

# FINAL REPORT

## TCA “Let’s talk about the ECHE”

### Introduction

The TCA “let’s talk about the ECHE” took place in the Hague from 31 May to 2 June 2023. It gathered 86 higher education representatives and 23 National Agencies from 23 countries. Furthermore, 9 student representatives and 4 Dutch Bologna experts attended and contributed to the TCA. In representation of the European Commission, Svava Findsen Berglind closed the meeting and responded to the reflections given by a panel representing the stakeholders involved in the TCA: Students, HEIs, National Agencies and Bologna experts.

This report gathers the observations reported from all the parallel sessions, the exercise “Mapping your ECHE experience” and the observations (in a nutshell) from participants in the panel discussion.

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## Observations from the interactive sessions

### The ECHE in practice: examples of HEI's

- Selection vs. inclusion: to make the selection process more inclusive some selection processes were discussed. One great example was making use of a lottery system instead of having students send in their motivation.
- Fair processes for outgoing staff: a great example was given, namely: make staff mobility part of staff personal development plans within an institution.
- Sustainability vs. short-term mobility: a great example was: make policy about how much travel is allowed and if green travel is not an option: make use of compensation activities (plant trees etc.)
- What is your best practice: Some best practices: good contact with ESN, 'Digi Friday's' organized by NA, 'transparency of procedures'
- What could your institution improve: an example: recognition

### Automatic Recognition (AR) and Diploma Supplement

- Automatic Recognition start at the learning agreement, and you need to use it correctly (in different situation like mobility window, table of subject equivalency, extracurricular activities)
- Diploma supplement is an added value for the student and should be supported more throughout the organization.
- There are multiple obstacle for both, there is no generic template, it is a bureaucratic procedure and there is no consistency in grade conversion.
- The relevance of grade conversion was challenged: the proposal is to remove this requirement and only present the grading table of the host institution in the DS. Conversion is always subjective, and sense-making of the grade can be done based on the distribution table.

#### Identified obstacles AR & DS

- Different SIS lead to different TORs, hampers transparency, there is no generic template
- Value of DS is not promoted in the labour market
- Consistent inclusion of Programme Learning Outcomes
- Consistent inclusion of grading tables in the DS
- Subject followed by student not on DS (study abroad - passed)
- Bureaucratic procedures related to last minute changes of the LA
- Awarding a joint DS

### Monitoring the ECHE by the NA's (target group NAs)

- NAs are interested in sharing resources that are already in place (ex. FI has a table to report observations from the final report. This is used as a monitory tool by the HEIs themselves. FI offers training for newcomers about E+ and other programmes. Partially online but also face to face. Knowledge assessed at the end. Participants receive certificate).
- NAs would like to see that the EC/ECHE WG to review the ECTS user's guide 2015.
- NAs suggest the need to have a kind of "repository" to exchange practical resources already in use (monitoring plans, tools, formats).
- NAs suggest the ECHE WG to make list of basic/useful/relevant ECHE resources all NAs need. We think about practical instruction films for ex. practical instructions and examples about implementing the course catalogue. NAs could produce these resources/films together for the whole NA network in order not to repeat efforts.

- NAs stress the need to follow-up this conference both for NAs, HEIs and students to keep each other updated.

### **The Course Catalogue: how to make it work?**

- Time of updating is very tricky.
- Having the means is a challenge for small HEIs that have to prioritise either EWP or CC.
- Suggestion: start with information about international programmes and widen up later.
- Language remains an issue.

### **Students and the ECHE: what can we learn from each other?**

- There are so many possibilities to involve students in supporting HEIs fulfilling the ECHE principles. Like the Roomswap Platform of ESN and Wageningen University. Inspiration needed please check the ESN website.
- To involve as many students as possible include them already in the first brainstorm session phase. Then they feel part of the whole process. And give them a mandate to act. Create a Student Engagement Plan.
- Satisfaction mobility period for internships is lower: how can we better guide students through their internship abroad. F.i. include them in activities of the university of the host city so they feel more at home and included.
- Use students as mentors/buddys and make it a mandatory part of their own mobility abroad.

### **Monitoring inclusion in the frame of the ECHE**

- Many institutions are looking for clearcut answers. Many institutions also want more data, even though they have data that they can use to analyse.
- Institutions are not sure of their steps, even though they are making them. Self-reflection lacking.
- Institutions apparently feel that they are not reaching all groups. Institutions are not saying which groups they think are missing. I would advise institutions to relay to their "partners/NA" what they are missing, so that it can be known and research if the inclusive approach is lacking (seems like attention to staff is missing).
- There are things being done. There is no clear strategy on inclusive mobilities yet, but actions are taking place. Important to keep reflecting on the link of those actions to inclusion.
- It is important to understand/know the own student population and define who you are not reaching yet. In other words, who would/ should you like to reach?
- Who are all the internal stakeholders dealing with inclusive mobilities? And how can we bring these parties/ stakeholders together, to work together.

### **Sharing the Dutch Inclusion scan**

- This scan serves the purpose (offering a quick and easy to use scan to evaluate the internal state of affairs of inclusive E+ mobilities within an institute). There is room for improvement and valuable feedback was given.
- It is difficult to monitor inclusion of students who encounter barriers because of GDPR.
- It might be nice to develop a separate scan for students.
- It would be nice to receive ideas (after doing the scan) how the institute can improve the state of affairs when there is clear room for growth. More specifically,

give information about which steps an institute can take to go from a red box to a green box? This could be a nice addition/next step in the development of this inclusion scan.

### **Working with the grading table in practice**

- There was a great need for information about the grading table. Participants asked many questions.
- Institutions do not know who to connect with to help with the grading table. I.E. IT-department to provide a query on grades etc. etc.
- Grading table as an instrument is valuable, but a lot of work is needed to actually match the correct conversion.
- The biggest pain point is that many partners do not use a grading table. How do you deal with that?
- One issue is how to deal with qualitative assessment and pass/fail. That, together with the question of whether or not you should convert.

### **The ECHE and International mobility KA131 and KA171**

- Monitoring of compliance with ECHE in KA171 is a challenge.
- Share OM to support; ECHE monitoring tool filled in by KA171 partner.
- Many issues to arrange and thorough relationship and communication between partner is essential.
- More guidance needed from NAs for 20% window KA131.
- HEIs are still struggling with the use of the 20% outgoing 131.
- A main challenge is to monitor if the partner is complying to ECHE (paper procedure or reality). Possible solutions: sending staff to partner institution, panel discussion with incoming students, and analyse participant reports of students.
- New insights: many do not use the Inter Institutional Agreement (yet) to make additional and explicit agreements on top of the usual mobility numbers or intention to collaborate. A best practice is to share Organisational Support to support individual mobility or events for groups. A second best practice from a Dutch HEI is a new experiment to ask the partner HEI (from a third country not associated to the programme) to fill in the ECHE Self-Assessment tool before the first mobilities, and again during Interim Report and/or Final Report stage to assess which improvements are made for the implementation of the ICM project.
- Conversation, conversation, conversation. Mobility through the international window or ICM takes a lot of conversation, capacity and planning (visa / scholarship payments / getting to know each other in general). The positive impact on the students, staff and institution is often in relation to the extra capacity it takes.
- (KA131 international window: wish for more guidance from NA over implementation - indication for a questionnaire in the near future).

### **Blended mobility**

- BM is the future and here to stay.
- Need for separate funding for BIP mobility.
- Blended does not replace physical mobility.

### **Succeeding digitalisation beyond the ECHE principles**

- We are asking the Erasmus+ coordinator to be a superhero in skills and flexibility.
- Extra attention to (internal and external) stakeholder management needed.
- Top-down management and guidance needed.

### The ECHE in a broader context

- Difference between the EHEA and the EEA is not well known by HEIs and NAs.
- Back to the ECTS basics is still relevant: recognition, course catalogue and DS. These are still the bricks upon which all new developments (micro-credential, EUAs etc) can build on.

### Green Erasmus: get inspired

- Greening the Erasmus+ programme remains a challenge, for HEI's as well as NAs. A point of criticism shared among participants is whether the green travel top-up is the most effective use of funds. Perhaps these funds are better spent on other green initiatives. The grant of fifty euros is often not enough to persuade students to travel more sustainably.
- Perhaps a change of mindset is a more effective stimulus than a small top-up. Alternatively, there could be a lobby (with the EC, education ministries, or HEI's themselves) for more funds to create larger top-ups. Finally, pilots on collaborations with Interrail and national railways seem like a promising alternative.

## Mapping your ECHE experiences

In this open session HEI's discussed in small groups (NA's, HEI's, Students, Bologna experts) the experiences with the charter. Which principle is good and on its way? Which one is problematic? Which one is giving a headache? What can we learn from each other? It was difficult to make a report with all the results because we could sometimes only guess the context of the remarks. Some remarks were specifically for one country, but most of the observations are shared by other countries. We have tried to summarize the most important observations.

### Which ECHE principles are well on their way and why?

No.	Principle	Why
3	Automatic recognition	Automatic recognition is going well for most universities in the group. Some are still catching up and are experiencing some issues- most are positive. In some countries support systems are setting up to improve automatic recognition.
4	Charge no fees	This principle seems well implemented by the HEI's.
6c	Inclusion	Support for participants with fewer opportunities is provided, but often more needs to be done especially for physical barriers and participants with social economic barriers. Participation of fewer opportunities students via blended and short term is a good option. Happy with the fact that there is a top up but some HEI's mentioned that the amount could be higher. Many countries develop national strategies
7	Selection procedures	HEI's mentioned that fair and transparent selection procedures of participants: Full support & equal academic treatment is going well.
8	Course catalogue	Each university in Greece is encouraged to have Erasmus website with practical + academic info and ESN info. The Erasmus+ courses are integrated in the global Course catalogue.
10	IIA's	Implementation of IIA's seems ok.

11	Preparation students	Implemented well at HEI's. Ensure that outgoing mobile participants are well prepared for the activities abroad included blended mobility.
12	Mobility based on agreements	Seems well implemented.
14-16	Visas, insurance etc.	Assistance to students with visa.
18	Safety	Increasing support because of safety issues.
22-24	Transcript, ECTS, Recognition, DS	Good practice.
34	Promote activities Erasmus+	Good practice to promote programme opportunities.
35	Display ECHE and EPS	This principle is on the way but never finished (involve and inform different parties, such as the communication unit).

### Which ECHE principles are causing you a headache and why?

No.	Principle	Why
2	Equal opportunities	Identify and reaching students with fewer opportunities is difficult. Making students with fewer opportunities more aware of the opportunities. Privacy is an issue here.
3	Automatic recognition	Automatic recognition and Erasmus+ seems to give many HEI's in many countries (not all) some issues. Many examples were given.
6a	Digitalisation	Systems we have to work with are not ready yet. There is no digital mobility management. EWP - not all universities connected. EWP is a HORROR!! Not ready!! Digitalisation is going poorly. Many are experiencing huge issues and are very frustrated – the implementation is poor. OLA, IIA, Beneficiary Module. The timeline is off.
6b	Green	The subsidy amount for the Green Travel is too low to cover the costs of the return trip. Therefore, students usually do not apply for or fulfil the requirements for Green Travel.
6c	Inclusion	Difficulties to convince and/or reach students with fewer opportunities to take part in an Erasmus+ exchange. The Individual Support Top Up and Inclusion Support are not well known among the students yet.
8	Course catalogue	Our institutions have difficulty to involve all parties internally, CC is a problem, hard to manage the update of the Course catalogue.
9	Grading system	Difficulty involving all parties and emphasize relevance, lots of disagreements, "Pass or fail" is an issue.
13	Accommodation	Accommodation support is provided but strong shortage makes it more difficult to maintain mobility.
14	Visas	Visa problems in some countries. Visa processes are not always optimal.
23	Automatic recognition	Difficulty involving all parties and emphasize relevance. Grade conversion tables (many HEIs don't use them). Automatic recognition of credits without additional work seems problematic at some HEI's.

26	Recognition Staff	Many remarks on the recognition of staff mobility. Recognition and rewards for staff are lacking, difficulty for such short mobilities to formally recognize, visibility of the opportunities and communication (for lecturers), time frames: academic calendars.
29/30	Impact and dissemination	Impact and dissemination of the results can be improved.
35	Display ECHE and EPS on the website	Website management of ECHE info is not always good because of communication strategy and website implementation in the HEI.

### General remarks on the mapping

- The communication is both good and bad – the communication between universities and students is going well – the mechanism for mobility is in place and seems to work well – selection procedure, promotion, peer to peer approach. The process of communication from Commission to the NA's to university leaves room for improvement.
- ECHE is considered as a responsibility of the IRO, but actually it is an institutional process.

## Observations (in a nutshell) from the panel “The ECHE now and the future”

### Reflection from a Bologna expert

1. The model of the TCA can be perceived as a successful one, bringing two important types of stakeholders together, that is national agencies and university representatives from a substantial group of European countries. Such a model allows for learning more about the different positions of organising internationalisation according to EC policies as defined in the ECHE, but also to allow for exchanges of experiences and debate regarding opportunities and challenges met between and in countries.
2. Given the enthusiasm and commitment of its participants, the TCA on the ECHE shows and confirms that this peer learning model allows for developing momentum again concerning the reform process of higher education.
3. Transnational debate of stakeholders is the foundation for developing insight and understanding of a variety of situations and as a result understanding and trust.
4. The TCA confirmed the concern that after some 25 years Bologna Process and building a European (Higher) Education Area, there is rather limited knowledge (left) about the motives to take the initiative to modernize the higher education sector in Europe and steps taken over time.
5. It seems a fair observation that key participants in the process of internationalisation of higher education are not able to make a distinction between the policies and roles and responsibilities of the Bologna signatory countries on the one hand and the European Commission on the other, in practice the distinction between the European Higher Education Area and the European Education Area.

6. There is an obvious need for highlighting current challenges and to share these with the staffs of Ministries of Education, National Agencies, Higher Education management, policy staff, staff devoted to internationalisation and implementation of degree programmes. The Memorandum of *Modernisation of HE in European context in 2023* prepared by the Dutch group of Bologna Experts is a response to lack of knowledge and insight. The memorandum prepared for the Dutch educational sector in particular, deserves to be edited to make it relevant for all European countries.
7. The TCA discussions showed how important it is to have a group of informed experts from higher education institutions in place. As many participants expressed, the contribution of the Dutch group of Bologna Experts allowed for bringing the discourse on a higher level, offering background information and filling in the gaps of knowledge regarding policy development and implementation, besides given direction and guidance.
8. Based on the observation expressed in point 6, it is highly advised to the European Commission, the EU countries to (re-)install national teams of Bologna Experts. This will allow for bridging a top down with a bottom-up approach. It also offers a more structured vehicle for international exchange of ideas and information, allowing for peer learning.
9. The ECHE is rooted in a number of key European documents which serve as the foundation of the European (Higher) Education Area: Qualifications (Reference) Frameworks, European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, ECTS Users' Guide and instruments for (automatic) recognition of studies. Given the fact that these tools have been developed in the years 2002-2007, and only partly updated around 2014-2015 and a lot of development has taken place since, real updates are required. One can even claim these are "conditional" for keeping the reform process, but also the ECHE credible.
10. Initiatives have to be taken at European level to update all of the mentioned documents / tools as soon as possible. Use should be made of EU Recommendations on Higher Education and the outcomes of relevant European projects and initiatives such as Microbol for micro credentials, GreenComp for sustainability, Digital Competences Framework, Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes of Higher Education in Europe (CALOHEE) for qualifications frameworks and QA, and the WEXHE projects for work-based learning (WBL) and eWBL. The consequence of not updating these tools is that Europe will lose its leading position and credibility in modernizing higher education.
11. There should be awareness that EC policies and actions should not result in 'haves' and 'have nots'. The ECHE has been signed by more than 5000 higher education institutions. The flagship action programme European Universities will only involve slightly more than 10% of these institutions. Both the EHEA and the EEA should be kept inclusive.
12. The TCA confirmed that it is crucial to have a reference tool for international cooperation. Without clear standards and guidance internationalisation cannot operate successfully. The ECHE is such a reference and should be nurtured. At the same time there is an obvious necessity to keep explaining its philosophy and content. It should also be updated regularly to keep it aligned with the fast changes taking place in higher education and society at large. In the present version more explicit attention should be given to 'staff exchange'. Staff exchange is essential for building commitment to internationalization, but also mutual trust and as an instrument for boosting student credit mobility, including underrepresented groups.

**Robert Wagenaar, Bologna expert The Netherlands**

- Lelav Zandi, National Agency Sweden NA (tbc)



### Reflexions from a student representative

"This TCA has shown that the ECHE is now more relevant than ever as an instrument to improve the internationalisation of Higher Education and that through collaboration between all the actors involved, we can create enthusiasm and momentum to improve international opportunities and support institutional transformation. Students expect mobility processes to run smoothly in aspects such as recognition, information exchange, and grant management, but they also value the efforts of Higher Education Institutions, even when there are challenges, in the different elements of the mobility experience: from housing to local integration. Through a focus on monitoring, capacity building, collaboration and innovation we can use the ECHE as a roadmap to transform the quality of education in all our institutions and countries.

Little bonus: Student data is fundamental to identifying which aspects should be prioritised. Help ESN to collect it by disseminating the [ESNsurvey](https://esnsurvey.org) among your students!"  
[esnsurvey.org](https://esnsurvey.org)

**Juan Rayon Gonzalez, President ESN international**

### Reflection from a HEI

Applying for the TCA "Let's talk about the ECHE" I was expecting diverse exchange of knowledge, ideas and good practices for development and improvement - and I was definitely not disappointed! Deciding on the choice of interactive sessions I went for the areas concerning "new" principles 2021-2027, i.e. blended mobility and eco-friendly practices (it seems that HEIs do need related guidance and quality know-how at the moment) as well as students' voice and role in implementing ECHE (its potential often not fully exploited). Erasmus+ programme supports developing solutions to serious modern challenges such as climate change, endangered democracy, social well-being and inclusion - quality higher education is one of the key success factors and the ECHE serves as the quality framework and action guide.

**Agata Bruska, West Pomeranian University of Technology PL**

## Supporting documents

At the website of the NA Erasmus+ Netherlands you will find useful documents (next to guidelines and the ECHE Monitoring guide) which you can use as support for the implementation of the ECHE.

- **Model Diploma supplement** (unfortunately the instructions are in Dutch)
- **Bologna Module** (useful as background document for your day to day work. You get insight into the Bologna process and the consequences of the process that staff employed in a HEI will be facing)
- **Modernisation of HE in European context 2023** (an overview with the actual developments in HE with reference to documents and the challenges we face at this moment)
- [Erasmus Charter for Higher Education \(ECHE\) | Erasmus+ \(erasmusplus.nl\)](#)