



European University Association

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Credit Transfer and Accumulation – the Challenge for Institutions and Students

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Conclusions and Recommendations for Action

I. CONTEXT

The Salamanca Convention of Higher Education Institutions held in March 2001 defined the goal for European higher education of “organising diversity” of institutions and systems in terms of “...sufficient self regulation to ensure minimum level of cohesion” and ensuring that “efforts towards compatibility should not be undermined by too much variance in the definition and implementation of credits”

Both the Salamanca Convention and the Prague Conference of Education Ministers agreed on the importance of credit systems for both transfer and accumulation, and on the need for progress on these issues.

In Zürich, the 330 participants from European universities, student bodies, national ministries and international organisations agreed on a number of key features of credit transfer and accumulation and on the importance of introducing widely ECTS as the only tried and tested credit system in Europe. At the same time, a number of open issues for further reflection were identified as we move forward towards Graz and Berlin.

II. ECTS: A CREDIT SYSTEM FOR EUROPE

Over the last decade, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) has been successfully introduced in Socrates ERASMUS. Primarily for facilitating European mobility, ECTS has therefore been used on a small scale as a credit transfer system, impacting upon a relatively small number of students. The further development of ECTS into a credit accumulation system at national level, speeded up by the Bologna process, effectively means mainstreaming ECTS as a generalised credit system for

the emerging European Higher Education Area, and thus is of key importance for Europe's higher education institutions and students.

III. OBJECTIVES

As a credit transfer system:

- § to facilitate transfer of students between European countries, and in particular to enhance the quality of student mobility in ERASMUS and thus to facilitate academic recognition
- § to promote key aspects of the European dimension¹ in Higher Education

As an accumulation system:

- § to support widespread curricular reform in national systems
- § to enable widespread mobility both inside systems (at institutional and national level) and internationally
- § to allow transfer from outside the higher education context, thus facilitating Lifelong Learning and the recognition of informal and non-formal learning, and promoting greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes
- § to facilitate access to the labour market
- § to enhance the transparency and comparability of European systems, therefore also to promote the attractiveness of European higher education towards the outside world

As a credit transfer and accumulation system, the key goals of ECTS are:

- § to improve transparency and comparability of study programmes and qualifications
- § to facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications

IV. KEY FEATURES

- § The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a student-centred system based on the *student workload* required to achieve the objectives of a programme, objectives preferably specified in terms of *learning outcomes*.
- § ECTS is based on the convention that 60 credits measure the notional workload of an average full time student during one academic year. This includes the time spent in attending lectures, seminars, independent study, preparation for and taking of examinations, etc

¹ cf the *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community, 1991*: this refers to student mobility; cooperation between institutions; Europe in the curriculum; the central importance of language; the training of teachers; recognition of qualifications and periods of study; the international role of higher education; information and policy analysis; dialogue with the higher education sector.

- § Credits are allocated to all educational and training components of a study programme (such as modules, courses, placements, dissertation work, etc.) and reflect the quantity of work each component requires in relation to the total quantity of work necessary to complete a full year of study in the programme considered.
- § Credits can be obtained only after completion of the work required and appropriate assessment of the learning outcomes achieved.
- § ECTS presupposes use of a minimum number of essential tools, first and foremost respect for the *Learning Agreement* which in terms of student mobility and credit transfer has to be concluded, before departure, between the student and the responsible academic bodies of the two institutions concerned. The use of Learning Agreements should also be extended to home students for registering study options and programmes.²
- § As an accumulation system, ECTS credits are used to describe entire study programmes. The basis for the allocation of credits is the official length of the study programme. There is broad agreement that first cycle degrees lasting three to four years require 180-240 credit points.
- § Credits are not interchangeable automatically from one context to another and can only be applied to the completion of a recognised qualification when they constitute an approved part of a study programme.
- § The Diploma Supplement and ECTS are complementary tools for enhancing transparency, and facilitating recognition.

V. TOWARDS GRAZ AND BERLIN: NEXT STEPS

Europe's Universities

The Zürich Conference demonstrated that Europe's universities recognise the importance of credit transfer and accumulation for the future development of the EHEA and accept their own responsibilities in this process. This means that on the basis of the key features agreed in Zürich institutions need to be able to apply ECTS in a transparent but flexible way taking into account their own specific mission and priorities.

This in turn requires:

- Institutional commitment ensuring that especially the institutional leadership is informed of the objectives and key features of ECTS and its full potential for supporting curricular reform, and not just as a support for international cooperation

² other essential ECTS tools are the Course Catalogue and the Transcript of Records

- Assessing the cost and benefits of developing and expanding ECTS and allocating sufficient human and financial resources for its implementation and proper use
- Developing appropriate instruments to ensure adequate monitoring and evaluation

The European University Association (EUA)

EUA will:

- § Encourage and support its members in the implementation of the Zürich recommendations at institutional level;
- § Through its Socrates supported ECTS monitoring and institutional visit programme follow-up the following open questions identified during discussions in Zürich:
 - ***The role of ECTS in the development of joint degrees***
 - ***The introduction and use of ECTS at doctoral level***
 - ***The ECTS grading scale and national credit systems***
 - ***Linking credits and different levels of study***
 - ***ECTS and quality: as an instrument for promoting transparency***
ECTS facilitates the dialogue on quality in a comparative perspective
- § Take forward the outcomes of the Zürich Conference to the Graz Convention of European Higher Education Institutions (May 2003);
- § Present the recommendations formally to the Bologna Follow-Up Group for inclusion in the preparation of the Berlin Ministers' meeting (September 2003)

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