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DESIGNING THE PROCESS OF ACADEMIC RECOGNITION – IMPLEMENTING "BRICOLAGE" AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL TO ANALYZE A DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN THE ULYSSEUS EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCE

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Abstract:

European Universities Initiative is transforming the landscape of European higher education in a fundamental way with the establishment of transnational, strategic alliances. In view of the overarching objectives of the European Higher Education Area, new alliances contribute to the consolidation of current best practices in education, research and innovation, and enable novel ways of cooperation to enhance them even more. Alongside the optimistic perspectives opening up with the initiative, alliances also face a number of administrative and pedagogical challenges. Fulfilling the expectations of the European Commission in terms of facilitating more flexible study pathways and of adopting transparent practices in academic recognition is one acute topic that needs to be addressed in every alliance: recognition for both access and for advancement needs thorough reconsideration in the new educational ecosystem. The article presents a pragmatic contribution by unfolding a recent development case from the Ulysseus European University Alliance. It describes an intensive process of designing an alliance-level framework agreement for academic recognition, with supporting documents, to enable more functional processes in alignment with the main European policy papers such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) and taking into account recent studies where hindrances and developments in academic recognition are discussed and analyzed. The case process is articulated methodologically with the framework of bricolage theory (Matthews 2019) that enables a synchronic analysis of the constituents and the outcomes of the process. Pragmatic recommendations are based on the post-hoc analysis of the case where a transdisciplinary working group achieved a significant administrative step forward in alliance cooperation.

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1. Introduction: Towards a new ecosystem of higher education in Europe

In the Gothenburg Social Summit of 2017, European leaders introduced an innovative plan on a new structure and cooperation level in the European higher education ecosystem, to establish strategic partnerships and enable the creation of new joint degrees across several institutions. The initiative had been originally suggested by Emmanuel Macron, the French President of the Republic, in a 2017 speech that consecutively triggered the political approval by the EU Council, which paved the way for the administrative measures to build the structure of the forthcoming alliances (Gunn, 2020). The idea of establishing alliance-type cooperation in European higher education is not entirely new (Orr, Unangst & de Wit, 2019; Charret & Chankseliani 2022), and it has been entwined with the objectives of more politically accentuated projects (Gunn 2020).

European Universities are "[…] *ambitious transnational alliances of higher education institutions developing long-term structural and strategic cooperation.*" (EEA 2023). The overarching mission of the European Universities Initiative is to foster European values, culture, and identity. All types of higher education institutions are eligible, and the funding is organised by the Erasmus+ programme. The case organisation of this article, Ulysseus, joined the network of European Universities in the second wave of alliances in 2020 and has currently eight partners[ii]. Ulysseus defines itself as "[…] *an international, open-to-the-world, person-centered, and entrepreneurial University that will shape Europe's future.*" (Ulysseus 2023). The alliance is constructed on the principle of innovation, which is highlighted by the establishment of Innovation Hubs that contribute to the appropriation of European values and of citizen engagement, aligning with the overarching objectives of the initiative (EEA 2023).

This article unfolds a pragmatic case example from Ulysseus European University Alliance where one official deliverable of the first funding phase was formulated as the design of a framework agreement for academic recognition, identified as a key constituent of functional cooperation and flexible studies. "Academic recognition" is a generic concept that encompasses the processes of recognizing (1) qualifications to enable access to higher education, (2) study periods that can be completed in foreign or national institutions, and (3) prior learning that can also stem from non-formal or informal contexts. (ECTS 2020, 75). Interpretations vary, triggering administrative challenges that are one hindrance to obtaining more flexible pathways, which are a major objective for European University alliances. Developing transparent recognition is a demanding process also on national and institutional levels (European Commission 2023).

[ii] During the case process, there were six partner institutions.

In view of consolidating recognition practices in Ulysseus, a working group was established in 2021 for the purpose of designing the framework agreement, and the author was designated as its chairperson.

The article develops with a literature review where the contextual and administrative fields of academic recognition are presented, in order to locate the topic in the debates of policymakers and practitioners and to highlight their challenges (chapter 2). Thereafter, the methods and material of the case process are articulated through the metaphoric lens of *bricolage* as a conceptual framework (chapter 3). Chapter 4 describes the results and discussion of the pragmatic process. Chapter 5 suggests recommendations for subsequent development, based on auto-evaluation. It is followed by a brief conclusion (chapter 6).

2. Literature review: Locating the study in current academic debates

Research on the EUI and its repercussions on higher education is expanding, as current alliances get established (Manzoni 2023). At present, however, there is only scarce literature on the administrative practices of European University alliances. This article seeks to contribute to further discussions by suggesting a pragmatic case of academic recognition development and recommendations stemming therefrom. It is noteworthy that academic recognition is addressed here from an administrative and institutional perspective, rather than as a process analyzed through the gratifications from the student's perspective as e.g. in Resch, Knapp, and Schrittesser (2022).

The author has been inspired by the insightful contribution of Frame and Curylo (2023) from the FORTHEM alliance. They suggest a pertinent notion to study European Universities: "Everyday Europeanhood" that involves a bottom-up process development, identity construction, and communication as a counterbalance of a top-down scenario that is often associated with European institutions and policy-making (Frame & Curylo 2023). Moreover, an article by Charret and Chankselyani (2022) has provided insights with an interesting methodological approach based on the metaphor of rhizomes to analyse three European University alliances. It shows alliance cooperation in the light of complex and unpredictable developments, which aligns with the author's perception of European Universities as dynamic environments of constant connection-making, occasionally in an unpredictable way.

The concept of European Universities is new and requires a novel ecosystem based on sustainable partnerships. This involves a long-term vision of new "campuses" across borders, to ensure smooth mobility and research and innovation projects. Higher education institutions involved in various alliances need to establish new administrational practices, including agreements on cooperation, mobility, and joint educational offers. Frame and Curylo's (2023) approach, suggested as an insider's view, encouraged the author to unfold the case process as an example of a challenge that has been addressed and will streamline further developments. It is one dimension in

constructing the "everyday Europeanhood" shared by the Ulysseus alliance in our efforts to provide more flexible study pathways for students who should all be mobile and benefit from being 'international at home' as well.

The challenge is of volume: how to design alliance-level practices that are transparent, equal, feasible, and smart, without compromising quality and concerning national and institutional regulations? How to conceptualize in transnational cooperation a portfolio of processes that were challenging already before the advent of European Universities? (Bergan 2009; Garnett & Cavaye 2015; ENQA 2017; Eurydice 2018; Council 2023). The alignment of current practices and the creation of new ones necessitate a co-creational mindset.

The present contribution draws from insiders' experiences, and it is suggested by an author who has coordinated the streamlining of recognition and validation within the Ulysseus alliance since 2021 and contributed to corresponding tasks in her own institution. The author wishes that the article may provide some insights into the administrative and pedagogical development of academic processes in other alliances.

2.1 European recognition landscape

To position the Ulysseus case into a wider sphere of European higher education developments, it is necessary to consider the concepts that relate to this field which is still under a lot of academic and administrative debates.

Academic recognition is considered as a significant enabler of the functioning of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA 2018) and a key driver for successful mobility (ECTS 2020; Bergan & Blomqvist 2013). Given the overarching political goal of the European Education Area to be reached in 2025, recognition of learning should be automatic on two dimensions: recognition of qualifications for admission, and recognition of study periods for advancement in studies (Council 2018, 2023).

The Bologna process was initiated in 1999 by the adoption of the Bologna Declaration (Bologna 1999), to enhance Europe's competitiveness and to increase the attractiveness of European higher education (Bologna 2023; EHEA 2018; Rome 2020). The process sets a framework for European higher education institutions and their development with three main pillars: (1) a study structure with three cycles: A Bachelor, a Master's, and a Doctorate degree (2) Recognition of qualifications and of study periods abroad, and (3) Quality Assurance. The pillars entwine and support each other, with the underpinning aspiration to build a stronger and competitive Europe by high-quality education and by ensuring flexible pathways for students.

The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015, after the initial version of 2005) set the framework for quality assurance in the Bologna process, where in particular quality assurance and recognition are two fundamentals supporting each other for mutual trust across the EHEA. The standard 1.4. explicitly states the pre-eminent nature of academic recognition within the internal quality assurance of higher education institutions: "*Fair recognition of higher*

education qualifications, periods of study, and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility." (ESG 2015: 13).

Yet, this standard does not provide instructions on how to design fair recognition, nor does it define the signification of the word "fair" in this context. Institutions across Europe have interpreted the objective in their own ways, entailing delays in comparison to the initial goal-setting on the European level (Bergan & Blomqvist 2013; EHEA 2020; European Commission 2023). Within the European Higher Education Area, the new dimension of European Universities cooperation has made the definition challenge even more acute: what is fair, what is feasible, and what is realistic? Yet, the most important policies streamlining the recognition process in European higher education institutions were defined already in 1997, when the "Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region" was signed in Lisbon. The city consequently gave its name to the document, commonly known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention, abbreviated as LRC (1997). It is the main policy document on the matter of academic recognition in Europe.[iii]

The LRC (1997) contains definitions for the most important notions and actions in terms of qualifications, recognition, access, and admission. The core term of *recognition* is defined as follows (LRC 1997:3): "*A formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign educational qualification with a view to access to educational and/or employment activities.*" Whilst the general definition refers only to "qualifications", i.e. certificates, degrees, or diplomas, the section V of the document (LRC 1997:7) extends the notion of recognition also to "periods of study" that are not defined in detail however. From the viewpoint of recognition and mobility practitioners, most studies completed during a mobility period in another higher education institution are part of this second category (ECTS 2015, 2020). In the post-pandemic and constantly digitalizing reality, an increasing number of study periods can also be of a virtual or hybrid nature, without a physical mobility dimension (Bruhn-Zass 2022).

The second concept is an extension of the first one, encompassing moreover recognition of study periods completed outside one's home institution, as well as recognition of prior learning (RPL) that englobes learning stemming from non-formal or informal contexts, such as work-integrated learning (Mäkelä 2022). Enhanced consideration of RPL in higher education studies is an objective that is shared by the EHEA Ministers, in view of facilitating more flexible study pathways and of enhanced lifelong learning (Rome 2020).

According to the LRC (1997), institutions are instructed to recognise full qualifications (op. cit., 6) and study periods (p7) "*unless substantial difference can be shown.*" This formulation leaves open questions for practitioners, in particular since the Preamble (op. cit., 1) of the document highlights the autonomy of institutions that needs to be

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[iii] Echoing this development on a global scale, UNESCO has subsequently introduced the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention (UNESCO 2023) that entered into force after ratifications, in March 2023.

protected. The challenge is obvious for European University alliances: how to promote a joint process while maintaining institutional autonomy that entails precedence of current institutional practices? (Mäkelä 2022).

Whilst the LRC remains as a somewhat philosophical and political document, the recognition process has been facilitated for practitioners by the introduction of a more pragmatic guide: The European Recognition Manual (2015; 2020). It provides explicit guidelines for credential evaluators and admission officers (2020, 3) who most often are in charge of recognition decisions. The terminology is extended from "recognize" to include also "charter", "register", "validate", or "approve", as verbs to be used (2020, 27), to showcase the variety of process descriptions applied.

The European Recognition Manual promotes the evaluation of *learning outcomes* that should be considered when scrutinizing a foreign qualification or study period in comparison to the studies at the home institution (2020, 46). This fundamental concept is solidly connected to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF 2023) and to the specific framework related to higher education (QF-EHEA 2023). It is highlighted also in the book published to celebrate and evaluate the LRC for its 15 years of existence (Bergan & Blomqvist 2013) as a key driver to assess learning and not just the contents of a course. For this purpose, the European Recognition Manual (2020) lists case examples of substantial and non-substantial proof in terms of curricular divergences, with recommendations for actions.

The European Commission has published moreover a guidebook for recognition practitioners which was adopted by the EHEA Ministers in 2015. The ECTS Users' Guide (2020) facilitates decision-making related to the extensive mobility actions in Europe. It includes *recognition of prior learning and experience* in the recognition scheme (ECTS 2020, 46-48), highlighting hence the importance of lifelong learning and aligning with the spirit of the LRC (1997) and the European Recognition Manual (2015; 2020). Experience from work, volunteering, civic engagement, and other non-formal and informal contexts need to be considered also in higher education. In the everyday discourse of practitioners, the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is often used for this heterogenic entity.

For the EHEA, the European ministers gave a communiqué on promoting RPL in higher education already in 2005 as part of the Bologna process (Communiqué 2005) and it was followed by a recommendation of the European Council (2012). The willingness to enable full recognition of learning stemming from all contexts is hence evident from the political viewpoints. The objective is also endorsed by researchers: e.g. Bravenboer and Lester (2016) note the importance of recognition practices as a facilitator in access to higher education also via unconventional pathways, which is a significant aspect in consideration of employment and lifelong learning objectives of the EHEA.

2.2 Challenges in implementing recognition processes

Whilst European recommendations streamline process development and provide a solid foundation in terms of policy papers, the concept of recognition is not entirely endorsed

in the same way by all European higher education institutions, which explains the heterogeneity of current processes and also the variation across the terms applied (Eurydice 2013; EHEA 2018; Council 2023). The recent Report from the Commission to the Council on the implementation of the Council recommendation (European Commission 2023, 4) even refers to a "*mixed picture on the implementation of automatic recognition of higher education qualifications at institutional level, with inconsistencies between institutions, or even within the same institution by different credential evaluators.*"

Challenges stem partly from misinterpretations of concepts (Council 2023). A distinction needs to be made between two notions: *automatic* and *academic* recognition. The first refers to access and admission in higher education and is straightforward: "*Automatic recognition of a degree leads to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access)*" (EHEA 2015). In a more colloquial version: "A Bachelor is a Bachelor is a Bachelor."

The Bologna Process Implementation Report (EHEA 2018) identifies three main reasons for the fact that practices across Europe are not meeting the expectations initially set by the European Commission: (1) there seems to be insufficient understanding of the legal frameworks related to the decisions on recognition (2) the level of awareness in higher education institutions is low in terms of implementing procedures in recognition, and (3) there is confusion on a conceptual scale, notably in what comes to the distinction between recognition and admission procedures (op. cit., 142). Moreover, to implement recognition, cooperation with the ENIC-NARIC agencies should be more efficient (also Bergan & Blomqvist 2013; EHEA 2015). The network of ENIC-NARIC agencies cooperates on the implementation level of recognition and provides information on European and national levels (ENIC-NARIC 2023). The EHEA Pathfinder Group (EHEA 2015) also identified the non-alignment of the European objectives and of recognition practices and suggested a set of practical and political measures to enhance recognition based on trust.

RPL remains one of the most challenging fields in recognition. The situation in European higher education institutions is very heterogenic and there are obvious hindrances to implementing RPL (Eurydice 2013, 2018; European Commission 2023). In the academia, recognition of non-formal and informal learning within the broader concept of RPL remains a matter of constant debates, and also of conflicting viewpoints (Conrad 2022). The variety in terminology highlights the multifaceted notion: one can refer e.g. to Accreditation or Prior Learning (APL), to validation, to recognition of experiential learning, or to Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), amongst other terms (Harris & Wihak 2018; Eurydice 2018). Restouiex (2013, 299) refers to this heteroglossia as a "*jungle of definitions*", noting the existence of different viewpoints and definition schemes applied by different stakeholders.

Conrad (2022, 8) defines RPL as a "*major stumbling block*" for higher education institutions, given the complexity of the task and the epistemological concerns it may

raise. In the same vein, Stephens (2022) emphasizes the challenge of institutions being obliged to implement new processes and strategies to offer RPL for their students, without setting aside their quality assurance protocol and their academic integrity. Whilst appreciating the diversity of European higher education institutions and their respective histories, one can identify some divergences in approaches between research universities and universities of applied sciences when implementing processes of RPL (Eurydice 2018; Mäkelä 2022). Delving deeper into that debate is however not the scope here.

Although RPL seems to constitute the major challenge for recognition in higher education (Harris & Wihak 2018; Conrad 2022; Stephens 2022), despite the policy level guidelines (LCR 1997) and the instructions for practitioners (ERM 2015, 2020; ESG 2015; ECTS 2020; European Commission 2023), it is undeniable that a number of hindrances exist to fully implement recognition in European institutions in general and not merely in the RPL context. The considerations by the EHEA (2015, 2018) and of the EEA (2020) on not reaching the standards set by the Bologna process were published at a time when the European Universities Initiative was starting to take shape. From a practitioner's viewpoint, the challenges are now increasing with an even more intense mode of cooperation compared to the ones that existed prior to the EUI. Recent observations on the developments in Europe (European Commission 2023) confirm this view.

The current objective of fully automatic recognition should engage all European University alliances. Bergan and Blomqvist (2013, 12) indeed refer to automatic recognition as the "holy grail" of recognition, nonetheless without admitting the challenges that persist in its full implementation. Moreover, technological progress affects process development in higher education in many ways, and the adoption of artificial intelligence is not the least of them. Lantero et al. (2023) emphasize the opportunities, but also the risks and threats that the rapid development of artificial intelligence can generate in the context of recognition of qualifications: to maintain trustworthy and ethical processes, institutions need to adopt a systemic approach and engage in strategic cooperation with all stakeholders such as ministries, ENIC-NARIC networks, and the corporate developers of AI-based solutions (op. cit., 31).

3. Material and methods

3.1 *Bricolage* as the conceptual tool
Methodological backbones are always needed, although the topic itself can be of a very pragmatic nature, as in this case description from the Ulysseus alliance. The present contribution and the analysis of the process of co-creating the academic recognition structure of Ulysseus are supported methodologically by an approach with *bricolage* (Kincheloe 2001; Matthews 2019; Pratt, Sonenschein & Feldman 2022). Without being precisely defined as a practice, it is a flexible and valuable design process that can be understood as scholarly crafting (Matthews 2019).

The bricolage theory draws from interdisciplinary qualitative methodologies and can be applied to study a broad scale of phenomena. Here, it is judged as an appropriate framework and lens to describe a pragmatically oriented and yet a complex task in an ecosystem of a transdisciplinary, transnational, and transversal nature that is moreover undergoing a transformation while new processes, practices, and policies are created for the needs of a new educational structure. Academic bricolage is a process of crafting methodologically a new entity.

Working on the task and the deliverable has revealed itself for the author, *a posteriori*, as a bricolage type of methodological endeavour (Kincheloe 2001, Matthews 2019): a pragmatic loop of development work where co-creation and collaboration were based on the will to endorse a set of existing European policy papers, and to implement them in practice by taking on board a multitude of institutional, established practices while heading to the same converging spirit, recognition based on trust. Out of the constituents of the process (see Table 1), something new has been developed, and this genuinely motivating academic crafting process is the focus here.

Designing a new academic process with all the necessary documentation and guidelines can be compared to crafting – the notion is sufficiently evocative in a metaphorical sense and yet sufficiently flexible to avoid collisions with epistemological barriers. Moreover, bricolage calls for interdisciplinary and collaborative efforts (Kincheloe 2001, 691), which aligns with the goal setting and the process of a transnational working group with representatives from administration, research, teaching, and management. In this aspect, it is appropriate to suggest a parallel between a research project and the type of development work described here: both can be articulated with objectives, a framework, stakeholders, a timeline, and a processual design. Pratt, Sonenschein, and Feldman (2022) suggest the notion of *methodological bricolage*, rather than the use of "bricolage" as a single template. This perception underpins the present study adequately, since the focus is on a manifold process that is not conducted as a research project but as a task. "*Bricolage is, first of all, a process of making do.*" (Pratt et al. 2022, 217).

In methodological bricolage, data collection, personal experiences, cooperation, literature, and theories nurture the process and enable its evolution (Mäkelä 2020). The origins of the concept stem from Claude Lévi-Strauss's groundbreaking study *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962) and the idea of "*un untamed human thought*" (Matthews 2019). Subsequent scholars have widely adopted and implemented the approach of Lévi-Strauss, their techniques often appearing as "*pick up the pieces of what's left and paste them together as best they can […]*" (Matthews 2019, 681), which speaks for the flexibility of the method. In the vein of Lévi-Strauss, Kincheloe (2001) highlights the somewhat unprecise and ambiguous nature of scientific inquiry that can be taken as a comparative viewpoint here: a task that is challenging to delineate and that underpins many other processes in a higher education institution. This echoes with the very pertinent perception of Charret and Chankselyani (2022) on the rhizomatic nature of cooperation in European Universities.

Academic recognition is one constituent of the higher education landscape where also flexible learning pathways, functional mobility, adequate information flows, smart digital solutions, and efficient leadership and decision-making are of importance for continuous development efforts (Mäkelä 2022). The advantage for the European University alliances is that many of those processes are developed simultaneously and hence benefit from a cross-section of the opinion of the stakeholders.

Scholarly bricoleurs find themselves at the crossroads of several disciplines, datasets, and documents to be analysed, and they can opt for a variety of approaches when tackling something new. In this multi-dimensional and even messy standing point, Matthews (2019) aptly highlights the processual nature of bricolage: with the tools and materials available, one attempts to achieve an outcome, evaluates it, and goes further. Matthews (2019) argues moreover that bricolage theories are particularly pertinent in the context of higher education, although his research setting draws on teaching and learning rather than on academic process development.

Wibberley (2012, 6) suggests insightful metaphors for scholarly bricolage: weaving, quilting, sewing, montage, or collage techniques that evoke an artist's or an artisan's work. The leitmotiv is always the deliberate design work of the creator, whatever the field, by using a variety of materials, sources, and data. In Wibberley's view (2012, 7), the outcome outweighs the process in bricolage. From the perspective of process development in higher education, however, it is unlikely that the outcome would be finished after the first phases. Yet, the prototype of an academic process is an achievement in itself and after gathering the feedback and implementing the prototype, the design process goes on in a loop of collaborative work that is genuinely interdisciplinary (Matthews 2019; Lévi-Strauss 1966) and hence reflects the necessity of a broad range of expertise.

3.2. From an objective towards the deliverable: the working process

"*Design is the intentional solution of a problem, by the creation of plans for a new sort of thing […]*" (Parsons 2016, 11, cited in Matthews 2019, 419). Although all Ulysseus partner institutions already had established practices for academic recognition at the moment of launching the alliance cooperation, the challenge on the alliance level was to design "*a new sort of thing*" (Matthews 2019): to reach a joint understanding and to formulate the framework agreement with the process description and documentation that support its implementation. The outcome in the form of a project deliverable was defined to streamline (1) *automatic* recognition in terms of access and admission, building on the European policies defined in the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997), and (2) the broader *academic* recognition process consisting of recognition of study periods, and of RPL including non-formal and informal learning. A supplementary dimension was constituted by the design of documentation and a first plan of implementation of the process. The working group that was assigned with the task convened for the first time in December 2021 in a hybrid meeting held in Seville and synchronously online.

It is noteworthy that the task was conducted as an administrative challenge, to reach the target of the deliverable D6.9 of the Ulysseus alliance in phase 1. It was not conceptualized in a framework of the bricolage theory during the process, or with other types of methodological aid that would have been actively negotiated and endorsed by the working group members. The approach was very pragmatic, based on the necessity to deliver the commitments of the Ulysseus funding proposal, and drawing from prior experience and joint motivation in the working group. Yet, throughout an auto-evaluation of the very intensive year and of the positive outcome, it became evident to the author that the entire process could also be articulated as a methodological bricolage effort, which might provide insights to colleagues across Europe facing similar challenges. This flash was intuitive, nonetheless based on prior bricolage experimentations in research (Mäkelä 2020) and on long-term interest in interdisciplinary, qualitative analysis streams such as methodological crafting. Working in a higher education institution streamlines one's thinking towards conceptualizing, modelling, and analyzing. This article is one small attempt at that kind of lifelong learning from a scholarly perspective, combining theory and practice.

3.3 "Pick up the pieces": the constituents

This section unfolds the starting points that can be categorized as six sets of constituents in the bricolage process of the working group. The process flow is presented first in Table 1, for enhanced clarity, and the most important items are consecutively presented in more detail to highlight their relevance.

The **triggers** for the process (Table 1, section 1) have been outlined mostly above, but it is noteworthy that delivering the outcome defined in the Ulysseus proposal presented itself more as an external trigger, as well as the policy papers advocating for more efficient recognition. They set the starting point, making it evident that the task was of importance. The internal triggers or motivation factors could be identified in the willingness to enhance smart processes for the new alliance, to promote mobility, to reach a common understanding, and also to develop further the processes in one's own institution. In this respect, the Everyday Europeanhood (Frame & Curylo 2023) manifested itself in the approach shared by the working group members.

The **objectives** set by the Ulysseus management (Table 1, section 2) were clear and their development established naturally the proceeding: a framework agreement should be created with the necessary supporting documentation, and it should be scrutinized by the legal offices in order to ensure consistency with national and institutional regulations, and the agreement should be submitted to the approval of the Ulysseus General Committee prior to being signed by all Rectors, which would conclude the first part of the process. The next steps would consist of the constitution of a Board of Academic Recognition to ensure the implementation of academic recognition in Ulysseus. At present, the members have been nominated and the Board has started to convene to enter the second phase of the administrative process development.

Table 1: Constituents of the methodological bricolage in the Academic Recognition process of Ulysseus

Constituents of the methodological bricolage in the Academic Recognition process of Ulysseus					
1. Triggers of the process	Necessity to fulfil the working plan of the Ulysseus 1 proposal (2019)	Objective to reach a common understanding on the importance of recognition to enable more flexible study pathways	European policy papers advocating more efficient recognition	Willingness to ensure transparent and efficient admission process (automatic recognition)	Motivation to enhance student mobility and flexibility of studies	Experienced needs to enhance processes on institutional level
2. Objectives set by the Ulysseus management	*Deliverable 6.9: Designing the Framework Agreement on Automatic Recognition for Ulysseus[iv]*	Creation of appropriate supporting documentation to complement the agreement	Scrutiny of the agreement by the legal offices of all partners	Approval of the General Committee prior to the signatures by all Rectors	Establishment of a Board of Academic Recognition to implement the process	Implementation of the process and follow-up
3. Stakeholders in the design process	Working group chairperson: a Principal Lecturer with experience in recognition and process development (Haaga-Helia)	Three professors (USE, UniGe and TUKE)	Head of International Affairs (MCI)	Expert in European policymaking and higher education administration (UniCA)	A programme coordinator to ensure administrative aid (Haaga-Helia)	The General Coordinator, the General Committee of Ulysseus and the Ulysseus Dissemination Unit
4. Background documentation and data	The Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997)	European Recognition Manual (2020)	The ECTS Users' Guide (2015, 2020), Erasmus+ Learning Agreement template	The Bologna Process Implementation Report (2018)	Institutional guidelines and process descriptions of Ulysseus partners. The framework agreement on double and multiple degrees of Ulysseus.	The ESG standards The DEQAR database
5. Processual challenges encountered	Divergent interpretations of concepts related to recognition	Variation in opportunities to recognise studies completed in other institutions	Different interpretations of task distribution in mobility (administrative structure)	Different perceptions and rules on recognition of nonformal and informal learning	Challenges to attend all meetings in a tight timeframe	Variation in flexibility of curricula
6. Enablers	Joint vision, consolidating alliance-level cooperation	Processual aid: a MS Teams channel for sharing documents and commenting the process	Cross-sectional knowledge in the topic, practical recognition experience	Manifold expertise in the working group	Collegial and constructive communication	Positive feedback from the European University Association

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[iv] During the design process, the target was reformulated to encompass all aspects of academic recognition.

Although the official deliverable would consist of the framework agreement, the working group took the initiative to design documents that would support the agreement. A significant aid to start the formulation of the agreement text was available, as there already was another framework agreement signed in Ulysseus (see Table 1, section 4: Background documentation and data). It was designed for the need to establish double and multiple degrees in the alliance and served as a template benchmark in terms of the administrative details that should be included in the text.

As we see in the list of **stakeholders** (Table 1, section 3), there was manifold and interdisciplinary experience in the working group, with members who could analyse the task from several positions: there were three university professors who are engaged mostly in teaching but who possess broad experience in recognition decisions from the administrative bodies in their institutions as well. The expert in quality assurance and European policy-making contributed with specific administrative and political knowledge, and the Head of international affairs was especially experienced in steering mobility processes that connect tightly with recognition. A researcher with long-term experience as a process developer in higher education chaired the group that was assisted technically by a competent administrative officer. Members complemented each other's expertise, which was a genuine asset for the task and hence an enabler in the developments. The bricolage endeavour was facilitated significantly by the interdisciplinarity of the group (Kincheloe 2001).

The other **enablers** (Table 1, section 6) consisted of less tangible features and reflected mostly the mindset of contributors working with the task. A constructive working mode and willingness to consider also diverging viewpoints that were occasionally inevitable were appreciated by the chairperson and the members throughout the process. The working group succeeded in a challenging task not only because of its joint expertise but also because of its positive and collegial approach. An alliance-level motivation was visible in the group. Yet, it was expressed in different voices echoing national and institutional diversity.

The working group had nine online meetings that were documented in the MS Teams channel dedicated to the working group. MS Teams as the principal online tool is mentioned as one important enabler (Table 1, section 6) of the process that had to be conducted almost fully online. The timeline with its different steps is displayed in Table 2.

When considering the process, the positive working atmosphere is a dimension that must be emphasized – it was everyday Europeanhood (Frame & Curylo 2023) experienced alive. Hands and minds on the challenging and multidimensional task, it may not have felt only positive all the time, especially when working with a tight timeline, online, and in a language that was nobody's mother tongue. For a European University alliance, this is a common setting nonetheless, and those modalities did not discourage the group. From the chairperson's viewpoint, the challenge was taken seriously but not without humour, and it was completed in an appreciative working

mode towards colleagues. Joint understanding and respect for each other are a solid foundation for cooperation.

Table 2: Proceeding of the task

Proceeding of the task									
Nine online meetings between December 2021 and September 2022 for the Working Group									
Asynchronous work in MS Teams									
Continuous communication with the General Coordinator of Ulysseus									
Key steps	Appoint-ing the working group. First meeting	Analysis of concepts, notions and practices for increased under-standing	Writing the first drafts of the agreement in a loop of continuous editing	Introducing the Ulysseus Learning Agreement as an Annex	Showcasing the development work in the conference of the European University Association "Spotlight on Recognition"	Final editing rounds and legal scrutiny	Approval by the General Committee, final comments	Signing the agree-ment	Implementing the process and monitoring it
Time-line	Decem-ber 2021	January-February 2022	March-April 2022	April 2022	May 2022	September-October 2022	November 2022	March-May 2023	June 2023 →

The group was able to work with the substantial help of the European policy papers and guidelines presented in chapter 2. With the institutional and national administrative documents, they constituted the elements of **support** for the bricolage process (Table 1, section 4). MS Teams was of processual help while it enabled uploading and online consulting of all background documents, relevant research papers, ongoing projects, and news on European decision-making. Everything was shared by the group, as well as the versions 1 to 8 of the agreement text and the respective versions of the Ulysseus Learning Agreement. Meeting agendas and memos were documented in Teams, and rapid exchange of comments was possible with the post function.

The most important administrative aid was found in the fundamental European documents: the Lisbon Recognition Convention (2017) and the European Recognition Manual (2020). The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) facilitated in establishing links with the quality assurance protocols that are a key element in recognition (EHEA 2018; Bologna 2023). Starting with the European-level documents, the working group proceeded by screening them towards the national and institutional regulations and suggested in the final deliverable an overarching process for Ulysseus. The alignment with the EHEA objectives was ensured by cross-checking with the ECTS Users' Guide (2020). In the design process of the Ulysseus Learning Agreement, the Erasmus+ template was constantly consulted (Erasmus 2023). Eventually, the last step was constituted by taking into account the observations of the Bologna Process Implementation Report (EHEA 2020).

While working on the challenge, members shared the mindset that the endeavour reflected joint motivation to achieve an academic recognition process that facilitates studies and mobility on a consolidated European dimension and reflects our European values and goals (Table 1, sections 1 and 2). However, all working group members had to occasionally break out from the traditions and conventions of their own institutions, which is not easy. There were **challenges** that needed to be discussed, in order to make progress. (Table 1, section 5). In a complex and interinstitutional process, this is not uncommon and it should not become an insurmountable obstacle for the stakeholders.

While addressing the challenges, the working group identified some of the hindrances presented in the evaluation of the Bologna process (EHEA 2020; European Commission 2023): at the beginning of cooperation in a newly established alliance, partners may apply different definitions and interpretations to concepts and also practise divergent procedures for them. To enable an open and constructive discussion and moreover, to save time, the chairperson suggested a preparatory phase to facilitate the first meetings. This decision was guided by prior experience in cross-institutional recognition related to mobility, confirming the aspect that in a bricolage process, also prior experience is valuable (Kincheloe 2001; Mäkelä 2020).

To obtain a cross-section of practices and interpretations, a table was created in Teams with a column for each partner institution and with a request to include a concise definition or description of the items listed below, as constituents of the national, institutional, and faculty-level recognition process features. Open spaces were added for questions and suggestions.

1) Type of recognition process (e.g. institutional or faculty-level),
2) Recognition of qualifications (process),
3) Recognition of credits (prior learning, mobility, work experience, lifelong learning, student's activities),
4) Responsible professionals,
5) ENIC-NARIC bodies steering the process, or autonomy of the institution,
6) Application process for recognition: standardised or freely formulated
7) Transfer of credits (formal learning on EQF levels 6-7), when learning outcomes align with those described in the degree,
8) Validation of nonformal and informal learning,
9) Annual scheduling of recognition or a continuous process,
10) Grading scale of studies,
11) Challenges encountered on the institutional level,
12) Open questions on Academic Recognition in Ulysseus,
13) Actions to be taken.

Members contributed with extensive consideration and cross-checking of concept definitions (see also Table 2 on proceeding). The analysis of the replies, undertaken in online meetings, revealed that experience from Erasmus+ and other international cooperation modes had already streamlined many parts of the process, and there were

no debates on the importance of the endeavour. Working group members mentioned challenges in terms of upskilling the awareness and competences of the lecturers in recognition; the need to harmonize processes on the alliance level; the importance of maintaining transparency and equality for students; the necessity to include various administrative bodies in decision-making; consideration of the supplementary workload that recognition may entail to different stakeholders; and the challenge to encounter diverging aspects of RPL. Assessment of learning varies considerably across institutions, and e.g. accepting other types of demonstration of competences than a written exam is not a practice everywhere. In RPL, consideration of modes of competence demonstration will definitely entail further development efforts.

In some partner universities, a Dean or a Recognition committee or jury takes decisions, whilst, in others, a degree programme director, a mobility officer, or a guidance counsellor can proceed and take action. There are substantial differences that stem from the type of higher education institution, from its size and history, from national regulations, from studies that may lead to regulated professions where rules are stricter than elsewhere, and from independence administered to faculty-level decision-making. The "recognitionscape" truly reflects the diversity of European higher education. In all, a simple table and the comments inserted in it facilitated meetings and made it somewhat easier to reach a common understanding on the matters that we can change and on the ones that depend on other structures than Ulysseus.

When considering the entire working process of the group (Table 1, section 5), some challenges were of a pragmatic nature, such as tight schedules of members that occasionally hindered attendance in meetings, or divergences in terms of responsibilities in recognition procedures and stakeholders. The more fundamental challenges were identified in the above-mentioned variation in concept definition, leading to different practices and heterogeneous decision-making. The most substantial difference was identified with the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, including work-integrated learning, where some partner universities need to align with stricter national, institutional, and faculty-level rules than others. This confirmed the observations referring to RPL made on the implementation of the LRC in a broader scope (Council 2023; European Commission 2023).

Although everything can't be changed in a process like the one unfolded here, identifying those acute questions and discussing them together was a major step forward. It led to the design of a detailed table in Annex I of the agreement that can serve as a reference point to support institutional process development. Institutional autonomy should prevail, according to the LRC (1997), and yet the creation of an alliance-level agreement with recommendations may lead to significant development towards the objectives of the EHEA 2025 (European Commission 2023). As a first step, it discloses the aspirations of the alliance partners, makes them explicit, and enables increased transparency that all contribute to enhanced trust across partners. The decision to establish a joint Board of Academic Recognition in Ulysseus will consolidate the

achievement and enable further development work, with the mission to document recognition decisions and to act as a contact point for practitioners and also for students in case of appeals.

In addition to the enablers listed in Table 1, section 6, a motivating factor in the form of positive feedback emerged as a small surprise for the working group. The European University Association (EUA 2023) launched in early 2022 a call to participate in a conference connected to the research project and network "Spotlight on Recognition" (EUA 2023). The objective was to showcase good examples of European practices in recognition in the form of poster presentations. The working group decided to create a poster with the title "Flexible Learning Paths and Academic Recognition – Ulysseus European University" where the key constituents of the agreement process were presented.

The poster showcased the Ulysseus process development: it included the tasks of creating the framework agreement and the respective agile recognition processes, with the help of six EHEA-compatible sets of national and institutional practices of recognition, associated with the current six Ulysseus partners and their Innovation hubs. The base for the process was identified in trust and in the pillars of the guidelines provided by the European policies, described also in this paper. The overarching objective of the entire endeavour was described as the flexibilization of study pathways, across smooth and agile Ulysseus procedures. Students should indeed be in the focus of all process development in higher education institutions, as in other fields of education.

The poster was accepted to the conference as one of four successful examples of process development in recognition in European higher education. Two working group members were able to join the conference in Brussels in May 2022, to present the work to the attendees and to discuss recognition with European colleagues. Although the poster showcased the process design rather than the outcomes that were not finalised at that date, the event was a positive signal that the approach adopted by the Ulysseus community was well-founded.

The working group held its last meeting in September 2022 and submitted the outcomes of its work to the scrutiny of the legal offices and the General Committee in Ulysseus, during which some final edits were made by the chairperson upon the feedback received.

4. Results and discussion

The framework agreement for academic recognition, signed in 2023 by the Rectors of the Ulysseus European University alliance, consists of seven pages with signatures. It is kept confidential, but it is pertinent to describe its structure and content concisely here. The agreement states the legal framework for recognition in Ulysseus and defines the terms and concepts that relate to the process, with reference to the European policy documents (as listed in the section 4 of Table 1). There are three Annexes that will constitute the most

important tools for recognition practitioners, as they provide full explanations for the concepts used, aligning with the recommendations of the EHEA (2018) for increased joint understanding of the terminology applied. Annex I steers automatic recognition in terms of access and admission based on qualifications, and Annex II outlines other fields of academic recognition such as studies in mobility and RPL options. Annex II includes all the categories of the educational offer in Erasmus+ and Ulysseus, with recommendations on their fair recognition in all institutions of the alliance, in the form of a table ("Ulysseus Recognition Chart on Credit Mobility, Prior Learning and Work Experience").

Institutional practices, the structure of degree programmes, and stakeholders diverging, the recommendations do not overrule the authority of institutional juries or boards in recognition decisions. The agreement outlines all levels of academic recognition, including non-formal and informal learning, with recommendations of either full or partial recognition based on evidence when reflected towards the intended learning outcomes of the student's degree at the home institution (QF-EHEA 2023). In this respect, the working group judged it very important to align with the European Recognition Area Manual (2020) guidelines on building the document and process on learning outcomes[v], rather than listing content areas that are subject to change and do not reveal competences but knowledge fields only.

Recognition decisions need to be compatible with national, institutional, and degree-specific regulation of partners (LRC 1997). However, fair recognition also requires mutual knowledge and trust, combined with smooth processes. It should avoid unnecessary hurdles across institutions, especially for students studying in a European University Alliance. With this in mind, the document and the discussions during the co-creation process of the working group demonstrate a significant step forward in alliance-level cooperation.

Since Ulysseus has the ambition to offer a broad range of learning opportunities of which all would not enter into the funding scheme of Erasmus+, it became evident that a Ulysseus Learning Agreement would constitute a helpful tool for recognition practitioners. It is presented as the Annex III of the framework agreement and consolidates the approach of Ulysseus towards the objectives of the Bologna process (2023) where insufficient use of learning agreements outside Erasmus+ is identified as one of the hindrances for recognition (European Commission 2023).

The Ulysseus Learning Agreement was designed with inspiration from the current model of the Erasmus+ template (Erasmus 2023), however with additional details referring to the Ulysseus alliance only. Students will prepare for the eventual recognition by filling in an Erasmus+ Learning Agreement for all study periods that are funded by that mechanism, and a Ulysseus Learning Agreement for studies that depend on other mechanisms of funding or that relate to online studies across the alliance and where no

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[v] The concept of learning outcomes (or intended learning outcomes) is fundamental for functional recognition. It includes knowledge, skills and competences on which the overarching qualification framework descriptors (QF-EHEA 2023) are built.

physical mobility is involved (Bruhn-Zass 2022). Given the broad range of online study options in the alliance (Ulysseus 2023), this procedure will facilitate recognition of virtual studies as well, when conducted in other alliance institutions. Moreover, it will make the recognition decisions more transparent for all stakeholders, when learning agreements are archived for further reference. That was one objective of the entire design process.

The creation of the framework agreement itself took most part of the time during the ten months following the first meeting (see Table 2). In all, there were eight versions of the agreement text and its annexes that were uploaded in the MS Teams channel of the working group, to be commented on by members prior to the meeting of September 2022 when the text was ready to be submitted for legal scrutiny. Thereafter, a final editing phase was undertaken upon the feedback of the General Committee which had the responsibility of approving all official deliverables.

The methodological application of the bricolage theory proved to be of value in the post-hoc reflection on challenges of administrative nature in a European University context, in view of future cooperation within the alliance in particular. At a retrospective observation of the methodological bricolage, it is worthwhile to consider the outcomes and learnings to conclude the article.

The alliance-level objectives of the process were met with the official approval of the framework agreement, and with the following phases of the academic recognition structure to be initiated in 2023. This aligns with the design process constituents of a bricolage suggested by Matthews (2019) with consideration of people, processes, and products.

5. Recommendations

The most fruitful outcomes, in view of subsequent corresponding efforts across other alliances and those that await in the Ulysseus alliance, draw from the analysis of the stakeholders (Table 1, section 3), the processual challenges (Table 1, section 5), and the enablers (Table 1, section 6). Based on them, the author suggests four recommendations.

5.1 Stakeholders as active bricoleurs

For an administrative effort such as the one described here, an interdisciplinary team with prior experience in the field and with divergent academic or administrative positions provides an undeniable asset. In a higher education institution, process development necessitates manifold expertise and viewpoints that are not anchored merely in discipline-specific orientations. They should enable a broad vision for the working group.

To initiate a bricolage approach methodologically, it is beneficial if it is solidly based on the active contribution of stakeholders who bring in their prior knowledge and interpret it in a new constellation (Kincheloe 2001; Matthews 2019). Crafting of a new product or outcome becomes an act and takes new directions whenever novel challenges

arise, hence confirming the adequacy of the rhizome metaphor (Charret & Chankselyani 2022). Constituting a team, a task force, or a working group should therefore be conducted with a cross-disciplinary consideration, and by breaking out from the established administrative constructs. The nature of the challenge should determine the selection of members and not their status in the extant hierarchy of the home institution.

5.2 Challenges should not intimidate

It was evocative of the forthcoming challenges to read the volume of comments and questions in the Teams table that prepared the field of cooperation: despite common European guidelines, there are as many process solutions in recognition matters as there are partners in an alliance. Dissimulating obvious challenges behind the motivation to reach joint alliance-level understanding would not have been an agile approach. Hindrances, challenges, difficulties, and possible frictions need to be identified to become "tamed". By definition, research-oriented universities and universities of applied sciences represent two different categories and in both, there are several disciplinary and pedagogical orientations, all with their own traditions.

It is possible to overcome difficulties stemming from divergent concept definitions or from procedural variation in areas such as the status of recognition juries, the assessment methods, or the validity of demonstration of competences in other modes than written reports, to name but a few, but it is important to tackle each question with mutual trust and respect. A fundamental principle in one institution may be less important in another.

As Harris and Wihak (2018) advocate, endorsing the fundamental European policy papers unfolded above, RPL should be enhanced in higher education to fully align with the aspirations of the Bologna process (2023). How to proceed with recognition of nonformal or informal learning, such as work-related experience, across hundreds of degree programmes in six higher education institutions with very different profiles, and by considering all national regulations that accentuated some interpretations? That was one of the most acute questions in the present case. It is not a surprise to anyone who has participated in transnational educational cooperation that academics or administrative experts do not agree on everything – yet, they can acknowledge the challenges and try to solve the issues one by one. In this development, a thorough introductory conversation on the definition of concepts enables cooperation in a neutral and positive mode.

The European Commission (2023) advocates the use of Learning Agreements for mobility periods also outside Erasmus+. The working group of Ulysseus endorsed this recommendation and designed a document to be implemented for all learning in the alliance, whatever the context and modality of learning. This outcome will enhance transparency and equity of recognition in the alliance, hence strengthening the aspirations drawing on the objectives of the European Higher Education Area (2015, 2018) and of the entire Bologna process (2023). The use of a common document for all types of learning will moreover facilitate the introduction of RPL in all institutions of

Ulysseus and make it a genuine alternative for students. Administrative challenges may be addressed in small steps such as in introducing new documentation to be adopted in the alliance.

Designing digital solutions with a roadmap of actions to proceed with the learning agreements fully online will be one of the next tasks, to be monitored by the Board of Academic Recognition and to be conducted as a joint effort with the developers of the Digital Platform of Ulysseus (2023). Documentation of recognition decisions will moreover be facilitated with the use of a standardized document, for enhanced monitoring of the processes in the future. This will introduce a new dimension to the ongoing bricolage of academic recognition.

5.3 Identification of enablers

Charret and Chankselyani (2022) emphasize the existence of dissimilarities in the ecosystem of the European University alliances. Each alliance is different, as each partner is somewhat different when compared to others, although there might be a leitmotiv for the alliance cooperation. Therefore, in administrative (and pedagogical) efforts, identification of the enablers of one's own institution, alliance, and cooperation methods will facilitate joint efforts significantly.

One core learning for the author, originating from the present case, is that the identification of the enablers of our own process at the moment of launching the very intensive working phase might have contributed even more positively to the cooperation. This is a takeaway for future endeavours in Ulysseus to which this pragmatic analysis has provided a concrete set of articulation elements. Yet, the working group could build on solid background documentation and data (Table 1, section 4) which can in this respect also be considered as an enabler.

5.4 Provision of training for all stakeholders and joining forces

Based on the learnings of the Ulysseus case and on prior experience, one can conclude that agreements, recommendations, and process development actions need to be complemented with adequate training of different stakeholders, in order to establish functional and transparent academic recognition processes. This is also one of the recommendations of the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA 2023), in view of development needs in European student mobility and subsequent recognition procedures.

Drawing on the discussions in the working group in Ulysseus, the training should be customized to meet the needs of different practitioners: study and guidance counsellors, lecturers and professors, mobility officers, and pedagogical management in partner institutions. In this endeavour, it could be cost-efficient and moreover, enriching, to join the efforts of different alliances, since we all share the overarching challenge.

As all European University alliances continue to consolidate their operations and hence contribute to the success of the European Higher Education Area, it will be an

opportunity to also start to identify the enablers that exist on the level of the entire EUI ecosystem. The present article might contribute on a small scale to that aspiration as one effort in disseminating good practices and in promoting Everyday Europeanhool (Frame & Curylo 2023) across colleagues in Europe and beyond. Functional academic recognition is a core constituent in reducing and removing obstacles to learning and teaching mobility (ACA 2023) and therefore a common goal for all European University alliances.

6. Conclusion

The case described in this article was a thorough learning experience in terms of European policies, process development, national regulations, inter-institutional cooperation, and teamwork. At present, Ulysseus continues to work towards more defined practices on implementing academic recognition, and the recently established Board of Academic Recognition has substantial challenges ahead. Succeeding in fully digitalized recognition procedures aligning with European data regulation is not the least of them. However, that is not a failure in but an item for further cooperation, building on increased knowledge of the educational offer of the alliance.

Bricolage was not a conscious methodological approach during the working phase but it proved out to be a well-founded articulation framework after the most active process, to prepare even better for future joint alliance-level tasks. Indeed, the loop of collaborative learning in Ulysseus did not stop at the completion of the task (see Tables 1 and 2). New pedagogical approaches such as micro-credentials set new kinds of challenges for recognition practitioners and also for curriculum developers everywhere, in order to meet the expectations of the European Commission towards the institutions in the European Higher Education Area (EC 2020; ACA 2023). Furthermore, the tremendously rapid developments of artificial intelligence challenge education providers with all the other sectors of society (Lantero et al. 2023). All those matters are on the Ulysseus agenda in phase 2 and beyond.

Developments and experiences of the Ulysseus alliance confirm the observations in a number of evaluation documents of the Bologna process (e.g. Bergan & Blomqvist 2013; Bologna 2023; European Commission 2023). Nonetheless, the case process enabled an analysis of the topics that need consequent joint efforts. Ulysseus partners are now more knowledgeable of the dimensions where interinstitutional collaboration may be needed, across decisions of recognition stemming from mobility in all its forms. The author wishes that learnings from Ulysseus could moreover benefit colleagues in other alliances and possibly trigger initiatives of enhanced cooperation across them in the future.

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Disclosure statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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