

02: Model Credit Recognition Agreement

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Given that the underlying objective of this project is to facilitate the endorsement and appropriation of open, online and flexible higher education, the recognition aspect was considered to be crucial.

This report presents the activities undertaken under Intellectual Output 2 (IO2) of the ECCOE project (2019-1-FR01-KA203-062951), which focused on creating and validating a legal document template, the “Model Credit Recognition Agreement” (MCRA, henceforth), in order to provide a fast track model for the recognition of credentials.

A JRC report published in 2019 about open degrees highlighted the increasing importance of the recognition of such courses (Inamorato Dos Santos, 2019). However, the recognition of foreign degrees, not to mention sub-degree certificates and credentials, is still not common practice and there are no widely approved guidelines or mechanisms that would aid this recognition process. The reasons are complex: while European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs, henceforth) use the same currency (i.e. ECTS credits), terminologies, awarding methods and local credit transfer practices differ and despite a few convincing good institutional collaboration practices (e.g. see some EADTU members’ collaborations) there is often a lack of trust in unfamiliar HEIs’ reputations.

Therefore, the MCRA has been designed as a way to capture, in an explicit and standardised manner, the details of any cross-institutional recognition agreements. In addition, to make the generation of MCRA easier, an online tool has been developed.

1.2 Objectives

The main objective of Output 2 has been to explore and create an agile way to establish cross-institutional agreements between HEIs in Europe on micro-credentials offered in their institutions.

2 Methodology

The main methodology was based on an iterative process of internal design, development and revision, together with external processes of open peer review. The overall work of the output has been in constant alignment with the other related outputs.

The activities and steps taken to develop and validate the MCRA can be seen as follows.

2.1 Identifying and clustering official documents that can serve as templates from partner countries

To specify an MCRA, the first step was undertaking an analysis of existing processes of the partner HEIs that are collaborating in this project, specifically on the ways prior learning is already recognised. This consisted of two main activities:

Firstly, desk research was undertaken to gather information about what was important to include in the MCRA template; which departments in HEIs are involved in credit recognition; and to identify useful templates for the development of the MCRA. To that end, all HEI partners collected official documents related to the recognition of credits and collaborative agreements at their institutions, in order to identify crucial aspects to include in the MCRA. Every partner gave feedback on the data gathering examples, and a Recognition Agreement template (Appendix A) was created for each HEI partner to summarise key information for describing recognition agreements at their institutions. In addition, an Institutional Expert Interview template (Appendix A) was designed for each HEI partner to undertake interviews with specialists from their legal departments.

Secondly, and based on work described above, a deep analysis of the information collected was undertaken and gathered into a report entitled “ECCOE O2A1: An Analysis and Classification of the Pathways for Cross-Institutional Recognition and Validation of Prior Learning in Higher Education Institutions”, which included detailed mind maps of every HEI recognition processes (<https://cutt.ly/Khq1jea>).

2.2 Developing a Model Credit Recognition Agreement

After the desk research and analysis, the second step was focused on the development of the MCRA template itself, undertaken in two main activities.

Firstly, based on the previous step and report, the project team performed a conceptual and functional analysis of an MCRA, and designed and developed the first prototype of the MCRA template using Google Sheets, together with a first usage manual in Google Docs. Partners gave their feedback on the template and manual, and the changes were incorporated the changes proposed in a new version of the MCRA, which was used during the first open review phase described in section 2.3.

Secondly, and after several revisions, the first version of the MCRA tool was developed and integrated in the ECCOE website (built using WordPress), so it could be part of the overall ECCOE System. Also, a new User Guide to help users to prepare an MCRA was developed. This version of tool and manual were refined during the following activity, and they are described below in section 2.4.

2.3 Open peer review and update of the MCRA

In order to validate a beta version of the MCRA template and tool, an open peer review process was undertaken among established experts with relevant experience in different aspects of (virtual) mobility recognition processes. This activity was developed also in two phases:

Firstly, in order to revise and fine-tune the MCRA, before releasing it for open public review, a round of internal reviews by the corresponding HEI partners' legal departments were launched with detailed instructions for stakeholders who were intended to use the MCRA. Feedback from 7 experts was collected in a survey integrated in the ECCOE website, the results were analysed, and changes incorporated into the template. Among the changes carried out, it is worth mentioning the development of a user guide providing examples of potential agreement scenarios.

Secondly, for the open peer review for public consultation, the consortium held a meeting in which they defined a list of stakeholders to be contacted, in order to select contributors with relevant legal and (virtual) mobility experience to increase the validity of the results. The instructions were revised accordingly and a survey prepared. This public consultation (<https://cutt.ly/RKN3ffK>) was performed in December 2021.

2.4 Development of user guidelines and publishing

This activity consisted of two steps.

Firstly, based upon the results of the public consultation, the final version of the MCRA tool and usability guidelines were developed and made available directly from the frontpage of the MCRA tool page on ECCOE website (see Section 8 References and further reading). Before using the tool, it is important to read MCRA User Guide. The workflow proposed to create your MCRA in the online tool is the following:

- 1) Add the data of the institution(s) that wish to establish the agreement.
- 2) Prepare the MCRA according to the data and fill in the different sections of the form.
- 3) Revise and edit the MCRA using an ECCOE user account (registration first).

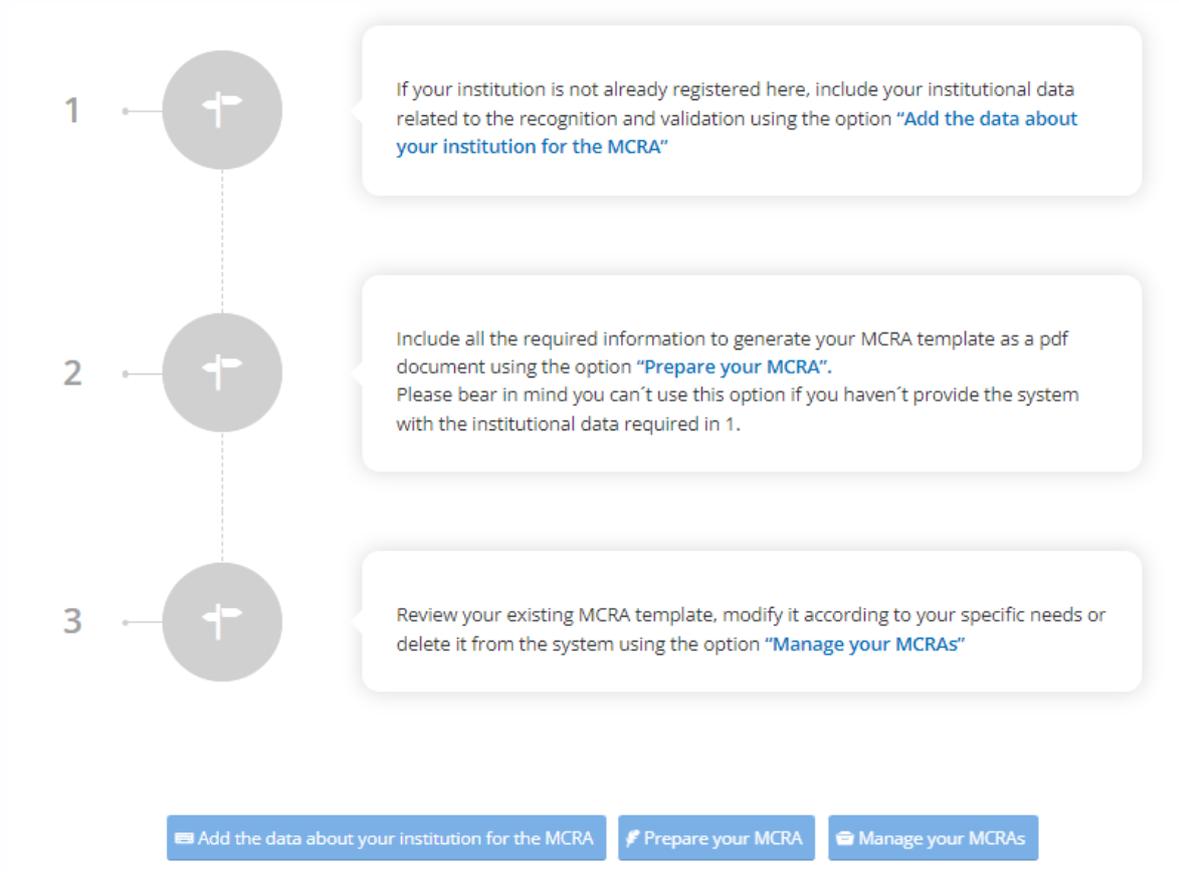


Figure 1 : screenshot of the online MCRA tool

The MCRA tool is semi-automatically configured to include the information that HEIs require to establish mutual agreements recognising/validating each other's courses. Once the form is completed, a final MCRA document will be generated for the two signing authorities of the respective institutions to sign. For those who don't want to use an online tool, a Word template is also available, that can be downloaded and completed.

Secondly and subsequently, from these tools and documents, and as part of the work of the IO5, a How-To guide was developed, showing how an MCRA can be developed.

Both final versions of MCRA Word template and the How-To guide have been translated into the 6 languages of consortium countries (FR, DE, IT, LT, ES), and openly published.

3 Results

As explained above, the MCRA tool was developed in WordPress and integrated in the ECCOE website as part of the ECCOE-system, which provides access to the following functionalities developed in the project:



Model Credit Recognition Agreement
(MCRA) tool



Catalogue of Learning Opportunities



ECCOE digital credentials



ECCOE Network

Figure 2: screenshot of the ECCOE-system page

Apart from the MCRA tool and the User Guide, three How to Guides (see Section 8 References and further reading) were created to support partners and external stakeholders in preparing potential agreements: how to establish a MCRA, how to recognise a credential in general, and how to stimulate ECCOE collaboration between HEIs and also with other learning providers.

4 Implications

4.1 For Higher Education Institutions

The MCRA work and tools can be useful to HEI staff (personnel such as international mobility, teaching, Dean, Head of department, Programme Director, Examination Office Staff, Teaching Innovation Unit, etc.) in order to explore the steps and conditions of their institutions that have to be applied to establish agreements with other institutions and recognise micro-credentials and courses. To this end, the How-To guidelines on the recognition of credentials, how to establish and MCRA and how to collaborate with other institutions could be helpful.

This can be a way to explore the potential of micro-credentials for students' mobility (physical and/or virtual) in HEIs and open up learning and more flexible pathways.

4.2 For Teachers

The MCRA tools can be useful for educators and teaching staff who wish to create add visibility to a given micro-credential or course offered by them at a particular HEI.

4.3 For the European Commission

The IO2 work represents an important step in the continued debate on the importance of micro-credential recognition at a European level, promote awareness on the issue, and the model generated can serve as a proof of concept for this purpose.

5 Added value

Over and above the results promised in the project proposal, as well as a MCRA document template, an interactive online tool was developed.

Furthermore, the project team held a series of meetings with representatives of several European universities to establish possible inter-institutional agreements. Only one was actually signed, which serves as a proof of concept of the output, and the other conversations served to show the reticence of universities to enter into such agreements, and for the need to continue advancing in the cross-institutional recognition of micro-credentials.

6 Links to other ECCOE outputs

The ECCOE MCRA (output 2):

- is fully integrated in the ECCOE-system (Output 5),
- builds upon the criteria and descriptors developed for technology-enabled credentials (Output 1), in the sense that the MCRA developed should facilitate the recognition of micro-credentials following these criteria,
- is complementary to the Learning Opportunities Catalogue (Output 3), since these learning opportunities, when completed by a learner, would lead to the achievement (credential) which could potentially be recognised in a MCRA,
- could be also linked to sample technology-enabled credentials (Output 4) also integrated in the Catalogue.

7 Conclusion

The process of creating and validating a MCRA has served to understand the underlying complexity and importance of the cross-institutional micro-credential recognition processes and has served to generate a model that can serve as a proof of concept for future steps and projects at European level. It can be noted that the work undertaken in this project and specifically this output has showed the need of further work in this field.

8 References and further reading

Inamorato Dos Santos, A., (2019). *Practical Guidelines on Open Education for Academics: modernising higher education via open educational practices*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. doi:10.2760/55923, JRC115663.

To find out more about the design and usage of the ECCOE MCRA, see:

Read, T., & Arnold, D. (2020). ECCOE: toward a robust solution for the cross-institutional recognition and validation of prior learning. Human and Artificial Intelligence for the Society of the Future European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) Proceedings 2020 Annual Conference. <https://doi.org/10.38069/edenconf-2020-ac0002>

Links

- MCRA frontpage in ECCOE Website (interactive tool and templates in different languages) https://eccoe.eu/outputs/io2/mcra_fp/

ECCOE How-To guides (downloadable from <https://eccoe.eu/eccoe-system/>)

- How to establish a Model Credit Recognition Agreement (MCRA)
- How to recognise a credential
- How to stimulate ECCOE collaboration between HEIs and also with other learning providers
- How to create a micro-credential module description a) and a catalogue entry in the ECCOE Learning Opportunities Catalogue
- How to create a micro-credential module description: b) General principles for describing Learning Opportunities

Appendix A

Templates for desk research analysis

X-Institutional Collaboration / Accreditation / Certification / Recognition / Etc. Agreement Process		Help
Institution		Name of your HEI
Title		Name of agreement
Date		Date signed
Type		For now, think of a type based upon function. These will be classified subsequently
Objective		
	1	
	2	
Process steps	3	Detail all the steps from reception of the agreement, through to its signing. Add more rows if needed or delete as required
	4	
	5	
Risk factors		Factors that might prevent future examples of this agreement from being accepted
Notes		Comment any details here, questions still to be answered, etc.
Examples of this agreement:		
File name		
Other Institution		
Actors / Organization section involved in process		Provide examples if possible, referring to the files contained in your sub-folder in O2 in Google Drive
Summary		

Institutional Expert Interview		Help
Institution		Name of your HEI
Date		Date carried out
Name		Name of the person interviewed
Role		His/her role in the HEI
Interview questions		
Can you describe any existing processes by which external courses can have their credits recognised by this university and these credits can be used as part of a course here		
Are there any limitations or difficulties with this process?		
How long does this process take?		
Are there any other comments you'd like to make?		
Notes		Any reflections on the interviews, actions that are needed, etc

Appendix B

The MCRA Tool

Model Credit Recognition Agreement Template Tool

Before using this tool to develop a Model Credit Recognition Agreement Template you should read [the MCRA User Guide](#). (Put the cursor on the “i” to retrieve context-sensitive help). You can also use the [Word Template](#).

[See an example of MCRA here.](#)

[This is a Beta version of the MCRA tool and it is available for experimentation only]

1. Title of the Agreement ⓘ ⓘ

Please insert the title of the agreement *

2. Preamble

This document is an MCRA template which is semi-automatically configured to include the information that HE institutions require to establish mutual agreements recognizing/validating each other’s courses.

Once you had completed this form, a final MCRA document will be generated for the two signing signatories of respective institutions to sign.

3. Institutions and recognition type ⓘ ⓘ

Select your institution *

Select the recognition type your institution will use for this MCRA *

Select the other institution *

Select the name of the institution

Select the recognition type the other institution will use for this MCRA *

4. Agreement details ⓘ ⓘ

4.1 Type

4.2 Objective

4.3 Institution process steps

4.4 Conditions

5. Description ⓘ ⓘ

Please add description text below *

6. Signatories and legal capacities ⓘ ⓘ

7. Agreement lifetime ⓘ ⓘ

Start Date *

End Date *

8. Dates and signatures ⓘ ⓘ

Date *

Signature

Date *

Signature

9. Annexes

Annex 1: ECCOE quality typology instance for both courses ⓘ ⓘ

A link to your document should be included here.

Annex 2: Course programmes

A link to your document should be included here.

Annex 3: Existing agreements ⓘ ⓘ

A link to your annex document would appear here.

Annex 3: Existing agreements

A link to your document should be included here.

Annex 4: Description ⓘ ⓘ

A description of your annex document would appear here.

Annex 4: Link

A link to your document should be included here.

Annex 5: Description ⓘ ⓘ

A description of your annex document should be included here.

Annex 5: Link

A link to your document should be included here.

Generate draft MCRA

About the ECCOE Project

The increasing unbundling of higher education and the availability of short learning programmes and online MOOCs have undeniable advantages to today's lifelong learners. These more agile means of education are more suitable to address quickly emerging new skills and competencies demanded by the labour market. However, some issues – such as concerns about data protection and privacy or the lack of validation and recognition mechanisms of digital credentials – cause a serious bottleneck to progress. The ECCOE project aims to present a solution to many of these problems with the perspectives of learners, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers in mind in equal measure.



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