



Qualitative study – the final report

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1. Introduction

This report summarises the results of the qualitative study conducted during the final phase of the EMREX field trial. For the study, a series of in-depth interviews with members of administrative personnel of higher education institutions have been conducted. Interviewees represented all field trial countries where the system had been implemented i.e. Denmark, Finland, Italy, Norway, and Sweden. Administrative personnel are one of the beneficiaries of the project, as well as a great source of knowledge on international student mobility.

The aim of the interviews was to discuss with respondents such topics as: opinion on the electronic system for achievement recognition, the realised and potential impact of the system on the process of academic achievement recognition, administrative workflow and workload, as well as on students' behaviour. Moreover, the interview covered the evaluation of EMREX's implementation, communication by the consortium, and technical issues.

This report together with the results of the analysis of administrative data and the surveys of exchange students will constitute the basis for the final evaluation report. Moreover, the report is

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meant to provide the development team at the consortium ideas for further improvements of the EMREX system.

The report is structured as follows. Section 2 gives an overview of the implementation of EMREX in partner countries. Section 3 presents the methodology of this study. Section 4 comprises the results of the study and is divided into six subsections: on the key features of recognition process, on experience with EMREX, on the evaluation of the system, on system's impact on administrative workflow and workload, on the EMREX impact on student behaviour, and on requested features.

2. Background

The interviews took place in March and April 2017. Before proceeding with the presentation of results, we would like to shed some light on state of EMREX implementation while the interviews were being conducted. Countries varied in their stage of project realisation, which influenced the responses of interviewees.

Denmark

Denmark did not have Student Mobility Plug-in (SMP) nor National Contact Point (NCP) in production. The Danish NCP was taken into production in June 2017.

Finland

The Finnish SMP was taken into production in April 2016 with the first student users in June 2016. The Finnish NCP was released in August 2016. The Finnish SMP was available to all Finnish higher education students. However, the level of integration to the home institution's student information system (SIS) varied as there is not a single SIS in Finland but many different systems in use. From a student perspective EMREX worked in the same way, but the administrator at this time would receive a certified PDF of the results or a view of the results in her system. The data still had to be typed or copied&pasted into the home SIS by hand.



In Finland there are two major SISes, SISU and PEPPI, that will most likely replace the existing SISes in the near future. The new system will replace the PDF file with direct transfer of data between systems.

Italy

By the time of the interview the system was implemented and installed at the two universities participating in the field trial. The NCP has been activated in the production environment at both HEIs. It allowed visiting students to import both the results and the PDF. Only the University of Siena activated the SMP in the production environment. It allowed students to import both the results and the PDF into the university's system.

Norway

Norway was the only country to offer full functionality of the system at the time of the interviews. Norwegian students could download their data from host institution's system and the transcript would be stored in the home institution's system.

Sweden

The Swedish NCP was in production in March 2016 and included all Swedish HEIs. In addition the SMP was released in September 2016 and was available for distribution for all Swedish HEIs. The solution was implemented in an existing system so ALL HEIs in Sweden got access immediately. Swedish International Coordinators invited their students to test the SMP.

During the time of the project a change of administrative system (SIS) takes place. Because of this the transcript was not stored as data but as a pdf. In 2019 the new SIS will be running and the pdf will be replaced with direct transfer of data from the host university.

The number of actual users is another factor crucial for the interpretation of the results. In total, there were about 100 students who used the solution. The main cause is relatively small student mobility between partner countries. Moreover, some of the students eligible for the electronic transfer lost their login credentials to their host institution's data system (for more information



see section 4.2). Due to the above-mentioned reasons, the interviewees' experience with EMREX was in most cases limited.

3. Methodology

The research technique was the in-depth interview. The interview was semi structured and the topics for discussion were as follows: 1) the introductory questions about the student mobility at interviewee's institution and interviewee's role in the student mobility, 2) the recognition process, 3) the opinion on electronic systems for achievement recognition and the evaluation of EMREX and its implementation, 4) the impact of EMREX on student behaviour. Fifth, the ideal system for academic achievement recognition. The complete scenario, including complementary question, is available in Appendix 1. The interviews lasted between 32 and 85 minutes (on average 54 minutes).

In total, there were 17 interviews at 16 institutions. Mostly these were individual interviews, but occasionally there were two people taking part in the research. Therefore, the total number of interviewees is 21. More detailed information on sample composition is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Number of interviews, institutions, and interviewees

Country	Number of institutions	Number of interviewees	Number of interviews
Denmark	3	3	3
Finland	4	6	4
Italy	1	2	1
Norway	3	4	3
Sweden	5	6	6
Total	16	21	17

The study was based on a purposive sample of administrative employees who have been engaged with student mobility and achievement recognition. The research sample comprises university



employees who were responsible either for facilitating student mobility or student management systems at their institutions. Some worked in central administration while others were employed by departments or other units. Respondents differed also in terms of their engagement with students. Some had more coordinating or overseeing roles and had rather little contact with students whereas others were directly involved in helping students at different stages of mobility (with applications, the pre-approval of courses, study plans or learning agreements, recognition process etc.). Moreover, the sample reflects the diversity of HEIs in partner countries. The interviewees represent institutions of various sizes and types (e.g. universities, universities of applied sciences, business schools, and medical academies).

4. Results

4.1. Organisation of student mobility and the recognition process

The organisation of student mobility differs in detail from university to university, however there are some common elements concerning recognition. In the description of the process which follows we will focus on the elements affecting recognition. Regardless of the exchange programme students have to declare which courses they would like to take abroad and prepare some kind of learning agreement or study plan.

Depending on the institution and study programme, students may have a different level of freedom in shaping their study plans abroad. Many institutions offer so called mobility windows or elective semesters during which students are free to choose courses. This enables them to go to study abroad. Sometimes students are required to declare which courses at their home institution will be substituted by the courses taken abroad. In some rather rare cases of very structured programmes (e.g. some master level studies or programmes leading to a licenced profession), students' options are very limited. This is the case of medical students at Karolinska Institutet. Students are then steered toward certain programmes and course packages offered by an established partner, up to the point when students are told that certain university is suitable only



for students of a certain semester. Institutions with strict curricula are more likely to send students for practice placements. Then students do not get credits nor grades.

The list of courses usually has to be pre-approved. The pre-approval can be granted by a study director, faculty member or members, or administrative coordinator depending on the institution. The procedure is meant to guarantee the recognition of courses after the student returns to the home institution.

The biggest issue with the preapproval is that the application process is so lengthy that at its beginning course catalogues for the mobility period are not yet available. Students are thus forced to plan their mobility basing on course catalogues from the year of application. In effect, changes to learning agreements and study plans are ubiquitous. According to interviewees, some students fail to update their study plans or do it shortly before the end of their exchange, even though they are usually strongly encouraged to report any changes immediately.

*„Even if we inform the students many times before, during [their stay abroad], and so on that they need to make changes to learning agreement, they don't. And this is a big problem, because we get a lot of changes to learning agreements one week before, or two weeks, or three weeks before the students come back. That is a bit late, because what can we do at that point?“
(Head of student and staff mobility)*

In order to reduce the need to update learning agreements some universities create modules or course packages for incoming students. Some bring forward the publication of next year's course catalogue. Others try to establish long term partnerships and identify which courses are offered constantly. However, these practices do not seem widespread.

After students come back, they usually have to apply for the recognition of courses taken abroad. The transcript of records is a crucial document in the process. Interviewees often cited the long wait time for transcript of records to arrive as main source of delay in the recognition process. Sometimes the delay may be caused by the fact that some courses are not registered in time, but usually it is the administrative process of issuing and sending the transcript that should be blamed for the late arrival of transcripts. According to one of the interviewees, it can take up to six months



for the transcript to arrive. The actual recognition process takes a couple of weeks. A delay may have profound consequences, it may prevent a student from getting achievement recognised in time and cause problems with a student loan or other forms of financial aid, even though there may not be an official deadline for recognition.

“There is no deadline. The deadline is the graduation. They get support from the government to study each month and they can only be half a year late. [...] If they are behind, they will lose their economic support, so they have a motivating factor for speeding up the process” (Staff member working with IT systems, formerly academic advisor for outgoing students)

In order to speed up the process, some institutions allow the process of recognition to start before the arrival of the transcript, however recognised grades will not be registered in the local data system unless a proper transcript is delivered.

It is also worth noting that universities differ in their policies regarding the mode of transcript delivery. Some accept only hard copies of documents and at each step use paper documents only (applications for recognition etc.). Others are willing to accept scans of transcripts. However, the universities accepting emailed transcripts differ in their approach to what can be sent by email. Some will accept only emails that are sent directly to the administration or accept a forwarded email from host institution. Yet others are willing to use transcripts sent by students as well.

When everything is approved, the recognised courses can be registered in a local data system. Administration is responsible for typing-in or copying the records.

The lack of information during pre-approval and together with the delayed transcripts were defiantly the most often cited and most serious problems affecting the recognition process. Otherwise the process of recognition is rather smooth according the interviewees. There may be occasionally a problem with missing information on the transcript or students get confused about where and when they should deliver the document. Some institutions find it problematic to maintain a coherent approach to the courses and always recognise courses in the same way. Academic teachers may differ in their assessment of a given course. Ideally it would be the best if the recognition was synchronised between universities i.e. all universities would recognise a



course in a same way. In a few cases, there are issues with incompatible systems of awarding credits for courses, e.g. the home institution awards a multiple of 7.5 credits per course and the host institution awards multiples of 5. There is no universal solution in case of such problems. It is possible that credits are upgraded or a student is asked to do some extra work to earn missing credits. However, in general there are no serious problems with the recognition process and unrecognised courses are rather rare. As one of the interviewees put it:

“I would say, so far it has worked pretty well. I just got feedback from our national Erasmus+ agency that actually 83% of our students from the past academic year had commented at the end of their exchange period that the studies had been accredited already. I find it rather amazing, because they fill in the survey immediately after the exchange so how can they know at that early stage. (...) That’s the general message that all studies that you complete and agree before will be accredited. I think the students do not see that as a challenge.” (Mobility team manager & Erasmus institutional coordinator)

Other interviewees also stressed that at their institutions students do not have to worry about the recognition of preapproved courses and that there are no major problems with recognition.

4.2. Experience with EMREX or other similar solutions

Most respondents had had very little experience with EMREX by the time of the interview. First of all, the system was not ready in Denmark and respondents could not even see the system.

“I have been taken through part of the login process. (...) Maybe it was just because it was a test version. I had to log in several times with different logins and things like that. As I said, unfortunately we didn’t reach the main site where you actually try the functionality” (Staff member responsible for incoming students 1)

In other countries, the universities struggled to find students who could test EMREX, mostly due to a small number of students going to the countries participating in the trial. Another issue limiting the number of testers was the short period after exchange when the login credentials at the host



institution remain valid. In many cases, students lose access to their accounts at host institutions after some time.

“Actually, we look forward to start using it. We would really like to. (...) but we haven’t really found any students to even test it.” (Staff member responsible for IT systems)

“Countries that [EMREX] works in have been so limited. We have had very, very few students who have been actually able to test it. Actually, only one student so far. (...) We have had all in all three students that would have been able to use it, but there is the problem of validity of user name and password for them. It expires so fast.” (Mobility team manager & Erasmus institutional coordinator)

The results of the tests were mixed. Not everyone succeeded in importing the data properly. There was, for example, a student from Norway who got wrong results (the problem has since then been fixed). Interviewees accepted that errors are part of any testing process, but in rare cases the mishaps had undermined the trust in the system and willingness to use it.

“We do not think it's good enough yet to just say 'Hello every student, just use this'. There are still some errors that have not been fixed” (Head of admissions and exchange office)

At the institution that used EMREX-generated transcript, the problem was that the PDF downloaded from the system was just “plain paper”. The administration had to send the transcript to people responsible for the recognition, because they could have not trusted such a document.

The EMREX system is not the only electronic solution for handling record transfers known to the interviewees, however these systems work within one country. In Denmark, there is a system for transferring records during the application to master programmes. Students log into application and they give the access to their previous records. When the application is sent, the results are imported. In Finland, there is a national system for internal exchanges. A student logs into home



institution's system and then fetches his or her data from the central system called Virta. Norway and Sweden have similar national systems.

Moreover, respondents were familiar with systems allowing exchange students to download records from host institution's system. Some of the institutions already offer such possibility to incoming students. Others know solutions of this kind from other countries.

Respondents could not indicate any features of these systems that could be added to EMREX. According to a Finnish interviewee, their national system is very similar to EMREX. The respondent offered the following description of the national system:

*"It's quite a bit like EMREX actually. You just authenticate yourself using your home university's user name and password to the service and you can get your credits transferred."
(Staff member responsible for IT systems)*

When asked whether there were any elements of the system that he would like EMREX to copy the respondent replied that those systems were copies already.

Moreover, some universities already use electronic systems for handling parts of the administrative processes related to student mobility. There are systems for applications, e.g. at Oulu University of Applied Sciences, students may apply for mobility using MoveON application and mobility management system. However, not all of these solutions eliminate paper documents altogether. Sometimes the systems enable only the preparation of a document which then must be printed and signed. Respondents would often like to see all the solutions integrated into a single system capable of handling the entire administrative process related to student mobility (see section 4.6).

4.3. The evaluation of EMREX

Strengths

The system was evaluated as easy to use and rather simple. It was mostly seen as a tool to improve the efficiency of the transfer of academic records. Interviewees were, by and large, eager to use it.



Even respondents disenchanted with the initial tests expressed their interest in using the tool as soon as all the technical glitches are eliminated and the system is stable.

“I think it is important to say that we are extremely positive to the solution. We're looking forward to start using it. Even if we have ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’, and all the stuff, and it does not work, we are really looking forward to have the solution in production.” (Head of admissions and exchange office)

In Finland, where the system still did not offer its full functionality, respondents were looking forward to the transition to the PEPPI ecosystem. The new system has built-in tools for dealing with the data imported with EMREX, which would allow for a direct transfer of records between universities' systems instead of an option to download a PDF file with the records.

The speeding-up of the recognition process is definitely the biggest gain from EMREX's introduction. This especially important for institutions relying solely on paper documents.

“Right now, the recognition process is done on paper. It's not complicated but it's time consuming.” (Staff member working with information systems & former Erasmus institutional coordinator)

Both students and administration would gain from that. Students would not have to think about the delivery of a paper copy. They could expect the recognition process to end sooner and thus they could avoid getting into trouble with obtaining financial support or graduation.

The administration would save time and effort, because it would not have to type all information from transcripts into student management systems of their institutions. Moreover, the administration would be freed from contacting students or partner universities in case of missing transcripts.

Another significant feature of the system respondents often mentioned by interviewees was the trustworthiness of the data imported with EMREX. Some institutions lack resources to validate transcripts. It is even more complicated when a university accepts scans delivered by students.



Having an electronic system that enables direct transfer of data between universities' data systems would solve the problem.

*"It [EMREX] would provide authenticated transcript of record that we could trust at least."
(Staff member responsible for IT systems)*

Especially data transferred directly to the system would be perceived as trustworthy.

"If the information is in the (...) system, then it is automatically considered reliable, because it's there already." (Erasmus institutional coordinator)

Direct transfer would also eliminate errors during entering the data into home institution's system. Somewhat surprisingly for a system dealing with personal data, the safety of transferred information was not a big issue. Some respondents mentioned that the system may become a target of hacking attack. However, respondents were not pointing to any particular flaw that would make system vulnerable to such an attack. There were rather expressing a general concern with data security.

"There is always something such as hacking but you can have that in all systems" (Staff member responsible for incoming students 1)

Weaknesses

The overall positive evaluation of the system does not mean that interviewees did not spawn any doubts or critical comments. First of all, the implementation of EMREX, as of any other new system, is not cost-free. Some respondents were concerned whether the benefits would outweigh the costs. The change itself maybe a problem as universities may not have enough resources to adapt to the new system. That does not mean that EMREX is particularly difficult or costly to implement. The problem is that there many other changes to which the administration has to adapt and it may lack means to work on EMREX as well.



In the partner countries, the members of the consortium are often responsible for creation and distribution of student management software, thus they are able to minimise the cost of implementing EMREX by building the necessary functionalities into the systems they distribute. However, there are higher education institutions that prefer to use their own systems, e.g. BI Norwegian Business School in Oslo. In case of such institutions, the costs of joining the system are considerably higher as the institution is responsible for adjusting the local system to the requirements of EMREX.

That is not the only type of costs. All institutions using EMREX, even those relying on centrally distributed IT solutions, will incur the cost of adjusting administrative processes to the new way of transcript delivery. As one respondent put it: *“an automatic system requires more planning in comparison to the current system which is kind of ad hoc”* (Mobility team manager & Erasmus institutional coordinator). User training was another type of cost that was brought up during the interviews.

The usefulness of EMREX largely depends on the number of countries connected with the system. The number of students going for exchange between partner countries is rather small. Interviewees would like to be able to transfer records from places where they send a lot of students, i.e. big European countries (Germany, France, United Kingdom), United States, Australia, China. Small number of countries would mean that benefits are too limited to justify costs.

“It is only a few countries and there will probably be a lot of work to get our system to work with the other systems. Will it be worth it just for a few countries?” (Staff member responsible for student management system 1)

“I think it has big perspectives if it gets rolled out, so it’s a lot of universities that participate. If it stays in a small number then it won’t be that interesting, because then we would still have to have the general making of transcripts (...) But if it could grow and be, say, half of our Erasmus partners or even more, then it would be very interesting. Because right now a lot of transcripts that we send out will either be lost in the mail or be sent to the wrong address.” (Staff member working with IT systems, formerly academic advisor for outgoing students)



Moreover, there are legal regulations that may diminish benefits of the introduction of EMREX. At this point EMREX allows students to pick courses that they want to import. This feature is problematic in Denmark. The Danish ministry responsible for higher education expects universities to collect the data on all courses taken abroad by Danish students. This is caused by the push for more balanced student mobility where the number of courses taken by incoming students is matched by the number of courses taken by outgoing students. The Danish interviewees complained that they would not be able to use the system for outgoing students unless the option to choose imported courses is removed.

“We simply have a law in Denmark saying that all the courses that you do on exchange should be transferred. (...) We have a kind of balance principle in Denmark. The ministry looks at difference between the number of ECTS that incoming students have done (for example at DTU) and the number of ECTS that our students have taken home from abroad. And then they calculate the difference. If more ECTS were taken than brought home from abroad, we will get a fine from the ministry. (...) So we get a fine each year” (Staff member responsible for incoming students 1)

Other countries did not have such regulations, nevertheless a couple of respondents expressed their desire to curb students' freedom to choose which courses to import.

Documents required for recognition are another factor affecting the usefulness of EMREX. At some institutions, a transcript of records is not the only document that must be provided. One example of an additional document is the logbook documenting the activity during an exchange. EMREX cannot handle this type of documents yet.

Another obstacle to the realisation of the full potential of EMREX is a too short period during which students retain access to host institution's system. In some systems, students lose their accounts immediately after they cease to be active students. Such students will be deprived of the possibility of using EMREX. Expiring accounts were cited as a serious problem, especially by interviewees from institutions that tested the tool.



Some respondents find the current model of logging-in cumbersome. They would like to see it simplified. Ditching multiple logins for a simplified system, e.g. one that students log to their local system only, would solve one more problem. Students tend to forget their username and password to host institution's system.

There is also an issue of limited trust in electronic solutions. Not all respondents feel safe about relying solely on an electronic system. Some would prefer to keep the paper versions of transcripts as a backup.

„When we rely on a system 100%, it can be dangerous” (Staff member responsible for incoming students 2)

This opinion was based on previous experience with other electronic tools. Some of the tools failed to work properly. Some data were missing and had to be entered manually.

4.4. Impact on administrative workflow and workload

Interviewees commented on the impact of EMREX on administrative processes. In case of incoming students, assessment of EMREX varied significantly, even within countries. Their opinion on the tool depended on the current method of handling transcripts. Some institutions still issue transcripts in an old-fashioned way i.e. they are created one-by-one. The process is not automated and, as one respondent put it, *“it takes forever”* (Staff member working with IT systems, formerly academic advisor for outgoing students). Those institutions are very keen to start using EMREX for handling the incoming students.

“I think it might make the administrative process smoother and more efficient when it comes to recognition. Since, for example, we will be possibly freed from doing all the work with issuing transcript of records. If more of the universities who send students to us join that would free us from administrative burden of issuing the transcripts (...) It is quite an administrative task to do that. Although we do not do it as many times per year. Twice a year more less, after each semester, but it is still quite many students to issue transcripts for.” (International coordinator 2)



However, there are countries and institutions that already offer the incoming students an easy access to their records hence will not benefit as much from EMREX:

"It kind of works already for the incoming students, because we transfer all the credits to the national data system. (...) Everyone that was here can actually get their credits from the system." (Staff member responsible for IT systems)

"I am not sure there is so much to gain from [EMREX] for the incoming students. Our incoming students can just log into our system. They can print their transcript of records and just bring it with them." (Erasmus institutional coordinator & the leading user of a student management system)

The evaluation of the usefulness of EMREX in case of outgoing students depended on the mode of transcript delivery. A transcript delivered as a PDF file would not change the process a lot as administration would have to perform identical tasks as it performs today in case of transcripts sent by host institutions by email. A system that delivers results directly to the student management system of the home institution was usually seen as a significant improvement to the process of recognition.

Despite the overall positive opinion on the system, some respondents wanted the consortium to pay more attention to administration's needs as these are the people who will be important group of users as well.

"Right now, EMREX is more for students. It's cool, it's very good, but they have to think about the administration in the process as well. It's actually the administration who is responsible for the last stage of the recognition process." (Staff member responsible for incoming students 2).

Interviewees expect some hesitancy on the side of administrative personnel. The administration often feels under-resourced and tired of constant changes. They may need some convincing to start using EMREX. The administrative staff must be convinced that the system is safe, that it actually



reduces the workload and that the imported data are trustworthy. It should help if the system is presented as part of already existing system, not an entirely new solution. If the administrative personnel can see the benefits, convincing them to use the system should not be a problem.

“The staff members, especially in the student services, who have been in the front row so to speak, they are actually taking all sorts of technical solutions eagerly into use if they see it assists them and eases their workload, even if that would mean that the workflow must be changed.” (Mobility team manager & Erasmus institutional coordinator)

“They [administration] have to be convinced that this is helping. But I think the fact that you don't have to retype something that someone else has already typed once ... they're sold” (Staff member responsible for student management system 1)

Some respondents talked about the necessity of convincing academic staff involved in the recognition process to use the system. Anticipated difficulties are similar to those expected in case of administrative personnel.

4.5. Impact on student behaviour

Respondents by and large agree that the system will help students to have their records recognised quickly. Only one interviewee said that the system might lead to an increase in the number of exchange students. Respondents were rather sceptical about EMREX's possible direct impact on student behaviour. In their opinion, the electronic system for achievement recognition would be a great help to students, but it is not what really matters when it comes to a decision whether to study abroad or where to go.

“I do not think that would be the decisive point of consideration, because what matters to [students] is to go a certain university that they have heard of or that have whatever prestige or where they speak English because our students do not speak many other languages.” (Staff member responsible for incoming students 1)



"I don't really think so. No. (...) Of course, it's a great thing. Everything that can help this bureaucracy and administrative part -- absolutely yes, but I don't think [EMREX] will have an effect on students choosing to go or not." (Head of student and staff mobility)

"Well, I wouldn't say that that would be a decisive factor. If the student is not motivated to go to any Nordic country so electronic system will not change that. The basic is that, of course, the studies are something that they can complete." (Mobility team manager & Erasmus institutional coordinator)

Others would go even further and suggested they would not like students to choose their destinations based on the ease of recognition.

"I hope that this is not an issue when students choose their destination that they [students] can get their results digitally. I hope there are other reasons why they choose their destination." (Head of admissions and exchange office)

Another respondent pointed out that the recognition takes place at the end of exchange and there are elements earlier in the process that are far more frustrating for students.

"It is one small stone that would be nice to remove, make it an easier path but I do not think that it will make a big difference in the numbers (...) It is so late in the process (...) The application and the pre-approval, that is what they [students] say is difficult and frustrating and where they need help." (Staff member working with IT systems, formerly academic advisor for outgoing students)

One of the interviewees said that an electronic system is something that students expect to have. Students are used to technology and electronic solutions and they actually demand this kind of tools.



*„I would say that for the students, they are so used to [the idea] that everything is electronic nowadays, so probably they see the paper version [as such an] old-fashion, ancient system.”
(Mobility team manager & Erasmus institutional coordinator)*

“I would say that today students in general expect things to be digital. It's obvious for them that it is like this.” (Staff member responsible for student management system 2)

When it comes to communication to students, interviewees expressed their intention to promote the tool, mostly either via emails or websites. Some consider boosting the popularity of the tool by labelling it “a recommended solution”. In general, interviewees were willing to promote the tool mostly to students who have already been accepted to mobility programmes.

Interviewees said that they would avoid putting too much stress on the ease of recognition with EMREX as they already market international mobility and recognition as a fairly risk free process, where students do not have to worry too much about having grades recognised.

“We already tell them that they do get everything recognised or accredited if they go abroad. EMREX cannot change much there.” (Head of student and staff mobility)

Stressing the ease of recognition supported by EMREX could undermine previous efforts to create an impression that recognition process is frictionless.

Even at institutions willing to promote EMREX to every student the message would not include the name of the tool. It would be presented as a possibility of fully electronic recognition without mentioning the EMREX brand. That would simplify the message.

4.6. Feature requests / ideal system

An important part of the interviews was a discussion on possible improvements to the system. Interviewees were asked to name missing features and possible improvement to the current system as well as to share their visions of an ideal system for recognition.

Unsurprisingly, the respondents expressed their desire to see the solutions to the problems reported in the earlier parts of the report, i.e.:



- Extending the time during which students retain access to host institution's system.
- Making EMREX work in more countries.
- Solving the problem of selective import in case of Danish outgoing students (barring students from selecting which courses to import).
- Validating PDF documents (in case when data are not transferred directly to the system).

Other features that could enhance the current system included:

- A system of notifications for administration. Some interviewees were not sure about the way they are going to be informed about new records imported by students. They would like to have some system of notifications about the availability of new records.
- An option for administration to initiate the process of achievement transfer. Some interviewees noted that in the current form the system relays on students to initiate the process, which may not be the most efficient solution. They would prefer that students granted the institution access to their data at the host institution and that administration would be able to import the data themselves. Another proposed solution was to let the host institution to initiate the process when the records are ready.
- A mechanism for handling the transfer while host or home institution's system is updated. One of the interviewees raised the issue of the possible effects of system upgrades on the transfer process. The question is what happens if a student tries to import credits or grades while either the home or host institution updates or upgrades its student management system.
- An original transcript used to be attached to a diploma when students graduate. EMREX enables direct transfer of records into home institution's system. One of the Norwegian respondents was not sure how the issuance of diplomas and attachments should be organised when EMREX is implemented, if there will be an option to generate an attachment with the imported information.
- A mechanism for handling cases when each part of a course is graded separately and then there is a final grade. Some incoming students request to have not only the final grade but also the partial grades on their transcripts.



- The creation of a single student ID would improve any transfer of data between systems and countries.

Interviewees had requests regarding the dissemination of information, too:

- According to one of the interviewees, the lack of a common interface for all countries (each NCP² has a distinctive look) may cause confusion among students. She requested promotional materials from the consortium to include screenshots of every national system. That would be useful for preparation of university's info packages for students.
- One of the interviewees strongly insisted that she maintains the communication with students and the consortium does not interfere in it. The rationale behind this was that additional messages to students may lead to confusion as the message may be not clear enough and may reach not the right people i.e. students not eligible to use EMREX. Students will end up asking administrators for help anyway.
- Another person asked for a template for internal dissemination, in other words:

"How to explain the tool to our colleagues. Very hands-on approach. Examples etc." (Erasmus institutional coordinator & the leading user of a student management system)

- Information on the institutions that use the tool could help as well. New users of the system would be able to contact those who have more experience and learn from them.
- Interviewees often asked to be informed about new countries joining EMREX as this strongly affects the usefulness of the tool.

Interviewees assessed the content of the EMREX generated transcript in the current form. Usually respondents had suggestions what information should be added to the transcript offered by EMREX. Few respondents did not see the necessity to any information as EMREX already offers

² National Contact Point



same information as a typical transcript do. Any additional information needed for recognition must be provided at some other point anyway, e.g. during the work on the learning agreement.

The list below comprises types of information requested by respondents. Of course, not all respondents asked for all types. The list is a collection of all kinds of data mentioned during the interviews. Institutions require some of the information already even though it may not be included in a typical transcript of records. Sometimes the information must be provided by students, for example in their applications for recognition.

- Name of the host institution in the original language and in English;
- Course name both in the original language and in English;
- Level;
- Language of instruction;
- Grading scale and its description – Some respondents would like to have ECTS grading scale as they use it and a grade in any other national system would have to be converted;
- CEFR scale for language courses;
- The description of the credit system or a link to such information;
- The date when the course ended.

Out of the items listed above, the course description would be most welcome.

„It would be great to have a link to the course description. because that's probably the thing that the heads of the degree programmes first look at, because the name of a course doesn't necessarily tell that much.” (Mobility team manager & Erasmus institutional coordinator)

“What is the description of course... To get that information is very important. It's not only the points or credits that they got and what the course name was but what it is inside is the information that we really need.” (Staff member responsible for the recognition of prior learning, central administration)

„The course description really, really helps. Because otherwise, if it says „programming”, they are going to ask what language, how much, and did you do something, did you have to



program, I don't know, a special game or what. And if it's already in there, that helps." (Staff member working with information systems & former Erasmus institutional coordinator)

The interviews often included a discussion on the possible future developments of the system. Many respondents were interested in a system that enables linking the courses imported by EMREX with the courses in learning agreements or study plans i.e. courses that were already pre-approved. Such solution should check if the right courses were present in the transcript of records and then automatically register them as recognised in home institution's system.

"EMREX works only when you have finished your exchange. I think it would be a good feature if it also could somehow help before the exchange period. This is a totally different thing but it would actually really useful to have the learning agreement registered somewhere where both partners can access the same learning agreement and can match the achieved credits with the learning agreement." (Staff member responsible for IT systems)

„I would probably do so that the learning agreement phase could be done through some sort of an electronic system. Then it would be easier. It would be already approved in the beginning that the course will be taken. And it is the same course that comes through [EMREX] that would go automatically all the way to the study register without anybody interfering anywhere anymore, because it was already agreed in the beginning. Now we do the same stuff twice. First, they see 'ok, this is a good course' and then at the end 'this is the same course'." (Mobility team manager & Erasmus institutional coordinator)

"For this to be really useful it should be so that once the people who register results get these transcripts, they could just automatically register them based on the learning agreement that was pre-approved. That would make it easier. The students wouldn't have to contact the teachers and go to seven different people. It could be done in student service system. (...) That would mean that the learning agreement would have to be up to date and the teacher would have to have the course information already at the stage when the learning agreement is approved." (Erasmus institutional coordinator)



Respondents were aware that such a solution would require an up-to-date learning agreement, which in turn would require a system for handling learning agreements. The system would be used to submit changes to learning agreements. Some found such a solution impossible, even though they had expressed a desire for the automatic recognition of preapproved courses.

“In the perfect world, [the students] should apply for approval. Go abroad. Take the courses they said they would take. Get home. The results are automatically [transferred] to our system and the students don’t have to do anything else. (...) That is the ideal world, that the pre-approval is the only thing that has to be done. But everyone working with student exchange knows that the world doesn’t work like that.” (Head of admissions and exchange office)

Another much welcomed functionality would be an interface that helps with linking courses taken abroad reported in the transcript with the courses that are to be substituted by the foreign courses:

“When we start thinking about using the system for outgoing students, we will have to think about where the data are stored in our system and if they end up at the right place. It would be great to have the imported grades next to the preapproval. It would be ideal to have a ‘click and match solution’, so ‘this is this’, then click. (...). That would make the process much easier. The courses would still have to be evaluated by study boards. Not everything could be automated. (...) The matching could be done by a student and then approved by administration or academic staff.” (Staff member working with IT systems, formerly academic advisor for outgoing students)

It is worth noting that respondents see limits to the possible automation of the process. At some point, the decision whether a course can be recognised must be made. This must be done by some sort of programme director or the board of studies or other people able to evaluate the content of the courses. It is hard to imagine this process being automated. The processes taking place at the beginning and at the end of mobility will be hardest to automate.

“I would say [EMREX] is very useful. Though, it won’t remove all the manual process, in the beginning at least, but it will work as a complement to the manual process. We can get the



records electronically to the system at least. Then the recognition process will probably continue to be quite manual but we can automate the registration of records. (...) Doing manual recognition but with electronic information.” (Staff member responsible for IT systems)

Some would like the system for handling student mobility to go even further. They would like a single database for all exchange applications, where students can look for programmes and courses instead of navigating through numerous websites of various universities. However, another respondent noted that such a solution is unrealistic. According to that interviewee, EMREX is complex enough for now and should first be fully implemented before the discussion on further steps can begin.

Moreover, respondents expressed interest in using EMREX for the application process – for transferring previous academic records during application for second cycle studies. There are such systems working at national level in some countries and some respondents see bigger potential for EMREX as a tool for the recognition of prior learning than as a tool facilitating student mobility. Users of application systems would count in thousands.

“We have thousands of applicants from all over the world applying for [advanced] degree studies. (...) The biggest gain for us is to use [EMREX] for international applicants, because we have so many. (...) We would have valid information without the need to ask their university to validate that.” (Head of admissions and exchange office)

Interviewees noted that expiring login credentials would be even problem in case of the application system. Exchange students usually apply for recognition soon after the exchange ends whereas applicants may have graduated from the previous programme long time before the application.

Another way to utilise EMREX suggested during interviews would be to use it for transferring grades of students of double degree programmes. These are whole classes of students moving regularly back and forth between two or more partner institutions.



5. Conclusions

The organisation of student mobility varies across the countries and between institutions. There are, however, some common issues affecting the recognition of academic achievements. First, changes to learning agreement are ubiquitous, which is not necessarily students' fault. Course catalogues are often not yet available at the time of application. Decisions are then based on the catalogues from previous years which may be outdated when students arrive at their host institutions. Keeping learning agreements up to date is a daunting task. The pre-approval of courses listed in a learning agreement is meant to guarantee smooth recognition process. Any new courses (not taken into account in the learning agreement) may not be accredited. Second, transcripts of records are not always delivered in time. On rare occasions, students have to wait even couple of months for their transcripts to arrive. The consequences of the delays may be severe: the lack of transcript makes recognition impossible, which in turn may block graduation, deprive a student of financial support etc.

Interviewees by and large agree that EMREX could alleviate problems related to recognition mainly by speeding up the transfer of records. The interviewed administrators were keen to start using EMREX, although a few still had some reservations. In general, the system was evaluated as efficient, rather simple, and easy to use. Trustworthiness of the data received through the system is another advantage. The system could thus improve student experience with recognition as well as reduce the workload of administration. However, interviewees were sceptical about the possible impact of EMREX on students' willingness to go abroad. In administration's eyes, the recognition process is not a decisive factor when students decide whether to study abroad.

Interviewees pointed also some downsides of the system, including technical difficulties such as expiring login credentials etc. What seems to be the most important issue is the small number of countries where the system is available. Limited coverage substantially diminishes the usefulness of the tool as it would be available only to a small fraction of exchange students. A small number of students using EMREX would mean that the costs of implementing the new system could outweigh the benefits.



Interviewees suggested a series of improvements to the system. The most common request was the addition of course description to the records transferred with EMREX. Even a link to the information about a course would suffice. Many of the interviewees expressed their desire for a system which would integrate all administrative processes related to student mobility. They would like this system to handle both learning agreements and transcripts of records and establish links between those two types of documents.



Appendix 1

EMREX Interview scenario

1. Introduction

General information about student mobility in the institution

- Could you please tell me about student mobility at your institution?
- How many students of your institution study abroad (per academic year)?
- How many students from abroad come to study at your university (per academic year)?
- Can you identify any patterns of international student mobility at your institution? What would they be?
- What are the typical destinations of students from your institution?
- Where do incoming students typically come from?

Respondent's role in student mobility

- How would you describe your role with regard to student mobility?
- Are you involved in helping students from your institution organise their exchanges? If yes, what is your role in that process?
- Do you assist foreign students when they come to your institution? If yes, what is your role in that process?

2. Recognition process

Respondent's involvement in the recognition process:

- Are you involved in the process of the academic achievement recognition?
- In what way do you participate in the recognition process?

Description of the recognition process at the institution



- Could you please describe the process of academic achievement recognition at your institution?
- What are the main problems with the recognition from your perspective?
- How do you deal with the problems? Can you recall the last problematic case and describe how it was tackled?
- What is a typical case? Can you describe some exceptional cases?
- Is the process burdensome for you or your office?

Recognition from student's perspective

- Based on your experience, what can you say about students' perceptions of the recognition process?
- What are their typical problems?

3. Opinions on the electronic systems for achievement recognition

Electronic systems for achievement recognition known to the respondents and his or her opinion about the systems.

- What electronic systems for achievement recognition do you know?
- Could you please describe those systems?
- How do they work?
- Which parts of the process are automated and which still require involvement of students or administrative personnel?

Advantages and disadvantages of using electronic systems.

- What are the main benefits and drawback of using each of those systems?
- In what way could those systems be improved to be more useful for you?

4. Evaluation of EMREX

Experience with EMREX

- Could you describe your experience with EMREX?



- Could you tell something about the implementation of EMREX at your institution? If you were to explain to a new employee at your office what EMREX is, how would you do it?

Usefulness of EMREX

- How would you evaluate the usefulness of EMREX for your institution?
- What has changed in the workflow of your institution since the introduction of EMREX? How did those changes affect your workload?

Possible improvements to EMREX

- What could be done to make EMREX more useful from your perspective? What are the missing features? Which features need improving? Can you recall any particular problem with using EMREX at your institution?
- Are there any regulatory/ legal issues which have to be solved in order to make EMREX more useful for you?

5. Implementation of EMREX

Opinion on the implementation of EMREX

- What is your opinion on the process of implementation of EMREX at your institution?
- What could have been done better?

6. Student behaviour

Observations regarding students' usage of EMREX

- How many students used EMREX at your institution?
- What could you tell about their reaction to the tool? Did they report any problems? Did they like it?

EMREX's impact on students' behaviour

- Have you noticed any impact of EMREX on the students' behaviour?
- Any changes regarding the recognition process?



- Any changes in the mobility destinations?

7. Ideal system for recognition

- Could you describe what in your view would be the ideal system for the transfer of academic records?
- * Are there any other issues you would like to comment on and were not raised before in the interview?