The Bologna Process – Principles, Key Commitments and Tools

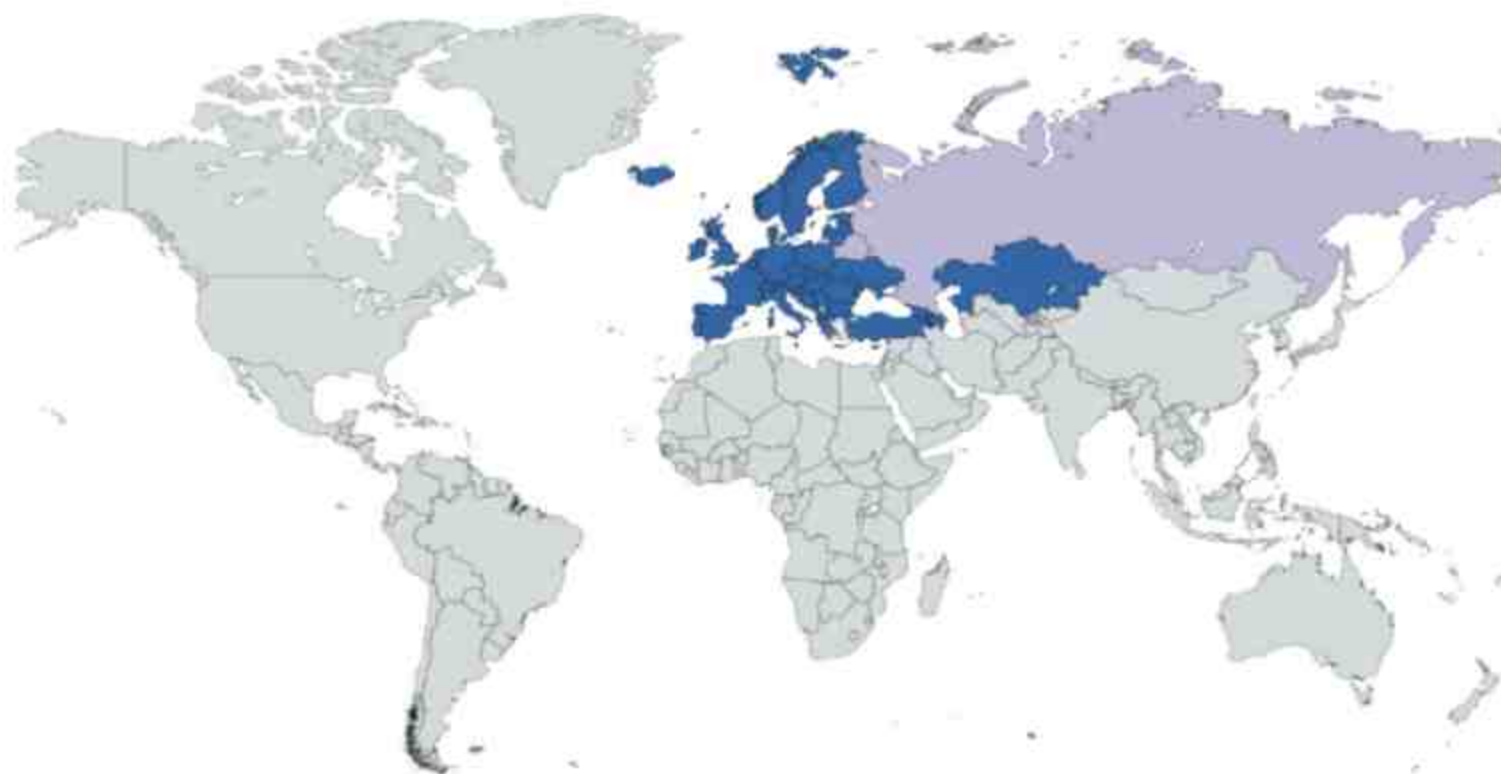Horia-Șerban Onița

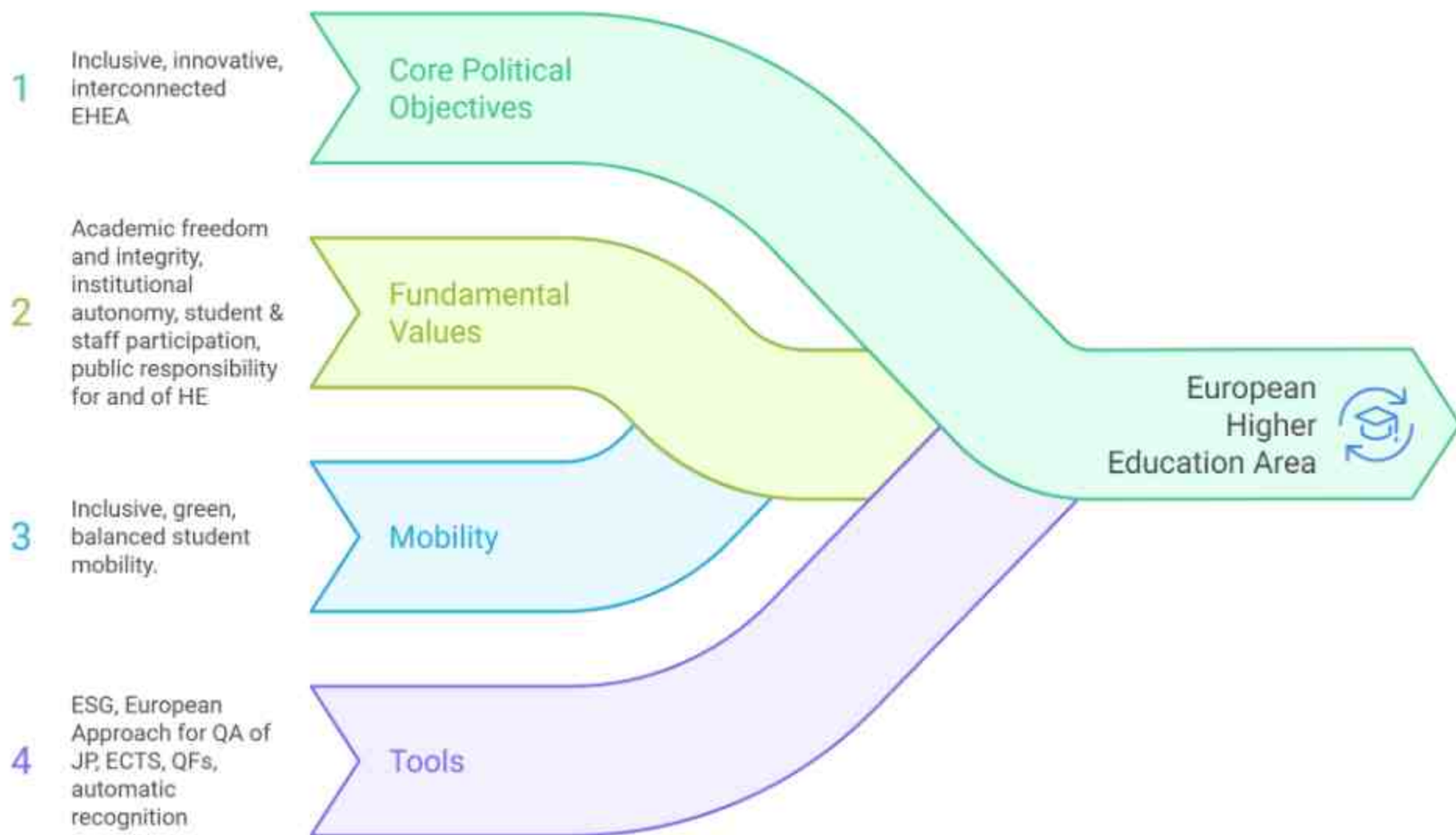Head of the EHEA Secretariat

9th of December 2025

Online TAM - Kyrgyzstan

About the EHEA

Preliminary information

- The Bologna Process is a voluntary, intergovernmental process between European member states

- The aim of the Bologna Process is to improve mobility, competitiveness and quality of HE through comparable, compatible and coherent HE systems

- As such, the Bologna Process has focused on building technical tools and overarching frameworks

- These technical tools brought political change, based on the paradigms they were created.

- The combination of political vision and technical tools created the 'Bologna acquis', heavily influienced by European-level stakeholders

EHEA Principles

1 Inclusive, innovative, interconnected EHEA — Core Political Objectives

2 Academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, student & staff participation, public responsibility for and of HE — Fundamental Values

3 Inclusive, green, balanced student mobility. — Mobility

4 ESG, European Approach for QA of JP, ECTS, QFs, automatic recognition — Tools
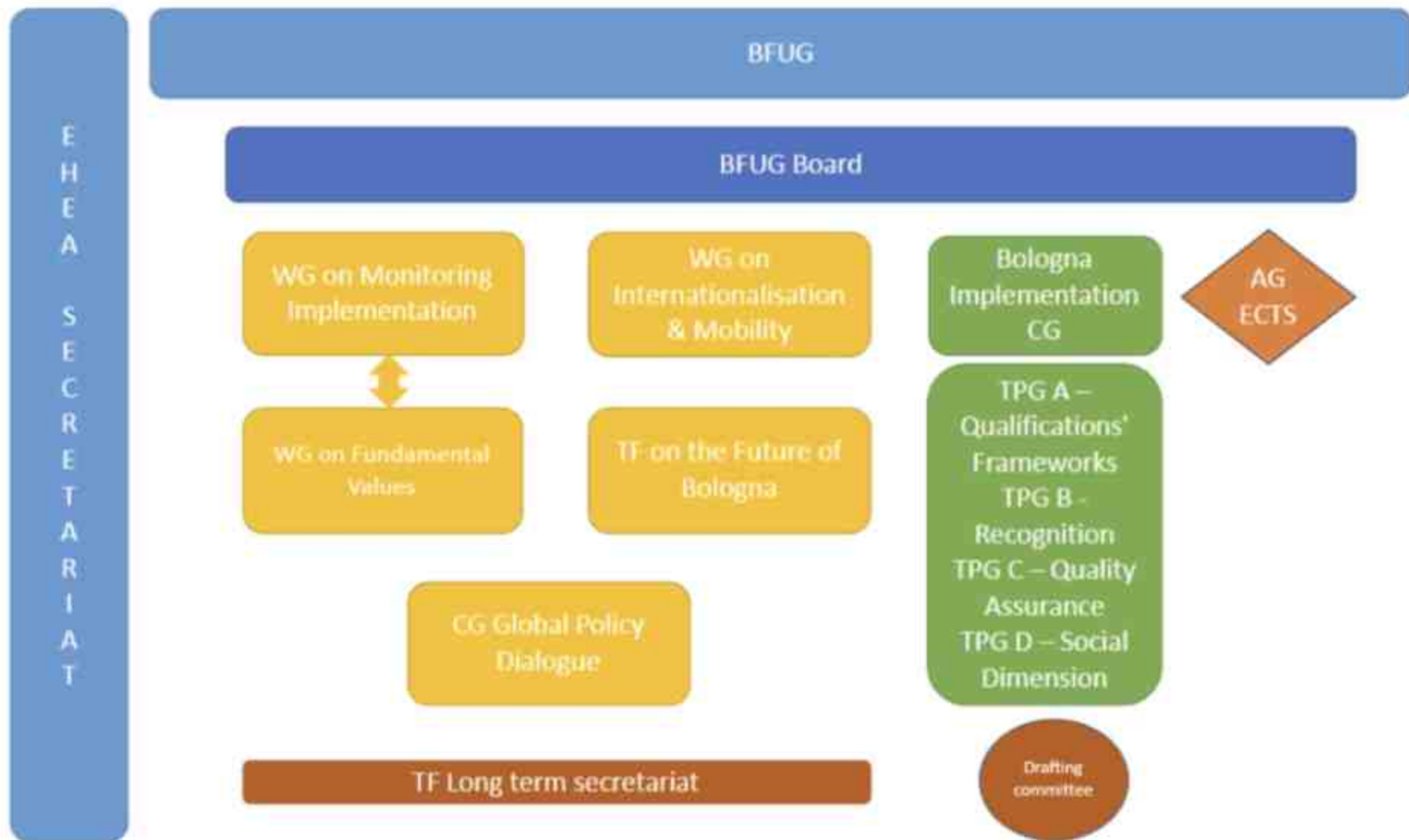
European Higher Education Area

Developing horizontally and vertically

The Bologna Process: from Sorbonne, 1998 to Paris, 2018

Mobility of students and teachers	Mobility also for researchers and administrative staff	Social dimension of mobility	Portability of loans and grants	Attention to visa and work permits	Attention also to pension systems and recognition	Target: 20 % graduate mobility by 2020	Explore path to automatic recognition of academic qualifications		Student digital data exchange
A common two-cycle degree system	Easily readable and comparable degrees	Fair recognition Development of joint degrees	Inclusion of doctoral level as third cycle	QF-EHEA adopted National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) launched	NQFs by 2010	NQFs by 2012	Roadmaps for countries without NQF	Implementation of key commitments	Short cycle as a stand-alone qualification level Revised Diploma Supplement
		Social dimension	Equal access	Reinforcement of the social dimension	National action plans	National targets for the social dimension to be measured by 2020	Widening access and completion rates	Social inclusion	Inclusion of under-represented and vulnerable groups
		Lifelong learning (LLL)	Alignment of national LLL policies Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)	Flexible learning paths	Partnerships to improve employability	LLL as a public responsibility Focus on employability	Enhance employability, LLL and entrepreneurial skills through cooperation with employers	Employability	Combine academic and work-based learning
Use of credits	A system of credits (ECTS)	ECTS and Diploma Supplement (DS)	ECTS for credit accumulation		Coherent use of tools and recognition practices	Implementation of Bologna tools	Ensure that Bologna tools are based on learning outcomes	Adoption of ECTS Users Guide	
	European cooperation in quality assurance (QA)	Cooperation between QA and recognition professionals	QA at institutional, national and European level	European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance (ESG) adopted	Creation of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)	Quality as an overarching focus for EHEA	Allow EQAR registered agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA	Adoption of revised ESG and European Approach to QA of joint programmes	Ensure compliance with ESG 2015 Promote European Approach for QA of joint programmes
Europe of Knowledge	European dimensions in higher education	Attractiveness of the EHEA	Links between higher education and research areas	International coope-ration on the basis of values and sustainable development	Strategy to improve the global dimension of the Bologna Process adopted	Enhance global policy dialogue through Bologna Policy Fora	Evaluate implementation of 2007 global dimension strategy		Develop synergies between EHEA – ERA
								Learning and Teaching Relevance and quality	Innovation and Inclusion in Leaning and Teaching Digitalisation and digital skills
								Sustainable Development	Support to UNSDGs
1998	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2012	2015	2018
Sorbonne Declaration	Bologna Declaration	Prague Communiqué	Berlin Communiqué	Bergen Communiqué	London Communiqué	Leuven/ Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué	Bucharest Communiqué	Yerevan Communiqué	Paris Communiqué

EHEA Work Programme

EHEA SECRETARIAT

BFUG

BFUG Board

WG on Monitoring Implementation

WG on Internationalisation & Mobility

Bologna Implementation CG

AG ECTS

WG on Fundamental Values

TF on the Future of Bologna

TPG A – Qualifications' Frameworks
TPG B - Recognition
TPG C – Quality Assurance
TPG D – Social Dimension

CG Global Policy Dialogue

TF Long term secretariat

Drafting committee

For adoption in Iași-Chișinău Ministerial Conference (26-27 May 2027):

➢ Revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in EHEA
➢ Revised European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes
➢ Revised ECTS User's Guide
➢ 2027 Bologna Process Implementation Report
➢ Action Plan on Internationalisation and Mobility
➢ First monitoring exercise of the six fundamental values

Key Commitment 1

Implement a **three-cycle system** of programmes and degrees, based on **learning outcomes** and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (**ECTS**), compatible with the overarching qualifications framework of the EHEA (**QF-EHEA**);

Tools:
- ECTS User's Guide
- QF-EHEA
- Dublin Descriptors
- Diploma Supplement

Topics of interest:
- Short-cycle higher education;
- Micro-credentials;
- Permeation between HE and VET;
- Proper use of LO's
- Multiple purposes and use of the qualifications frameworks by the stakeholders;
- **Countering diploma and accreditation mills, fraudulent qualifications and academic cheating services,**

The Dublin Descriptors

The Dublin descriptors were built on the following elements:

- ➢ knowledge and understanding;
- ➢ applying knowledge and understanding;
- ➢ making judgements;
- ➢ communications skills;
- ➢ learning skills.

Integrated in QF-EHEA

Dublin Descriptors Bachelor level	
Knowledge and insight	Has demonstrable knowledge and understanding of a discipline that builds on and exceeds the level achieved in secondary education; usually operates at a level where, with the support of specialised manuals, there are some aspects that require knowledge of the latest developments in the field of expertise.
Applying knowledge and insight	Is able to apply his knowledge and insight in such a way that it shows a professional approach to his work or profession, and also has competencies for drawing up and deepening arguments, and for solving problems in the field of expertise.
Judgement	Student is able to collect and interpret relevant data (usually in the field of expertise) with the aim of forming an opinion that is partly based on weighing relevant social, scientific or ethical aspects.
Communication	Is able to communicate information, ideas and solutions to an audience consisting of specialists or non-specialists.
Learning skills	Has the necessary learning skills to enter into a follow-up study that presupposes a high level of autonomy.

ECTS User's Guide

ECTS Users' Guide

ECTS User's Guide - The programme profile

The profile presents the **distinctive features** of the programme. It indicates the **field(s) of study** (which may be expressed in ISCED-F codes), the **level of the programme**, the **main focus**, the key **learning outcomes** expected on completion, the **learning environment** and the **main learning, teaching and assessment activities.**

An effective programme profile will make it clear to students and stakeholders **what generic and subject specific competences will be developed** and the **employability** potential of the programme

Competence means **'the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development'**. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described in terms of **responsibility and autonomy'** (Recommendation 2008/C 111/01). Competences can be **generic or subject–specific**.

Learning outcomes express the level of competence attained by the student and verified by assessment. They are **'statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process'** (Ibid.). They are formulated by academic staff, involving students and other stakeholders. In order to facilitate assessment, these statements need to be verifiable.

ECTS User's Guide - Formulating LOs

The learning outcomes should adequately reflect the **context, level, scope**
and content of the programme:

- **succinct, not too detailed, mutually consistent, easily understandable and verifiable**
- **achievable** within the specified workload, **linked with appropriate learning activities, assessment** methods and assessment criteria.
- Experience suggests between 10 and 12 LOs/study programme and 6-8 LOs/course, which coherently progress and contribute to the LOs of the study programme (matrix)
- Written with **active verb + outcome (object/skill) + how is it demonstrated**

E.g.: graduates explain the interlinks of hardware-components by applying up-to-date scientific terminology

Allocation of ECTS: 25-30 hours/credit (total student workload). Fine-tuning through a priori/a posteriori methods

Supporting documents: course catalogues, learning agreements, transcript of records

# Flexible learning – definition and rationale

Flexible Learning = learning process **free from the constraints of time, place, and pace**, where a learner can **choose entry and exit points**, learning **activities, assessment** modes, and educational **resources** (Naidu, 2017)

Flexible Learning Pathways = Entry points and re-entry points at **all ages and all educational levels** , strengthened links between **formal and non-formal structures** and **recognition, validation and accreditation** of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education (UNESCO, 2015)


Source: Universities UK, 2016.
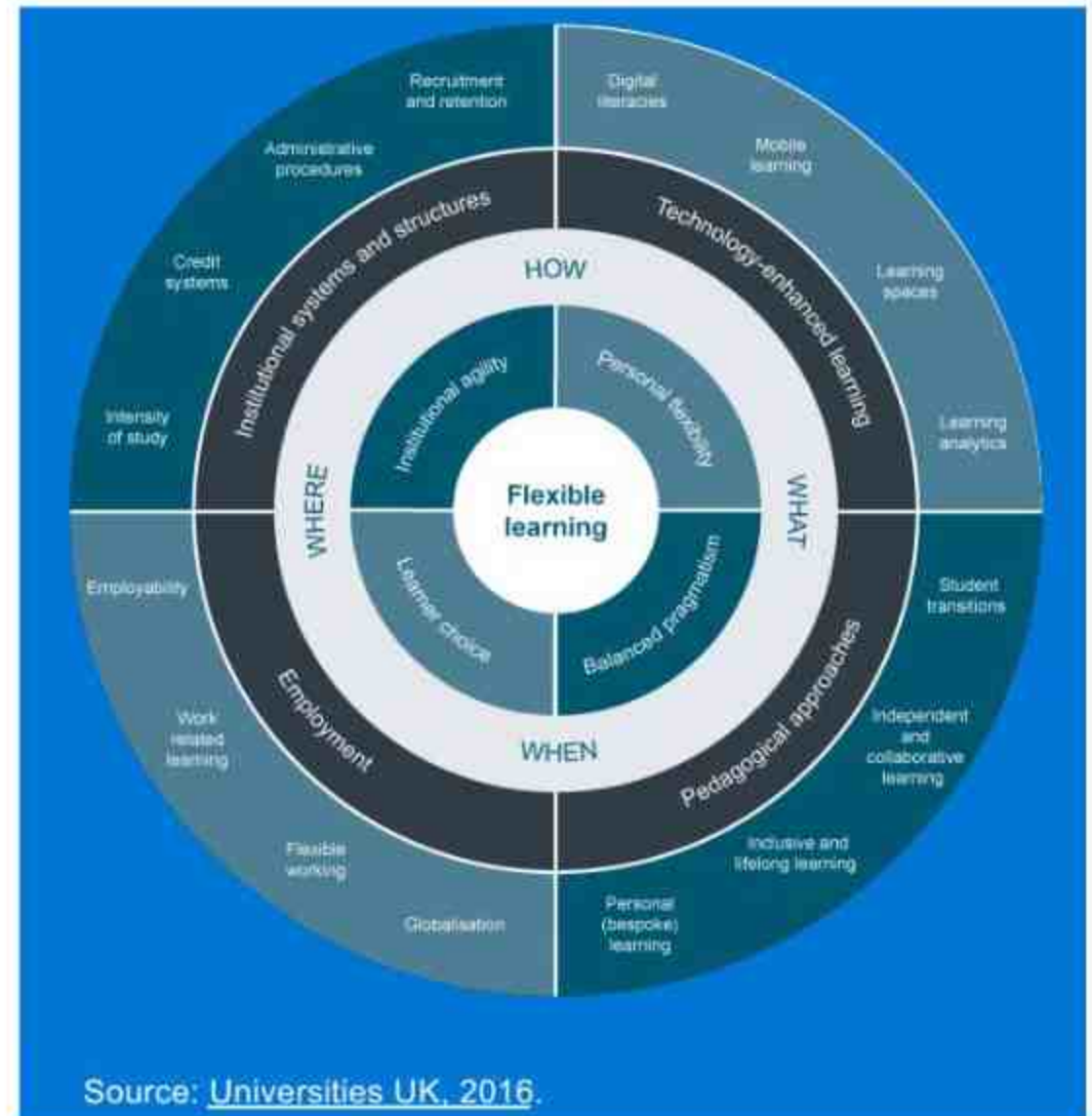
Learning and Teaching and SCL

- The use of LOs was determined as essential also for promoting student-centred learning

- SCL as a pedagogical paradigm has been embraced in BP since 2007, developing its own understanding (in 2015 also included in ESG)

- Student-centered learning as a meta-concept involving a change in pedagogy (first level), the learning environment (resources, content, pace), and institutional culture/approach (third level), leading to student agency

- Part of a wider topic in EHEA on L&T commitments, including National Recommendations focused on flexibility, lifelong learning, teacher training, parity of esteem with research etc, innovation in L&T

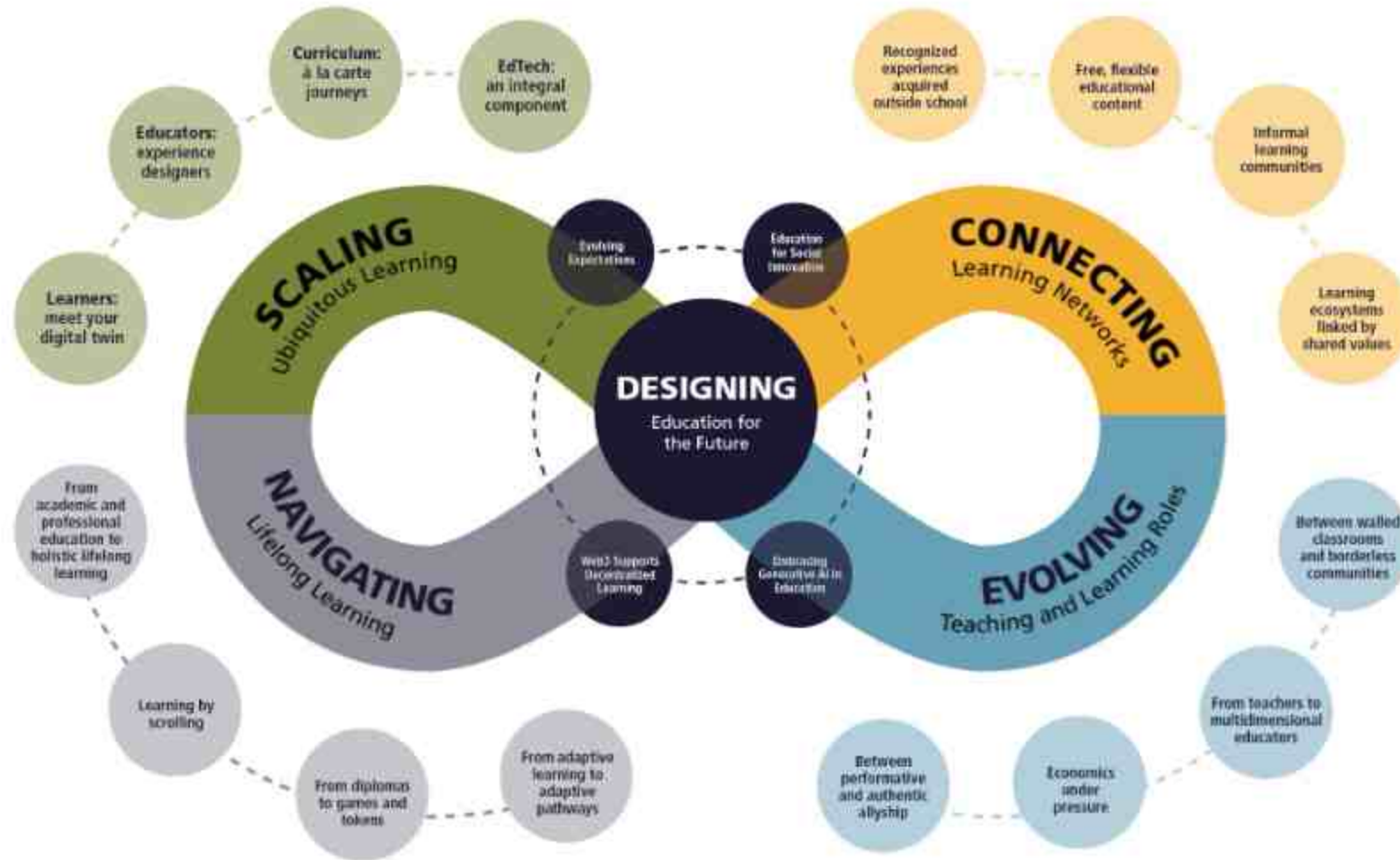- ECTS + ESG + QF guide how & to what extent to be flexible

Steele and Rickards 2016
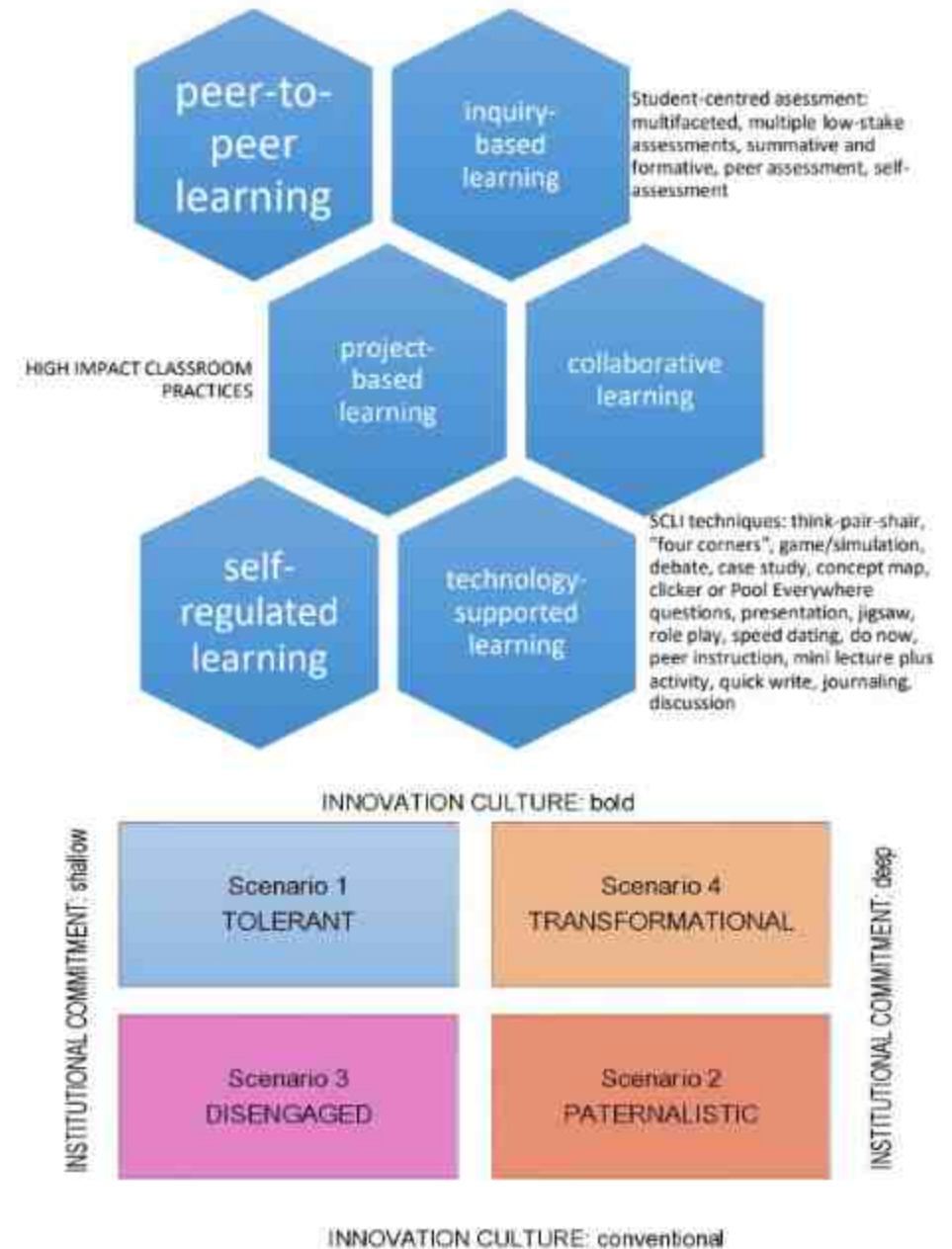
Transversal skills - OECD and UNESCO
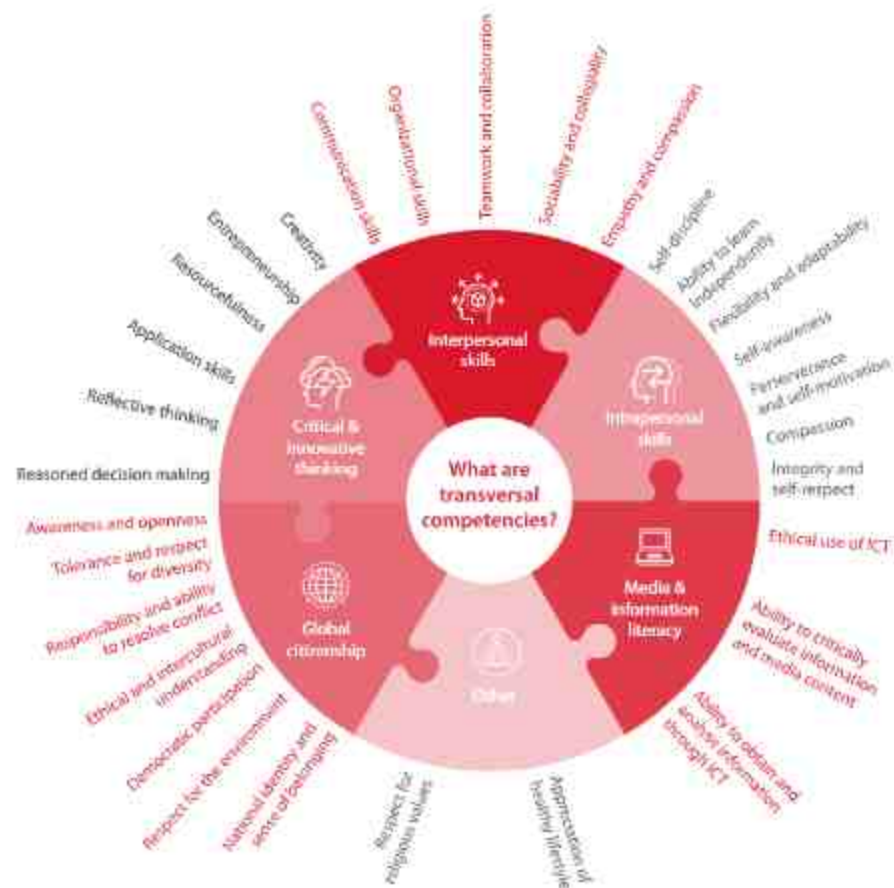
Different learning environment

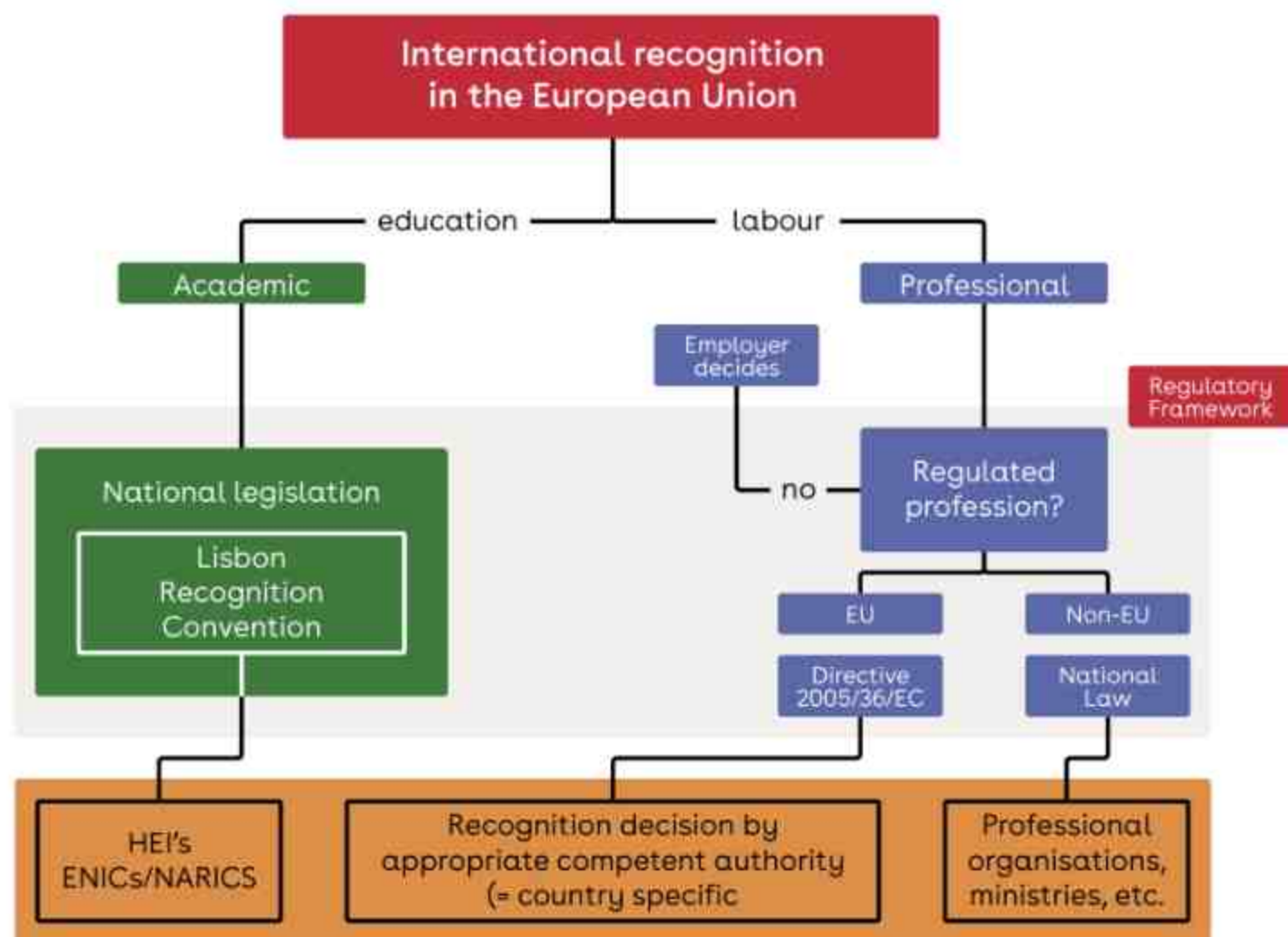eCampus Ontario, 2024

Key commitment 2 - Recognition

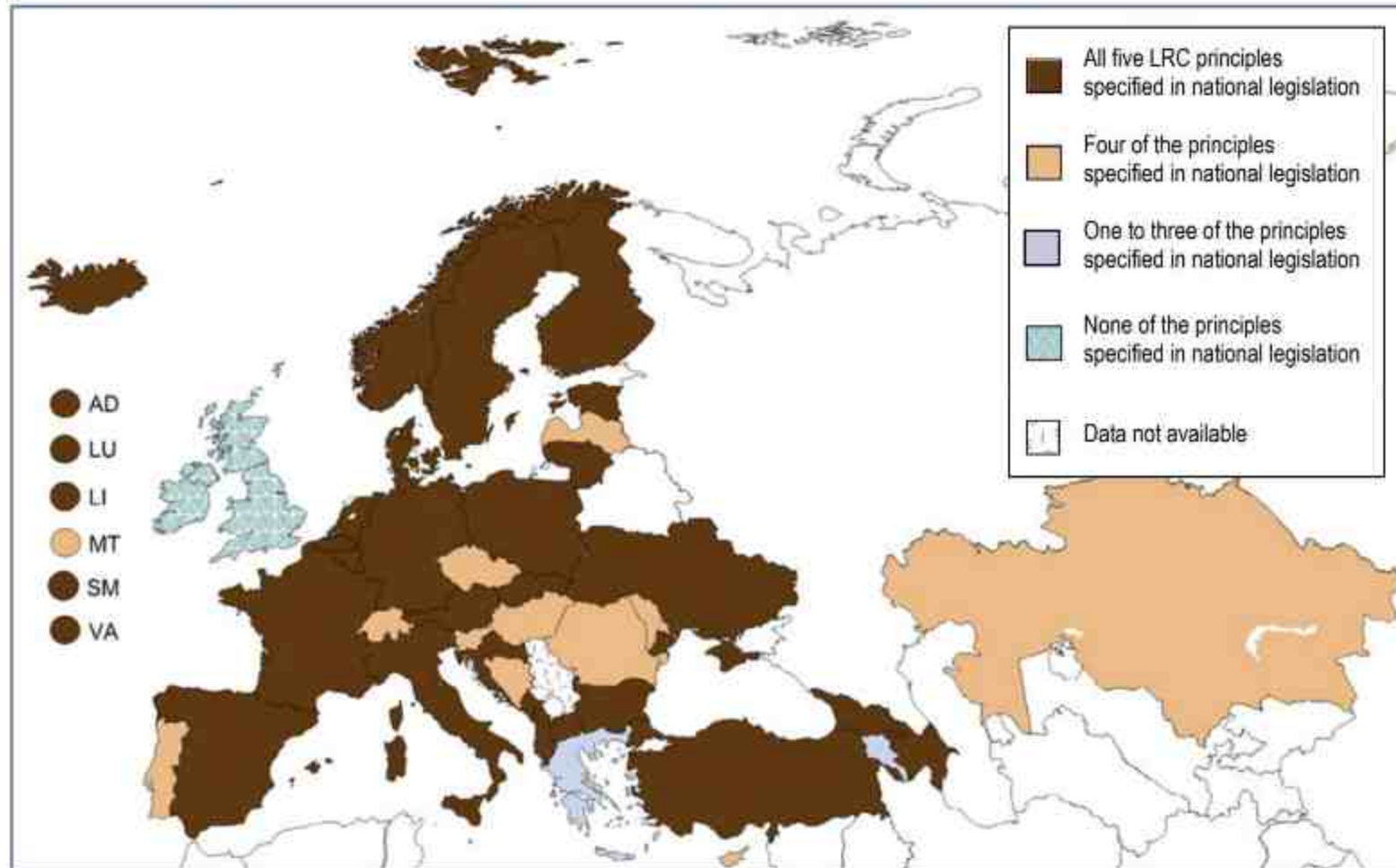**Framework for international recognition in the European Region:**

The Lisbon Recognition Convention

Overarching Principles:

1) applicants have **right to fair assessment**;

2) there is **recognition if no substantial differences** can be proven;

3) legislation or guidelines encourage **comparing of learning outcomes** rather than programme contents;

4) in cases of negative decisions the competent recognition authority **demonstrates the existence** of substantial difference;

5) **applicant's right** to appeal of the recognition decision.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention

Figure 2.12: Principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in national legislation, 2022/2023

Legend:
- All five LRC principles specified in national legislation
- Four of the principles specified in national legislation
- One to three of the principles specified in national legislation
- None of the principles specified in national legislation
- Data not available

AD, LU, LI, MT, SM, VA

MONITORING
THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF THE LISBON RECOGNITION
CONVENTION
Monitoring report
Paris/Strasbourg 2022

Source: BFUG data collection.

Official Guidance

The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions

Practical guidelines for credential evaluators and admissions officers to provide fair and flexible recognition of foreign degrees and studies abroad
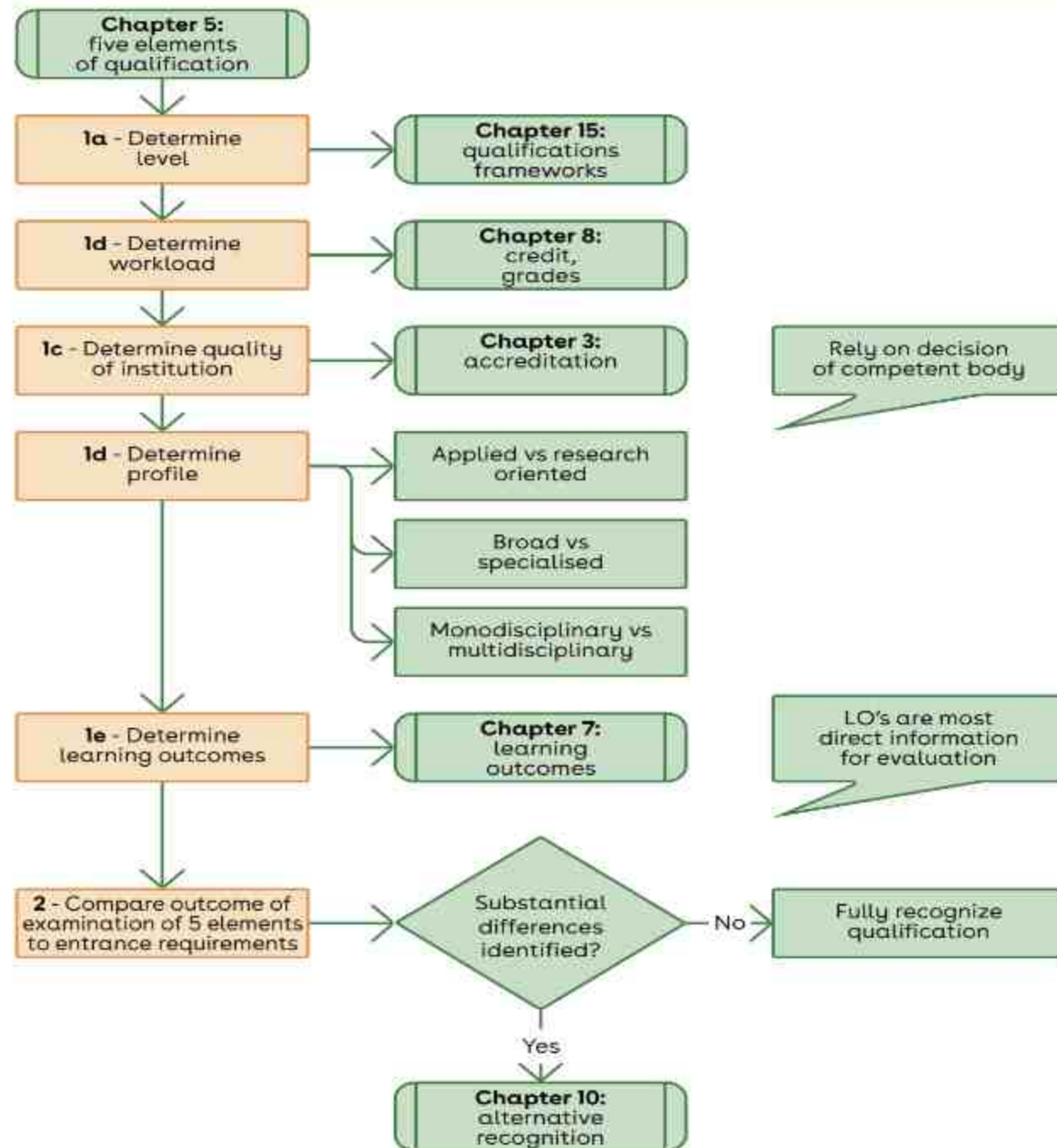
Third edition, February 2020

nuffic
lead the world

EAR manual
2023

nuffic
lead the world

NUF2023

Chapter 5: five elements of qualification

↓

1a - Determine level → **Chapter 15:** qualifications frameworks

↓

1d - Determine workload → **Chapter 8:** credit, grades

↓

1c - Determine quality of institution → **Chapter 3:** accreditation

Rely on decision of competent body

↓

1d - Determine profile →
- Applied vs research oriented
- Broad vs specialised
- Monodisciplinary vs multidisciplinary

↓

1e - Determine learning outcomes → **Chapter 7:** learning outcomes

LO's are most direct information for evaluation

↓

2 - Compare outcome of examination of 5 elements to entrance requirements → Substantial differences identified? → **No** → Fully recognize qualification

Yes ↓

Chapter 10: alternative recognition

Automatic recognition

I. Legal bilateral and multilateral agreements;

II. Legally binding unilateral list of degrees;

III. Non-legal bilateral and multilateral agreements;
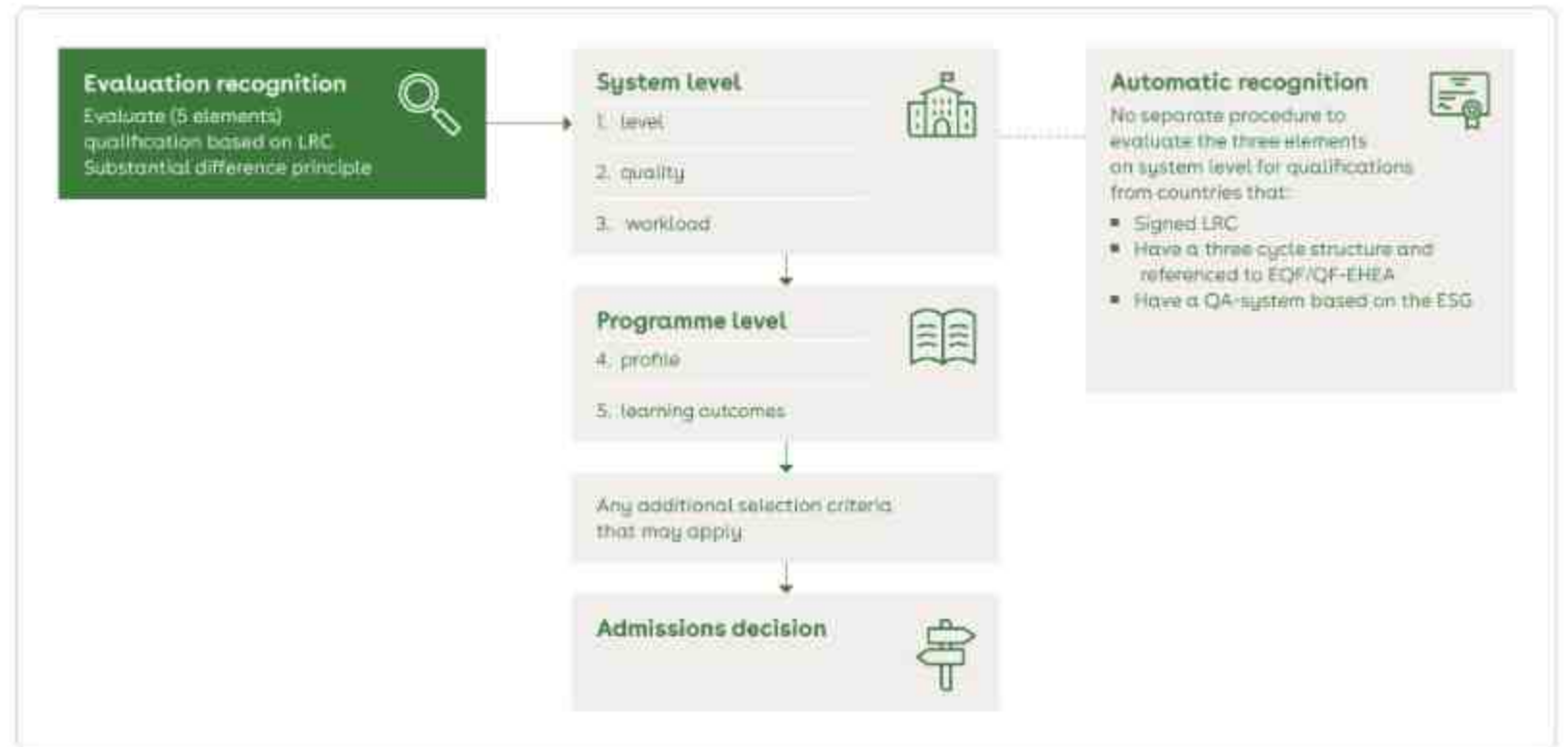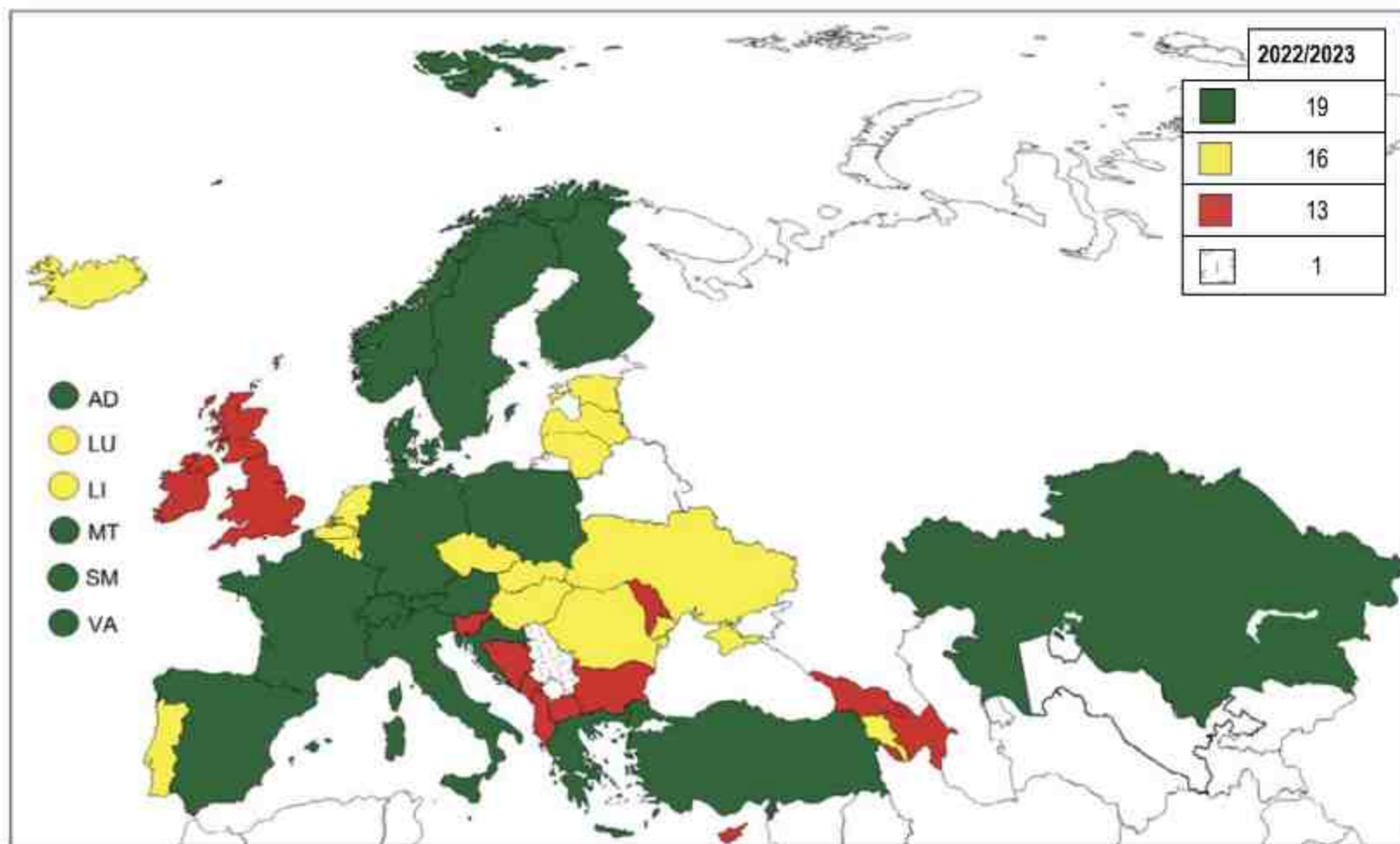
IV. 'De facto' automatic recognition.

Figure I

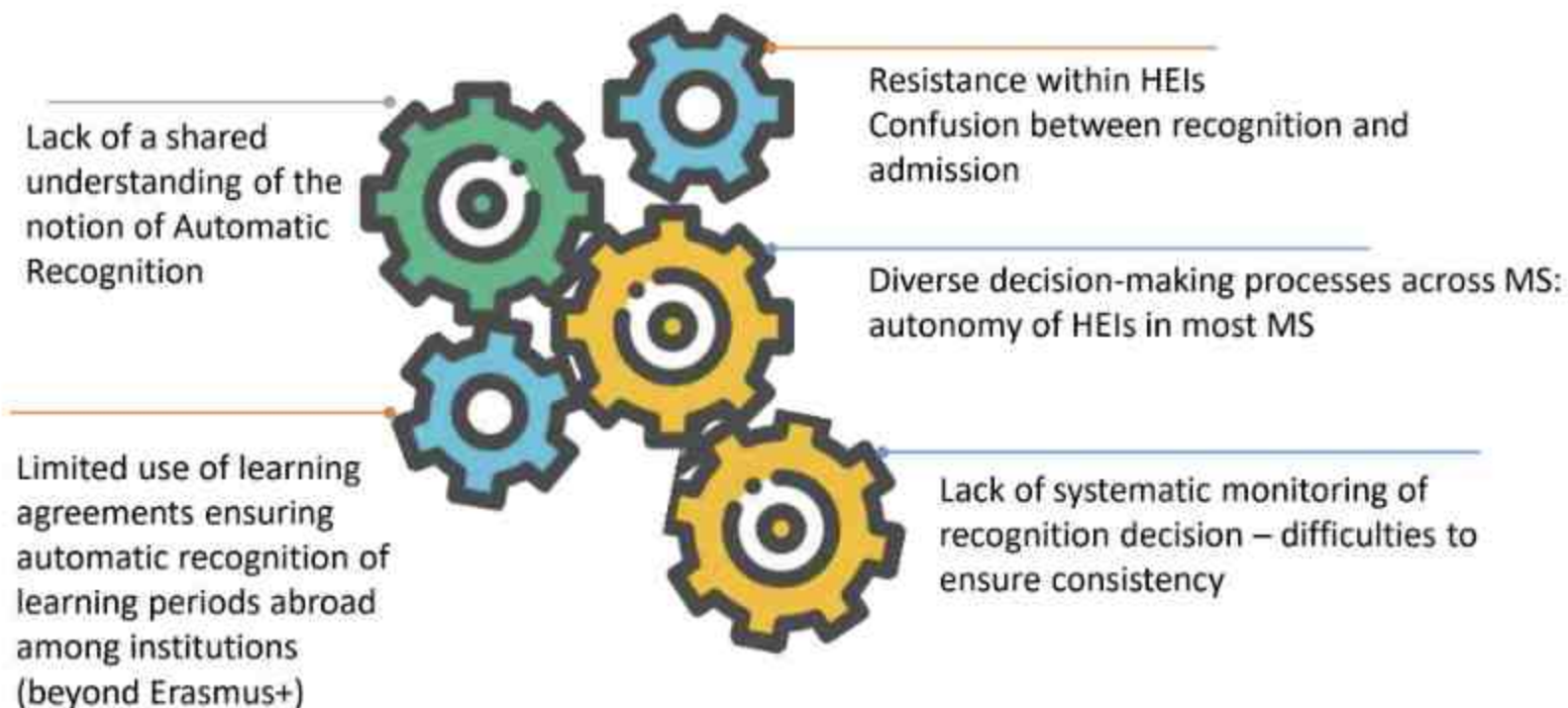All EAR Manual for HEIs, 2016

Implementing Automatic Recognition

Figure 2.15: Scorecard indicator n°5: System level (automatic) recognition for academic purposes, 2022/2023

Source: BFUG data collection.

Challenges to Automatic recognition

Lack of a shared understanding of the notion of Automatic Recognition

Resistance within HEIs
Confusion between recognition and admission

Diverse decision-making processes across MS: autonomy of HEIs in most MS

Limited use of learning agreements ensuring automatic recognition of learning periods abroad among institutions (beyond Erasmus+)

Lack of systematic monitoring of recognition decision – difficulties to ensure consistency

European Commission, 2022

Issues

- **Division of competence** between national and institutional level
- **Recognition 'discourse' disconnected** at institutional level (lack of training, misconceptions, reliance on 'prestige' etc)
- **Poor writing of learning outcomes**
- **Confusing access and admission**
- **Improper information provision**
- **Lack of data on recognition decisions** → QA of recognition lacks evidence base
- **Domestication in the European environment** may pressure up expectations from other parts of the world → added value of voluntary certification, cooperation projects etc
- **Recognition of ECTS**

Main topics

- Optimizing the potential of digital technology; impact of digital transition on higher education in the EHEA, including AI, and with regard to the key commitments and the use of Bologna Process tools.
    - Including digital means to countering education fraud, thus, contribute to fostering ethic, transparency, and integrity in education.
- Recognition of alternative pathways.
- Achieving automatic recognition.
- Establishing the distribution of work and responsibilities among the competent institutions that have the right knowledge and capacity to carry out recognition procedures.
- Ensuring fair recognition of qualifications held by refugees.
- Establishing the legal framework to allow the implementation of the LRC and synergies with the Global convention on Recognition of qualifications and second generation.
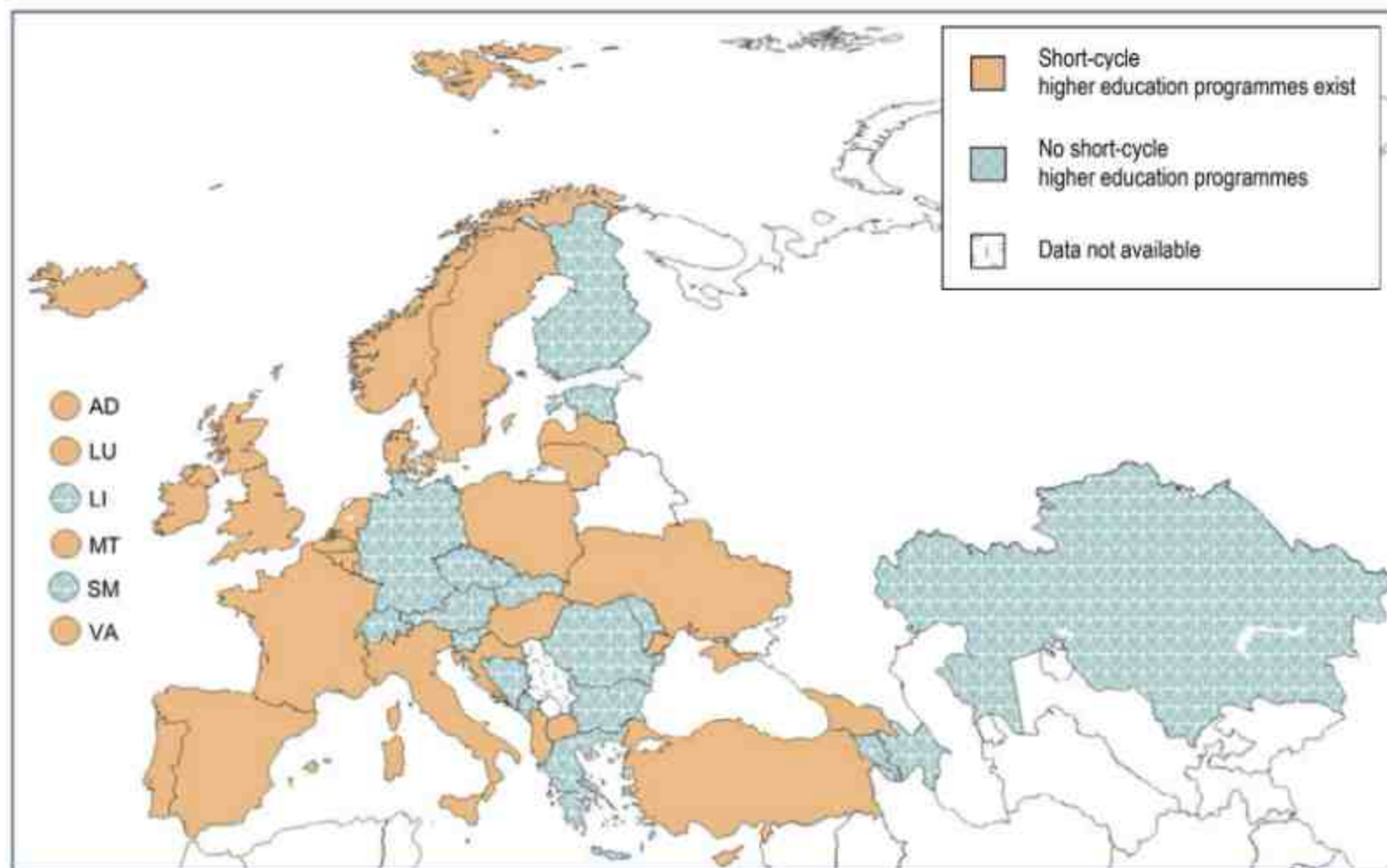
Short cycle

Paris Communique (2018):

*In many of our systems, ECTS-based short cycle qualifications play an increasingly important role in **preparing students for employment and further studies** as well in **improving social cohesion** by facilitating access for many who would otherwise not have considered higher education. We are therefore **including short-cycle qualifications as a stand-alone qualification** within the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA). **Each country can decide whether and how** to integrate short cycle qualifications within its own national framework.*

Short cycle

Figure 2.4: Presence of short-cycle programmes considered as part of higher education, 2022/2023

Legend:
- Short-cycle higher education programmes exist
- No short-cycle higher education programmes
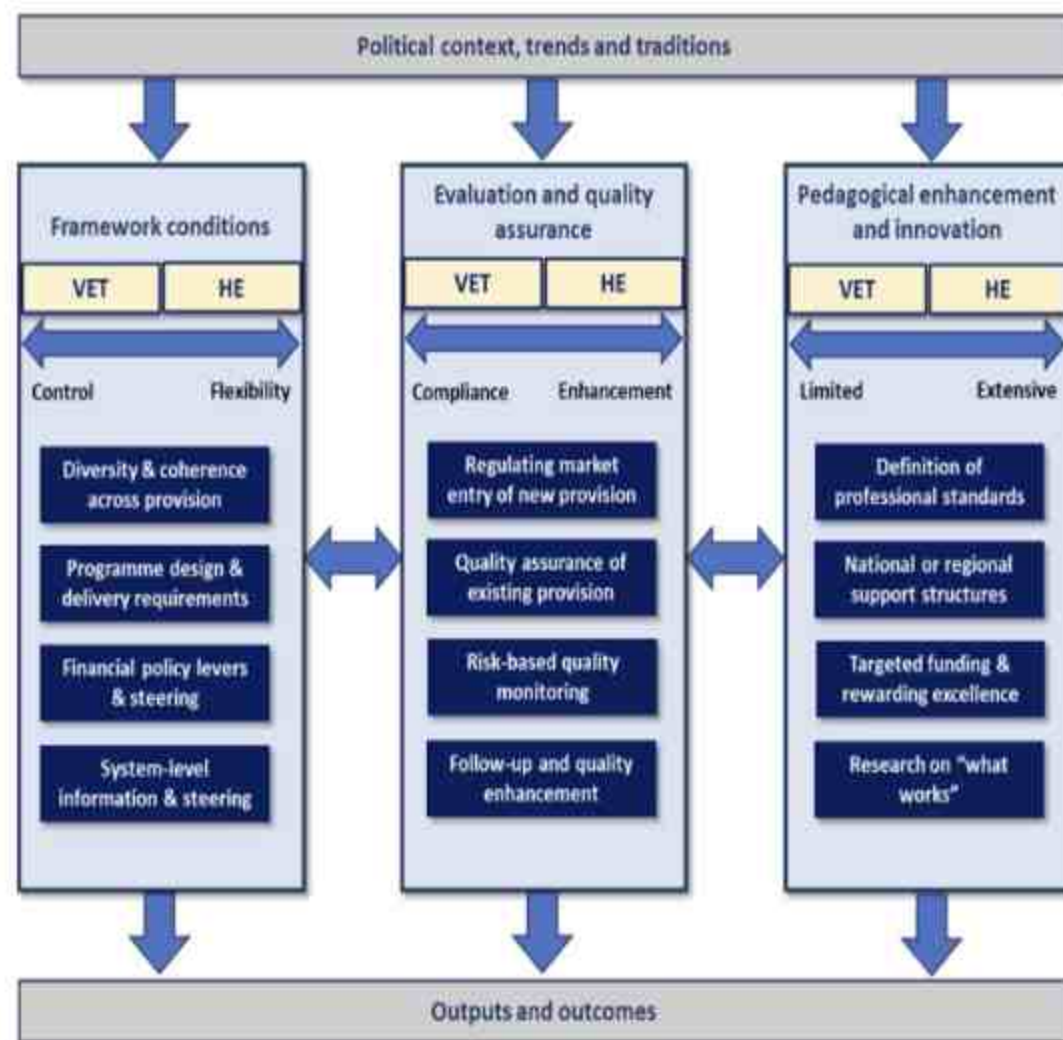- Data not available

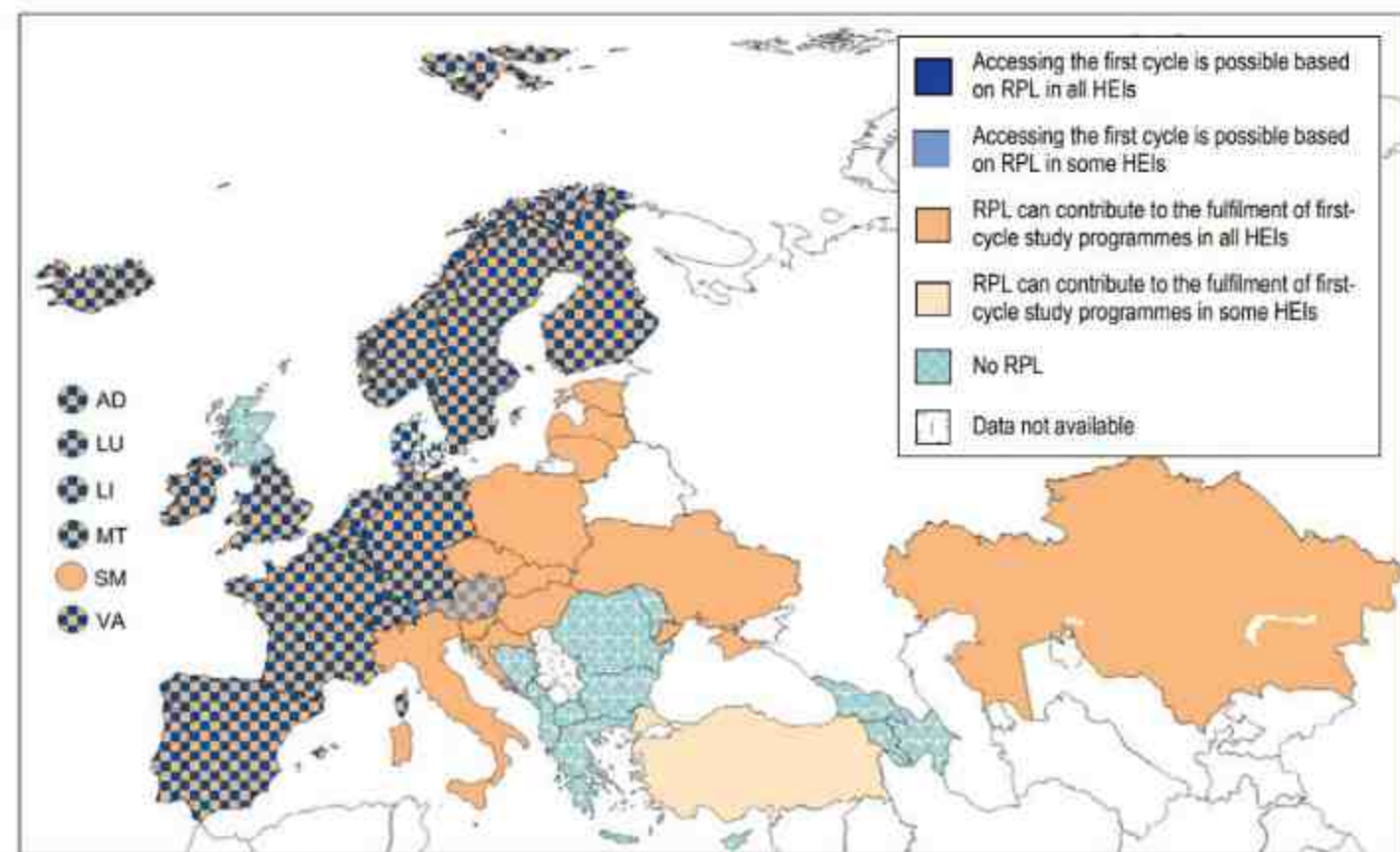Inset labels: AD, LU, LI, MT, SM, VA

Source: BFUG data collection.

Short cycle – main topics

- **Part of HE or not/differences** to non-HE programmes at level 5 ISCED
- **Articulation with HE** (level 6) + the extent to which it can be recognized at (**combined with**) level 6
- **Quality assurance and funding**
- **Student support systems** (in consideration of the profile of learners)

Recognition of prior learning

Source: BFUG data collection.

Principle 1: Strategic approach to the social dimension →	**Principle 2: Flexibility of higher education systems** →	**Principle 3: The inclusiveness of the entire education system** →
Principle 4: Monitoring and data collection →	**Principle 5: Counselling and guidance** →	**Principle 6: Funding** →
Principle 7: Inclusive institutional culture →	**Principle 8: International mobility** →	**Principle 9: Community engagement** →
Principle 10: Policy dialogue →		

Examples and challenges

Policies: Scotland (higher education institutions as credit assessment bodies) and Korea (academic credit banking system)

Percentages: Italy – 12 ECTS, Germany, Switzerland, Poland – 50%, Hungary – 66%, Lithuania – 75%, Norway – at least 60 ECTS not recognized

Challenges:

- Lack of referencing to common framework (NQF)

- Students: poor counselling, costs

- Staff: lack of training, lack of trust

- System-level: validity, reliability, quality assurance (common guidance in EQF)

Micro-credentials

European principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials:

- Quality
- Transparency
- Relevance
- Validity of assessment
- Learning pathways
- Recognition
- Portability
- Learner-centredness
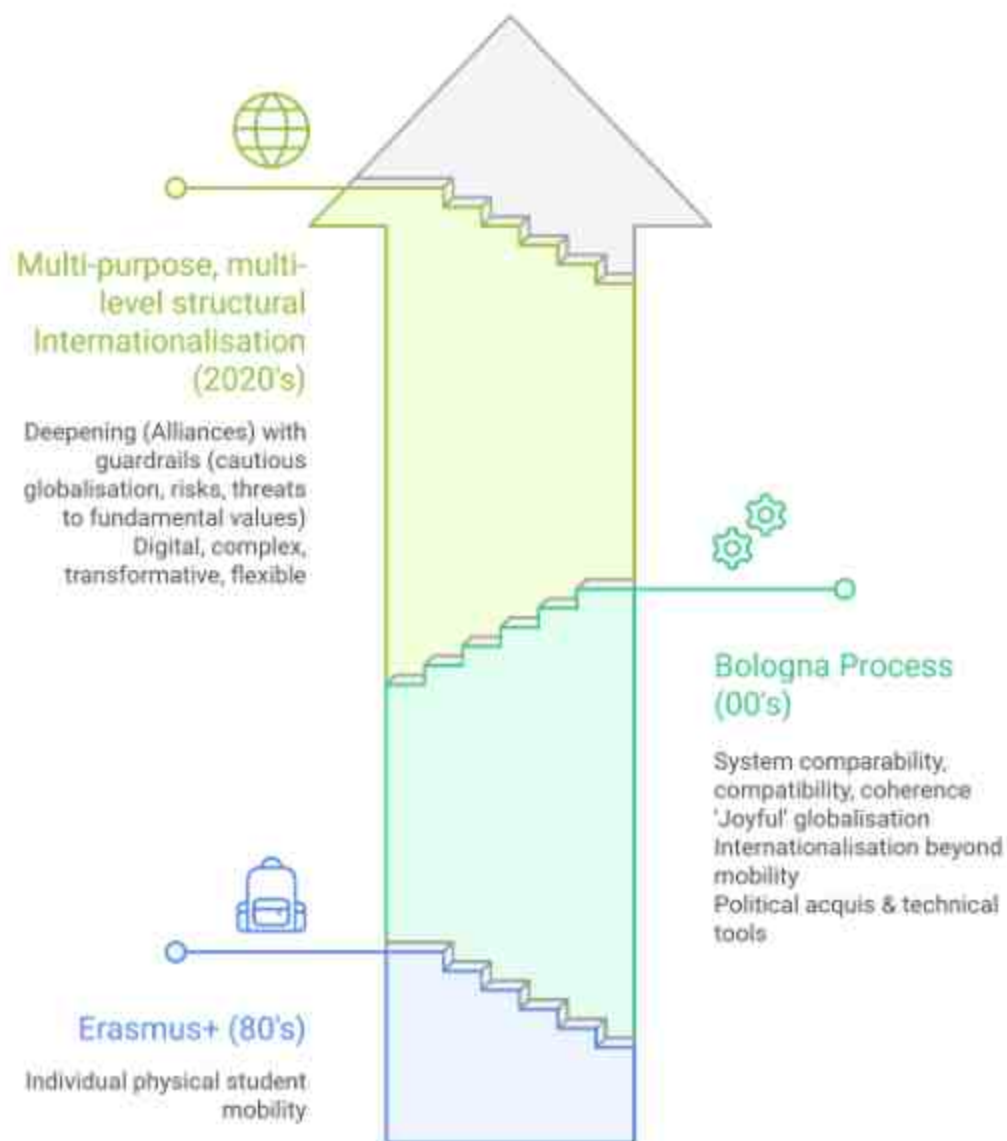- Authenticity
- Information and guidance
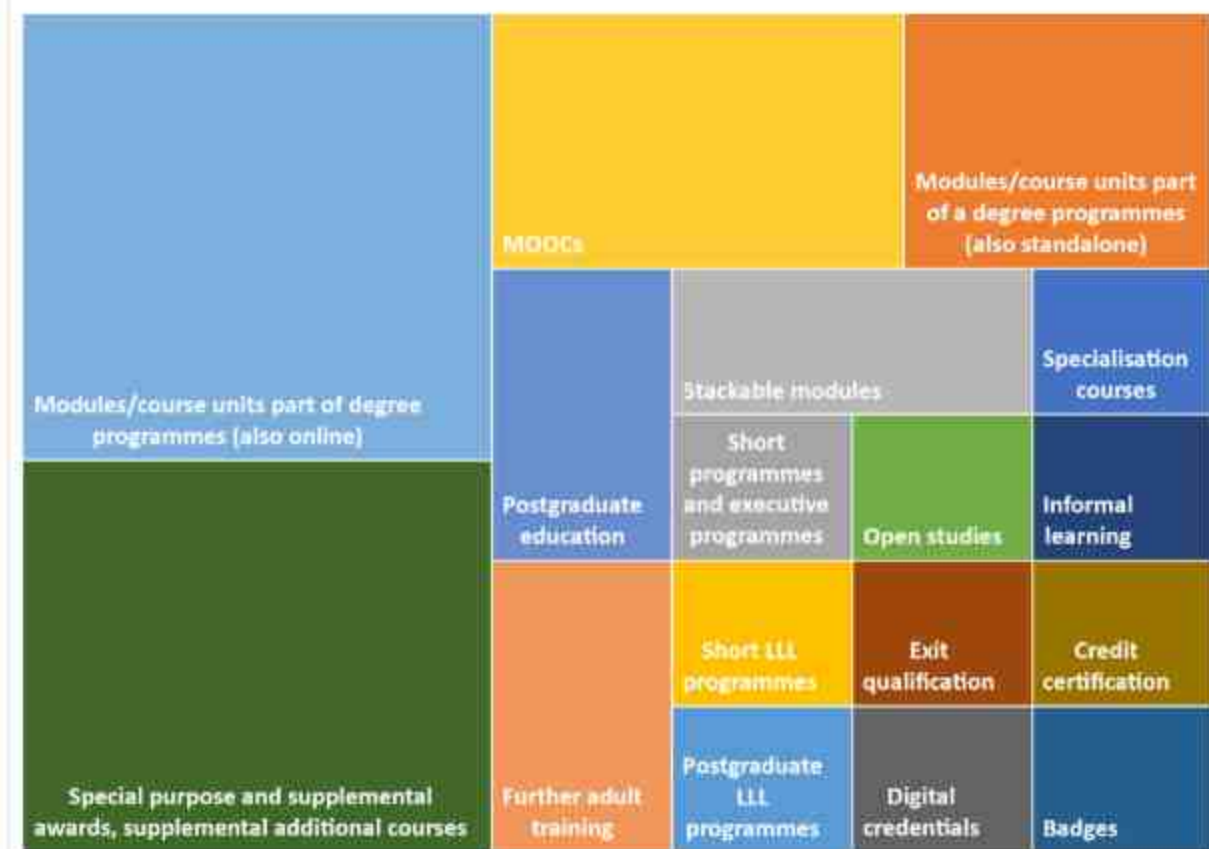
Key commitment 3

Promote a quality culture in higher education, fostered by fit-for-purpose quality assurance processes in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

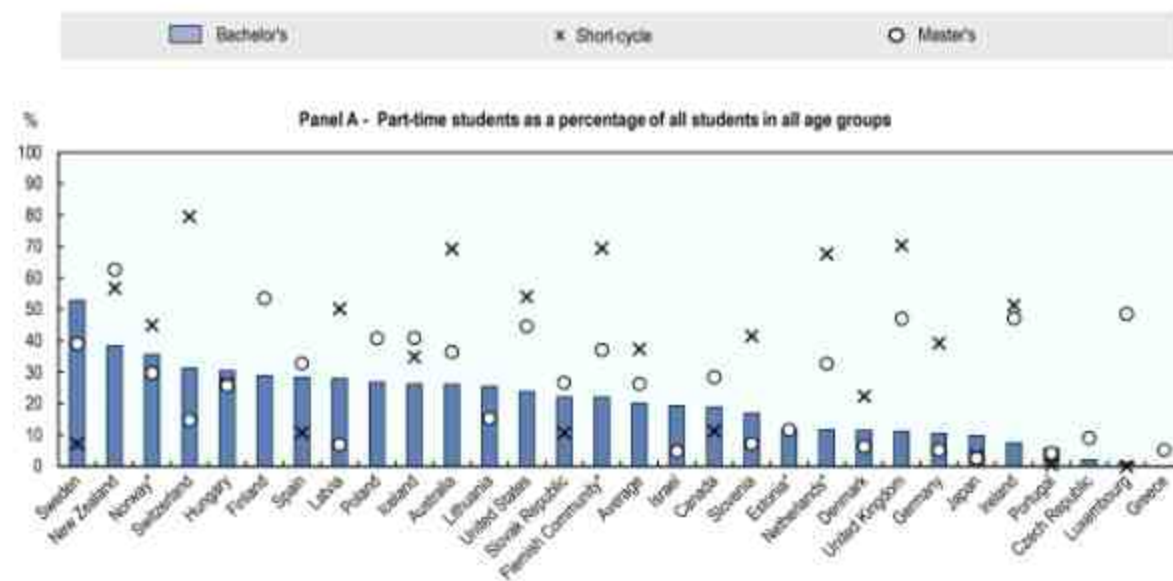Tools: ESG, European Approach for the QA of Joint Programmes

Topics: Cross-border QA, QA of TNE, Stakeholders involvement, Digitalisation, QA of European University Alliances, enhancement-oriented QA etc

Waves of internationalisation in Europe

Multi-purpose, multi-level structural Internationalisation (2020's)

Deepening (Alliances) with guardrails (cautious globalisation, risks, threats to fundamental values)
Digital, complex, transformative, flexible

Bologna Process (00's)

System comparability, compatibility, coherence
'Joyful' globalisation
Internationalisation beyond mobility
Political acquis & technical tools

Erasmus+ (80's)

Individual physical student mobility

General trends

- Different students

OECD, 2023

General trends

- Different students

- Different skills

Proportion of employed individuals younger than 35 with higher education reporting to be unable to choose or change "the sequence of tasks" and "how to do the work" (upper secondary education = 1)
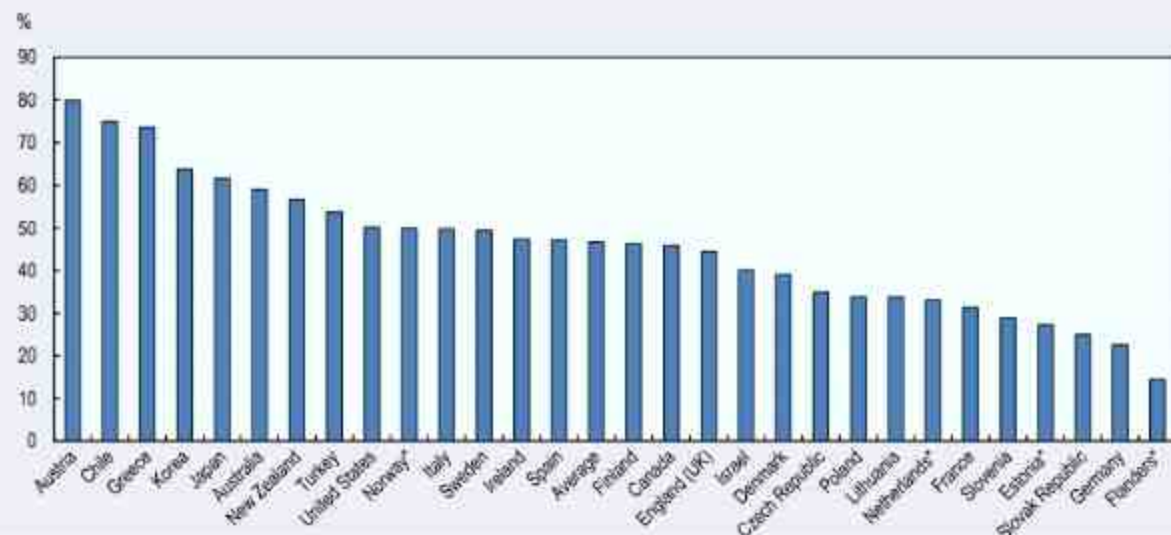
OECD, 2024

Exhibit 10

Skills of today vs skills of tomorrow: technological, social and emotional skills will become even more important.
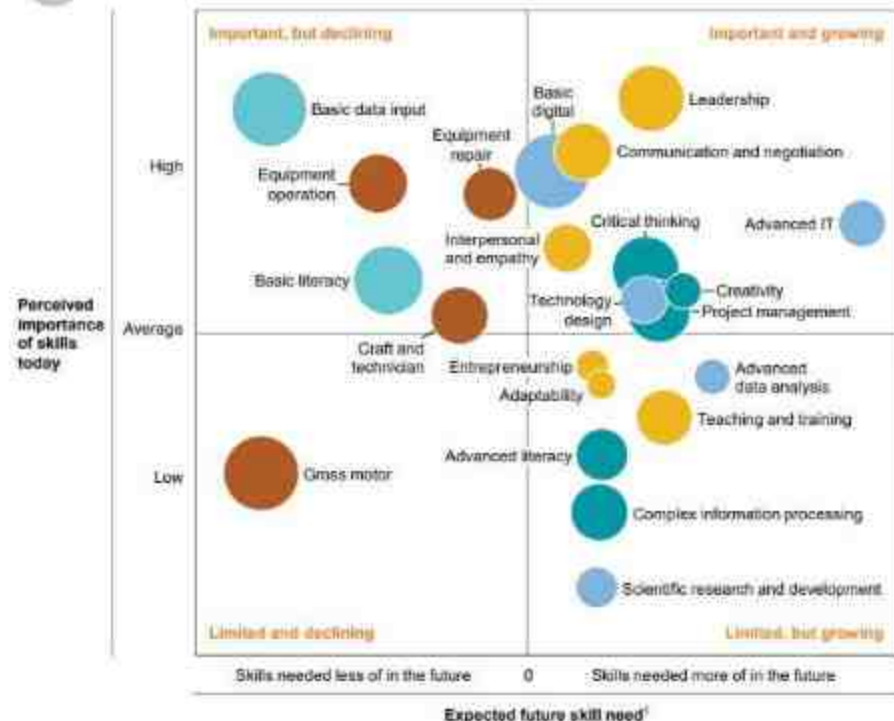
Based on McKinsey Global Institute workforce skills executive survey, March 2018
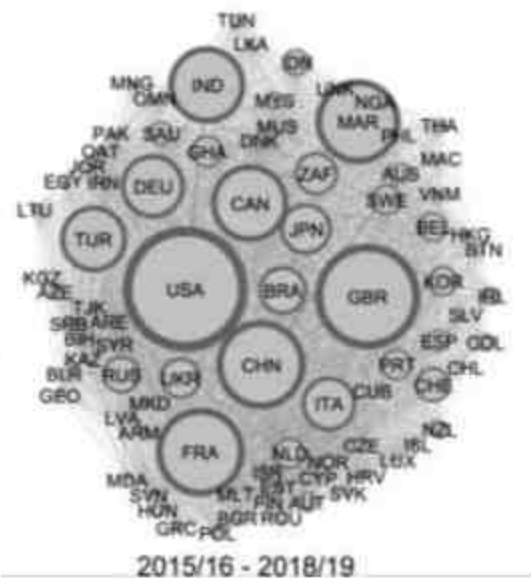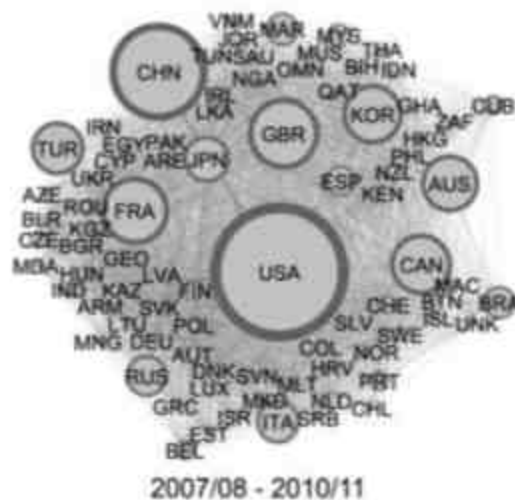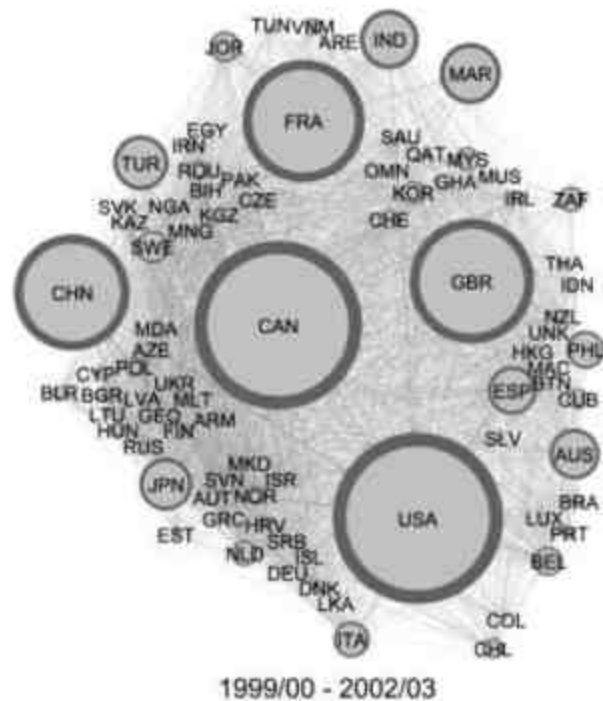
McKinsey, 2018

General trends

- Different students

- Different skills

- Diffuse national regulation: combining deregulation with increasing regulation, depending on topics

- Risk of homogenisation/'catch-up' syndrome

- Populist drives – back to showing the value
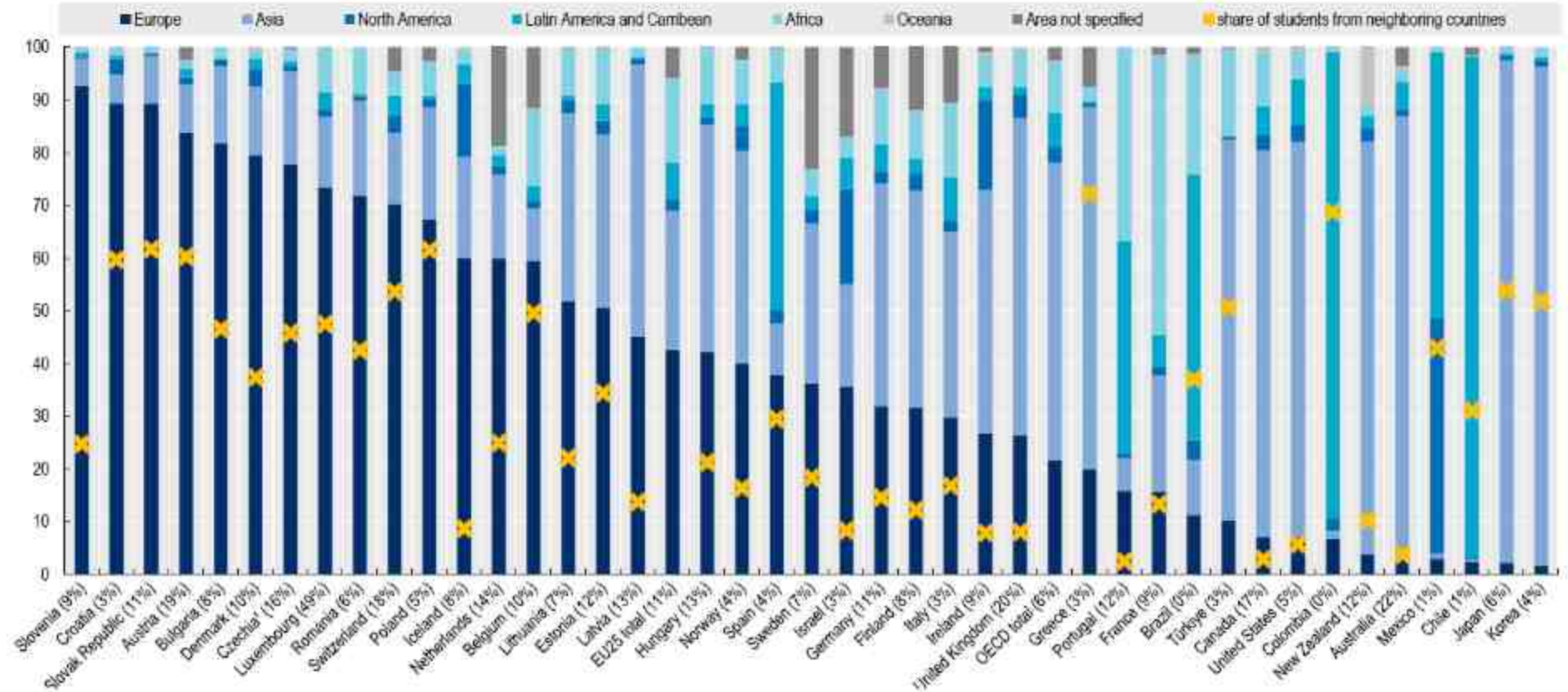
Internationalisation trends

- No more giants

1999/00 - 2002/03

2007/08 - 2010/11

2015/16 - 2018/19

Glass, 2024

Internationalisation trends

- No more giants
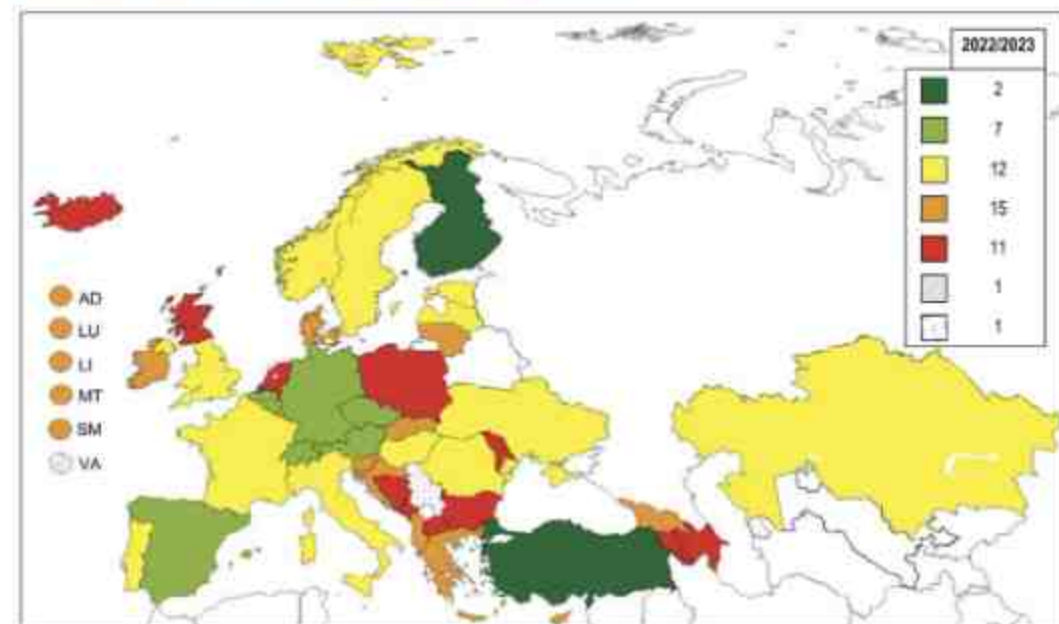- Know thy neighbours

OECD, 2022

Internationalisation trends

- No more giants
- Know thy neighbours
- Still about the rich

Figure 4.16: Scorecard indicator n°16: P&G 8: Supporting vulnerable, disadvantaged or underrepresented groups of students and staff in participating in international mobility, 2022/2023

Source: BFUG data collection.

BFUG, 2024

Figure 2. Distribution of incoming international students by origin countries' income level (2022)
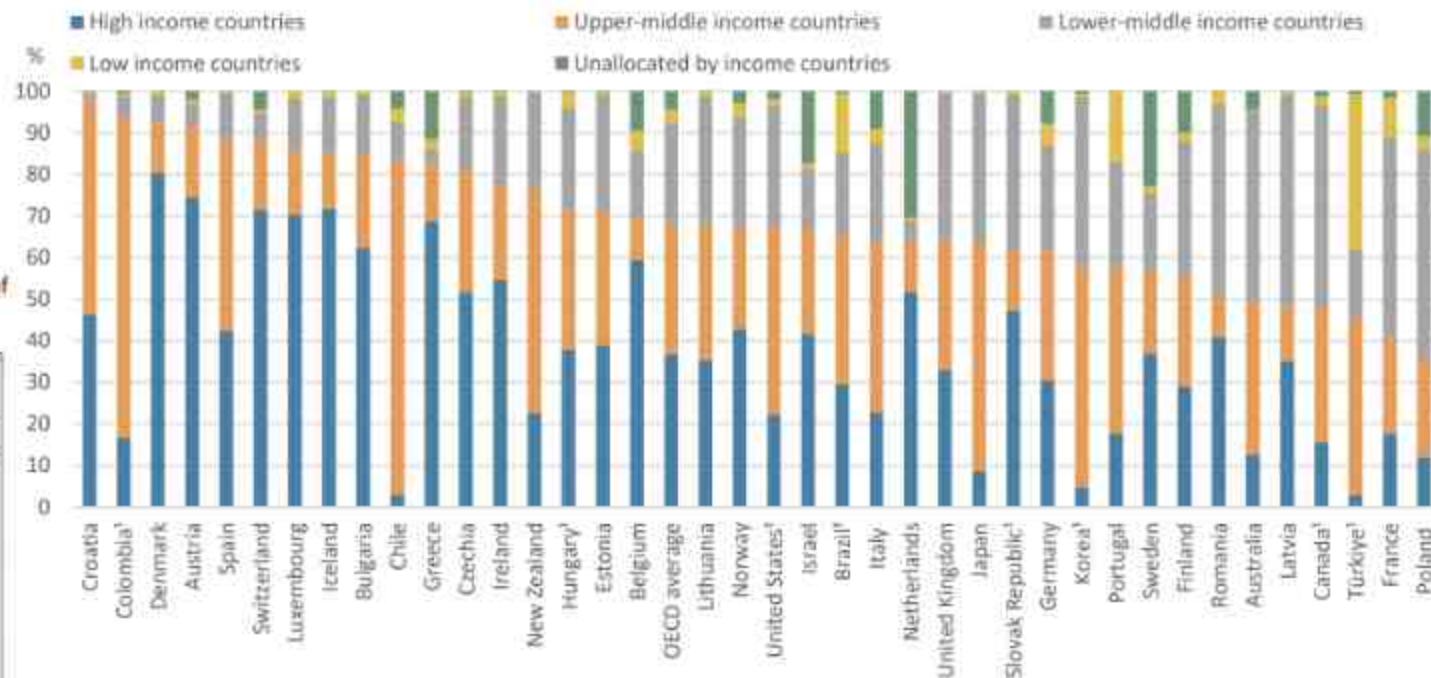
Note: The World Bank assigns the world's economies to four income groups — low-income, lower middle-income, upper middle-income and high-income. The classifications are updated each year on 1 July and are based on gross national income per capita in current USD of the previous year.

OECD, 2025

Internationalisation trends

- No more giants

- Know thy neighbours

- Still about the rich

- In upper levels and westwards

Figure 6.6: Extent of balance in degree mobility flows within and outside the EHEA, ISCED 5-8, 2020/2021
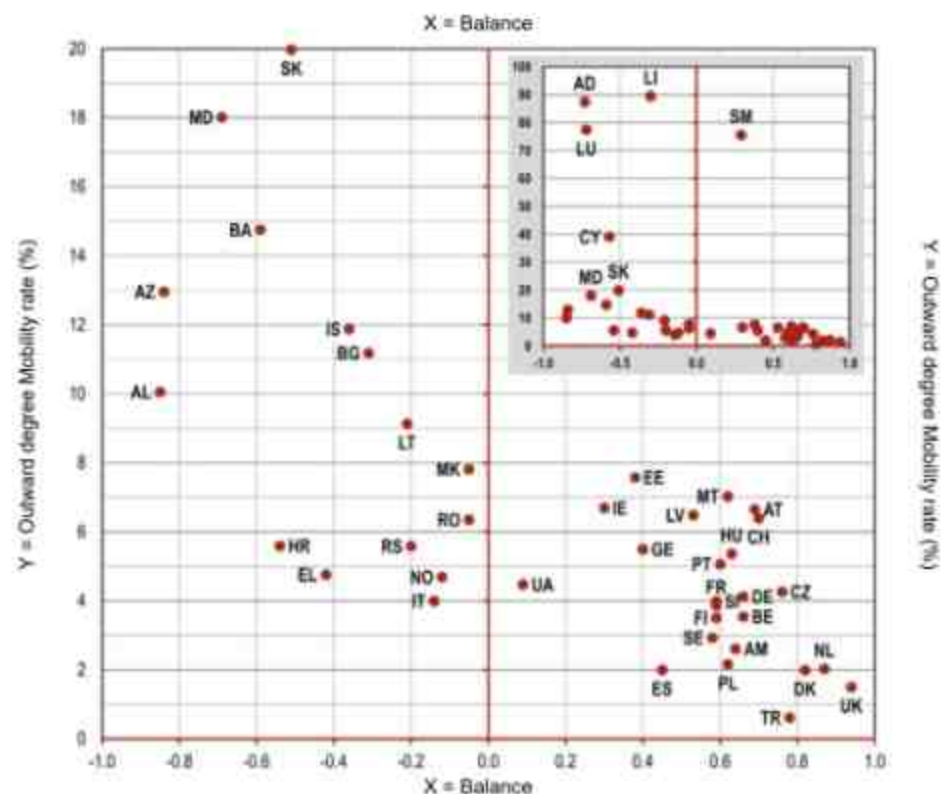
Figure 6.2: Outward degree and credit mobility of graduates, by country of origin and level of educational attainment, 2020/2021, (%)

ISCED 6   ISCED 7   ISCED 8   — ISCED 5-8
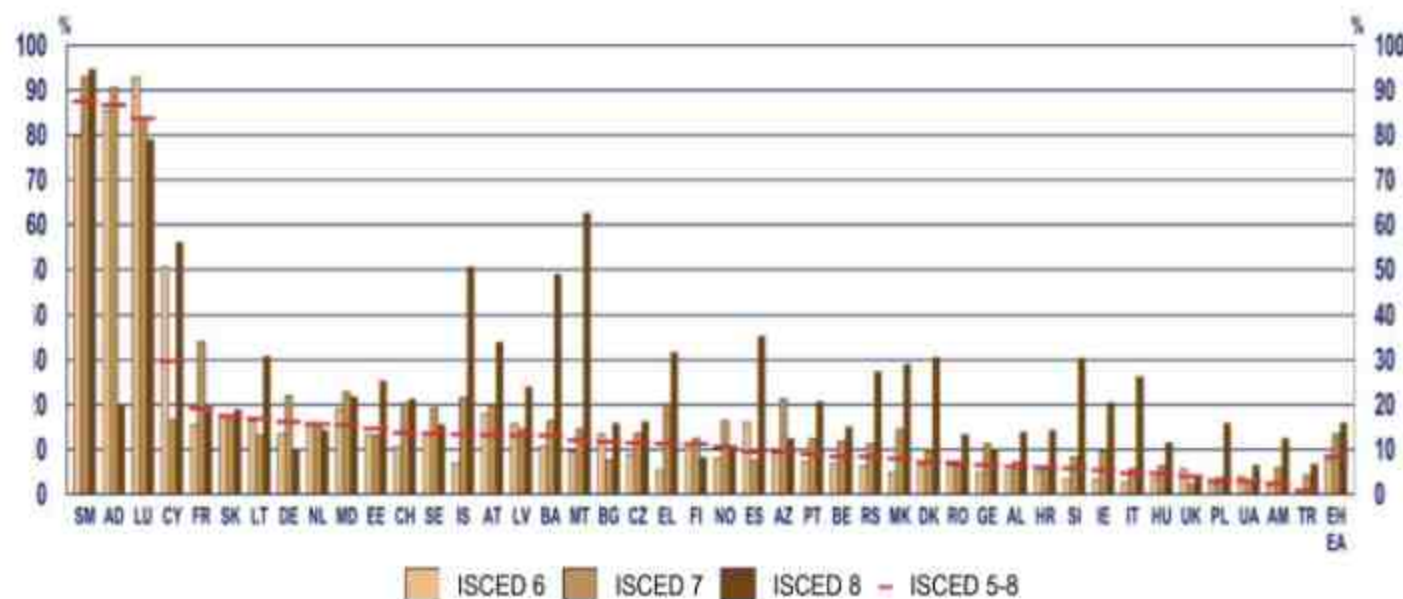
BFUG, 2024

European developments in mobility

Erasmus Exchange Mobility, incl. Intensive Programmes

Networked programmes: mobility windows

Erasmus Mundus Joint Degrees, embedded mobility of staff and students

Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships, Knowledge Alliances, Capacity Building

European Universities initiative
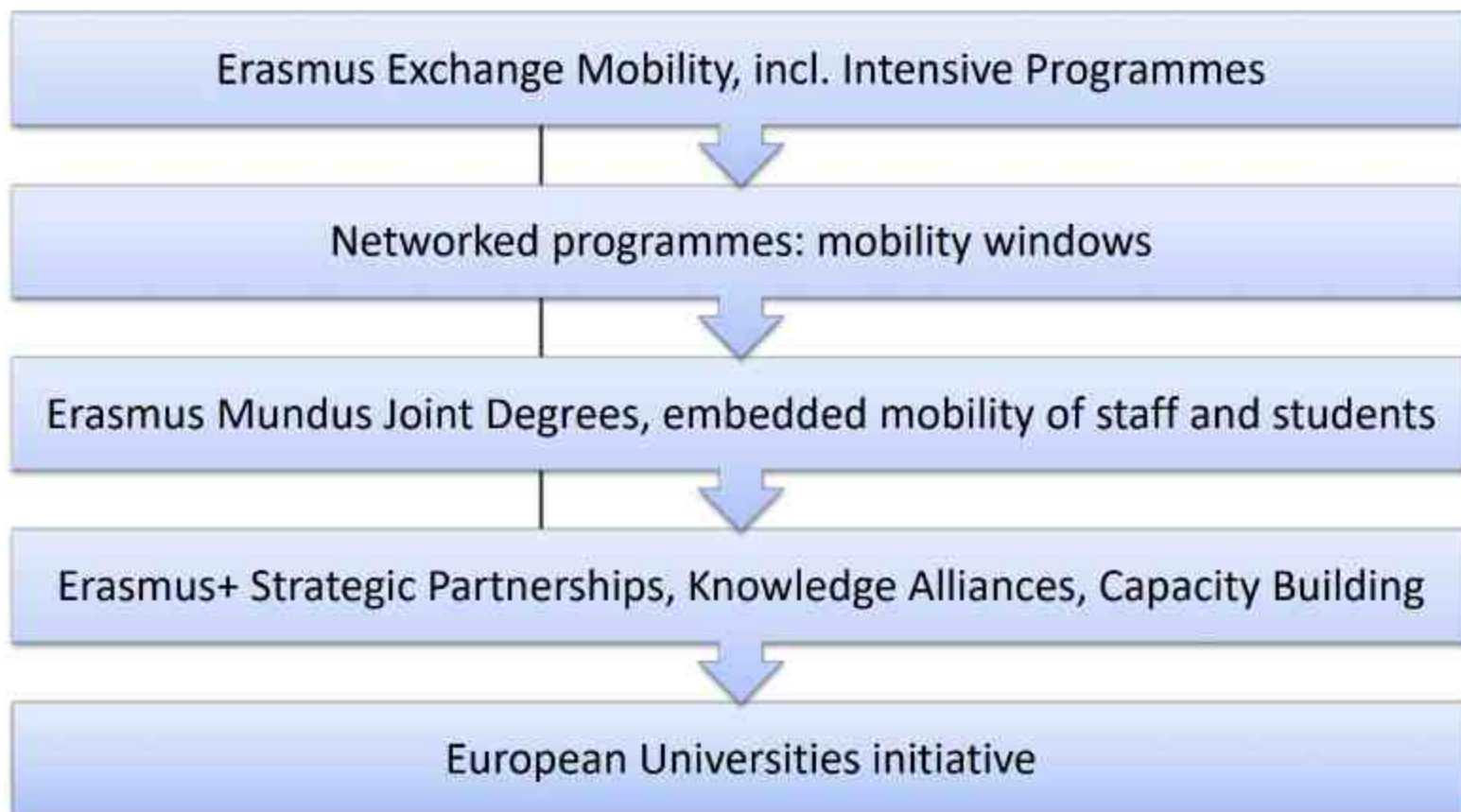
Barriers as seen by students

Barrier	Percentage
Financial situation	88.57%
Study programs / curriculum not being designed to facilitate mobility	54.29%
Fear of non-recognition of credits/diploma after returning from mobility	48.57%
Being employed or otherwise committed in home country	42.86%
Fear of administrative burden	42.86%
Lack of transparency and access to necessary information	42.86%
Taking care of children / dependents	31.43%
Disabilities or chronic illnesses	28.57%
Language barriers	28.57%
Visa issues or other travel restrictions	14.29%
Fear of living in a different cultural space	11.43%
Lack of interest	11.43%
Fear of receiving lesser-quality education abroad / lacking good choices of where to study abroad	2.86%

ESU, 2024

Internationalisation and mobility

Initial priority for physical mobility:

- Leuven 2009 target – **20% of mobile students by 2020**. Mobile students were defined as having received at least 15 ECTS abroad.
- 2012 Bucharest Communique – **Action plan** for mobility adopted by ministers
- 2027 – New action plan

Rome Communique (2020):

- *We further commit to **enabling all learners to acquire international and intercultural competences** through internationalisation of the curricula or participation in innovative international environments in their home institutions, **and to experience some form of mobility,** whether in physical, digitally enhanced (virtual) or blended formats.*

EHEA tools

- QA of internationalization activities; quality as purposeful and transformative; quality culture as both structural and cultural changes;
- ECTS Users' Guide: structural and functional role of learning outcomes
    - Learning outcomes for international engagement? How to recognize and valorise them? How to assess them?
        - Assessment sends the signal to students and counselling gives the arena
    - new: enhanced use for LLL, VET, alternative providers?
    - Fixing ECTS credit recognition issues for all mobile students
- European Approach for the QA of Joint Programmes
    - Links with the European Degree

The balancing acts

- Extents of hybridization, adaptive pedagogy, coherent combination
- Right to err versus standards
- Risks of commodification
- Multilingualism
- System-level factors, cultural factors, pedagogy viewpoints
- Meaningful approaches and active choice of rationales

Knight, 2004

Approach at Institutional Level	Description
Activity	Internationalization is described in terms of activities such as study abroad, curriculum and academic programs, institutional linkages and networks, development projects, and branch campuses.
Outcomes	Internationalization is presented in the form of desired outcomes such as student competencies, increased profile, more international agreements, and partners or projects.
Rationales	Internationalization is described with respect to the primary motivations or rationales driving it. This can include academic standards, income generation, cultural diversity, and student and staff development.
Process	Internationalization is considered to be a process where an international dimension is integrated into teaching, learning, and service functions of the institution.
At home	Internationalization is interpreted to be the creation of a culture or climate on campus that promotes and supports international/intercultural understanding and focuses on campus-based activities.
Abroad (cross-border)	Internationalization is seen as the cross-border delivery of education to other countries through a variety of delivery modes (face to face, distance, e-learning) and through different administrative arrangements (franchises, twinning, branch campuses, etc).

Rationales	Existing—National and Institutional Levels Combined
Social/cultural	National cultural identity
	Intercultural understanding
	Citizenship development
	Social and community development
Political	Foreign policy
	National security
	Technical assistance
	Peace and mutual understanding
	National identity
	Regional identity
Economic	Economic growth and competitiveness
	Labour market
	Financial incentives
Academic	International dimension to research and teaching
	Extension of academic horizon
	Institution building
	Profile and status
	Enhancement of quality
	International academic standards

Level	Of Emerging Importance— National and Institutional Levels Separated
National	Human resources development
	Strategic alliances
	Commercial trade
	Nation building
	Social/cultural development
Institutional	International branding and profile
	Income generation
	Student and staff development
	Strategic alliances
	Knowledge production

Some final (initial) thoughts

- Establishing tiered partnership frameworks (strategic, priority, primary) and innovation networks
- Mapping complementary capabilities: identifying where each institution's strengths address partner weaknesses
- Cross-implementation of technical, comparability tools keep the locus in times of change
- Higher need for leadership training (educational leadership, system change, VOCU)
- Links with industry beyond the academic jargon
- New offerings (e.g. MCs) are complementary so far rather than disruptive

Biggest challenge in my opinion: maintaining relevance, credibility of qualifications, meaningful interaction etc in the age of AI → BP still to act on it, with some initial commitments in 2024

The Bologna Process – Principles, Key Commitments and Tools

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Online TAM - Kyrgyzstan