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MOBILITY RECOGNITION FOR INTEGRATION



MORIN



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WP 2. Mobility recognition via learning outcomes

D 2.2 – Literature review report on mobility recognition practices

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Abbreviations

| | |
|--|---------|
| AAB College | AAB |
| Annotated Grant Agreement | AGA |
| Associated partner | AP |
| Beneficiary | BEN |
| Biznesi College | BC |
| Conflict Resolution Plan | CRP |
| Coordinator | COO |
| Document, report | R |
| ESN Nis | ESN Nis |
| European Commission | EC |
| European University of Tirana | UET |
| Grant agreement | GA |
| International Advisory Committee | IAC |
| Palacky University in Olomouc | UP |
| Partner Teams | PTs |
| Partnership agreement | PA |
| Professional College, Tirana | KPT |
| Project Management Guidelines | PMG |
| Public | PU |
| Qendra ESN AL | ESN AL |
| Quality Assurance Committee | QAC |
| Risk Management Plan | RMP |
| Research and innovation | R&I |
| Sensitive | SEN |
| Steering Committee | SC |
| University of Nis | UNI |
| University St Kliment Ohridski Bitola | UKLO |
| University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali" | UV |
| Websites, patent filings, videos, etc | DEC |
| Work package | WP |
| Western Balkan | WB |





Abstract

This literature review report is a stand-alone paper written in the framework of MORIN, an Erasmus+KA2 CBHE strand 1 project (project no. 101128376), as deliverable (2.2.) within work package 2 “Mobility recognition via learning outcomes” of the project. The aim of this report is to review the grey literature, concerning the quite multidimensional impact of student mobility mainly in the countries of the project partners consortium from the students’ perspective (such as advantages, benefits, disadvantages, access and recognition) and from the organization perspective (regulation, procedures and management) – issues that may have been overlooked in the past. Although the focus remains WB, the report has covered EU related practices as a good practice or a reference. The report includes the latest and new research produced after the proposal of Morin Project was submitted or research that was unintentionally omitted when the proposal was written.

The report provides an overview of identified advantages and disadvantages, challenges and gaps, and suggestions on how to overcome them.

Keywords: mobility, learning agreement, recognition, study period abroad

1. Introduction

Globalization is currently transforming the fundamental parameters of the post-modern world, while EU integration remains a strategic priority and the most important challenge for WB countries. Supporting the education and potential of young people in the Balkans is crucial for the region's further development and a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence and reconciliation. (COM (2018) 65 final, Western Balkans). It is worth noting the operation context implying, in which EU has granted visa-free travel to the Schengen area for citizens of several Western Balkan countries, with ongoing dialogues to extend these benefits further, illustrating the EU's commitment to increasing mobility and people-to-people contacts. Together, as globalization and internationalization have become a kind of “dish of the day” for HEI-s, we have to remind ourselves that “Internationalisation is not a purpose in itself. It is a means to prepare students for learning, living and working in an intercultural society and an international labour market.” (NUFFIC, The Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education).

The Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION, ‘Europe on the Move’ defines that **Learning mobility**¹ (European Parliament 2021) means moving physically to a country other than the country of residence, in order to undertake study, training or non-formal or informal learning. It has a broad scope covering all types of learning mobility and learners and staff in all sectors of lifelong learning, including school, higher education, vocational education and training, adult

¹Note: The same **definition** of ‘learning mobility’ is used as in Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Erasmus+ programme





learning as well as the learning mobility of young people, youth workers and staff in the area of early childhood education and care, and in the area of sport. It also covers both intraEU and international learning mobility to and from the (Commission, "Europe on the Move" - learning mobility for everyone, COM (2023) 719 final, 2023/0405 NLE, page 1 2023).

Quite important is also the surrounding context where it is worth mentioning: (i) the European Year of Skills (9 May 2023 - 8 May 2024), with a view to promote skills policies and investments to match people's aspirations, needs and skills-set, including the skills acquired during mobility, with labour market needs and opportunities; (ii) Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (2021), a comprehensive, long-term cooperation strategy of the EU and the Western Balkans, includes an objective for improving learning mobility; (iii) European strategy for universities (18 January 2022) includes objectives to develop a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System to encourage automatic recognition of qualifications across Europe, and to support transparent and fair recognition of third country qualifications, including those of refugees, through the network of academic recognition centers and the EU transparency tools – the European Qualifications Framework and European Digital Credentials for Learning.

According to Leeds University² (Leeds 2024), grey literature is any information that is not produced by commercial publishers, such as research reports, working papers, conference proceedings, theses, social media posts, policy documents, reports produced by government departments, academics, business and industry etc. In line with the definition of grey literature, for the purpose of this research the partners were invited to inquire the above-mentioned items. In this research, the document analysis is made use of being placed in a comparative plan. Document analysis is a research method that is widely used in the social sciences given the ease and the large amount of information that can be gathered from the examination of certain documents. However, what the document analysis contains, depends on how the term document is defined and what it represents. For research purposes, document means data in written form about people and phenomena created during the life process (Matthews 2010). In this sense, every document is written or produced by a certain tool communication in a given context and for given purposes and as such the document cannot be analyzed without considering these other dimensions.

In this research, in line with its definition, document means surveys, reports, results from previous/recent projects, various recent studies that will be examined not only from the content point of view of but also for their function in creating mechanisms and operation in a tangible reality.

For a better reading of this research and its assessment, the involved literature inquired was categorized in the main pillars as follows: papers, articles, research /academic article, monography, reports, policy briefs, conference proceedings, policy paper etc.

² A more detailed definition may be found here <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/1110/resource-guides/7/grey-literature>





The grey literature research ran concurrently with two training workshops, aiming to build knowledge and approaches among WB staff and to increase awareness of the impact of student mobility and its recognition in the WB 6. This research focus was to look into grey literature on the impact of student mobility (surveys, reports, results from previous/recent projects, various recent studies), to identify aspects pertinent to the impact of mobility recognition on the student beneficiaries to be then, included in the self-assessment questionnaire. As the grey literature research was already carried out during the writing of the project proposal for the purposes of needs analysis and for outlining the project's action areas, now this the aim was to expand the scope of grey literature review to cover more recent studies/reports/surveys and to include them in the picture.

2. Literature review

Learning mobility has proven to be a highly valuable experience for people in gaining knowledge and skills needed for personal, educational, and professional development, and for civic engagement and social inclusion. Organising learning mobility is also a strong driver for education and training institutions and non-formal and informal learning providers to enhance the quality of learning they offer. In the context of the green and digital transitions, requiring a 'skills revolution', learning mobility contributes to tackling skills gaps, accelerates skills development and builds a strong sense of citizenship and understanding of common values across Europe and beyond (Commision, "Europe on the Move" - learning mobility for everyone, COM (2023) 719 final, 2023/0405 NLE, page 1 2023). The Proposal for a Council Recommendation, 'Europe on the Move' appears to be a powerful tool in this regard.

EU monitor (monitor 2023) analysing the Proposal emphasizes the importance of learning mobility and forwards ideas and proposals to enhance it. Among the issues mentioned is also the recognition by pointing out that "Another important barrier hampering mobility is the limited extent of automatic recognition of qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, as recognition procedures are often slow, information is not readily available, and are left to the discretion of individual institutions." It also emphasizes the promotion of automatic recognition. "The Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad stressed the importance of recognition of European qualifications and learning periods abroad in higher education and upper secondary education without any separate recognition procedure. The Implementation Report as well as the related Council conclusions, adopted on 26 May 2023, emphasize that substantial additional efforts are required to make automatic recognition a reality in the EU, or "The European strategy for universities (18 January 2022) includes objectives to develop a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System to encourage automatic recognition of qualifications across Europe, and to support transparent and fair recognition of third country qualifications, including those of refugees, through the network of academic recognition centers and the EU transparency tools – the European Qualifications Framework and European Digital Credentials for Learning." (Ibid.)





Besides the regulation at EU level as above mentioned, part of the research and analysis are also documents that provide a generic overview with regard to the procedural and management aspects of mobility including: definitions, trends, benefits, barriers and different types of student mobility (Káplár-Kodácsy 2020), a systematic literature review to investigate trends, research directions and key themes in the literature (Dandi Merga Gutema 2023), or directly related to a given country (whether EU or not) such as how UK universities manage outward students mobility programs together with the regulatory framework, the process of validation and recognition in Netherlands, overviews of country's program structure, practice and legislation (Austria, Sweden, Greece, Croatia, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Czechia, Nordic Countries³, Russia etc) (Mari Elken 2023).

From the literature review it is assessed that some of the researched materials put an emphasis and analyze an important element, the personal growth and employability as impacted from students mobility such as: students on mobility develop their skills for the labor market (Maria Antonietta Confalonieri, International quality mobility: validation of the intercultural experience in terms of soft skills and enhanced employability 2016), have a positive impact on workers' productivity, showcasing their contribution to a more skilled and adaptable workforce (Pinto 2020), impact their employability (the case of Erasmus students at the university of Patras) (Andreas Vasilopoulos 2021), (Cairns et al 2018), the impact on employability in Greece, Spain and Belgium (Papakota, Mouratoglu, 2024), bridge skill gaps and enhance graduates employability (Greba, 2023), mobility fosters personal growth and equips individuals with diverse competencies, from language proficiency to adaptability, enhancing their prospects in the job market (Fondas 2014).

Croce & Ghignoni (2024) investigate the effects of studying abroad through the Erasmus Programme on the probability of employment, including abroad, on the quality of jobs and on wage levels at different points in time after graduation. The results show that the participation in the EP improves employment prospects at least in the short term, as well as the quality of job, and has a positive long-term effect on the participants' ability to find a job abroad. The wages of participants are persistently higher than those of non-participants. Less advantaged groups also benefit from the Erasmus experience (Croce 2024).

Since the 1950s, the Council of Europe has established conventions and information networks to enhance student mobility and qualification recognition in Europe. It is worth mentioning that documents examined herein address one important element of mobility as well: the staff

³ Note: The article provides some insights into the Policy framing in the Nordic countries, which is used here as an analytical lens for analysing national policy documents on international student mobility over a 20-year period. The analysis finds that the Nordic countries have become increasingly different in how international student mobility is framed. In both Denmark and Finland, the economic frame has become prominent, yet containing somewhat different kinds of ambitions and concerns. In Sweden and Norway, the framing is still predominantly educational. The article challenges the assumptions of the Nordic countries as a cohesive region, and provides a critical exploration into how justifications for international student mobility include important national translations (Elken, Mari, Elisabeth Hovdhaugen, and Janneke Wiers-Jenssen. "Policy framing of international student mobility in the Nordic countries." *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 7, no. 1 (2023): 29-55).





involved whose training is of crucial importance, especially with regard to recognition of the learning mobility, particularly the necessity for enhanced training and awareness among university staff. The necessity for improved training and information dissemination among university staff in the Western Balkans becomes crucial for facilitating smoother recognition procedures. This is particularly relevant as countries in the region seek to enhance their integration into the broader European academic framework, making the implementation of practices in compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention a pivotal step towards ensuring equitable and transparent academic recognition across Europe, including the Western Balkans. Reports also indicate a lack of awareness among university staff responsible for recognition-related processes and decisions on the documents and tools developed to establish a common European approach to academic recognition. Against this background, it can be concluded that provision of clear information to and training of staff responsible for academic recognition is needed. They form a basic prerequisite for making recognition procedures in compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention across the European Higher Education Area a reality" (EUA n.d.). Main drawbacks identified– a lack of predeparture preparation, prolonged bureaucracy and delays in getting a ToR, decisions on mobility recognition being decided by individual teachers and not by bilateral practices. Recommendations: predeparture preparation is an area that requires particular attention. All institutions should expand their offer of predeparture preparation and training to cover intercultural and diversity issues and ensure that communication with host HEIs is frequent and that shared responsibilities are clearly mapped out and agreed upon. HEIs should ensure full recognition of learning outcomes, all relevant stakeholders, including administrative staff and teachers, should be made aware of how recognition processes are organized between Erasmus partner institutions (Cosmin I. Nada 2023).

The issue of the recognition is now a tangible reality, with its ups and downs. Recognition is an indicator of the validation of the learning mobility itself. Studies aim to describe the current situation in the recognition of foreign qualifications in higher education institutions in Europe and Asia. Next, to follow schemes, procedures and challenges for recognizing a joint degree will be analyzed (Angela Yung-Chi Hou 2017). This body of evidence supports the argument for academic recognition of international mobility experiences, showcasing their contribution to a more skilled and adaptable workforce (Pinto, 2022).

The literature identifies challenges in the academic recognition process, particularly regarding discrepancies between learning agreements and the actual availability of courses at host institutions. However, it also acknowledges the positive impact of standardizing mobility instruments (like ECTS, learning agreements, and grade conversion systems) across Europe, which has enhanced the reliability and recognition of academic credits. Moreover, examining learning outcomes closely can be beneficial, suggesting a more nuanced approach that could further improve the recognition process. This contrast underscores the importance of further streamlining and enforcing academic mobility frameworks to ensure the effective recognition of international study experiences and learning outcomes. Although learning agreements should safeguard students against non-recognition by their home institution, a commonly mentioned issue was the non-availability of the subjects included in the agreement on arrival at the host establishment, potentially threatening recognition. (Cristina Sin 2016).





Another point worth mentioning is the postulate that the most important goals of the Bologna Process are essentially the improvement of mobility and recognition at all levels of higher education. Curricula can be used to encourage mobility and recognition or to hinder them, but as an element of the education process they have been treated very unevenly during the development of the EHEA. Well-designed curricula are vital, but must not be misused. In the European climate of today, the development of regional, national or even international curricula is neither possible nor necessary. Mitchell reflects on the inconsistent treatment of curricula within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), emphasizing its pivotal role in enhancing or impeding educational mobility and recognition, crucial to the Bologna Process's aims, and argues that creating uniform regional, national, or international curricula is currently neither feasible nor required (T. N. Mitchell 2015).

Report on the HERE meeting held in Sarajevo with representatives of the EACEA, among the issues tackled there, considered Mobility and Student Exchange critical. The workshop focused on facilitating seamless student mobility, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and enhancing international collaboration. Possibilities of hybrid exchange, but also obstacles and problems related to visa and residence permit in countries outside of the EU. When focusing on virtual student mobility it is laid as the foundation for the future development of student mobility, emphasizing democratization and reducing exclusivity (Emma Sabzalieva 2022).

A Report by EACEA on the CBHE projects focuses on the impact and sustainability of the funded projects, including their inclusiveness and institutional development. It examines the modernization of HEIs, structural reforms, and technical capacities. The report also examines how EU projects have influenced national policy developments in the education sector, particularly through structural projects. The analysis aims to identify challenges and provide recommendations for future reference. Among other things, the report makes reference to the STINT project implemented in the Bosnian HEI. More specifically it is pointed out that "Within the STINT project, the model of recognition of students and staff mobility was developed and was later on adopted by all public HEIs in Bosnia Herzegovina" (EACEA 2020).

Besides Erasmus + being a pioneer of mobility in higher education, another case is the students' mobility in VET, made possible through different pilot programs financed from the Commission. Intervet project⁴, (Project 2024) in its document, Project Output and General Findings⁵ for a common reflection about Planting the seeds of learning mobility in the WB countries points out two important elements, the culture /mindset and the information and competences of the involved staff: "In order to make mobility a reality in these countries, there is the need to introduce the "culture of learning mobility" that Europe has developed since the launch of the Erasmus programme in the 80'. In particular it is essential to inform VET teachers and headmasters on learning mobility and increase their competences in the planning and managing

⁴ INTERVET Western Balkans was a 3-year pilot project for the internationalization of vocational education and training systems in Western Balkans. The project aimed at creating opportunities for learning mobility in the training centers of Western Balkans and improving the culture of learning mobility in the field of VET (<https://intervetwb.net/>)

⁵ The complete report may be found at <https://intervetwb.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Intervet-Final-Publication.pdf>





processes of mobility projects”. Also, an important pillar was to ensure the sustainability of the mobility scheme, a toolkit on how to successfully set up a mobility project containing the best practices resulting from the testing phase was prepared and made available to all practitioners in the Western Balkans. Although the implementation of this project was quite challenging, as being the first initiatives piloting learning mobility in WB in VET, and overlapping with the outbreak of Covid 19, the achieved results have been worth it. Special attention is paid to the definition of the learning outcomes by having a specific section “Description of the learning outcomes to be achieved during mobility”, in the Learning Agreement, including an Assessment of learning outcomes, validation and recognition⁶. The self-reported benefits and satisfaction with Erasmus + mobility of intermediate and higher technical students who participated in internships are also addressed in other reports such as Sisa, Penna, Garrido (Montero García-Siso 2023).

3. Discussion

Key recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Mobility stresses that the Western Balkans (WB6) faces significant challenges in mobility and migration, impacting its relationship with the EU. Addressing these challenges is crucial for regional development and integration. Research and innovation (R&I) and knowledge transfer in the WB6 can accelerate sustainable growth and convergence with the EU. Despite aligning R&I ecosystems with EU standards, support and investment in mobility-driven R&I are still needed (CSF. 2023). Students planning or undertaking learning mobility experiences abroad need to be secure in the knowledge that the learning outcomes acquired during their study period abroad will be recognized back in their home country and elsewhere. Recognition is therefore a practice that must become automatic and fully effective if learning mobility and academic exchange are to become the cornerstones of European higher education. Failure to meet these recognition objectives will mean that all credit mobility, including Erasmus+ exchanges, will be undermined (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice 2023/2023). Although the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) was launched in 1989, within the Erasmus programme, to support the recognition of credits earned by students during their studies abroad so that they count towards their degree in their home institution, it is not always used in a consistent way. The automatic recognition of credits, including within Erasmus+ credit mobility, is further hampered by administrative issues, for example, related to the use of ECTS documents or grading systems.

Another point is the postulate that the most important goals of the Bologna Process are essentially the improvement of mobility and recognition at all levels of higher education. Studies reflect on the inconsistent treatment of curricula within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), emphasizing its pivotal role in enhancing or impeding educational mobility and recognition, crucial to the Bologna Process's aims, and argues that creating uniform regional, national, or international curricula is currently neither feasible nor required (T. N. Mitchell 2015).

Also, students’ mobility needs to be carefully observed also for two other specific cases: (i) the case of VET Education, and (ii) with the reality imposed from Covid 19, the virtual mobility, which

⁶ <https://intervetwb.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Intervet-Final-Publication.pdf>, page 40, 41, 42.





lays the foundation for the future development of student mobility (Sabzalieva, Mutize, Yerovi 2022).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Fostering regional partnerships and exchanges within the Western Balkans and with EU member states is in the agenda of WB6, whereas emphasis is added to fostering a learning mobility culture, enhancing skills portability and mutual recognition of qualifications. However, “lessons learnt” from the literature review so far point out that: most of the focus is paid to Erasmus + Program being the most prominent and pioneer program. In simple words, people say work experiences abroad are useful, enriching, favor employability, development of one’s skills, etc. The most noted indication of the “Return of the Investment” from the learning mobility appears to be employability of the participants. The importance of mobility for study has already been emphasized in various studies/reports not simply as a life/intercultural experience, but most importantly, as related to career prospects/job opportunities (ter Horst, van der Moolen, Brandsma-Dieters 2017, 262-264; (PANAJOTI 2019), 199; Beharić et al. 2021, 5; ESN 2022, 34), as equipping students with employability skills (EC 2019, 15-19), the so-called ‘soft’, ‘transferable’ or 21st-century skills (ter Horst, van der Moolen, Brandsma-Dieters 2017, 262, 264), more recently referred to as ‘future-proof’ skills, with a whole European agenda for linking skills with the labour market, job and learning opportunities, mobility, recognized qualifications throughout 2023 (EC 2022). While employers do not have any particular regard for mobility, they do look for those skills students build when on mobility (ter Horst, van der Moolen, Brandsma-Dieters 2017, 265).

It is needed to foster and enhance the learning mobility culture creation process within HEIs and to get students and staff embrace it, being thus a “top-down approach” and user friendly. Mobility and exchanges should be commonplace, not rare, with precise indicators demonstrating it and its related benefits and recognition. It is therefore considered essential to properly upskill and train the involved staff in the fields of transnational mobility and to have clear internal management and administration procedures in place.

It is needed to devise methods or toolkits to make recognition a commonplace regulated process, rather than a personal subjective assessment, starting with a common denominator such as learning outcomes, as so evidenced from successful implemented mobility projects both in HE and VET. A validated and recognized mobility will increase quality in learning mobility, will attract more participants and will ensure the sustainability of mobility schemes in the long run both in the region and larger. Taking advantage of the autonomy vested on HEI-s, the involved parties could still make better use of common European legal instruments, tools and agreements, and at the same time develop common recognition denominator such as learning outcomes⁷.

⁷ In the case of Albania for example, the Albanian Government, has adopted Decision No. 41, dated 24.1.2018, “On the elements of the study programs offered by higher education institutions, as amended. The decision provides the mandatory template of the course syllabi, which includes inter alia, the section SUMMARY AND LEARNING OUTCOMES: (Summary is an abstract that gives the general idea of the course. The objectives of the course are the goals that the course tries to reach upon its finalization, which are divided into knowledge, skills and competencies that the student is expected to acquire at the end of the course), thus in other words, Learning Outcomes are





Defining clear learning objectives, together with assessment of learning outcomes and validation, will contribute to a better and more efficient implementation of mobility experiences, better fitting to the need for personal satisfaction and employability, and personal growth as well.

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mandatory requirement for each course taught in any Albanian HEI-s.





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