the student experience. Transparent appeal mechanisms, coupled with greater awareness of student rights, are equally important. Communication strategies should also adapt to changing student habits by offering digital-friendly, interactive formats.



Improve Institutional Capacity and Training

Institutional capacity and training need to be reinforced. Universities should adopt formal, institution-wide recognition policies to avoid fragmentation across departments, and increase the share of compulsory course recognitions to prevent delays in graduation and ensure academic progression. Mandatory training for academic staff and mobility officers—covering recognition obligations, digital tools, and student-centred practices—would professionalise recognition processes. Regular surveys and systematic analysis of recognition outcomes should be used to build effective feedback loops and continuous improvement.

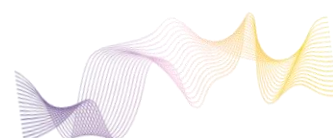
Promote Evidence-Based Policy and Research

Stronger commitment to evidence-based policy and research is needed. Longitudinal and comparative studies should track recognition outcomes over time, examining their impact on academic progression, completion rates, and career trajectories. Good institutional practices must be systematically documented and disseminated to serve as benchmarks for others. Furthermore, the research agenda should expand beyond Erasmus+ to include bilateral and global mobility schemes, offering a more comprehensive view of recognition in international higher education.

6.3. Final Remark

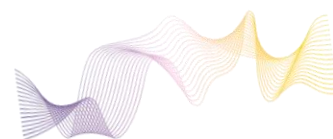
The findings of the AUREA project confirm that automatic credit recognition is both achievable and indispensable for the success of the European Education Area. Realising this goal requires a coordinated effort across European, national, and institutional levels: enforceable frameworks, robust digital infrastructures, transparent and student-centred practices, and evidence-based reforms.

Only through such a comprehensive, multi-level approach can automatic recognition move from aspiration to reality—ensuring fair, transparent, and seamless academic mobility for all students in Europe and beyond.

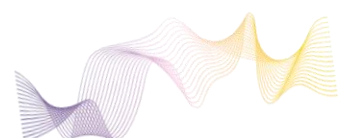


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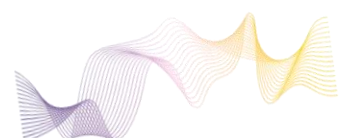
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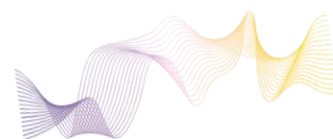
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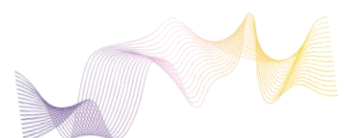


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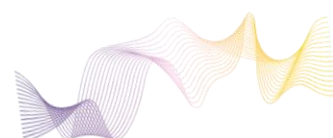
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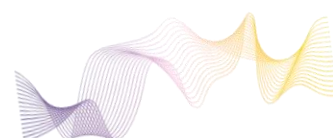


8. Abbreviations and Explanations

Acronym	Full Form/Explanation
AUREA	Automatic Recognition Assessment
AMR	Automatic Mutual Recognition
CR	Council Recommendation
DESERT	Ghent University's module dedicated for mobility management, which is integrated with the Erasmus Without Paper network
EAR	European Area of Recognition
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
ECHE	Erasmus Charter for Higher Education
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ELTE	Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem (Eötvös Loránd University)
ENIC	European Network of Information Centres
ENQUA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
ESN	Erasmus Student Network
ESU	European Students' Union
EU	European Union
EUA	European University Association
EURASHE	European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
EEA	European Education Area
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESCI	European Student Card Initiative
EWP	Erasmus Without Paper
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ILIAS	Marburg University's Learning Management System
IRO	International Relations Office
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
JSP	Joint Study Programmes
LA	Learning Agreement



LLP	Lifelong Learning Programme
MIX	Marbourg International Exchange programme
MU	Philipps-Universität Marburg (University of Marburg)
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centres
Nas	National Agencies
NUS	National Union of Students
OASIS	Ghent University's online student information system. The credit recognition at UGent is managed through this system
OLA	Online Learning Agreement
QA	Quality Assurance
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
ToR	Transcript of Records
UGent	Universiteit Gent (Ghent University)
UKZ	Universiteti Publik "Kadri Zeka" (Kadri Zeka Public University)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



9. Annexes

Annex 1: Instructions - AUREA Focus Groups with Students

Instructions

1. Purpose of the focus groups with students

The focus groups will seek to gather in-depth information from past and current mobile participants from at least 10 countries. The focus groups will target students who have had mobility experience between Erasmus+ programme countries, as well as those whose home or host institution is outside the programme countries, and will address their experience with credit recognition practices, including automatic recognition.

2. Aims (research questions):

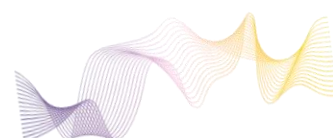
- Understand the information needs of students
- Understand the challenges students face with credit recognition
- Identify bottlenecks to automatic credit recognition at institutional level

3. Target audience

- Students with mobility experience in academic years 2022/2023, 2023/2024,
- Students who have participated in Erasmus+ mobilities between programme countries,
- Students who have participated in Erasmus+ mobilities and whose sending or host institution is in a country not associated with the Erasmus+ programme,
- Students in BA and MA programmes.

4. Logistics:

- ESN and ESU will organise focus groups involving a total of 40 participants from 10 different countries. The groups should include between 8 and 10 participants to allow full engagement in the discussion. This setting has been convicted as the best one to allow students to share more details about their experiences.



- The focus groups will be held in English.
- The Focus Group will last for a maximum of 1 hour 30 minutes. Longer sessions may influence responsiveness of participants due to screen fatigue or an excessive number of questions or topics discussed.
- Slido/Mentimeter will be used to break the ice and encourage participation from the participants.

5. Recording findings and anonymity

The following methods to record the discussion will be used:

- Digital audio recording of session (e.g. through ZOOM)

To ensure the anonymity of students, at the beginning of the session the moderators will require participants to accept the terms and conditions for data processing, furthermore, they will announce their commitment to deleting all records after the anonymous write-up is completed.

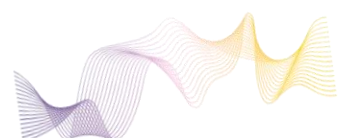
All participants are required to sign the consent form, after they have been provided with sufficient information about their participation in the focus group, its objectives and how the results of the focus group will be used.

6. Results

A fully anonymised transcript of the focus group discussion will be produced, including all questions and comments. In addition to the transcript of the focus group, the contributions shared on Slido will be saved. The documentation from the focus group will include consent forms from all participants.

7. Timing

The model has a precise timeline for discussions. However, if the participants seem particularly interested in discussing a specific issue, please allow the discussion to continue. This will enable participants to comment on the topics or issues that are most important to them and ensures that the most pressing demands or challenges of the student body are raised during the session.

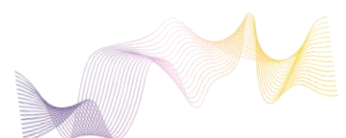


8. Respect and conduct

It is important that both the facilitator and participants of the focus group are respectful of each other's experiences. Please outline expectations of conduct at the start of the session by establishing the following ground rules:

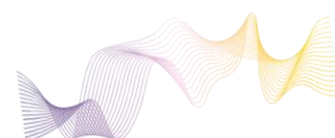
- Participants should listen to each other;
- Participants should contribute to the discussion;
- Participants should not speak over each other,
- Participants should allow everyone to participate.

As a facilitator it is important to also follow these rules. You should also create a safe and comfortable space for discussion. Please encourage students to share their experience, but do not push a student to share anything they do not offer freely in group discussion. As a rule, do not ask questions directly to students but instead pose questions to the group. Remind students that there are no right or wrong answers, we are keen instead to hear their views. Adopt a friendly and positive manner with students – the focus group should not feel like a test!

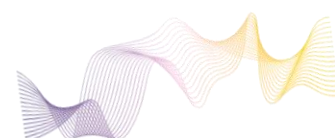


Annex 2: Scenario – AUREA Focus Groups with Students

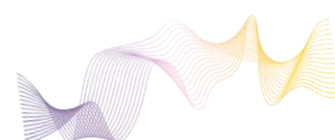
Topic, time, purpose	Questions
Introduction (10 minutes) To welcome participants and make them feel comfortable	<i>Introduce yourself and the co-moderator.</i> <i>Outline the AUREA project and its goals, and the purpose of the focus group.</i> <i>The aim of this discussion is to</i> • Understand the information needs of students • Understand the challenges students face with credit recognition • Identify bottlenecks to automatic credit recognition at institutional level <i>Explain for the purposes of the focus group how we understand “automatic credit recognition”:</i> 2018 Council Recommendation: Automatic mutual recognition of the outcomes of a learning period abroad: at higher education level, the right to have the learning outcomes of a learning period recognised: as agreed beforehand in a learning agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records, in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Concretely, it means applying the rule set out in the 2015 ECTS Users' Guide that states that: ‘[a]ll credits gained during the period of study abroad or during the virtual mobility – as agreed in the Learning Agreement and confirmed by the Transcript of Records – should be transferred without delay and counted towards the students' degree without any additional work or assessment of the student’ <i>Please also ensure participants of their anonymity and inform them about the recording. Inform participants how the results of the session will be used (projects publications, conference presentations, scientific articles). Please inform the students that this is a “safe space” where they should feel welcome. If at</i>



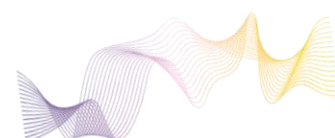
	any point they decide not to speak about certain issues, they should be free to skip any question. Briefly describe the plan of the session.
Ice Breaker (5 minutes) To warm participants up, and engage participants in group discussion	Poll questions (e.g. via slido) - In which mobility programme did you take part - Erasmus+ within programme countries - Erasmus+ international credit mobility to partner countries - European University Alliance programme - Other - When did you do your mobility? - Before 2023 2023/2024 2024/2025 - How long was your mobility? 3 months 1 semester 1 academic year - Did you have issues with credit recognition after mobility? - Yes - No These questions aim to break the ice, but at the same collect information about the profile of the participants in the focus group.
Part 1 (20 minutes)	Transition to the specific focus group questions. The moderator explains that the first set of questions aim to understand the information needs of students regarding credit recognition before going on mobility. Questions focusing on the experience before mobility, e.g. The lead questions are numbered. The sub-questions are to be used as additional guiding questions if needed in the group. This applies to all sections. How would you describe your experience in selecting a receiving higher education institution with regards to your academic experience?



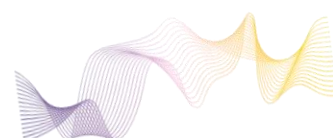
	a. <i>What was important for you to know about your receiving institution?</i> a. <i>Did you receive guidance from your mobility coordinator in choosing a host institution?</i> 2. How would you describe the accessibility and transparency of information regarding ECTS and credit recognition at your sending institution? a. <i>Grade distribution and conversion at your host and sending institution?</i> b. <i>Who provided you with this information and how was it communicated to you?</i> 3. When preparing your Learning Agreement, did you feel you had enough information to confidently select courses that would be recognised by your home university? a. <i>Did you experience any challenges?</i> b. <i>Were the course catalogues of partner universities accessible and updated?</i> c. <i>Did you know who to approach if you had questions or needed support in preparing your LA at both institutions?</i> d. <i>What kind of guidance or information did you receive when preparing your Learning Agreement? Was it clear and sufficient?</i> e. <i>What would have made this process easier?</i> 4. Looking back, is there any specific information about credit recognition, ECTS, or the Learning Agreement preparation that you wish you had received earlier or in more detail?
Part 2 (15 minutes)	The moderator transitions into the next part of the group interview, which focuses on the student experience with courses during mobility. Begin with a polling question: ● Did you need to make changes to your Learning Agreement after arriving at the host institution? If so, what was the main reason? ○ I did not have to change my Learning Agreement ○ Course availability



	○ Schedule conflicts ○ Content mismatch ○ Other The moderator can pick up some of the responses and ask for further elaboration by 1-2 participants. E.g. for those who did not have to make any changes: <i>What helped make the process smooth for you?</i> 5. How easy or difficult was it to adjust your Learning Agreement once you were at the host institution? 6. How did you communicate issues with your Learning Agreement or courses to your home or host institution? a. <i>How responsive and supportive were your sending and host institutions in resolving these issues?</i> b. <i>What could have improved the communication and support you received?</i>
Part 3 (30 minutes)	The moderator transitions into the final part of the interview, during which the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges related to achieving credit recognition after mobility. Begin with poll questions: ● How many (approx.) of the ECTS credit you had successfully obtained at the end of your mobility were recognised by the sending institution? Follow up questions: 7. How would you describe your experience with credit recognition after mobility? a. <i>Would you say that ECTS credit recognition happened automatically for you - without delay and counted towards the degree?</i> b. <i>Would you say that your mobility experience was recognised based on learning outcomes, as opposed to matching course syllabus?</i> 8. Were there any differences between your Learning Agreement and the actual recognition outcome? a. <i>What factors or challenges contributed to that difference?</i> 9. Can you identify any points in the credit recognition



	process where things become stuck or delayed? <i>a. How were these handled?</i> 10. Who did you turn to for help when you faced issues with recognition (e.g., academic advisor, international office, faculty)? <i>a. How helpful and responsive were they?</i> 11. Is there an appeal mechanism to request a review of the credit recognition outcomes at your sending institution? If your ECTS credits were not recognised fully, were you able to appeal the decision? 12. Did your learning mobility experience result in additional coursework or academic requirements when you returned to your home institution? If so, what were the reasons behind this?
Final Questions (5 minutes) To capture any final comments of feedback from participants	Before closing the focus group interview, the moderator should ask participants if there are any other comments or observations that they would like to share with the group. Thank the participants for taking part in the focus group interview.



Annex 3: Observation Sheet – AUREA Focus Groups with Students

Please write down any observations from the discussion, key discussion points and insights, as well as group dynamics.

General information about the Focus Group

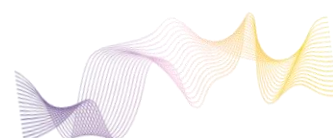
Date	
Location	
Format (physical/ online)	Physical
Moderator 1	
Moderator 2	
Number of participants	
Duration	

Experience Before Mobility - Information Needs

Goal: To understand participants' information needs to participate in mobility and create a foundation for further discussion.

The discussion will begin with polling questions via slido. The moderator will ask participants to share more about their responses. Key trends will be noted down in the sheet.

- In which mobility programme did you take part?
- When did you do your mobility?
- How long was your mobility?
- Did you experience any issues with credit recognition after mobility?



Questions for discussion:

1. How would you describe your experience in selecting a receiving higher education institution with regards to your academic experience?
2. How would you describe the accessibility and transparency of information regarding ECTS and credit recognition at your sending institution?
3. When preparing your Learning Agreement, did you feel you had enough information to confidently select courses that would be recognised by your home university?
4. Looking back, is there any specific information about credit recognition, ECTS, or the Learning Agreement preparation that you wish you had received earlier or in more detail?

During Mobility - Issues experienced with Courses

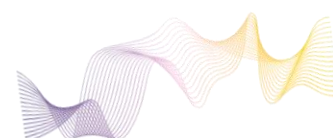
Goal: To gain insights about the barriers students face, especially in relation to courses

Polling question:

- Did you need to make changes to your Learning Agreement after arriving at the host institution? If so, what was the main reason?

Questions for discussion:

1. How easy or difficult was it to adjust your Learning Agreement once you were at the host institution?
2. How did you communicate issues with your Learning Agreement or courses to your home or host institution?



After Mobility - Understanding Challenges with Automatic Credit Recognition

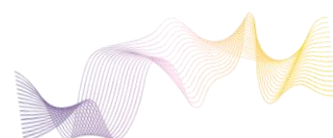
Polling question:

- How many (approx.) of the ECTS credits you had successfully obtained at the end of your mobility were recognised by the sending institution?

Questions for discussion:

1. How would you describe your experience with credit recognition after mobility?
2. Were there any differences between your Learning Agreement and the actual recognition outcome?
3. Can you identify any points in the credit recognition process where things become stuck or delayed?
4. Who did you turn to for help when you faced issues with recognition (e.g., academic advisor, international office, faculty)?
5. Is there an appeal mechanism to request a review of the credit recognition outcomes at your sending institution? If your ECTS credits were not recognised fully, were you able to appeal the decision?
6. Did your learning mobility experience result in additional coursework or academic requirements when you returned to your home institution? If so, what were the reasons behind this?

Final remarks



Annex 4: Methodology for Case Studies on Credit Recognition Procedures in HEIs

Here's a structured methodology and a set of guiding questions for conducting case studies on credit recognition procedures in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

1. Research Design

A qualitative study approach will be used to provide a more in-depth analysis of the credit recognition procedures in 4 HEIs that are part of the project consortium (ELTE, UGent, UMarburg, and UGijlan) and the practices in the respective countries. This will support a better understanding of how credit recognition procedures work in practice, what departments/units contribute to procedures of recognition of credit mobility, the role of academic and administrative staff, as well as functional links between them. It will also provide important insights for comparison of the situation between Erasmus+ programme countries that are part of the EHEA (Belgium, Germany, Hungary) and those outside the programme and the Bologna Process (Kosovo).

This methodology, the structured set of questions and a data analysis will allow HEIs to critically assess and improve their credit recognition procedures.

The questions help assess the current state of play regarding credit recognition at the respective HEI and explore developments, obstacles, and achievements in the process.

The respective data collection and analysis represents the directions of improvement and critical changes of credit recognition results.

2. Data Collection Methods

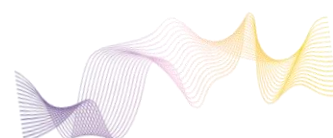
- Document analysis: Institutional regulations, policies, and guidelines on credit recognition.
- Case study analysis based on below table of questions.

3. Sampling Strategy

- Selected HEI's: partner institutions of the AUREA project consortium
- Target key units: International Relations Offices, Academic Departments, Registrar's Office, and Faculty Committees

4. Data Analysis

- Thematic analysis of qualitative responses.
- Comparison across institutions to identify best practices and challenges.
- Analysis of changes and improvements of credit recognition results.



Comprehensive Table of Questions for HEIs on Credit Recognition

Please give a respective analysis of each category listed below at least about half a page.

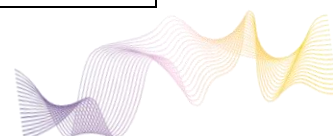
Key aspects should help prepare the category analysis, please cover them.

Please consult all relevant units (International Relations Offices, Academic Departments, Registrar's Office, and Faculty Committees) in order to prepare a respective case study of your institution.

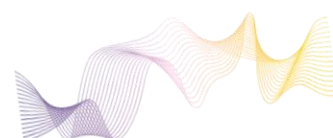
Categories are structured in 10 main topics:

1. Institutional Framework
2. Process & Workflow
3. Roles & Responsibilities
4. Decision-Making Criteria
5. Use of Digital Tools
6. Outgoing Student Experience & Support
7. Incoming Student Experience & Support
8. Institutional Cooperation
9. Quality Assurance & Improvements
10. Current Developments, Achievements & Challenges

Category	Key aspects
Institutional Framework	• What policies govern credit recognition in your institution? • How are these policies communicated to students and staff and how are these circulated? • Are there national guidelines or frameworks that support your procedures? • Have there been any recent changes in institutional policies regarding automatic credit recognition? • Are there any ongoing institutional or national initiatives aimed at improving automatic credit recognition?
Process & Workflow	• Does your institution have a standardized process of automatic credit recognition? • What are the key steps in the credit recognition process? • How long does the process typically take? • When does the decision happen (before/during/after the mobility)? • Do you have mobility windows? If yes, how do they determine the credit recognition process? • Do you have any tools that support automatic credit recognition? • What sort of documents do you require for credit recognition? • What are the main bottlenecks or challenges encountered and when do they occur in the process?



Category	Key aspects
	• Have there been any recent improvements in the workflow? If so, how were they initiated? Was this a bottom-up or top-down development? • Are there common delays in processing credit recognition requests? If so, what causes them? • How flexible is the current process in recognizing credits for non-traditional learning formats (online courses, micro-credentials)?
Roles & Responsibilities	• Which departments/units are involved in credit recognition? • Who makes the decision and on what basis? Who gives the authorization for this? • What role do academic staff play in approving credit transfers? • What is the role of administrative staff in facilitating recognition? • How effectively do different units collaborate on credit recognition? • Have any new rules or committees been introduced to improve the process? • Does responsible staff have the opportunity to attend training sessions to ensure recognition competences stay current?
Decision-Making Criteria	• What factors determine whether a course is recognized? • How does your institution handle a difference in amount of credits at the receiving institution compared to the amount of credits to be recognized at the sending institution? • Is there a standardized approach in your institution for evaluating course content and learning outcomes? • Are there any planned updates to decision-making criteria to improve transparency? • What is the minimum number of ECTS credits your institution accepts in the framework of mobility per semester? If the minimum number of credits is less or more than 30 ECTS, what is the reason behind it? • Does your university allow extra-curricular credit exchange (without credit recognition)?
Use of Digital Tools	• What IT systems or platforms support credit recognition? • Are digital Learning Agreements or databases used? • What challenges exist in digitizing the recognition process? • Have there been recent upgrades to IT systems to improve efficiency? • Is there a need for additional digital tools to better manage credit recognition?
Outgoing Student Experience & Support	• How are students informed about the recognition process? • What support and appeal mechanisms are available for students facing credit recognition issues? • Are students involved in any decision-making processes regarding recognition? • What are the most common student complaints related to credit recognition? • Has student satisfaction with credit recognition improved over time?



Category	Key aspects
	What additional support services would be beneficial for students navigating credit recognition?
Incoming Student Experience & Support	- In your experience is the information provided on the learning agreement correct for all incoming students? - Do students participate in all exams at the host university? - What is the effect on your university/city of students who do not benefit from full credit recognition?
Institutional Cooperation	- How do partnerships with other universities influence credit recognition in your institution? - What mechanisms exist to resolve disputes with partner institutions? - Are there institutional agreements that predefine credit recognition rules? - How does the institution ensure consistency in credit recognition across different partnerships? - Have there been any conflicts or mismatches with partner institutions regarding credit recognition? How were they resolved?
Quality Assurance & Improvements	- How is the effectiveness of the credit recognition process evaluated? - What improvements have been made based on past experiences? - Are there feedback mechanisms for students and staff regarding credit recognition? - Do you collect relevant data? If yes, what are these? - Have external audits or evaluations been conducted on credit recognition procedures? If so, what were the findings? - What best practices have been identified from past experiences? - Are there any planned reforms or upcoming projects aimed at further improving credit recognition?
Current Developments, Achievements & Challenges	- How has the credit recognition process evolved in the last five years? - What are the biggest achievements in credit recognition at your institution? - What are the most persistent obstacles to effective credit recognition? - Have there been any legal or policy changes at the national level that have influenced credit recognition practices? - What are your main development goals for improving credit recognition in the next 3–5 years? - What resources (financial, human, technological) are needed to overcome current obstacles? - Do you know any pilot projects being tested to enhance credit recognition?

