



Recognition and digitalisation in Europe

What steps to take for higher education institutions?

14 December 2022

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Digitalisation has gained significant momentum in Europe as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. How can we further improve administrative processes especially in the higher education sector? What must we do to make administrations more efficient, more transparent and more sustainable? And how can we successfully establish consistent standards that will enable the exchange of data between universities at the international level? These and similar questions were examined and discussed by leading experts on 14 December 2022 at the DAAD virtual conference on recognition and digitalisation in Europe.

The event took place under the umbrella of the “bologna hub” project, which offers policy makers and important actors in the German and European higher education landscape thematic platforms for exchanging experiences to support the internationalisation activities of universities. Contributing to ongoing debates within the EHEA is part of the “bologna hub’s” mandate, and digital recognition procedures are one of the intensely discussed topics in higher education at the European level today.

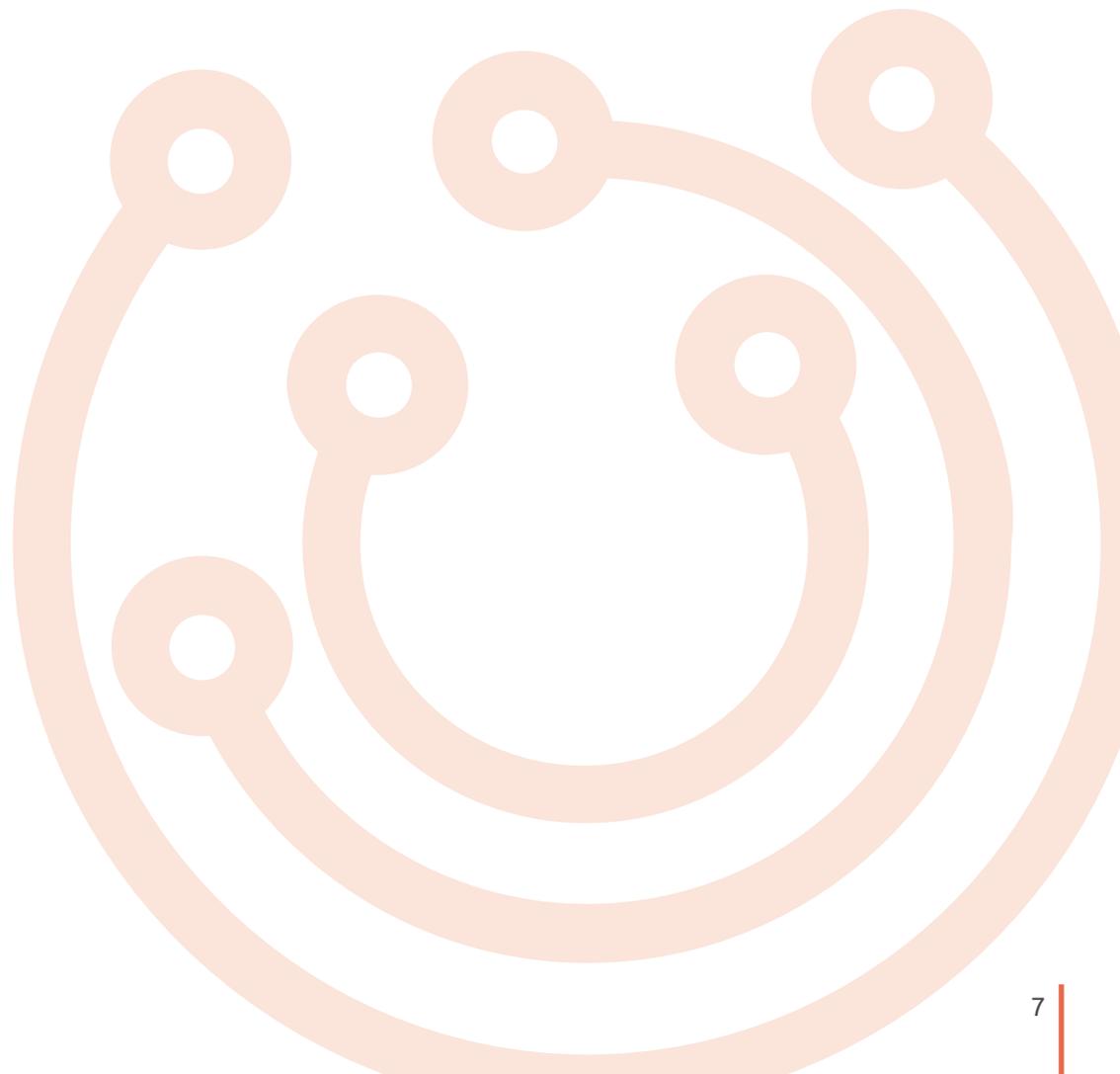
Instead of analysing the digitalisation process as a whole, the event focused on the Europe-wide recognition of study credits as envisaged in the Bologna Process. Standardised electronic certificates would not only make matters much easier for students, who are becoming increasingly mobile and flexible, but also simplify administrative processes. Over 200 participants followed two introductory inputs and a panel discussion that not only elucidated the state of digitalisation in the sector and examples of good practice, but also presented available tools. In addition, experts outlined possible routes towards an efficient and generally useful system based on data sets that universities all over Europe could work with in the future.



Opening

David Akrami Flores, Head of Section Erasmus+ Key Action 3: Policy Support,
Erasmus+ National Agency Higher Education, German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)

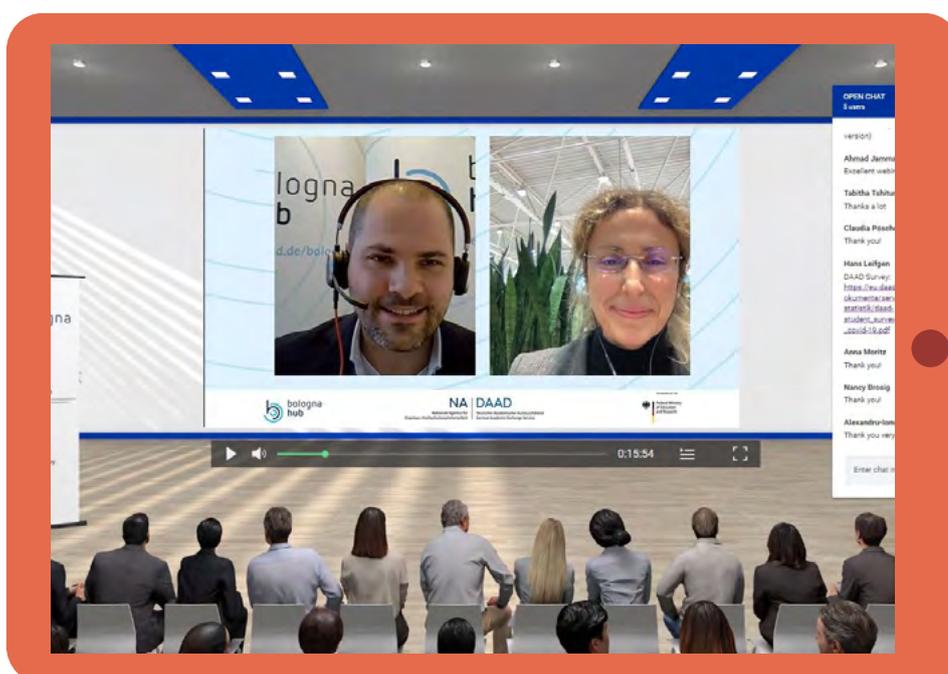
“The recognition of study credits and digitalisation are currently two strongly debated topics in the EU higher education landscape,” emphasised David Akrami Flores, Head of the Section for Erasmus+ Policy Support at the DAAD, in his welcoming speech. “Digital work processes, databases, electronic certificates and the digital exchange of student information make it possible to simplify existing formalities and significantly improve their quality and efficiency in the long term.” The goal of the event was to enrich and inspire the debate with different positions by approaching the subject from an explicitly European rather than a purely national perspective. Akrami Flores emphatically thanked not only the participants, but also the European experts from universities and student and educational organisations who contributed to the event and shared their insights and different perspectives.



Input I: Digital technology for the recognition agenda. State of play in the Bologna Process.

Chiara Finocchietti, Deputy Director of Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence (CIMEA), Italy

Digitalisation is undoubtedly of fundamental importance to the Bologna Process. In her input, Chiara Finocchietti, Deputy Director of Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence (CIMEA) in Italy and Co-Chair of BFUG's Thematic Peer Group B on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, outlined the current state of development and pointed out the strategic role of digitalisation, including appropriate certification and recognition of study credits, which has been identified as such at conferences of European education ministers in Yerevan (2015), Paris (2018) and Rome (2020). This issue is also very high on the agenda of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group, which focuses on the implementation of the Lisbon Convention and therefore on the recognition of higher education qualifications. Furthermore, according to Finocchietti, it has received renewed impetus due to the coronavirus pandemic. "We must ask ourselves how far digitalisation can serve the Bologna principles, which in this context would represent, among others, a student-centred approach, and how we can realise trouble-free navigation through different education systems and countries." She emphasised, however, that no one should believe all the problems would disappear if the right tools were available. "Technology is not the panacea to everything, but it can be an important part of the solution," said Finocchietti.



Input II: Digital workflows for recognition in practice. Example from the University of Göttingen

Anne Sennhenn, Project Coordinator liveSciences³, University of Göttingen, Germany

Wolfgang Radenbach, Head of Unit Digitalisation in Teaching and Learning, University of Göttingen, Germany

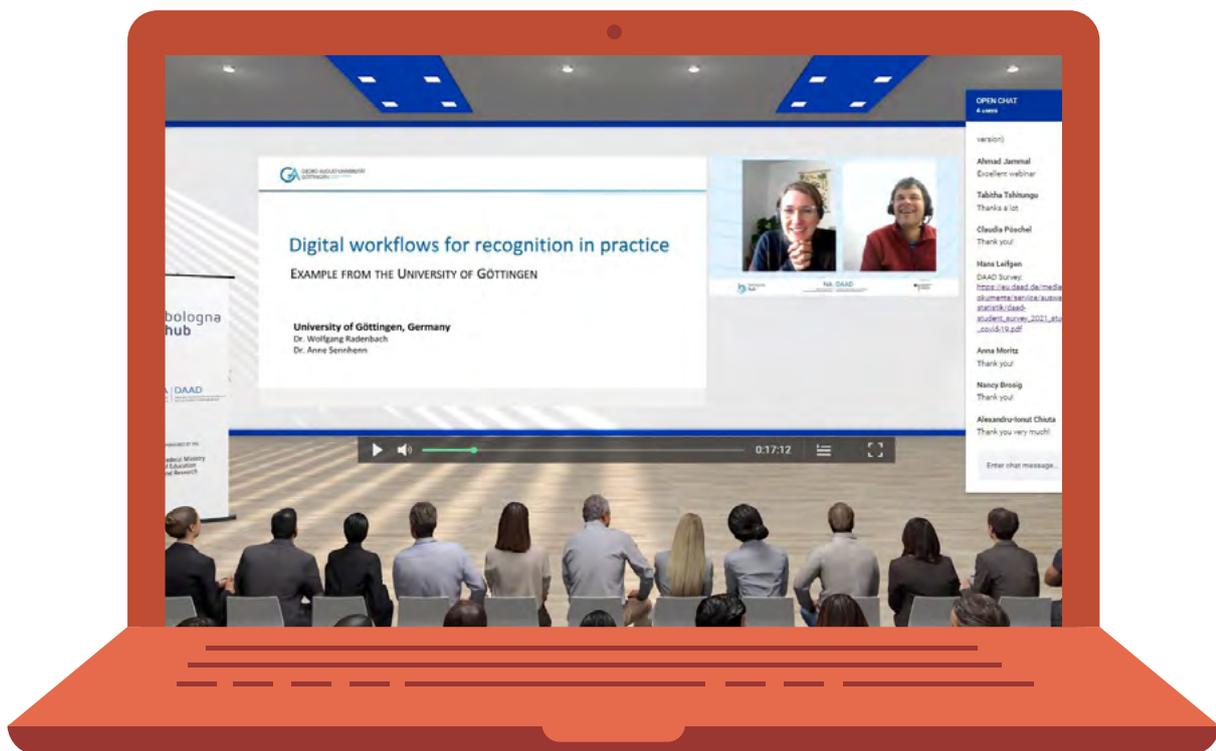
In their introductory input, Anne Sennhenn, Project Coordinator for the liveSciences³ collaborative project at the University of Göttingen, and Wolfgang Radenbach, Head of Unit for Digitalisation in Studying and Teaching at the University of Göttingen, also underlined the special significance of the recognition of study credits. “It is important for the mobility of students and researchers and for guaranteeing academic quality,” emphasised Sennhenn. “A functioning system is the key to cooperation across institutional and national boundaries, while the current uncertainty with regard to recognition processes represents the greatest obstacle for the named factors.” In fact, “more than 5 million students are currently enrolled in higher education institutions outside of their home countries” (UNESCO 2020, *A practical guide to recognition*), which makes adequate recognition even more urgently needed.

“We have the responsibility to create a fair and open system and ensure that students do not need to carry suitcases full of documents around from one secretariat to the next to have them stamped.”

Anne Sennhenn

However, establishing a Europe-wide standard is difficult. “The challenge lies in harmonising the process and simultaneously making it easy to configure,” said Radenbach. Data have to be collected and accepted across national boundaries, yet differences in grading systems already require harmonisation – and the requirements are much greater when it comes to differences in modules, courses and degrees. “It isn’t the case that there are no standards,” explained Radenbach, “There are simply too many of them.”

At the University of Göttingen, which already began the digitalisation of its administration five years ago, Radenbach and Sennhenn now rely on the EMREX system that uses the ELMO data format, as does the European student exchange programme Erasmus+ with its programme “Erasmus Without Paper”. The system is easy to implement, freely scalable and relatively secure, emphasised Sennhenn and Radenbach. In Germany, however, it is still at the test stage. Since major student information system providers recently added support for EMREX, the situation is likely to improve. The University of Göttingen and seven other higher education institutions are now actively involved in the Platform for International Student Mobility (PIM), which works with EMREX and has now completed the design and validation stage; it is currently being integrated into existing administrative processes at the participating universities. During their input, both Sennhenn and Radenbach praised the opportunities the system offered, but returned once again to the problem of the lack of standardisation. “As long as not enough universities are actively involved in such a project, the benefit will remain limited,” said Radenbach.



Panel discussion: What is next for digital recognition in Europe?

Different perspectives on challenges and solutions

Participants:

- **Wolfgang Radenbach**, Head of Unit Digitalisation in Teaching and Learning, University of Göttingen, Germany
- **Tor Fridell**, Head of Student Information Systems, Linköping University, Sweden
- **Ana Gvritishvili**, Executive Committee Member, European Student's Union (ESU)

Anne Sennhenn's and Wolfgang Radenbach's input was followed by a panel discussion. Tor Fridell, Head of Student Information Systems at Linköping University in Sweden and Chair of the EMREX User Group Executive Committee, highlighted the advantages of the EMREX system and argued for its general use. Here, using Sweden as an example, he explained the current implementation of digital options – and their limitations. “The digitalisation of universities is already advanced in my country,” he said. Thus, for example, there is a central national admissions system that automatically imports credits issued by all universities and other further training institutions and makes them immediately accessible when required. This applies not only to degrees, but also to individual modules and courses. “However, it doesn't work with data from foreign universities,” said Fridell. “We still have to enter all these documents by hand.” EMREX – or another open system – would solve this and numerous other problems if universities could overcome their reservations about the harmonisation of data at the international level and agree on a standardised format.

“We have good, functioning tools, but not enough institutions use them,” emphasised Wolfgang Radenbach of the University of Göttingen. “It seems to me that during the pandemic, when there was little student mobility, we made definite advances, but now most of the people in charge are working on other things again and the pace of the digitalisation of recognition processes has declined significantly as a result.” Nevertheless, it only took three months to implement EMREX at the University of Göttingen – a manageable period of time.

“The greatest challenge is the lack of a willingness to change anything.”

Tor Fridell



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FEDERAL MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

RECOGNITION & D IN EUROPE

A TOOL TO SUPPORT:
- ETHICS
- INTEGRITY
- TRANSPARENCY
IN EDUCATION

(GE)-DANKE!
THANKS=THINK
CREDENTIAL SHARING



CHIARA FINOCCHIETTI

THE STUDENT SHOULD BE IN CHARGE

EUROPEAN STUDENT IDENTIFIER



THE BIG QUESTION:
HOW CAN DIGITALISATION SUPPORT OUR VALUES?

AT THE MOMENT IS THE BEST SYSTEM...



ANA GVRITSHVILI

CONSTANT MONITORING = QUALITY ASSURANCE

BALANCE I

MACHINE READABLE!
NOT MANY PAPERS SENT TO SWEDEN



TOR FRIDELL

WE HAVE TO SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE...
GOLF COURSE?
WHAT COURSES DO YOU HAVE?

NO TOTAL AUTOMATIZATION...
THE INITIAL DECISION TAKES THE PERSON



THE INITIAL DECISION TAKES THE PERSON

DIGITALISATION

14. DECEMBER 2022

DON'T BUILD OWN SOLUTIONS...
COOPERATE!

DIGITALISATION OFFERS
A LOT OF OPPORTUNITIES:

QUALITY
MOBILITY
SPEED
FAIRNESS

DAVID AKRAMI FLORES

DATA EXCHANGE

RECOGNITION IS THE KEY FOR COLLABORATION
... AND THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE

ANNE SENNHENN

WOLFGANG RADENBACH

THE PANDEMIC BOOSTED THE
PROCESS

GRADE SYSTEM CONVERTER

PLATFORM EXCHANGE BENEFITS

STAFF

PIM

IS THE CHALLENGE

OFFICE
OFFICE
OFFICE



Tor Fridell expressed that the reasons for this hesitant progress lay above all in the complexity of the task. “We are dealing with four forms of interoperability,” he explained. “The first concerns the legal level – in other words, for example, the question of whether and under which circumstances it is permitted to pass on digital student information.” The second relates to the organisational structure within a country; Norway, for example, has a central provider of student information systems, whereas in Germany universities have very much greater sovereignty and each institution can make its own choices. “The third touches upon semantic questions, for example, whether we are talking about degrees or individual credits. And the fourth involves technological interoperability: we need machine-processible data and not PDF files, for instance.” However, the greatest challenge has nothing to do with that: “It is the lack of a willingness to change things,” said Fridell.

This view was shared by many conference participants. In a spontaneous survey, 54% said they were not satisfied with the state of the digitalisation of recognition processes. According to Fridell, however, things are beginning to move forward at the European level – for example, with an official recommendation for the ELM data standard, a further development of the ELMO format used by EMREX. Furthermore, both Fridell and Radenbach had high expectations of the new European Student Identifier, which is already being used by the Erasmus+ programme, but still needs to be adopted by a large number of universities. Nevertheless, Fridell reckons with its compulsory implementation within the next few years.

Ana Gvritishvili, Member of the Executive Committee of the European Student’s Union (ESU), gave the student perspective during the panel discussion. “We need to talk about digitalisation more broadly – not only in relation to the recognition of study credits, but also in the area of teaching and learning,” she said. “Of course, transformation processes of this kind take time, but during the pandemic, and also now in the light of the war in Ukraine, we have seen how urgently they need to be addressed.” Here, with reference to an ESU resolution, she spoke in favour, among other things, of a better link between quality assurance and recognition procedures as well as consideration of the ongoing debate on micro-credentials.

“The debate we are currently engaged in should only be a first step towards the automatic and full recognition of study credits worldwide, which is in turn an important element of the goal of education without borders.”

Ana Gvritishvili

Wrap-up and conclusion

David Akrami Flores, Head of Section Erasmus+ Key Action 3: Policy Support,
Erasmus+ National Agency Higher Education, German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)

At the conclusion of the event David Akrami Flores summed up some of the main points as follows:

1. Digital recognition processes are part of the necessary digitalisation of higher education administration and should therefore receive special consideration and prioritisation.
2. Digital recognition processes can significantly facilitate the flexibility and mobility required of students in the academic environment and simultaneously reduce the amount of work involved for university administrative and teaching staff. However, the initial costs are high and do not only include the deployment of staff and technology for implementation, but also require a revision of relevant administrative processes, which institutions should therefore evaluate in advance and, if necessary, optimise.
3. The EU has already defined relevant technical and legal guidelines for universities and higher education institutions, such as, for example, the implementation of the Erasmus Charter and the European Student Card. This obliges institutions to push ahead with digitalisation within the next few years.

