

BOLOGNA WITH STUDENT EYES 2009

The European Students' Union



IMPRINT

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Printed in: Leuven, Belgium, April 2009

Bologna With Student Eyes 2009 is produced as part of the *Enhancing the Student Contribution to Bologna Implementation—ESCBI*—project funded by the European Commission.



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

6 STUDENT MOBILITY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Mobility is fundamental to the Bologna Process and has become a barometer of the success of the entire reform agenda. It is widely regarded as both a tool and an end in itself, due to its well-known role in fostering tolerance and diversity at the societal level, while contributing to personal development, social networking and employability. At the last Conference in London, this point was widely acknowledged by Ministers: *“Mobility of staff, students and graduates is one of the core elements of the Bologna Process, creating opportunities for personal growth, developing international cooperation between individuals and institutions, enhancing the quality of higher education and research, and giving substance to the European dimension.”*

Mobility can also be a tool for the proper implementation of the Bologna Process, because it engages with every policy area of it: qualifications frameworks, understanding of ECTS and learning outcomes, progress on recognition practices, trust in quality assurance mechanisms, attention to internationalisation, concern with the European dimension, development of flexible and student-centred provision and significant social support for the student body to achieve its full potential. Although the Ministers committed to a number of actions for removing obstacles to mobility, and while calling for more institutional commitment and striving for balanced mobility flows, it appears that no substantial progress has been made as mobility opportunities are still out-of-reach for many students across the European Higher Education Area.

This chapter will focus on students’ perception regarding the progress made in removing the main mobility obstacles: financial restraints, administrative red-tape, recognition barriers and language provision. It will also look into the general perception in terms of the involvement of the national and institutional levels in fostering mobility.

6.2 CONCLUSIONS

When looking at general student perceptions, it seems like progress on making mobility the rule, rather than an exception, is considerably slower than the rhythm of commitments expressed by the ministers,

higher education institutions leaders and European institutions representatives in various European mobility seminars.

Financial problems related to the lack of accessible and portable grants and loans, in addition to clear limitations in covering the actual costs of studying and living have a significant impact on the motivation of students to be mobile. Fears of recognition difficulties, generated particularly by institutional protectionism and the lack of proper implementation of recognition tools are also a severe deterrent to the increase in mobility numbers.

When looking at whether mobility flows have become more balanced, it becomes obvious that the lack of an overall European target and underpinning strategy for mobility fosters very different approaches across the EHEA states. Fears of a brain drain puts a strain on the political commitment to invest in mobility and students have to face supplementary restrictions in order to access mobility support schemes, in addition to complicated administrative procedures, especially if we look at the non-EU to EU flows. From the answers provided by our members, it seems that little concern is given to the issue of diversifying the mobile student population, with a special focus on students with special needs and students with families.

Data collection continues to be a problem, although surveys such as Eurostudent made mobility more measurable across the European continent. In order to balance the mobility flows, the need for objective information gathering and analysis is self-evident. Hence, we recommend all countries to commit to comprehensive data collection and provide the necessary support for progress in this area.

For mobility to be more than an auxiliary action line in the next decade, a clear coordinated effort should be made. Both governments and stakeholders should combine their efforts in order to follow a common strategy to make balanced EHEA mobility a viable reality.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the conclusions listed above, the following actions are essential in fostering mobility across the European Higher Education Area:

- ▶ Financing mobility—more coordination and investment needed:
 - ▶ multilevel coordination of funding sources at European, regional, national and institutional level,
 - ▶ introducing full support for mobility, not just partial assistance as in the case of Erasmus, in addition to making grants and loans fully portable,
 - ▶ the setting up of a European mobility fund that could function in a similar manner to the CEEPUS system.
- ▶ Addressing the need for institutional commitment in the field of recognition, through the implementation of grassroots Bologna Process recognition tools and the development of a European Charter for mobility, for guaranteeing the rights of mobile students across the EHEA.
- ▶ Making a true governmental commitment to remove “red-tape” administrative obstacles: visas and work permits.
- ▶ Taking a straightforward and easy-to-monitor European political commitment—20% mobile students by 2020. Every fifth student should be mobile in an academically meaningful way during the study period.
- ▶ Committing to national action plans for mobility, underpinning an overarching European strategy for mobility.
- ▶ Improve data collection and analysis, in order to make the progress in the field of mobility evident across the EHEA.

6.4 FINANCIAL OBSTACLES

Ministers have consistently reaffirmed their commitment—in the Berlin, Bergen and London communiqués—to removing the remaining barriers to the portability of loans and grants and recognising this issue as a major obstacle to student mobility. Despite some improvement, this survey has returned results which show that there still are many impediments to full portability.

Perhaps the most considerable area of concern, reported by the majority of unions, is the particular difficulties with portability when it comes to full cycle mobility to non-EU EHEA and non-EHEA countries.

Most countries still report lingering problems with the full portability of loans and grants for all forms of mobility. This is particularly evident in Romania, the Czech Republic and Lithuania, where unions state that portability is still not possible in any case.

In other countries portability is often not possible or is hindered by major obstacles for certain types of mobility. One case in point is Ukraine, where students report major obstacles for every type of mobility, while in the UK, full portability is only available for short-term Erasmus type mobility, with major barriers still remaining for all other periods spent abroad.

It was only the respondents from Malta, Finland, Croatia and Italy that reported that students faced no major obstacles in terms of the portability of their grants and loans. Noteworthy is the example of Croatia, which has registered significant progress since 2007, with students now reporting fully portable loans and grants when compared to none being available by the publishing date of the 2007 edition of this survey.

Many unions report that portability for all forms of student mobility is often limited or prevented by a number of minor obstacles. This is clearly shown to be the case in Bulgaria, Slovakia, Sweden, Netherlands, Norway, Iceland, Austria, Denmark Belgium, Luxembourg and Macedonia—with students in Slovakia identifying administrative difficulties as being one remaining barrier in question.

As it seems relative progress is being made across the European Higher Education Area on ensuring various forms of portable financial aid for students²², this year's edition of the BWSE also tries to answer the question of whether this support is sufficient to cover the studying and living costs incurred by mobile students. More than 80% of the respondents indicated that many or some national students spending a period abroad do not find their grant or loan sufficient to meet their living expenses.

Respondents in Denmark and Belgium (the Flemish community) indicate clear problems related to students going to countries outside the Erasmus area or the EHEA, with tuition fees in particular being mentioned as a definite deterrent to going abroad.

22 According to the Bologna Process Stocktaking Leuven/ Louvain-la-Neuve 2009, p.95

fig. 17—Portability of grants and loans

- grants and loans are fully portable
- portability of grants and loans is possible with minor obstacles
- portability of grants and loans is possible with major obstacles
- portability of grants and loans is not possible

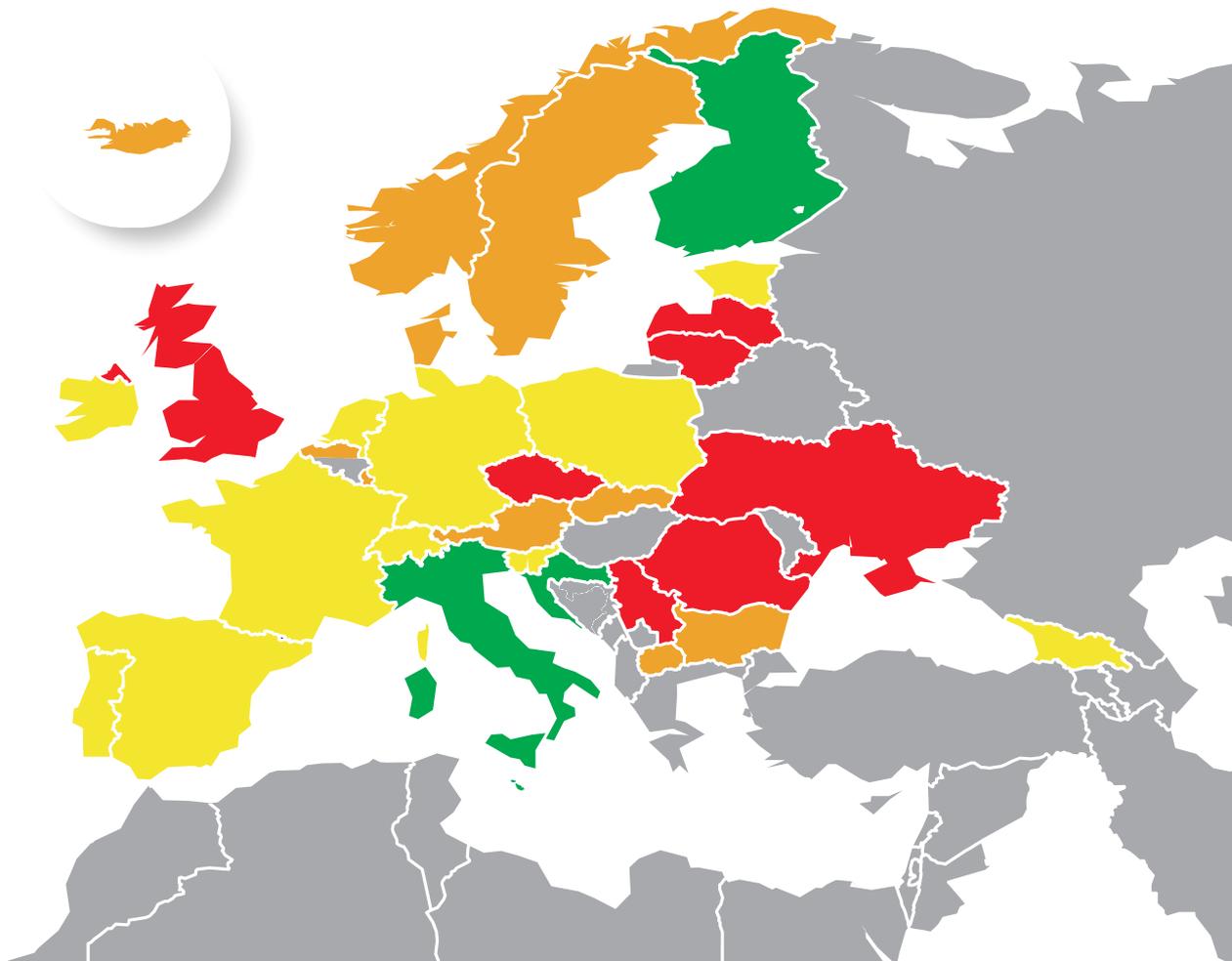
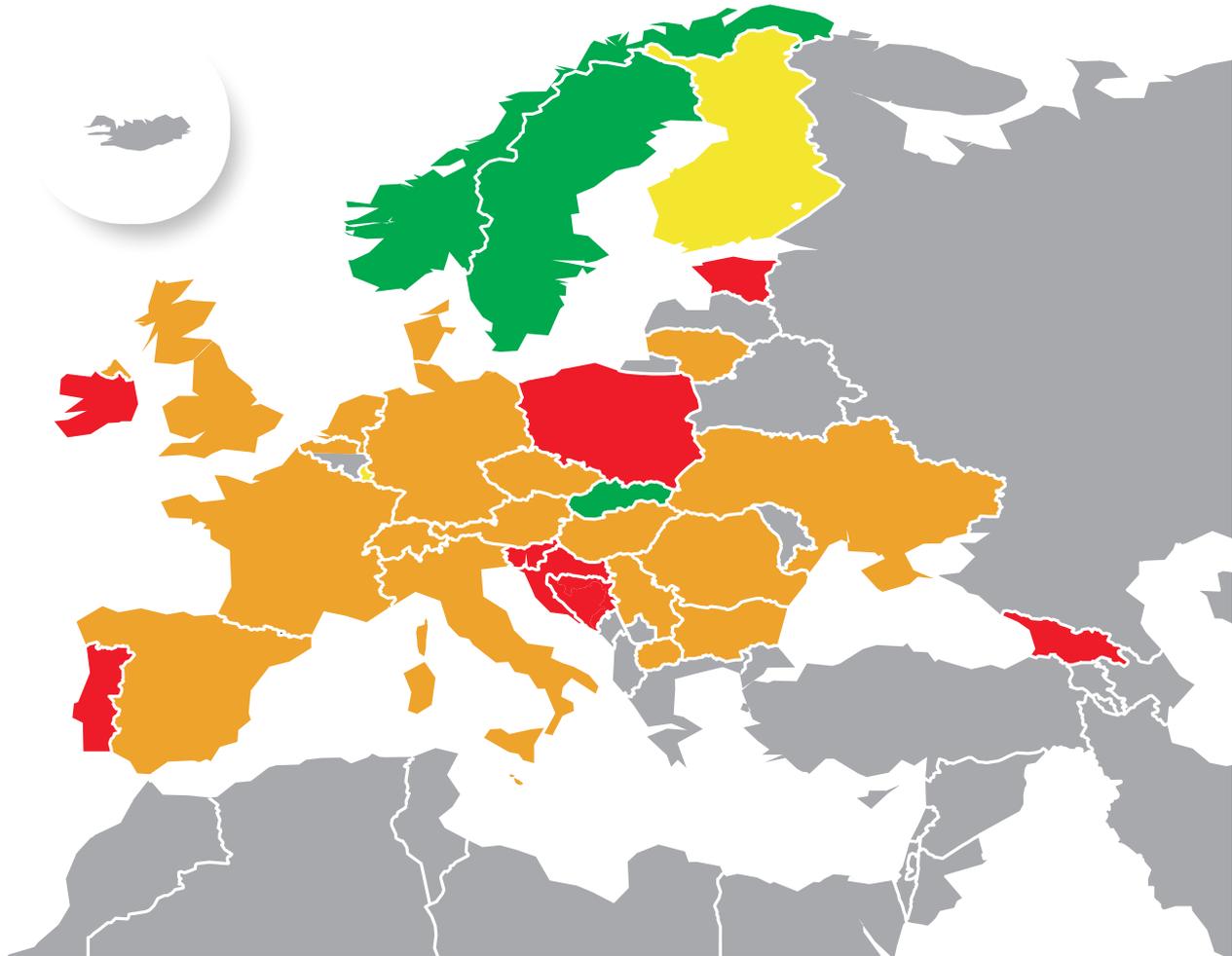


fig. 18—Situation of national students spending a period abroad that encounter problems meeting their living expenses from their grant or loan

- None or almost none have problems
- Few have problems
- Some students have problems
- Many students have problems



Students in Croatia, Estonia, Ireland, Slovenia, Portugal and Poland report serious problems with being able to meet living expenses abroad with their grant or loan. On the other hand, students in Sweden and Finland seem not to have to face such problems.

It is clear is that if countries are to reach the target of 20% of students being mobile by 2020; urgent increased focus needs to be given to removing these remaining obstacles and increasing the financial incentives available to students.

The picture seems slightly better, but not significantly improved, when analysing whether foreign students spending a study period in their respective higher education system have problems meeting their living and studying expenses from their grants and loans. 70% of respondents pointed out that most or some foreign students have problems in meeting their expenses. Ireland, Denmark, France, Germany, Finland and Norway are revealed to be the countries where the highest amount of foreign students incur severe financial problems in trying to offset their expenses with the available grants and loans.

The Mobility Barometer (Connor Cradden, 2008) points out that 58% of respondents were dissatisfied or entirely dissatisfied with the funding available for mobility. The difference in figures might originate from different types of additional support for mobility. In this regard, it is clear that there is a need for coordinating the various types of funds available for mobility, at European, regional, national and institutional level; so that larger shares of the costs incurred are offset and any available funds are used in an effective manner.

A relevant aspect in discussing mobility is the extent to which opportunities for a meaningful mobility period abroad are granted to different groups of students, for example students with disabilities or female students. 60 % of the respondents said that mobility opportunities are distributed reasonably fairly but extreme cases were signaled, such as Ukraine and Slovenia, where it seems like mobility opportunities are completely beyond the reach of certain student groups. Among the reasons mentioned for some groups not having equal access to being mobile, the following were mentioned: lack of counseling, lack of additional support and non-existent special facilities for students with disabilities. It is clear that more effort in the direction of ensuring equal mobility opportunities is required and a possible solution could include concrete support measures in future national and institutional action plans for mobility.

In addition to this, significant administrative deterrents are making mobility complicated, especially between EU and non-EU countries. Several countries have started to improve the situation, but more

involvement from the government side is necessary for lifting visa and working permit-related obstacles for mobility.

6.5 INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT FOR MOBILITY

While the European ministers committed to making mobility a reality within their authority, higher education institutions have had the freedom to decide their own policies regarding mobility. But are the institutions convinced of the benefits of mobility? And if so, what is their contribution in fostering mobility in a balanced manner, while fulfilling the recent internationalisation recent goal?

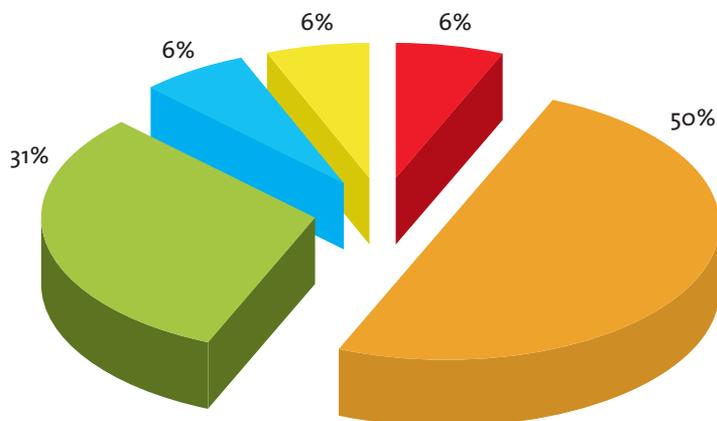
Three main areas were surveyed within the European Students' Union membership: support of the institution for incoming or outgoing mobile students, recognition of credits or existing qualifications and language provision.

When asked whether students wishing to spend a period abroad have problems getting the support or permission of their institution, 55% of the respondents answered that most or some have such problems. The Finnish and Romanian student unions pointed out that the support of the institution depends highly on the destination of the mobility programme. The areas in which students feel that they are not supported by the institution are primarily recognition (France, Bulgaria, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta), followed by information (most respondents) and obstacles posed by academic staff and inflexibility / overburdening the curricula (Norway). Also, a clear deterrent for accessing mobility support schemes is the academic performance filters mentioned by the Slovenian and Slovakian student unions. Moreover, it seems that these obstacles appear with more frequency in some fields of study and have a strong link with the duration of the mobility period spent abroad, especially in Croatia, France and Georgia.

When discussing the possible problems with the recognition of credits gained abroad during the mobility period, 85% of the respondents said that many or some students have problems in this department. This outcome seems to be consistent with both the Data collection and Stocktaking 2009 reports, especially since the link between ECTS and learning outcomes is usually problematic. An interesting example of institutional obstacles linked with credit recognition comes from Switzerland. Here, credits are recognised but not validated. In some higher education institutions credits are recognised without validation, which means that these “extra credits” are not accumulated but only “added as a surplus in the diploma supplement”.

fig. 19—Percentage of student unions stating that students have problems related to the institution's permission or support

- None or almost none have problems
- Depends on their destination
- Some have problems
- Many have problems
- Not sure/difficult to say



One of the reasons that students lack the confidence to go abroad is the lack of linguistic proficiency. Since language provision is of an institutional remit, we surveyed the extent to which the appropriate language courses are available before departing to participate in a mobility programme abroad.

22% of respondents confirmed that many students have problems accessing these courses, while 60% indicated that some students have such problems, especially when languages are not a mandatory part of the curricula. The problems originate also from language courses only being provided in English and French (in Belgium, Italy and Denmark), when a much larger variety would have been required to satisfy the needs of outgoing students. The fact that quite often the language courses are not free of charge has a

fig. 20—Status of free language provision around Europe

- Free language provision in all programmes and HEI
- Free in some programmes and HEI
- Additional fees are always or almost always charged
- Not sure/difficult to say

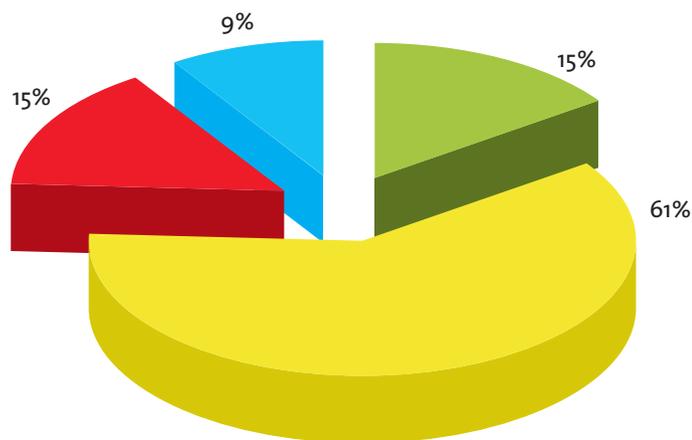
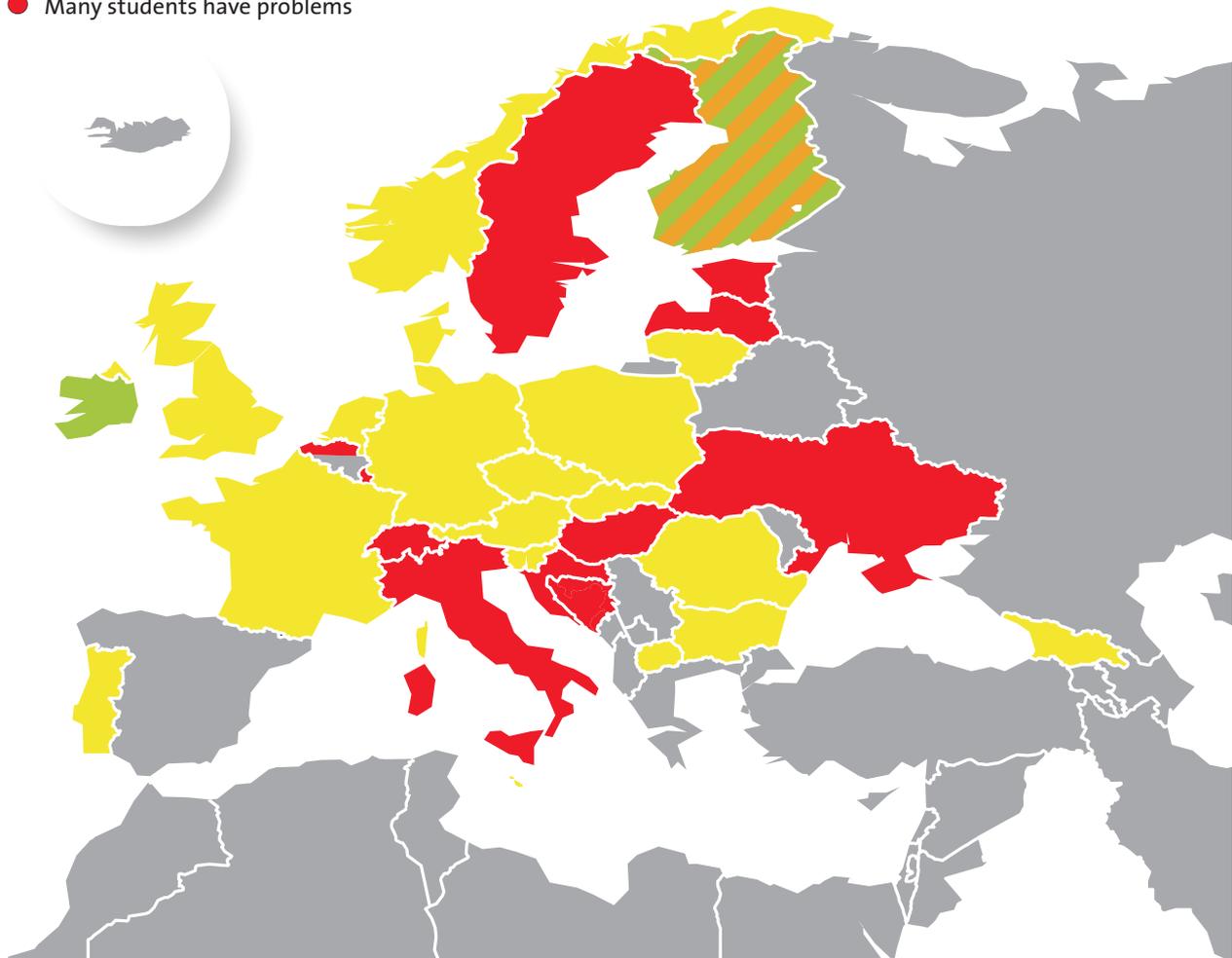


fig. 21—Situation of national students returning from a period of study abroad encountering problems with the recognition of their credits

- None or almost none have problems
- Some students have problems
- Depends on where they were studying
- Many students have problems



significant impact on students' ability to achieve the confidence and motivation to apply for a mobility period. 63% of the respondents confirmed that language courses are free only in some institutions and programmes, usually conditioned by their inclusion in the curricula. 16% of the respondents confirmed that additional fees are always or almost always charged. The countries with such a system are Germany, Croatia, Austria, Belgium and Malta. What is interesting is that these countries seem to have a rather high degree of outgoing mobility, which means that probably language provision is considered as an additional source of funding for higher education institutions. One might wonder if the language courses were to be more accessible, whether the mobility figures would not noticeably increase.

If we look at the type of obstacles still present at the institutional level, we can easily see that instruments such as a Bologna Charter for Mobile Students would help in guaranteeing the rights of mobile students and raise the stakes for higher education institutions in their mission to support and foster mobility in their internationalisation process.

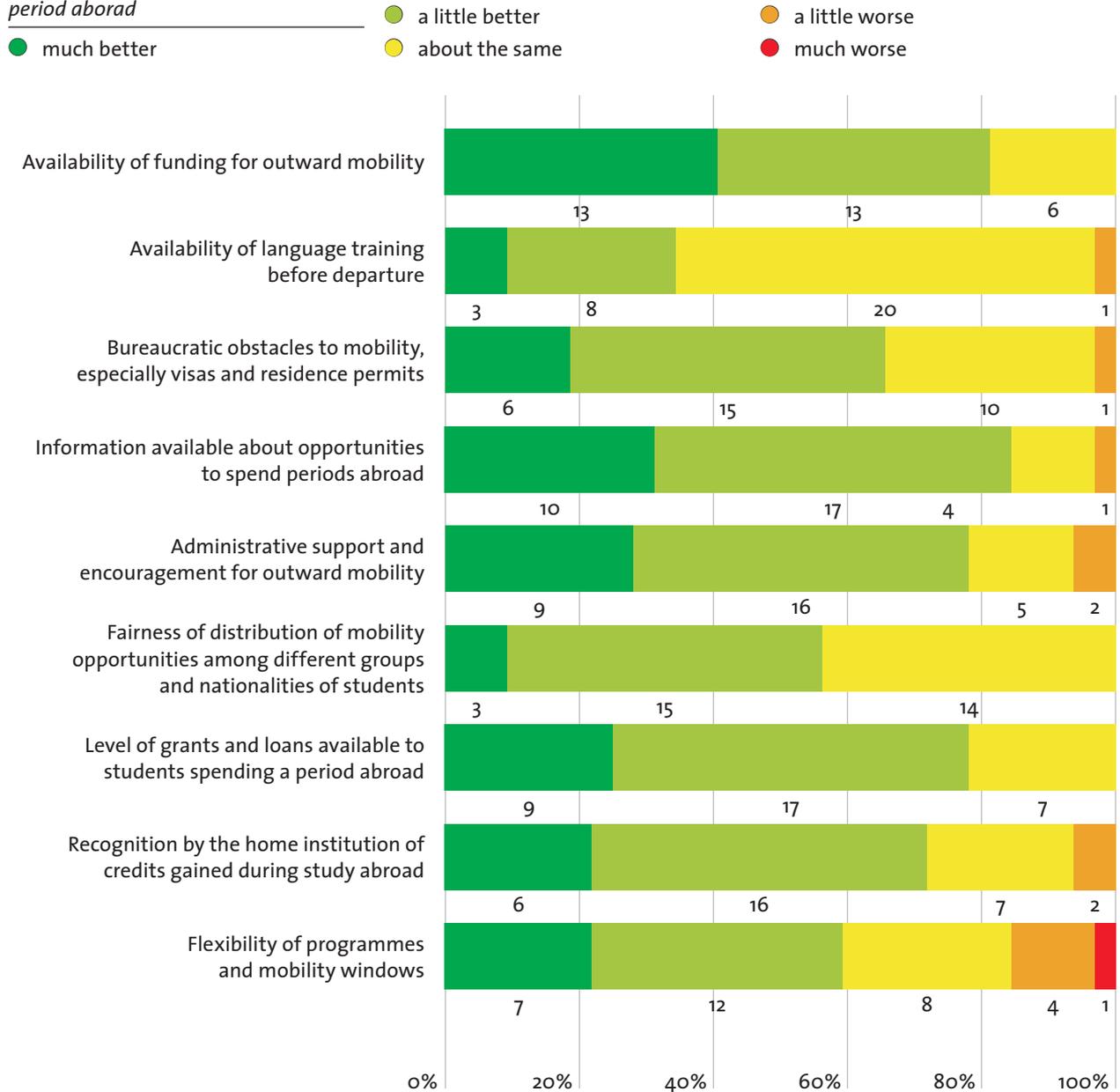
6.6 GENERAL PROGRESS IN REMOVING MOBILITY OBSTACLES

As a new agenda is emerging and mobility competes for a front row position in the next list of Bologna working priorities, we have asked our members how they saw progress in removing various mobility obstacles.

From the graphs below we can see that in terms of almost all the possible obstacles listed, the situation seems to have remained the same or presents slight improvements, notably with reference to information, administrative support and the level of grants and loans for national students who have spent or wish to spend a period abroad. Similarly, for foreign students who have spent or who wish to spend a period in the respective country, information and administrative procedures seem to be the issues that generate most progress. Worrying developments can be seen in the field of language provision and in the fairness of the distribution of mobility opportunities.

The situation at the European level continues to be remarkably diverse when speaking about the level of commitment for mobility. Hence a coherent and overarching European strategy for mobility, underpinned by concrete national action plans to remove mobility obstacles, would ensure an increased and more balanced inward and outward flow of mobile students.

fig. 22—Situation for national students who have spent or who wish to spend a period abroad



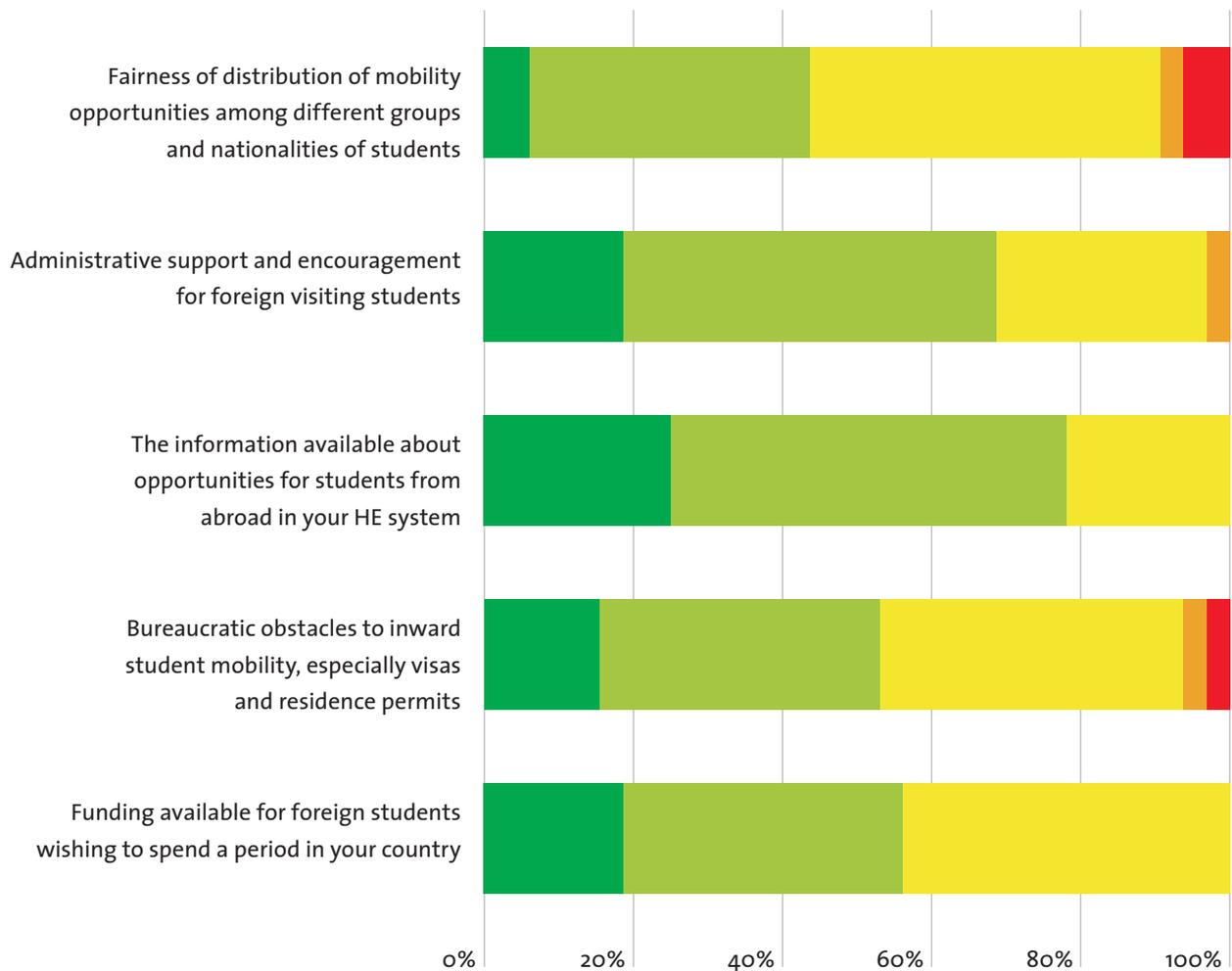


fig. 23—*Situation for foreign students who have spent or who wish to spend a period in the respective country*

- much better
- a little better
- about the same
- a little worse
- much worse