

Assessing Courses of the Online Learning Agreement

2.2 Transversal and course specific requirements for evaluation methodology of Erasmus+ courses

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Introduction

AsCOLA is an acronym which stands for “Assessing Courses of the Online Learning Agreement”. An Erasmus+ Key Action 2 project, AsCOLA aims to enhance and digitalize the quality framework of Erasmus+ student mobility and contribute to closing the data gap in the quality aspect of higher education transformation. The project will help higher education institutions (HEIs) better monitor and assess their institutional performance in education activities related to their internationalization strategy and policy.

The project will achieve these objectives through multiple activities, namely:

- Creating an evaluation methodology of the courses offered to Erasmus+ students.
- Developing and piloting an online evaluation tool connected to the Online Learning Agreement.
- Carrying out training sessions and producing train-the-trainers material to equip HEIs with the necessary knowledge to use the tool effectively.

Furthermore, the project will give special attention to including the quality aspect of student mobility in the data exchange that currently takes place within the European Student Card Initiative and the Erasmus Without Paper Network.

Every year universities across Europe host exchange students. We recognize that these students may encounter unique challenges, needs, and restrictions that can impact their educational journey and their evaluations of the courses they follow. These challenges may be linked to the education and training system, but may also be related with social and economic barriers, cultural differences, health issues etc. To better understand and address these issues in the student evaluation questionnaire that we are developing within the framework of the AsCOLA project, we have created a short questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions for teachers, coordinators and other stakeholders involved with exchange students in Europe. Their perspective, as those who directly engage with these students, is invaluable. Their responses help us gather information on specific needs of exchange students, how these needs and restrictions affect their expectations from the courses, and how this might influence their evaluation of the courses.

Method

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions on the respondents' perspectives on specific needs for exchange students, restrictions for exchange students, impact of needs and restrictions on expectations from students,

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problems with administrative procedures, course evaluations, addressing specific needs of exchange students, and suggestions for the evaluation questionnaire. The questions were asked via Microsoft Forms and were treated anonymously. The questionnaire was sent out by the AsCOLA partners Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) and Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) to their partner universities through e-mail. The questionnaire used can be found in Appendix 1.

Background of respondents

The questionnaire was filled in by 44 people. We first discuss their characteristics. The respondents' home countries vary, namely 11 respondents from Germany, 10 from Spain, 8 from Italy, 5 from Croatia, 3 from The Netherlands, 2 from France, 1 from Turkey, 1 from Portugal, 1 from Sweden, 1 from Norway and 1 from Slovakia. There is a relatively high response from respondents from Germany (11), Spain (10) and Italy (8). Their total share is $29/44 = 65,9$ percent. 43 respondents work at a university and one respondent works at a university of applied sciences. It is difficult to indicate the size of the universities, since some respondents filled in the total number of students of the university while other respondents filled in the number of students within a specific department, faculty or school. Other respondents could not answer this question or filled in nothing. The respondents did not fill in their roles and functions, because this was not asked. Based on their answers, almost all of them (43 respondents) seem to have teaching obligations towards exchange students (and will be professor, academic teacher or academic researcher with teaching obligations). One respondent is a coordinator and has no teaching obligations towards exchange students. The number of exchange students following their courses varies a lot (range from several students to 75 exchange students every year). It is often unclear whether respondents refer to the number of the exchange students in their own courses or all the exchange students following courses within their departments, faculties or schools.

Results

We've analysed their answers to each question in the questionnaire. Below you will find the outcomes of each question.





Question 1: Specific needs of exchange students

“Based on your experience, what are some specific needs that exchange students in your courses have expressed?”

A few common responses were given to this question. It should be noted that it is not always clear whether responses are based on a need explicitly voiced by students or on the perception or opinion of the respondent themselves.

1. A need expressed frequently was the **availability of academic courses in English**. Although some courses may be taught in English, not all students feel that these are enough.
2. Related to this, teachers note that some students are not accurately **estimating their own language levels** and therefore having trouble finding suitable courses or not being able to follow a course once entered.
3. Another need students may face is a **mismatch in the academic schedules** between the home university and the host university. Consequently, not all students are well prepared or arrive at the right moment to properly follow the full semester from the start or partake in all the exams.
4. Because **academic registration systems work differently**, some course results are not adequate for the other university's system and can therefore not be recognized/are confusing to figure out for students.
5. Students (can) struggle to **find accommodation**.
6. **Teaching and/or examination styles** may vary between universities.
7. Likewise, students are not always aware of any **differences in the institutional system** (such as mandatory presence, registration, etc.).
8. According to the survey, students may have a need for **more (accessible) information**.

Question 2: Restrictions for exchange students

“Based on your experience, can you describe any restrictions that exchange students encounter at your university that may not apply to domestic students?”

Many respondents do not think there are any restrictions that exchange students encounter compared to regular students. A few concerns mentioned are, however:

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1. Incongruency of **academic calendars**.
2. Trouble finding **accommodation** for exchange students.
3. **Course accessibility** (some courses are not open for guest students or students do not meet required language levels).
4. Differences in **institutional system**/administration.
5. **Cultural barriers** (including language barriers).
6. **Practical issues** outside of the university (such as healthcare, costs of public transport, etc.).

Question 3: Impact of needs and restrictions on expectations

“Have you noticed any impacts of these specific needs and restrictions on the exchange students' expectations from your course?”

17 of the 44 respondents answered this question with 'no'. These respondents perceive no impacts on the exchange students' expectations. Seven respondents filled in nothing or '-', which we interpreted as no perceived impact. Three respondents answered, 'not applicable'.

Seventeen respondents answered this question with 'yes'. Examples given of the impact of restrictions or specific needs can be divided into four categories: impact on personal wellbeing, access to courses/exams, impact on performance, and administrative issues. The given examples¹ are shared per category below:

Personal wellbeing

1. In a blended learning system, sometimes exchange students dislike not having enough **personal (offline) contact** with their classmates.
2. Exchange students get disappointed if they **cannot follow the whole program** they had planned for.
3. Exchange students can get discouraged and frustrated because of the **language level**.

Access to courses/exams

4. **Lack of registration** complicates participation in exams.

¹ Some responses are clearly examples of impact while others refer rather to the restrictions themselves (e.g. example 11, 12), are speculations of impact (e.g. example 8), indicate students' behaviour (e.g. example 9, 11). The European Commission's support for the production of this 'publication' does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.





5. Mostly/only English-speaking exchange students might struggle to find enough courses as a result of a **limited range of courses**.
6. Exchange students sometimes have to register for **more advanced courses** than they are used to, which means that they sometimes are nervous about being able to pass these courses.
7. Exchange students can face difficulties in module or **course selection**.

Performance

8. The fact that exchange students have to deal with an **unfamiliar system** might impact their achievements.
9. Exchange students are (or can be) **less autonomous**.

Administration

10. Exchange students (sometimes) have to **change their LA** if the subjects they have chosen are not available.
11. Exchange students expect that **registration** during the first weeks of the start of the semester will be possible, but unfortunately this is not possible at every university.
12. Exchange students can be confronted with **bureaucracy** which is time consuming and confusing.

Question 4: Problems with administrative procedures

“Have your students mention any problems related with the administrative procedures for the exchange programme, their studies at your university or their life there?”

15 of the 44 respondents answered this question with ‘no’. This means that their exchange students did not mention any problems related with these issues. One respondent filled in ‘---’, which we interpreted as no problems being mentioned.

Twenty-eight respondents answered this question with ‘yes’ and/or specific problems related to these issues. Concrete problems that exchange students have mentioned are:

General administration and navigation



1. Time consuming **bureaucratic and administrative procedures** at their home university, immigration office and host institution that result in a significant amount of paperwork.
2. Exchange students sometimes **get their account too late** and as a consequence cannot register for classes and exams.
3. Finding (affordable) **accommodation** for exchange students.
4. It takes time for internationals to understand the **computer system** at the host university.
5. The **systems** used by different universities are sometimes different, the communication can be difficult.
6. **Timetable overlap.**

Learning agreement and application for courses

1. The **course selection** and **administrative structure.**
2. Problems with the **application procedure** (most often regarding the learning agreement (for example how many ECTS exchange students have to do each semester) or certificate of stay/arrival/departure).
3. Sometimes exchange students cannot find an appropriate course and some exchange students may have to face **slightly different procedures.**

Language

4. In some countries (for example France) people from administration and in everyday life **don't speak English.**
5. For some exchange students it is difficult to receive an **English translation** of the transcript of records, sometimes they have problems to recognize their exams.

Other perceived (personal) experiences

6. **Poor academic experiences.**
7. Being **shy** at asking their new classmates for extra information.
8. **Individual problems** (no general information possible).

Concrete solutions for these problems that were mentioned by the respondents include orientation programs, an international mentoring scheme, honest and





complete information (a stay abroad is never easy), the deployment of an employee at the faculty who deals with these issues (the exchange student can contact this person), and offering more flexibility in changing courses. See also analysis of question 7.

Question 5: Course evaluations

“Have you noticed any difference in the (verbal) course evaluations given by exchange students compared to local students? If so, can you describe these differences?”

23 of the 44 respondents answered this question with ‘no’. These respondents have noticed no differences in the (verbal) course evaluations given by exchange students compared to local students. Three respondents filled in ‘-’, which we interpreted as no differences being noticed. Two respondents answered, ‘not applicable’.

Seven respondents noted that they could not answer this question for the following reasons:

- The respondent did not know;
- The respondent did not have experiences on this level;
- The respondent has administrative or coordination tasks instead of educational tasks;
- The respondent’s university don’t have verbal course evaluations;
- The exchange students do not evaluate courses;
- The respondent has no contact with local students (and can’t make this comparison);
- The respondent is not involved in the course evaluation.

Eleven respondents answered this question with ‘yes’. The answers given suggest that differences between students might have as much (or more) to do with differences between universities as with the distinction between local versus international. For instance, while one respondent mentions that “the English language level of incoming students is very often below the required standard” while another says that “It is not unusual that international students have a better level of English than national students” (Spain). Likewise, university (teaching) styles may differ, which could explain why both “some exchange students do not feel confident holding presentations” and “some exchange students are more used to presenting their work than national students” were included in the answers.





Some universities say to take into account the curricula needs, language limitations, and cultural differences that exchange students face in comparison to local students. One respondent even mentions that exams for exchange students “are easier”.

According to the survey, exchange students have been more vocal in describing their experience and giving their feedback. This is usually very positive feedback, especially when they get to have the classroom experience with their domestic peers, and they find this important and useful for their learning and their social life. One respondent mentions that at their university (Norway) “many think that the level requirements are a little too easy.”

Question 6: Addressing specific needs of exchange students

“What steps have you, or the university, taken to address the specific needs and restrictions that exchange students may have?”

9 of the 44 respondents answered this question with ‘no’ or ‘---’ or could not answer this question.

The other respondents have named the following measures or activities:

1. Orientation/introduction sessions:
 - Orientation sessions on the central level and introduction of a **mentoring system** on the school level.
 - Exchange students receive a **welcome package** and support by the agreement **tutors**.
 - The students **receive all the information** regarding courses, schedules, and internships when they are nominated, they are required to fill out a **provisional learning agreement**, and respondents check the availability of the courses chosen and class clashes.
 - Organizing **meetings** specifically designed for exchange students.
 - Many and different kinds of a **welcoming culture**, informing exchange students before the start of their exchange and during their exchange, give them useful information which is hard to find on the website that is partially in English, be interested in them, translate course materials, course guides, etc.
 - Organizing **welcome day and tutorships**, responding to their request and suggestions and acting accordingly, recommending them to enrol in the courses which are not too demanding for them, organizing early informative meetings with the international relations office.

2. Social network

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- A **buddy system** where senior students help exchange students and support their needs.
- Contact with the **exchange mobility** (centre).
- **Language Clubs**, different culture meetings, full commitment of the International Relations Office in supporting the student at all levels, supportive department coordinators, students volunteering association.
- Meet up with exchange students.
- They also have an **exchange student organisation** that gives support and organises social events that are targeted at making the exchange students feel as involved as possible.

3. Language/culture

- Exchange students receive **free language and/or cultural courses**.
- Some courses are **taught in English** (very few).
- Some courses taught in the university language admit **assessment in English or German**.
- Offering a program in which they can learn more about the country for free (for example visit the museums in the city), giving them a **student ID** so they can use all the student learning and socialising facilities as domestic students.

4. Adapting teaching/examination style

- Offering exchange students **individual oral exams** held in English and highlighting the benefits of these individual oral exams (i.e., usually better grades).
- Improving the **English course offer** (sometimes there are not enough teachers).
- When needed, having **special tasks** and final evaluation tests in some subjects for exchange students (because of language restrictions).

5. Guidance

- There are **academic advisors** specifically dedicated to exchange students, who facilitate them the information (for example elaborating a detailed document with all the steps they have to take).
- Communication to the exchange students that they can come with all their questions, as well as **employed tutors** that can help them directly, trying to support exchange students more in-depth (although we need to rely on them coming to us with their problems as we cannot check in with every single person on a regular basis).





- Suggest them to adapt to **foreign teaching methods**, always give pieces of advice to any students who report some difficulties to our office, or, we suggest the appropriate contact for the specific matter.
- Having a well-organized **international office**.
- **Individual treatment** of incoming students.

6. Practical

- Try to provide more **student accommodation**.

7. Flexibility

- Incoming students have (officially) the option to change to another course within the first month of their arrival (sometimes they listen to the advice offered by us, sometimes they don't), trying to make sure they **choose courses** at the most appropriate level as possible, and trying to assure them if the courses are a bit more advanced than they are used to, paying particular attention to them.
- **Informing the student**, offering a lot of courses within different fields of study, the exchange students are relatively free to choose courses from their own field of study, as well as from other related fields.
- Offering modules with **flexible content**, offering combination of online and offline teaching, and explaining carefully what courses are about and what the expectations are, examinations in English, **individual solutions** when courses can only be taken in part.

Question 7: Suggestions for evaluation questionnaire

“Do you have any suggestions on how we can incorporate the needs/requirements of exchange students into a questionnaire to evaluate their experiences in exchange courses?”

The respondents filled in many suggestions which we have clustered according to the following themes:

1. Possible **concrete questions** to exchange students:
 - Asking exchange students what suggestion they would have on this specific topic.
 - Asking exchange students how well supported they felt by their host institution and about their experiences there so that the host institutions could help them more adequately.



- Offering help in objectively assessing their knowledge and skills which they will need during their exchange at the foreign faculty of their choice.
 - Asking exchange students directly what are the barriers that they have or perceive during their mobility.
 - Asking them to make a comparison between administrative procedures of their university and host university.
 - Asking exchange students directly what the most relevant differences (positive and negative) are between studying abroad and in their home country.
2. **Mixing and integrating** exchange students and other students:
- A priority for universities should/could be to better integrate exchange students and other students and to make sure exchange students do not "stay among themselves".
 - Accommodate mixed classes and end the segregation of the domestic and exchange students in classes (meeting other exchange students only limits their social circle).
3. Conducting **mandatory surveys**:
- Conducting a mandatory survey prior to each exchange student will make the situation more serious.
4. **Information supply**:
- Mentioning the international office contact information (in the questionnaire).
 - Developing an automatic data base with information about the offered lectures.
 - Reminding exchange students to read carefully the information that is available online.
 - Asking exchange students about the information supply (information about courses, syllabus and schedules).
 - Explaining the way teachers work in each faculty and country (although this is difficult).
5. **English courses**:
- Exchange students should be aware that it can be difficult to only study in English, especially for undergraduate students.
 - In case the exchange students do not have the required language level, they should definitely check the course catalogue to see if there would be enough English courses within their study program.
 - Asking them if they prefer to have courses taught in English.





6. **Personalized education** for exchange students:

- Offering modules with flexible content.
- Individual treatment of exchange students.
- Offering them a combination of online and offline teaching.





Conclusion

The results of the questionnaire show us some interesting aspects that could be part of the evaluation methodology of AsCOLA. We will summarize the outcomes per question here.

Question 1: Specific Needs of Exchange Students

- A recurring need is for more academic courses in English, with concerns about the adequacy of current offerings.
- Students often misjudge their language abilities, leading to challenges in course selection and comprehension.
- Academic calendar mismatches between home and host universities disrupt preparation and participation in courses and exams.
- Differences in academic registration systems cause confusion and may hinder credit transfer.
- Accommodation issues and varied teaching/examination styles pose significant challenges.
- Lack of awareness about institutional differences (mandatory attendance, registration, etc.) is common.
- There's a need for more accessible and comprehensive information for exchange students.

Question 2: Restrictions for Exchange Students

- No significant restrictions compared to domestic students were noted by many, but some issues include:
 - Incongruent academic calendars.
 - Difficulties in finding accommodation.
 - Limited accessibility to certain courses due to language barriers or closed enrollment.
 - Different institutional systems and administrative processes.
 - Cultural and language barriers, and practical issues like healthcare and transportation costs.

Question 3: Impact of Needs and Restrictions on Expectations

- About 40% of respondents noticed impacts on student expectations, categorized as:





- Personal wellbeing (e.g., limited offline interaction, disappointment in course participation, language struggles).
- Access to courses/exams (e.g., registration issues, limited course availability in English, challenges with advanced courses).
- Performance (e.g., struggles with unfamiliar systems, less autonomy).
- Administrative challenges (e.g., changes in learning agreements, bureaucratic complexities)

Question 4: Problems with Administrative Procedures

- Over 60% of respondents reported issues, including:
 - Time-consuming administrative procedures across universities and immigration offices.
 - Late account setup hindering class and exam registration.
 - Difficulties in finding affordable accommodation.
 - Navigational challenges with university systems and timetable overlaps.
 - Course selection and application problems.
 - Language barriers, especially in non-English speaking countries.
 - Varied personal challenges like poor academic experiences and shyness in seeking help.

Question 5: Course Evaluations

- Over half of the respondents saw no difference in course evaluations between exchange and local students.
- Among those who did, observations included:
 - Varied English language proficiency levels.
 - Differences in university teaching styles impacting presentation skills and academic expectations.
 - Exchange students being more vocal in their feedback, generally positive, especially about social integration.
 - Some noting the academic requirements for exchange students being perceived as easier.

Question 6: Addressing Specific Needs of Exchange Students

- Various measures have been implemented, such as:
 - Orientation sessions and mentoring systems.
 - Social networks like buddy systems and student organizations.
 - Language and cultural courses.





- Adapting teaching and examination styles, including English language options.
- Providing dedicated guidance and academic advisors.
- Efforts to increase accommodation availability.
- Flexibility in course selection and adaptation to foreign teaching methods.

Question 7: Suggestions for Evaluation Questionnaire

- Suggested approaches for future surveys include:
 - Direct questions to exchange students about barriers, comparisons with home universities, and suggestions.
 - Encouraging integration of exchange and local students in classes.
 - Implementing mandatory surveys.
 - Enhancing information supply about courses, schedules, and institutional procedures.
 - Awareness about the challenges of studying solely in English.
 - Personalized education options like flexible modules and combined online/offline teaching.





Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Questionnaire for Higher Education institutions – exchange students

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Introduction text:

Your university is fortunate to host exchange students each year, who enrich the academic community with their diverse perspectives and experiences. However, we recognize that these students may encounter unique challenges, needs, and restrictions that can impact their educational journey and their evaluations of the courses they follow. They may be linked to education and training system, but may also be related with social and economic barriers, cultural differences, health issues etc.

To better understand and address these issues, we have created a short questionnaire. Your perspective, as those who directly engage with these students, is invaluable. Your responses will help us gather information on specific needs of exchange students, how these needs and restrictions affect their expectations from the courses, and how this might influence their evaluation of the courses.

We will use this information to create an evaluative questionnaire specifically for Erasmus exchange students as part of the Erasmus+ project Assessing Courses of the Online Learning Agreement (AsCOLA).

The questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Your responses may be anonymous or eponymous and the data will be used solely for the purpose of creating the evaluative questionnaire for exchange students.

We appreciate your time and value your input. Thank you in advance!





Questions (all open-ended):

Name (optional):

e-mail (optional):

1. What is the name of the university you are working at and your department?
2. Approximately, how many exchange students have you taught / are being taught at the university?
3. From which countries do exchange students usually come from?
4. Based on your experience, what are some specific needs that exchange students in your courses have expressed?
5. Based on your experience, can you describe any restrictions that exchange students encounter at your university that may not apply to domestic students?
6. Have you noticed any impacts of these specific needs and restrictions on the exchange students' expectations from your course?
7. Have your students mention any problems related with the administrative procedures for the exchange program, their studies at your university or their life there?
8. Have you noticed any difference in the (verbal) course evaluations given by exchange students compared to local students? If so, can you describe these differences?
9. What steps have you, or the university, taken to address the specific needs and restrictions that exchange students may have?
10. Do you have any suggestions on how we can incorporate the needs/requirements of exchange students into a questionnaire to evaluate their experiences in exchange courses?

Could we contact you for a follow up if needed? Yes No

References:

Jin, L., & Schneider, J. (2019). Faculty Views on International Students: A Survey Study. *Journal of International Students*, 9(1), 84–96. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i1.268>

