

PRACTICE-BASED WHITE PAPER

ONE JOURNEY, ONE FRONT DOOR

How ECIU University designs and supports the user experience across 12 universities, 2022–2026

SUMMARY

A European University feels like one university when it is designed from the user's journey and supported through one front door that all its members run together. Imagine a learner who takes a challenge at another member university: they cross several institutions, systems and offices, and no single university is responsible for that experience. Between 2022 and 2026, ECIU University addressed this in two ways.

- 1. Design from the journey.** All work packages work from a shared User Experience (UX) Strategy, user personas and user journeys, built with and tested by users and backed up by evidence from user research and surveys. The user journey shows where each touchpoint, human or digital, affects the user, and where the experience breaks.
- 2. Serve through one front door.** The ECIU University User Service Centre, launched in September 2023, gives every user one place to ask for help. It is a one-stop shop that runs on a shared digital platform and is staffed by Admission, Mobility and IT officers from all 12 member universities, who share equal responsibility for it.

The results show that it works:

- **5,525 support cases** handled since launch, with 93–97% resolved and 94–97% answered within 24 business hours;
- **92% satisfaction** with the ECIU University User Service Centre and **91% satisfaction** with the overall ECIU University experience;
- **82%** of users say they are likely to take part again, and users would recommend ECIU University to others (Net Promoter Score of 53);
- user feedback led directly to a new ECIU University homepage, restructured pages for learning opportunities, an alumni approach and changes to learner guidance.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned is that user experience should have a central position across all work packages and become the responsibility and compass for all the work developed. It works when every work package and every member university shares the same map of the user's journey and understands users' needs, and when support is organised as one service with shared ownership.

1. The challenge: one journey, 12 universities

In a European University, the user's experience is shared between many owners. A student at one university finds a learning opportunity on an alliance platform, applies through a central process, is admitted by the hosting university, may travel with a mobility grant from the home university, and receives a micro-credential from the alliance. Teachers, support staff and external partners face similar journeys. Each step is run by a different team, in a different system, often in a different country.

In ECIU University's pilot phase (2019–2022), this worked, but it did not scale. At the time, support ran through shared mailboxes and distributed institutional support, admissions were handled manually, and the database behind them had no user-facing side. Services focused on one group, learners, and on a simple journey: take a challenge as an extracurricular activity and receive a diploma supplement. Users needed clearer entry points for help and seamless access to learning opportunities, and support staff lacked clear ownership, accountability and transparency.

The pilot phase also left valuable foundations: a network of Institutional Admission Officers at all member universities and a shared Admission Roadmap describing how applications are assessed. ECIU University built on both and added one important element that was missing: the user experience perspective.

For its second phase, ECIUn+ (2022–2026), ECIU University set two objectives in its user experience work package (WP7): to offer a unique, flexible, inclusive and excellent experience to all users, and to develop the services and support structures the ecosystem needs. The number of learners grew to more than 5,000, which made both objectives more urgent.

This paper describes how we met them, so that other alliances can use what worked for us. It complements our papers on student engagement and on community building.

2. Design from the journey

Our UX Strategy starts from one principle: understand how users experience the alliance and what they need, then design services, processes and platforms around that instead of around the organisation; then release, evaluate and repeat. The strategy is a living document, and the design process based on it is iterative: it always starts from the user, is validated with the user and is finally released for the user. Its first version was ready in the second month of the project, and it reached its fifth version in month 26. It rests on three pillars:

1. **Understand users** through personas and journey maps.
2. **Serve users well** through a central User Service Centre.
3. **Improve continuously** through user feedback.

Personas and journeys as the shared map

A persona describes a typical user: their goals, motivations, needs and frustrations. A journey map shows the steps that user takes and the touchpoints they interact with, in five phases:

Phase	What the user does
1. Awareness and discovery	Hears about ECIU University and finds an opportunity
2. Consideration and decision	Compares options and decides whether to apply
3. Onboarding	Applies, is admitted and prepares, including mobility
4. Participation	Takes part in the challenge or micro-module, and completes it or not
5. Completion and loyalty	Receives a micro-credential and decides whether to come back

By continuously identifying and updating user profiles, we gained a better understanding of user needs and motivations, so that we could build processes, tools and digital infrastructures that create a personalised experience. Journey mapping and persona building are iterative processes that should be run regularly to stay relevant as user needs grow. At ECIU University, we built them step by step, combining our own staff's expertise and experience with outside expertise through strategic user research and design activities:

- **2023:** workshops led by an external user experience and service design expert, with support staff, education coordinators and work package leaders from all universities, produced the first detailed student persona and student journey.
- **2023:** the UX Coordination Team (UX and service experts and work package leaders, see section 5) used the student journey to map a macro-level journey, showing which work package is responsible for which step and identifying each work package's touchpoints in the journey.
- **2025:** a series of workshops with an external agency, using data from focus groups and interviews, produced two detailed student personas, two personas for continuous learners and an updated journey.
- **2025:** a master's student from the University of Trento, as a trainee in the work package, produced a service blueprint of how our support actually works behind the scenes, based on interviews with staff, officers and students.
- **2026:** a revised persona and a first user journey for external stakeholders, built with an external agency. It produced three personas based on role and function: partners for challenges, partners for continuous learning and strategic partners. These personas and journeys connect with the work of the work package on societal impact (WP10).

What the journeys changed

The student journey became the common starting point for six work packages: learner guidance, education, community building and mobility, digital platform, user experience and services, and communication. Three examples highlight its effect:

- **Learning opportunity pages.** The pages where students find challenges and micro-modules were designed around the 2023 journey and completely restructured in 2025–2026, after focus

groups showed that students struggled to find information and navigate it smoothly. We translated the needs users expressed into technical developments and placed them high in the development backlog. The education (WP3), digital platform (WP6) and user experience (WP7) teams worked on the change together. As an iterative process, this does not stop here: the pages will be evaluated again, leading to new improvements.

- **A new ECIU University homepage.** University.eciu.eu, launched in December 2025, added what the platform for learning opportunities lacked: one place for information about the learning experience, the value proposition and expectations for users, the educational model, community activities and support. Five work packages shaped its design and content, and users took part through online focus groups and feedback sessions from design through development to release. Co-creation and constant user engagement were pivotal to the final result.
- **Continuous learners.** The new personas for professionals learning alongside their work informed ECIU University's approach to continuous education, including the content offered and how to reach these learners. This work is also of high strategic value: it supports decisions across the organisation on services and products for this user group.

Together with the evidence gathered, the user journeys also showed where to focus first. Based on an analysis of needs and available information, the ECIU University Board decided to prioritise students, the largest and most strategic user group with 4,706 learners. Students therefore have the most detailed personas and journeys, with the most frequent revisions. Academic staff, support staff and external stakeholders have a first, basic version, ready to be developed further; this is ongoing work that follows the growing needs of these user groups.

3. Know your users

Personas and journeys are only as good as the evidence behind them. Before ECIUn+, most developments were based on assumptions and operational experience. We made user research (internally called user discovery, to avoid confusion with academic research) a standard step before and after every major development.

A focus group model any partner can use

With the guidance of WP7 and UX experts, we created a model for user research in the ECIU University context: the focus group. Focus groups are not our invention; they are a widely used method in UX design. We adapted the format specifically for ECIU University, with the aim that it becomes an easy template that partners can also use locally. We developed one format and used it across the alliance:

- **10 to 20 users** from several member universities, depending on the topic;
- **in person**, with travel funded centrally by the user experience work package;
- **built around the journey map**, so users react to their own steps and touchpoints;
- combined with other methods where useful, such as user journey mapping, experience-sharing sessions and usability tests of the platform;

- ending in an **analysis with clear recommendations** that goes to the work packages and decision makers, and helps prioritise development work on the digital platform.

Any work package can request a focus group, and universities can run one locally with the same format; so far, most focus groups have been coordinated and delivered centrally. The examples below show how they helped us understand our users, listen to their needs and turn those needs into designs and developments.

Focus group	Participants	What it changed
March 2024, University of Twente	9 students	Feedback on the learning platform; students did not want to share detailed personal data for learner guidance, which redirected that work towards tools they control
April 2025, University of Twente	20 students	Usability tests of the platform and ideas on AI-supported learner guidance; input for restructuring the learning opportunity pages
July 2025, online	Students	Usability test of an AI tutor prototype developed after a hackathon
March 2026	22 students	Needs of alumni, leading to a new alumni webpage and a dedicated campaign
April 2026, online	Students and staff	Feedback on the new homepage four months after launch
October 2026, University of Twente	8 students and 2 staff	A first journey map for learner guidance, covering both human and digital touchpoints

One coordinated approach to surveys

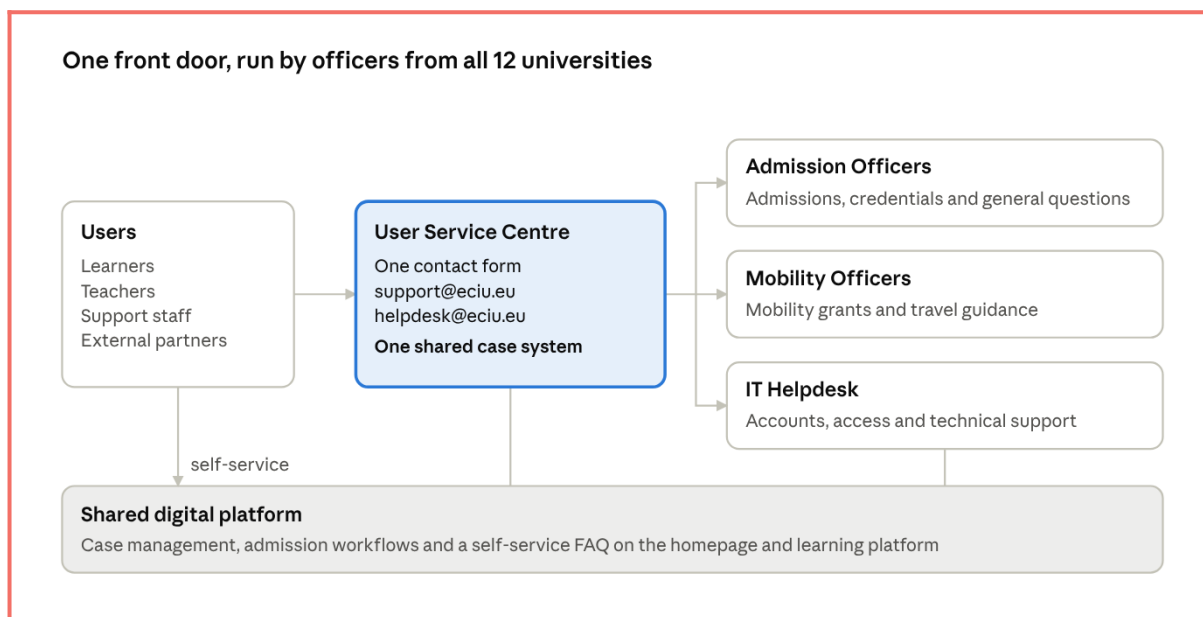
The same students are asked for feedback by many work packages and by their own universities. To avoid survey fatigue, the user experience work package coordinates the main surveys centrally. This lets us ask users for feedback at the right moment and store the data in a central database, so that analyses give a holistic picture and support improvement cycles.

- **After every support case** (since 2023): a three-question survey on overall satisfaction, speed and the solution after contact with the User Service Centre.
- **After every learning opportunity** (since September 2024): one survey designed with the work packages on learner guidance, education, community and communication, sent automatically when a learner completes a challenge or micro-module. Between 2024 and 2026, challenges achieved overall satisfaction of 91–92% and a recommendation rate of 88–90%, while micro-modules achieved overall satisfaction of 89–90% and a recommendation rate of 84–86%. The feedback led to clearer schedules and information on the platform, easier navigation, a better-defined scope for challenges and more networking and social activities.
- **A holistic experience survey** (September–October 2026): designed with an external survey agency and structured along the five journey phases, sent to learners, teachers who offered or took training, and support staff. It was the first 360-degree survey of its kind at ECIU University. The user groups rated their satisfaction between 88% and 93%, and the overall score across all groups (214 respondents) was 91%.

The lesson is simple: one well-designed survey approach, coordinated centrally and shared by several teams, yields better data than several surveys competing for the same users.

4. One front door: the ECIU University User Service Centre

Every ECIU University user has one place to ask for help, no matter which university they come from or which step of the journey they are in. The ECIU University User Service Centre was launched in September 2023 and has run without interruption since.



The ECIU University User Service Centre: one front door, three support teams

Central coordination, shared ownership

The centre combines a virtual one-stop shop, coordinated centrally, with officers at every member university who share equal responsibility for it. Our pilot phase taught us that the quality of service depends directly on ownership, accountability and the capacity universities make available as their contribution and investment. Each university therefore commits staff time in kind, so that the centre is staffed equally and jointly:

Support team	What they handle
Admission Officers	Applications, eligibility checks, enrolment, credentials and general questions
Mobility Officers (since 2024)	Mobility grants and travel guidance, working with the international offices
IT Helpdesk	Accounts, access, authentication and technical problems

The officers also run the matching processes at their own university, so central and local support stay connected. This is the core of our support model: a centralised structure for support and services, with decentralised operations.

The ECIU University User Service Centre rests on four pillars:

1. **Technical infrastructure:** a shared digital workspace on the ECIU University platform.
2. **Human support:** dedicated, accountable teams at every university.
3. **Performance:** clear targets, monitored with data and improved continuously.
4. **Knowledge:** shared knowledge, training and new tools for all officers.

How a request is handled

The service was designed in a workshop with an external agency in April 2023, starting from the student journey and the experience of the Admission Officers.

1. A user submits a request through the central contact form or by email to support@eciu.eu or helpdesk@eciu.eu.
2. A case is created automatically and the user receives an acknowledgement of receipt.
3. The case is assigned to the right team, and the response clock starts.
4. All correspondence is kept in the case record and history log, so any officer can take over and risks are kept to a minimum.
5. When the case is resolved, the user is informed. If the user does not reply within 72 hours, the case is closed.
6. The user is invited to rate the support through the central survey.
7. Officers can turn resolved cases into knowledge articles that help with future questions.

Response targets that tighten over time

The centre is staffed from 08:00 to 20:00 CET, Monday to Friday, covering the time zones of all member universities. Response targets are therefore counted in business hours.

Our original target was a first response within three business days, or 36 business hours. From launch, we asked officers to respond within 32 business hours for admission, mobility and general questions, and within 4 hours for technical questions. Starting slightly stricter than required made the next step easier: since January 2025, the target is 24 business hours for all support requests and 4 hours for IT and technical requests.

Outside business hours, users find answers in the FAQ on the ECIU University homepage and learning platform. By combining human-led support with information in the FAQ and on the website, users have access to information and support 24/7. We want to make this even more accessible and interactive, including AI support to help prioritise and escalate cases and to serve users who prefer self-service.

A community of officers

People are at the centre of our operations and form the operational backbone of ECIU University. Over the years, the officers have formed a community of practice, and the way they cooperate has made the service centre self-sustaining and effective. Admission and Mobility Officers meet online every month to solve problems together, improve processes and give feedback on the platform; the IT



Helpdesk meets weekly to share knowledge, solve common technical issues and set priorities. Each university's team also has an annual one-to-one review, which officers value as a safe space to raise problems and ideas. Over the project, 14 trainings, organised with the education work package, onboarded new officers and refreshed existing ones. These trainings strengthened the support teams' knowledge of the digital infrastructure and enabled them to help improve it. We also built a solid library of materials, such as short demonstration videos, recordings and an operational manual, which remain available to everyone in Teams.

5. Make user experience everyone's job

The biggest change was not a tool but a way of working. At the start, user experience was seen as the task of one work package; by the end, it guided decisions across the alliance. Four mechanisms made that shift.

A coordination team across work packages

From January 2023 to November 2025, a UX Coordination Team met every month. It brought together two groups: user experience and service experts from the member universities, who connected the work to each campus, and all work package leaders plus members of the central team, who connected it across the project. In its first six months, the team mapped the macro-level journey that showed how every work package affects the user. It also served as the place to raise problems that no single work package could solve alone. By 2025, user experience methods had become part of how the work packages worked, and joint meetings and the officers' community had taken over much of the coordination. The team's added value had become smaller, so we chose to focus our limited capacity on activities with a more direct effect for users, such as focus groups and joint meetings. A coordination structure like this is most valuable at the start, to build a shared way of working; once that way of working is in place, it can step back.

Joint meetings on shared problems

The work packages on community (WP5), user experience (WP7) and communication (WP9) found they faced the same practical problems, so they started meeting in person to solve them together, using the journey as their method:

- **Linköping, May 2025:** Admission and Mobility Officers, international relations officers and communication contacts mapped bottlenecks in support and communication along the student journey. Their recommendations helped set priorities for the digital platform.
- **Stavanger, March 2026:** the same groups designed an approach for staying in touch with learners after graduation, by identifying the gaps at the end of the journey.

New roles where the journey showed a gap

The journey also revealed gaps between work packages. The community work package had designed a mobility framework, but no one had the capacity to run its administration. The two work packages agreed to create a new role: Mobility Officers at every university, who joined the User Service Centre

in 2024 and handle mobility grants locally. Similarly, the Teacher Hub, a digital space for teachers, was developed jointly by the work packages on education, community and user experience.

The methods spread

Personas, journeys and focus groups are now also used by the work packages on education, the digital platform and communication. Students, teachers and support staff became contributors rather than recipients: student ambassadors test new designs, support staff help improve the back-office platform, and education coordinators help shape the tools they use to publish learning opportunities.

6. What it delivered

Users are satisfied with both the support they receive and their overall experience, and most want to come back.

A front door that grows with demand

Period	Support cases	Resolved
September–December 2023	215	95.3%
2024	1,124	96.8%
2025	2,226	96.4%
January–October 2026	1,960	93.0% (some still open)
Total	5,525	

Demand roughly doubled each year without a growing backlog. In 2024 and 2025, about 62% of cases received a first response within 4 business hours, about 80% within 8 hours and 94–97% within 24 hours. Technical questions, the largest category with 2,019 cases, were answered fastest, in 3.9 business hours on average. Questions about learning opportunities, the second largest category with 1,020 cases, took longer (12.7 hours on average), because officers often need to check details with the hosting university. That is where we see the most room to improve.

Satisfied users

- **92%** satisfaction with the User Service Centre (357 responses), with 90% for speed and 91% for the solution provided. Quarterly scores ranged from 82% to 100%.
- **91%** satisfaction with the overall ECIU University experience in the holistic survey of 2026 (214 respondents across learners, teachers and support staff).
- **82%** of respondents say they are likely to take part in more ECIU University activities: more learning opportunities, more training, more teaching or more support.
- **A Net Promoter Score of 53:** far more respondents would actively recommend ECIU University to a friend or colleague than would not.

Feedback from the support survey also improved the service itself: first responses became faster, cases reach the right officer more often, and the entry points to support became easier to find.

Better digital experiences

User feedback shaped the new homepage, the restructured pages for learning opportunities, the alumni approach and the next steps in learner guidance (sections 2 and 3). Each of these started with something users told us.

7. Recommendations

1. Put user experience first. Designs, products and processes should always be developed strategically and in a user-centred way. The foundation is a user-centred UX Strategy that is embraced across the organisation and the alliance. User journeys and personas help you understand your user groups, build a meaningful relationship with them throughout their journey and create unique, personalised experiences. The strength of such a strategy is its holistic and systematic approach to user experience, combining methods such as user research, service design and organisational development. Concrete steps:

- a UX Strategy, treated as a living document and updated as you learn;
- personas and a journey map for each identified user group, continuously updated and kept relevant;
- user experience as a standard practice for all stakeholders and across all work packages.

2. Listen to your users. Engaging users constantly and discovering their needs makes a difference. Frequent user research is pivotal for prioritising and implementing developments based on user needs. It helps an organisation make evidence-based decisions instead of relying on assumptions about what users need. Finding the user research method that works for your organisation and making it a standard format helps you run user research both centrally and locally. Concrete steps:

- choose a user research format, such as a focus group or a journey-mapping session, preferably in person, and use it across the alliance partners to build the journey;
- update the user journey based on the evidence from user research;
- prioritise developments in the digital infrastructure based on user needs, not on assumptions and technical requirements alone;
- show users the changes their feedback led to;
- coordinate feedback collection, such as surveys, and store the results in a central database.

3. Offer a seamless service through one front door. The way support services are designed and delivered can make a huge difference to a seamless, user-friendly experience. A model in which all services are reached through one door, a one-stop shop, means users always know where to go for the help they need. To make it a success, it is crucial not only to build the right infrastructure but also to create a shared sense of ownership, responsibility and accountability through the contributions and commitment of the partner institutions. With shared responsibility and committed capacity, a service centre can become effective, efficient and self-sustaining. Concrete steps:

- one front door: a one-stop shop with one accessible contact form for all users and all questions;



- a shared case management system with automatic acknowledgement, assignment and follow-up;
- equal responsibility across the partner institutions, with well-defined support roles and clearly allocated time;
- clear service operating guidelines with instructions and a library of knowledge articles;
- a clear framework of service level agreements and targets to manage user expectations;
- 24/7 access by combining tools, such as an FAQ for questions outside business hours.

4. Keep the people behind the service engaged. The digital infrastructure is where the work takes place, but the people who form the operational backbone are where the magic happens. Keeping the support staff engaged, and helping them grow into an active community of practice, makes a service centre self-sustaining and effective. Investing in continuous knowledge development, a sense of community and active participation in developing the service centre has a huge impact on results. Concrete steps:

- keep close contact with the support teams through regular meetings, trainings and one-to-one reviews;
- create space to exchange knowledge and practice, to strengthen the community and tackle shared problems together;
- involve support staff in co-creating services: they are an important user group too.

