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Analysis of academic recognition for
higher education students studying
abroad with the Erasmus+
programme

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings and conclusions of a study of recognition for students from five countries, who studied abroad within the Erasmus+ programme 2014–2016. The five countries are Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Sweden. The study builds on a quantitative analysis of Participant Report data (altogether nearly 60,000 student mobilities) and other information made available by the respective National Agencies in the five countries. Individual country case studies were conducted to complement the quantitative data, see Appendix A – Appendix E. A total of 67 respondents were interviewed as part of these case studies. Additional country-specific statistical analyses were also made.

The main conclusions of the study are:

- Overall, recognition of student mobility remains an issue, though HEIs are inclined to look to solutions to issues that emerge during the mobility process and work together with students to reach a satisfactory conclusion to the recognition process. Between 2014 and 2016, the expected level of full academic recognition across the five countries has risen from 76% to 81%. The average level of expected full recognition across the five countries is 79%. This is on par with the EU28 average in 2016, which was 80%.
- Across all five countries, the main obstacle to the recognition process seems to be caused by discrepancies between the content of course(s). On a number of occasions, it was reported that students found themselves in a situation where, upon arrival at the receiving institution, their chosen courses were no longer available. In these situations, students have to try to resolve the issue quickly and on their own.
- A delayed signature of the Learning Agreement reduces the risk of changes to the agreement during the mobility stay. The interpretation is that longer drafting periods translate into better informed decisions regarding the choice of programmes for the mobility stay. For instance, Estonia, Latvia and Poland report less delays of signing Learning Agreements (meaning a faster drafting process) but also have higher rates of changes being made to the Learning Agreements after the mobility started. In contrast, Denmark and Sweden, which show more delays of signatures of Learning Agreements, have the lowest shares of changes to Learning Agreements (among the five countries) during the mobility stay.
- Denmark and Sweden apply processes that are designed to counter issues that might emerge during the mobility and offer more built-in flexibility for students in the Learning Agreement. Estonia, Latvia and Poland show good responsiveness to making changes in the Learning Agreements after the start of mobility (when issues among selected courses emerge). This suggests that while HEIs in Denmark and Sweden choose a pre-emptive approach to solve issues, HEIs in Estonia, Latvia and Poland are more reactive.
- Individual HEI departments or faculties, and even individual teachers, may have different opinions on how flexible or strict the curriculum abroad needs to be for students who undertake Erasmus+ mobility. There are teachers who demand that courses taken abroad must match the curriculum they teach exactly.
- There are issues linked to the quality of data on recognition. National Agencies may consider following up with the European Commission on the current design of the Participant Report. For example, the results of this study could be used for further work on the wording of the Participant Report survey questions around recognition, making sure that students fully understand the meaning of the questions. In addition, further consideration should be given to the timing of the questions around the finalisation of the recognition process and full academic recognition, which currently do not capture the final outcome, but the students' expectations.

1 Introduction, method

The Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education contracted Technopolis Group for a study called Analysis of Academic Recognition for Higher Education Students Studying Abroad with the Erasmus+ Programme. Five countries were included in the study: Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Sweden. Although it was the Danish National Agency that functioned as contractor, the study was initiated jointly by the respective national agencies in the five countries. The study covers the call years 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Academic recognition of the period of study abroad is one of the key objectives of the Erasmus+ programme – the European Commission has a goal of attaining 100% recognition level for higher education students' mobility across Europe by 2020. It is the responsibility of the sending institution to make sure that students' studies are recognised upon their return from abroad.¹ This means that sending institutions that have been awarded the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education² are expected to recognise all activities that have been satisfactorily completed when the student was studying abroad, as counting towards the degree.

Academic recognition is a key indicator of the quality of mobility. In the Learning Agreement that the sending institution, the receiving institution and the student should undersign before the mobility period starts, 'academic recognition', is defined as follows:

The Sending Institution commits to recognise all the credits or equivalent units gained at the Receiving Institution for the successfully completed educational components and to count them towards the student's degree

All higher education students receive formal recognition of their participation in mobility, but when it comes to full academic recognition of learning outcomes, is it only 80 percent of students who receive full recognition, and another 15 percent receive partial academic recognition. Between 2016 and 2018, a programme-level evaluation of Erasmus+ and its predecessors were undertaken,³ involving data collection across all EU Member States. The evaluation found that in 2016, 80 percent of the students expected to receive full recognition which means that HEIs must recognise the credits (using ECTS credits or an equivalent system) as defined and agreed in the Learning Agreement, signed before the mobility, and count them towards the student's degree without any further requirements)⁴, thus indicating that there is still some way to go before the goal of 100 percent is achieved. This means that the key elements of "full recognition" are: 1) Learning Agreement defines the ECTS credits the students are expected to gain; 2) ECTS credits gained during mobility must be recognised based solely on the successful completion of courses agreed in the Learning Agreement; 3) if the study courses agreed in the Learning Agreement are completed successfully, no further requirements (i.e. additional courses) can be raised against the student by the HEI. The research conducted as part of the evaluation also pointed to the Learning Agreements as being a strong predictor for recognition. There was an important difference identified for those students who have their Learning Agreement signed and those who do not, with the latter group more frequently receiving only partial recognition.

¹ European Commission (2018) *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2019*, version from 24/10/2018, available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus2/files/erasmus-plus-programme-guide-2019_en.pdf.

² European Commission (2014) *Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2014–2020*.

³ European Commission (2018) *Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes: Final report – main evaluation report (volume 1)*, prepare by ICF International, Technopolis Group and Science Metrix.

⁴ European Commission (2019) *Studying abroad*, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities/individuals/students/studying-abroad_en

The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions⁵ identified two main barriers to academic recognition:

- Sending institutions failing to assign the authority to recognise courses successfully completed abroad to an appropriate person (either at central, faculty/school or departmental level)
- Persisting insistence on the necessity of the courses completed abroad being identical to those which would have been taken at the sending institution, i.e. when equivalence is confused with comparability of learning outcomes

The recommendations put forward by the Manual include establishing institution-wide procedures for the recognition of credit mobility, establishing a credit mobility system capable of issuing and capturing student data on mobility and a set of steps that the university staff members should take prior, during and after the student mobility.

To analyse non-attainment of full academic recognition for students who take part in Erasmus+ mobility there is a need to more specifically identify which obstacles that ultimately result in the failure to recognise the learning achievements of Erasmus+ participants. It is necessary to analyse these obstacles, or issues, from a multifaceted perspective. Therefore, five key study questions were applied across five already recognised issues that create barriers for academic recognition in the Erasmus+ mobility programme.

Table 1 presents the issues related to recognition of academic outcomes and the study questions that will be applied.

Table 1 Issues resulting in incomplete recognition, and study questions

Issues	Study questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large variation in process time for credit transfers between HEIs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What individual (student) related issues create barriers for recognition? • What institutional issues create barriers for recognition? • What Erasmus+ operational issues create barriers for recognition? • What time related issues create barriers for recognition? • What issue is the largest barrier for recognition?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HEIs do not fill out the Mobility Tool for students' realised ECTS 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different understanding/definition of what 'full recognition' means by the parties involved in Erasmus+ mobility 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misinterpretation of what 'academic recognition' relates to in the context Erasmus+ mobility 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting data sources for academic achievements 	

The empirical data consist of two different types. First, quantitative data were gathered from the so-called Participant Reports that students fill out after their return home from the mobility, complemented with data from the Erasmus+ National Agencies. More details about the quantitative data and the analysis of them follow in the next chapter.

Secondly, qualitative information was collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives from higher education institutions, National Agencies, and occasionally from other stakeholder organisations. The interviews followed an interview guide, but with opportunities for free follow-up questions. In total 67 respondents were interviewed. Please find the distribution of interviewees per country and organisation in Appendix F.

⁵ STREAM Consortium (2016) *The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions: Practical Guidelines for credential evaluators and admissions officers to provide fair and flexible recognition of foreign degrees and studies abroad*

The study was undertaken between December 2018 and June 2019. It was conducted by a Technopolis Group team consisting of Göran Melin (project leader), Zsuzsa Jávorka, Adam Krčál, Reda Nausédaité, Maciej Markowski, Olga Mikheeva, Kalle Nielsen, Jonatan Ryd, Vera Stafström, and Anete Vingre.

The team wishes to express our gratitude towards all who took part in the interviews and generously contributed with their views, experiences and insights.

2 Analysis of quantitative data from Participant Reports

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results from the analysis of quantitative data obtained from students' reporting upon return from their mobility stay (the so-called Participant Report) and additional data from the Erasmus+ National Agencies.

This analysis serves three main purposes:

- To provide background data and findings for the more qualitative work in the country-specific case studies
- To provide quantitative data for cross-country comparison
- To provide evidence for the representatives of the five countries that participate in the study on potential issues linked to the current system of collecting data from Erasmus+ mobility participants at the EU level, which could be used as a means for suggesting improvements to the European Commission

The analysis starts with a methodological section, where the scope and issues encountered are also presented.

2.2 Methodology, scope and data content

The quantitative analysis covers the five EU Member States and Erasmus+ programme countries, that are part of this study: Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Sweden. It is only an analysis of study mobility in the EU; internships or studies outside of the EU are not covered. Only data relevant to these five countries were used for the analysis; however, where relevant, the EU average values for some specific indicators were used for comparison purposes. The analysis covers three years: 2014, 2015 and 2016. These are the points in time when students reported on their mobility stay, which means that the actual mobility stays had in most cases happened in the preceding years.

In total, across the five countries and three years, 58,980 mobility data points were analysed. Table 2 provides an overview of the numbers of analysed mobility data points. This captures the data used for the analysis after a process of data cleaning had been undertaken (more information below).

Table 2 Overview of the numbers of analysed mobility data points per country and year

Country	2014	2015	2016	Grand Total
Denmark	2,723	2,772	2,793	8,288
Estonia	733	654	509	1,896
Latvia	1,951	2,008	2,043	6,002
Poland	11,187	11,033	9,893	32,113
Sweden	3,997	3,299	3,385	10,681
Grand Total	20,591	19,766	18,623	58,980

Source: Technopolis, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

The Participant Reports collect information on quite a number of aspects linked to students' experience with Erasmus+. In addition to the Participant Report, we also had access to the information on mobility stays provided by the sending institutions. For the purpose of this study, the quantitative analysis focuses on those aspects that are relevant to the scope of the study, i.e. issues directly and indirectly linked to academic recognition of students' studies abroad. The broader lines of enquiry of the analysis cover the following:

- Demographics (institutions and countries, level of study etc.)

- Learning Agreement and the process of making changes
- Recognition process itself and obstacles
- ECTS credits in the process of recognition

The study team worked with the data provided by the client through the five National Agencies. The data were provided separately for each country and for each year. The team developed a protocol for the data cleaning and preparation for the analysis. This involved the following broader steps:

- Checking for duplicate/triplicate data points, with the caveat that one student could take up multiple mobility stays during his or her studies
- Checking for mobility data points that contain significant number of erroneous/missing entries
- Cleaning of the data and selecting the information relevant for this study
- Harmonising the data sets across the years and countries so that it could be cross-analysed by country and year

Although the number of data points analysed (58,980) allowed for a robust analysis to be conducted, the study team identified several limitations and issues linked to the data quality:

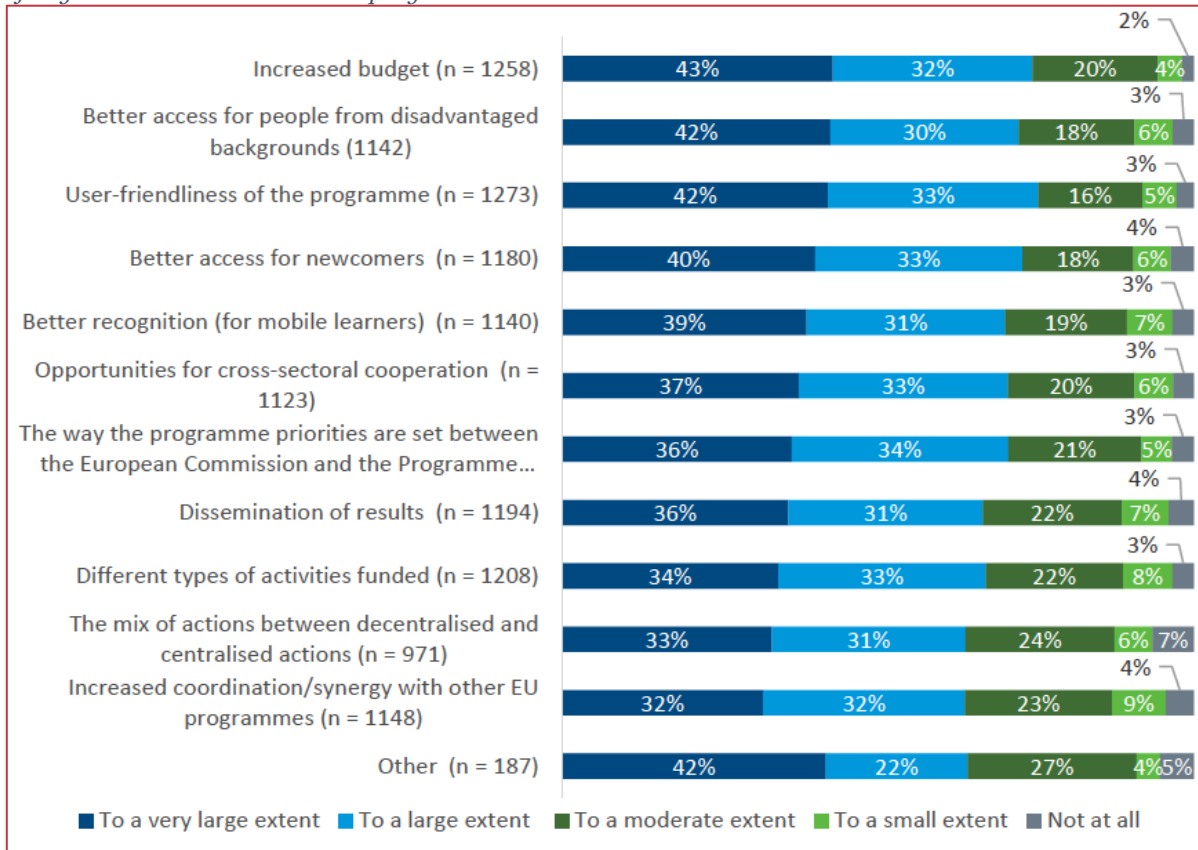
- **Missing blocks of data and/or missing information.** Despite several iterations, in some instances, there were blocks of data missing. Methodologically, this was reflected in various bases for each of the analysed aspects (i.e. the number of Participant Report responses analysed is different for various survey questions). Out of the three years, 2014 in general showed more errors across the countries than other years.
- **Data being largely based on students' self-reporting.** The fact that data for many aspects come from students' self-reporting (i.e. students answer the questions themselves, as opposed to the data being supplied by the Erasmus+ National Agencies), may be limiting to the analysis as students may not have recalled all the details about their mobility stay several weeks after the mobility stay finished (e.g. the number of ECTS credits awarded abroad) and/or understand fully the questions asked (e.g. the meaning of "academic recognition")
- **Difficult unique identification of the institutions in the data.** In some cases, the data on higher education mobility contain institutions that are further education colleges. For the study team, it was very difficult to make a decision whether these institutions were to be included or not because some of them provide study programmes at ISCED 6 level (Bachelor level). In addition, the data included some institutions that were not educational institutions, but rather placement providers, which suggests that the data on higher education Erasmus+ mobility could have been contaminated in some case by traineeship mobility.
- **Interpretation of the data was possible only together with the qualitative information.** Given the limitations of the data described above, the quantitative data must be interpreted with caution. Validation of the findings at the national level must always be conducted by means of interviews with national-level stakeholders. Interviews were also necessary to better understand how and why certain issues have arisen in specific countries.
- **Recognised ECTS credits / Awarded ECTS credits ratio being larger than 100%.** In some cases, students reported a larger number of ECTS credits recognised than they had earned at the receiving institution according to the Transcript of Records. One explanatory factor for this could be the transformation of credits earned abroad at the receiving institution to corresponding credits at the sending institution. However, this issue was further explored by means of national-level interviews, because there may exist other explanations to this.

2.3 A brief flashback to the mid-term evaluation of Erasmus+

Before presenting the findings from the analysis of Participant Reports related to the five countries that are in the scope of this study, it is important to present some related previous findings at the European level.

Between 2016 and 2018, a combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and its predecessor programmes was conducted at the EU level.⁶ An Open Public Consultation was part of the evaluation and the results indicated that better recognition (for mobile learners) remained among the top five most pressing issues that should be addressed to maximise the impact of any successor to the Erasmus+ programme (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Question: "To what extent do you think the following topics need to be addressed to maximize the impact of any successor to the Erasmus+ programme?"



Source: ICF and Technopolis Group (2018): *Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes: Synopsis report of the results of the Open Public Consultation on the Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes (Volume 5)*

The Erasmus+ evaluation also highlighted several other findings related to recognition:

- Signature of a Learning Agreement is a strong predictor for recognition
- The absence of a Learning Agreement is associated with a higher rate of non-recognition. More than 50% of learners without a Learning Agreement consulted in the survey launched as part of the evaluation reported that they had not received recognition
- Across the whole Erasmus+ programme, the level of full recognition was at 80% on average

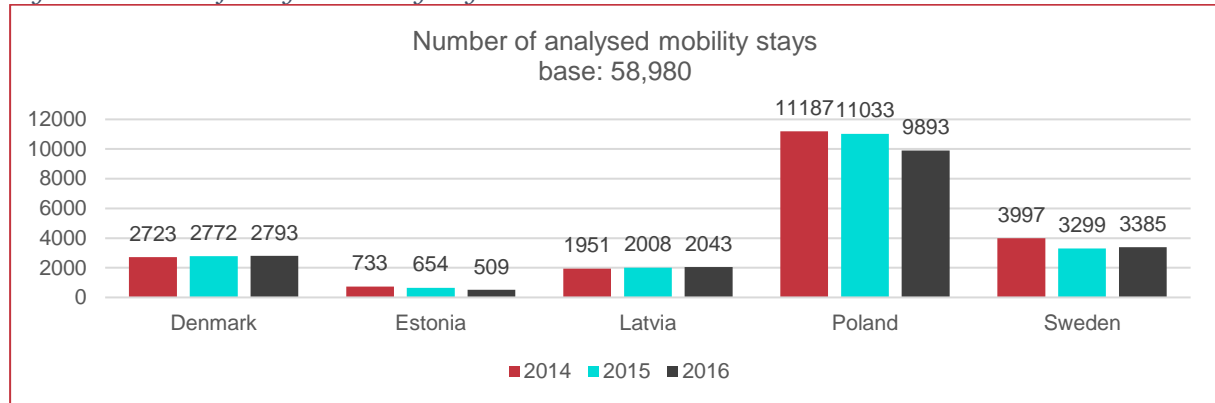
The findings from the evaluation confirm that recognition of the mobility stays remains one of the issues in the Erasmus+ programme countries and that this study on recognition is therefore well justified.

⁶ ICF and Technopolis Group (2018): *Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes: Main Evaluation Report.*

2.4 Descriptors of higher education mobility

The study team analysed in total 58,980 of mobility stays across the five countries and across the three years. The distribution of mobility stays naturally reflects the sizes of the countries in terms of student population. Poland makes up for almost 55% of all analysed mobility stays, followed by Sweden (18.1%), Denmark (14.1%), Latvia (10.2%) and Estonia (3.2%). This is illustrated in Figure 2.

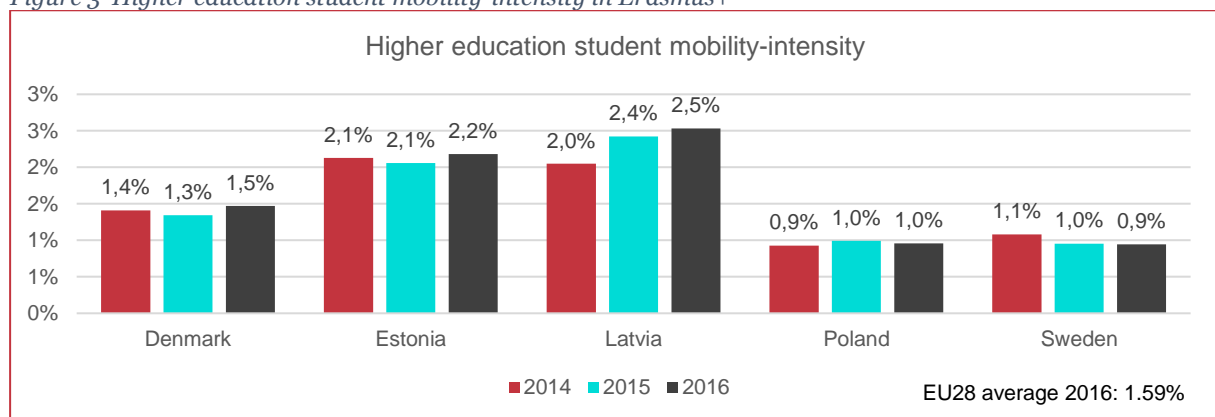
Figure 2 Number of analysed mobility stays



Source: Technopolis, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

In relative terms, taking into account the differences in the sizes of the countries, Figure 3 provides an overview of the higher education student mobility intensity through Erasmus+ across the countries. This is calculated as a share of the number of mobility stays (using data from the official Erasmus+ annual reports) over the total enrolment to higher education in the country in the given year. Countries with smaller populations tend to be more mobility-intense. In 2016, 2.5% of all enrolled higher education students in Latvia went on a mobility stay abroad through Erasmus+. This was followed by Estonia (2.2%), Denmark (1.5%), Poland (1.0%) and Sweden (0.9%). Latvia and Estonia overperform the EU28 average for 2016, which was at 1.6%. The mobility-intensity has grown between 2014 and 2016 for four out of the five countries. Sweden is the only country which shows a moderate decline from 1.1% in 2014 to 0.9% in 2016.

Figure 3 Higher education student mobility-intensity in Erasmus+

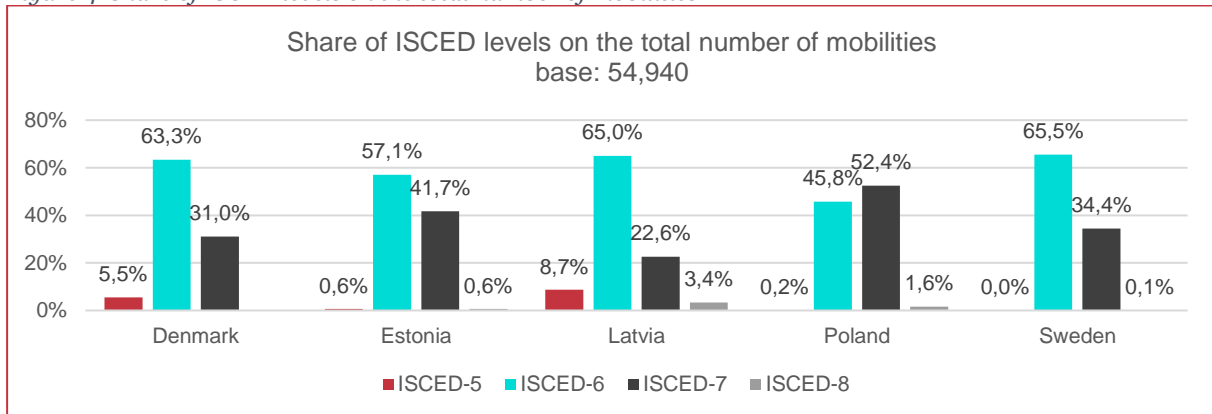


Source: Erasmus+ Annual Reports and annexes, Eurostat data (the total enrolment to higher education in the given years)

Figure 4 presents the distribution of the ISCED levels at which the various mobility stays took place. In four of the five countries (all except Poland), ISCED 6 (Bachelor level) dominates the picture (57.0%–65.0% of the total number of mobility stays across all three analysed years), followed by ISCED 7 (Master

level, 22.6%–41.7% across the four countries). ISCED 5 (Short tertiary cycles) comes third in Denmark and Latvia. In Poland, most of the mobility stays (52.4%) took place at the ISCED 7 level, which is most probably due to the tradition of ‘long’ Master’s study programmes (which incorporate Bachelor’s study programmes), often leading to higher education qualifications necessary for regulated professions, such as doctors, lawyers, teachers and architects. Some data points included in the institutional reporting indicated ISCED 9 level (“unspecified”), which the team excluded from the chart below.

Figure 4 Share of ISCED levels on the total number of mobilities



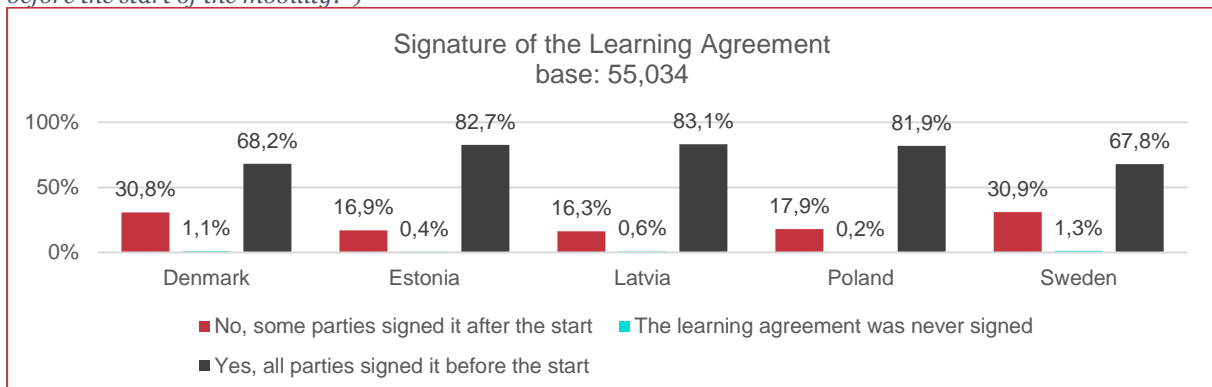
Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data and institutional reporting (2014–2016)

2.5 Recognition process

2.5.1 Learning Agreement

The signature of the Learning Agreement comes early in the mobility process. Based on the responses from students (Figure 5), it does not seem to be a major issue. In all five countries, the majority of respondents said that all parties had signed the agreement before the start of the mobility. In three countries (Estonia, Latvia, Poland), this happened in more than 80% of cases. In Sweden and Denmark, this percentage is relatively lower (68.2% in Denmark and 67.8% in Sweden) and 30.8% of the respondents in Denmark, 30.9% in Sweden, reported that some parties had signed the agreement after the start of the mobility, which suggests some delays in the process occurred.

Figure 5 Signature of the Learning Agreement (Question: “Was your Learning Agreement signed by all parties before the start of the mobility?”)



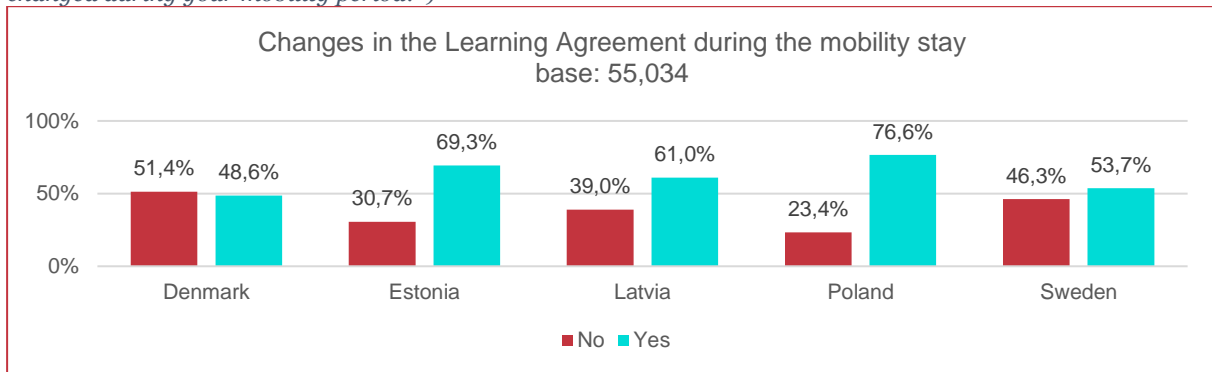
Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

However, when combined with the information on the changes in the Learning Agreement during the mobility stay (Figure 6), the data suggests that delayed signature of Learning Agreements in fact seems

to point to a lower percentage of changes during the mobility stay. Denmark and Sweden whilst showing the relatively highest shares of delayed signature of Learning Agreement, they also show the relatively lowest shares of changes to Learning Agreement during the mobility stay. On the other hand, Poland and Estonia show relatively higher shares of changes to Learning Agreement (76.6% and 69.3% respectively).

Overall, across the five countries, the data shows very low numbers of Learning Agreements never signed. Non-signature of Learning Agreement was found to be a strong predictor the subsequent non-recognition of the mobility stays at the EU level.⁷ This means that across the five countries the issues linked to recognition are probably caused by other factors.

Figure 6 Changes in the Learning Agreement during the mobility stay (Question: “Was your Learning Agreement changed during your mobility period?”)

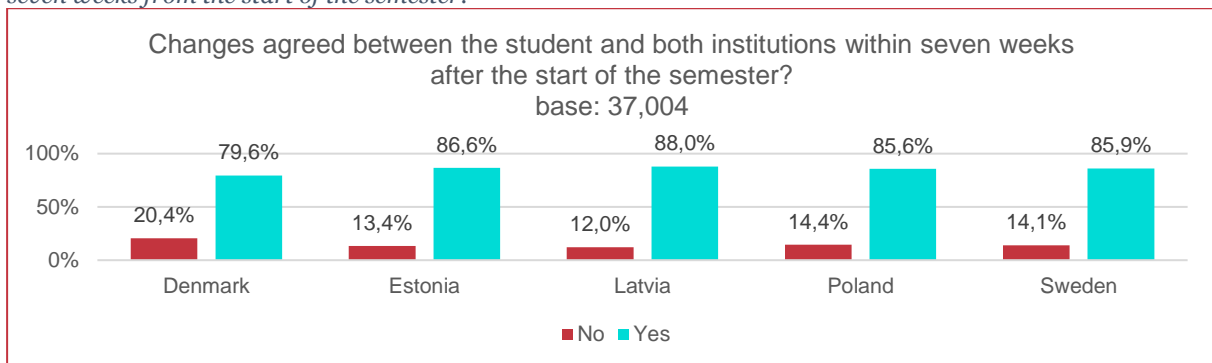


Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

2.5.2 Changes to the content of the mobility and completion of mobility

In all five countries (across the three years), between 79.6% and 88.0% of the Erasmus+ participants (Figure 7) reported that they had managed to agree on the changes with the sending and receiving institutions within seven weeks from the start of the semester. This finding indicates that there exist no major issues in the process when changes to the content of the mobility are necessary. Furthermore, the findings are very consistent across the countries.

Figure 7 Question: “Did you manage to agree on the changes with the sending and receiving institutions within seven weeks from the start of the semester?”

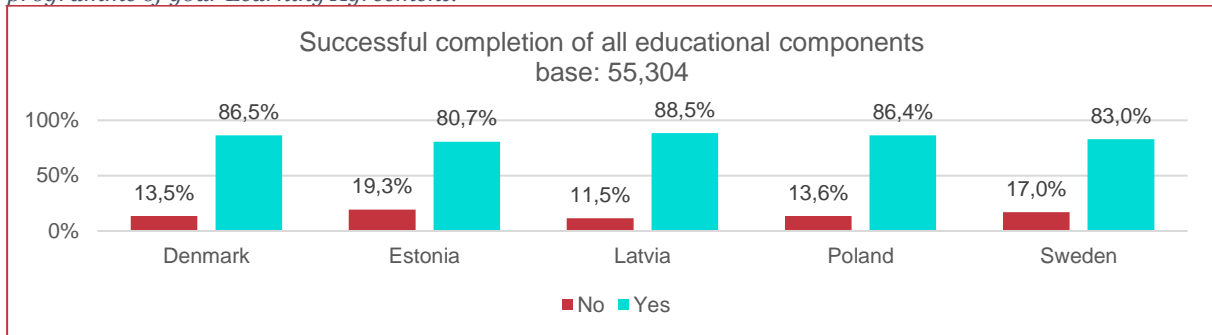


Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

⁷ ICF and Technopolis Group (2018): *Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes: Main Evaluation Report.*

Similarly, when asked about the completion of all the educational components listed in the Learning Agreement, a very high percentage of students reported having completed all the components successfully (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Question: “Did you successfully complete all the educational components that were listed in the study programme of your Learning Agreement?”



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

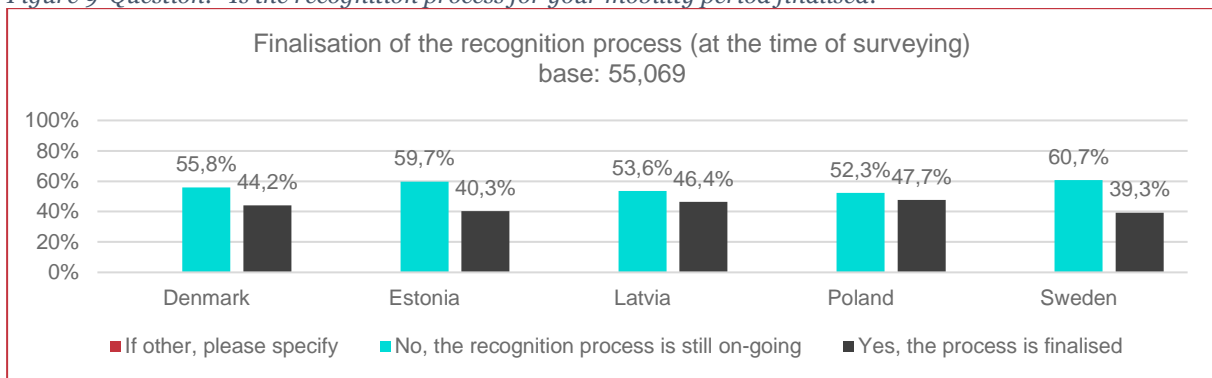
2.5.3 Finalisation of the recognition process

Figure 9 illustrates the share of those students that reported that their recognition process had been finalised and of those who answered that the recognition process was still ongoing. In all five countries (across the three analysed years), in the majority of cases (between 52.3% and 60.7%), the recognition process was still ongoing. The percentage of students who reported having finalised their recognition process varied between 39.3% (Sweden) and 47.7% (Poland).

Although the survey data show relatively high shares of unfinished recognition processes across the countries, it is important to note that the data capture the reality at the time of filling in the Participant Report. Students receive the link to answer the Participant Report survey almost immediately after returning to their receiving institution from the mobility stay and are asked to complete the report within a month.⁸ Therefore, this question does not necessarily capture the number of the recognition processes which ended up with partial or no recognition. This would mean that students would have to be asked to fill in the Participant Report survey much later than they currently do to ensure that enough time has elapsed to allow for the recognition process to be finalised. Currently, students fill in first part of the Participant Report survey several weeks after return, with the second part (recognition process, conducted by sending organisation) coming several weeks after the first one. This practice started only in 2016. Prior to that, students used to fill in the whole Participant Report survey on one occasion, a few weeks after they returned from abroad.

⁸ We did not ask this question to all institutions, but to a few. They explained that they send a link to the students immediately after their return home, with a request to complete the Participant Report within a month. We do not know if other institutions do the same, but it seems reasonable. Even a slightly extended period for students to complete the Participant Report (a few weeks extra) would still mean that the recognition process may not be completed at the time of responding to the report.

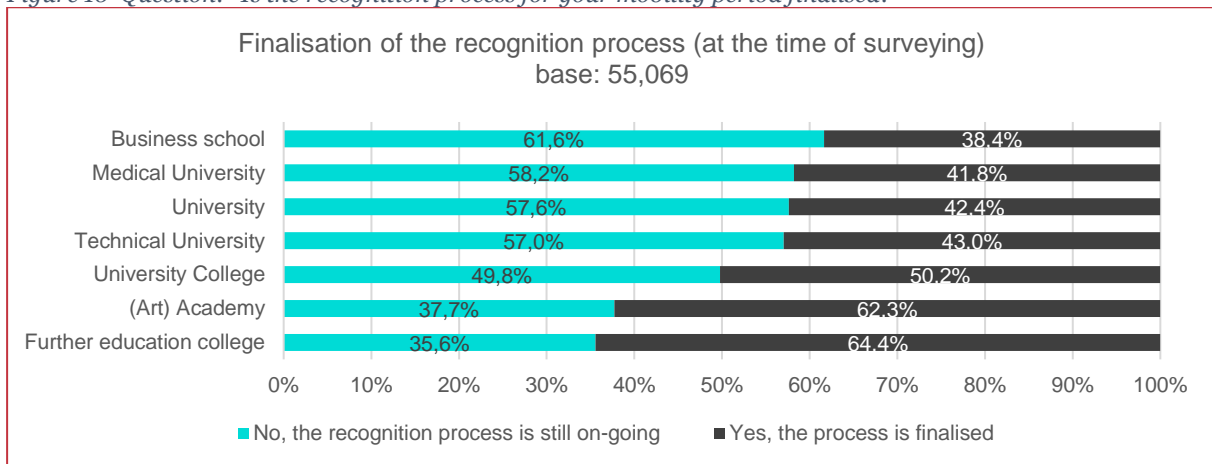
Figure 9 Question: "Is the recognition process for your mobility period finalised?"



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

The study team also undertook an analysis of the Participant Report data at the level of institutions. For that, the institutions in the five countries were broadly categorised as follows: (Art) Academy, Business school, Further education college, Medical University, Technical University, University College⁹ and University. Figure 10 provides an overview of the finalisation of the recognition process by institutional category. The figure includes data from all five countries and across the three years. Based on the responses by students, further education colleges followed by (art) academies show the highest shares of finalised recognition process (64.4% and 62.3% respectively). On the other hand, the students' responses indicate that business schools, medical universities, universities and technical universities have relatively lower levels of finalised recognition processes (all between 38.4% and 43.0%). This suggests that there exist differences between various institutional types. With the exception of business schools, the other three categories showing relatively lower levels of finalised recognition processes, are more academic than professional. For medical universities, the regulated character of medicine could be another explanation for lower levels finalised recognition processes, suggesting that there may be some delays encountered at medical universities.

Figure 10 Question: "Is the recognition process for your mobility period finalised?"



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

⁹ The category 'University college' refers to institutions that are HEIs but not full-scale universities. The category is more applicable in some countries, and less so in others. All five countries in this analysis have institutions labelled as University colleges.

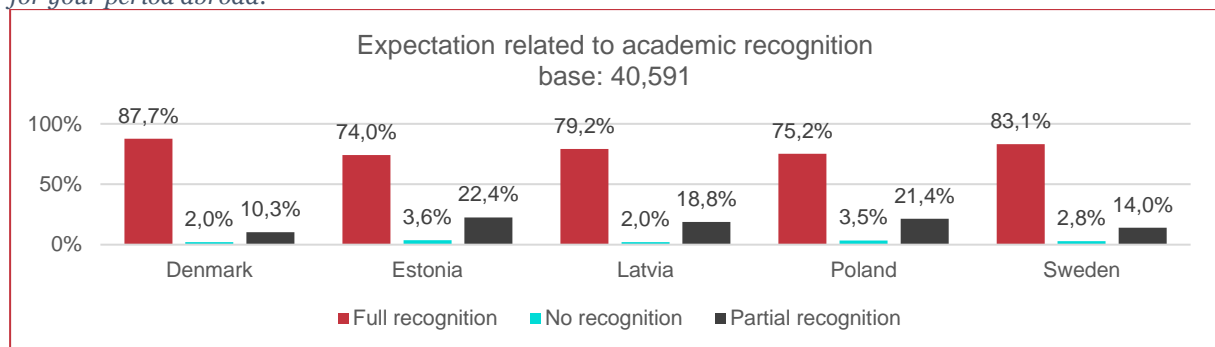
Although the levels of reported unfinished recognition processes were relatively high, the expectation from students as to whether they were likely to gain academic recognition from their sending institutions was very positive (Figure 11).

Between 74.0% and 87.8% (across all three years) of the respondents expected full academic recognition from their sending institutions upon return. The highest levels of expectation were reported in Denmark (87.8%) and Sweden (83.1%), whilst for Estonia, it was 74.0%, for Poland 75.2% and for Latvia 79.2%. When compared with the data in Figure 5 (signature of Learning Agreement), it appears that a delayed signature of a Learning Agreement does not correlate with the level of expected no or partial recognition. On the contrary, Denmark and Sweden show the highest levels of expected full recognition. Across all five countries and three years, of all students who responded that their Learning Agreement had been signed before the start of a mobility, 79.8% expected full recognition. Of those students whose Learning Agreements were signed with a delay, 76.7% expected full recognition (overall, 79.0% of the students expected full recognition). The differences in the percentages of expected full recognition by the timeliness of Learning Agreement signature are therefore very small. Furthermore, the study team calculated Pearson Correlation coefficient (0.03364345) and ran a Chi-square test, which did not show any dependence between the two variables across the full dataset (five countries, three years).

Interestingly, 72.9% of those students who reported that their Learning Agreements had never been signed expected full recognition as well. However, 8.1% of them expected no recognition at all, which is higher than in the case of those students with timely and delayed Learning Agreements, where the percentages were only 2.9% and 3.3% respectively.

It is important to note, however, that Figure 11 captures data on student expectation, not the final outcome. There is no data showing to what extent this expectation has held true.

Figure 11 Question: "Did you gain or do you expect to gain academic recognition from your sending institution for your period abroad?"

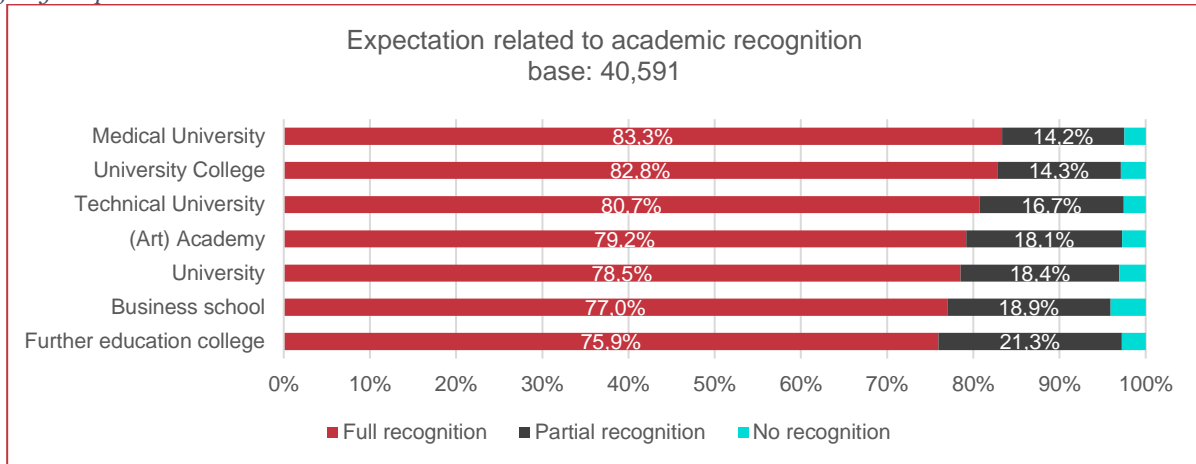


Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Between 2014 and 2016, the expected level of full academic recognition has risen from 76.4% to 81.2%. The average level of expected full recognition among student beneficiaries, across the five countries and three years is 79.0%. This is on a par with the EU28 average in 2016, which was 80%.¹⁰

¹⁰ ICF and Technopolis Group (2018): *Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes: Main Evaluation Report*.

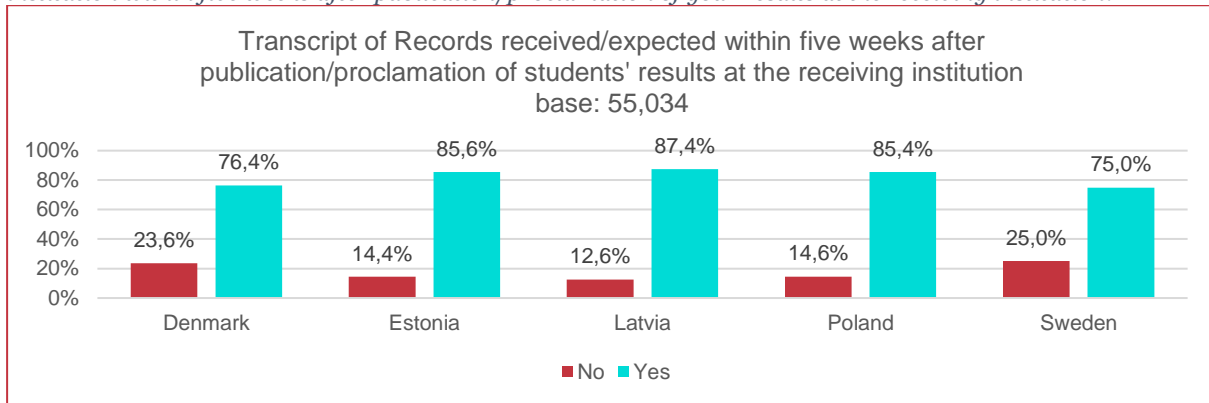
Figure 12 Question: "Did you gain or do you expect to gain academic recognition from your sending institution for your period abroad?"



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

At the level of institutions, students at medical universities have the highest expectations in terms of receiving full academic recognition (83.3%). This could be explained by the medicine study programme being heavily regulated and therefore students are likely to know well ahead before the end of the mobility stay which courses will be recognised upon return. University Colleges and Technical Universities follow second and third respectively (82.8% and 80.7%). A relatively narrow specialisation of study programmes at these institutions could explain these relatively high levels of expected full academic recognition. On the other hand, further education colleges and business schools, which are perhaps the least academic, show the relatively lowest levels of full recognition (Figure 12).

Figure 13 Question: "Did you receive or do you expect to receive the Transcript of Records from the receiving institution within five weeks after publication/proclamation of your results at the receiving institution?"



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

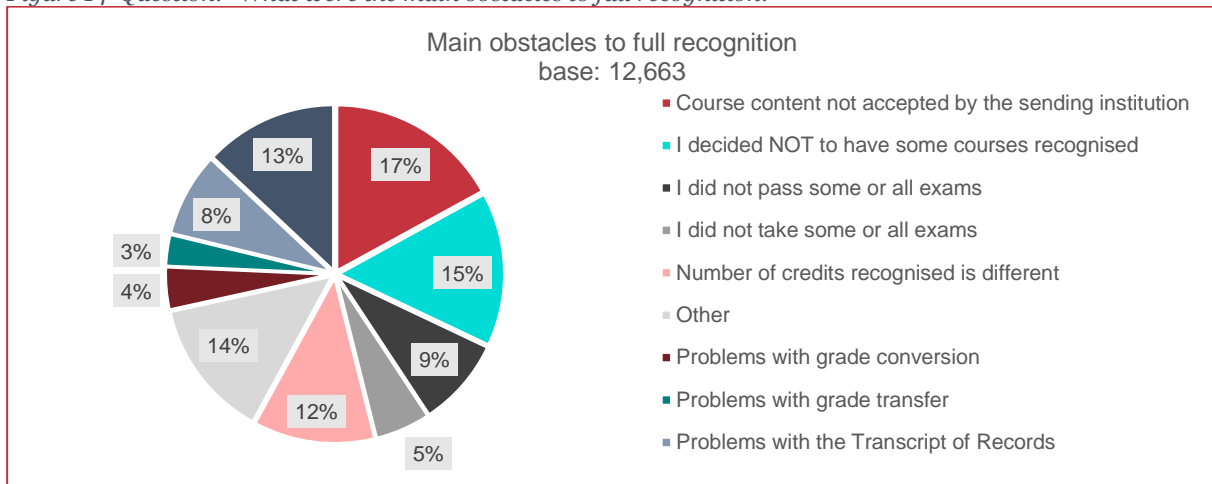
Figure 13 shows shares of students who received or expected to receive a Transcript of Records within five weeks after publication/proclamation of their results at the receiving institution. There does not seem to be any major issues related to Transcript of Records across the five countries, because the shares of students who received or expected to receive the document on time were high, ranging from 75.0% to 87.4%.

2.5.4 Obstacles to recognition

In the Participant Report survey, students are asked to indicate the main obstacles to their recognition process. They can select multiple answers. Discrepancies between the content of course(s) or parts of it

seem to be the most important obstacle to full recognition, because it was selected as an answer in 17.0% of the responses (this is across the five countries and across the three years). The second most frequently selected option was “I decided NOT to have some courses recognised” (15.0%). This is an interesting finding, because this option denotes students’ choice rather than an obstacle that they have to face. The “Other” option comes third. In this case, students can type in (free form) what other obstacles they had faced. The study team conducted a brief analysis of the free-text answers and there exists a wide range of other obstacles, from personal reasons such as sickness, to changes of the sending institutions’ recognition policies. In addition, a large number of students selecting the “Other” option stated an obstacle that is already categorised (e.g. failing exams, discrepancies in the course content etc.) (Figure 14)

Figure 14 Question: “What were the main obstacles to full recognition?”

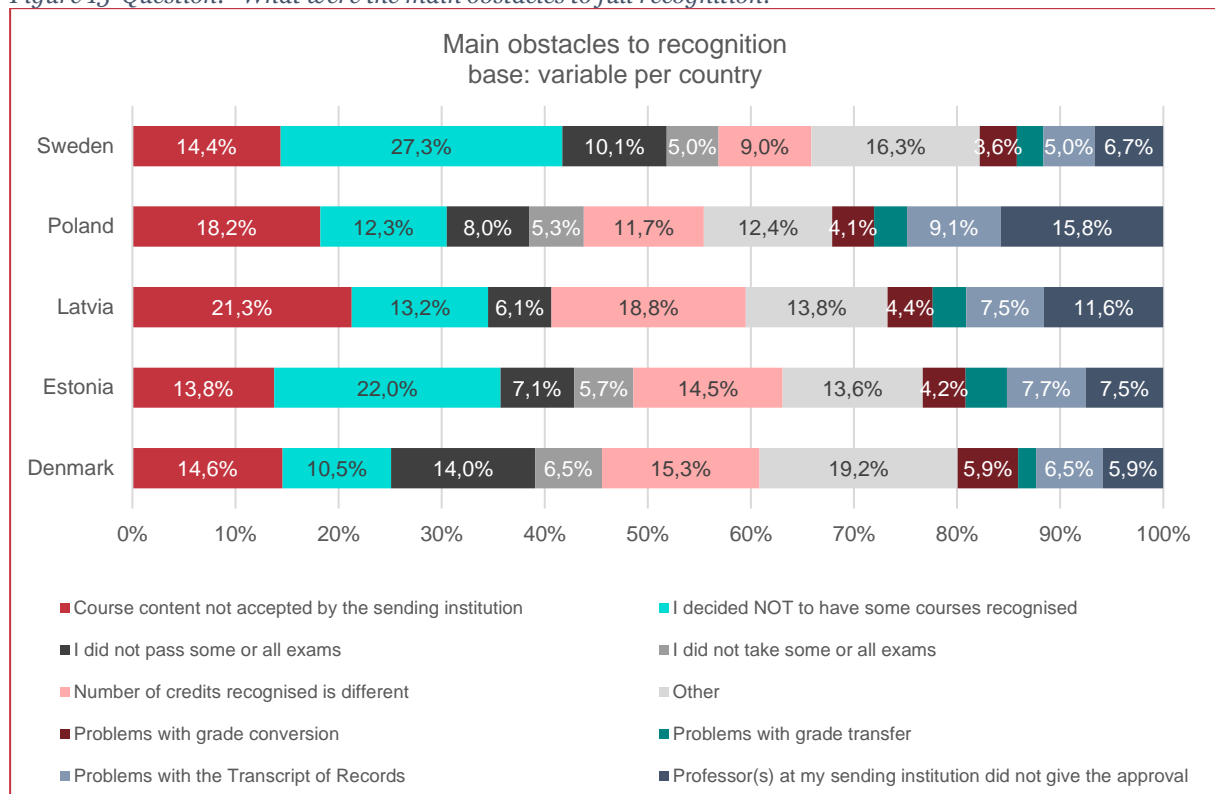


Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

At the level of the individual countries, the picture is more varied (Figure 15):

- In Denmark, the most frequently selected option was “Other” (19.2%) and the second most frequently mentioned answer related to the differences in numbers of credits recognised from that one agreed in the Learning Agreement (15.3%), followed by discrepancies in the course content (14.6%) and failing the exams (14.0%).
- For Estonia, the choice of students not to have some courses recognised was the most frequently selected main obstacle (22.0%), followed, with a considerably large margin, by differences in credit numbers (14.5%) and discrepancies in the course content (13.8%) and “Other” (13.6%).
- In Latvia, in 21.3% of the survey responses, students selected discrepancies between the course content, followed by differences in numbers of credits (18.8%) and the “Other” option (13.8%).
- In 18.2% of the survey responses in Poland, students selected discrepancies in the course content, making this the most frequently selected option. In 15.8% of cases, students answered that their professors at sending institutions had not given the approval, which distinguishes Poland from the other four countries and suggests that there is rather a large degree of discretion with individual academics in Poland in the recognition process.
- In Sweden, the choice of students not to have some course recognised was selected in 27.3% of the survey answers, followed, with a margin of 11 percentage points, by the “Other” option and by discrepancies in the course content (14.4%).

Figure 15 Question: "What were the main obstacles to full recognition?"



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016, note: Base for Denmark: 988, Base for Estonia: 574, Base for Latvia: 733, Base for Poland: 8,701, Base for Sweden: 1,667. Detailed charts for each country available in the full versions of the country case studies.

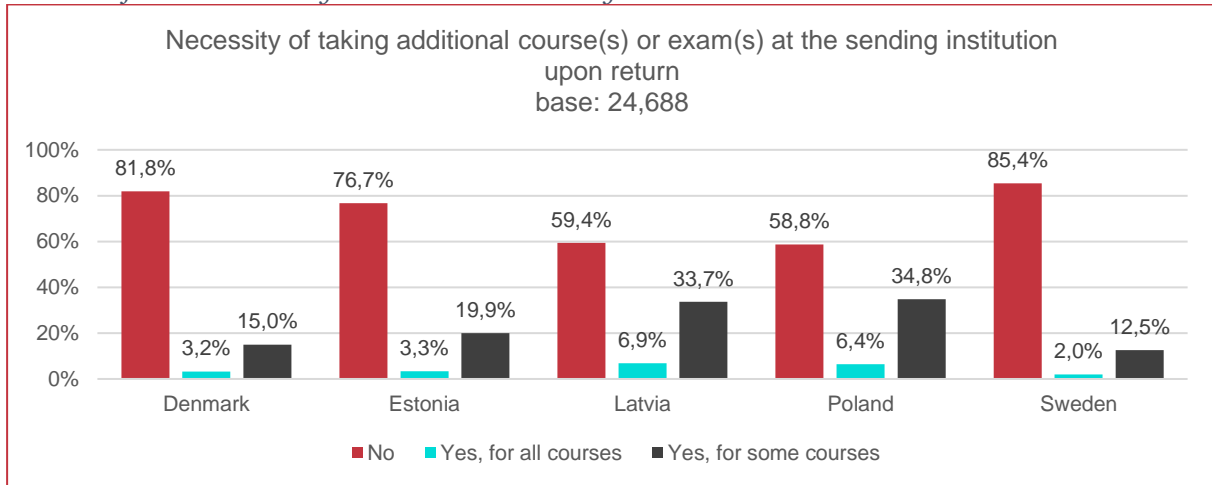
Full legend: Course content (or part of it) as agreed in the final version of the Learning Agreement was not accepted by the sending institution upon return; I decided NOT to have some courses recognised; I did not pass some or all exams; I did not take some or all exams; Number of credits recognised is different from the one agreed in the final version of the Learning Agreement; Other; Problems with grade conversion; Problems with grade transfer; Problems with receiving the Transcript of Records from the receiving institution; Professor(s) at my sending institution did not give the approval

Interviews at the national level further explored these issues. This was analysed and reported upon in the country-specific case studies, where country researchers also conducted investigation as to why some of the obstacles featured high in some countries and low in others.

2.5.5 ECTS credits recognition and study plans

The majority of students (between 59.4% and 85.4%, depending on the country) did not have to take additional course(s) or exam(s) at their sending institutions upon return from their mobility stays. Around a third of the students who responded to the survey in Poland and Latvia said that had been asked to do it for some courses (Figure 16).

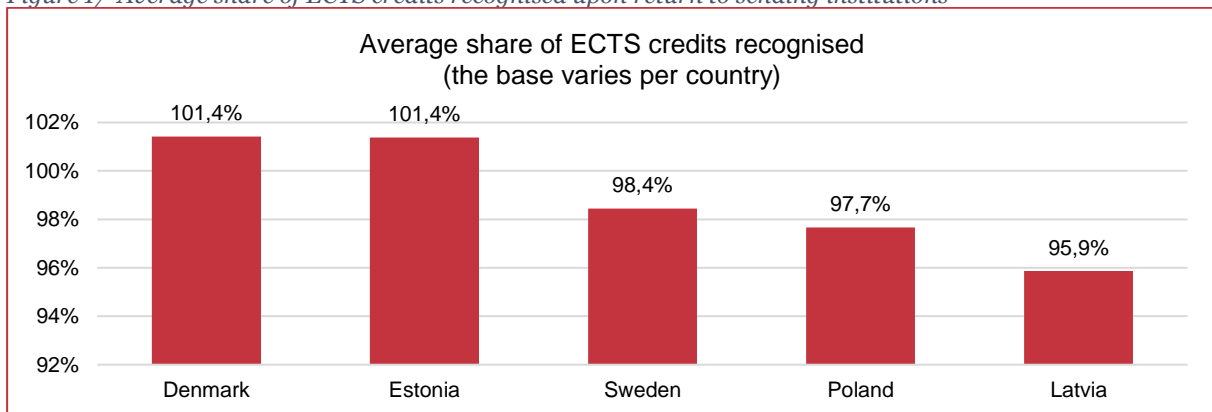
Figure 16 Question: “Did you have to or will you have to take additional course(s) or exam(s) at the sending institution for courses already evaluated at the receiving institution?”



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Figure 17 presents the country averages of shares of ECTS credits recognised upon return to sending institutions. This is calculated as the number of ECTS credits recognised by the sending institution (the question in the Participant Report: “Total number of ECTS credits finally recognised by the sending institution after the mobility”) divided by the number of ECTS awarded at the receiving institution (“the question in the Participant Report: “Total number of ECTS credits earned during the mobility period as stated in the transcript of records”). The values for all five countries are near 100%. Denmark and Estonia show values higher than 100%. At first sight, this may seem incorrect, however, there may be a number of possible reasons. For example, a course at a receiving institution may be bearing four ECTS credits, whereas a similar course (against which the recognition has taken place) at the sending institution may bear six ECTS credits, resulting in a scenario where the number of ECTS credits recognised at home is higher than the number of ECTS credits awarded abroad.

Figure 17 Average share of ECTS credits recognised upon return to sending institutions



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

It is important to note the following points:

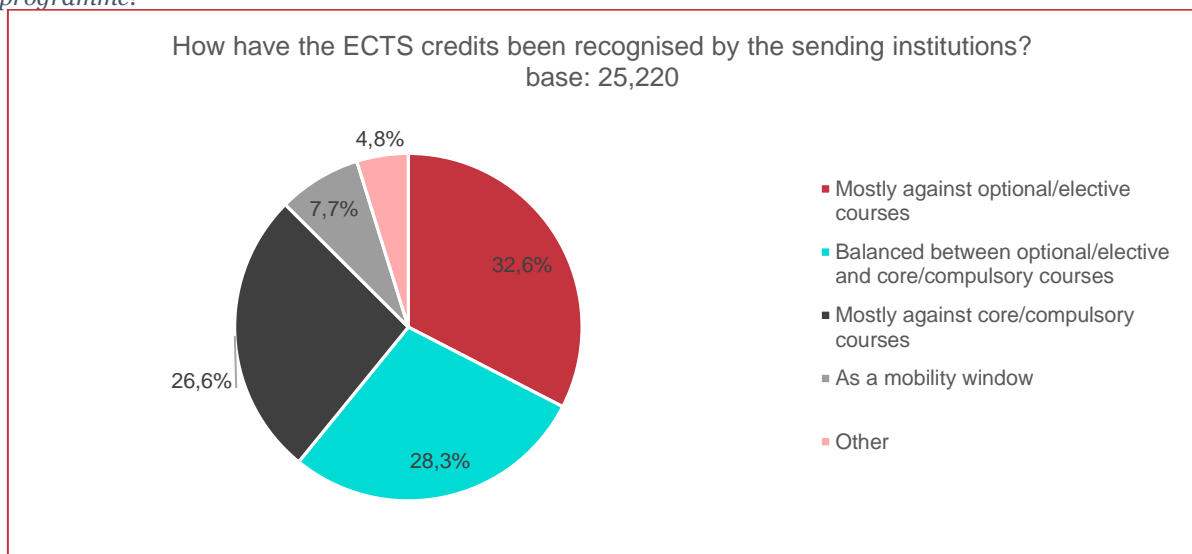
- The study team discarded obvious errors during the process of data cleaning (e.g. when students reported 1,000 ECTS credits recognised etc.)
- The values per country are merely average values. There is a great variety at the level of individual students

Furthermore, the average shares of recognised ECTS credits calculated as described above, cannot be directly compared with other percentage values presented in this report, for example with the percentage of students who reported expecting full recognition. The reasons are the following:

- Both variables describe different points in the mobility cycle and use different source of data (ECTS credits recognised describe the official act of both sending and receiving institutions awarding ECTS credits for the mobility, whilst student expectation towards recognition is recorded by means of survey self-reporting via the Participant Reports)
- The values presented in this report are average values (an average per country and/or an overall average across all five countries and three years), which does not allow any interpretation in relation to the individual circumstances at the level of each mobility and individual students

Figure 18 provides an overview of the different ways of recognition of the courses and ECTS credits gained abroad at the sending institutions. Across the five countries and the three years, almost a third of the respondents (32.6%) said their credits had been mostly recognised against optional/elective courses. The second most frequently selected option was “Balanced between optional/elective and core/compulsory courses” (28.3%) and “Mostly against core/compulsory” courses (26.6%). A mobility window was selected only in 7.7%. This suggests that some issues with recognition exist in relation to the core curriculum where the requirements are usually less flexible compared to other parts of the curriculum.

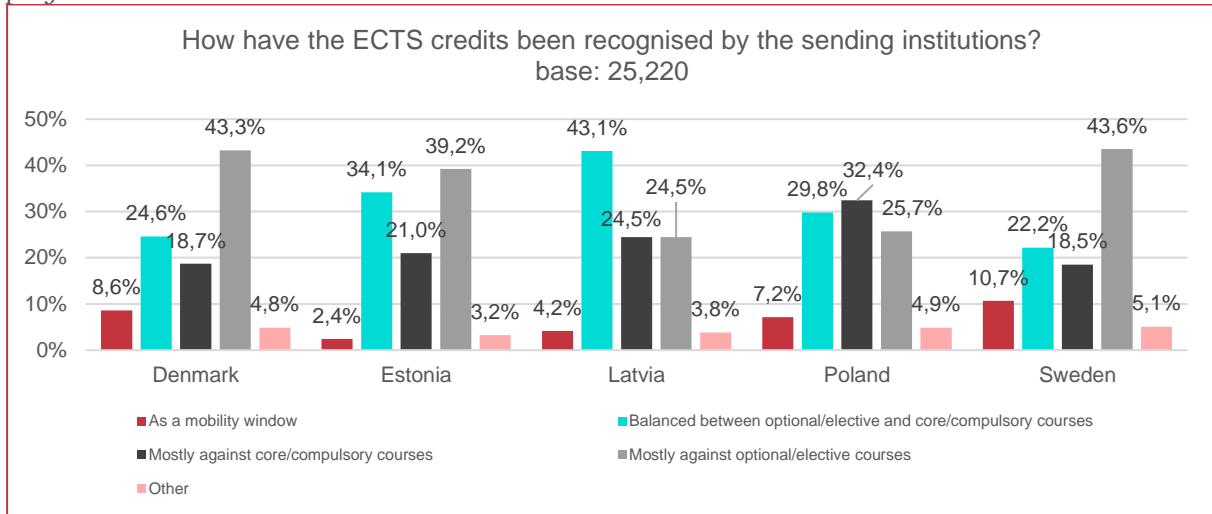
Figure 18 Question: “How has recognition of the ECTS credits gained abroad been granted in your home degree programme?”



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

At the level of each of the five countries, the picture is more varied (Figure 19). In three countries, Sweden, Denmark and Estonia, the highest shares of students reported that most credits had been recognised against optional/elective courses. In Latvia, 43.1% of the students had their recognised credits balanced between the core curriculum and elective courses and in Poland the highest proportion of the students (32.4%) said that the recognition had taken place mostly against the core curriculum.

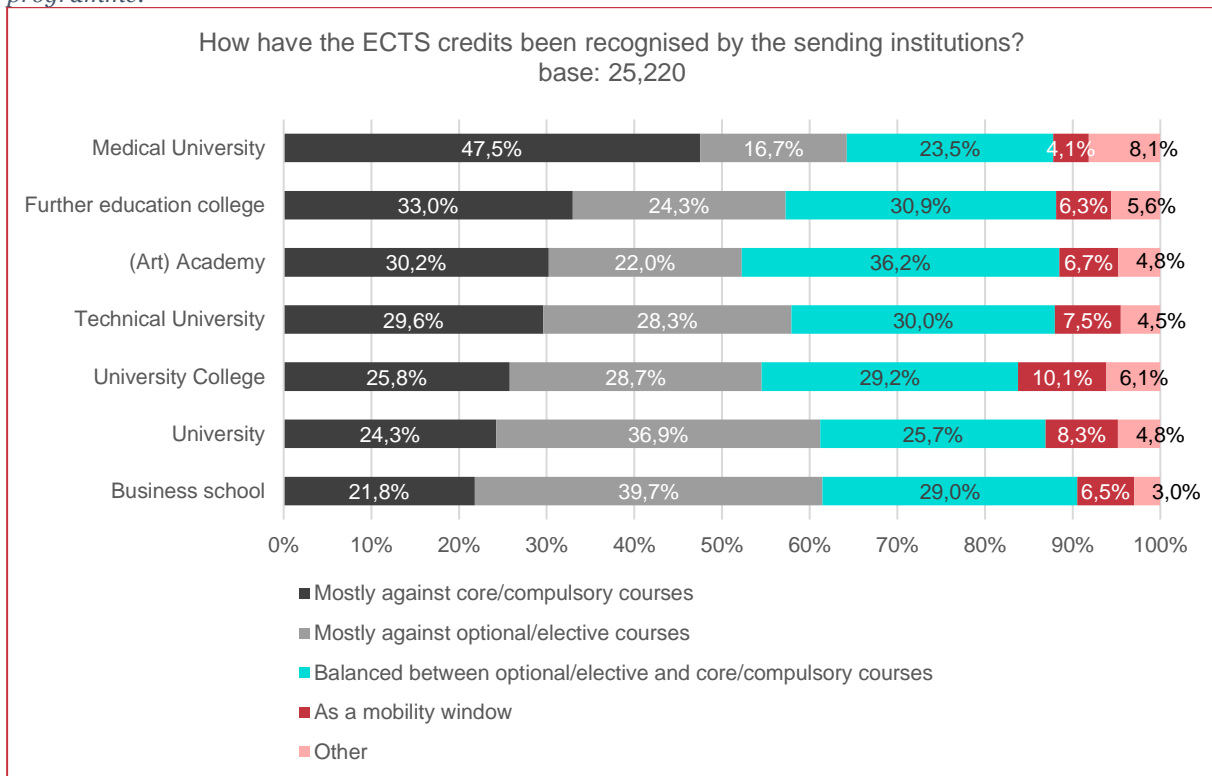
Figure 19 Question: “How has recognition of the ECTS credits gained abroad been granted in your home degree programme?”



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

At the level of institutions, the results confirm the previous institutional-level findings. Almost half of the students at medical universities in the five countries who responded to the Participant Report said their ECTS credits had been recognised against the core curricula. This is by far the highest proportion, compared to other categories of institutions. The regulation and harmonisation of the medical profession across the countries is perhaps the most likely explanation. On the other hand, only 21.8% of respondents had their ECTS credits gained abroad recognised against the core curriculum. (Figure 20)

Figure 20 Question: “How has recognition of the ECTS credits gained abroad been granted in your home degree programme?”



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

2.6 Observations and concluding points

The main observations and conclusions from the quantitative data analysis could be summarised as follows:

- Overall, the findings from the analysis suggest that recognition (as a broader issue linked to Erasmus+ mobility) of study mobility stays remains one of the issues in the Erasmus+ programme
- The data suggests that delayed signature of Learning Agreements results in a lower percentage of changes of the agreements during the mobility stay. Denmark and Sweden whilst showing the relatively highest shares of delayed signature of Learning Agreement, they also show the lowest shares of changes to Learning Agreement during the mobility stay
- Overall, across the five countries, the data shows very low numbers of Learning Agreements never signed. Given that non-signature of Learning Agreement has previously been found to be a strong predictor of subsequent non-recognition of the mobility stays at the EU level, this means that across the five countries the issues linked to recognition are probably caused by other factors than those linked to the Learning Agreement
- Although the levels of reported unfinished recognition were relatively high, the expectation from students as to whether they were likely to gain academic recognition from their sending institutions was very positive. When compared with the data on the signature of Learning Agreement, it appears that a delayed signature of a Learning Agreement does not correlate with the level of expected full or partial recognition. On the contrary, Denmark and Sweden show the highest levels of expected full recognition. At the institutional level, medical universities show relatively higher levels of expected full academic recognition than other institutional types, which could be explained by the high level of regulation in the field of medical education
- Between 2014 and 2016, the expected level of full academic recognition has risen from 76.4% to 81.2%. The average level of expected full recognition among student beneficiaries, across the five countries and three years, is 79.0%. This is on a par with the EU28 average in 2016, which was 80%
- Across all five countries over the 2014–2016 period, the main obstacle to the recognition process seems to be caused by discrepancies between the content of course(s) or parts of it. The second most frequently selected option was “I decided NOT to have some courses recognised”. This is an interesting finding, because this option denotes students’ choice rather than an obstacle that they have to face
- Around one third of the students said that most of their ECTS credits awarded abroad had been recognised by their sending institutions against optional/elective courses, which is more than the number of students who reported having their credits recognised against any other part of the curriculum, including the core courses. This suggests that some issues with recognition exist in relation to the core curriculum where the requirements are usually less flexible compared to other parts of the curriculum.
- The study team has come across significant issues linked to the quality of the data. The team was unable to track back the causes of some of these issues. However, the analysis shows that National Agencies may consider following up with the European Commission on the current design of the student survey collecting data for the Participant Reports. Examples of such possible improvements include:
 - Wording of the survey questions around recognition, making sure that students fully understand the meaning of the questions
 - Timing of the questions around the finalisation of the recognition process and the full academic recognition, which currently do not capture the final outcome, but rather expectations
 - Reducing the overreliance on student self-reporting overall by complementing the survey questionnaire with information from student mobility information recorded by the institutions

3 Synthesis of the country case studies

The following chapter presents a synthesis of the findings in the previous five country cases. This includes both a summary and an analysis with respect to potential barriers to the Erasmus+ recognition process, how and why these issues occur in the five countries, and the methods applied to reduce them. The following issues will be covered in the chapter:

- Changes to the Learning Agreement – the different approaches in drafting the Learning Agreement and responding in the case changes have to be made
- Processing times for recognition – whether communication, credit transfer from certain geographic regions or countries prolong the recognition process. We additionally examine any other instances that result in longer recognition times as well as evaluate the impact this has on successful recognition of student achievements
- Incomplete data in the Mobility Tool – whether the frequency of updates made to the Mobility Tool affect the recognition process as well as examine reasons regarding the frequency of updates made to the Mobility Tool
- Misinterpretation of ‘academic recognition’ and ‘full recognition’ by HEIs – how the terms are understood by academics, programme managers, etc. and how this affects the preparation for Erasmus+ mobility and the recognition process
- Misinterpretation of ‘academic recognition’ by students – how the term ‘academic recognition’ can be misunderstood by students and how it affects their ability to plan their mobility and report their mobility outcomes
- Changes in the course offer – whether there was changes in the receiving institution’s course offer compared to what was stated in the Learning Agreement, and what impact it has on recognition

The synthesis uses both the quantitative data from Participant Reports (analysed in detail in Chapter 2) and qualitative data from the country case studies, combining the information into a single narrative.

3.1 Changes to the Learning Agreement

An often-discussed problem in the Erasmus+ recognition process is changes in courses that were agreed upon in the Learning Agreement. Across Danish, Estonian, Latvian, Polish and Swedish HEIs, such changes were the most commonly mentioned cause for a prolonged recognition process, which at times could result in situations where students must retake the courses. Some differences in the drafting process for Learning Agreements can be observed between the countries. As highlighted in Figure 5, Estonia, Latvia and Poland have a higher rates of Learning Agreements being signed before the start of the mobility process (over 80% of cases in all 3 countries) while Sweden and Denmark show a considerably lower rate (approximately 68% in both countries).

In Sweden’s case, one possible explanation to lower number of Learning Agreements signed before the start of mobility could be attributed to how the national legislation is interpreted. The Swedish Higher Education Ordinance states that students have the right to have their achievements recognised at another HEI, unless there is “essential difference” between the compared courses. The question is how to HEIs interpret “essential difference” when matching their curriculum with another institution. This appears to translate into a stricter matching process and a prolonged drafting of the Learning Agreement. However, the Swedish example highlighted that despite strict control being used when drafting a Learning Agreement, students are still not entirely protected from finding that their receiving HEI no longer offers their agreed-upon courses when they arrive.

Even though Denmark and Sweden have a lower rate of Learning Agreements signed before the start of the mobility, quantitative data highlights that both Sweden and Denmark also display a lower rate of Learning Agreements being changed after signing (see Figure 6). HEIs in both countries also have established solutions to address issues from changes being made to the Learning Agreement (see Box 1 for a Swedish example from Linnaeus University). In particular, Danish HEIs emphasise the pre-

approval stage to reduce the risk of issues as much as possible. In multiple analysed Danish institutions students are given permission to select more courses than they need (i.e. going above the required ECTS credits per semester) when drafting their Learning Agreement. This allows students to have more flexibility during the recognition process since they have a larger “pool” of credits and backup courses. For example, at Aarhus University students can select courses up to twice the amount of ECTS required for a single semester (60 credits) of mobility. However, the students are expected to only achieve the actual requirement of 30 ECTS credits during their mobility.

Box 1 Linnaeus University approach to minimise risk of negative impacts from changes in the Learning Agreement

In order to minimise the risk that the recognition process is affected by changes to the courses given at the receiving institution, Linnaeus University recommends their out-going students to keep some reserve courses. Such reserve courses, as the original planned courses, are confirmed by the sending institution and listed in the Learning Agreement in advance. By staying flexible and by having a back-up plan, most students do not need to contact the course administration at Linnaeus University to reconfirm new courses, and they thereby minimise the risk of not gaining full recognition upon return.

The Danish case also suggests that several HEIs in Denmark have established fast-track procedures which are designed specifically to deal with sudden need to amend the Learning Agreement during the first few weeks after arriving at the receiving institution. Interestingly, while examples of such fast-track procedures were not present in other countries, the quantitative analysis also showed that Denmark had the lowest rate (79.6%; Figure 7) of agreeing on amendments to the Learning Agreement within seven weeks from the start of the semester. This suggests that the fast-track procedure could be a response by Danish institutions to be more attentive when their students find themselves in a situation when the Learning Agreements have to be amended.

3.2 Processing times for recognition

In general, examples of certain regions or countries being more problematic in terms of transfer times were evident in the analysed countries. However, the common consensus in the examined countries was that processing times for recognition are primarily affected by differences in the academic calendar between the sending and receiving countries. An example was German HEIs, which are still on summer break in August, and no data transfers happen during that month. Polish representatives indicated that while calendar issues exist, as time passes HEIs are becoming better acquainted with the academic calendars of other countries and learn to foresee such issues.

When it came to specific regions that caused more issues in the recognition process, a few examples emerged, and the common opinion was that processing times are related to individual countries more than to regions. The few examples were in the south of Europe. Some Swedish representatives noted that HEIs from the Mediterranean region have longer credit transfer times. This notion was at least partially echoed by Estonian HEIs; delays appeared to be more frequent with receiving HEIs from Southern Europe. Estonian representatives also highlighted that delays in credit transfer were more often encountered with art-related HEIs.

However, while extended processing times increase the length of the recognition process, no specific cases were found where processing times resulted in unrecognised mobility. This was specifically highlighted by Swedish representatives who found that while variation in process time for credit transfer between partner HEIs exists, these delays do not affect the level of recognition. Rather, it is a time obstacle and even in extreme cases (an example of a six-month delay period was given in one case) the academic achievements in the end are recognised (unless other issues emerge). The same notion was echoed in Denmark, where there were no examples of delays in processing time impacting the students' ability to progress through their studies.

The Estonian case also showed that processing time can extend due to students failing in some of their courses. In this case HEIs encounter situations where only passing grades are transferred immediately while failed courses remain in a state of limbo for certain amount of time. This may be due to the fact that students are given the option of retaking examination to improve their grades or in other cases receiving institutions do not see the need to transfer “failed” results. In any case, this issue is directly related to institutional communication (or lack thereof). What is important to consider is that students are not themselves acting directly to have their “failure” unrecognised (this issue is discussed further in the following). Rather, poor communication between sending and receiving institution causes delays in recognition that can negatively affect the student.

However, it was pointed out that students may wish to not transfer specific grades and instead present the courses as “passed” or “assessed” in order to maintain a better grade average (i.e. if they received a passing grade that is still quite low in the grading system). Such a situation was evident in at least one Polish HEI as well (see Box 2).

Box 2 Asking not to be recognised – the case of Jagiellonian University

In Poland, at least one institution, Jagiellonian University, reported that students themselves sometimes ask to have one or more of their courses unrecognised when they have achieved a passing grade that they believe is too low. In such a situation, the students have to retake the appropriate courses once back at their home university.

Note that in this case, the problem to the recognition process originates in a deliberate action from the student. It is worth considering that this is also the second most identified issue by students. This can be a cause for concern if the students do not treat their studies during the mobility period with the same responsibility as they would in their home university. However, we lack data to make a more substantial assessment of how students themselves treat the mobility period.

During 2014–2016, across all five countries, the majority of the Participant Reports (filled out after returning from mobility) showed that the recognition process was still ongoing (see Figure 9). After 2016, students have begun to fill-out a two-part survey; the first part several weeks after returning and the second part (which present the results of recognition process) several more weeks after the first one.

Even with these improvements, the case studies still suggest that students are filling out the Participant Report sooner than the HEIs can finalise the recognition process. This was for instance brought up by Polish representatives. The given example was when students are being required to fill out the Participant Report within 30 days after finishing the mobility period, while the receiving HEIs have to deliver the transcript of records within a five-week time period after the students’ departure. This creates a situation where it is possible for students to complete the survey before the official recognition process is completed, whereby they may not have full information regarding its outcomes. This was also noted by the Latvian National Agency; there were instances of students reporting that they had not received recognition for their mobility, but in reality, the recognition process was still ongoing. These examples from Poland and Latvia show that the student survey data may not present a complete picture of the recognition process. It is uncertain if the fact that this issue was mentioned only by Latvian and Polish HEIs means that such timing related issues are more prevalent in these countries than the others.

3.3 Incomplete data in the Mobility Tool

From the perspective of HEIs, the use of the Mobility Tool was never connected to recognition issues. However, qualitative data do reveal differences in how HEIs engage with the Mobility Tool and frequency in updates. Regarding the latter, for Swedish HEIs the frequency of updates to the Mobility Tool largely depend on the number of mobility students. HEIs (i.e. Malmö University) which have fewer Erasmus+ mobility participants are able to update the data in the Mobility Tool more frequently and treat the use of the Mobility Tool as an ongoing process, while HEIs with larger number of mobile students appear to update the Mobility Tool less frequently and for multiple students at the same time. At least in Sweden, the Mobility Tool was never considered an issue to the recognition process. A similar

situation also applies in Denmark, where the use of Mobility Tool is regarded more as additional (and perhaps unnecessary) administrative burden. At several Danish institutions, it appears that updates to the Mobility Tool are not always performed after the recognition process was completed, which results in mismatches between what is showed in the Mobility Tool and what is presented in the final report submitted to the National Agency (Box 3).

Box 3 Using 3rd party software to complement the Mobility Tool

One of the Danish HEIs suggested that the use of the 3rd party software MoveOn has helped them manage student mobility. This software allows institutions to manage international mobility, and the generated data can be transferred into the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool. It should be noted that beyond presenting additional monetary costs, the use of 3rd party solutions may present challenges to data security and privacy.

From the perspective of National Agencies, the way HEIs use the Mobility Tool is problematic, though none of countries in the analysis could demonstrate how National Agencies would be able to deal with the situation. Specifically, the Estonian National Agency did highlight that on the issue of how frequently HEIs fill out the Mobility Tool, the National Agency has little control. It was brought to attention that HEIs do not even necessarily update the Mobility Tool and ECTS after the final reports are submitted to the National Agency, meaning that if there were issues with recognition and HEIs only filled out the Mobility Tool partially, there is no guarantee (nor a way to enforce behavioural change) that HEIs will update the Mobility Tool with the missing ECTS. In Estonia's case this issue is related to the fact that the minimum amount of ECTS that must be transferred from courses taken abroad is 15, and if that is achieved any further updates are up to individual HEIs and how diligently they update the Mobility Tool.

Thus, there emerge two sides to the use of the Mobility Tool. For HEIs the Mobility Tool is not regarded as a problem to the recognition process, and it is not regarded as a necessary part of managing the recognition process (the final report that is sent to NAs considered the main method of submitting student mobility outcomes). On the other side, National Agencies face data mismatches between the Mobility Tool and the Participant Reports, but National Agencies lack the means to encourage (or enforce) behavioural change in how frequently HEIs update the Mobility Tool. The information in Mobility Tool should be the actual information about the amount of credits recognised as this is also transferred to the final reports. The Participant Reports reflects the students' subjective understanding.

3.4 Misinterpretation of 'recognition' by HEIs

From the analysis of student Participant Report data, it was evident that one of the larger issues hampering the recognition process was professors who did not approve the learning outcomes (see Figure 14) for student survey data which identifies this as the fourth most commonly selected issue). The qualitative data from the case studies highlighted how multi-layered this problem can be, ranging from different interpretations on a faculty level, to individual professors displaying a diverging opinion of the matter.

This issue was present to some degree in all the investigated countries and in many given examples, tied to how well-informed HEIs and their personnel are regarding the Erasmus+ recognition process. Both Latvia and Sweden had examples of HEIs where individual faculties from the same HEI had different opinions on how strictly courses at the receiving HEI have to match the curriculum at the student's home institution. At the Linnaeus University in Sweden, this was considered a potential problem where some faculties may have stricter views on what courses students can choose for Erasmus+ mobility, resulting in narrower options for the students. In Latvia, examples existed of programme managers or individual professors having the assumption that Erasmus+ participants have to complete courses with the same content as provided in by the sending HEIs (notably in Riga Graduate School of Law and the University of Agriculture and Life Sciences). This situation is related to how strictly programme managers or professors believe their courses have to correlate to those chosen by Erasmus+ participants.

In Latvia, a change in how Erasmus+ mobility is managed has reduced these issues. By involving study programme managers in the coordination process for Erasmus+ participants, the overall situation with recognition has reportedly improved. Programme managers review the courses chosen by students and help them plan which courses should be taken. There are even examples of Erasmus+ coordinators or programme managers advising students against (or not allowing) participation in mobility programmes when they have semesters with “problematic” professors who usually do not recognise the courses taken during the mobility. While this solution prevents students from encountering problems with recognition, their freedom when to participate in Erasmus+ mobility is of course still somewhat limited.

A different approach to reducing misinterpretation of ‘academic recognition’ and ‘full recognition’ was mentioned in the Swedish case. Thorough preparatory work is performed to eliminate the risk that differences in the definition of the terms would later affect the recognition process. The preparatory work includes a dialogue between the student, the international coordinator and the course coordinator regarding the planning of what courses the student is required to take abroad. However, while this in theory results in a Learning Agreement that is drafted to ensure that the chosen courses match the curriculum at the home institution, it was also noted that Learning Agreements are not a guarantee for recognition, and these documents even state that the recognition will take place after the exchange. This means that students have no absolute guarantee that their achievements will be fully recognised after they return.

In Latvia and Estonia the study programmes are organised in a way where students have a semester that is specifically designed to encourage mobility (Box 4 and Box 5). In Estonia’s case this is widely known as a Mobility Window which essentially means that one of the study semesters is comprised of elective courses. However, this approach is not without its issues, mostly related to the possibility for study programmes to have a full semester of elective courses, i.e. this approach does not work very well for medical study programmes that require very specific courses and course content.

Box 4 Mobility Window at University of Tartu – increasing flexibility in student mobility

The University of Tartu is currently working towards implementation of a Mobility Window, which is expected by 2020. The Mobility Window will be a way to organise the curriculum so that students will have a semester comprising mostly of elective courses and few core/mandatory courses. The underlying logic to this approach is that it is easier to transfer elective courses compared to core/mandatory courses. It is considered that this will open up more opportunities for student mobility by making it easier for students to select courses abroad (more flexibility compared to core/mandatory coursework). It is believed that it might also have positive effects on academic recognition and the overall recognition procedure.

Box 5 Mobility semester in Stockholm School of Economics in Riga

The Stockholm School of Economics in Riga dedicates a semester in the 3rd year of studies when students can participate in mobility. All courses completed during this semester are recognised. This approach practically eliminates any issues with recognition.

However, as already evident in the quantitative analysis, when asked how the ECTS credits from Erasmus+ mobility were recognised, the majority of students responded that their courses were recognised mostly against optional/elective courses (see Figure 18) while “Mobility Window” was a response in only 8%. This demonstrates that the idea of a Mobility Window/Mobility semester is not widespread across the five countries. For the majority of students in Sweden, Denmark and Estonia, their mobility results were not recognised as part of their core curriculum. In Latvia the majority of cases for recognition of the ECTS was a balance of optional and core courses while in Poland, in the majority of cases, ECTS were transferred as part of core courses (see Figure 19). This shows a wider problem of HEIs in the analysed countries still not seeing Erasmus+ studies of equal value as courses provided by the sending institution.

Linked to this is the fact that different European countries can have different views on what ECTS credits are worth and how many ECTS credits comprise a semester. This is reflected by the quantitative analysis which shows that Sweden, Poland and Latvia display credit recognition levels slightly below 100% (see Figure 17) while Denmark and Estonia are actually above 100% – a situation explained by differing ECTS values between sending and receiving institutions. And even though Sweden overall had an ECTS recognition level above 100%, the Swedish case highlighted examples of students having to take additional courses after returning to their home university, because their receiving university assigned less credits to a single semester.

It should be pointed out that if correct information is presented during the drafting of the Learning Agreement, students are made aware of discrepancies in the ECTS credits they will receive. This makes taking additional courses after returning from Erasmus+ an added but calculated inconvenience.

3.5 Misinterpretation of ‘recognition’ by students

Issues in misinterpreting ‘academic recognition’ were identified to at least some degree in each of the five countries. What is interesting is that the individual cases reveal that it is often not just an institutional issue across HEIs but an individual one; how the students themselves understand ‘academic recognition’. Examples of students’ misinterpretations were evident in Estonia, Sweden, Denmark and Poland.

In Sweden representatives from Malmö University discussed how it may be confusing for students to navigate the academic terminology used for Erasmus+ mobility. This was recognised as a discouraging factor to students. The Estonian case elaborates further on this by implying that students often do not fully understand what ‘academic recognition’ means, which results in them filling out the Participant Report incorrectly. In fact, across all the investigated Estonian HEIs, issues in how students interpret the terminology were evident.

The Danish case offers further insights into how the use of the term ‘recognition’ can create confusion, especially in light of the Erasmus+ Participant Report being filled out in English, rather than their native language. Danish representatives highlighted that the term ‘recognition’ refers to the transfer of ECTS credits and suggest that ‘recognition’ should be instead changed to ‘transfer of credits’, ‘approval’, or similar terms that make it clearer to students. This is because Danish HEIs encounter situations where students believe that ‘recognition’ refers to the transfer of grades, rather than ECTS credits. Similar problems were encountered in Poland, where ‘academic recognition’ has varying interpretations among students (i.e. having full recognition for completing 30 ECTS credits-worth of courses despite results from exams). Box 6 presents a proactive approach from Cracow University of Economics.

It appears that the frequency of encountered misinterpretations has reached a level in Poland where HEIs are taking active measures to ensure that students understand precisely what information they are expected to present and what the different terms mean to their mobility achievements.

Box 6 Reducing misinterpretation of ‘academic recognition’ – the proactive approach at Cracow University of Economics

The Cracow University of Economics has taken the measure to send Erasmus+ mobility participants an e-mail reminder, which provides them with a clear explanation of the key terms used in the Erasmus+ Participant Report. This includes an explanation for what ‘academic recognition’ means. The university has found that this practice increased students’ understanding of the terms used when filling out the Erasmus+ Participant Report.

Similarly, Estonian HEIs are also taking measures to ensure that students have a correct understanding of the terms used in the Learning Agreement, the Participant Report, etc. Reportedly, Estonian HEIs have begun to present students with this information through Erasmus+ info-sessions which are typically organised twice a year.

3.6 Changes in course offer

Sometimes the receiving HEIs do not present the most up-to-date information on their study courses. Examples include chosen courses not available in English, or different assessment methods, resulting in students selecting courses that do not match what was initially stated in their Learning Agreement. Such mismatches can extend the recognition process, if not cause some courses not being recognised because the actual results of the mobility are different from that agreed upon in the Learning Agreement.

Note that this problem is not specifically related to particular HEIs/countries/regions but is rather observable in each presented case and represent a larger communication issue between HEIs. Whether caused by academic calendar misalignments, cultural matters, or other factors, there are no ways to guarantee that every course chosen by Erasmus+ participants will be available when they arrive at their receiving institution. The most effective method in addressing this appears to be practices of pre-approving more courses, summarising to more ECTS credits, than necessary for a single semester (observable in Denmark and Sweden).

4 Conclusions

Our findings in Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Sweden point towards a few areas where there are still some room for improvement with respect to recognition of completed courses during Erasmus+ student mobility. These areas are summarised and elaborated on in the following list of bullet points. Although recognition remains an issue, it should be noted that for a majority of students and among a majority of HEIs, it is not a severe or particularly problematic matter. In many cases, the recognition process runs smoothly for all parts. But to the individual student who faces problems, it may be severe and even devastating. An unrecognised semester of studies abroad may have profound negative consequence for graduation, with subsequent economic effects that also may be severe enough for the individual. Behind the statistical figures in a report like this one are individuals who have spent time and efforts and probably private money during their studies in another country, and to whom improved processes and levels of recognition are of fundamental importance. From the highest policy perspective, Erasmus+ is a programme that ultimately aims at bringing Europe's countries closer together, through opportunities for mobility for our young citizens. Whatever improvements that can be done to increase the recognition level and smooth the recognition process, ought to be done.

The study has arrived at the following conclusions:

- Overall, both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that recognition (as a broader issue linked to Erasmus+ mobility) of student mobility remains an issue in Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Sweden, though HEIs are inclined to look to solutions to issues that emerge during the mobility process and work together with students to reach a satisfactory conclusion to the recognition process. Between 2014 and 2016, the expected level of full academic recognition has risen from 76% to 81%. The average level of expected full recognition during the period across the five countries is 79%. This is on par with the EU28 average in 2016, which was 80%.
- Across all five countries over the 2014–2016 period, the main obstacle to the recognition process seems to be caused by discrepancies between the content of course(s). On a number of occasions, it was reported that students found themselves in a situation where, upon arrival at the receiving institution, their chosen courses were no longer available. In these situations, students have to try to resolve the issue quickly and on their own, which results in changes to the Learning Agreement. While Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Sweden typically react swiftly to these situations (approving new courses within seven weeks), and several Danish HEIs also appear to have set up fast-track procedures designed to address such issues, students are nevertheless not guaranteed that the changes made will be recognised upon their return.
- A delayed signature of the Learning Agreement reduces the risk of changes to the agreement during the mobility stay. The interpretation is that longer drafting periods translate into better informed decisions regarding the choice of programmes for the mobility stay. For instance, Estonia, Latvia and Poland report less delays of signing Learning Agreements (meaning a faster drafting process) but also have higher rates of changes being made to the Learning Agreements after the mobility started. In contrast, Denmark and Sweden, which show more delays of signatures of Learning Agreements, have the lowest shares of changes to Learning Agreements (among the five countries) during the mobility stay.
- Denmark and Sweden apply processes that are designed to counter issues that might emerge during the mobility and offer more built-in flexibility for students in the Learning Agreement (i.e. going above the required ECTS, choosing more courses than necessary). Estonia, Latvia and Poland show good responsiveness to making changes in the Learning Agreements after the start of mobility (when issues among selected courses emerge). This suggests that while HEIs in Denmark and Sweden choose a pre-emptive approach to solve issues, HEIs in Estonia, Latvia and Poland are more reactive.
- Individual HEI departments or faculties, and even individual teachers, may have different opinions on how flexible or strict the curriculum abroad needs to be for students who undertake Erasmus+ mobility. This is part of a larger issue of different interpretations for what 'academic recognition' and 'full recognition' means. While the existence of this problem uncovers institutional issues in the

investigated countries (i.e. teachers who demand that courses taken abroad match the curriculum they teach exactly), it also represents a larger issue of Erasmus+ lacking better definitions for these terms and ways of enforcing HEIs to comply with them.

- 33% of students said that most of their ECTS credits awarded abroad had been recognised by their sending institutions against optional/elective courses. If the idea of a mobility stay is to be an integral part of the studies, then one would expect, in a majority of cases, that most ECTS credits are recognised against core/compulsory courses or at least balanced between optional/elective and core/compulsory courses. However, of the analysed countries only Poland has a majority of ECTS credits recognised against core/compulsory courses. In some cases, the choice to recognise mobility achievements as optional/elective is done when the final courses do not match what was presented in the Learning Agreement.
- HEIs do not use the various reporting tools similarly. Some National Agencies (Latvian and Polish) reported that the Participant Report is viewed as the primary reporting tool for the recognition process while, for example, the Mobility Tool is seen as secondary and updated less often. (In fact, the Participant Report is based on students' perception of their stay abroad and of their expectations. It is not a reporting tool for the recognition process). Thus, National Agencies observed that over time, the content in the different data sources start to diverge and show different levels of recognition. While steps have been taken to better align the timing of submission of the Participant Report and submission of the Transcript of Records by HEIs, it is not unusual that students are still filling out their Participant Report survey earlier than the HEIs can finalise the recognition process.
- The conducted country case studies present examples of improvements that could facilitate how Erasmus+ mobility is managed:
 - The case studies present various examples of how individual HEIs are approaching recognition issues for Erasmus+ participants. Both HEIs and National Agencies have expressed interest in joint events for institutions involved in mobility as a chance to discuss issues and learn about ways to reduce them. For instance, Latvian HEIs expressed an interest in informative events organised by National Agencies about the programme. Representatives believed that such events could facilitate a discussion on the meaning of recognition and other issues that are encountered by HEIs. A proactive approach by National Agencies would offer a chance to discuss the issues HEIs are encountering and establish a platform for best practices to be shared.
 - On many occasions the duration of the recognition process was impacted by differences in the academic calendars between sending and receiving institutions. Consequent sharing of such information between HEIs participating in Erasmus+ mobility would be of significant benefit. This would allow HEIs to cross-reference their academic calendar between the sending and the receiving institutions with the purpose to avoid calendar-related delays in the information transfer.
- The study team has come across significant issues linked to the quality of the data. The team was unable to track the causes of some of these issues. However, the analysis shows that the National Agencies may consider following up with the European Commission on the current design of the Participant Report. For example, the results of this study could be used for further work on the wording of the Participant Report survey questions around recognition, making sure that students fully understand the meaning of the questions. In addition, further consideration should be given to the timing of the questions around the finalisation of the recognition process and full academic recognition, which currently do not capture the final outcome, but the students' expectations.

Appendix A Denmark

A.1 Introduction and overview of the level of mobility

A.1.1 Institutional landscape

The majority of Erasmus+ students in Denmark come from the country's eight universities. As shown in Table 3, the three largest institutions alone accounted for more than half of outbound students between 2014 and 2016. Other institutions involved in the Erasmus+ exchanges for higher education include university colleges, business academies, artistic higher education institutions, schools of maritime education and training.

Table 3 Erasmus+ participation results from the largest sending HEIs in Denmark during 2014–2016, by institution (intra-EU mobility)

	Outbound Erasmus+ students	Mostly against core/compulsory courses (%)	Learning Agreement (LA) signed before start (%)	Completed all educational components in LA (%)	Full recognition achieved or expected (%)
Universities (8)	5994	14.7%	62.7%	85.4%	88.6%
Aarhus University	1464	19.1%	54.6%	88.7%	90.0%
Roskilde University	311	22.7%	81.8%	82.5%	84.6%
University of Aalborg	201	25.4%	76.9%	85.1%	88.3%
Copenhagen Business School	1213	7.0%	36.5%	87.7%	88.6%
University of Southern Denmark	722	21.7%	69.5%	85.2%	86.6%
University of Copenhagen	1698	12.2%	81.7%	83.2%	89.5%
IT University of Copenhagen	33	15.0%	84.8%	81.8%	92.3%
Technical University of Denmark	352	7.5%	71.8%	78.2%	86.7%
Other institutions (33)	1751	28.0%	83.2%	89.3%	85.1%
VIA University College	496	31.0%	90.8%	84.4%	84.7%
Dania Academy	14	58.3%	100%	100.0%	92.9%
Total (all institutions)	8255	18.7%	68.2%	86.5%	87.7%

Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Most major Danish institutions have participated in Erasmus+ for many years and have well developed procedures for managing Erasmus+ exchanges. Many see European exchanges as routine business and do not consider it to be problematic. Erasmus+ mobility and recognition is often dealt with at different levels within each institution, in most cases involving at least two types of bodies:

- **Central administration:** Most universities have an international unit within the central administration responsible for managing the Erasmus+ projects on behalf of the university and for providing advice and general information about Erasmus+. In some cases, there are additional administrative units at Faculty level responsible for international mobility.
- **Study Boards (*Studienævn*):** These bodies – regulated by the University Act (para. 18) – are composed of representatives for academic staff and students within a given subject area and are responsible for planning, implementing and developing the courses within their remit. The Study Boards make decisions about transfer of credits for courses taken abroad based on an assessment of academic content and fit within the course curriculum.

At many smaller institutions and colleges, Erasmus+ exchanges are managed more flexibly.

A.1.2 The role of the National Agency

The institutions rarely need to draw on the National Agency in the course of the implementation of Erasmus+ exchanges, except in cases where students contest an institution's decision, e.g. in relation to credit transfers. The institutions do, however, have regular contact with the National Agency about Erasmus+, including through the following mechanisms:

- The National Agency has set up an Erasmus+ 'Reference Group' with representatives from each of the main types of institutions. They meet approximately once every six months. Among other things, the group helps plan the Erasmus+ seminar (see below)
- The National Agency also organises an annual national Erasmus+ seminar with participation from all institutions in the sector. This is an occasion for the National Agency to update institutions on rules and planned changes. One topic which has been discussed recently are the plans for 'Erasmus without papers'¹¹
- In addition, several Erasmus+ coordinators at the institutions report having regular informal contact with the National Agency and describe the National Agency as accessible and helpful

A.1.3 Legislative context

The institutions' remit for including international exchanges in higher education courses are defined in the University Act¹² and the "Executive Order on the universities' international education programmes".¹³

Significant changes to the University Act (and equivalent) were introduced with the Progress Reform (*Fremdriftsreformen*) from 2013 and amended again in 2015. Several institutions made reference to the reform during interviews, indicating that students were more focussed on achieving full time progression in their studies, including when they were on a mobility stay. Some did however refer to a broader cultural shift within the student population over the last 10–15 years towards a more ambitious and targeted approach to their studies. In any case, interviewees agreed that 'academic tourism' was a thing of the past as far as students from Danish institutions are concerned.

'Progress reform' (2013 and 2015): key points¹⁴

- Students must study full time and are required to register for courses equivalent to 60 ECTS per year (from July 2014, amended in 2015 to give institutions greater flexibility in setting requirements for students)
- Institutions to 'significantly expand' their offer of summer courses, e.g. to help students catch up if delayed (from July 2014)
- Students delayed for more than 6 months (or 12 months for students who start within 2 years after completing secondary education) will lose the right to their government stipend (*SU*) (from July 2016)
- Credits for courses pre-approved by the Danish sending institutions are to be automatically recognised upon the student's return if that they have passed the relevant exams (from July 2014)
- If pre-approved courses are no longer available at the host university, the student and the sending institution must find alternative courses which can replace the unavailable courses (from July 2014)

A.1.4 When do students go on exchange

The majority of exchanges take place during the Bachelor's (ISCED-6) or Master's (ISCED-7) degrees (see Figure 21). Note that there was only sufficient data for 2014 and 2015. Some institutions, such as

¹¹ <https://uni-foundation.eu/european-university-foundation/projects/erasmus-without-paper>

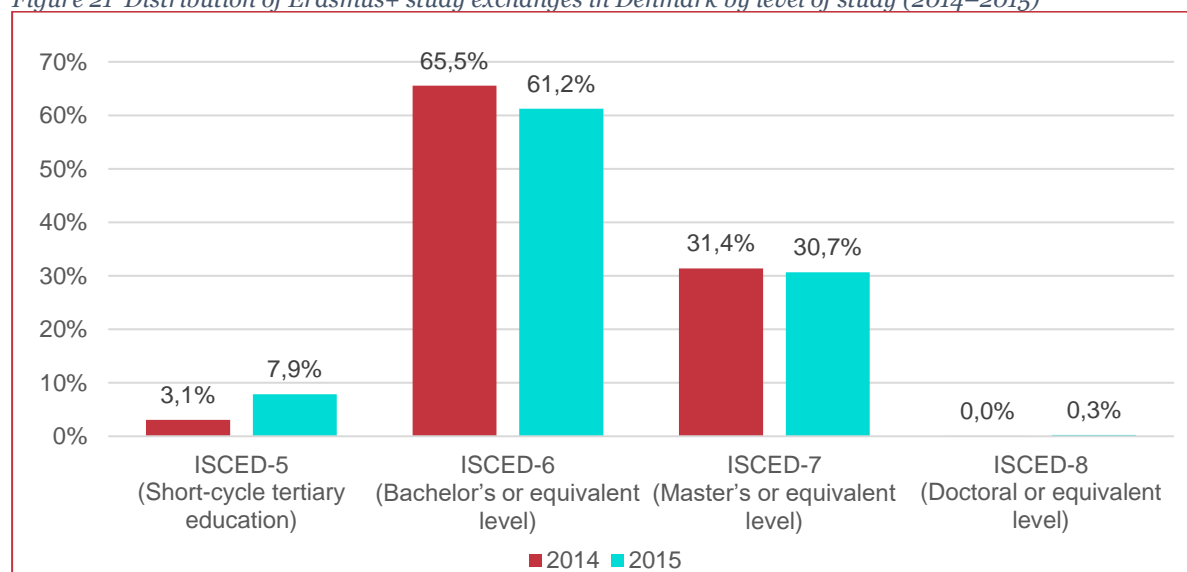
¹² Equivalent legislative acts exist for other types of higher education institutions.

¹³ BEK nr 247, 13/03/2015 (available at: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=168248>)

¹⁴ <https://ufm.dk/uddannelse/indsatsomrader/fremdriftsreformen>

Copenhagen Business School, have explicitly defined ‘mobility windows’ when students are allowed to go abroad whereas others leave it more open for the students to decide when to go abroad, as long as they can find relevant courses. 16% of survey respondents indicate that a mobility period abroad is a mandatory part of their course – e.g. certain language-based courses – but for most students, international mobility is optional. For shorter degree courses, there is often little flexibility for students who wish to go on exchange because of the short duration of the degrees. For example, Dania Academy offers two-year degrees of which it is mandatory to complete the first full year at the home institution. As a consequence, only the third semester is suitable for studying abroad and relatively few students decided to take this step.

Figure 21 Distribution of Erasmus+ study exchanges in Denmark by level of study (2014–2015)



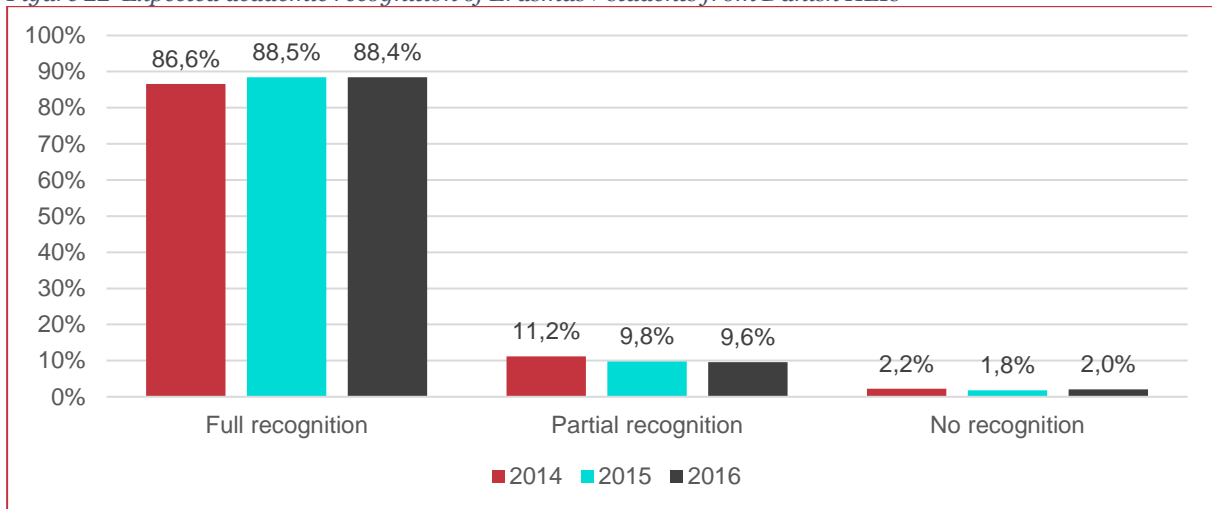
Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Courses taken abroad most often replace optional courses at the home institution. 18.7% of the students indicate that the courses taken count ‘mostly against core/compulsory courses’ compared to 43.3% who indicate that it is primarily for optional courses.

A.1.5 Outcomes of the Erasmus+ exchange

As shown in Figure 22 below, the trend has been towards a slight increase in the number of students achieving ‘full recognition’ over the three years (2014–2016), and these figures are likely to have changed further in subsequent years as new reforms have been implemented.

Figure 22 Expected academic recognition of Erasmus+ students from Danish HEIs



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

A.2 Understanding of recognition

The understanding of the term ‘academic recognition’ or ‘full recognition’ used in the Participant Report taken by students at the end of their Erasmus+ exchange can differ. Confusion about the meaning can have implications for the data collected by the National Authority and the European Commission about the results of the Erasmus+ exchanges. This issue has no bearing on process of transferring credits or on the outcomes for the students.

A.2.1 Misinterpretation of what ‘academic recognition’ relates to in the context of Erasmus+ mobility

In Denmark, the use of the term ‘recognition’ leads to some confusion among both institutions and students, compounded by the fact that Danish students take the Participant Report in English rather than their native language.

What institutions mean by recognition is the transfer of ECTS credits (in Danish: *meritoverførsel*). They generally do not allow the transfer of grades from courses taken overseas given the different grading scales used. Courses are transferred as a ‘pass’ and are not counted against the overall grade average for the degree. Instead the transcript from the receiving institution is often appended to the main degree transcript for information.

Several institutions suggested using ‘transfer of credits’, ‘approval’ or similar terms in order to make it clearer to students what is meant.

A.2.2 Different understanding/definition of what ‘full recognition’ means by the parties involved in Erasmus+ mobility

The Participant Report defines ‘full recognition’ as the recognition of courses in the learning agreement. Institutions interviewed were not sure how to define ‘full recognition’ but understood it to mean one or more of the following:

- Transfer of credits corresponding to a full course load for the duration of the exchange period (e.g. 30 ECTS for a semester)
- Transfer of credits for courses which were pre-approved by the Study Board (not necessarily identical to what was in the Learning Agreement)
- Transfer of enough credits to allow the students to achieve a full course load for the period (e.g. 30 ECTS for a semester), combining modules completed at the sending institution with courses taken at the host university.

- Students achieve the desired number of ECTS credits (e.g. 20 ECTS remaining before final dissertation)

Each of these definitions have limitations, and it is possible for students to achieve ‘full recognition’ without living up to the stated conditions. For example, students may not aim to transfer 30 ECTS per semester and so may achieve ‘full recognition’ with less than 30 ECTS. Students sometimes obtain pre-approval for more courses than they need (or want), in which case they will not receive recognition of all pre-approved courses.

Although the Participant Report defines ‘full recognition’ with reference to the Learning Agreement with the partner university, it is also possible that students responding to the Participant Report focus more on the pre-approval they have obtained from their home institution, since this is the main reference in the approval process. Survey responses (see below) suggest that some students consider the following factors to be relevant to full recognition:

- Delays in receiving grades and/or transcripts
- Transfer or translation of grades
- Rounding down of ECTS points (e.g. transferring 25 instead of 28)

Finally, the ‘Progress Reform’ described above could also have influenced the perception of full recognition and led to a focus on achieving a full 30 ECTS every semester.

A.2.3 Recognition process and barriers to full recognition

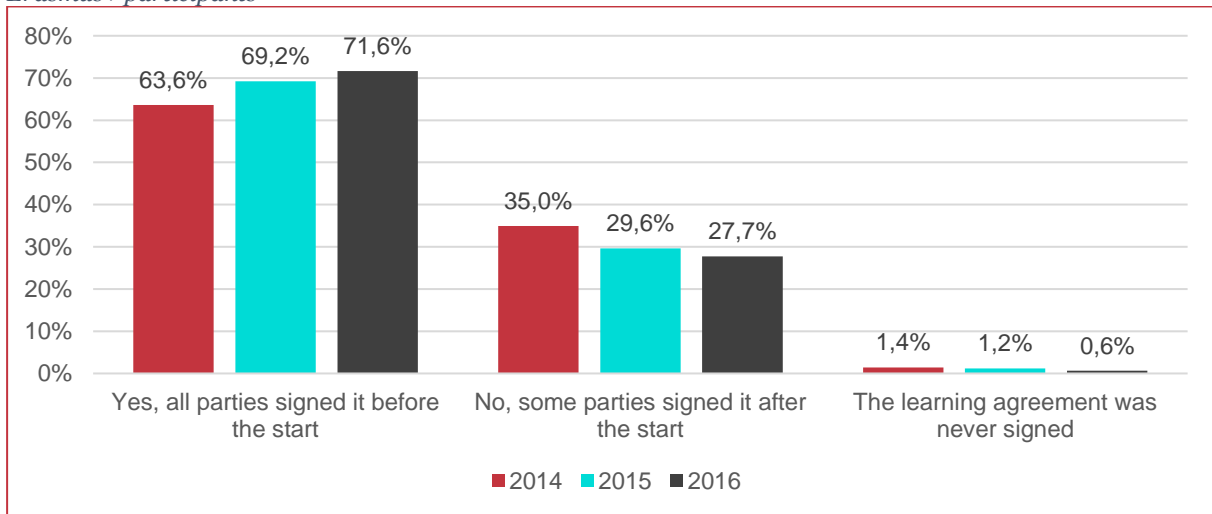
The academic recognition of courses taken on Erasmus+ exchanges depends on actions taken by individual students and by institutions before, during and after the study.

Before the exchange

Before the exchange, the students are required to apply for one of their home institutions exchange places, apply to the overseas institution, apply for pre-approval for course modules they wish to take overseas and finally have the learning agreement between the students, the sending and receiving institution signed.

For Danish institutions, pre-approval is a central part of the overall recognition process and is ultimately decided by the Study Boards (or equivalent) based on academic considerations. The individual higher education institution (HEI) examples below describe some of the criteria used in this context. Following the ‘Progress Reform’ (see above), a pre-approval of a course now constitutes a legal guarantee that credits can be transferred upon successful completion. Perhaps as a consequence, an increasing proportion of students report having had their Learning Agreements signed by all parties before the start of the overseas stay, as shown in Figure 23.

Figure 23 Learning Agreement signed by all parties before the start of the mobility – survey answers from Danish Erasmus+ participants



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

To support the students in the preparation process, the institutions’ international offices typically organise meetings and make information available about partner institutions. Some institutions have compiled databases of previously approved courses and other experiences from previous years.

The main barriers at this stage, which may ultimately affect successful recognition of the overseas studies, are difficulties in finding reliable information about the courses offered by potential host institutions and ensuring that they match the requirements at the home institution. In addition, some students may be deterred from applying in the first place because of the perceived risks that an unsuccessful exchange may affect their study progression. As a consequence of the ‘Progress Reform’, delays in study progression are more likely to have financial consequences for the students, and some interviewees argued that vulnerable students were particularly likely to decide against a foreign exchange for this reason.

Barriers:

- Finding adequate information about courses available at the host institutions
- Matching courses with course requirements at the home institutions
- Finding relevant courses in the desired language (typically English)
- Perceived riskiness of exchange outcomes

Several interviewed institutions advise their students to get pre-approval for a larger number of courses than they need (e.g. 45 ECTS for one semester). This provides greater flexibility when they arrive at the host institution as they have one or more back-up options if their preferred options are unavailable and thereby decreases the risk for needing to apply for pre-approval for new courses. At Aarhus University, for example, they allow students to get pre-approval for up to twice the amount of ECTS required (e.g. 60 ECTS for one semester), although the student is expected only to follow courses worth 30 ECTS once the semester has started.

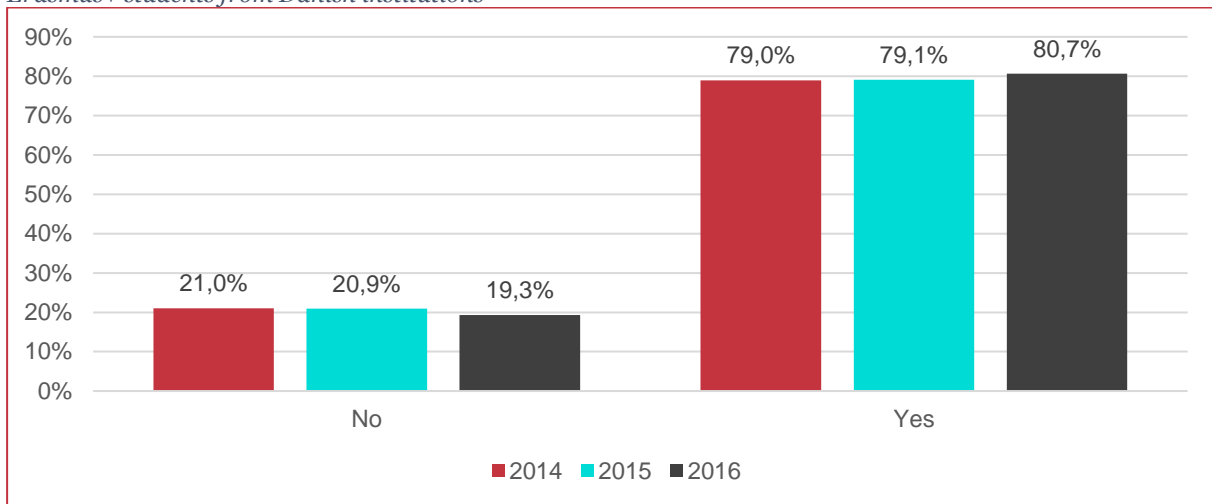
During the exchange

The main difficulty during the exchange is the frequently occurring situation that the courses for which the students have received pre-approval are no longer available, are no longer available in English, or are scheduled at the same time as other pre-approved courses. According to responses to the Erasmus+

participant report from the period 2014–2016, 48.6% of all Erasmus+ students from Danish institutions experienced having their Learning Agreement changed during the mobility period.

The interviewed institutions encourage students to be pro-active during the first period of the stay overseas and to apply for any necessary amendments to the pre-approval of courses as soon as possible. Several institutions indicate that they have fast-track procedures in place to deal with such applications to amend the pre-approval and Learning Agreements from the students during the first few weeks of the stay. As shown in Figure 24, about four of five students who need to make changes to their Learning Agreement, manage to do so within the first seven weeks of their stay.

Figure 24 Changes to the Learning Agreement agreed within seven weeks from the start of the semester – Erasmus+ students from Danish institutions



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Whereas universities generally expect the student to alert them of any problems during the stay, the university colleges and business academies often appear to take a more pro-active approach. For example, VIA University College reported that their course advisors would maintain contact with the students during their stay abroad to make sure they were able to gain the necessary skills.

Some students also experience difficulties related to unfamiliar teaching or exam formats or traditions. Examples reported by students in the Participant Report include pen-and-paper exams and teaching based on factual knowledge rather than analytical skills. Finally, a small number of students simply do not complete their semester abroad, often for reasons of sickness or other personal issues.

Barriers:

- Pre-approved courses no longer offered
- Final course selection not possible until several weeks into the semester (Germany)
- Scheduling conflicts mean that the student cannot attend all pre-approved courses at the same time
- Course content differs from description or expectations
- Language of instruction differs from description or expectation (e.g. no longer offered in English)
- Students do not complete the semester abroad, e.g. due to personal issues or illness
- Students fail exams and may not be able to take re-exams during their stay

After the exchange

The transfer of credits for pre-approved courses is automatic and is a purely administrative matter. It does not necessitate a re-examination of the academic content of the course by the Study Board. As described above, this is a right protected by the University Act since the Progress Reform and as such applies across the sector. The main difficulty with respect to pre-approved courses is obtaining the official transcripts from the host institution in a timely manner (see section A.3.2).

The difficulties can arise when changes have been made that were not pre-approved, either before departure or during the stay abroad. In this case, the course content will need to be assessed and a new decision made by the Study Board (or equivalent). Unlike the transfer of credits for pre-approved courses, the outcome of this process is not guaranteed. This can also lead to delays depending on the timing of the relevant Study Board's next scheduled meeting.

Finally, the number of ECTS may be rounded down (not up) to fit the course structure at the sending institution. For example, a course module at Copenhagen Business School counts for 7.5 ECTS and students can only transfer multiples of that number (e.g. 22.5 or 30 ECTS for a semester).

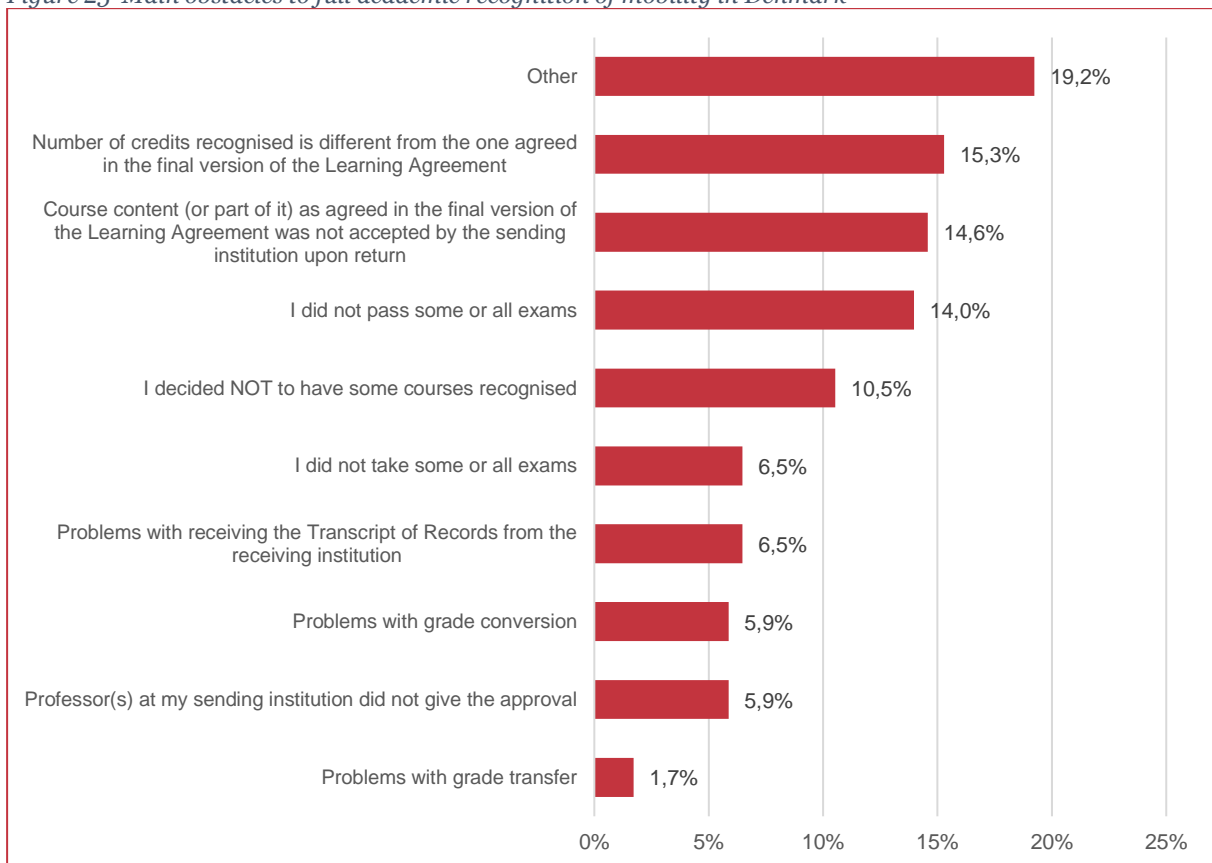
Potential barriers:

- Transcripts not received from host institution (can lead to delay but usually not lack of recognition)
- Course title or description differ from what was pre-approved
- Students have taken courses which were not pre-approved
- The number of ECTS points does not fit with sending institutions' structure and is rounded down

Figure 25 shows what respondents to the Participant Report indicated as the main obstacles to full recognition. As shown, 'other' was the most frequently selected option across the three years. However, it is worth noting that the option 'I did not pass some or all exams' was included only in the 2014 version of the Participant Report, and for that year, it was by far the most common response. Similarly, the answer option 'I did not take some or all exams' was the third most frequently selected option in 2014 but not included in subsequent years' Participant Reports.¹⁵

¹⁵ These response options were not included under the question 'obstacles to full recognition' in the participant survey of the years 2015 and 2016, but was still included under the questions about completion of educational components.

Figure 25 Main obstacles to full academic recognition of mobility in Denmark



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Students who indicated ‘other’ were given the option to leave a free text comment. For students indicating ‘partial recognition’, some of the most frequent types of answers are summarised below:

- **Failed exams:** Many (about 15% of those who answered) indicated that they had failed one or more exams, in some cases due to a mismatch in requirements (e.g. assuming language or technical skills that the student didn’t have)
- **Still waiting:** Many (about 10%) stated that they were still waiting for transcripts and/or exam results
- **Language courses:** Danish institutions often do not transfer credits for language courses, but many students indicated that they decided to take these courses anyway, often explicitly stating that they knew they would not be transferred
- Several students indicated that they had to take mandatory courses at their home institutions, in some cases because they had failed to find matching courses at the host institution and in other cases the student indicated that this had been planned from the outset
- A relatively small number of respondents described specific problems with particular professors, or institutions (sending and/or receiving), e.g. confusion about deadlines or requirements, or poor communication
- Several students described problems related to different academic calendars, e.g. that they had to leave before the end of the semester in order to be present at the start of the new semester at home
- A number of students in this category stated that they did not have any problems at all. They may have taken additional courses, knowing that they would not be transferred or that they did not need

‘full recognition’, e.g. if they only needed 20 ECTS for the semester. Several simply stated that they had not experienced any obstacles

Students who indicated ‘no recognition’, gave some of the same type of reasons (e.g. failed exams or language issues) but some types of answers were more prominent:

- About 30% indicated that they had interrupted their stay due to personal or health-related issues
- Several indicated that they had planned the stay without expecting any transfer of credits, e.g. during PhD or thesis writing or simply because they were interested in courses which could not be transferred

A.3 Highlights of good practices and key issues at HEI level

A.3.1 Issues with HEIs not filling out the Mobility Tool for students’ realised ECTS

The Mobility Tool has not been used systematically to report ECTS points transferred until 2017, thus after the period covered by the survey data analysed here. Institutions are now required to update entries into the system regularly so as to ensure that the reporting is correct.

For most institutions interviewed for this study, the Mobility Tool does not play a central role in the management of Erasmus+ exchanges nor does it affect the academic recognition of courses taken by students overseas. It is primarily used to report on results to the National Agency and the European Commission after the recognition process has been completed and before the Erasmus+ project report is submitted. For some institutions, this is seen as an unnecessary administrative burden.

Two potential sources of inaccuracies in the Mobility Tool data has been identified by the institutions interviewed:

- The number of ECTS points completed is typed in manually by the Erasmus coordinator and so typing errors might occur
- Institutions do not always update entries in the Mobility Tool immediately after completion of the recognition process and so data might not be up to date at all times

At least one institution reported using a commercially available software package, ‘MoveOn’, to manage international student exchanges. The software package allows institutions to manage all aspects of international mobility ‘in one place’ and, among other things, allow for data to be transferred into the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool.¹⁶ This is, however, a somewhat expensive solution and there are also potential issues related to data security and privacy when linking different databases in this way, and so there is no easy off-the shelf solution.

A.3.2 Large variation in process times for credit transfers between HEIs

In Denmark, the main emphasis is on the pre-approval process. As noted above, students have a legal right to have courses completed on exchange recognised if they were pre-approved by the Study Board at their sending institution.

There are no clear geographical patterns in the delays in the recognition process, but the following countries were mentioned by interviewees from the institutions:

- United Kingdom: Several institutions mentioned that UK universities tend to take a long time to send the official transcripts. Reportedly, some universities only issue transcripts once a year (during the summer), which is problematic for students on exchange during the autumn semester.
- Malta: One institution reported that Maltese institutions insist on sending everything by post rather than electronically.

¹⁶ <https://www.qs-unisolution.com/moveon/#!>

More generally, it was noted that differences in the academic calendar could cause delays. For example, the university administration in some partner universities may still be on summer holiday when the new academic year starts in Denmark and therefore unable to respond to requests for transcripts.

The institutions were not able to provide precise data on the processing times but a few unique examples aside, they reported that the vast majority of students have their courses recognised within a few months after returning home. The institutions interviewed were not aware of any examples where delays in the recognition process (as opposed to failure to get approval) had impacted on the students' progression.

A.4 Individual HEI examples

The major institutions all achieve similar rates of 'full recognition' of Erasmus+ exchanges, and it is difficult to identify examples of particularly 'good' or 'bad' practice. Instead, this section will describe illustrative examples of how the institutions organise outbound Erasmus+ exchanges and, in some cases, how this is adjusted to fit specific course requirements.

Table 3 above shows a selection of indicators derived from the Erasmus+ Participant Report for each of the institutions consulted for the study. The eight universities had broadly similar rates of 'full recognition' with an average of 89%. The IT University achieved a higher rate, 92%, but this was based on a very small volume of students. Other types of institutions achieved a slightly lower rate of students reporting 'full recognition' but only by a couple of percentage points. The extensive experience with the programme and the regular interaction between institutions and the National Agency are likely explanations to why the results are relatively similar across the sector.

Whereas the end result, the rate of 'full recognition', is similar across the sector, other factors differ between institutions. For example, some universities have specifically defined mobility windows where all or most course modules are optional. Other institutions, particularly university colleges but also among 'new' universities like Roskilde University and Aalborg University, have a higher proportion of students who cover core parts of their course curriculum during their Erasmus+ exchange. As shown in the examples below, this requires the institutions to take a different approach to Erasmus+ exchanges.

The institutions also differ with respect to the proportion of students who have had their Learning Agreements signed by all parties prior to the exchange, but this does not appear to have a significant bearing on the final recognition. For example, only 36% of the students from Copenhagen Business School confirm that this was the case, but the outcomes (completion of courses and subsequent recognition) are in line with other universities regardless. This would suggest that Danish institutions consider the internal pre-approval of courses to be more urgent than the completion of the Learning Agreements.

A.4.1 Copenhagen Business School: Mobility Windows

Copenhagen Business School (CBS) is one of the eight Danish universities and has 20,000 students enrolled in disciplines spanning business and economics, social sciences and languages.¹⁷

CBS has taken a systematic approach to managing Erasmus+ and other international exchanges, implementing a fixed mobility window. The majority of study programmes are planned so that the fifth semester (Bachelor) and third semester of the Master's degree consist entirely of elective modules. During these windows, students can organise their exchanges with greater flexibility in their choice of courses at the host institution. For certain degree courses, an overseas exchange visit is mandatory and certain modules have mandatory elements that the student must complete during an exchange. During the exchange, applications for amendments to the pre-approval necessitated by unforeseen changes are fast-tracked and usually processed within two weeks. This procedure is among a series of measures which have been adopted after 2016, and their effect will not be reflected in the data referenced above. According to internal monitoring data at CBS, on average students transferred 27 ECTS points in 2017/18.

¹⁷ <https://www.cbs.dk/en/about-cbs>

A.4.2 Faculty of Medical Sciences at the University of Copenhagen: Exchanges underpinned by inter-institutional network

The Faculty of Medical Sciences at the University of Copenhagen ('SUND') has 7,800 students enrolled across a number of courses, e.g. medicine, dentistry and veterinarian sciences.¹⁸

Like CBS, SUND operates with a mobility window, but the course curricula for regulated professions like medicine allow much less flexibility in terms of what the students need to cover if they choose to spend a semester abroad. As a consequence, the faculty has developed a rigorous system for managing Erasmus+ and other exchange programmes.

The International Office at the Faculty level – i.e. between the university's central international office and the Study Boards – plays a central role throughout the process.

- A mobility window has been implemented in the curricula for the 5th semester of the Master's degree (i.e. 11th semester of post-secondary studies) – or less frequently the 2nd semester of the Master's degree. In the study of medicine, for example, the curriculum offers the opportunity for students to choose an 'international perspective', focussing 'clinic abroad', 'international health' or 'global health'.¹⁹
- Thorough quality control of partner universities to ensure that outbound exchange students receive the teaching they require. The Faculty is a member of an international network, ECGSMA, made up of institutions with similar profiles and needs, and have been able to develop their portfolio of about 80 trusted partner universities.
- Strict requirement that students have their courses pre-approved before leaving on exchange. To safeguard against unforeseen changes in course availability, students are encouraged to apply for pre-approval of 15 ECTS points more than they need, e.g. 45 ECTS for one semester.
- In addition to passing pre-approved courses, the faculty uses a 'log book' with additional mandatory elements to be achieved during the stay. The student is required to have each element signed off by academic staff at the host institution
- Post-exchange follow-up to verify the entries in the log book and formalise the approval of credits from the exchange visit. If one or more elements are missing during the student's time in the foreign clinic, the Faculty can arrange to cover these gaps on the student's return. Feedback from students is also used to inform decisions about the continuation or termination of partnerships in the future.

Overall, medical students are much less likely to go abroad on Erasmus+ exchange than students from many other parts of the university. The students are under significant pressure to fulfil the requirements of the curricula, not least in light of the 'Progress Reform' (see above).

A.4.3 VIA University College

VIA University College offers some 40 different degree courses in applied sciences, across eight campuses situated in the central part of the Jutland peninsula.²⁰ Compared to the universities, the courses are of somewhat shorter duration, 3.5 years, and involve working with a different set of partner organisations abroad.

The relatively short duration of the degree courses and the pressure to avoid delays in the studies have changed the partners of Erasmus+ exchanges in recent years. Erasmus+ exchanges are now most common among students of subjects like business and engineering which are often taught similarly across different countries. These courses are offered in English at VIA, which makes the idea of a semester abroad seem less daunting. Students studying towards degrees in educational and social care

¹⁸ <https://healthsciences.ku.dk/>

¹⁹ Studieordning for kandidatuddannelsen i medicin ved Det Sundhedsvidenskabelige Fakultet på Københavns Universitet, School of Medical Sciences, 2015. Available at https://sund.ku.dk/uddannelse/vejledning-information/studieordninger/medicin/tidligere-kandidatstudieordninger/Medicin-ka-2015_pr_01.09.2018_opdateret_07032019.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.via.dk/om-via>

professions have found it increasingly difficult to find space for an international exchange within their packed curricula.

VIA and other university colleges manage Erasmus+ exchanges somewhat differently than universities. Notably, the structures are less formal and the individual student has a much looser and more interactive relationship with their academic supervisors before, during and after the exchange.

- After their application to go abroad, the International Office advises the students on who to contact within the academic departments, and how to prepare the Learning Agreements. They will be referred to their course curriculum and asked to find courses in the host institution that match the courses they would have studied at home.
- Based on their initial choice of courses, the student will enter into dialogue with the academic supervisor, and they will reach an agreement on a study programme for the semester abroad.
- During the first two weeks of the semester, the students can amend their study programme, provided that they can agree on the changes with their academic supervisor.
- The academic supervisors will sometimes take a direct interest in their students' courses during their semester abroad. In one case, for example, a construction engineering student was required to use an unfamiliar software package for drawing, and the supervisor intervened to support the student.
- Upon completion of the exchange period, the International Office will collect relevant documentation (e.g. transcript of records) and forward it to the academic supervisor who, in turn, makes the final decision on the approval and transfer of credits. The processing time after this decision is usually a week.

For most students at VIA, a successful Erasmus+ exchange is likely to be one that results in 30 ECTS being transferred. One barrier is the relative lack of courses offered in English and, at times, the delays from host institutions in sending the transcripts. Finally, VIA University College, and reportedly other university colleagues have adopted more advanced software solutions to manage international exchanges.

Appendix B Estonia

B.1 Introduction and overview of the level of mobility

In Estonia, HEIs are mainly located in two cities: Tallinn and Tartu (Estonia’s second largest city). Overall admission to the system of higher education has been decreasing since 2010/2011, due to demographic change. Since 2012/2013 higher education is free of charge for those studying full-time and in Estonian.²¹ In addition, some HEIs offer international degree programmes taught fully in English, and some of them offer scholarships that cover tuition fees. The small size of the country has certain implications, e.g. there is only one university that specialises in technology and engineering and only one comprehensive (‘classical’) university. The sample of sending institutions analysed in the case of Estonia consists of the following 15 institutions which participate in Erasmus+ Programme:

- Six universities that operate under the public law (University of Tartu, Tallinn University, Tallinn University of Technology, Estonian University of Life Sciences, Estonian Academy of Arts, Estonian Academic of Music and Theatre)
- One private university (Estonian Business School)
- Seven state professional HEIs (Estonian Aviation Academy*, Estonian Academy of Security Sciences*, Lääne-Viru College*, Tallinn Healthcare College*, Tartu Healthcare College*²², TTK University of Applied Sciences, Pallas University of Applied Sciences)
- One privately owned professional HEI (Euroacademy)

There were slightly less than 1,900 mobilities²³ recorded for 2014–2016 period in Estonia, according to the student Participant Report data. The top six sending institutions accounted for almost 2/3 of all mobilities (Table 4).

Table 4 Erasmus+ participation results from the largest sending HEIs in Estonia during 2014–2016, by institution (intra-EU mobility)

HEI	Number of mobilities analysed in the study (based on available responses)
University of Tartu	405
Tallinn University of Technology	292
Tallinn University	259
Estonian Academy of Arts	89
Estonian Business School	58
Estonian University of Life Sciences	50
Total for 6 largest HEIs	1153

Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

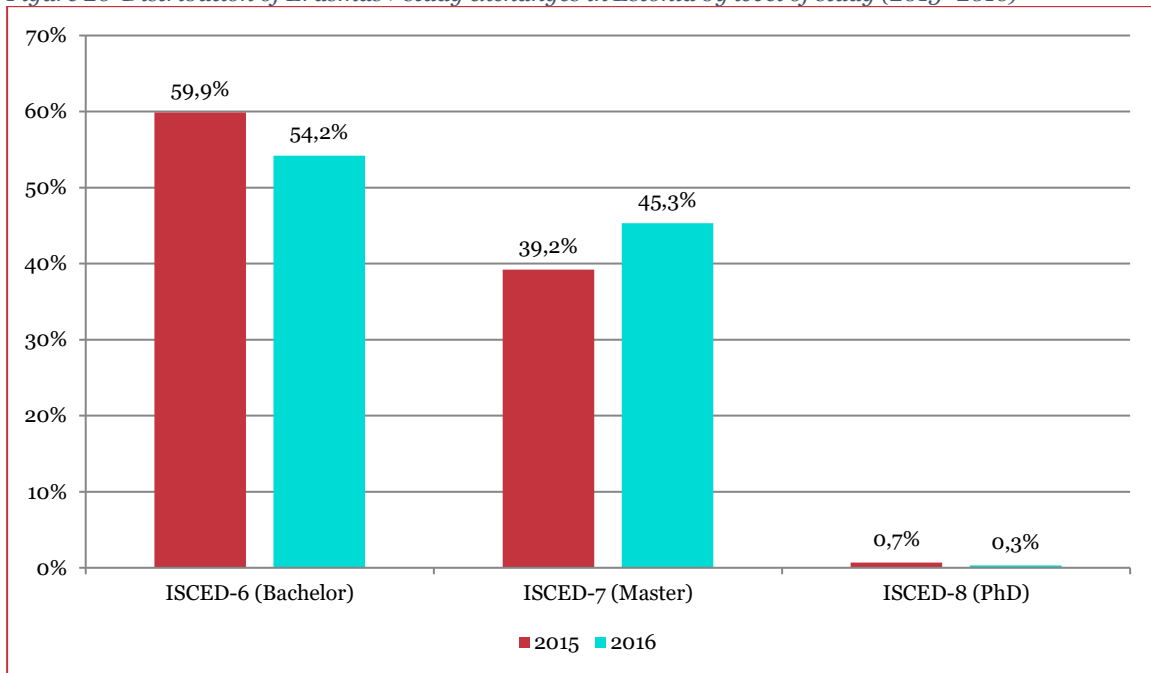
Students from Estonia went to study in some 600 various receiving institutions in 28 countries. 8% of the students reported that the mobility period abroad formed a mandatory part of their curriculum, and 36% of the respondents planned to take part in Erasmus+ mobility again (12% responded ‘no’ and 52% remained undecided). Mobility at the Bachelor level remained higher than on Master level (Figure 26). Note that data for Estonia was only available for 2015 and 2016.

²¹ Source: Ministry of Education and Research <https://www.hm.ee/en/activities/higher-education>

²² HEIs marked with * represent vocational higher education institutions. Source: Ministry of Education and Science <https://www.hm.ee/en/activities/vocational-education>

²³ There were 1896 entries for Estonia (sending country), but the actual number is slightly less.

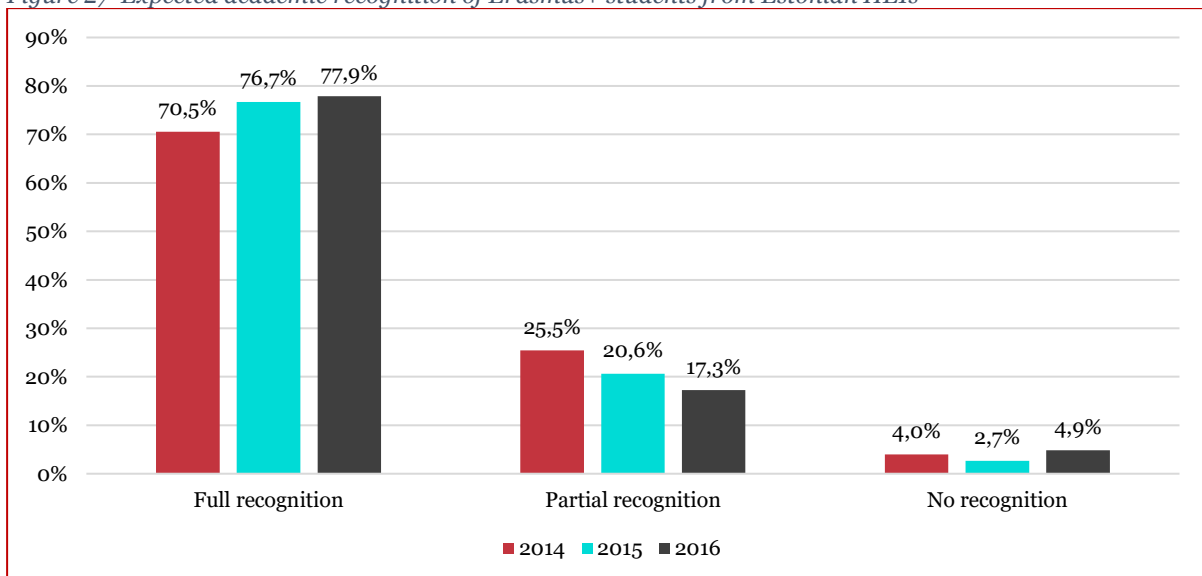
Figure 26 Distribution of Erasmus+ study exchanges in Estonia by level of study (2015–2016)



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Over the whole period (2014–2016), full recognition rates have been growing from 70.5% in 2014 towards 77.9% in 2016 while partial recognition rates have been declining from 25.5% in 2014 to 17.3% in 2016 (Figure 27).²⁴

Figure 27 Expected academic recognition of Erasmus+ students from Estonian HEIs



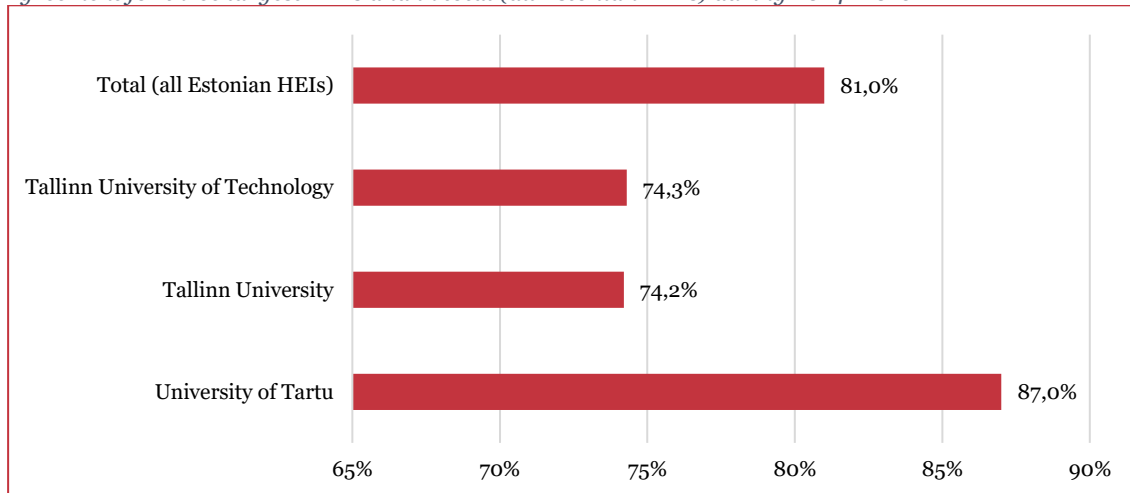
Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

The three largest HEIs that account for the majority of mobilities are University of Tartu, Tallinn University and Tallinn University of Technology. In terms of completion of all educational components that were listed in the Learning Agreement, the distribution among the three major HEIs is as follows:

²⁴ Data for 2016 show a significant number of gaps for this particular indicator.

87% of students from University of Tartu, 74.2% from Tallinn University and 74.3% from Tallinn University of Technology reported that all educational components had been completed. Overall, 81% of students (for all HEIs) reported completion of all educational components that were listed in the Learning Agreement (Figure 28).

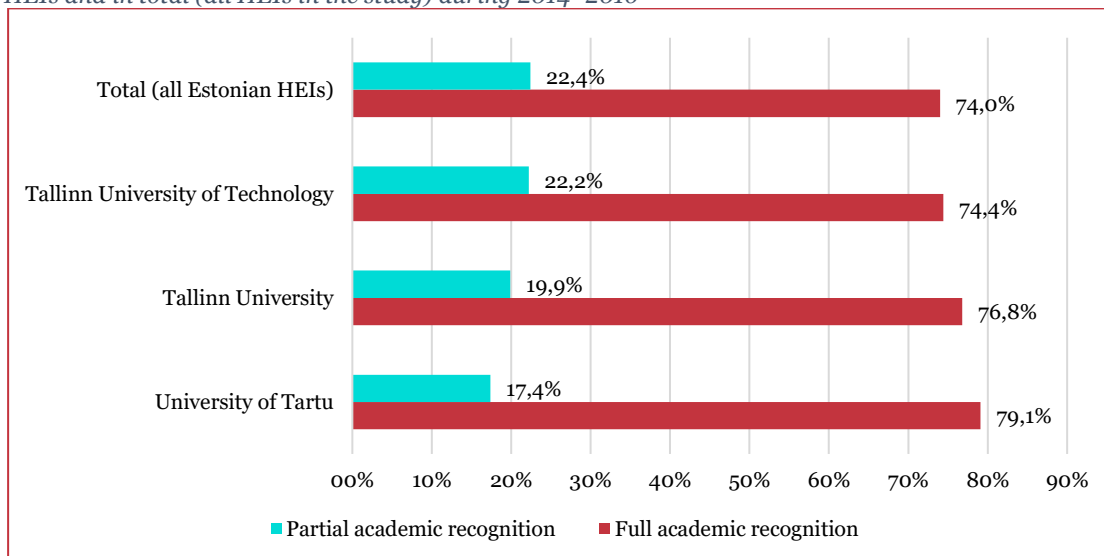
Figure 28 Share of students who completed all educational components that were listed in the Learning Agreement for three largest HEIs and in total (all Estonian HEIs) during 2014–2016



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Full academic recognition was either gained or expected by 79.1% of the students from University of Tartu, 76.8% of students from Tallinn University and 74.4% of students from Tallinn University of Technology. Partial recognition was either gained or expected by 17.4% of students from University of Tartu, 19% of students from Tallinn University and 22.2% of students from Tallinn University of Technology. Overall, 22.4% of all students reported partial recognition and 74% reported full recognition (Figure 29). 3% (average among three major HEIs) reported no recognition, either gained or expected.

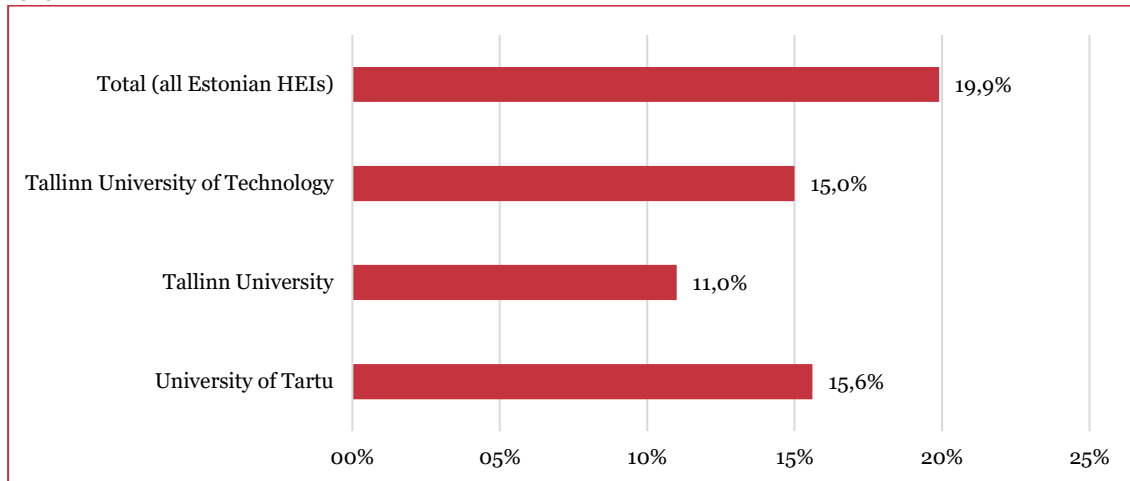
Figure 29 Share of students who either gained or expected to gain full and partial recognition in the three largest HEIs and in total (all HEIs in the study) during 2014–2016



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Additional courses or exams were either taken or foreseen for some of the courses by 15.6% of the students from University of Tartu, 15% of the students from Tallinn University of Technology and 11% of the students from Tallinn University. Overall, 19.9% of the students either took or anticipated the need to take some additional courses or exams at the sending institution (Figure 30).

Figure 30 Share of students who either had taken or foreseen taking additional courses / exams for courses already evaluated by receiving institutions at the three largest HEIs and in total (all Estonian HEIs) during 2014–2016



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

B.2 Understanding of recognition

B.2.1 Misinterpretation of what 'academic recognition' relates to in the context of Erasmus+ mobility

Most of Erasmus+ Programme Handbooks provided by HEIs to the students mention full academic recognition that participants of the mobility programme are entitled to.²⁵ There were no substantial differences in how mobility-related staff or the National Agency interpreted the question of recognition: almost none mentioned the difference between full and partial recognition. Therefore, no HEI-related or geography-related variations in how academic recognition is perceived were observed. Instead, several interviewees noted that the interviews and this study as such made them aware of recognition-related issues and problems for the first time.

B.2.2 Different understanding/definition of what 'full recognition' means by the parties involved in Erasmus+ mobility

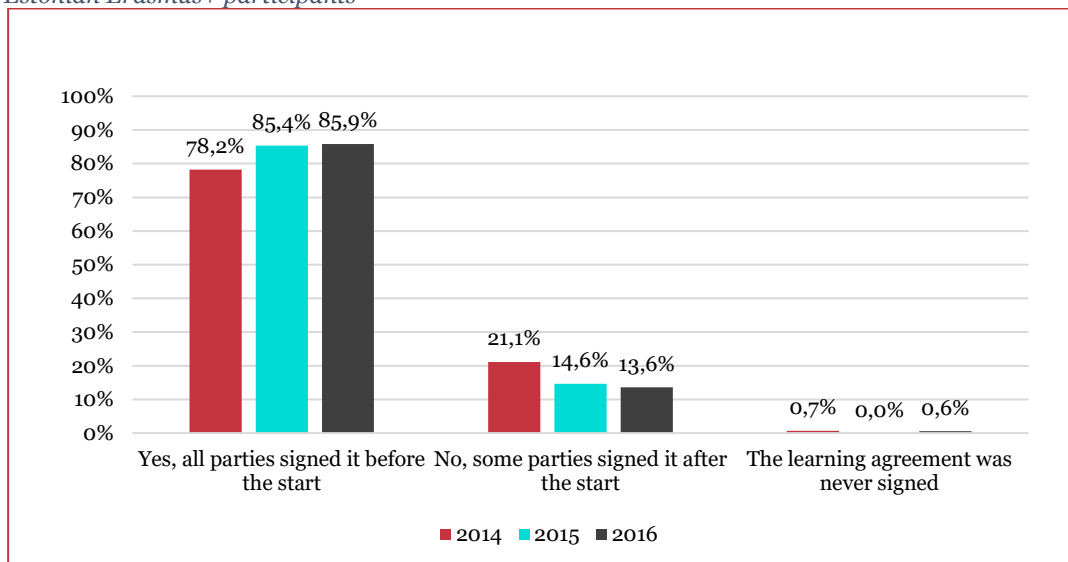
The HEIs and the National Agency refer to difficulties in communicating the importance of academic recognition of mobility to students, including the importance of full recognition. There is very little awareness of the difference between full and partial recognition among HEIs and the National Agency – or, rather, partial recognition is not perceived as an issue that deserves attention and corrective action. Nevertheless, students are often unaware of what 'academic recognition' implies in general. In addition to mobility handbooks, HEIs communicate this information to the students through info-sessions that are typically organised twice a year. Yet, many students lack a thorough understanding of academic recognition while filling out the Participant Report. Both HEIs and the National Agency see two major reasons for that: 1) the Participant Report is rather long; 2) there are various ways of how students might interpret terms such as 'academic recognition', 'full recognition' and 'partial recognition'. The latter can refer to situations when courses are transferred as 'assessed' or 'passed' instead of particular grades, or when students themselves decide to transfer less courses than they took due to fear of lower Grade Point

²⁵ Example from Tallinn University of Technology: Erasmus+ Handbook 2018/2019: https://www.ttu.ee/public/e/en/studying/Exchange_studies/2018.04_Erasmus_handbook.pdf

Average (GPA). Another situation is when academic transcripts are delayed by the receiving HEI, or when some courses are not transferred because students received ‘fail’ (only courses with ‘passed’ are transferred).

On average during 2014–2016, the ECTS credit system was used in 94% of Learning Agreements. This share decreased from 95% in 2014 to 90% in 2016. The Learning Agreement was signed by all parties before the start of mobility in 83% of the registered cases and in 17% by only some of the parties. Across the three-year period there was some improvement; the share of Learning Agreements signed by all parties before the start of the mobility increased from 78.2% in 2014 to 85.9% in 2016. (Figure 31) Changes in the Learning Agreement are very common, and indeed in 69% of the cases, the Learning Agreement was changed during the mobility (this proportion did not change significantly over the years). The major reasons for amendments in the Learning Agreement include the following: Courses listed by receiving HEIs are unavailable; Courses had prerequisites that were either not listed by receiving HEIs beforehand or students overlooked that; Clashes of schedules (often schedules are not available well in advance). In 79% of the cases, students were able to agree on changes in the Learning Agreement within seven weeks from the start of the semester.

Figure 31 Learning Agreement signed by all parties before the start of the mobility – survey answers from Estonian Erasmus+ participants



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

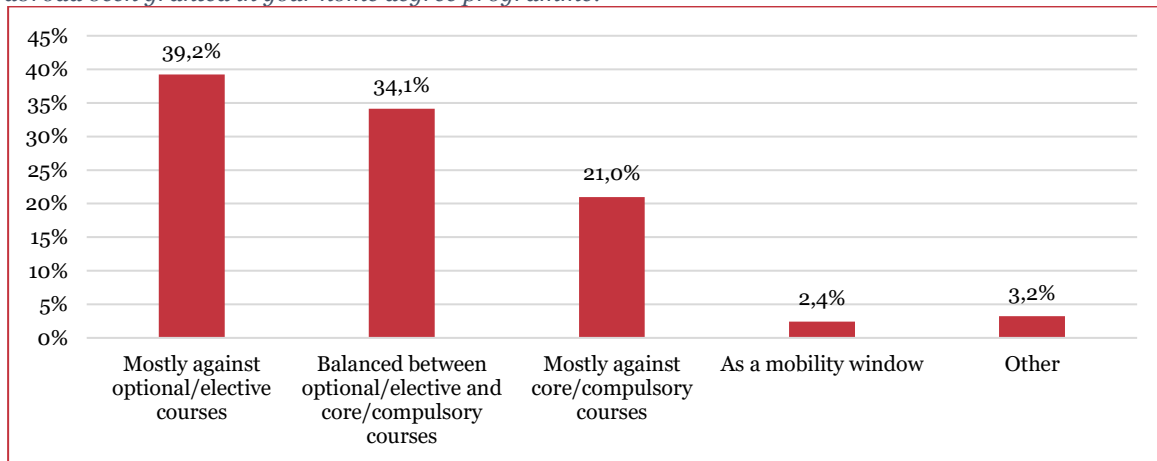
81% of the respondents indicated that they successfully completed all the educational components that were listed in the Learning Agreement. There is very little variation among the gender of participants; for example, in 2016 84% of male students and 82% of female students completed all the components. For the period of 2015–2016,²⁶ this figure stands at 84% for all female and male students. In terms of variation across different levels of study, 84% and 85% of Bachelor and Master students respectively reported that they successfully completed all educational components.

There are various ways or modalities of how to transfer the results from courses taken abroad (Figure 32). In terms of modalities of academic recognition, 39.2% of the students transferred ECTS credits gained abroad as optional/elective courses, 34.1% as a balance between optional/elective and core/compulsory courses, 21.0% as core/compulsory courses, and 2.4% through a Mobility Window. Respondents who reported Mobility Window as the main modality of academic transfer were coming from HEIs other than the three major HEIs. This is largely due to the fact that Mobility Windows are currently being developed in Estonia, and so far, only very few HEIs had implemented this. Various ways

²⁶ Gender data are not available for 2014.

of academic recognition are indirectly related to the process of recognition; for example, grouping all elective courses under a semester-long Mobility Window makes the recognition process somewhat more straightforward since elective courses might be easier to transfer compared to the core ones. There is also a fixed number of elective/optional courses in a curriculum, and therefore if some of them were already fulfilled before the mobility, this might result in additional difficulties when transferring courses as core/mandatory, especially when Learning Agreement is changed (in majority of cases it is changed during the mobility).

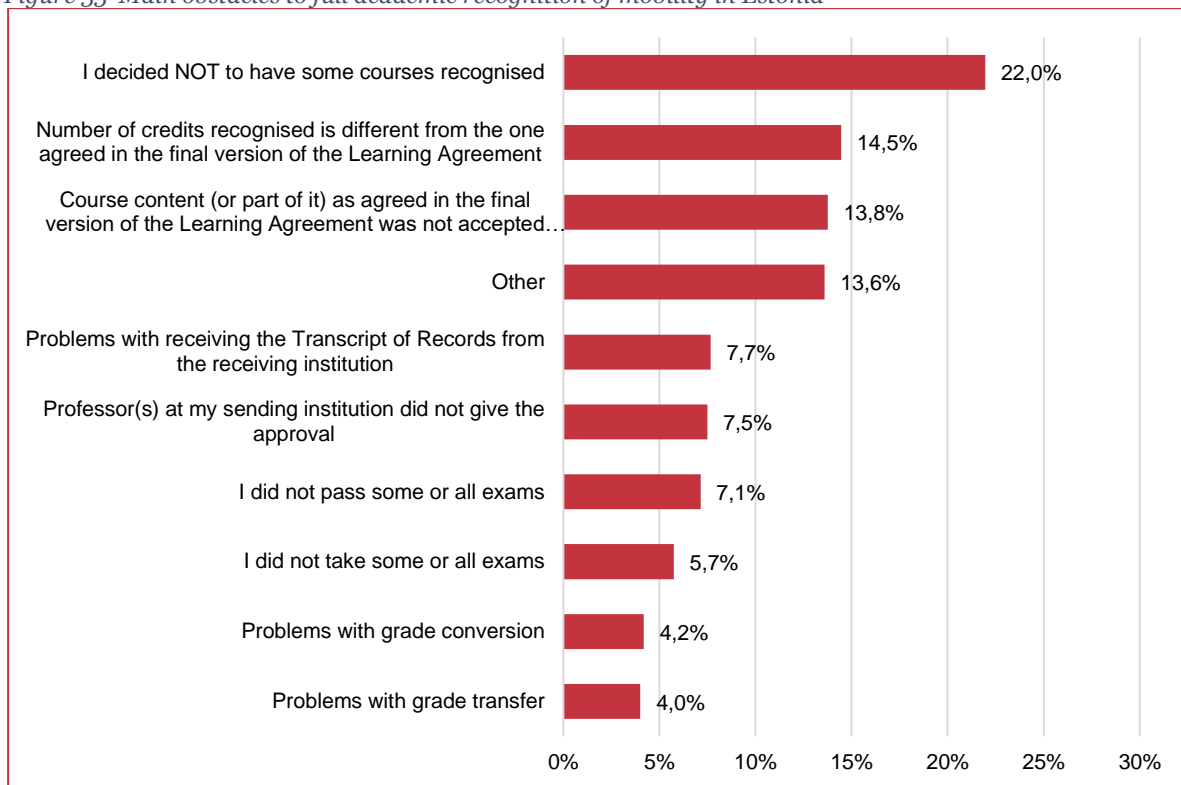
Figure 32 Estonian answers for the student survey question “How has recognition of the ECTS credits gained abroad been granted in your home degree programme?”



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

As reasons for partial recognition or obstacles to full recognition, in their Participant Report students could indicate multiple choices in the survey, but this question was not mandatory. During the period 2014–2016, the following top three reasons/obstacles were reported: A student decided not to have some courses recognised (22.0%); Number of ECTS recognised was different from the ones agreed in the final version of Learning Agreement (14.5%); Course content (or part of it) as agreed in the final version of Learning Agreement was not accepted by the sending HEI upon return (13.8%) (Figure 33).

Figure 33 Main obstacles to full academic recognition of mobility in Estonia



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

B.3 Highlights of good practices and key issues at HEI level

B.3.1 Issues with HEIs not filling out the Mobility Tool for students’ realised ECTS

The National Agency confirmed that not all student-specific entries in the Mobility Tool contain numbers of realised ECTS. The National Agency cannot and does not control whether HEIs later (i.e. after submitting the final report) insert the missing numbers for realised ECTS. The National Agency perceives its own role in the process as a controller, i.e. to control whether HEIs report on academic recognition or not, in general terms, and acknowledges that the issue of academic recognition of mobility has been discussed at the EU level. The National Agency, however, sees few incentives in the current system for HEIs to report realised ECTS in a more consistent way. This is related to the minimum amount of 15 ECTS that is mandatory at most (if not all) HEIs in Estonia for students to transfer from courses taken abroad.²⁷ This emphasis is, in turn, related to the nominal study load of up to 30 ECTS – the amount of ECTS a student has to fulfil during every semester.²⁸

Typically, HEIs report the main reasons for lower numbers of realised ECTS in final project reports, and the National Agency takes these comments into account when evaluating the reports. Main reasons include delayed academic transcripts from receiving institutions, as well as differences in academic calendars across countries. According to the National Agency, arts-related HEIs score highest in terms of less entries for realised ECTS. Other than that, the National Agency does not keep any HEI-specific statistics for academic recognition, as the issue should be the responsibility of HEIs. HEIs also see no proactive or direct role of the National Agency in relation to academic recognition, the process and improvement thereof. The issue of academic recognition seems to be perceived as being under full

²⁷ Making 15 ECTS a compulsory minimum requirement for Erasmus+ studies is under the jurisdiction of individual HEIs.

²⁸ The amount of ECTS which comprise the ‘nominal study load’ differs between HEIs and between faculties within a given HEI. It is worth mentioning that the ‘nominal study load’ plays a larger role in the reformed system of higher education in Estonia, i.e. studies are free from tuition but are also conditioned upon the nominal study load that students need to fulfil every semester.

jurisdiction of HEIs, and therefore the National Agency can decide in what way and whether to provide any support in this regard. To conclude, the issue of not filling out the Mobility Tool, on the one hand, and the general question of academic recognition, on the other hand, provide a good opportunity to discuss whether and how HEIs could cooperate with the National Agency in this regard.

B.3.2 Large variation in process times for credit transfers between HEIs

Variation in process times for credit transfers between HEIs could not be identified. The National Agency pointed out that arts-related HEIs tended to provide less information on realised ECTS as compared to other HEIs when submitting the final report to the National Agency, which could be related to delayed process of recognition. Indeed, during interviews, all HEIs pointed out that delayed academic transcripts (especially from the Southern European region) and differences in academic calendars (especially in Germany and Austria) tend to be the main reasons for not reporting on the numbers of realised ECTS in the Mobility Tool. The National Agency acknowledged the overall usefulness of making HEI-related statistical data regarding various aspects of academic mobility as well as academic recognition within mobility programmes.

B.4 Individual HEI examples

Due to substantial differences between the three largest HEIs and other HEIs in Estonia in terms of amount of mobilities, the following six HEIs are presented as individual examples: the University of Tartu (405 mobilities), Tallinn University (259), Tallinn University of Technology (292), the Estonian Academy of Arts (89), the Estonian Business School (58) and the Estonian University of Life Sciences (50). The remaining Estonian HEIs have seen very few mobilities: the amount of mobilities ranged between 1–42 during the entire three-year period (2014–2016). In addition, it was hard to apply solid criteria for selecting best performing and worst performing cases, due to specific contexts that each HEI implied; for example, HEIs with highest recognition numbers were too small (i.e. sample size is insignificant for making general conclusion), or the worst performing HEIs had state-regulated curricula, which are subject to more rigid procedures (e.g. the Estonian Aviation Academy, the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences). The sample of individual HEIs also includes one art-related institution, which made it possible to identify any specific aspects of creative studies that might be related to mobility and academic recognition. The sample also includes one privately-owned HEI, which was selected to identify any specific aspects of mobility and recognition that might be related to the form of ownership. The selected HEIs differ in terms of how the recognition process is organised and coordinated with respect to, for example, relations and administration between the HEI and the student, the sending HEI and the receiving HEI, as well as within the sending HEI. These varying practices reflect differences in internal structures and may be used as learning examples and comparative analyses among HEIs as well as for the National Agency to better understand the recognition process related to academic mobility.

B.4.1 University of Tartu

The University of Tartu (405 responses) scores first in terms of number of students who reported that they either gained or expect to receive full academic recognition – 79%. 17% of the students reported partial recognition. Decisions regarding academic recognition are made by curriculum-specific committees and importance is attached to the Learning Agreement. 87% of the students from University of Tartu completed all the educational components that were stated in the study programme of the Learning Agreement. 82% of the students from the University of Tartu reported no additional courses or exams that had to be taken at the home university after the mobility ended, while 16% of the students reported they had to take additional courses or exams for some courses. The University of Tartu is currently working towards implementation of Mobility Windows by 2020. It is believed that in this way, the number of outgoing students will increase, because Mobility Windows would represent a semester comprised mostly of elective courses, and it would be easier for students to select courses abroad (more flexibility as compared to core/mandatory coursework). It might also have positive effects on academic recognition, its rates and the overall recognition procedure; it is easier to transfer courses as electives as compared to core/mandatory courses.

B.4.2 Tallinn University of Technology

At Tallinn University of Technology (292 responses), 74% of the students either gained or expected to gain full recognition, and 22% received or expected to receive partial recognition. Decisions regarding academic recognition of mobility are made by study programme directors, who in most cases are also part of the academic staff. Faculty Coordinators / Study Counsellors at the Dean's Offices coordinate work with study programme directors, which facilitates a common understanding of the recognition process among programme directors, i.e. emphasis on learning outcomes when deciding on comparability of courses.

Almost 9% of the students reported that they could not agree on changes in the mobility study plan with sending and receiving institutions within seven weeks from the start of the semester. 74% of the students reported that they successfully completed all components that were listed in the Learning Agreement. 15% of the students had to take additional courses/exams at the sending HEI after the mobility. In terms of modalities of recognition, 37% of mobilities were transferred as a combination of optional/elective courses and core/mandatory courses; 23% as core/mandatory courses; 34% as optional/elective courses; and less than 2% reported Mobility Window.

B.4.3 Tallinn University

At Tallinn University (259 responses), 77% of students expected to gain or gained full academic recognition and 20% only partial recognition. During interviews, it was noted that prior to going abroad, students receive information that all courses successfully completed at receiving HEIs should be transferred. There is also an internal agreement between institutional Erasmus+ coordinators who receive all academic transcripts and enter the data into the Mobility Tool that all courses taken abroad should be recognised. At one of the Faculties (the Baltic Film and Media School), a stronger emphasis has recently been made on interviews: students are strongly advised to come prepared by examining the courses at the receiving HEI that they would like to take and by discussing this with respective study programme directors.

81% of students agreed on the changes with sending and receiving institutions within seven weeks after the start of the semester and 74% completed all educational components that were listed in the Learning Agreement. 11% of students had to take additional courses/exams at the sending institution that were already completed at the receiving HEI. In terms of modalities of recognition, 43% of mobilities were transferred as optional/electives courses; 35% as a combination of core/mandatory courses and optional/elective courses; and 19% as core/mandatory courses. Mobility Windows accounted for less than 1% of mobilities.

B.4.4 The Estonian Academy of Arts

At the Estonian Academy of Arts (89 responses), 76% of students agreed on the changes with sending and receiving HEIs within seven weeks after the start of the semester. 90% of the students reported successful completion of all educational components that were listed in the Learning Agreement, but 36% of the students had to take additional courses or exams for courses that were already evaluated by receiving HEIs. There is less emphasis on the exact match between the Learning Agreement and the actual coursework, due to particularities of art-related studies: often Master Classes are offered/scheduled on a short notice, and therefore students are more apt to take extra courses, in addition to those already mentioned in the Learning Agreement. The Estonian Academy of Arts commented that there is an explicit emphasis on transferring all the courses that were taken abroad.

It is nevertheless more difficult to assess comparability of courses based on learning outcomes, because individually made portfolio of creative works comprises the very core of the curriculum. That is why the role of professors and academic staff is important when it comes to the recognition process, but so far it has been working very well due to explicit emphasis on recognising all courses. The exception might be made for studies in architecture due to less flexibility in the curriculum, in terms of courses to be taken.

71% of students either gained or expected to gain academic recognition of courses and 25% partial recognition. In 38% of mobilities, courses were transferred as a combination of core/mandatory courses

and optional/elective courses; 28% as optional/elective courses; 26% as core/compulsory courses and less than 1% as a Mobility Window. The key decision-makers regarding transferability of courses are academic staff, who act as study programme directors. The policy of the Academic Affairs Office has been to recognise all courses that were taken abroad. Evaluation of creative portfolios that students made while studying abroad is assessed individually and case-by-case by a respective study programme director.

B.4.5 The Estonian Business School

At the Estonian Business School (58 responses), 84% of students agreed on the changes with sending and receiving HEIs within seven weeks since the start of the semester. Only 65% of the students completed all educational components that were listed in the Learning Agreement. 65% either gained or expected to gain full recognition, and 31% reported only partial recognition. In 38% of the cases, students had to take additional courses or exams in their sending HEI. 50% of mobilities were transferred as a combination of core/mandatory courses and optional/elective courses; 33% as core/compulsory courses; and 17% as optional/elective courses.

At the only private HEI in the sample, the Estonian Business School experiences less pressure to make a minimum of 15 ETCS as the mandatory amount of credits to transfer. This requirement will no longer exist for Master's students from 2020, and together with the Mobility Window (implemented in 2017/2018), it is expected to make academic mobility more popular among students. In addition, the Estonian Business School is considering starting a discussion on whether and how short-term mobility programmes could be implemented on a larger scale. This is related to the general EU requirement for students to spend at least 3 months abroad in order to qualify for an Erasmus mobility grant. Shorter mobility programmes have been in growing demand at EBS and in Estonia at large, especially from MA students who work full-time outside of university.

One of specificities of the existing curriculum is smaller courses in terms of ECTS. This might create additional challenges for the recognition process, because in many cases, the receiving HEIs offer courses with more ECTS. If the course that was taken abroad covered multiple topics, it can be transferred as more than one shorter course at the Estonian Business School. In this case, the content of the course is key to making the decision regarding the number of courses the student will get credits for.

B.4.6 The Estonian University of Life Sciences

At the Estonian University of Life Sciences (50 responses), 86% of students agreed on changes with sending and receiving HEIs. 83% of the students completed all educational components that were listed in the Learning Agreement, but 72% reported full recognition (gained or expected to gain), and 24% reported partial recognition. 26% of the students had to take additional courses/exams for courses that were already evaluated by the receiving HEI. Modalities of recognition were the following: 6% Mobility Window; 25% a combination of core-mandatory and optional/elective courses; 31% core/compulsory courses; and 36% as optional/electives courses.

Decisions regarding recognition are made by the respective faculty-specific committees (similar to the University of Tartu), which make decisions easier and faster. Any changes in the Learning Agreement are also subject to approval by the same committee. Previously academic staff and study programme directors were consulted more frequently, which created more challenges for the recognition process (professors and lecturers were more likely to reject comparability of courses). A specific issue was raised regarding applied curriculum, which involves formal qualifications (e.g. particular types of civil engineering studies that last five years), and therefore makes transfer of courses from abroad sometimes more challenging due to the lack of flexibility.²⁹

²⁹ Similar comments were made about state-regulated curricula in such fields as security, aviation, etc.

B.5 Final remark

To conclude, all HEIs highlighted the importance of academic mobility, and their efforts to encourage students to spend at least one semester abroad. Almost all HEIs emphasised that they also encourage students to take courses at the receiving HEIs that are not available at their home universities. In terms of how the recognition process is organised internally, almost all HEIs reported that the decisions are made by either committees or study programme directors, as opposed to the earlier practice when individual professors and lecturers were consulted directly. Interestingly, two HEIs located in Tartu (the University of Tartu and the University of Life Sciences), both reported on consensus-based decision-making done by faculty-specific committees. Nevertheless, despite differences in internal processes, no big variation between the three largest HEIs was observed – these HEIs are comparable in terms of number of mobilities, diversity of programmes and the number of international students. In other words, there is no single best way to organise a recognition process in an HEI.

With respect to the recognition process, all HEIs referred to the students' individual responsibility as one of the reasons why things do not go as expected during the mobility or after it. HEI representatives mentioned general negligence and a lack of understanding of all the steps in the process of academic mobility among the students. Students tend to interpret questions in the Participant Report in various ways, which might account for lower recognition rates. None of the respondents from the HEIs reflected on measures or ways of helping students improve their understanding of the mobility and recognition process in particular. This might be largely due to the fact that the topic of recognition has only recently started to gain attention among the HEIs and the respective National Agencies, partly as a consequence of this very study being undertaken. At the same time, when deciding on where to go for exchange studies, students often select HEIs based on a geographic location (as the main decisive factor) rather than the academic profile of the receiving institution, which might contribute to difficulties in selecting comparable courses. In this regard, interviews that sending HEIs conduct with students prior to the mobility can play a bigger role in 1) informing students about the recognition process and some potential problems therein; 2) in preparing students to make appropriate changes in the Learning Agreement since more than 2/3 of Learning Agreements are adjusted during the mobility; and 3) in cultivating more proactive behaviour in regard to communicating with receiving HEI and clarifying all the details. Two HEIs reported that they see interviews serving precisely those purposes.

Most of the mobilities in Estonia were recognised and transferred to sending HEIs as either elective/optional courses, or as a combination of elective and core courses. Based on interviews with HEIs, modalities of recognition are increasingly discussed as a means to influence students' decisions as well as the recognition process at the sending HEIs. Mobility Windows were discussed with most of the HEIs, as they are sometimes seen as a tool to make academic mobility more visible, easier for students, and as a tool for faster and more straightforward academic recognition. Concern was raised regarding cases when study programmes are cumulative, e.g. in the Baltic Film and Media School (a faculty at Tallinn University), some curricula imply development/pre-production/production/post-production sequence, which lasts for 3–4 semesters. This might leave little space for implementing a semester-long Mobility Window. Similarly, civil engineering and medical studies comprise a system of state-regulated professional qualifications and therefore more rigid curriculum, which makes the process of recognition more challenging. Transferring mobility courses as electives/optional courses is the easiest, but the problem arises when some of electives were already taken before the mobility. This is especially relevant for Master-level studies where the number of electives is smaller than in the Bachelor-level curriculum.

The demand for short-term mobilities was recognised by a few HEIs, especially from Master-level students who have full-time jobs in most cases. The latter fact is related to the socio-economic context of Central and Eastern Europe where part-time jobs are either very poorly paid and/or not very common, and where there are almost no scholarships that would help cover living expenses. At the same time, shorter mobilities might be in conflict with the compulsory three-month period that students are required to spend abroad, which is one of the requirements of Erasmus+ mobility.

Appendix C Latvia

C.1 Introduction and overview of the level of mobility

In Latvia, 48 HEIs have participated in the Erasmus+ programme. The HEIs selected for interviews and the main reasons for their selection are summarised in Table 5. HEIs with respectively high and low levels of expected recognition were selected with the ambition to identify any specific characteristics these institutions might have. The total number of mobile students was also considered during the selection process. A few regional HEIs and specialised HEIs were also chosen to explore any trends that might characterise these institutions.

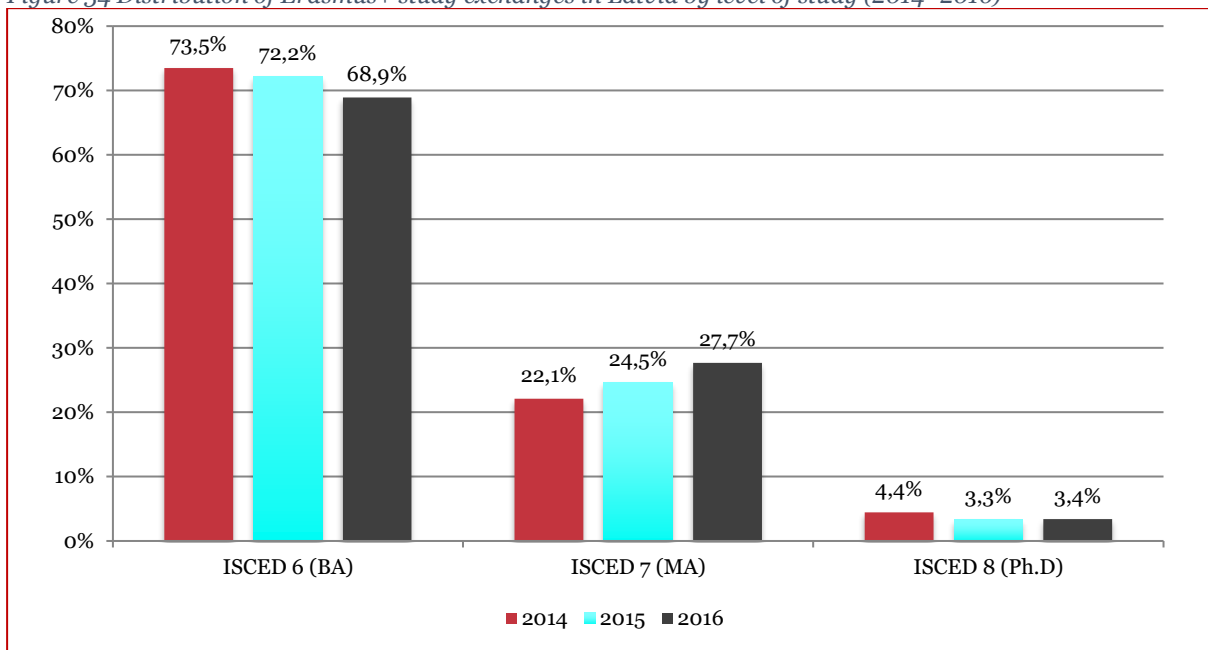
Table 5 Erasmus+ participation results from the largest sending HEIs in Latvia during 2014–2016, by institution (intra-EU mobility)

HEI	Number of mobilities analysed in the study (based on available responses)
University of Latvia	721
Riga Technical University	466
Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies	369
Riga Stradins University	145
Rezekne Technology Academy	146
Ventspils University College	144
Total for 6 largest HEIs	1991

Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

In Latvia most participants (79.2%) of the Erasmus+ programme have received or expect to receive full recognition from the sending institution; however, this situation suggests that there remains room for improvement. In general, the majority of mobilities in Latvia have been at the Bachelor-level (ISCED 6) during the analysed period of 2014–2016 (Figure 34). What is interesting is that while Bachelor-level mobilities have declined, at the same time there is a noticeable growth in Master-level (ISCED 7) mobilities.

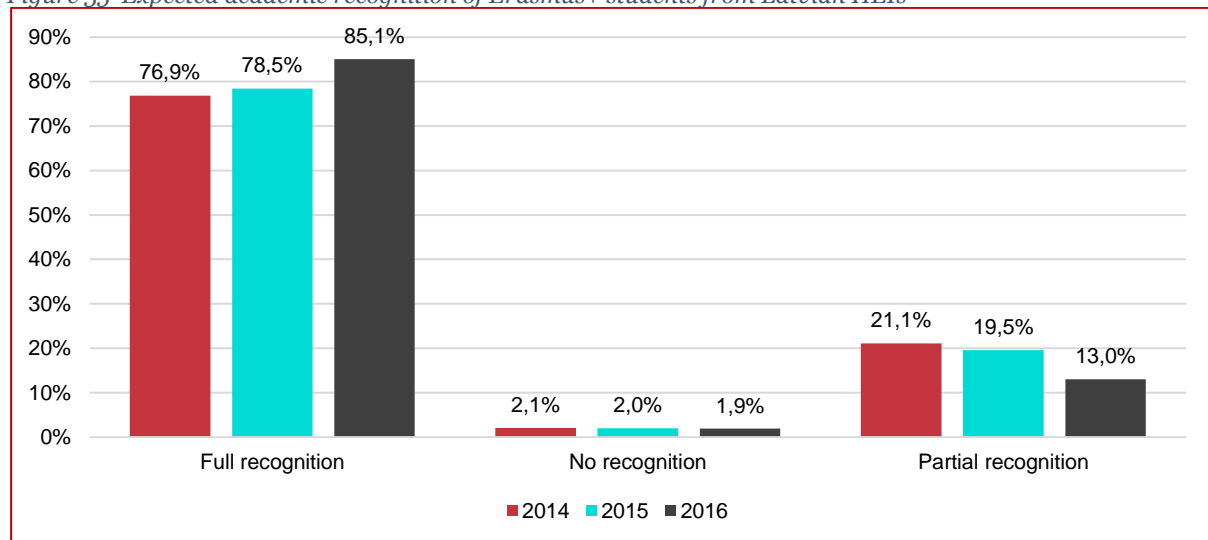
Figure 34 Distribution of Erasmus+ study exchanges in Latvia by level of study (2014–2016)



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Erasmus Participant Reports, 2014–2016

Furthermore, Figure 35 demonstrates that over time full recognition of academic achievements for Erasmus+ participants in Latvia has gradually increased. This shows that on a whole, within the period of 2014–2016, Latvia has achieved higher levels of recognition.

Figure 35 Expected academic recognition of Erasmus+ students from Latvian HEIs



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

One representative from the State Education Development Agency, the National Agency for Erasmus+, was interviewed. The interviewee commented that the quantitative data from Participant Reports should be interpreted carefully, because students have to fill out a very long survey, and they do not always fully understand the questions or might fill out the questionnaire incompletely or incorrectly. Due to this, the National Agency representative expects that the recognition levels in Latvia are actually higher.

C.2 Understanding of recognition

C.2.1 Misinterpretation of what ‘academic recognition’ relates to in the context of Erasmus+ mobility

Since the persons responsible for the content of study programmes (usually directors of study programmes) started to be directly involved in coordinating the mobility from its inception and recognising the content of courses after the mobility, the overall situation with recognition has improved. Before 2012, the directors of study programmes were not involved in coordinating the mobility agreements, and then the situation with recognition was more problematic, because students and study programme directors did not discuss the courses to be studied abroad and their correspondence with the study programme at the sending institution. Now that the directors of study programmes are involved and agree with the student on the courses to be taken abroad, usually there are no big problems with recognition. If the Learning Agreement is signed, and there are no changes in it, recognition should not be problematic.

However, there are examples of different understandings of the terms ‘academic recognition’ and ‘full recognition’. This problem is noticeable both among academic personnel and students. One example of this is when teachers sometimes request that courses taken abroad match the courses at the sending institution completely. In rare cases, students do not always understand that in order to receive recognition of their coursework, they must successfully complete the courses studied abroad. Misunderstandings of this kind sometimes impact the time required to complete the recognition process. Furthermore, the National Agency does not have the mandate to be involved in solving these issues.

Representatives from only two of the interviewed HEIs reported that they had faced misinterpretation of the term ‘academic recognition’. The University of Agriculture and Life Sciences indicated that sometimes directors of study programmes or professors involved in the recognition expect students to have completed courses with the same content as that provided by the sending HEI. This is especially the case in the field of agriculture, where the professors are less flexible. There is a lack of understanding among the teachers that the courses should be comparable, but not necessarily identical to the ones provided by the sending institution.

There is a kind of solution to this issue, but it does not address the actual problem: the mobility coordinators at the university do not allow students studying with professors who usually do not recognise the courses taken during the mobility, to participate in the mobility during the semester with coursework under the professor in question. Although this prevents the students from potentially problematic situations in terms of recognition, it also limits the freedom of students to participate in mobility according to their own wishes. Rather a systemic solution to this problem should be sought. For instance, universities could pursue explanatory work with the academic personnel involved in problematic situations or spend more effort in finding courses in receiving institutions that best fit the requirements of the sending institution.

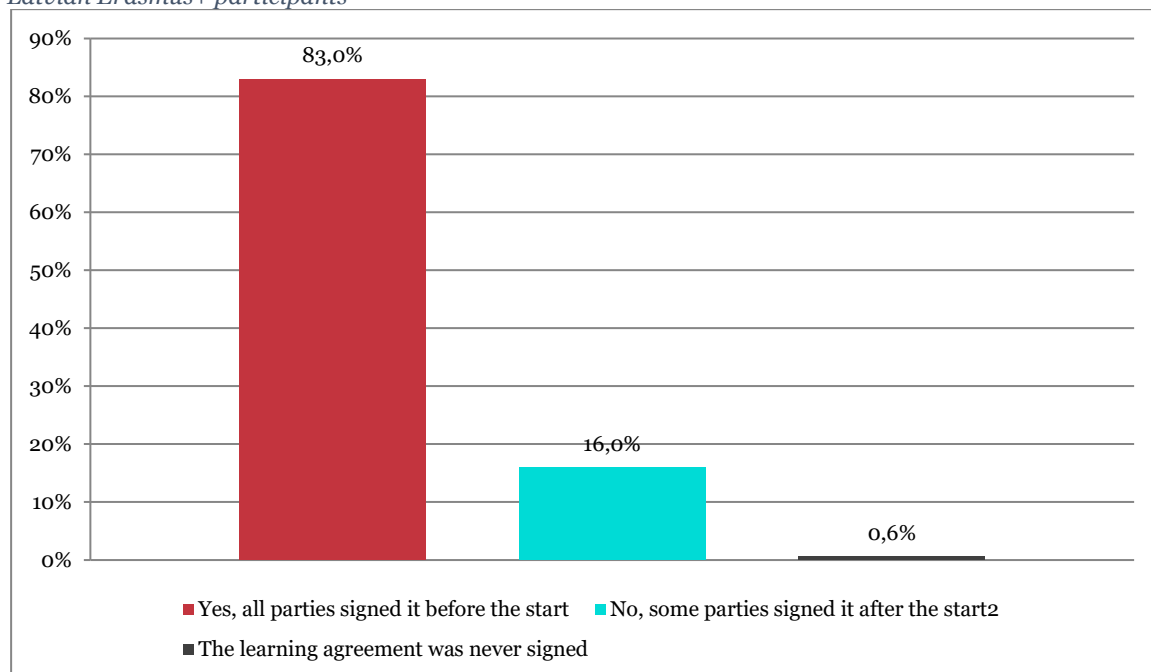
Riga Graduate School of Law also claimed that there are some problems with misinterpretation of the term ‘academic recognition’. Similarly, as with the University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, often professors expect foreign courses to be the same or very similar to the ones at sending institution. Although the professors are familiar with the guidance on recognition provided by the Erasmus+ programme documents, in reality, guidelines are not always followed.

Other interviewed representatives of HEIs deny that there is any problem with the understanding of recognition. Often HEIs refer to the Erasmus+ guidance documents and internal regulations on Erasmus+ mobility that define and describe matters related to recognition, and the HEIs try to act in accordance with these guides. Both the National Agency representative and all representatives at the interviewed HEIs claimed that they have not experienced any problems related to the understanding of the term ‘academic recognition’ among the receiving institutions. As explained above in this section, the only problem with the receiving institutions is changes in the course offer that leads to changes in the Learning Agreement, which can sometimes cause problems with recognition.

C.2.2 Different understanding/definition of what ‘full recognition’ means by the parties involved in Erasmus+ mobility

The main obstacles to recognition in Latvia are summarised in Figure 37. In Latvia, the largest obstacle (21%) to recognition is that course content (or part of it) as agreed in the final version of the Learning Agreement was not accepted by the sending institution upon return. While in general, the signing of the Learning Agreement before the start of mobility was registered for 83% of all mobilities in Latvia during the period of 2014–2016, the signing of the Learning Agreement does not guarantee that it will not have to be amended (Figure 36).

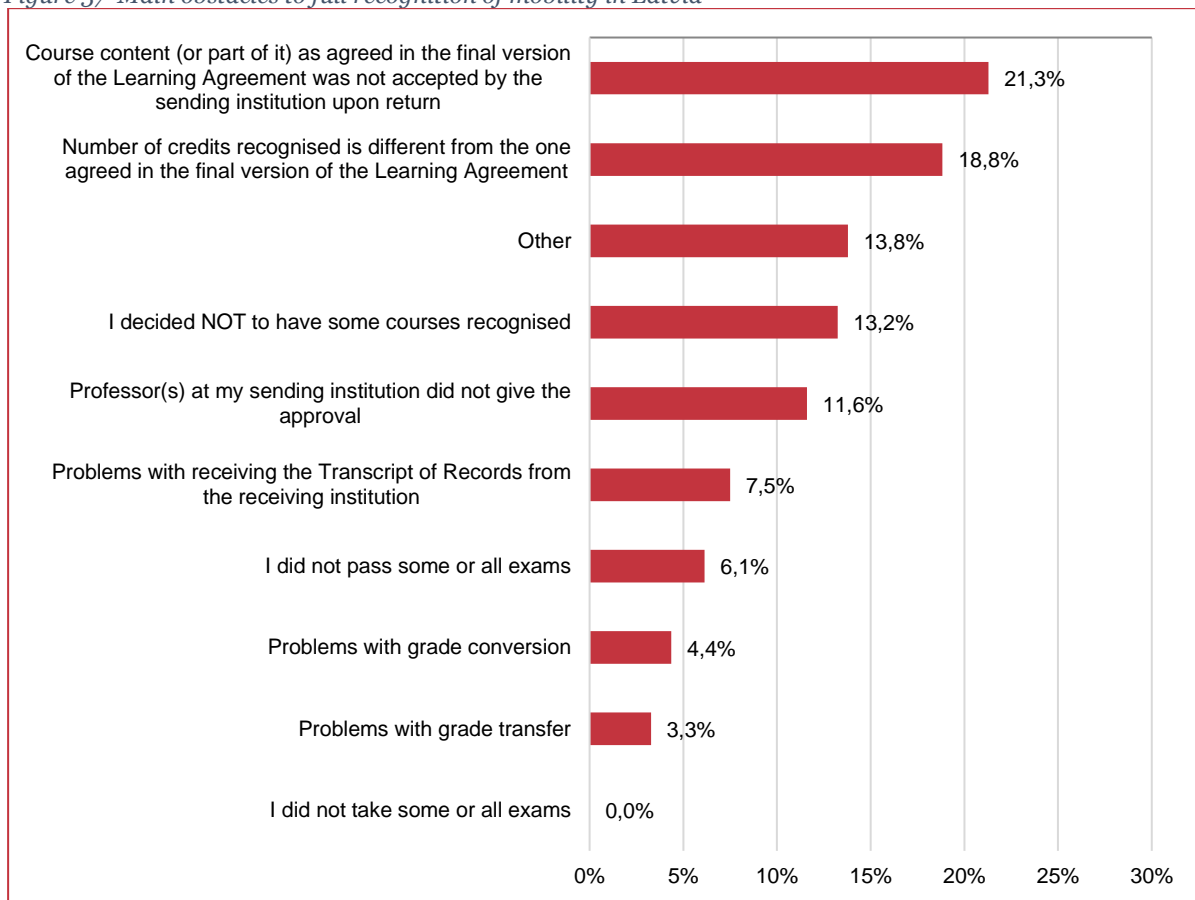
Figure 36 Learning Agreement signed by all parties before the start of the mobility – survey answers from Latvian Erasmus+ participants



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

In fact, several of the interviewed HEIs claimed that instances where the Learning Agreement is not accepted happen mainly due to the changes made in the Learning Agreement during the mobility. The analysis reveals that the Learning Agreement was changed in 88% of mobility cases. The main reason for changes in the Learning Agreement is the fact that the agreed-upon courses were unavailable at the receiving institution. The second most often mentioned reason (18.8%) is that the number of credits recognised is different from the one agreed in the final version of the Learning Agreement. This is confirmed by the interviews performed with HEIs in Latvia and is discussed in more detail in following sections of this analysis.

Figure 37 Main obstacles to full recognition of mobility in Latvia



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Despite the statistics for recognition and obstacles to recognition reported by participating students, most interviewed HEIs in Latvia tend to think that there are no big problems with recognition, and problematic cases are exceptions and caused by students ignoring the rules. The problematic situations described in the following sections of this case study were mentioned as exceptional, and according to the HEIs, are not systemic.

Interviews with the National Agency and HEIs indicate that there are problems with the understanding of what 'full recognition' means. Often the courses studied abroad are not recognised as the core programme courses by the sending institution and this results in a number of uncompleted courses. The courses studied abroad are formally recognised but are recorded as elective courses. This creates a situation where students selecting courses believing they will be recognised as corresponding to core courses of their sending institution, must on their return complete core programme courses at their home HEI. These situations can be avoided if the courses are agreed upon before the mobility, and the Learning Agreement is signed. If there are no changes in the Learning Agreement, there are usually no problems in recognising the study results. However, HEIs report that Learning Agreements are changed very often. This circumstance is confirmed by the analysis of Participant Reports – 88% of the students change their Learning Agreement during the mobility. Students prepare and sign their Learning Agreement well before the mobility, and the situation at the receiving institution may have changed when the student arrives there. According to the HEIs, changes have to be made, because the course offer often changes at the receiving institutions. Some courses are not offered anymore, or some are incompatible in terms of timing. Sometimes the courses are not provided in English. If the Learning Agreement needs to be changed, the substitute courses are rarely sufficiently discussed between the student and the programme coordinator of the sending institution. This later results in a problematic

recognition process. According to the HEIs, the situation could be improved if receiving institutions could offer more stable courses that do not change after a few months. However, the solution could also be a better organised process of making changes in the Learning Agreement during the mobility.

HEIs claim that there are no geographical tendencies related to changes in the Learning Agreement; changes of offered courses occur in various countries and HEIs.

These obstacles cause delays in the recognition process, because it takes time to solve the disputes. It also results in the students being required to take additional tests or exams, or study courses, or them being forced to study specific topics. This creates an additional burden to the students after the mobility. The above described chain of problems with full recognition is illustrated in the Figure 38.

To summarise, changes in the Learning Agreement mostly happen because of problems at the receiving institution. HEIs deny that more careful preparation before the mobility could help to avoid these changes and refer to internal regulations. All interviewed HEIs have internal regulation documents that describe the mobility process and rules for recognition. According to these documents, before the mobility, students, study programme directors and mobility coordinators mutually prepare the Learning Agreement. On the side of the sending institutions, preparation before the mobility is well organised. However, improvements could be made towards better coordination and exchange of information with receiving institution to avoid massive changes in Learning Agreement during the mobility. At the University of Latvia, sometimes reserve courses are discussed by the student and the programme director. However, the HEIs normally do not list reserve courses in the Learning Agreements that could work as substitutes for the cancelled courses.

Figure 38 Problems with full recognition in Latvia



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016 and interviews

It is interesting, for example, that Riga Graduate School of Law demonstrates 100% expected recognition according to data from the Participant Reports, but in reality, the institution fully recognises the courses, but not as mandatory courses. This means that after the mobility, the students have to take additional courses or exams in mandatory courses. Although the HEI statistically demonstrates complete recognition, in reality students are required to put further effort into successfully completing the study programme. There are no systemic solutions to this problem, but the representative of Riga Graduate School of Law expressed interest in an increased role of the National Agency in raising awareness about these matters among HEIs generally. Informative events could, for example, be organised once a year for programme directors to discuss about the meaning of term full recognition. Stockholm School of Economics in Riga dedicates a semester in the 3rd year of studies when students can participate in mobility. All courses completed during this semester are recognised. This approach practically eliminates issues with recognition.

It can be concluded that although internal regulation of the HEIs provides a basis for unified understanding of 'full recognition', in practice, there are several organisational and interpretation challenges. Changes in course offerings and in Learning Agreements during the mobility cause problems in recognition of core courses that are necessary for successful completion of study programmes. Although 'full recognition' is granted and also illustrated by the statistics (in case of Riga Graduate School of Law), it does not mean that the students will not have to take additional coursework or exams to compensate for courses that have not been recognised as core courses. These issues could at least be

partly addressed by more proactive preparatory work before the mobility. For instance, students and programme directors could agree upon and list reserve courses in the Learning Agreement. These could work as previously agreed substitutes to the courses that for some reason are cancelled by receiving institution.

C.3 Highlights of good practices and key issues at HEI level

C.3.1 Issues with HEIs not filling out the Mobility Tool for students' realised ECTS

According to the representative of the National Agency, most of HEIs fill out the Mobility Tool for students' realised ECTS completely and without major problems. Sometimes mistakes are made due to carelessness. The field containing data on realised ECTS is not controlled, and it might be that HEIs occasionally miss the field. This has no impact on the recognition of the academic achievements, because the system is informative. In case an HEI has made a mistake or has not filled in the required data, the National Agency informs the HEI and requires revision. Overall, the use of the Mobility Tool has improved, and HEIs are used to the tool and are satisfied.

C.3.2 Large variation in process times for credit transfers between HEIs

One major problem with the recognition process is the delay (sometimes 6–7 months) in sending the records by the receiving HEIs. Germany and Spain are countries that usually have substantial delays in issuing records after mobility. However, the National Agency and the interviewed HEIs report that it has never been an obstacle in receiving full recognition at the end. Most HEIs are supportive in these situations and allow taking final exams, even if they have not received the records confirming completion of courses taken during the mobility. Daugavpils University, which demonstrates lower recognition rates, is not that flexible. That may at least partly explain its lower recognition levels. To solve the problem with delayed records from receiving institutions, sending institutions usually contact the receiving institutions; no help from the National Agency has been requested.

The recognition process among sending HEIs is regulated and mostly automatised and does not delay recognition.

C.4 Individual HEI examples

C.4.1 Daugavpils University

According to Participant Reports data, students of Daugavpils University expected to gain full recognition for their mobility period in 63% of the cases. 49% of the students had to take additional courses or exams for some of the courses upon return to the sending institution, and 8% had to take additional courses or exams for all courses studied abroad. It is often expected that study programmes will be very similar, but in reality, that is not the case. This creates problems in recognising the courses studied abroad and explains the statistics on the need to take additional courses or exams at the sending institution. Problems in the recognition process might also be explained by lack of flexibility by the university, when students have to wait for long periods of time for the transcript of records from the receiving institution. In these situations, the university does not always allow students to take final exams.

Quite often, the motivation for students to participate in the mobility is not based on the content of foreign study programmes, but rather on their desires to improve their English or other language skills in a foreign country. In these cases, the motivation of students to complete the courses is smaller, and therefore, the recognition statistics change. Based on interview and document analysis, no institutional factors explaining lower recognition levels in this particular case were identified.

C.4.2 Rezekne Technology Academy

According to Participant Reports data, students of Rezekne Technology Academy expected to gain full recognition for their mobility period in 65% of the cases, although 94% of the respondents claimed that

they had successfully completed all education components of the receiving institution. Only 39% of the students reported that they had not taken additional courses or exams at their sending institution.

According to the interview with representative of Rezekne Technology Academy, the forms of examination at receiving institutions do not always correspond to the one used at the academy. For example, if a student took a test at the receiving institution, but at the sending institution exams are used, then the student has to take the exam at the sending institution after the mobility. This is because Rezekne Technology Academy considers exams to be a stricter form of knowledge testing, which examine the learning outcomes in more detail than the tests. Therefore, if the student did pass a test at the receiving institution, there is no guarantee that the learning outcomes were sufficiently examined according to the standards of the academy. This illustrates a certain lack of trust in foreign examination forms. Based on interview and document analysis, lower recognition levels in this particular case could be explained by too strict an approach to the examination form.

C.4.3 Riga Graduate School of Law

According to Participant Reports data, Riga Graduate School of Law demonstrates a high level (100%) of recognition. 93% of the students reported that they did not have to take additional courses or exams at their sending institution. Despite these high numbers, the interviewed representative of the Riga Graduate School of Law claimed that the institution faces some challenges with understanding what full academic recognition means. Sometimes professors expect students to have studied and completed identical courses at the receiving institution. Often the courses are not recognised as mandatory courses. The recognition level is high, but in reality, students have to take additional courses to complete their studies. This is not a good practice, and awareness about what academic recognition actually means should be raised among the teachers.

The comparatively high numbers of recognition can be explained by an active approach to coordinating the recognition process taken by the mobility coordinator at this HEI. The coordinator is actively involved in problematic cases and strives to ensure that all parties involved (students and professors) have the right understanding of the recognition requirements and meaning as such. According to the interviewee, the NA on the national level should also perform such explanatory work.

C.4.4 Latvia University of Life Science and Technologies

According to Participant Reports data, the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies demonstrates a comparatively high level of recognition (81%). 68% of the students report that they did not need to take additional courses or exams at their sending institution. Although the data demonstrates comparatively good results, the interviewed representative of the institution claimed that the university faces challenges with recognition, especially in the specific field of agriculture studies. Some professors expect the courses to be exactly the same at the receiving institution and do not recognise the learning outcomes. To handle this situation, the university limits participation in mobility during the semesters when these courses are taught. On the one hand, it provides a solution to expected recognition problems, but on the other hand, it limits the choice of the students when to participate in the mobility. Improved information and explanation of the purpose with mobility within Erasmus+ and how to conduct recognition is needed in order to avoid problems with recognition. Based on interview and document analysis, no institutional factors explaining the comparatively higher recognition levels in this particular case were identified.

C.5 Final remark

Problems with recognition are rather exceptional and caused by misunderstanding of the meaning of recognition on an individual level. All HEIs reported students' individual responsibility as the main reason why problems with recognition occur. However, in some cases, there are problems also with academic personnel that does not fully understand the main principles of recognition and require completion of identical courses at the receiving institution. Some Erasmus+ coordinators at HEIs reported a need for educational work on explaining the recognition principles to the academic personnel.

It seems as if better preparatory work prior to the mobility period could make it clearer to the students what requirements they have to meet to receive the recognition. Although all analysed HEIs do some preparatory work, there is a room for additional effort, for example, inclusion of reserve courses in the Learning Agreement.

To conclude, recognition is not considered a big problem among Latvian HEIs, but the reported problems illustrate that there is a room to improve when it comes to understanding of the recognition concept, and regarding some of the processes that guide the recognition process.

Appendix D Poland

D.1 Introduction and overview of the level of mobility

During the analysed period of 2014–2016, more than 32,000 occasions of study mobility was registered in the Erasmus+ exchange programme. The ten higher education institutions in Poland that send the highest number of Erasmus+ students make up for 40 percent of the Polish Erasmus+ students. Table 6 gives an overview of the Polish universities and the number of mobility students.

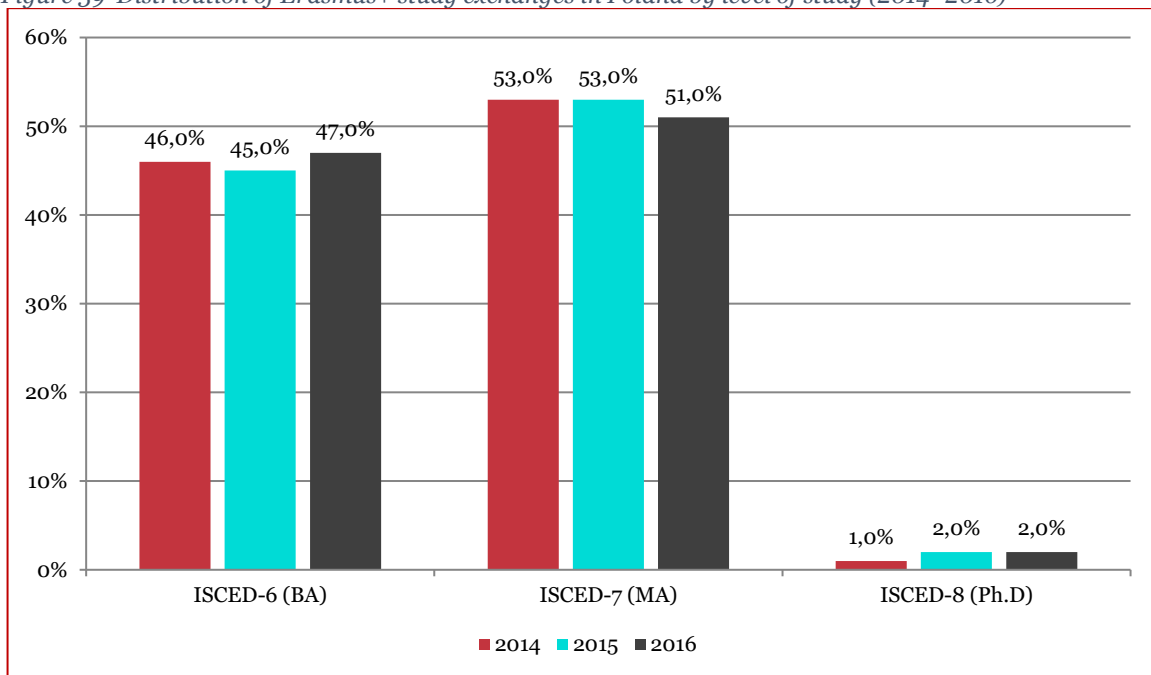
Table 6 Erasmus+ participation results from the largest sending HEIs in Poland during 2014–2016, by institution (intra-EU mobility)

Institution	Number of outbound Erasmus+ students (2014–2016)	Average number of students per institution per year (2014–2016)
Uniwersytet Warszawski	3075	1025
Uniwersytet Jagielloński	1893	631
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu	1777	592
Uniwersytet Wrocławski	1335	445
Uniwersytet Łódzki	1154	385
Szkoła Główna Handlowa w Warszawie	1038	346
Politechnika Łódzka	968	323
Politechnika Warszawska	913	304
Politechnika Gdańska	816	272
Politechnika Wroclawska	743	248
Grand total	13712	4571

Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

In recent years, the balance between Erasmus+ students on different levels has been relatively stable (Figure 39). In general, the students of Master's programmes (EQF 7, ISCED-7) are more interested in using the opportunity for going abroad for part of their studies than students at Bachelor level (EQF 6, ISCED-6).

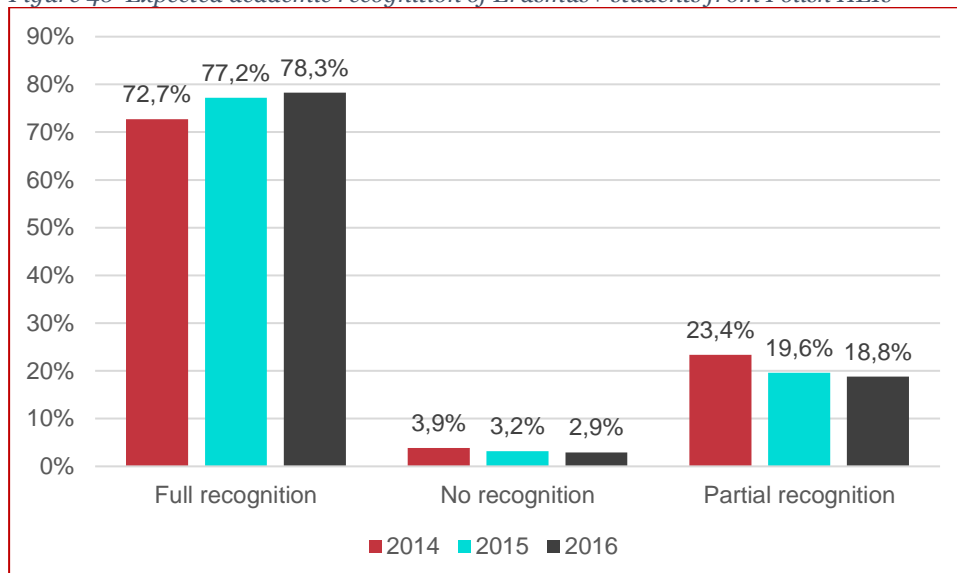
Figure 39 Distribution of Erasmus+ study exchanges in Poland by level of study (2014–2016)



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

The key figures relevant for this study concern students' perception of the recognition process. In the analysed period (2014–2016), full recognition is declared on average by 75% of all participants. It is also important to notice that the average number of students declaring none or partial recognition decreases over time (Figure 40). As indicated further below in this case study, higher education institutions have introduced some important good practices aiming to reduce the problems with recognition.

Figure 40 Expected academic recognition of Erasmus+ students from Polish HEIs



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

The quantitative analysis was supported by qualitative research in the form of interviews. The selection process regarding interviewees aimed to cover different types of Polish higher education institutions, geographical spread, number of students participating in the Erasmus+ mobility programme and results of Erasmus+ Participant Report. The selected institutions have the following characteristics:

- Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu – classic university located in western Poland, third most mobility-active higher education institution in Poland; average full recognition rate declared by students: 72%
- Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Katowicach – university specialised in the area of economics, finance, management; located in southern Poland; average full recognition rate declared by students: 56%
- Gdański Uniwersytet Medyczny – medical university located in northern Poland; average full recognition rate declared by students: 80%
- Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie - classic university located in southern Poland, second most mobility-active higher education institution in Poland; average full recognition rate declared by students: 66%
- Politechnika Łódzka – technical university located in central Poland; the most mobility-active among technical universities; average full recognition rate declared by students: 87%

D.2 Understanding of recognition

D.2.1 Different understanding/definition of what 'full recognition' means by the parties involved in Erasmus+ mobility

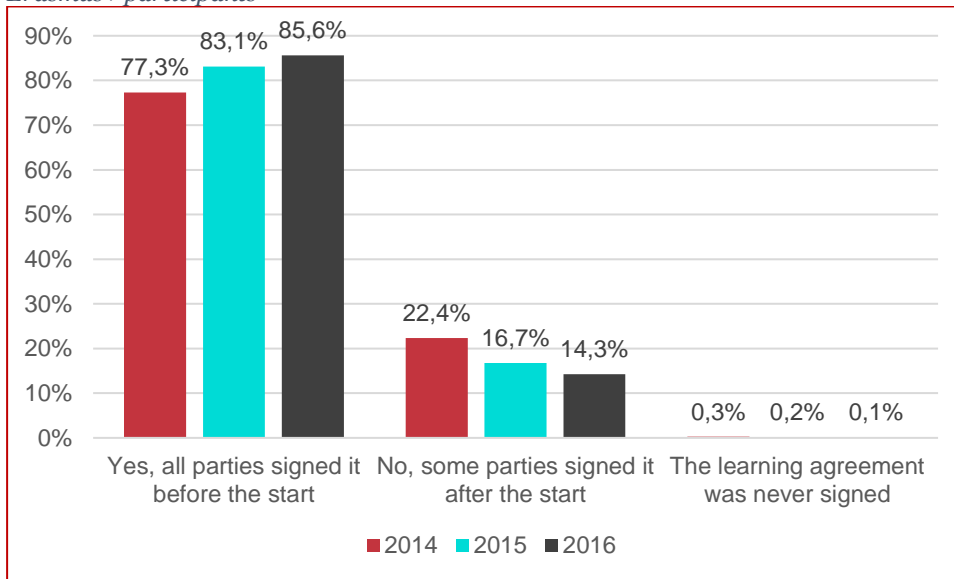
Understanding of recognition is the most relevant issue regarding the seeming underperformance of the Polish higher education institutions. According to the information collected, there are two layers of this problem:

- Institutional / policy level – higher education institutions and Erasmus+ National Agency operate within the officially adopted definition of 'academic recognition'
- Individual participant level – students filling in the Participant Report may base their answers on their individual understanding of the term 'recognition' or follow the official definition

During the analysed period (2014–2016), 86% of the students declared successful completion of all the components listed in the Learning Agreement (Figure 41). This number is similar across all the study levels.

According to students' responses provided in Participants Reports, the Learning Agreements are signed more and more often prior to the beginning of the mobility period. However, all of the interviewed higher education institutions indicate that students are not allowed to participate in the Erasmus + exchange without a signed Learning Agreement. Interviewees suggest that some students confuse the further changes in the Learning Agreement with the response "No, some parties signed it after the start".

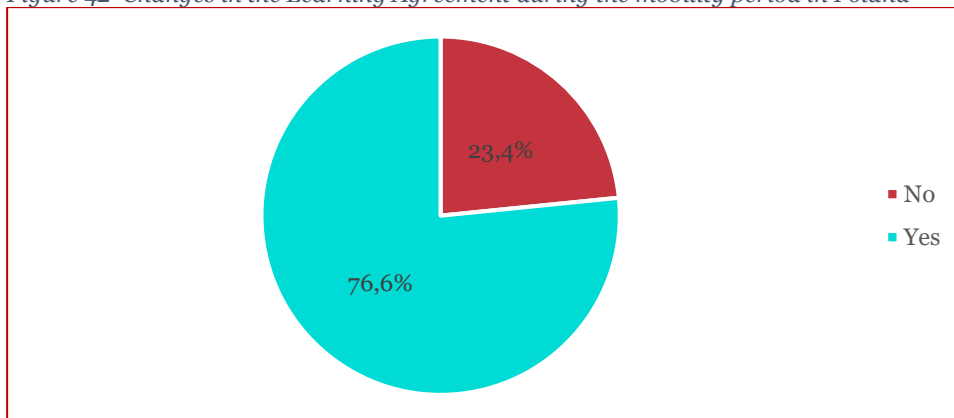
Figure 41 Learning Agreement signed by all parties before the start of the mobility – survey answers from Polish Erasmus+ participants



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Participant Report data also reveals that changes in the Learning Agreement during the mobility period are very frequent, with only less than a quarter of Learning Agreements remaining unchanged (Figure 42).

Figure 42 Changes in the Learning Agreement during the mobility period in Poland

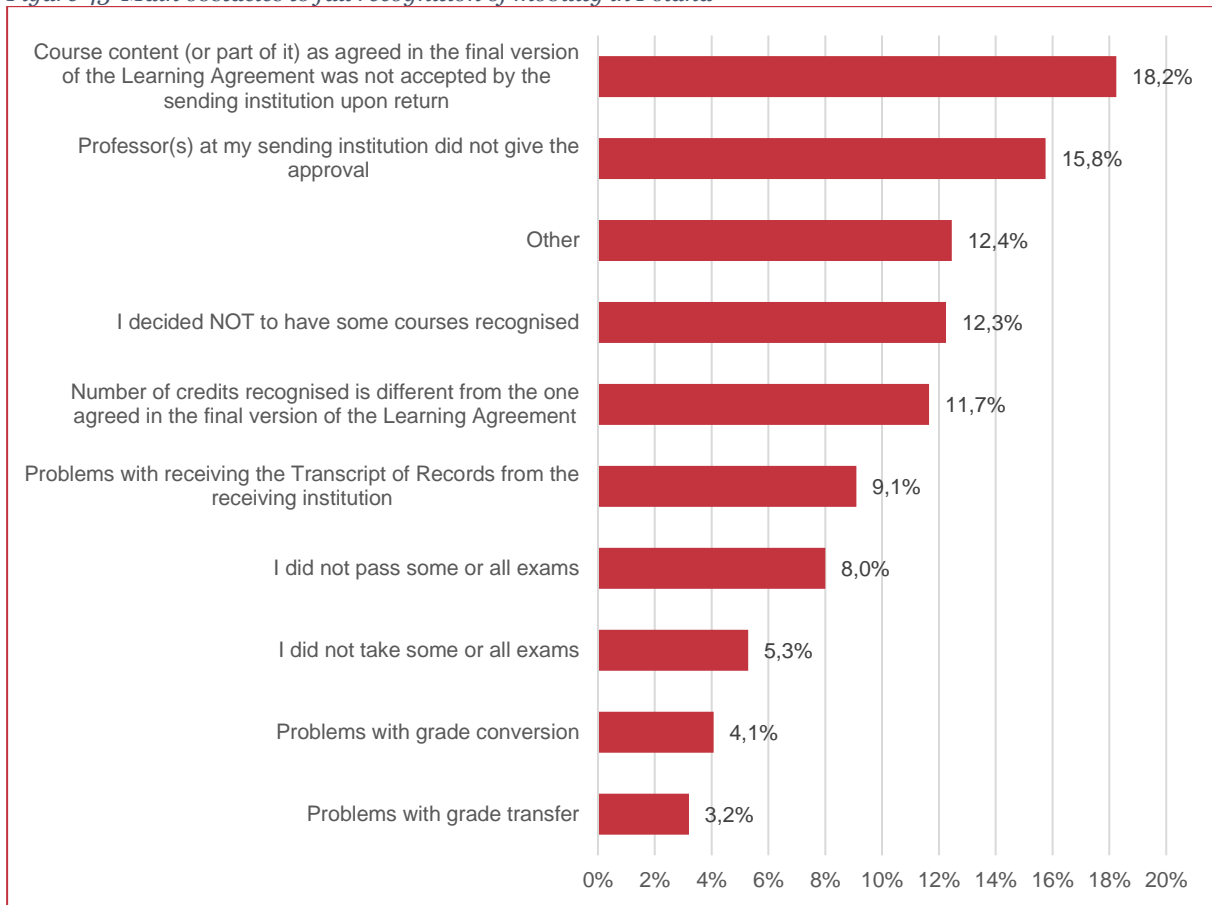


Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Among the causes for unsuccessful completion of the recognition procedure, the two most frequently indicated causes in the analysed period (2014–2016) were (Figure 43):

- Course content (or part of it) as agreed in the final version of the Learning Agreement was not accepted by the sending institution upon return
- Professor(s) at the sending institution did not give the approval

Figure 43 Main obstacles to full recognition of mobility in Poland



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Interviewed higher education institutions are responsible for approx. 17% of the total number of students participating in the Erasmus+ programme. According to Participant Report results, the average rate of full recognition in those higher education institutions is 72%³⁰ (country average – 75%). At the same time, none of the interviewees could recall even a single case of a non-recognised achievement, provided that the mobility was undertaken in line with the Learning Agreement.

The results of the interviews suggest one explanation for this discrepancy. According to the interviewed HEIs, students do not fully understand the term 'academic recognition' used in the Participant Report questions. Based on their experience with day-to-day management of individual students' mobility activities, they indicated the following causes of such misunderstanding:

- In general, according to the students' perception, achievement of 30 ECTS abroad should result in an automatic promotion to the next semester without any extra effort from the students after mobility (i.e. exams), regardless of the initial text of the Learning Agreement
- Some of the courses completed abroad are generally in line with the obligatory courses at the sending institution and, as such, are recognised. However, they do not necessarily have to align perfectly with the curriculum of the period that a student spends at the receiving institution. In such cases, the recognised courses are spread across different semesters of the study programme. Therefore, students may need to take additional exams or courses during the semester after their return to the sending institution. Nevertheless, such cases are always included in the Learning Agreement

³⁰ Survey question: Did you gain or do you expect to gain academic recognition from your sending institution for your period abroad?

- Some of the obligatory courses are not possible to complete abroad, due to lack of similar courses offered by the receiving institution. These courses have to be completed by the students at their home institutions upon their return from their mobility period. These restrictions are, however, always noted in the Learning Agreement
- Some of the courses are not recognised upon students' requests. This means that despite having some courses successfully completed at the receiving institution, some students might not want them to be recognised by the sending institution. Usually the reason is a positive, but unsatisfactory, mark achieved at the receiving institution for a given course. Such possibility is offered to the students by some faculties of the Jagiellonian University (the only one among the interviewed institutions).

All abovementioned issues were highlighted by the interviewees as factors that contribute to the misinterpretation of the Participant Report question about recognition, resulting in the somewhat misleading information on the rate of the academic recognition. At the same time, the HEIs have already introduced some countermeasures to mitigate these problems:

- An extra annex has been added to the Learning Agreement template: usually it is a table which aims to show in the most transparent form the correlation between the courses chosen by students at the receiving institutions and the equivalent courses at the sending institution
- Cracow University of Economics (Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Krakowie) sends an e-mail reminder to all exchange students with a clear explanation of the key terms used in the Participant Report, including the meaning of 'academic recognition'. This was reported as a useful exercise that helps students better understand the terms used
- Jagiellonian University (Uniwersytet Jagielloński) used to offer support to students in explaining the correct meaning of the terms used in the Participant Report. It was a voluntary service provided only upon the students' request. However, some students to which this support was offered, indicated that they did not feel fully comfortable with it, as they perceived it as an external influence on their opinion. Therefore, the university decided to withdraw this offer.
- All higher education institutions have dedicated online space where all the necessary information regarding the mobility process, including definitions used, is provided.

D.3 Highlights of good practices and key issues at HEI level

D.3.1 Issues with HEIs not filling out the Mobility Tool for students' realised ECTS

None of the interviewed higher education institutions encountered any issues with filling out the Mobility Tool. Moreover, the interviewees indicated that this has no impact on the issue of recognition.

D.3.2 Large variation in process times for credit transfers between HEIs

Interviewed higher education institution representatives mentioned a few issues that disturb a smooth recognition process related to the transcript of records.

First of all, there are usually large time variations in issuing the transcript records by the receiving institutions. This may vary from the immediate issuing of the transcript to issuing it after a period of 2–3 months. However, there was no strong indication of any geographical correlation with the issuing time. The delays might also have very different causes. In some cases, there are significant differences in the organisation of the academic year calendars (i.e. German higher education institutions do not operate in August due to the summer break) or general student assessment system (i.e. French business schools issue a distributional marking system instead of an individual one). All interviewed higher education institution representatives said that although such cases were problematic at first, they have currently adjusted their internal processes to accommodate to them.

Moreover, some problems might be caused by different systems of confirmation of students' achievements. In most cases, the receiving institution officially issues a transcript of records on paper. However, some institutions only issue an electronic version or even only a printout from their internal

IT system. In such cases, the sending institution usually contacts the receiving institution in order to confirm the information received.

Finally, some interviewed institutions reported significant problems with recognising the learning outcomes achieved in a non-traditional manner. For example, Łódź University of Technology (Politechnika Łódzka) indicated that research projects are part of some students' exchange programme. Some students are very keen on working on their diploma thesis in another academic environment. This situation happens either when students are working on comparative analysis of a studied phenomenon, or when the receiving institution specialises in a given research area and is much more advanced than the sending institution. Sometimes, students also want to continue their research under supervision of an outstanding research leader working at the receiving institution. Such situations are more common at research-intensive or research-based programmes. However, not all receiving institutions award ECTS points for such projects, unless they are concluded with the defence of a Master's or PhD thesis at the receiving institution. Therefore, it causes some problems with recognition of those projects as part of sending institution's curriculum. In this case, the problem is solved using the procedure for direct identification and recognition of the learning outcomes, based on the students' projects description and tangible outcomes, even without official transcript of records of identified ECTS points.

However, the interviewees could not recall any case where any of the above-mentioned issues had an impact on academic recognition. At the same time, all interviewees thought that the results of the Participant Report³¹ are biased by non-compatible timing. The students are required to fill in the questionnaire within 30 days after finishing the mobility period. Completing the survey is also required to receive the second part of the Erasmus+ scholarship grant. At the same time, a receiving higher education institution is obliged to deliver the transcript of records within a 5-week time period after the student's departure. Therefore, in many cases students complete the Participant Report before the official recognition process even starts, and they do not have full information regarding its outcomes. Due to lack of further student incentives, the individual questionnaires are not followed-up or updated after the formal completion of the recognition process by the students.

D.4 Individual HEI examples

D.4.1 The Medical University of Gdańsk

The Medical University of Gdańsk (Gdański Uniwersytet Medyczny) has a rather rigid approach to the recognition of individual courses. A course completed at a receiving institution needs to be compatible not only at the level of the learning outcomes and ECTS points, but also regarding the number of direct contact hours (hours of formal learning) of the particular course components and a form of assessment.³² The latter is also the case with the medical study programmes at the Jagiellonian University. This practice can be explained to some extent by the fact that all medical programmes are heavily regulated. However, the different approaches regarding the contact hours between Medical University of Gdańsk and Jagiellonian University suggest that it is not a complete explanation of this practice.

D.4.2 Politechnika Łódzka

Incompatibility between the terminology and methodology used for designing study programmes (learning outcomes-based) in higher education and quantitative-based (i.e. formal learning hours per specific course) requirements issued by professional regulatory bodies may have a restricting impact. Politechnika Łódzka explained that some courses completed abroad cannot be formally recognised by them, as it would lead to complications with achieving professional status by the graduates. This issue is particularly apparent regarding the civil engineering programmes, as the professional regulatory body requires completion of specific courses with a minimum number of contact hours. Students are informed

³¹ Survey question: Is the recognition process for your mobility period finalised?

³² The courses are formally divided into those concluded with a final exam and those with other forms of assessment. The final exams are considered as more important, therefore students need to pass the exams regardless of the achievements at the receiving institution, if the assessment form is other than exam-based.

in advance about those difficulties. In the case of those study programmes, students usually are encouraged to select only those courses which are fully compatible with the mandatory ones at the sending institution. Another solution offered to the students is to select those courses which will be recognised as electives by the sending institution³³

Politechnika Łódzka has taken a very innovative approach to organisation of students' mobility. It has introduced Mobility Windows in some of their curricula, which limits the problematic issues with recognition of students' achievements. However, embedding the Mobility Windows is only possible during the development of completely new study programmes. Some efforts were also made to introduce this practice into the already well-established study programmes, but they failed due to internal resistance.

D.4.3 Adam Mickiewicz University

Some faculties of Adam Mickiewicz University introduced additional requirements regarding the students' obligations on completion of the study programmes. Traditionally, some parts of the practical courses in foreign languages programmes, for example, are excluded from recognition, regardless of students' achievements abroad. However, students are well-informed about that fact prior to the exchange period, and it is included in the Learning Agreement.

D.5 Final remark

The interviews with the HEIs highlighted that there are no systematic issues that need to be tackled to improve on the recognition rates, but there are a lot of individual problems and issues that need flexibility and solutions by the HEIs.

- The interviewed higher education institutions have limited practice in the management of international partnerships. The decisions of entering Erasmus+ partnerships are usually not influenced primarily by study programme compatibility, but by the prestige of the partner institution or are built on previously established common research activities and interest. Such partnering therefore may result in incompatibility of the study programmes between the receiving and sending institutions, in particular regarding the obligatory courses. The lack of programme compatibility can therefore cause situations where students are unable to choose the obligatory courses abroad, even in the non-regulated study programmes, because the receiving institutions have somewhat different educational profiles. This results in increased requirements regarding the students' obligations prior or after the mobility period (i.e. extra exams, courses, etc.)
- All interviewed higher education institutions had created positions as Erasmus+ exchange coordinators and empowered them with the formal authority to complete the recognition process. This practice replaced the previous approach, which required a student to obtain the recognition of courses completed abroad with each individual academic teacher. That usually caused problems with effective recognition of students' achievements, even despite their alignment with the Learning Agreement. Introduction of this practice in more and more higher education institutions explains the trend observed earlier in the report: fewer and fewer students indicate problems with recognition caused by individual professors
- All analysed higher education institutions introduced very professional central international offices. In most cases, the operational management of student mobility is done at the faculty level, while the central offices provide necessary support and information, including involvement in practical problem-solving at the individual student level, if necessary. All discussed problematic cases regarding recognition issues were successfully solved with the support of such units.

³³ According to the Polish legal regulations for study programmes, each curriculum has to contain at least 30% elective courses

Appendix E Sweden

E.1 Introduction and overview of the level of mobility

In Sweden, there are 42 HEIs that participate in Erasmus+. Of these, 17 are universities, 13 are university colleges, four are university colleges of fine, applied and performing arts and the remaining eight are independent higher education providers. The top ten sending HEIs account for 71% of all the students that went abroad during the years 2014–2016 (Table 7). In total during the years 2014–2016, 10,183 students went abroad from Sweden.

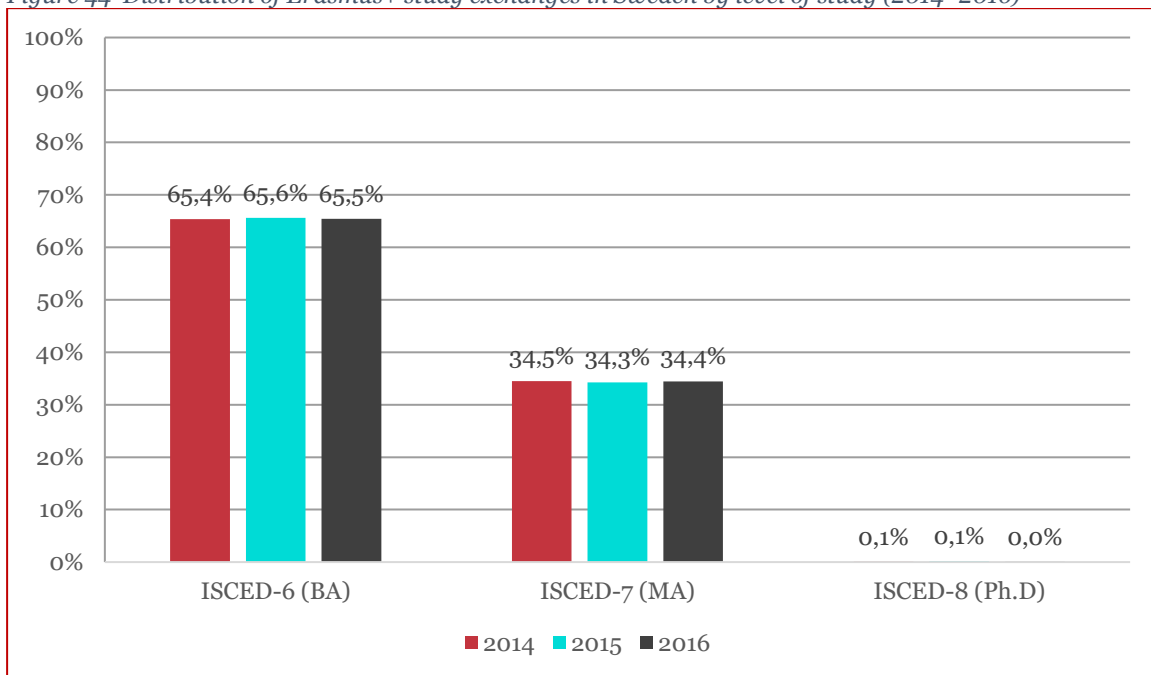
Table 7 Erasmus+ participation results from the largest sending HEIs in Sweden during 2014–2016, by institution (intra-EU mobility)

HEI	Number of students/mobilities
Lund University	1,105
Uppsala University	1,103
Stockholm University	937
Linköping University	925
University of Gothenburg	896
KTH Royal Institute of Technology	647
Chalmers University of Technology	559
Umeå University	547
Jönköping University	461
Linnæus University	423
Others	3,078

Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

In total throughout the three-year period, roughly 65% of the outgoing students studied at the bachelor's level (ISCED-6), and roughly 34% at the master's level (ISCED-7) (Figure 44).

Figure 44 Distribution of Erasmus+ study exchanges in Sweden by level of study (2014–2016)

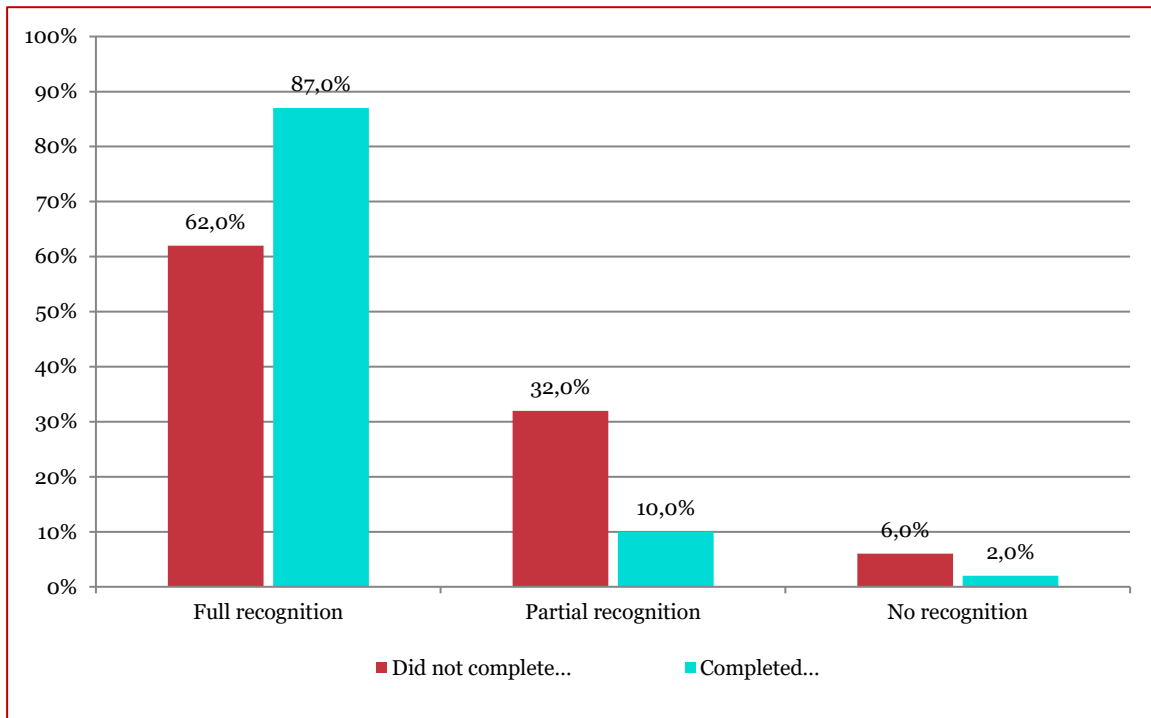


Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

In Sweden, the overall share of ECTS credits getting recognised is surprisingly high, 98.5%. This share can be compared to 80% of the students in EU who receive full recognition and another 15% who receive partial recognition in 2014 and 2015.³⁴ Figure 45 displays that of the students who completed their educational components, 87% expected to gain full recognition. Of the students who did not complete all of their educational components, 62% expected to gain full recognition, and 28% had to redo all or some courses. Unsurprisingly, the students who successfully completed all their educational components at the host university to a larger extent expected to get full recognition and more seldomly had to re-take courses.

³⁴ Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes. Final report – main evaluation report (volume 1), European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2017, p.368. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/erasmus-plus/eval/icf-volume1-main-report.pdf>

Figure 45 Expected academic recognition of Erasmus+ students from Swedish HEIs

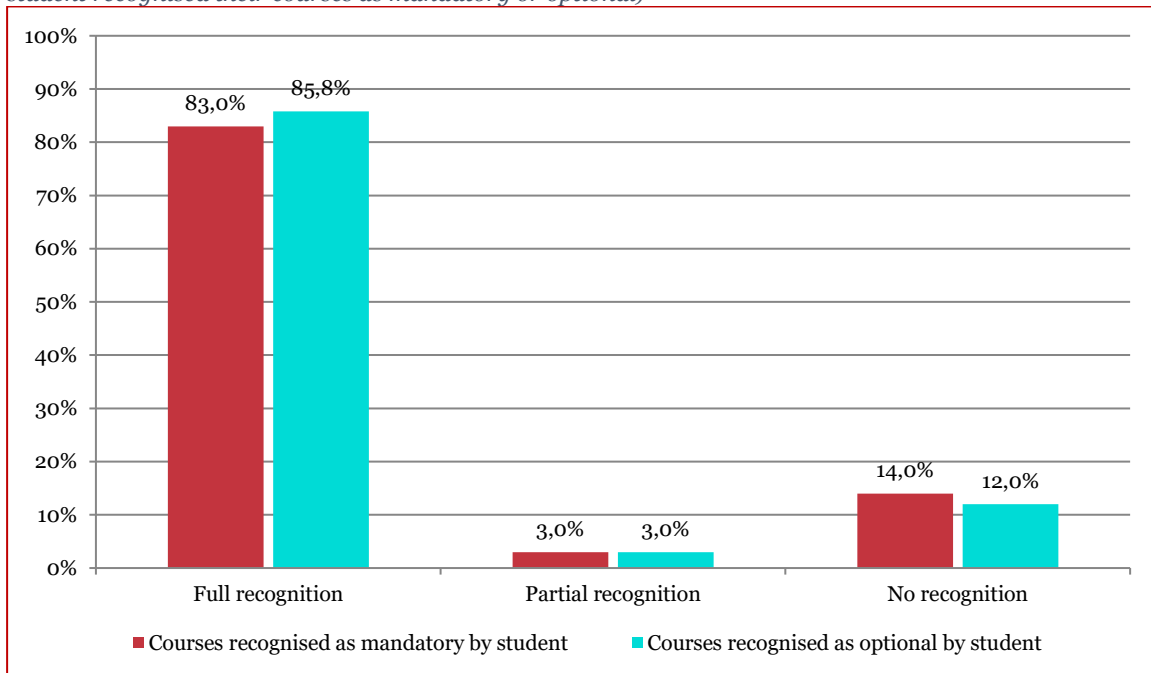


Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

During the surveyed three-year period of 2014–2016, 85% of students went abroad on a free semester, while 15% did it as a mandatory part of their curriculum (Figure 46). Of students who went abroad as a mandatory part of their curriculum, 86% expected to gain full recognition for their studies, and 20% had to redo all or some courses. Of the students who went abroad on a free semester, 83% expected to get full recognition, and 14% had to redo all or some courses. Students who took mandatory courses during their mobility period did receive or expected to receive academic recognition to a higher degree than students who went abroad on a free semester, but they also had to redo courses to a higher degree.

A possible explanation of why students on a mobility period as a mandatory part of their curriculum expect to gain full recognition to a larger extent, could be the thorough control of what courses that can and cannot be included in the Learning Agreement. According to interviews with representatives at the Swedish Council for Higher Education and at the HEIs, students who need to find equivalent courses to those included in their curriculum at the home institution have a harder time getting their ECTS recognised.

Figure 46 Expected academic recognition of Erasmus+ students from Swedish HEIs (differences in whether the student recognised their courses as mandatory or optional)



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

E.2 Understanding of recognition

E.2.1 Misinterpretation of what ‘academic recognition’ relates to in the context of Erasmus+ mobility

The Swedish Higher Education Ordinance states that “if a student has completed an educational component with a passing grade, the student has a right to get this recognised at another Higher Education Institution, unless there is an ‘essential difference’.³⁵ According to the interview with the National Agency representatives, the term ‘essential difference’ is open for interpretation and could lead to differences among the Higher Education Institutions.

In an interview with an Erasmus+ coordinator at Malmö University, the interviewee stated that the institutions “throw around” different academic terminology towards the student. This may lead to the student being confused and may also result in the student not applying for a mobility period. However, the interviewee also clarified that the framework from the European Commission related to the recognition process is clear. When asked about ‘essential differences’ in the Higher Education Ordinance, the interviewee said that problems related to the interpretation of ‘essential differences’ mostly occurred when the student takes compulsory/core courses abroad. Students then must find courses that correspond to their curriculum at the home institution to be able to include these in their degree. The control of what can and cannot be included as course components is strict, which could make it difficult for the student to find the right courses. If the students succeed in finding the right courses, however, the control could provide the student with assurance, since the courses are agreed upon in the Learning Agreement. The term ‘essential differences’ should therefore not lead to problems concerning recognition. Despite this strict control, one problem could arise when the agreed courses are not given at the host institution. This could then cause the student to take other courses than those agreed upon. The student may therefore have to redo or take additional courses when returning home.

According to an interviewee from the Linnaeus University, one institutional barrier to academic recognition could be that course coordinators at different faculties have different perspectives regarding

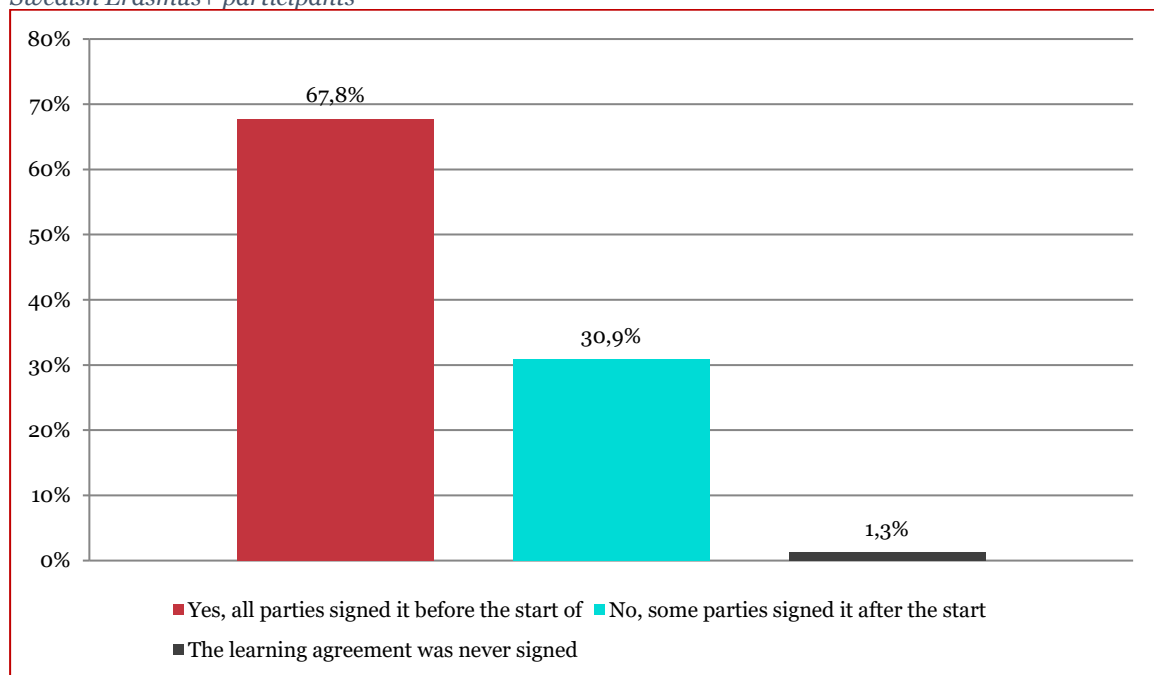
³⁵ http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/hogskoleforordning-1993100_sfs-1993-100 (authors’ own translation from Swedish)

what courses the students are required to take. The interviewee stated that the university and course coordinators should take a generous approach, in line with the Bologna agreement, and let the students choose courses relatively freely.³⁶ However, some course coordinators could take a more restrictive approach, requiring the students to take certain courses, which to some extent could make the recognition process problematic. At Linnaeus University, the Learning Agreement is considered important since the courses stated in the study programme are agreed upon by the student, the sending institution and the host institution. Consequently, some individual barriers could appear when students do not realise the importance of the Learning Agreement and instead choose to deviate from it during their mobility period, which could result in lower recognition level than initially expected.

E.2.2 Different understanding/definition of what ‘full recognition’ means by the parties involved in Erasmus+ mobility

In an interview with the representatives at the Swedish Council for Higher Education, the interviewees stated that the definition of what ‘full recognition’ means could be something of a discussion. Results from the interviewed university representatives show the opposite – this is not a problem concerning students getting their credits recognised. The universities have different solutions to how they clarify what ‘full recognition’ means to the students. Uppsala University has an appendix attached to the Learning Agreement which states that the recognition will take place after the exchange and that the student must apply for it him- or herself, and that there are no guarantees that the student will get full recognition in advance. In general, during the period of 2014–2016, roughly two thirds of mobilities in Sweden had Learning Agreements signed before the start of mobility (Figure 47).

Figure 47 Learning Agreement signed by all parties before the start of the mobility – survey answers from Swedish Erasmus+ participants



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

Problems with the definition of ‘full recognition’ should, in practice, not impact the recognition process. The interviewee at Linnaeus University recognised that different understandings of the definition of ‘full

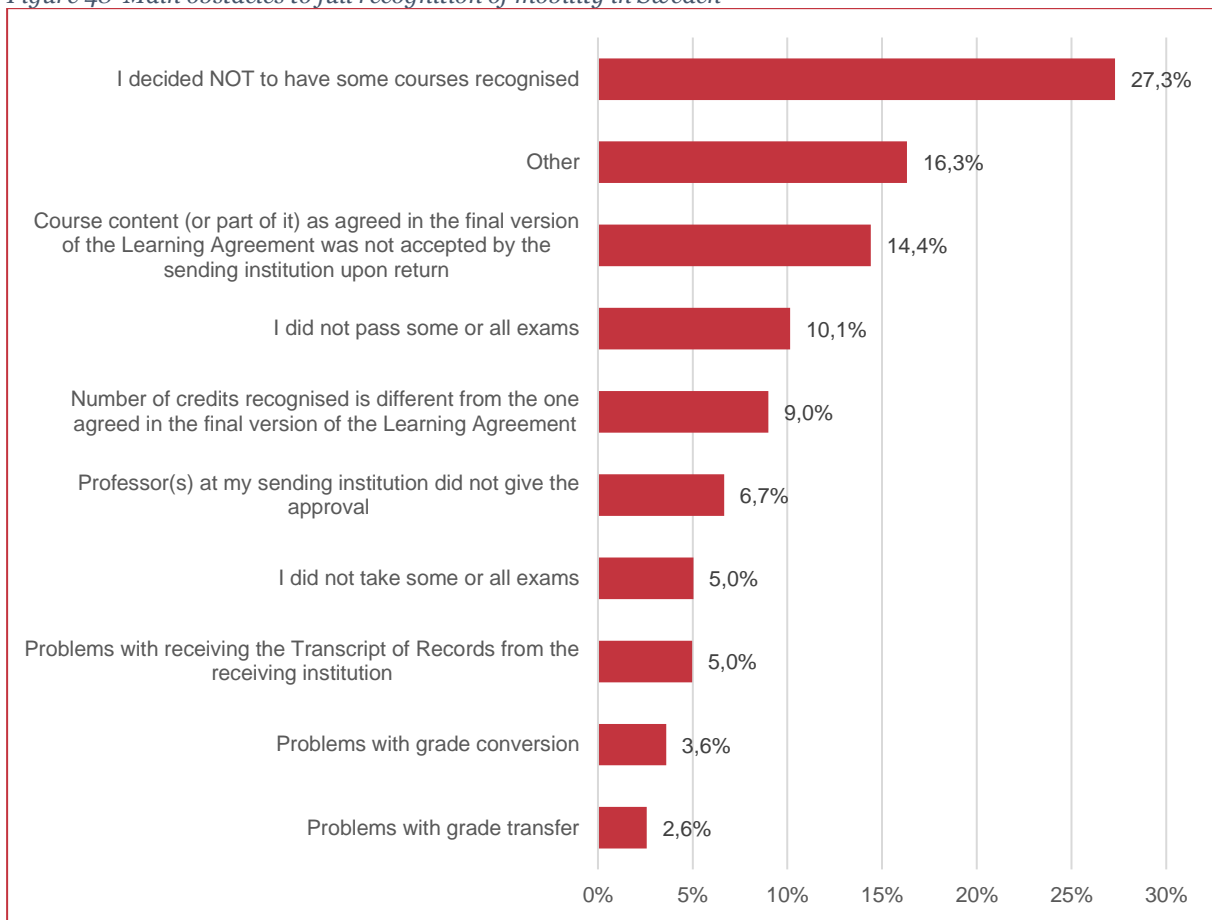
³⁶ Explanatory Report to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, European Treaty Series - No. 165, 1997, p. 15. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016800ccde6>

recognition' may appear, mostly between different partner universities, but also among faculties at the university itself. This was handled by thorough preparatory work before the students start their mobility period, to eliminate the risk that differences in the definition of 'full recognition' would later affect the recognition process. The preparatory work includes a dialogue between the student, the international coordinator and the course coordinator regarding the planning of what courses the student is required to take abroad. This is then stated in the Learning Agreement.

In an interview with an Erasmus+ coordinator at the Swedish University of Agricultural Science (SLU), the interviewee spoke about how different interpretations of 'academic recognition' and 'full recognition' exist, and that the definitions differ between institutions and countries. This can be illustrated by how much one ECTS credit is worth. In Sweden, ECTS credits correspond to the time the students must put into their studies for them to complete an educational component. The interviewee at SLU explained that in other countries, Spain for example, ECTS credits correspond to lecture hours. The magnitude of this problem has decreased over the years, but there are still differences.

Although the share of recognition in Sweden is high, there are still some obstacles to academic recognition. Figure 48 shows the main obstacles according to the students themselves. What differs Sweden from other analysed countries is that the main obstacle in students' opinion was that the largest obstacle for students not getting their credits recognised, 27%, is that the students themselves choose not to have some courses recognised. Two possible explanations when students choose not to have some courses recognised could either be that they did not get a passing grade or that they do not want to include some courses in their diploma. The third largest obstacle, 14%, was that the course content as agreed in the final version of the Learning Agreement was not accepted by the sending institution upon return. Since the Learning Agreement was signed by all parties in almost 99% of the cases, either prior to departure or within seven weeks of the start of the mobility period, it is remarkable that the third largest obstacle to recognition was that the Learning Agreement was not accepted upon return.

Figure 48 Main obstacles to full recognition of mobility in Sweden



Source: Technopolis Group, based on Participant Report data 2014–2016

The importance of the Learning Agreement may differ among the sending institutions. One interviewee mentioned the Learning Agreement not being legally binding, and that it only created an opportunity for the student to discuss what courses to take. Another interviewee emphasised the importance of the student following what was agreed in the Learning Agreement to simplify the recognition process.

There is consensus among the interviewed HEI representatives that one of the biggest issues in Sweden concerning recognition emerges when a student follows a professional education programme in which the entire curriculum is predetermined. The student then may have difficulty finding courses abroad that correspond to the mandatory curriculum. To give the students a chance of going abroad, some of the interviewed HEIs representatives explained that some programmes include a semester in the curriculum with free elective courses. However, for some professional education programmes or license degrees, the programme management wants to have an exemption from including a free semester in the curriculum, since they consider their programme to be of high quality, and they cannot ensure the same quality at other HEIs. One example is the forestry students at SLU, who have a very niched curriculum. Another example is psychology students at Uppsala University. They can only spend their mobility period at Groningen University, which has a special agreement with Uppsala University. These students then take courses of a total of 22.5 ECTS credits abroad, which is supplemented with 7.5 ECTS credits as a distance learning course. If the students choose to do their mobility period at another HEI, they cannot include the courses taken in their degree and must take additional courses upon return. This case is different compared to, for example, civil engineers, who have a more general curriculum and therefore more easily can find corresponding courses.

E.3 Highlights of good practices and key issues at HEI level

E.3.1 Large variation in process times for credit transfers between HEIs

All the interviewees explained that variation in process time for credit transfer between partner universities does not affect the level of recognition, but only delays the process. One example was a student who had to wait six months for her transcript of records to be transferred from the host institution to the home institution. This delay, however, did not ultimately affect her recognition. The reason for her transcript of records being delayed was that the host institution only produced transcript of records once every year.

According to most of the interviewees, the geographical scope of this problem is focused to the Mediterranean area. Many HEIs from this area take longer time transferring the transcript of records than institutions in western Europe. One interviewee said that the variation in process times for credit transfers from partner universities always has a natural explanation, and that the variation rarely cause any essential problems, especially not related to recognition itself.

E.4 Individual HEI examples

Four Higher Education Institutions are presented in the following section. According to the interviewed HEI representatives, there is no essential problem related to the recognition process. This consensus view is confirmed by the quantitative data as well. The high share of ECTS credits getting recognised by all Swedish HEIs lies within the range of 90–103%.

E.4.1 Swedish University of Agricultural Science

SLU has the lowest average share of recognised ECTS credits of all included Swedish HEIs, 90%. In 2015, the proportion of recognition was significantly lower, namely 77%. Again, 90% recognition is not really low in absolute numbers, but merely in comparison to other Swedish HEIs. Although SLU offers many professional education programmes, only six students from SLU did their mobility period as a mandatory part of their curriculum. Of these six students, one student had to redo some courses upon return to SLU. This student stated that he/she managed to complete all educational components but only gained partial recognition, because the final version of the Learning Agreement was not accepted by SLU upon return.

E.4.2 Karolinska Institutet

For Karolinska Institutet, the average share of ECTS credits getting recognised is 96%. Although this share is high, it is the fifth lowest share of recognition among all Swedish HEIs participating in the Erasmus+ programme. Mobility periods were mandatory parts of the curriculum for 23 students (11%). Almost all of these, 95%, expected to gain full recognition for their studies abroad. Only nine students answered the question regarding the obligation to take additional courses upon return to Karolinska Institutet. Of these nine students, two had to redo some or all courses. In total, regardless of whether the mobility period was a mandatory part of the curriculum, just over 28% of the students had to redo courses, which might be a point of attention, since almost 93% of the students stated that they successfully completed all their educational components. The main obstacle for recognition among these students varied. A few students stated that they successfully completed all the educational components but only gained partial recognition, because the course content as agreed upon in the final version of the Learning Agreement was not accepted by Karolinska Institutet upon return.

E.4.3 Jönköping University

Of the ten largest Swedish HEIs, Jönköping University has the best overall rate concerning the share of recognition of ECTS credits, students' expected recognition and the completion of all educational components, as well as the obligation to redo or take additional courses upon return. Jönköping University had the best overall rate among the seven largest HEIs and achieved 230 mobilities during the 2014–2016 period. Of the students from Jönköping University, 87% of the students stated that they

successfully completed all the educational components, and 15% had to redo some or all courses upon return.

E.4.4 Malmö University

Malmö University has a very high share of recognition and a low share of students obligated to redo courses upon return, 5%. During the three-year period of 2014–2016, Malmö University had 461 mobilities. Some of its programmes offer students a free semester for mobility, while other programmes have a stricter curriculum. At Malmö University, 91% of the outgoing students during the three-year period managed to successfully complete all educational components, and only 5% had to redo some or all courses.

E.5 Final remark

A possible explanation to the high levels of recognition and the relatively low share of students having to redo or take additional courses upon return at Jönköping University and Malmö University, could be that both universities have fewer professional education programmes than SLU and Karolinska Institutet. Instead, they have more general qualification programmes, which include a semester with free elective courses. The possibility to do a mobility period as a free semester with less directions regarding what courses the student can and cannot take, simplifies the recognition process and seldom creates any problems with the recognition itself. Another explanation could be that mobility coordinators and course coordinators at Jönköping University and Malmö University perform thorough preparatory work prior to the mobility period, which makes it clear for students what the requirements for recognition are.

Karolinska Institutet has many degrees that are license degrees such as Doctor of Medicine, psychiatrist and nurse. Such programmes, according to the Swedish Council for Higher Education and the interviewed universities, have a fixed curriculum, and it might be more difficult for these students to find corresponding courses. Even if the control beforehand is thorough, it might still be the case that the agreed courses are not recognised upon arrival at the host institution, which may result in the student having to redo courses when returning home.

Appendix F List of interviewed organisations

For the sake of anonymity of the interviewees, we list only the respective organisations where we have interviewed representatives.

Table 8 List of interviewed organisations

Organisation	Individuals interviewed
DENMARK	
Aarhus University	2
Roskilde University	2
University of Aalborg	1
Copenhagen Business School	1
University of Southern Denmark	1
University of Copenhagen	1
IT University of Copenhagen	1
Technical University of Denmark	1
VIA University College	2
Dania Academy	1
Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education (National Agency)	2
ESTONIA	
National Agency Archimedes	2
University of Tartu	4
Tallinn University of Technology	2
Tallinn University	2
Estonian Academy of Arts	2
Estonian University of Life Sciences	2
Estonian Business School	2
LATVIA	
University of Latvia	1
Riga Technical University	2
Latvia University of Life Science and Technologies	1
Riga Graduate School of Law	1
Daugavpils University	1
Rezekne Technology Academy	1
State Education Development Agency (National Agency)	1
POLAND	
National Agency	2

Gdański Uniwersytet Medyczny	1
Politechnika Łódzka	3
Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Katowicach	3
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu	6
Uniwersytet Jagielloński	6
SWEDEN	
Swedish Council for Higher Education (National Agency)	2
Malmö University	1
Swedish University of Agricultural Science	1
Linnaeus University	1
Uppsala University	2
Grand total	67

Appendix G Interview guide

Following the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) we need your acceptance to store personal information. We ask you to read through the information below and provide us with your written acceptance, before the interview, that we can store your contact information and interview notes.

We take notes during the interview but do not record anything. The notes are working material and will not be shared outside of the research team at Technopolis Group. Your answers may be quoted but will be anonymised. Your name will appear in a list of interviewees in the report.

We take steps to protect your personal information and follow procedures that comply with the European General Data Protection Regulation. For further information on your rights and how to contact us, please refer to Technopolis Group's [Privacy Notice](#).

Table 9 Interview guide

The issue/topic	Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large variation in process times for credit transfers between HEIs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has this issue been encountered? - Any differences between faculties or subject areas, or between regulated professions i.e. medical studies and other study programmes? - How frequent is the issue in their experience? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Has the issue grown in time (i.e. process times increased, or increase in the number of Erasmus+ participants affected by time variation in credit transfers) or decreased? ◦ Are there specific Erasmus+ mobility partner countries/universities with whom this issue is more common? - What are the causes for this issue? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ What are the (largest) time gaps encountered for credit transfers? ◦ Can the large time gaps be attributed to the institutions as a whole or are certain faculties, study fields, etc. displaying particularly long times for credit transfer? - How has this affected full academic recognition for students? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Have there been students whose academic achievements were not recognised because of this issue? ◦ Have there been students who had to redo courses because of this issue? - Has the issue had an effect on Erasmus+ enrolment (i.e. lower number of outgoing or incoming students)? - What steps have been taken to resolve the issue? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Was there support from the NA to try and solve this issue? ◦ Was the support sufficient?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HEIs do not fill out the Mobility Tool (MT) for students' realised ECTS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has this issue been encountered? - Any differences between faculties or subject areas, or between regulated professions i.e. medical studies and other study programmes? - How frequent is the issue in their experience? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Has the issue grown in time (i.e. more students find that HEIs did not fill out the mobility tool) or decreased? ◦ Are there specific Erasmus+ mobility partner countries/universities with whom this issue is more common? - What are the causes for this issue? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Can errors in filling out the MT be attributed to the institutions as a whole or is this issue more evident with certain faculties, study fields, etc? - How has this affected full academic recognition for students?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Have there been students whose academic achievements were not recognised because of this issue? ◦ Have there been students who had to redo courses because of this issue? - Has the issue had an effect on Erasmus+ enrolment (i.e. lower number of outgoing or incoming students)? - What steps have been taken to resolve the issue? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Was there support from the NA to try and solve this issue? ◦ Was the support sufficient?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different understanding/definition of what “academic recognition” and/or “full recognition” means by the parties involved in Erasmus+ mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has this issue been encountered? - Any differences between faculties or subject areas, or between regulated professions i.e. medical studies and other study programmes? - How frequent is the issue in their experience? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Has the issue grown in time (i.e. increase in the number of instances where a difference in understanding what “academic recognition” and/or “full recognition” means emerged) or decreased? ◦ Are there specific Erasmus+ mobility partner countries/universities with whom this issue is more common? - What are the causes for this issue? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Why did the issue arise if recognition of credit mobility had to be defined in the learning agreement with the students before their stay abroad? ◦ Was the issue encountered due to changes in the curriculum after the start of the mobility programme (i.e. when the Erasmus+ participant arrived at the new HEI)? - What differences in understanding “academic recognition” and/or “full recognition” arose? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Was the issue(s) with either sending or receiving universities? - Were there cases where these different interpretations affected full academic recognition for students? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Have there been students whose academic achievements were not recognised because of this issue? ◦ Have there been students who had to redo courses because of this issue? - Has the issue had an effect on Erasmus+ enrolment (i.e. lower number of outgoing or incoming students)? - What steps have been taken to resolve the issue? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Was there support from the NA to try and solve this issue? ◦ Was the support sufficient?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting data sources for academic achievements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has this issue been encountered? - Any differences between faculties or subject areas, or between regulated professions i.e. medical studies and other study programmes? - How frequent is the issue in their experience? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Has the issue grown in time (i.e. increase in the instances that conflicting data sources emerged) or decreased? ◦ Are there specific Erasmus+ mobility partner countries/universities with whom this issue is more common? - In what ways, what areas did the data sources conflict? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Who was responsible for the issue (sending institution or receiving institution)? - Were there cases where these conflicting sources affected full academic recognition for students? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Have there been students whose academic achievements were not recognised because of this issue? ◦ Have there been students who had to redo courses because of this issue? - Has the issue had an effect on Erasmus+ enrolment (i.e. lower number of outgoing or incoming students)? - What steps have been taken to resolve the issue? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Was there support from the NA to try and solve this issue?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Was the support sufficient?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E+ Dashboard does not always correspond to data in E+ link 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has this issue been encountered? - Any differences between faculties or subject areas, or between regulated professions i.e. medical studies and other study programmes? - How frequent is the issue in their experience? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Has the issue grown in time or decreased? ◦ Are there specific Erasmus+ mobility partner countries/universities with whom this issue is more common? - In what ways, what areas did the data on E+ Dashboard did not correspond to data in E+ link? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Who was responsible for the issue (sending institution or receiving institution)? - Were there cases where these conflicting sources affected full academic recognition for students? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Have there been students whose academic achievements were not recognised because of this issue? ◦ Have there been students who had to redo courses because of this issue? - Has the issue had an effect on Erasmus+ enrolment (i.e. lower number of outgoing or incoming students)? - What steps have been taken to resolve the issue? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Was there support from the NA to try and solve this issue? ◦ Was the support sufficient?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to full academic recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In your opinion, what are the most common and critical individual barriers to full academic recognition? - In your opinion, what are the most common and critical institutional barriers to full academic recognition?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anything else of importance that you wish to point out or underline? - Can we contact you again if further questions would arise or if anything seems unclear?

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