

# STUDENTS' USER JOURNEY

## GOING ON MOBILITY

24.01.24

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## 1.0 PREFACE

The universities in the Circle U alliance have high ambitions for the next project phase, Circle U. 2030:

*“Whilst continuously testing out new concepts in higher education and research cooperation, Circle U. will scale up and offer a significantly increased range of flexible learning opportunities for half a million students and other learners: summer and winter schools, public conversations and lectures, open courses, challenge-based learning activities, language and intercultural skills modules, joint courses and programmes.*

*By 2030, Circle U. will be a truly integrated European University – inclusive, interdisciplinary and research-intensive – where students and staff across Europe and beyond work seamlessly together within a shared ecosystem through joint tools, procedures and infrastructure (Circle U, 2023).*

In preparation for the upcoming phase, which began in November 2023, I engaged in discussions with Bjørn Stensaker, Chair of the Circle U. Management Board and Vice-Rector for Education at the University of Oslo, and Kevin Guillaume, Circle U. Secretary General, to undertake a project aimed at gaining greater insight into the students' perspective.

The project was carried out as a staff exchange over three months from September 1st to November 28th, 2023, visiting the nine universities in a continuous journey, mainly by train. As a Director of Communication at the University of Oslo, my skills are usually to keep track of numerous tasks, try to work out strategies for communication, and get a broader perspective. I am grateful to my university director and rector for giving me this opportunity to focus on one project and work in an international environment. I must admit that my skills regarding mobility and different university systems have improved throughout the journey. Ideally, I would have had another three months to complete the discussion/analysis and dive even deeper. I hope that this report will present some key issues that we can address together on the way forward.

Berit Kolberg Rossiné

Oslo, 24.01.2024

## 2.0. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tracking the students' journey from the beginning of the mobility process to the moment when they get their transcript can help us figure out what activities we should focus on to increase the number of students who get international exposure. It is crucial to understand students' motivations and the practical obstacles they face when considering going on exchange. This relates especially to uncertainties regarding recognition of subjects and whether the students can afford to go. Furthermore, we need to look at the regulations and procedures that form the basis for both physical and digital steps in the process, in order to improve the journey.

### Recognition and funding

When considering mobility, students quickly start looking for answers to a number of questions, among them *“where I should go, what can I study, will it be recognized, can I afford it, when, will I get housing”*. The main issues are related to funding and whether studies taken abroad will be recognised at their university as part of their annual study plan. The Erasmus funding is limited and may not fully cover expenses, especially in Western European capitals where most partner universities are located. Grant amounts and allocation practices vary by country and university.

The recognition of studies abroad into annual study plans is also related to the students' economic situation, as many universities expect students to produce a certain number of credits/ECTS each semester. Failure to do so can result in loss of funding or other benefits. If recognition of studies abroad is not guaranteed, or if it is simply recognised as a diploma supplement, students may be hesitant to make use of mobility opportunities as that could potentially delay their graduation or job opportunities.

The culture for recognition and the recommendations for going on exchange are dependent on the faculty at every university. Some academics are more open to recognizing multidisciplinary courses or the student's own choices, while others prefer or need<sup>1</sup> courses like those taken at home to be recognized as part of the annual study plan.

### Information channels

Students are looking for answers from several information channels early on in the journey. The most important source is their university's website, but they also visit potential host universities' websites. Since they worry about recognition, course descriptions are especially important, and they also consult academics or administrative personnel regarding this issue. Other channels, like social media, talking to former exchange students, information sessions and one-to-one meetings are also important.

Universities have a lot of information about study offers and practical information related to this on their websites, but it is not always coordinated, updated or user friendly.

Universities embed multiple messages in their communication regarding mobility: Study program descriptions and statements from teachers, professors, and administrative staff may offer recommendations on study destinations, timing, and subjects.

The emphasis universities place on the learning agreement and nomination process, as well as the information and guidance given, can influence students' opportunities and choices. Students seem more likely to follow recommendations and paths suggested by professors and other students to ensure recognition of their courses.

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<sup>1</sup> If courses are mandatory due to legislation

## Improving the user journey

The level of digitalisation varies depending on the digital maturity of both the home and host universities, national legislation, and internal procedures. To improve the student journey and reduce obstacles to mobility, universities must prioritize resources and work on both structural and digital elements.

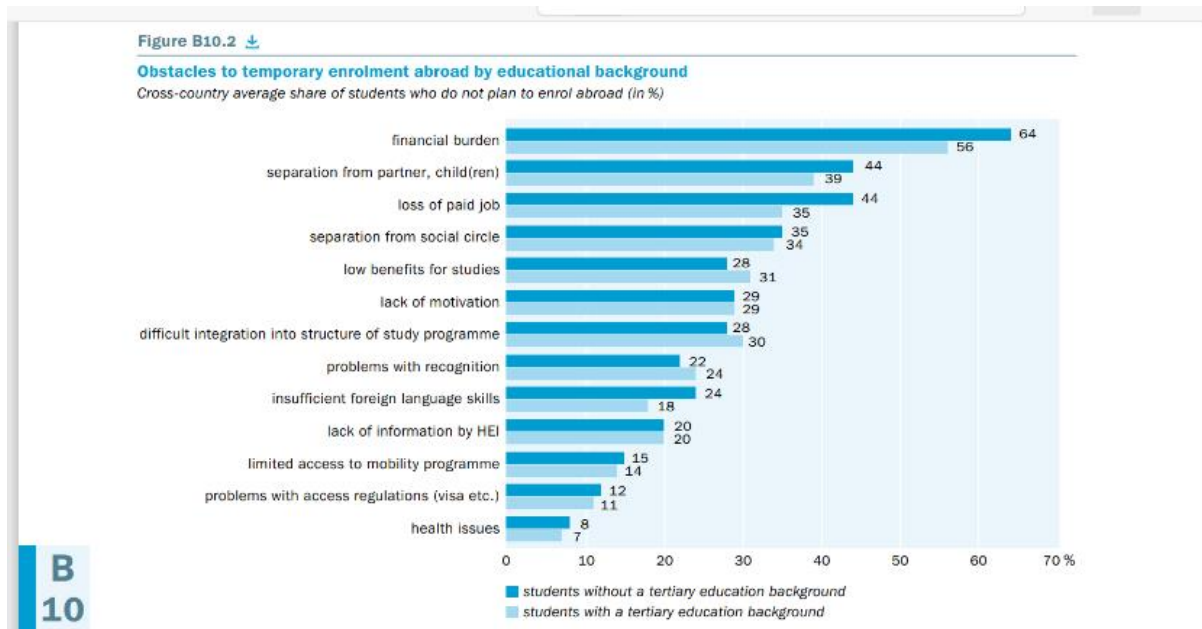
Alignment of procedures and digital systems internally with faculties and externally with partner universities, is crucial. Universities seem to invest significantly in manual labour to assist students in navigating complex rules and systems and to facilitate their mobility. Simplifying and digitalizing procedures might release resources needed for scaling study offers.

Students expect digital solutions to be user-friendly and intuitive, and they are eager to find answers to their questions early on in their journey.

Students rely on university websites for information, both at their home university and the host university. The user journey could be improved with more knowledge and better understanding of the most important user tasks, as well as aligning content, such as course descriptions, across universities, and simplifying procedures and language. Further investigation is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of each university's digital system and the potential for simplifying both procedures and digital solutions.

## 3.0. BACKGROUND

Over the years, several important aspects regarding obstacles students face have been illuminated in research projects. The project Eurostudent <sup>2</sup>, finds that across all countries in Europe (Figure B 10.2), students main obstacles going on exchange programs are the expected financial burden, separation from partner and/or child(ren) and fear of losing their job (Hauschildt, Vögtle, & Gwosć, Eurostudent, 2018, p. 256). Factors like social and economic inequalities, lack of cultural capital, language skills, previous intercultural



experience, and stronger ties to their social environment at home, play a role. In addition, the field of study is a factor: students in arts and humanities are more likely to go on mobility (Hauschildt, Vögtle, & Gwosć, Eurostudent, 2018, pp. 252, 269). “Students with a tertiary education (higher education) background are slightly more put off studying abroad temporarily due to benefit-oriented aspects, such as low benefits for their studies (28 % vs. 31 %), problems with recognition of results achieved abroad (22 % vs. 24 %), or

<sup>2</sup> Eurostudent.eu

difficulties in integrating a stay abroad into the structure of their study program (28 % vs. 30 %)" (Hauschildt, Vögtle, & Gwosć, Eurostudent, 2018, p. 257).

Recognizing these findings, and the Circle U. goal of being more inclusive to a broader student population (JPF, 2023, p. 7), I wanted to gain more insight regarding the obstacles students face and how this affects students' decisions regarding mobility.

This report examines different steps and interactions that students have with digital tools and people in the process of considering going and participating in mobility programmes. This process is referred to as the *user journey*.

Taking this user-oriented approach can help us better understand the user needs and preferences. An important aspect when developing digital services is how we move beyond putting paper into digital formats (digitization), towards changing and improving our processes, and ultimately how the interactions with users and organizations, will lead to better services (digitalization) (IGI-GLOBAL, n.d.). To outline the user journey and work on the problems identified could enhance our services and reduce the obstacles that students are facing.

Important topics in this project have been:

- What kind of questions do the students have when considering going on mobility and what are the obstacles they experience?
- Where do students look for information and what kind of information channels do the universities offer?
- How is data<sup>3</sup> being transferred through different digital systems at the universities?
- What does the user journey look like and what will it take to improve it?

## 4.0. METHOD

I have mapped the student user journey, as it currently looks for a student going on semester exchange (Erasmus/other places) at all nine universities in the Circle U. alliance. There are certainly not just nine journeys, but thousands, and there is no such thing as one right process or journey. However, this mapping provides an insight into the different tasks and topics students face along the journey.

Informants were selected by the universities based on their relevance for addressing the questions I had outlined in the project description sent out in advance.

I met people from different parts of the university, such as the international department, the rectorate/president, teachers, global mobility offices, students, the IT department, communication, career and information offices, Circle U. Student Union (CUSU), and other people who work with Circle U. I also met with random students at different campuses and examined various websites and tools for students.

Based on the information gathered from the universities, I have created nine descriptive presentations, which all address the same set of questions, each illustrating a different user journey. This report is based on these presentations. I have talked to both students and staff who think the procedures and systems are functioning well and those who are more critical.

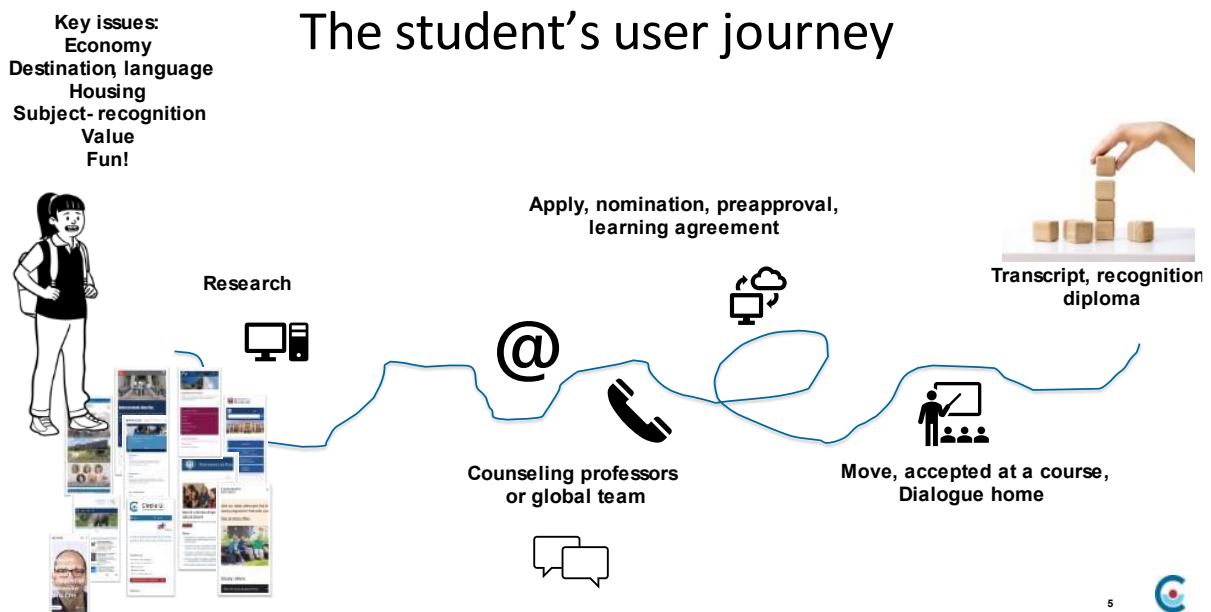
It has been a challenge to map the steps in a coherent way. This relates to different cultures, interpretations of rules and procedures, and issues with language and definitions between the respondents and me, but also between respondents from the same universities. Some of the steps taken during the journey may have been emphasized by certain individuals, while others may have been overlooked. I have followed up

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<sup>3</sup> I have looked briefly into data relevant to students, courses and mobility.

with questions by email. In general, my experience is that it takes several days with stakeholders gathered in the same room to explore and shape common ground and create a user journey. Despite this, the nine different journeys mapped in this project can be seen as a starting point for identifying topics to work on. The journeys need to be further developed and aligned. All the universities have qualified "their" presentation. Any errors or inaccuracies are solely my responsibility.

## 5.0. RESULTS



The main steps in the nine journeys from the universities are outlined as shown in the picture “*The students user journey*”. The primary steps for a student start with discovering, researching different sources and considering several key issues regarding economy, destination, language, housing and subjects (*where I should go, what can I study, will it be recognized, can I afford it, when, will I get housing*). In addition, they consult academics and administrative personnel before or while they apply and write their learning agreement. They get nominated by their home university, which is in dialogue with the host university. The learning agreement is signed by the student, the home and host university. The student applies to the host university, move and enrol, get accepted at courses and finalizes the learning agreement. After studying and taking exams abroad, students return with transcripts and credits that will be incorporated into the degree.

The journey consists of both digital and physical steps and a mixture of information at websites, catalogues, documents, e-mails, excel sheets, phone calls, and application tools, in addition to spoken messages and one-to-one consultations with both academics and other staff at the university.

The journey is not linear, where things naturally happen chronologically. This is due to the variety of information regarding students' key issues and the different channels used in the process. The lack of linearity may also relate to different routines and organizational procedures at the universities.

### 5.1 CONSIDERING AND GETTING MOTIVATED - KEY ISSUES.

The primary objectives of students going on mobility are to gain exposure to diverse cultures, enhance their language proficiency, and establish new friendships. They might have big dreams of going everywhere in the

world, but practical questions like "Where can I go", "Will I afford it" and "Will these courses be recognized" surface early in the process. The obstacles and issues that might prevent them from going are related to the previous shown research, but I will elaborate some more on how issues like funding, recognition, and destinations are interconnected and important to students.

### 5.1.1. FUNDING

The socio-economic dimension plays a significant role across our student population. Some have money available from savings, parents, or work, which allows them to go abroad without worrying about the expenses. Others benefit from a certain amount of funding, while many students require the exchange to be fully financed due to commitments to jobs, family, accommodation etc. After Brexit and the UK not being a part of Erasmus any longer, King's students don't have any scholarships available.<sup>4</sup>

Even if some of our students are more well off, the majority of them find it essential that mobility offers are funded. Currently, Erasmus funding is limited to covering accommodation, travel costs, and living expenses, especially when it comes to going to the capitals of Western Europe, where most of the Circle U. Universities are located. Here the living costs are higher than the amount that students eventually receive from the Erasmus grant. Furthermore, the countries and universities have different practices which may vary from the Commission's recommendations. Several reports have addressed the fact that current Erasmus grants are not sufficient to cover the extra costs of mobility and that the financial burden is the single most important reason students do not enrol in international student mobility (Esu, 2020, p. 60).

To the students, this matters. The European Student Union emphasises several challenges regarding funding and the "Erasmus for all – project" highlights proposals to develop the funding program (uni-foundation.eu, 2021).

### 5.1.2. RECOGNITION AND FUNDING

The question of funding is not only related to the actual mobility grant, but also to recognition. Students are worried that their studies abroad will not be recognized and credited by their home university in their annual study plan. This is central to them, as their economic situation is influenced by the expected number of credits/ECTS they are required to produce every semester.

For instance, a Serbian student must earn at least 48 ECTS per year to receive public funding from the Serbian government (student status with housing, a meal allowance, etc). Some students are unable to obtain the required number of credits from mobility. In that case, they must do exams at home in advance, during or after the exchange to maintain their status as a student. This makes it a challenge to go on a physical mobility, for longer than a few weeks during a semester. If the exchange course is not included in the pre-approved interinstitutional agreement, or if the programmes change during the exchange at the host institution, students are dependent on their academics' willingness to recognize the courses. They might therefore struggle to maintain progression.

Norwegian students can receive a student loan, of which up to 40 per cent may be converted to a grant if you complete your educational program within the expected time frame. This is an incentive to finish their studies. Consequently, to avoid any delays in their studies, Norwegian students tend to favour courses with credits earned abroad that can be recognized in their study plan.

The willingness among students to extend their studies to go abroad might also be affected by securing a job before they finish studying.

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<sup>4</sup> Aside from the King's grant for language learners and the Turing grant for a small number of students around the globe.



### 5.1.3. RECOGNITION, REGULATIONS, AND CULTURE

The culture for recognition, and when and where it is appropriate to go on exchange, depends on the study program and faculty. This applies to students at all universities. When the students are about to apply, they must fill out a learning agreement, which should be signed by their professor, the host university and themselves before going. Included in the agreement is a list of courses they want to attend, which the professor must pre-approve for their annual study plan or as a supplement diploma. The current practice, at most universities/faculties, is to recognize courses that are similar to those students would take at home. This is specified either as a formal or in formal agreement in the interinstitutional agreement between the home university and the host university. Other universities/faculties are more open to recognize more multidisciplinary courses or the student's own choice.

In this stage of the process, students express a sense of uncertainty regarding the following:

- The list of courses at the host university is released later in the semester, thereby preventing them from knowing whether the courses will be offered.
- They don't know if they get a place on the course before they start their exchange.

According to both students and staff, although universities tend to gradually change their portfolios, there may be some difficulties in recognizing changes in courses or what to do if students fail to pass examinations at the host institution. Some people emphasize the fact that the courses should be similar to those at home if they are going to be recognised in the learning agreement.

In other universities, they're less focused on the learning agreement up until it's finalized when the student start their studies at the host universities.

Due to national legislation or internal academic or administrative procedures, universities seem to differ in how much they emphasise the nomination process and in what way they assess the students. Some universities simply nominate those who apply, while others choose the most motivated and academically skilled students. Others are stricter because they believe their institution holds a higher academic level that cannot be met at other universities. And some are eager to motivate and send the students on mobility because internationalization is an important skill of its own.

One faculty has even worked out an algorithm that automatically gives students exchange places based on their grades and academic background. Several students have experienced professors and advisors with strong opinions on whether they should go at all, and where, whether the academic quality of the chosen host university is high enough, and whether the timing is right.

Some universities and faculties have a window for exchange in the study plan. Some have a window of electives, some have a stricter thinking replacing the courses at home one-by-one, and some only allows it to be an addition. Almost all universities allow students to extend their studies by a year or more. Some students have difficulty interpreting and converting credits from their host university and meet the requirements for credit transfer from their home university.

Circle U. Student Union (CUSU) representatives share the concern that with different cultures for recognising, interpreting, and recalculating credits, the result may be that not enough of ECTS are recognized and funding is lost. Student unions in Europe express their concern that the goal of automatic recognition "is far from achieved due to both legal and institutional practices" (Esu, 2020, pp. 4,5).

### 5.1.3. ADDED VALUE

Whether they worry about recognition or credits or not, students today closely plan their education and career and seek challenges which will benefit them academically and give them an advantage in the future labour market. Usual questions when deciding what to study, are “*What will I learn,*” “*What will I earn*” and “*How can I change the world?*”, depending on personal priorities.

When they do their research, they want to know what kind of unique skills they will gain from taking these studies, how they can use their studies in a job, and what kind of job will be available to them. When choosing what to study and whether go on exchange, the following factors might be of crucial importance: activities that include establishing a European network, learn to work in an international environment, internship opportunities, or joint courses where universities collaborate with organizations/companies or civil society. These skills are referred to as “added value”.

### 5.1.4. LANGUAGE, DESTINATION, AND HOUSING

The level of language skills might also influence whether a student chooses to go on exchange, and where. The German and Austrian students tend to choose each other’s country as their destination. Norwegians prefer Denmark and English-speaking countries, while Serbs prefer their neighbouring countries and Italy. Belgian students also favour English- or French-speaking countries, as well as Holland. French students prefer Canada, while Italian students prefer Spain. Language spoken in the host country might affect their ability to get friends, while language spoken in the courses might affect their ability to follow the education, participate in workshops, pass exams, and meet the academic expectations at the host university.

Housing is a major issue among students. Many of them struggle to find a place to stay at their university, and to get a room for a shorter period at a decent price in a capital city, is even more difficult.

Another obstacle to traveling abroad could be formal regulations and requirements for a visa.

## 5.2. SEARCHING FOR INFORMATION.

Given these issues and considerations, students are looking for answers as soon as possible in their journey. Their first digital activity, the application tool, requires research up front from many channels on key issues mentioned in 5.1. This information is closely connected to the requirements and practical information at their study program and needs to be accessible in the channels students use in their daily life. Students also need information early in the journey from potential host universities, such as information about deadlines, courses, study life, living costs, housing etc.

### 5.2.1 WHAT CHANNELS DO THE STUDENTS USE?

All the student respondents value the universities’ website, both at their home university and the host university. Nevertheless, they do have opinions about the updating, navigation, the amount of text, difficult language and unclear guidelines, which leaves them with many new questions they might pass on to the university staff in other channels. The new language models introduced during the last year are already widely used among students, but being critical individuals, they know they cannot trust the AI-models completely.

Other channels they might look at are social media, especially Tik Tok and Instagram which have a lot of content from former or current exchange students, like “*How to survive being an exchange student*”. Advice and information from former exchange students constitutes an important part of the consideration phase. Some people read reports from former students staying abroad published by some universities. Others have established student-driven social media groups, where former exchange students can help those who are

considering going abroad. Other channels might be Google, friends, parents, academics, and student information offices both at the central and local level.

It is important to note that students trust each other more than ambassadors or content that looks like advertising, several respondents say. Former exchange students are important role models, and students find their testimonials trustworthy. They must rely on the universities' information, but the stories they hear from other students give them different impressions, ranging from motivation to anxiety.

## **5.2.2. WHAT CHANNELS DO THE UNIVERSITIES USE?**

Regarding the issues students have in mind during the considering and planning phase (what, when, where and how, practical general funding, accommodation, visa), the universities provide a mixture of digital content about this, and their websites are the main channels.

### **Web sites, course descriptions and catalogues**

The practical information is mostly centralized in the universities' website-structure, but not always. Some universities have this content doubled or even tripled (central, faculty, study program), it's not always coordinated, or even up-to-date, and rarely tailored to a user's needs.

The overview of study opportunities can be found both centrally in a course catalogue or at a website showing all the interinstitutional agreements, as well as at the faculties/study program websites. Furthermore, the faculty/study program sites contain recommendations showing interinstitutional agreements for going on exchange. In some cases, this is in a specified course catalogue, or the students are sent into other catalogues.

Students might also have to look at content at several potential host universities to get information about courses, exams etc. to fill out their learning agreement, in addition to specific mobility information, information regarding visa, accommodation and so on.

Some universities "cover" for their partner universities if they do not have courses updated at their websites, having "copies," of earlier courses, fact sheets, etc, with the risk of this being outdated.

### **Academics and staff**

Academics are, without a doubt, important in delivering information to students, primarily in connection with study plans, courses, etc. Many universities have given academics a special role in the mobility process, taking care of information, nomination, assessment, recognition, and so on. At some universities, administrative personnel are responsible for the entire mobility process. This has been delegated from the academics, and when in doubt, administrative staff consult the academics. Other universities have stricter procedures where study committees need to approve every application.

### **One-to-one**

Every university offers different one-to-one-services, either through international offices, student service centres or academics given the role of mobility coordinator. The services differ as to what extent they can provide the concrete information needed. Student respondents at our universities value personal contact both at home and at the host university, and both students and staff describe contacts by email, and one-to-one meetings.

## Application platforms

Universities use different digital application systems to facilitate the application process, which enable students to look for interinstitutional agreements, submit their applications, find course descriptions, develop their learning agreement, and receive transcripts. The level of digitalisation in this process differs.

## Student ambassadors

Former exchange students are important as ambassadors, meeting students at different information sessions, online-meetings, in social media content or offering personal contact in specific offices at campus.

## Social media, information sessions

Other channels are newsletters and social media, where opportunities for exchange are promoted. The general information sessions are appreciated by all respondents, but they lack the specific information students are looking for in connection with recognition and building their own study plan.

## 5.3. DIGITALISATION

In general, the universities differ in their digital maturity. Some universities have developed digital solutions for students, such as "My studies," "Study portals," and apps, which are connected and transfer data to and from the central student information systems. Such services provide important information about courses and allow students to manage their study plan, sign up for courses and exams, and see their grades. Some universities have a more manual approach where students have to collect and coordinate information from different sources and catalogues by themselves, and manually organise their study plan either on paper or through a digital tool.

Depending on the digital maturity of home and host universities, national legislation, and how internal procedures are organised, the universities differ in how user-friendly the digital mobility process is from the start to the end. Sometimes, students may need to consult academic and administrative staff regarding which courses to choose both at home and at the host university. This can be done in person, by email, or internally in the mobility system.

As academics oversee the study programs and courses, most of them also maintain and update the course descriptions. This happens either in the student information system, a database, on the website or as a paper. Some universities have course descriptions in a central database and transfer data to other platforms (via API)<sup>5</sup> which keeps the information automatically updated on all platforms. Other universities have to manually update their platforms.

All Circle U. universities possess digital systems that facilitate the mobility process. The EU project "Erasmus without paper" has great ambitions making the mobility processes easier between universities and for the students, but the universities differ in which way they have implemented the tools in EWP; interinstitutional agreements, learning agreements, and transcript of records. This is also due to challenges connected to the digital systems and solutions presented by the EU, as well as the timelines, some respondents say.

The report "*Making interoperability*" (Berger, Galati, & Witteler, 2023) describes challenges of interoperability<sup>6</sup> both internally at universities and between universities. Among three other university alliances, Circle U. serves as an example in the report that addresses the design and set-up of joint course catalogues, joint digital enrolment processes, joint learning platforms and common arrangements for joint micro-credentials. The report focuses on the institutional perspective rather than the user perspective. In addition to the technical

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<sup>5</sup> Application Programming Interface (API) is a method of transferring data from one source to other platforms. When data is updated in one source, it is updated on all other websites and platforms.

<sup>6</sup> Interoperability – how systems work together.

interoperability, they also describe organizational interoperability in situations where diverse cultures, working processes or priorities are not aligned. (Berger, Galati, & Witteler, 2023, p. 3). Mapping the user journey at the different universities also uncovers challenges both internally and externally regarding flows of data and how systems are connected, and this affects the user experience.

## 6.0. DISCUSSION.

If we will fulfill the potential of giving more students international exposure, we need to acknowledge all the practical issues facing students in order to release this potential.

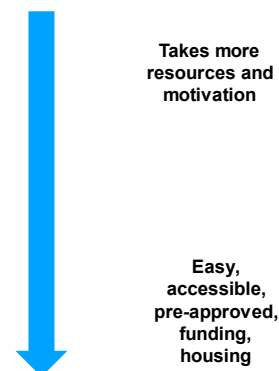
### 6.1. MOTIVATION, REALITY, AND RECOGNITION.

As shown, students have various kinds of questions, resources, and motivation when they consider exchange. The free movers will probably not allow anything to stop them, but what kind of obstacles they encounter might influence their choice of destination. Some of our study programs have internationalization as an expected and natural part, while other programs lead the students into national pathways.

Either way, there is a need for motivation and energy to go abroad, and even that is not enough. A lot of students have different life circumstances that may become impediments to going on exchange. Furthermore, most universities use a lot of manual work power to help those who go today, due to difficult rules and systems, digital maturity, and a challenging user journey internally or/and between universities. Figure “*Target*

## TARGET GROUPS MOBILITY

- Free movers
- Joint MA
- Semester exchange, courses
- Short term/blended/summer schools
- Internationalisation at home



*groups mobility*” shows the different “mobility-offers” on the left and the state of motivation needed to make use of the offer on the right. While students who intend to go abroad for a full undergraduate or master/joint degree are highly motivated and resourceful and intend to go no matter what, other students face more challenges, and need a more seamless, accessible, and pre-approved offer.

This relates especially to those who face financial burdens and are uncertain about recognition, who are afraid of “losing” ECTS, and who worry about the possibility of replacing compulsory courses in the degree with the ones taken abroad.

Depending on the universities’ recommendations, emphasis on the learning agreement and nomination process, different messages influence the student’s choice. It seems that students are more likely to follow recommendations from professors and students to ensure that they receive recognition for their courses.

Having a more accessible offer, might influence whether they tend to go, where they go, and their choice of academic institution/field of subject.

Another related topic is in what way students can get clear answers regarding recognition when attending multidisciplinary courses. Some fields, such as the social sciences, might be more open to recognizing a broader variety of courses in the annual study plan. Indeed, the students say that this issue relates especially to more technical studies (STEM), where the number of mandatory courses is higher, and the tradition of interdisciplinary collaboration is rarer.

## **6.2 IMPROVING THE USER JOURNEY.**

Most of us are used to simple digital procedures, such as when we buy flight tickets or go by bus with our credit card, or when we pay our taxes without lifting a finger. We lose our patience when a digital solution is difficult, especially when we are sent across websites and digital tools in a circle without finding what we are looking for.

Overall, student respondents seem to use and value the channels that the universities provide. The most important channel is the website with practical information, the study programs, course catalogue and course descriptions. Students require information at an early stage of their journey, and they require information from both their home university and potential host universities. When these sites are not user-friendly or updated, or the user journeys between universities are “bumpy”, it could influence what choices students make when going on exchange.

To create a smooth journey that reduces the obstacles students face throughout the user journey, will require work both in the physical sphere, in simplifying and aligning procedures and processes, and in the digital sphere doing the same.

As shown, students receive information from several sources, both personal and digital, and from different digital tools and services. There are several steps in the journey (nomination, learning agreements, assessing, etc.) that are influenced by different cultures, interpretations, and regulations.

As a result, the students’ user experience differs, and the user needs are met in many ways, both physical and digital.. There seems to be a potential in aligning procedures, information, and the digital services/websites to make it easier and clearer to the student, which will reduce the number of emails and consultations needed.

The experience from digitalization in big organizations is that a user-oriented approach can help aligning technical and administrative/organizational procedures. Working with important stakeholders across different departments and entities, it is possible to simplify the process, which means to allocate more resources to the necessary tasks, and less to answer questions that can be dealt with automatically. The development in AI will undoubtedly continue to have a considerable impact on this matter.

Every university faces challenges in coordinating and facilitating necessary information towards and from the students regarding several aspects of their study life, not just mobility.

It might seem tempting to build new systems, for example at the alliance level. However, before introducing new systems into the universities IT complexity, it seems vital to consider not only the institutional approach, but also the users’ needs, tasks, and journeys.

As shown, the user needs are closely connected to the procedures and regulations, and core information at every university (courses, study programs, practical, the student’s personal data). Having the student’s user experience at the centre of attention might lead to more effective services, leaving staff with more time for other tasks, in addition digital services providing a better user experience. This is also essential when scaling up offers.

Consequently, universities should do the hard work of addressing their core procedures and systems and aligning them with each other in order to improve the journey. One obvious starting point is the website.

### **6.2.1. IMPROVING WEBSITES.**

The website has become increasingly important in almost every organisation or entity as a main channel for information. It also acts as an entry point to digital services and a tool for different target groups internally and externally. This requires systematic management and shaping of content in accordance with user needs. To achieve precise results in search engines, it is important to work towards search engine optimization, such as updating and deleting outdated content.

Every university has the potential to improve and manage their websites and how these interact with other tools and services. This includes focusing on target groups, and different user's tasks and user's journey.

Since we must ensure that the user perspective is secured throughout the journey, teamwork is essential, involving people responsible for the web, user patterns, search engine optimization, and navigation, as well as those responsible for procedures and content across different units. Simplifying routines, using understandable language, and prioritizing the most sought-after data are all important.

The templates for course descriptions at the universities are diverse, making it challenging to compare and comprehend what will be recognized. An important measure is to improve the design and make them easier to compare, to understand the quality, how courses are credited, and what kind of learning outcomes courses have. As the students put it; "A bad website is a red flag!" It leaves people with a negative impression of how processes and services are managed. On the other hand, a professionally managed websites can be an advantage for students and staff. Since the field of mobility is a global and growing market, several companies that specialize in mobility-services to students, parents, and universities, have from a more customer-oriented approach looked at reasons why students discard certain universities. In one report they point at five reasons; slow admissions response times, poor user experience on the university website, high tuition fees, lack of affordable tuition fees and scholarships, and inflexibility with matters concerning finance and payments (Studee.com). Several of the universities are working on new websites or developing existing ones.

## Discover our study abroad opportunities

Whether you are a King's student looking to add an international element to your degree, or a student at an overseas university wishing to study abroad for a semester or year in London, the Global Mobility team are here to help. Our webpages contain a wealth of information on our opportunities – start your journey here!



### Outgoing study abroad opportunities

Discover what options and destinations are available to King's students.



### Study abroad in London

Information for incoming students wanting to study in London.



### Contact us about studying abroad

How to contact King's if you're interested in studying abroad.



### Current students and staff

Information for King's students & staff (King's log in required).

Recently launching a new website, you can tell King's College London ([King's College London \(kcl.ac.uk\)](http://kcl.ac.uk)) focus on the user journey and user tasks presenting their offers in clear categories; outgoing, incoming, contact points and current students and staff.

## 7.0. CONCLUSION.

To conclude: Students today are both ambitious and idealistic and an increasing amount of them are going abroad, they carefully plan their careers and want to study subjects that give them the right credits, added value in terms of specific skills and better chances at the labour market. The practical issues regarding funding and the proper production of ECTS, which includes pre-approved recognition embedded in their study program, are of utmost importance to them, if we are to increase the number of students getting international exposure.

Students expect trustworthy, updated, and accessible information that is easy to find, understand, search for, and manage throughout the entire journey. This depends on the digital ecosystems and how they are set up, both at the home university and across the universities. The journey will depend on local websites and digital tools, as well as how routines and integration with other systems at partner universities are handled.

If we really are to improve the student's journey and possibly reduce the number of obstacles students face when thinking of going on mobility, we will need dedicated resources at every university, taking into account both the structural, digital and the physical elements in the user journey.



The user journey needs to be further developed in relation to routines at every university and to be aligned with partner universities. Further investigation is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of each university's digital system and the potential for simplifying both procedures and digital solutions.

Keeping the user's perspective in mind, acknowledging the channels students use in their daily student life, simplifying, and aligning the procedures internally and between our universities, will hopefully make the user journey smoother.

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## 8.0 DEFINITIONS

*Learning agreement*<sup>7</sup> - is to provide a transparent and efficient preparation of the exchange to make sure that students receive recognition for the activities successfully completed abroad. The Learning Agreement sets out the programme of the studies or the traineeship to be followed abroad. It must be approved by the student, the sending and the receiving institution, organisation, or enterprise before the start of the exchange.

*Home university*- the students primary university and/or where the student is enrolled in a degree.

*Host university* – the university where students go on mobility.

*Annual study program* – the mandatory study program i.e., MA and BA (minimum credit requirements)

*Curriculum/Syllabus* – the content of the course.

*Faculty/Department/Institute*– the highest academic organization level underneath the president/rector/level. I use the term faculty in this report.

*User journey* - represents the sequence of steps or interactions that a user goes through while using a product, service, or website. A digital user journey typically includes the user's interactions across multiple touchpoints, such as landing pages, forms, menus, content pages, and user tasks.

*User task* – the activity a user needs to perform in order to achieve a specific goal within a software application or system, i.e., updating personal settings, searching for information, making a purchase, or attend a course.

## 9. INTERVIEWS

University of Oslo, Sept 5-6. 2023

University of Aarhus, Sept 7-8. 2023

Humboldt University, Sept 18-19. 2023

University of Vienna, Sept 20-22. 2023

University of Belgrade, Oct 10-12. 2023

King's College, London, Oct 16-18. 2023

UCLouvain, Oct 26,31, Nov 2. 2023

CUSU 06.11.2023

University of Pisa 09-10.11 2023

Université Paris Cité 13-14.11 2023

## 10. CONFERENCES

National conference, Brussel Oct 23-24. 2023

IAEA Rotterdam Sept 26-29. 2023

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<sup>7</sup> [Learning Agreements | Erasmus+ \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/erasmus-plus/en/learning-agreements)

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