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# Grade conversion in the context of the recognition of learning mobility

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# **Grade conversion in the context of the recognition of learning mobility**

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## Executive summary

Grade conversion in the context of the recognition of learning mobility is paramount, given its impact on academic recognition and the broader implications for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The present report provides a comprehensive review of grade conversion challenges and practices in European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Addressing the complexities of grade conversion at national, institutional and student levels, the report explores the role in the conversion process of organisational practices, grading culture and student commitment. Furthermore, it delves into the consequences of inefficient grade conversion on student mobility.

This summary encapsulates the report's key findings, challenges and policy recommendations derived from an extensive review of the literature.

**Impact of diverse grading systems:** the sheer diversity in grading cultures and practices across institutions and countries poses significant challenges to an effective grade conversion process. These differences result in some HEIs lacking an understanding and acceptance of grading outcomes from various educational contexts, thereby impacting students' mobility and academic progression. The existence of cultural variations in grading, coupled with the inherent subjectivity embedded within the grading process, introduces notable challenges to achieving fair and objective grade conversion.

The diversity in grading systems within the EHEA adds complexity to the standardisation of the grade conversion process, resulting in inconsistencies and potential unfairness in the recognition of academic achievements. With regard to this, the European Grade Conversion System (Egracons) has emerged as a prominent tool to facilitate a fair and transparent grade conversion process. Its adoption by many institutions has significantly improved the quality and consistency of grade conversion practices in the EHEA.

**Transparency and communication issues:** despite the availability of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) grade system, many institutions continue to use their own conversion tables – a situation that results in a complex and non-standardised grade conversion process. A lack of clear communication from many HEIs regarding the steps involved in the grade conversion process contributes to misunderstandings and perceptions of unfairness among students.

Understanding the perceptions and expectations of students, professors and coordinators with regard to the grade conversion process is crucial in order to address communication gaps and refine the process.

The absence of a standardised grade conversion process also adds a substantial administrative burden to sending institutions. This necessitates the examination of each case individually, demanding significant time and effort to assess each student's academic history, the courses taken abroad, and the associated grading systems.

**Impact on students' mobility experiences:** an ineffective grade conversion process not only impacts students' overall degree outcomes, but also prompts significant concerns about the potentially negative consequences that courses taken abroad may have on their academic records. This not only shapes how students experience their mobility but also intensifies stress levels, adversely affecting their well-being. The perceived unreliability of the grade conversion process can further erode students' commitment to their academic responsibilities while abroad. Collectively, these issues contribute to a negative perception of international study programmes. Consequently, such factors may discourage students from participating in student mobility schemes.

**Student engagement and compliance:** it is not uncommon for students to lack a comprehensive understanding of all the steps necessary for successful grade conversion. Therefore, sending institutions should organise information sessions for students to ensure they understand the grade conversion process.

**Higher education institutions:** sending and receiving institutions should prioritise building trust and enhancing cooperation. It is crucial that they streamline administrative procedures to ensure fair and transparent grade conversion. Adoption of the ECTS grade system and/or the use of the Egracons grade conversion tool is highly recommended. Furthermore, HEIs should develop clear and detailed conversion tables, and make these easily accessible to students.

**Erasmus+ National Agencies:** it is recommended that Erasmus+ National Agencies increase awareness of grade conversion issues among HEIs via guidebooks, webinars and workshops on the subject. Moreover, the National Agencies should also promote the ECTS grading system, and encourage the adoption of the Egracons tool.

Effective management of the grade conversion process is essential to enhancing learning mobility across Europe. Addressing the challenges identified and implementing the policies recommended will contribute significantly to a more equitable, transparent and efficient system, ultimately fostering greater student mobility and academic exchange within the EHEA.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Grade conversion: a general overview

This report, commissioned by the European Commission (EC) and conducted by the European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE), offers a comprehensive analysis of grade conversion practices – the process of translating grades from one educational system to another – in European higher education, and examines their implications for learning mobility.

Learning mobility offers students the opportunity to gain international experience and knowledge. However, the challenge of grade conversion poses a significant obstacle to the seamless movement of students internationally between higher education institutions (HEIs). Progress on grade conversion is hindered by limited resources at national level, as well as underdeveloped system-level monitoring of recognition practices, administrative obstacles, perceptions regarding quality, and a lack of transparency (European Commission, 201).

Automatic recognition of qualifications and outcomes derived from learning periods abroad is crucial to the establishment of a European Education Area (EEA), as well as for enhancing mobility and improving access to quality education. Recognising this, the Council Recommendation of November 2018, issued by the European Commission (EC), aims to promote automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad (European Commission, 2018). The Recommendation sets clear objectives towards the establishment of automatic mutual recognition of qualifications in higher education, and on making progress towards the same for upper-secondary education qualifications for the Member States. The target set in the 2018 Recommendation was to be achieved by 2025 – one year from the writing of the present report.

A report presented by the Commission to the Council in 2023 classified the progress made by each Member State towards implementing the automatic recognition of learning periods abroad. In the higher education sector, Belgium, Denmark, Malta and the Netherlands stand out, with a full recognition rate of over 90 %. Conversely, Bulgaria and Hungary were noted as requiring improvements, both in their full recognition rates (below 70 %) and in the implementation of quality assurance measures to ensure full compliance with ECTS Users' Guide (European Commission, 2023a).

According to a report by the European University Foundation, only 80 % of Erasmus+ Programme students receive full recognition for their academic achievements after their experience abroad (European University Foundation, 2019). When it comes to other mobility programmes, the recognition process can be even more challenging. A survey conducted by the European Students' Union (2020) revealed that over half of the student unions that responded (57 %) found it relatively easy for students to get their credits recognised within the Erasmus+ mobility programme. However, when it came to credits obtained outside this programme, the recognition process remained a challenge, with 38 % of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the credit recognition procedures in such cases (ESU, 2020). Particularly notable difficulties in credit equivalence were highlighted by national student unions in Czechia, the Republic of Moldova, Slovakia and Germany, where the process was deemed non-transparent, overly complex, and excessively time-consuming (ESU, 2020).

Despite this, higher education has seen more progress in automatic mutual recognition than upper-secondary education (including vocational education and training), due to the framework provided by the Bologna Process and the efforts made by the EU member states and the EC in developing tools to facilitate automatic recognition (European Commission, 2023a). Among these tools, two stand out: the Diploma Supplement (DS) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (Vercruyssen and Proteasa, 2012). Both were created prior to the Bologna Process, and became crucial for its implementation (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). The DS is a tool designed to facilitate the recognition of academic qualifications, enhancing the comparability of



individuals’ qualifications and of study programmes for students across Europe. All students should receive this document upon completion of their studies – automatically, and free of cost – as it constitutes proof of the learning outcomes (EHEA, 2018).

In parallel, the ECTS aims to integrate diverse learning styles within the same educational programme or throughout lifelong learning. Hence, it has the potential to promote student mobility within a country, between countries, and between different types of institutions. The system is rooted in mutual confidence and trust among HEIs, and assumes comparability as to quality across the European higher education system (Wagenaar, 2019). Despite the prospective advantages the ECTS system could bring for grade conversion, its implementation has been challenged by the diverse grading cultures that exist in different countries (Jim, 2013; Nizam, 2019). The under-utilisation of the ECTS grading scale prior to 2009 prompted a new model to be developed, wherein each grade should be accompanied by the percentage of the individual’s peer group that were awarded that grade (Wagenaar, 2019). Table 1 shows the evolution of the ECTS model over the 30 years of debate about grade conversion.

**Table 1.** Evolution of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

<b>1990-1992</b>	<b>1993-2004</b>	<b>2004-2009</b>	<b>2009-present</b>
Percentages	Percentages + qualifications	Percentages	Percentages
1 = best 25 %	A = best 10 % =	A = best 10 %	Grade distribution according to a national system, expressed in % of successful students (based on defined reference group: ISCED-F classification)
2 = next 25 %	Excellent	B = next 25 %	
3 = next 25 %	B = next 25 % =	C = next 30 %	
4= final 25 % of successful students	Very Good	D = next 25 %	
	C = next 30 % =	E = final 10 %	
	Good	FX = fail	
	D = next 25 % =	F = fail	
	Satisfactory		
	E = final 10 % =		
	Sufficient (of successful students)		
	FX = fail		
	F = fail		

Source: Robert Wagenaar (2019), in *A History of ECTS 1989–2019*

Despite these efforts, the ECTS grading scale continues not to be used effectively, hampering the automatic recognition of learning outcomes abroad. Furthermore, teaching, learning and grading cultures differ significantly across Europe. What is deemed “excellent” performance in one country might only be considered “average” in another, due to differences in grading practices and philosophies that are deeply rooted in cultural and educational beliefs (Witte, 2011). Together, these elements contribute to the intricate challenges involved in grade conversion. Hence, it is crucial to clearly articulate local nuances with regard to learning and evaluation at institutional level, thereby providing essential guidance for students who are contemplating engaging in a mobility programme. In addition, the absence of automatic grade recognition may result in challenges when converting grades to the sending institution’s system. Students may need to complete additional assignments or exams to validate the transferred credits, potentially causing delays in their academic progress. Consequently, this hindrance could affect their willingness to participate in mobility programmes.

The present report delves into the multidimensional aspects of grade conversion within the context of learning mobility. By assessing the existing literature and the need for further exploration, this *ad hoc* EENEE report aims to provide valuable insights for potential future studies on the topic.

## Aim and research questions

The main objective of this *ad hoc* report is to review the available scientific and grey literature, reports, legislation and other relevant sources on the topic of grade conversion in learning mobility, in order to pinpoint the central impediments that contribute to the complexity of this process. The ultimate goal of this review is to produce evidence-based knowledge that can inform future policies to enhance grade conversion practices within the context of learning mobility. Special attention is paid to learning mobility within Europe – specifically, the Erasmus+ Programme – and, to a lesser extent, joint degrees and degree mobility. The report also aims to identify existing good practices that could be adapted and eventually replicated in other contexts.

The structure of the report is guided by the following research questions:

- What is the structural framework for grading systems within the European Education Area (EEA)?
- What are the primary obstacles encountered when dealing with ‘grade conversion in the context of recognition of learning mobility’, as evidenced in the existing literature?
- What are the trends and practices in grade conversion in the context of learning mobility across different European countries, according to the literature?

## Methodological approach

This report adopts a scoping review methodology, defined as an approach that aims to “identify and retrieve international evidence relevant to a particular question or questions, and to appraise and synthesize the results of this search to inform practice and policy” (Munn et al., 2018). Scoping reviews synthesise evidence and report on information to offer valuable insights to end users by elucidating the characteristics of a body of evidence. They deliver comprehensive summaries of research and policy domains, covering areas both broad and specific. Such reviews serve as a foundation for the shaping of research and policy agendas, precisely identifying knowledge gaps (Peters et al., 2021).

In accordance with the recommendation by Arksey and O’Malley (2005) that scoping reviews should be as comprehensive as possible, a search was conducted in September 2023 across three databases (Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar) using various terms relating to grade conversion, the automatic recognition of learning, and learning mobility. This search was carried out in English, Portuguese and Spanish, and covered the period from 2009 – the year in which the first version of the ECTS user guide was launched – to 2023. Two researchers independently conducted a screening process to evaluate the quality of the documents retrieved and to determine the extent to which they were relevant to the research questions guiding this review. After removing duplicates, the research team analysed the titles and abstracts of the remaining documents to ensure they met the required criteria. The full texts of each record were then read, with the exception of those that did not fulfil the required aspects regarding year of publication, type of document (e.g. opinion articles, press reports), and the quality of the record (to what extent it answered the research questions). A total of 46 documents, including peer-reviewed articles (n=21), book chapters/theses (n=7) and grey literature (n=18), were deemed suitable for inclusion in the review. The majority of the documents analysed primarily address grade conversion and the issue of automatic recognition within Europe, with a smaller portion also analysing these issues in Latin America and Asia. Most of the documents (53 %) used a qualitative approach. In the final list of references, we have used an asterisk (\*) to indicate the documents reviewed. Other articles not subject to review pertain to the methodology and, in some cases, to the introduction sections of this report. Annex A provides an overview of the documents retrieved.

In the sections of this report that follow, we synthesise and discuss the studies along with their key findings, and draw conclusions on the basis of this analysis.

### **Grading systems in the EEA, and their impact on learning mobility**

The Bologna Process has substantially improved the quality of intra-European learning mobility (Teichler, 2019). Learning mobility typically involves students or learners physically travelling to another country to attend part (“credit mobility”) or all (“degree mobility”) of a study programme at a different institution. It aims to enhance the quality of education and training by offering individuals the opportunity to experience different cultures, languages, teaching methods and work environments (European Commission, 2015). Another aspect of learning mobility involves virtual mobility schemes, in which students participate in exchange programmes through the use of digital communication and information technologies as part of their training. In addition, there is blended learning mobility, which combines physical mobility with a virtual component. This modality contributes to boosting learners’ digital skills and enhancing inclusivity by facilitating collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork – for example, for those students with barriers to physical mobility. In the context of these diverse learning mobility schemes, it is crucial to ensure the formal and automatic recognition of the credits earned during these mobility experiences, regardless of their modality, enabling them to count towards the students’ degrees. With respect to this, a commitment to fair grade conversion is imperative, as underscored by the European Commission (2015). Hence, the thorough process of grade conversion is a critical element in facilitating successful and effective learning mobility within the EEA. In addition, grade conversion plays a pivotal role in securing admission to further studies in various Member States (McGrath and Frearson, 2016).

Despite joint efforts made to establish an effective common grade conversion mechanism across Europe, it remains one of the most enduring obstacles to credit and degree mobility (López-Duarte et al., 2021; Rachaniotis and Agiomirgianakis, 2013). This section of the report analyses the structural framework of grading systems within the EEA, illustrating how the recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad serves as a fundamental building block towards fostering student mobility.

European countries employ various types of grading scales. These range from numerical scales (e.g. 0 to 20 in France) to letter grades (e.g. A to F in the UK), to descriptive terms (e.g. “Very Good” to “Fail” in Germany). The existence of these diverse grading systems within the EEA presents an additional challenge to achieving automatic recognition, necessitating an accurate conversion system to understand and compare grades between countries. Annex B provides a compilation of the national grading systems used in EEA Member States, and explores their differences. In addition to the differences seen across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), differences even exist within the same country. For instance, in Slovenia and Latvia, while some institutions adopt a pass/fail system, others use a grading scale system.

Dahlgren et al. (2009) argue that grading systems influence the type of assessments given to students, which subsequently affects their preparation strategies. In their study, the authors analysed the performance of 402 students and found that 75 % of those enrolled in a pass/fail system firmly believed that such a grading system encourages effective learning and collaboration between students. Conversely, among those enrolled in multi-level grading systems, only around a third shared a similar viewpoint. Moreover, it was found that students in multi-level grading systems were more likely to favour reviewing previously set assessment tasks as their primary approach when preparing for a new assessment, than those enrolled in pass/fail systems (Dahlgren et al., 2009). These findings suggest that pass/fail system can encourage students to focus on mastering the subject rather than competing for grades, which can reduce stress and promote a more learning-centred environment. However, it also poses challenges that institutions must navigate carefully in order to maintain academic rigour and student motivation.

### **Credit mobility**

Under the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027, the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) is an accreditation that provides a quality framework for Erasmus+ activities, focusing among other things on clarity and transparency in credit mobility and grade recognition. All HEIs participating in the programme must have ECHE accreditation (European Commission, 2020). As of the time of writing this report, 5,638 institutions have ECHE accreditation (see Annex B).

According to the ECHE guidelines, HEIs are required to have transparent frameworks for recognition, detailing the terms and practices of their credit recognition procedures. These frameworks must accommodate unique situations and ensure that credits earned abroad are recognised as part of a student's degree without the need for additional coursework or exams. The ECHE also establishes that HEIs have to provide information about their grading systems, including the statistical distribution of grades across faculties or programmes. In light of the challenges involved in grade conversion, HEIs participating in Erasmus+ 2021-2027 are required to commit to the correct use of the ECTS grading scale and the automatic issuance of a DS (European Commission, 2020). The implementation of such commitments is monitored by Erasmus+ National Agencies. According to the ECHE guidelines, because timeliness is crucial in the recognition process, the timeline for accepting and processing transcripts of records post-mobility should not exceed five weeks after the end date of the mobility. Studies have found that successful implementation of the mobility tools presented in the ECHE (i.e. the Diploma Supplement, quality assurance and ECTS) correlates positively with increased Erasmus+ Programme mobility rates (Jørgens, 2017).

A study conducted by Melin et al. (2019) analysed the academic recognition of students who participated in the Erasmus+ Programme between 2014 and 2016. During the period analysed, the authors found an increase in total academic recognition from 76 % to 81 % in the countries surveyed – Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Sweden. However, academic recognition still faces challenges, particularly with regard to the quality of the courses or activities to be recognised. Specifically, many institutions still insist that courses completed abroad must be identical to those taken at the sending institution, confusing equivalence with the comparability of learning outcomes (Melin et al., 2019).

In rare cases, institutions in EU Member States or third countries associated with the Erasmus Programme+ 2021-2027 may use compatible systems if they have a valid justification. However, they must also provide detailed information about the measures they will take to implement the ECTS as soon as possible (European Commission, 2020). Another alternative is the use of digital mobility management tools, such as the Egracons platform – a freely accessible and user-friendly web-based application for grade conversion, open to all European HEIs and beyond – designed to allow streamlined and automatic recognition procedures (European Commission, 2020). For international mobility outside the EHEA, if the ECTS is not used, a compatible credit system based on student workload and learning outcomes is recommended.

Regional agreements can be used to enhance automatic mutual recognition for both credit and degree mobility and to promote wider cooperation within the EHEA. When examining the recognition process for learning outcomes obtained abroad, Đaković (2014) found that credit recognition is more effective when HEIs work within the framework of a consortium. Recognition Matters (Rec-Mat), a project funded by the EU and involving Brazil, Argentina, Belgium, Spain, France and Portugal, aimed to improve credit mobility between Latin America and Europe by streamlining the credit recognition process. The project focused on building the capacities of Latin American HEIs to establish fairer and more transparent recognition processes. A significant challenge highlighted by the project lay in the disparities within educational systems, which affect recognition not only between Latin America and Europe but also within Latin America itself, where the higher education system is less integrated than its European counterpart. For instance, in countries such as Brazil and Argentina, credit systems are structured around class hours rather than the student workload model employed by the ECTS (Rec-Mat Conclusions Paper, 2020). This

incongruity can instigate concerns both with regard to student mobility, and with partner universities. Apprehensions arise regarding the relevance and quality of courses pursued abroad, raising crucial questions about their alignment with the learning outcomes set by the sending institution (Cheng et al., 2020).

### **Degree mobility**

In the process of converting grades for diploma recognition – as is the case when an entire degree programme is undertaken abroad – various stakeholders play a crucial role. These include the student’s home and host countries, the institution that conferred the previous degree, the foreign institution at which the student has pursued or is pursuing further education, and the student themselves.

At national level, each European National Information Centre (ENIC) or National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) is part of the ENIC-NARIC network, which supports academic qualification recognition across borders, aiding student mobility and academic collaboration in Europe (UNESCO and Council of Europe, 2022). This network has created tools, guidelines and training for HEIs to support them in the diploma recognition process. The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (third edition, 2020) is a significant document presenting comprehensive guidelines for the recognition of foreign qualifications. It has been developed by the Dutch ENIC-NARIC as part of the European Area of Recognition Project, and provides a practical approach for evaluators at HEIs, the principles of which they can apply in their daily work. The manual is an essential tool for evaluators to ensure a fair and consistent recognition process. Given the relevance of ENIC-NARIC centres to the dynamics of the internationalisation of higher education, the Council of Europe has suggested strengthening their role by providing them with more resources (European Commission, 2018).

Currently, ENIC-NARIC centres are making efforts to create digital tools such as Q-Entry and other qualification databases, the aim of which is to simplify the recognition process for institutions. By enhancing cooperation between national databases across Europe and drawing inspiration from successful models (for instance, the Kwalifikator database, ANABIN and CIMEA) it will be possible in the future to issue personal Recognition Statements for automatic recognition. This would significantly reduce the administrative work for both applicants and institutions (European Commission, 2023a).

The Bologna Process, with 49 member countries<sup>1</sup> along with the European Commission and consultative members such as UNESCO, EUA, ESU, EURASHE, ENQA, Education International and BusinessEurope, plays a crucial role in facilitating the automatic recognition process by enhancing cooperation among its member countries. The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), is the executive structure supporting the Bologna Process in-between Ministerial Conferences. The most recent conference in 2020 resulted in the Rome Communiqué, which focused on the recognition of academic qualifications and study periods. Key points included ensuring the automatic recognition of qualifications and study periods within the EHEA, advocating for legislative changes to support this recognition, and strengthening the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC, 1997) (EHEA, 2020). This document provides a legal framework for cross-border academic recognition, emphasising flexibility in the assessment of foreign qualifications. It suggests that only substantial differences in level, workload, quality, profile and learning outcomes should affect the recognition process (UNESCO, 2022). The Convention places the burden of proving any such substantial differences on the receiving country’s recognition authority. This approach marks a shift from expecting foreign qualifications to closely match domestic ones, to a more inclusive recognition of non-substantial differences (European Commission, 2015). Concerns have been raised regarding countries that have fully implemented the LRC but lack a clear decision-making structure either at system level or the level of individual HEIs. This situation creates ambiguities in the application process, and raises the potential for appeals if applicants perceive violations of the LRC. There is

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ehea.info/page-full\\_members](https://www.ehea.info/page-full_members)



also a need to address how automatic recognition practices should be to assessed and categorised, including differentiations between comprehensive recognition across the EHEA and regional or subset recognitions (BFUG, 2023). Furthermore, the BFUG is committed to reviewing legislation and practices for the fair recognition of qualifications held by refugees and displaced persons, in line with the LRC (Council of Europe, 2017). To date, there are clear legislation and procedures for recognising refugees' qualifications in 21 systems, including Italy and Malta, which are the major entry points for refugees into Europe (European Commission, Eurydice, 2020).

Another key instrument that has emerged from the Bologna Process is the qualifications frameworks (Jörgens, 2017). Initially, only a few national systems possessed National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), but aligning these to a European framework became an important objective to support structural reforms. These initiatives help to increase transparency and trust in automatic recognition, with quality assurance playing an important role. According to Szabó and Tück (2018), there are many transparency tools in the EHEA that have been built around the general idea of excellence and performance indicators, but which ignore the diversity of higher education systems.

In joint programmes, the agreed mobility schemes and rules for credit recognition are set by partner institutions. Learning Agreements (LAs) serve as good practice to clarify the student's learning pathway, although they are not mandatory for joint programmes (European Commission, 2020). According to Hou (2020), the main concerns with joint programmes relate to the number of credits required for theses or courses, along with national requisites for academic staff and programme duration beyond the Bologna requirement. Hou, Morse and Wang (2017) stress the importance of collaboration between national recognition bodies and quality assurance agencies. They call for more flexible and coordinated international approaches to accommodate various educational systems and legal frameworks.

In conclusion of this section, efforts to improve the diploma recognition process across the EHEA underline the critical roles played by ENIC-NARIC centres, digital tools for simplification, and the frameworks of the Bologna Process. The challenges identified, from the need for clear decision-making structures to specific concerns with joint programmes, highlight the necessity for a collaborative and nuanced approach. Efforts to refine recognition processes and improve quality assurance across diverse educational systems are essential steps towards facilitating the recognition of learning outcomes from degree mobility, and ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities.

## **Chapter 2: Challenges of grade conversion and its implications for European student mobility**

This section of the report systematically reviews the primary obstacles encountered when dealing with grade conversion in the context of the recognition of learning mobility. Moreover, it also presents the trends and practices in grade conversion within the context of learning mobility across different European countries. It focuses on how the grade conversion process unfolds at different levels, and provides evidence of the key challenges involved in grade conversion within the process of learning mobility. Lastly, the chapter analyses the impact of grade conversion on the automatic mutual recognition of the outcomes of learning periods.

### **National level**

Despite the progress that the Bologna process has made to improve student mobility by facilitating the recognition of qualifications, the fact that education systems across Europe differ greatly (Teichler, 2019) means that some major obstacles hindering student mobility can still exist at national level.

One of these is the fact that considerable variations exist between the grading systems used in different national higher education systems, in line with their pedagogical and cultural practices. A national grading system is instituted to provide a standardised benchmark for assessing the quality of degrees granted by various HEIs in a given country. Adhering to uniform ranges of marks within a national higher education system ensures a high level of comparability across institutions in terms of standards. The underlying assumption of a national grading system is that if all institutions adhere to the same grade allocation rules, it will lead to national consistency in academic standards.

However, a national grading system, while aiming to uphold academic standards, is not foolproof due to various underlying factors within the educational system. In the UK, for example, external assessors strive to ensure consistency and comparability between HEIs. However, the issue of grade inflation underlines the intricate challenges involved in regulating academic standards. According to the British Office for Students (2019), the percentage of students achieving a first-class honours degree in the UK increased from 16 % in 2011 to 29 % in 2018, prompting concerns in the public discourse. This surge in first-class degrees drew sharp criticism, leading the British government to issue stern warnings to universities against "unfair practices". Unsound grading practices – exemplified by grade inflation – not only cast doubt on the comparability and quality of academic achievements, but also raise questions about the credibility of HEIs. This is especially crucial in the context of competitive job markets, or for individuals seeking to pursue further academic endeavours, where the grading standards of a given institution could profoundly impact a student's future opportunities. Moreover, the perception of grade inflation can tarnish an institution's reputation, especially for those HEIs engaging in student exchange programmes and bilateral agreements. Trust between HEIs here is paramount, as the perceived integrity of grading systems directly impacts the effectiveness of such collaborations.

The country report produced by the Egracons project illustrates this variation by describing the grading practices of HEIs taking part in Erasmus+ mobility from 27 European countries, highlighting their distinctive characteristics and encompassing factors such as grade range, grading curves, grade distribution patterns, prerequisites for overall averages, the existence of specific grade bands, variations across disciplines, and more (Egracons Project, 2015). The report outlines challenges to the fair conversion of grades given abroad in the context of learning mobility. For instance, in Germany, four grading systems coexist, and there is no national law on grading systems. Each federal state is responsible for regulating the grading system within its jurisdiction. Another distinctive feature of the German grading system is the variety of different pass grades it offers (four or six). In contrast, systems in countries such as Sweden and Czechia typically have only two or three pass grades (Peksen and Zeeman, 2019). In Estonia, all HEIs use a unified grading system established by the Ministry of Education and Research (Egracons Project, 2015). Furthermore, some countries such as Lithuania and Latvia use a ten-point scale, while Portugal adopts 20-point scale, and the Italian grading system is based on a scale of 0-30 (Baptista et al., 2022; Giada et al., 2014). Countries also differ in terms of grading practices. Under the 20-point French system, grades 18 to 20 are virtually unattainable; hence, the lower part of the scale prevails. Conversely, in Italy, higher grades are awarded to students more easily (Lieponiene and Kulvietiene, 2011).

The grading system employed within a country varies in terms of its application of relative or absolute grading methodologies. Under an *absolute* scaling system, a student's individual performance in terms of their level of information, competence and understanding is assessed against, adhering to a standardised criterion. Conversely, a *relative* scaling system assesses students' achievements in relation to the performance of peers within the same class (Sadler, 2009). This mismatch can give rise to issues. For example, Denmark has adopted an absolute scaling system, and does not recognise grades achieved in relative scaling systems. Consequently, grades from foreign countries are simply registered as "pass" or "fail", without being factored into a student's overall average grade for graduation. As a result, academic performances from abroad may not receive

the same level of consideration within the Danish HEI system (Huber, 2012). However, noting that students studying abroad encountered additional hurdles throughout their mobility, a UK National Agency report on mobility practices in the UK from 2019 suggested that implementing a pass/fail grade conversion model could alleviate stress and address students' concerns about receiving lower grades than they might have earned if they had remained at their original institutions in their home countries. Challenges encountered during mobility include language barriers, searching for accommodation, limited social networks and adapting to new cultures – all of which could impact students' academic performance (Erasmus+ UK National Agency, 2019).

Lastly, grading scales are also applied differently even within the same country, depending on the institutions and subject areas concerned (Lieponienė and Kulvietienė, 2011). Factors contributing to variations in grade allocation encompass the choice between product and process criteria, the frequency of employing performance assessments, and the framing criteria for grading (Lipnevich et al., 2020). Even some joint degree programmes, such as Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree programmes (EMJMs), are affected by differences in grading systems (relative vs absolute). These different grading systems require several grade conversion procedures, which may result in some inconsistencies. For example, the 'Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education' (MARIHE) created by the University for Continuing Education Krems/Austria (UWK), Tampere University/Finland (TAU), Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences Osnabrück/Germany (UASO), Eötvös Loránd University/Hungary (ELTE), Beijing Normal University/China (BNU) and the Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology/India (TIET), adopted the ECTS grade scale. However, the diversity in course grading practices among the partners posed significant challenges in converting national grades to ECTS and subsequently adapting them to another partner's grading scale. (Vellamo et al., 2023). In the case of the Joint International Master in Smart Systems Integration, different requirements for the awarding of the "distinction" recognition exist, based on the local systems of the consortium's members. These differing requirements, however, vary in terms of their complexity. For instance, in the Scottish partner institution, Heriot-Watt University (HWU), a comprehensive set of criteria was in place, with the most crucial being that the weighted average mark throughout the MSc programme is equal to or greater than 70 %. Similarly, at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME), the corresponding requirement is that the weighted average grade is equal to or greater than 4.5. In contrast, the University College of Southeast Norway (HSN) had no specific procedure for awarding a distinction. The solution involved leveraging the criterion for MSc qualification for admission to a PhD programme, which requires a weighted average of B or higher. This calculation includes numerical averaging by converting A-F grades to the corresponding numbers (5-0) (Aasmundtveit et al., 2018).

### **Institutional level**

Grades, the most conventional measure of learning outcomes in higher education, are influenced by various socially driven factors, resulting in substantial disagreements among assessors in their grading practice. For instance, there are different ways in which course grades can be translated into indicators of performance. It can be determined either exclusively through final semester examinations, or by aggregating marks or scores from various assessment events (self-assessment, coursework, class participation) held at different intervals during the teaching period (Sadler, 2010). Moreover, in some contexts, attendance requirements are also a relevant part of student assessment (Macfarlane, 2015). Hence, variations in weightings present challenges in accurately equating grades from different educational systems. The grade conversion process adds to these already existing complexities.

Differences in assessment styles between HEIs are a problem affecting grade transfers, and can also impact students' performance and learning practice (Cheng et al., 2020; Witte, 2011). In brief, research has demonstrated that different types of assessments



shape students' priorities regarding literature, learning strategies, and their retention of knowledge (Dahlgren et al., 2009). However, most grade conversion processes, including the ECTS grading system, do not take into account that international students may have diverse experiences regarding the assessment process and educational objectives at the receiving institution (Thole, 2012).

The grading practices of teachers towards mobile students may also have a significant influence on their final grades. Due to uncertainty regarding appropriate grades for this specific cohort, teachers often rely on the average performance of all mobile students rather than assessing each student's individual achievements (Varela, 2016).

Specifically, in the case of Europe, although the ECTS permits credits earned at one HEI to be applied towards a qualification pursued at another, and offers a grading scale that provides a basis for comparability, there is still no unified and international grade conversion system, thereby allowing excessive subjective interpretation in the grade conversion process. Moreover, according to Kunze and Geye-Schulz (2012, p. 564), publishing ECTS grades together with local grades for grade conversion purposes is a multi-level process that involves a "complex interaction of politics, legal and organisational aspects, statistical issues, and IT requirements", leading to both the poor implementation of ECTS as well as a simple refusal to adopt it. Similarly, the Erasmus+ UK National Agency highlights that the creation and maintenance of precise grade conversion scales imposes additional administrative challenges on the staff managing the mobility process (Erasmus+ UK National Agency, 2019).

Across Europe, most institutions have established their own procedures for recognising foreign qualifications and converting grades, rather than applying the grading standards of the ECTS regime. As a result, the grading conversion process in many cases is cumbersome and time-consuming, involving multiple departments or units, which not rarely results in contradictory approaches. This was the case at the University of Tübingen, as reported by Huber (2012). While a general guideline had been issued by the international office, certain departments were found to implement their own processes, contradicting the overarching orientations outlined in the main document. This practice was also identified in the ESN STORY 2014 report, which revealed that in the Erasmus+ Programme, grades are typically converted using a grade distribution table established by the institution, reflecting the individual perspectives of Erasmus coordinators, heads of department, or even teachers with regard to translating foreign grading criteria into local terms (Alfranseder et al., 2014). Adding such a subjective dimension to the grade conversion process is extremely problematic, given the existence of the bilateral/Learning Agreements that are put in place to facilitate this procedure. As a result, in many cases, the grade conversion process is deemed neither fair nor transparent by students. The ESN Prime report (Dicle et al., 2010) reveals that only a limited number of HEIs provide students with conversion tables for grades and credits before they start their mobility). In some instances, despite the LA being signed prior to the mobility, the grade conversion procedure is often omitted from the document (Dicle et al., 2010). This lack of transparency over the grade conversion process leads to the perception among some students that grades have been inaccurately converted during the recognition process (Alfranseder et al., 2014). As a result of this inefficient communication standard between sending institutions, 33 % of the students who went on Erasmus+ had to obtain information concerning grade transfer by themselves (Alfranseder et al., 2014).

Communication problems between sending and receiving institutions are also identified in the literature. Technopolis Group's report "Analysis of academic recognition for higher education students studying abroad with the Erasmus+ Programme" indicates that some receiving institutions take extra time to process "failure" grades, or even do not notify the sending institutions, as they do not consider it relevant. Hence, conclusion of the mobility grade conversion process remains in a state of limbo, which can negatively affect students (Melin et al., 2019).

In the 2019 report by the Erasmus+ UK National Agency on mobility practices in UK, a lack of confidence in the grading procedures of foreign institutions is indicated as a significant

barrier to a smooth grade conversion process. Sending institutions may choose not to accept the grades obtained abroad, or may downgrade them before including them in students' records (Erasmus+ UK National Agency, 2019). Consequently, some sending institutions also constrain the validity of the conversion tables to specific levels – for instance, either Bachelor's or Master's – or to specific courses, mandatory or optional (Huber, 2012). Furthermore, the extensive bureaucratic procedures concerned, which involve substantial paperwork and multiple interactions with various offices at both sending and receiving institutions, contribute to the inefficiency of this process. In numerous instances, the individuals responsible for signing essential documents or issuing official authorizations are not easily reachable, leading to delays (Dicle et al., 2010). It is not uncommon for delays to occur in providing students with their transcript of records (ToR) on the part of the receiving institution, and sometimes students' home institutions prolong the process after receiving all of the required documents (Dicle et al., 2010). Several factors contribute to this challenge, including unfamiliarity of staff with the grade conversion process; the bureaucratic, cumbersome and time-consuming nature of the process itself; difficulties in obtaining information on grade scales from partners; and, in some cases, the necessity for professors' approval before final recognition. Lastly, incompatibility in the study programme between the receiving and sending institutions also emerges as another obstacle to grade conversion (Dicle et al., 2010). Even when the student possesses all of the documents issued by the receiving institution that are required for the grade conversion procedure, the grade transfer process may not occur. This may be due to various factors ranging from rigid degree programmes with limited flexibility, to issues of trust between collaborating universities and recognition decisions being subject to the discretion of individual professors (ESN, 2023). In such cases, the course taken abroad may be considered incompatible with the course at the sending institutions, despite the existence of a bilateral/Learning Agreement. Similarly, the Technopolis Group report also highlights discrepancies in course content as obstacles to course recognition, thereby hindering any possibility of grade conversion (Melin et al., 2019).

### **Student's level**

The ECHE 2021-2027 states that, by agreeing to the principles of the Charter, HEIs undertake to ensure that students will receive clear and transparent information on recognition and grade conversion procedures. Nevertheless, the literature highlights that certain institutions emphasise that students share responsibility for ensuring that the requirements for grade conversion are met (Dicle et al., 2010; Melin et al., 2019).

While there is limited information on how students themselves might impede their own grade conversion process, the insights provided by the ESN Prime Report 2010 (Dicle et al., 2010), Erasmus+ UK National Agency report (2019) and the Technopolis Group report (Melin et al., 2019) offer different perspectives on this process that are relevant to this discussion.

The ESN Prime Report 2010 (Dicle et al., 2010) suggests that in certain instances, either due to inadequate guidance regarding the implications of the learning agreement for their grading recognition or because they have not paid attention to all of the details involved in the recognition process for their studies abroad, students fail to properly fulfil the learning agreement. For instance, some students may attend courses that are different from those accepted by the sending and receiving institutions, doing so without prior consultation. In other cases, students themselves may fall short of providing all of the necessary documents on time to the receiving institution, even when they are oriented by their sending institution. This delay in submitting necessary documents hampers the recognition process, as essential steps that should have been completed earlier are then pending and need to be addressed at that stage. Meanwhile, the 2019 Erasmus+ UK National Agency report on mobility practices in the UK highlights another challenge in the process – students' lack of understanding of the grade validation process. Mostly, this lack of comprehension stems from the complexity of the procedure and difficulties in accessing

clear information about it. Consequently, students often question the process without a solid rationale (Erasmus+ UK National Agency, 2019).

Both reports highlight instances in which some students face challenges in successfully completing the courses specified in the final version of their learning agreements. For example, they may not pass exams, and the opportunity to re-take the exam at the receiving institution arises only after their period of mobility has already concluded. While the grade conversion can occur at a later time, such a situation does cause a delay in recognising the entire mobility period. In other cases, as disclosed by the Jagiellonian University in the Technopolis Group report, students sometimes request not to have their grades transferred after failing their exams, so they can retake the exams at their sending institution to improve their grades (Melin et al., 2019).

Lastly, some students choose to participate in the Erasmus+ Programme to enrich their international experience and enhance language and cultural skills, even after fulfilling the required credit hours for graduation. Consequently, they opt not to initiate the grade recognition process, since they do not need these additional courses on their transcripts.

### **Impact of challenges in grade conversion on student mobility**

Souto-Otero et al. (2013) conducted a comprehensive analysis of barriers to participation in the Erasmus+ Programme across seven countries. Notably, both participants and non-participants identified issues pertaining to system compatibility in grade conversion, and anticipated challenges in relation to credit transfer as being particularly formidable barriers. These insights underline the persistent challenges that remain, despite the ongoing initiatives within the Bologna Process and the Erasmus+ Programme. It highlights that, in practical terms, the realisation of recognition remains elusive despite concerted efforts. The absence of a uniform process for the direct and automatic conversion of grades received in the context of learning mobility within the EEA leads to difficulties in ensuring a fair and transparent grade conversion process, which is one of the primary goals behind the ECTS grading system. In many cases, grade conversions are done at the discretion of heads of department or teachers, and students are often not well informed about the process (ESN, 2011; 2014).

Inconsistent grade conversion has a detrimental effect on academic records, and can hinder a student's prospects of continuing their studies, such as applying for a Master's programme. It can also hamper their chances in the labour market. This is regrettable, especially considering that international experience should ideally enhance students' opportunities for both further education and entry into the workforce (Thole, 2012).

It is not rare for students to feel that their grade conversions are incorrect, leading them to question whether it was worth jeopardising their academic record to study abroad. The uncertainties surrounding the grade conversion process can serve as a deterrent, either discouraging students from participating in international mobility or leading to higher withdrawal rates. This is due to students' concerns about its potential adverse effects on their overall degree outcome (Erasmus+ UK National Agency, 2019). This was the case for students participating in the joint degree programme in the field of engineering offered by Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). These students expressed concerns over inconsistencies in the grade conversion process at the partner institution, leading them to refrain from participating in an exchange programme (De Pelsmacker, 2019).

Moreover, grade conversion can have a negative impact on students' well-being and their overall experience abroad, as some students may become excessively preoccupied with their academic performance during their time abroad, diverting their focus from the non-academic benefits of the experience (Erasmus+ UK National Agency, 2019). For instance, students may hesitate to engage in extracurricular activities such as joining societies, clubs, sports teams or volunteering during their time abroad. Such activities may be perceived as potential distractions from their studies and from exam preparation, and thus hindrances to their focus on academic responsibilities. Nevertheless, the growing

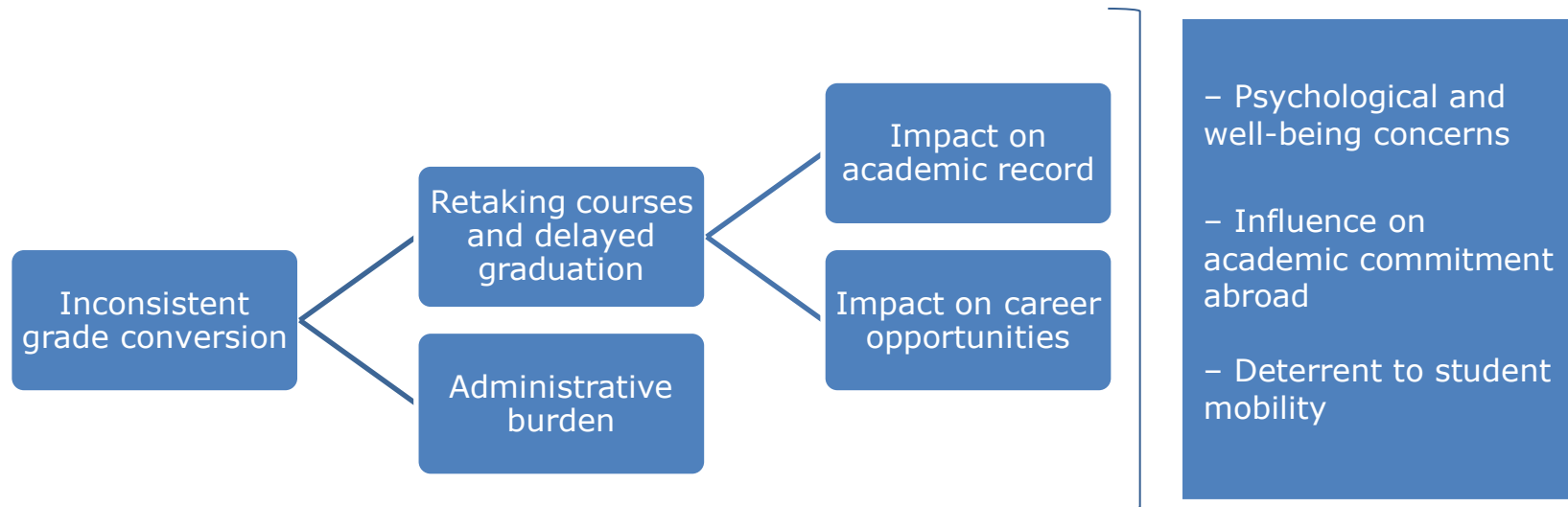
acknowledgement by employers of the value of extracurricular activities in enhancing employability means that students might miss an opportunity to amplify the gains of their learning mobility experience (Brando et al., 2020).

Conversely, driven by scepticism regarding the recognition process, some students may opt not to fully commit to their academic responsibilities while abroad. This scepticism arises from the awareness that many students are compelled to retake certain courses and exams upon their return to the sending institution, inevitably leading to significant delays in their graduation (Dicle et al., 2010). The absence of trust in the grade conversion process prompts students to view the learning mobility period as an optional or supplementary qualification rather than an integral component of their regular study programme (Nada et al., 2023). This perception perpetuates the misconception that student mobility is merely seen as a 'leisure opportunity' rather than an opportunity to cultivate academic skills and cross-cultural awareness. In addition, it reinforces the perception that international students may not exhibit the same level of commitment to their academic obligations as their domestic counterparts (Brando et al., 2020).

From the perspective of the institutional level, the absence of a standardised grade conversion process also renders the process inefficient and more time-consuming for sending institutions, as they often have to examine each case individually (Melin et al., 2019). Hence, a significant amount of extra administrative time and effort is required, as each student's academic history, the courses they have taken abroad and their grading system must be examined on a case-by-case basis in order to make informed decisions.

In conclusion, the lack of a clear and uniform grade conversion system can exert a profound influence on student mobility within the EEA, as illustrated in Figure 1. This not only impacts students' academic records, but also extends to their psychological well-being, their dedication to academic responsibilities during the time abroad, and to their overall perspective on international mobility programmes. Collectively, these factors may discourage students from actively seeking educational opportunities abroad.

**Figure 1.** Factors relating to bad practices in grade conversion, and their influence on student mobility



## Chapter 3: Promising practices for grade conversion identified

Aware of the complexity of grade conversion across the EU and internationally, some institutions have put into practice various strategies to tackle the challenges they have encountered or may encounter. Some of these practices have the potential to be translated to other contexts or further enhanced to improve the automatic mutual recognition of the outcomes of learning mobility periods.

One of the main promising practices to highlight in relation to grade conversion is the **Egracons (European Grade Conversion System) project**<sup>2</sup>. This project was co-funded by the European commission, with the aim of facilitating both credit mobility and degree mobility by working out a conversion system based on ECTS grade conversion tables, as recommended in the European 2015 ECTS users' guide. Leveraging the annual, statistically based grading tables submitted by individual institutions within a comprehensive database, the project has created an online, web-based tool known as Egracons. This tool facilitates direct and automatic grade conversions. It is accessible at no cost to all participating HEIs in Europe and beyond, contingent upon them submitting their own grade distribution tables. Currently, 146 institutions have supplied their grading tables for inclusion in the tool, out of which 126 are located in the top 10 EU-27 countries sending the greatest numbers of students abroad. The Egracons tool offers separate grading tables for Bachelor's and Master's courses under the same ISCED (2013) study field codes in order to constitute a unified reference group. The ISCED fields of education and training are used by UNESCO/Eurostat/OECD to classify degrees into disciplines. A new classification was agreed upon in 2013 by UNESCO. The ISCED-2013 F classification comprises around 80 fields of education (detailed level = four digits). Moreover, Egracons allows both single conversion (a single student grade to a single grade) and multiple conversion (all the grades from a ToR) from a university abroad to the sending institution.

The advantages of the tool can be summed up as follows:

- A tangible solution to grade conversion;
- Unique and flexible to institutional needs;
- User-friendly interface and clearly demonstrated conversion results;
- Qualitative approach towards the conversion process; and
- Transparency that offers added value to the credibility of partner institutions

**On a smaller scale, the experience of Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)** is also relevant. Upon receiving concerns from students regarding the possible negative impact of going abroad due to the lack of uniformity as well as consistency in grade conversion, both institutions carried out an in-depth and extensive review of their grade conversion policies. In line with the European Commission's recommendations, they created a single ECTS scale for each university based on data from the past five years for each of the five academic years, and for each Master's programme. VUB and ULB reached out to each of their partners to furnish them with an ECTS scale that represented their respective students' grade performance. This step was taken to facilitate the development of a comprehensive guideline for each of their partners within the Erasmus+ exchange programme. Both universities implemented their new conversion policies effectively at the beginning of the 2019-2020 academic year. This was achieved through extensive discussions throughout the process with exchange coordinators, outgoing students, and the international offices of the universities. The guidelines established were disseminated widely to the upcoming cohort of students, who welcomed the initiative positively. In line with the Erasmus+ Programme for 2021-2027, during the renewal of bilateral agreements VUB and ULB stipulated that partner universities must make their ECTS scales accessible as a mandatory condition.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://egracons.eu/>



At an individual level, the development of the **University of Glasgow's process for converting overseas grades involved both staff and students seeking to ensure that the process would be efficient, transparent and fair**. A statistician explored the existing conversion protocol, examining the grades awarded by the receiving institution, the converted grades, and the relationship between the converted grades and the final grades awarded in the Senior Honours year at Glasgow. This research resulted in clear recommendations for data gathering and long-term analysis, allowing the reliability and validity of conversion tables to be continually assessed. After this, a consultation exercise was carried out in which the standardised conversion tables were considered only as starting points for the conversion process. This stage also relied on students' self-assessment of grade conversions, based on evidence gathered by the students themselves. Lastly, new guidance for staff<sup>3</sup> and students<sup>4</sup> was published, and the unified conversion tables as starting points for conversion were promulgated (Erasmus+ UK National Agency, 2019).

The **Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree Programme in Smart Systems Integration (SSI)** offers an efficient grade conversion practice for joint degree programmes. The degree programme's three partners use different grade scaling. Heriot-Watt University (HWU; Edinburgh, Scotland) grades are given as percentages; grades at the University College of Southeast Norway (HSN) are given only as ECTS grades; and Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME; Hungary) uses a system of grades ranging from 1 to 5. All grades are converted to ECTS grading system. The mobility scheme is predefined, guaranteeing the equitable evaluation of all students in the cohort, regardless of the differing national implementations of the ECTS scale. Furthermore, the overall distribution of the grades for each course is detailed in the Joint Diploma Supplement (Aasmundtveit et al., 2018).

The **Diploma Supplement (DS)** is also considered an important tool to ensure that the process of grade conversion is efficient, by providing a detailed overview of the training content within the framework of education system in the respective country, including grade information. The DS encapsulates all pertinent information about the degree, encompassing the legal status of the degree, learning outcomes, as well as grades and grading tables showing the distribution of the passing grades. Hence, the DS facilitates the interpretation, comparison and translation of grades between institutions. A number of EIs have been awarded as Supplement Label Holders in recognition of their correct implementation of the DS. One of these is Wageningen UR (University & Research Centrum), which also distinguishes itself by having a dedicated DS Institutional Coordinator, responsible for ensuring the accurate utilisation of the DS to enhance transparency regarding completed degrees. The DS Institutional Coordinator is identified prominently on the institution's webpage, together with an email address, facilitating communication for any interested parties, including students and other stakeholders seeking clarification or information.<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, **the development of conversion tables**, as well as their wide dissemination among the academic community, is the simplest and most popular promising practice implemented by various HEIs to ensure that the grade conversion process is smooth. Some examples of excellence in the provision of conversion tables are:

- **Università di Pavia (Italy)**: this institution's Erasmus+ webpage states that it has developed a conversion table for ECTS grades by subject area, in line with the ECTS users' guide 2015. Within each field of study, the data are broken down by the course of study (Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, or single-cycle Master's degree). The university emphasises that its ECTS grading scale is applicable exclusively to HEIs within the EHEA countries that

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_489842\\_smxx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_489842_smxx.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_556072\\_smxx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_556072_smxx.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.wur.nl/en/education-programmes/study-abroad-and-exchange-students/outgoing-from-wageningen-university/grading-table.htm>

have adopted the standardised ECTS scale. Furthermore, it explicitly specifies that it is inapplicable in situations involving other grading systems that are expressed using alphabetical letters. The ECTS tables can be downloaded, as well as examples of how to use them<sup>6</sup>.

- University of St Andrews (Scotland, United Kingdom): on the study abroad section of their website, the university makes available its credit and grade conversion policy. Furthermore, it clearly states that the conversion grade process is carried out using the university's standard conversion tables, which are available for download. The conversion tables follow the principle of equivalence established between the St Andrews grade scale and the grade scales adopted in the countries of partner universities. In total, 35 conversion tables are available<sup>7</sup>. The institution also emphasises that students are not allowed to take part in an exchange scheme until the conversion table has been officially approved.
- Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree Crossways in Culture Narratives (a consortium of 12 institutions – Università degli studi di Bergamo, Italy; Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal; Université de Perpignan Via Domitia, France; University of Saint Andrews, Scotland, UK; Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Spain; University of Sheffield, England, UK; University of Guelph, Canada; Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, Argentina; Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Germany; Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland; Universidad Iberoamericana de la Ciudad de México, Mexico; and Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil): students can access a comprehensive student handbook, which is available to download from the webpage of this programme. The handbook provides extensive information on grade conversion, elucidating the translation of grades obtained at each institution into the ECTS grading scale. A complete conversion table is included, facilitating the comparison and comprehension by students of grading scales effortlessly across all partner institutions<sup>8</sup>.
- Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Belgium): this university displays a section on its webpage detailing the institution's grading culture. It clearly states that the institution uses the Egracons tool to convert the grades obtained by students during their mobility period. In addition, it also explains how the results obtained by incoming students on Erasmus+ mobilities are communicated to the sending institutions<sup>9</sup>. A table is presented, indicating the accumulated frequency distribution of all successful students who have attained a given grade.

## Chapter 4: Implications for policies and practices

This report has been prepared for DG EAC in order to provide a focused review of the literature published since 2009 with regard to grade conversion in the context of the recognition of learning mobility. In the preceding sections, we have documented the main challenges involved in grade conversion in the context of learning mobility, looking at three different levels: countries, HEIs and students. In doing so, we have discussed how organisational practices, the subjectivity of the grading process, grading culture, and students' commitment to the learning agreement can hamper the process of grade conversion, and what impact inefficient grade conversion has on student mobility. We have also reviewed promising practices that have been implemented by different institutions to

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<sup>6</sup> <http://internationalactivities.unipv.it/erasmus/ects-tables/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/students/study-abroad/academic/credit-conversion/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://master-crossways.univ-perp.fr/en/students/studies>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.erasmushogeschool.be/en/grading-system-and-culture>



facilitate the grade conversion process. This chapter summarises the findings of the report and lays out its key policy recommendations.

### **Key findings and conclusions**

The available evidence consistently indicates that grade conversion poses a significant challenge in the context of learning mobility. There is a noticeable lack of references addressing grade conversion issues, from both academic and practitioner perspectives. And unlike the ECTS credit transfer system, the ECTS grading system is rarely discussed in the context of learning mobility.

The primary obstacle to achieving an efficient grade conversion process is the diversity of grading systems among European HEIs. Despite the existence of the ECTS grading system, many institutions continue to use their own conversion tables, rendering the process complex and challenging to standardise. This decision is often tied to the HEIs' autonomy and their dedication to upholding the quality of their own diploma requirements. Consequently, mobility must align with these standards, necessitating a meticulous grade conversion process for consistency between institutions.

Furthermore, in many instances, the steps involved in the grade conversion process are not adequately transparent. HEIs often fail to communicate them properly to students, who may feel that their mobility experience has negatively impacted their academic performance, as well as to those responsible for the grading process. The absence of clear and well-defined guidelines can result in a high degree of discretion being employed, as various individuals, such as professors, department heads and Erasmus+ coordinators, may be involved in the course recognition as well as the grade conversion process.

The process of course recognition presents a preliminary challenge that also impacts grade conversion. If the individual responsible for course recognition does not approve a course, the grade conversion process does not even commence – regardless of whether the student has provided all of the required documents. Evidence suggests that credit recognition rates are higher within the Erasmus+ Programme compared with other mobility programmes and forms of degree mobility. A potential explanation for this disparity may lie in the use of LAs, which are typically established before mobility commences within the Erasmus+ Programme. These agreements, in tandem with the commitments outlined in the ECHEA to acknowledge agreed terms, appear to account significantly for the high rates of credit recognition observed. Therefore, adopting a structured pre-approval process, akin to the model employed in the Erasmus+ Programme, could potentially offer a robust framework for other programmes. However, additional research is required to comprehensively grasp the factors contributing to the success of Erasmus+ and to explore how its effective practices can be adapted and applied to other programmes.

The subjectivity inherent in the grading process presents another significant challenge in the process of grade conversion. Various countries, institutions and academic disciplines possess distinct grading cultures, with some institutions tending to assign higher grades than others, or having different distributions of failing and passing grades. These variations may not be adequately understood in a different context, or may simply not be accepted. Cultural differences lead to qualitatively different grading and assessment practices, which impact students' further study and employment opportunities, as shown by some reports retrieved by this literature review. This issue necessitates a deeper understanding of how differences in the quality of grading practices influence grade recognition, as well as potential strategies to mitigate negative impacts.

Students also bear some responsibility for the grade conversion process, and therefore contribute to both the success and to potential challenges in achieving a seamless conversion process. Difficulties may arise when students fail to promptly inform either the sending or receiving institution about their inability to fully adhere to the terms outlined in the learning agreement, often due to circumstances beyond their control, such as unavailable or fully subscribed courses. Enrolling in courses not previously agreed in the Learning Agreement without discussing the change with either institution, or neglecting to

collect essential documents in a timely manner, can compound such challenges. These situations underline the imperative need to provide clear guidance and support to students to ensure they fulfil their requirements for a successful mobility experience. Given the potential adverse consequences of inefficient grade conversion processes on student mobility, and the limited yet growing attention it has received in the academic literature, both scholars and practitioners are increasingly cognisant of its significance. To address the challenges posed by the grade conversion process in the context of learning mobility, various initiatives have been developed. The Egracons (European Grade Conversion System) project has been recognised as one of the most efficient tools to support a fair and transparent grade conversion process. Many institutions have already adopted it fully, enhancing the quality and performance of their grade conversion. The extensive adoption by institutions of these tools demonstrates their active pursuit of solutions to the challenges associated with grade conversion. It is therefore crucial to promote the wider dissemination of Egracons among HEIs and to encourage its uptake.

While this is a positive step forward, other issues associated with the grade conversion process remain that cannot be readily addressed by the Egracons tool. Notably, one significant concern is the extensive bureaucracy and paperwork required from students, both at the sending and the receiving institution. This paperwork is demanded to ensure that the process is complete and all necessary steps for grade conversion are meticulously addressed. The documents concerned vary from institution from institution, but in many cases, they encompass the Learning Agreement, certificate of matriculation for the semester abroad, certificate of attendance, a transcript of academic records, and study plan form<sup>101112</sup>. Similarly, the Egracons tool cannot effectively address either the discretionary aspect of course recognition or the quality of communication from the sending institution – explaining to students the significance of complying with the Learning Agreement to ensure their grade conversion, as well as gathering all the correct documents and submitting them in a timely fashion. Hence, other strategies also need to be developed to ensure the grade conversion process becomes efficient, transparent and fair, as is expected.

### **Knowledge gaps identified**

As previously stated, our overview and classification of the available information demonstrates that, despite the relevance of the grade conversion process to fostering learning mobility, the literature on the topic is only incipient, and hence several aspects could be further investigated further.

**What are the obstacles to the implementation of the ECTS grading system in the EEA, and how it can be improved?** Research enquiries could delve into the reasons behind the relatively smooth adoption of ECTS credit systems by HEIs, compared with the resistance observed towards embracing its grading counterpart. By identifying the main hindrances indicated by HEIs, it would be possible to determine how to overcome these obstacles and make the system more suitable for the reality HEIs face.

**How can the principles of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education be enhanced to ensure a smoother grade conversion process?** In line with the ECHE Monitoring Guide for Erasmus+ National Agencies, the National Agencies could conduct regular

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<sup>10</sup><https://www.elte.hu/en/incoming-mobility/erasmus-international-credit-mobility/incoming-students/after-mobility?m=632>

<sup>11</sup>[https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/af9c6fa6bcad6c251ad94a42140accd2-en.pdf/Erasmus+SMS\\_Checkliste2021\\_22\\_English.pdf](https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/af9c6fa6bcad6c251ad94a42140accd2-en.pdf/Erasmus+SMS_Checkliste2021_22_English.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://novalaw.unl.pt/en/faqs-erasmus-mobility-studies/>

training sessions for academic staff to deepen their understanding of the ECHE principles, with a specific focus on their binding commitment to the grade conversion process.

**How do students, professors and Erasmus+ coordinators envisage that the grade conversion process should be conducted?** Because the grade conversion process engages various stakeholders – students, professors, and Erasmus+ coordinators – with distinct interests, studies should be undertaken to analyse their perceptions and expectations regarding the grade conversion process. This could contribute to identifying potential communication gaps and refining the existing grade conversion process to ensure it aligns with the needs and expectations of all involved partners.

### **Policy recommendations**

This report has outlined the negative impact of inefficient grade conversion in the context of learning mobility, as well as indicating some of the main obstacles hampering this process. For greater mobility to be achieved at the level of higher education, swift and coordinated efforts are needed to tackle the obstacles identified, necessitating collaboration among the stakeholders involved in learning mobility schemes.

#### **For the Erasmus+ National Agencies:**

As per the ECHE Monitoring Guide for Erasmus+ National Agencies (European Commission, 2023b), it is the responsibility of National Agencies to ensure the precise implementation of the ECHE within HEIs. This entails offering ongoing guidance and support to these institutions, particularly in areas where pressure points such as grade conversion have been identified. Initiatives that could be developed in this regard include organising information sessions and themed meetings tailored to the needs of HEIs, as well as delivering personalised guidance to raise awareness about the significance of grade conversion and its potential impact on students' academic careers. These sessions could introduce the ECTS Grading Table, presenting its main advantages in relation to the grade conversion process. Likewise, Egracons could also be presented and HEIs could be encouraged to adopt this tool.

The monitoring processes of National Agencies should devote specific attention to institutions' grade conversion practices. This scrutiny should be evident in the institutions' reports and on their websites, ensuring the accessibility of comprehensive and accurate information regarding the grading system, the grade distribution employed within these institutions, and the procedures used for grade conversion.

ENIC-NARIC networks also play a crucial role in enhancing grade conversion to implement the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications across Europe, especially within the realm of higher education. These networks have undertaken the development of numerous projects, tools and instruments aimed at facilitating recognition, promoting mobility and advancing the internationalisation of higher education. Collaboratively, ENIC-NARIC and National Agencies can identify best practices among these existing initiatives that are replicable at the level of credit mobility.

#### **For higher education institutions:**

To facilitate academic mobility, it is essential to build trust between sending and receiving institutions. This involves enhancing and consolidating administrative processes to ensure greater fairness and transparency. A thorough comprehension of the academic systems of partnering institutions, including grading scales and credit allocation, is another key point. Likewise, the strengthening of partnerships is also necessary to enable smoother student mobility processes and to foster trust.

Egracons has been proven to be an efficient option for a transparent, fair and accurate grade conversion process, as required by the ECHE guidelines. Clear channels and procedures should also be ensured that allow students to contest a grade obtained by

conversion. No exchange should take place without an agreed-upon Conversion Table between the receiving and sending institutions' grade scaling.

Communication between sending and receiving institutions with regard to grading scales, as well as the grading conversion process itself, should be enhanced. Timely deadlines for the submission of students' grades to the sending institution should be agreed in advance. HEIs should inform their partners in the event that they alter their grading structures.

Likewise, document submission deadlines for both students and institutions should be clearly indicated. Students should be well-informed about all of the stages of the grade conversion process. The conversion tables adopted should be easily accessible to them, and clear guidance should be offered on how they are used.

HEIs should clarify to their students the importance of adhering to the Learning Agreement to guarantee the accurate conversion of grades. It is recommended that HEIs explicitly convey to their students that, in the event of any changes or uncertainties, their first course of action should be to promptly inform their institution. Sending institutions should appoint a staff member who will advise students on the choice of the courses that will be undertaken. The same person should be responsible for signing the Learning Agreement and recognising the credits obtained during the mobility upon the student's return. This measure provides a comprehensive basis for the proper conversion of grades and helps to establish a transparent framework, ensuring accurate and effective communication between institutions. Receiving institutions must ensure timely access to their course catalogues by students. It is incumbent on both sending and receiving institutions to offer comprehensive guidance to students regarding the selection of courses. Both the sending and receiving institutions should establish procedures to address situations in which the selected courses cannot be taken, ensuring clarity and support for students throughout the process. Furthermore, both institutions should commit to taking the Learning Agreements as binding documents, reinforcing their role in facilitating automatic recognition and ensuring the proper acknowledgment of students' academic achievements upon their return. In a similar vein, upon signing a bilateral/inter-institutional agreement, sending institutions should commit that the grades students attain at the receiving institution will be accepted and fairly converted, and that no additional assessment process will be required.

Information sessions on the culture of grading conversion should be organised, targeting the teachers and staff responsible for grade conversion. Sessions should focus on explaining the core principles of learning mobility and that, although grading systems may differ, this does not mean that one is better or worse than another. Moreover, these sessions should also emphasise that students have the right to the fair conversion of grades they have attained abroad.

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## Annex A: Mapping the field

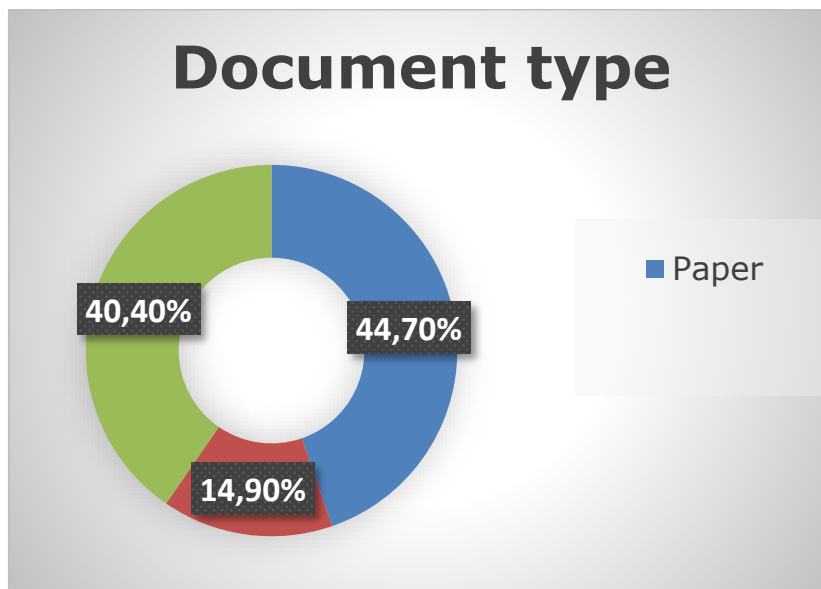


Figure 1. Classification of the documents included in the review according to their type.

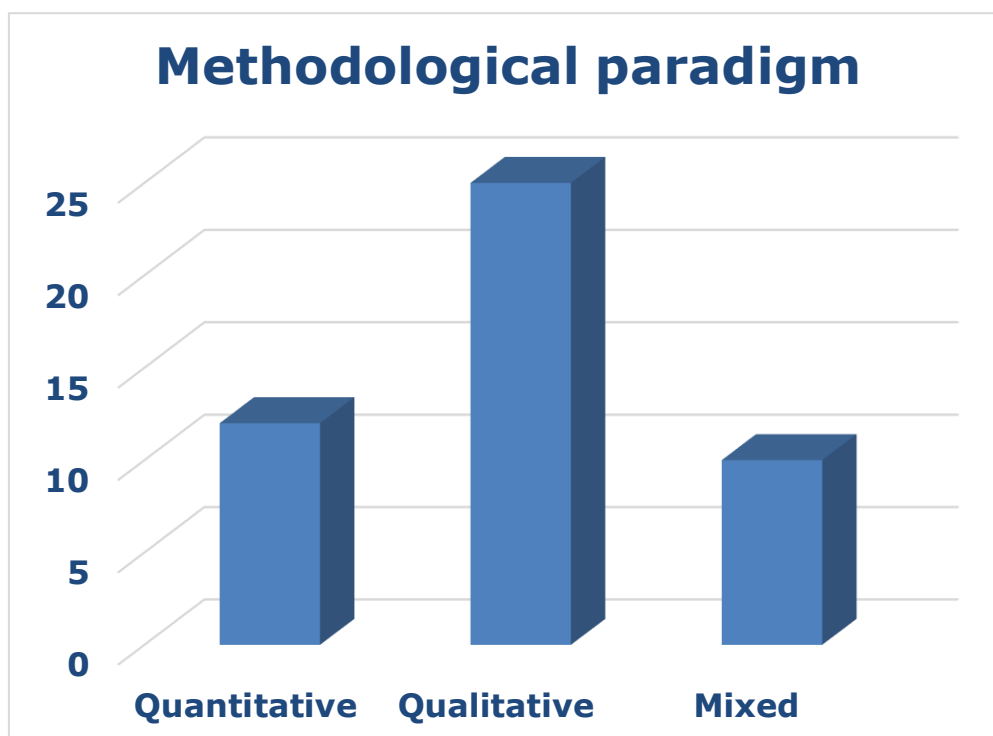


Figure 2. Methodological paradigms applied by the documents included in the review.

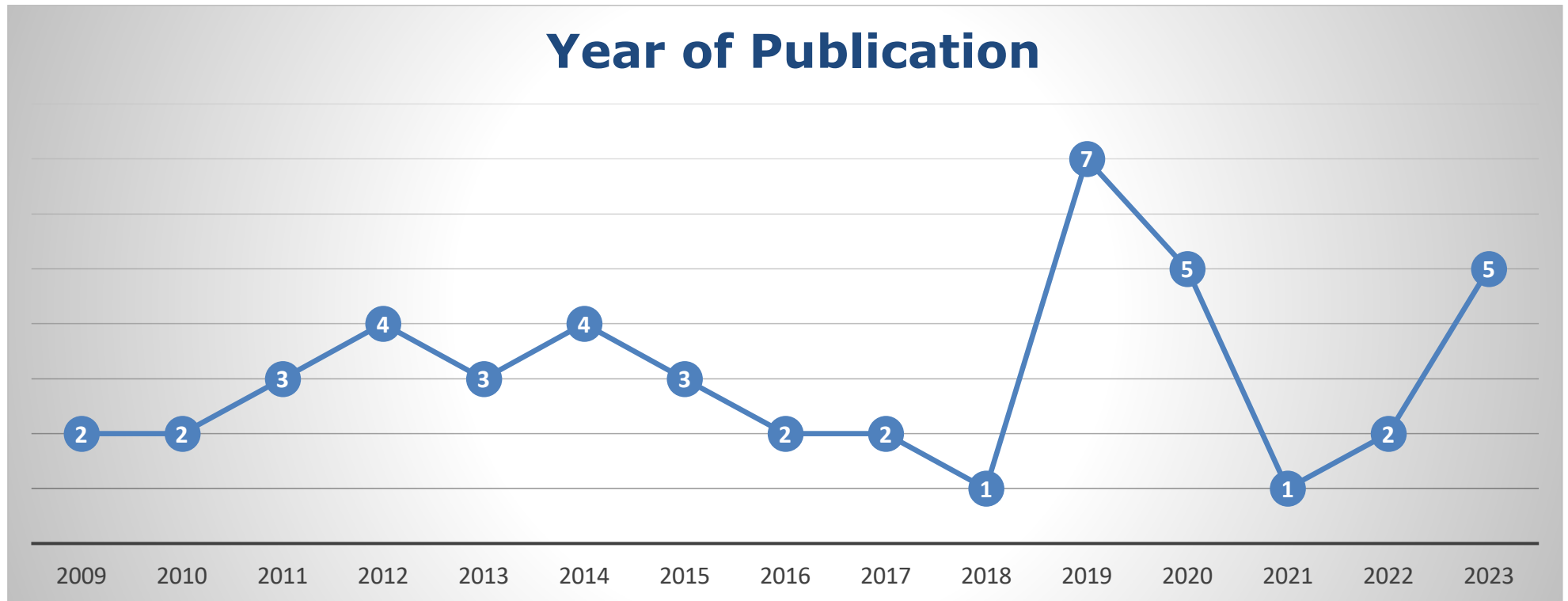


Figure 3. Years of publication of the documents included in the present review.

**Annex B: National grading systems**

				<b>A (Excellent)</b>	<b>B (Very Good)</b>	<b>C (Good)</b>	<b>D (Satisfac tory)</b>	<b>E (Sufficient)</b>
	<b>Year joined Bologna Process/ EHEA</b>	<b>ECHE- accredited HEIs</b>	<b>Fail mark</b>					
AUSTRIA	1999	79	5 (Nicht genügend)	1 (Sehr gut)	2 (Sehr gut)	3 (Gut)	4 (Befriedigend)	4 (Genügend)
BELGIUM	1999	81	Less than 10 (Echec)	20–18 (Avec la plus grande distinction)	17.99– 16 (Avec grande distincti on)	15.99– 14 (Avec distincti on)	13. 99–12 (Satisfaction)	11.99–10 (Passable)
BULGARIA	1999	53	Less than 3	6 (Otlichen)	5 (Mnogo Dobur)	4 (Dobur)	3 (Sreden)	3 (Sreden)
CROATIA	2001	42						
CYPRUS	2001	37	Less than 5	10–9.5	9.45– 8.5	8.49– 6.5	6.49–5.5	5.49–5.0
CZECHIA	1999	73	4 (Nedostate čny)	In some cases, only Pass/ Fail (Z- Zápočet)	1 (Výborně)	2 (Velmi dobře)	–	3 (Dobře)
DENMARK	1999	38	00 (Inadequat e) / -3 (Unaccepta ble)		12	10	7	4
ESTONIA	1999	17	0 or F (Puudulik)	5 or A (Suurepärane)	4 or B (Väga hea)	3 or C (Hea)	2 or D(Rahuldav)	1 or E (Kasin)

## GRADE CONVERSION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RECOGNITION OF LEARNING MOBILITY

FINLAND	1999	36	0		5 (Kiitettävä)	4 (Erittäin hyvä)	3 (Hyvä)	2 (Erittäin tyydyttävä)	1 (Tyydyttävä)
FRANCE	1999	1,536	Less than 10		20-16 (Très bien)	15-14 (Bien)	13-12 (Assez bien)	11-10 (Passable)	-
GERMANY (except for law schools)	1999	370	5 (Nicht ausreichen d/ Nicht bestanden)	The top grade mit Auszeichnung (with distinction) is not awarded very often.	1.0 (Mit Auszeichnung bestanden)	1.1-1.5 (Sehr gut)	1.6-2.5 (Gut)	2.6-3.5 (Befriedigend)	3.6-4.0 (Ausreichend)
GREECE	1999	32	Less than 5		10-8.5 (Άριστα)	8.49-6.50 (Λίαν Καλώς)			6.49-5.00 (Καλώς)
HUNGARY	1999	55	1 (Elégtelen)		5 (Jeles)	4 (Jó)	3 (Közepes)	2 (Elégséges)	
ICELAND	1999	7	Less than 5.0		10-9.0 (Ágætiseinkunn)	8.99-7.25 (Fyrsta einkunn)	7.24-6.0 (Önnur einkunn)	5.99-5.0 (Þriðja einkunn)	
IRELAND	1999	30	Less than 40 %		100 %-70 %	69 %-60 %	59 %-50 %	49 %-45 %	44 %-40 %
ITALY	1999	331	Less than 18		30 (cum Laude)	30-29 (Eccellente)	28-27 (Buono)	26-24 (Abbastanza buono)	23-18 (Sufficiente)
LATVIA	1999	46	Less than 4	In some cases, only Pass/ Not pass	10-9 (Teicami)	8 (Loti Labi)	7 (Labi)	6 (Gandrīz Labi)	5-4 (Viduveji)
LITHUANIA	1999	34	Less than 4	Alongside the 10-point system, HEIs may	Puikai	Labai gerai	Gerai	Vidutiniškai	Patenkinamai

## GRADE CONVERSION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RECOGNITION OF LEARNING MOBILITY

				use the Pass/ Fail system					
LUXEMBOURG	1999	6	Less than 10		20-16	15-14	13-12	11-10	
MALTA	1999	10	Less than 44		100-80	79-70	69-55	54-45	
NETHERLANDS	1999	65	Less than 6	Grades 1-3 are hardly ever awarded, and 9 and 10 are very rare.	10-9 (Uitstekend)	9-8 (Zeer goed)	8 (Goed)	7 (Ruim voldoende)	6 (Voldoende)
NORWAY	1999	38	F	Alongside the letter grade scale, there is a Pass/ Fail system	A	B	C	D	E
POLAND	1999	285	Less than 2 (Niedostateczny)		5 (Bardzo dobry)	4.5 (Dobry plus)	4 (Dobry)	3.5 (Dostateczny plus)	3 (Dostateczny)
PORTUGAL	1999	84	Less than 10		20-18	17-16	15-14	13-10	-
ROMANIA	1999	77	Less than 5, with no zero.		10	9	8 - 7	6	5
SLOVAKIA	1999	33	5 (Nedostatočné)		1.00-2.99 (Vyborny)	2.00-2.99 (Veľmi dobry)	3.00-3.99 (Dobry)	4.00-4.99 (Dostatočný)	
SLOVENIA	1999	83	Less than 6	In some cases, there is the "Passed with distinction	10	9	8	7	6

GRADE CONVERSION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RECOGNITION OF LEARNING MOBILITY

SPAIN	1999	1710	Less than 5	/Passed/ Failed" system Some credits obtained through credit recognitio n only have "Pass/Fail "	10-9 (Sobresaliente /Matricula de Honor)	8.9- 8.0 (Notabl e alto)	7.9-7.0 (Notable bajo)	6.9-6.0 (Aprobado)	5.9-5.0 (Suficiente)
SWEDEN	1999	43	There is no national grading system. The most common grading system is a three-point scale: pass with distinction (väl godkänt), pass (godkänt) and fail (underkänt). To make it easier to compare the grades of students from other countries, some universities and university colleges have introduced a seven-point grading system.						
SWITZERLAND	1999	-	The grading system lies within the responsibility of the respective HEI. The most common grading system ranges from 1 to 6 (where 6 is the highest). A scale ranging from 1 to 10 is also used in a few cases.						

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