

BOLOGNA AT THE FINISH LINE

An account of ten years of European higher
education reform



ECTS

Conceived as a part of the ERASMUS programme, primarily as a mobility recognition tool, the ECTS was launched with the ERASMUS programme (launched in 1987). ECTS was thus not launched within the Bologna Process implementation. *»A pilot scheme was launched for the 1989/90 academic year in five subject areas: History, Chemistry, Business Studies, Mechanical Engineering and Medicine«* (Jones and Liempt 2010). Based on mutual trust between institutions in order to ensure quality, ECTS quickly gained momentum.

From the very start of the Bologna Process it was stated that there was going to be a credit system, but it was only later in the process that ECTS emerged as the European standard system. The positive attributes of ECTS were however acknowledged and the concept was described as a ›best-practice‹ tool in terms of credit transfer, in both the Sorbonne and the Bologna declarations. Soon, most countries started adopting the ECTS as the main credit accumulation and transfer system. In the 2001-communication however, the ECTS was still not adopted as the European standard system, but the 2001-communication stressed that qualifications should be: *»supported by a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible, providing both transferability and accumulation functions [...]«* (2001:2). It is important to note that ministers emphasised the credit system as tool for transferability and accumulation. Originally ECTS was envisaged solely as a transfer system and it was only later that it developed into an accumulation system.

An important Bologna seminar on this topic was held in Zurich in October, 2002 titled ›Credit transfer and Accumulation: The Challenge for Institutions and Students‹. This seminar was important in terms of recognising ECTS as the standard European system. In 2003 the ministers noted that: *»[...] ECTS is increasingly becoming a generalised basis for the national credit systems«* (Communiqué 2003:4). The ministers stressed that the ECTS system should evolve further as an accumulation system, which should be applied ›consistently‹ in the European Area of Higher Education. This was also stressed in the recommendations from the general rapporteur Prof Pavel Zgaga (2003).

The implementation of the ECTS system appeared to run smoothly in the following years and the stocktaking report (McKenna et.al. 2005) had very positive comments on the status of implementation on this topic. The ministerial communiqué of the same year does not mention ECTS, underlining the impression that ECTS at that time was *en route* to being fully implemented within a few years. This was however not the case.

Learning outcomes and the entire outcome-based education paradigm rely heavily on the proper link with curricula and ECTS. Unless learning outcomes are clearly linked with credits (ECTS), the actual use of learning outcomes will be limited. This link is underlined as a major challenge in the Trends IV publication: *»However, it is still often perceived as a tool to translate national systems into a European language,*

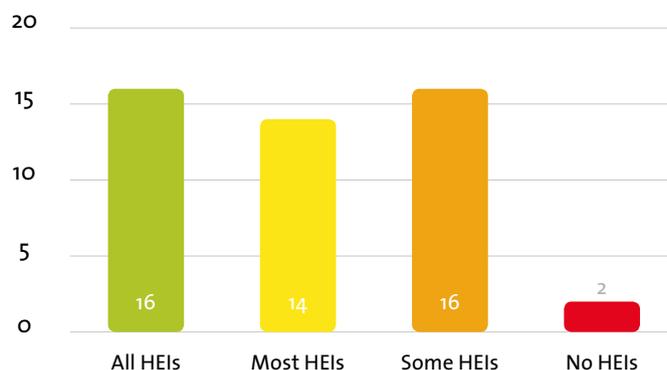
rather than as a central feature of curriculum design» (Reichert and Tauch 2005:5). ESU also notes this challenge: »Especially the student workload is neglected, [...]. Therefore there is the danger that ECTS cannot be used properly, neither for transfer nor for accumulation purposes« (ESU 2005:5). As ESU pointed out two years later »[...] key features are not properly implemented« (ESU 2007:7). The ministerial communiqué of the same year also dealt with this issue by stating that »efforts should concentrate [...] on proper implementation of ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload« (Communiqué 2007:2).

The major challenges facing the implementation of ECTS have been consistent in recent years and it is a widespread impression that central elements of the ECTS system are only partially implemented or not implemented at all. The 2009 Stocktaking notes that »[...] there are two main challenges in fully implementing ECTS: measuring credits in terms of student workload and linking them with learning outcomes« (Rauhvargers 2009:10).

De facto involvement of all stakeholders is important, in order to bridge the gap between promises made and what materialises in practice. This was stressed at the Bologna seminar in Moscow (Bologna Process 2008).

fig. 6—Linking credits with learning outcomes (number of countries giving each answer).

(Rauhvargers 2009:79)



ESU’s member unions also paint a somewhat grim picture when it comes to the implementation of ECTS. There is an overall inclination towards superficial implementation, without the link to workload and learning outcomes. Several countries implement ECTS without linking it properly to cycle descriptors and competences. Quite a few member unions have pointed to the faulty implementation of ECTS as one of the main challenges facing the Bologna Process at the national level, in their responses to the BAFL questionnaire. There is also widespread concern that unless this is immediately addressed, students will necessarily face a dysfunctional system that undermines other elements of Bologna reform—notably

learning outcomes. ESU has been concerned about this development for some time: *»while ECTS should allow flexibility in the way the education paths are built, the type of implementation observed sometimes undermines that possibility, especially at the institutional level«* (ESU 2009:92). A tool which was originally conceived to enhance mobility is now seen as an obstacle to increased flexibility and mobility. This is linked to diploma supplements and the recognition of degrees.

2.3 CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It is a clear trend that both cycles and ECTS are on the way to being implemented. However, in order to fully tap into the potential of the Bologna Process, further focus on implementation is needed. This is particularly true when it comes to ECTS, since there is much work yet to be done linking credits with descriptor and learning outcomes. ESU observes a clear trend that ECTS is durable. ESU also notes that the focus for the near future should be to implement and fully realise the potential of both the degree structure and the ECTS.

One of the major challenges facing doctoral candidates is their ambiguous status. When being considered as either students, early stage researchers or employees, the variations in definitions make it difficult to create unified policies, owing to the heterogeneous nature of the group. The difference in definitions is also reflected in the way doctoral candidates are represented. Some national students' unions represent doctoral candidates, but not all national unions do. In addition, EURODOC represents doctoral candidates and the cooperation between EURODOC and ESU is therefore important. This is becoming increasingly important, because the third cycle is facing further reform and implementation.

2.4 CONCLUSIONS

Looking at how major areas of the reforms have been adopted at a national level, it is important to remember how different the European system of higher education is now, especially compared to the situation at the end of the nineties. Both on the issues of ECTS and degree structure there has been widespread reform and substantial elements of the initial objectives have been met. There are however reasons for concern:

- When it comes to ECTS, several national students' unions and other stakeholders (notably EUA), remark that the implementation of the essential elements has been superficial. This is particularly worrying when linking ECTS to workload and learning outcomes; the latter being essential to move towards true student-centred learning
- The first two cycles have been widely implemented, but there are still challenges concerning admission to the second cycle for students, even within their own field of study.
- Several countries have kept their old degree system whilst introducing the three-cycle system. This has led to confusion and superficial implementation.
- Reforms in degree structure are not matched with reforms of curricula and teaching and there are thus substantial elements of the Bologna Process that are not implemented.
- The third cycle has not yet been sufficiently integrated within the Bologna Process. In this respect, further action is mandatory.

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3 RECOGNITION

Recognition is a very important dimension of the Bologna process, regardless of whether it involves degrees, competences, or the acknowledgement of prior learning outcomes. Ultimately, recognition is crucial to mobility, to life-long learning, to access, to employability and—ultimately—to the very existence of a coherent European Higher Education Area.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Recognition of qualifications as a process, began long before Bologna. Of course, the initial levels of discussion were based around the recognition of degrees and qualifications, that were needed for fostering of academic and professional mobility.

Attempts to streamline the process culminated in *The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*, which was developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO and adopted by national representatives in April 1997 (Council of Europe 1997). The Convention—usually referred to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention—has since been gradually ratified by almost all Bologna signatories, making the recognition of qualifications one of the few Bologna dimensions that is regulated within a formal agreement.

3.2 OVERVIEW

RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

The Lisbon Recognition convention set out the main principles behind the process of recognition of attained qualifications:

- The concept of ›substantial differences‹: countries which ratified the Convention have been obliged to recognise foreign qualifications directly, unless ›substantial differences‹ between a foreign and a home qualification can be proven.
- Holders of qualifications issued in one country shall have adequate access to an assessment of these qualifications in another country.
- The responsibility to demonstrate that an application does not fulfil the relevant requirements lies with the body undertaking the assessment.

- Each country shall recognise qualifications—whether for access to higher education, for periods of study or for higher education degrees—as similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system, unless it can show that there are substantial differences between its own qualifications and the qualifications for which recognition is sought.
- All countries shall encourage their higher education institutions to issue the Diploma Supplement to their students, in order to facilitate recognition. The Diploma Supplement is an instrument developed jointly by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO that aims to describe the qualification in an easily understandable way and relates it to the higher education system within which it was issued.

The national stocktaking reports show that the compliance of national legislation with the Lisbon Recognition Convention has increased over time, but progress has also been slow, considering the fact that the Convention preceded the Bologna process itself. What is lacking however, is a coherent approach on the issue of the recognition of qualifications across EHEA, as the approaches differ from country to country. This has been visible both in the National Action Plans and in the persistence of problems of recognition signalled by mobile students in many Bologna signatory countries.

There are also problems in implementing the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and its subsidiary texts at institutional level, facilitated recognition being sometimes viewed as a reduction of institutional autonomy. This problem persists despite the advantage brought about by the recognition of foreign qualifications, which would likely bolster both mobility and cross-border cooperation. Some countries have tackled the issue at institutional level, by including institutional recognition procedures in the list of aspects evaluated within both internal and external QA.

As shown in the *Bologna With Student Eyes* 2005 publication, the existence of the ENIC-NARIC network—with roots dating as early as 1984—has also brought valuable support for the recognition of foreign degrees and periods of study, especially in the cases in which they act as the decision-making body (ESU 2005:32).

RECOGNITION OF PERIODS OF STUDIES

One of the areas in which unions have signalled a repeated problem linked with recognition, is in connection with periods of study abroad that occur via mobility schemes (ESU 2009:70). Recognition of studies is a major problem for mobile students, and often acts as a discouraging factor for students who want to conduct part of their studies in a different institution. This is especially problematic if there have been prior cases of students having to repeat parts of various programmes due to recognition problems.

Indeed, there are signs that: *»the level of problems associated with the recognition of credits for students returning from a period of study abroad remains stubbornly high. 47% of institutions admit that some students have problems with the recognition of their credits gained abroad, an insignificant decrease since 2003. 48% venture to state that none of their students have such problems, which is likewise only a small improvement from the Trends III response (in 2003)«* (Crosier 2007:40).

The BWSE survey noted that students in numerous countries face continuous problems in getting their periods of study abroad recognised.

THE DIPLOMA SUPPLEMENT

One of the most visible tools for the recognition of qualifications developed within the Bologna context is the Diploma Supplement. After being cited in the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the Diploma Supplement became part of the Bologna declaration under the action line of *»Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system«* (1999:3). The necessity of the Diploma Supplement was stressed in the Prague Communiqué (2001), but in the Berlin Communiqué (2003), a set of specific objectives followed the Diploma Supplement; namely that every student graduating from 2005 should receive it automatically and free of charge, issued in a widely spoken European language. Ministers also reaffirmed that institutions and employers should actually use the Diploma Supplement to foster employability and ensure academic recognition for further studies. In the London Communiqué (2007), Ministers called for a coherent implementation at the national and institutional level regarding the Diploma Supplement, among other tools for recognition.

ESU has supported the Diploma Supplement as an instrument for creating transparency, supporting mobility and promoting employability in Europe, following the objectives from the Berlin Communiqué. Recognition of qualifications and the promotion of mobility between higher education institutions in Europe could also be improved through the use of the Diploma Supplement (ESU 2008). In the case where a student has accumulated more credits than needed for the degree, these credits must also be recorded and should be enclosed in the Diploma Supplement (ESU 2007a).

»The third cycle studies are diverse across Europe and the links between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area face several challenges. In the eyes of ESU it would be beneficial for the graduates from doctoral studies to receive a Diploma Supplement. This would improve the employability of doctoral candidates by providing transparency about their qualifications for employers« (ESU 2007b).

Bologna With Student Eyes shows that, from the point of view of the national students' unions, most students in the European Higher Education Area receive the Diploma Supplement, but that the main concern is that there is a generally low level of awareness of the Diploma Supplement by employers and the general public.

Overall however, measurement of results of the 2005, 2007 and 2009 *Bologna With Student Eyes* publications shows considerable progress from the very low level of usage of Diploma Supplements at the middle of the last decade.

National students' unions across Europe have also identified problems; with the Diploma Supplement is not issued automatically to all students, or it is not free of charge or is only issued in a local language. Another problem imposed on the students is the quality of the Diploma Supplement, which is not consistent and is dependent on the individual institution.

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a hotly debated issue in some countries, with the overall situation at European level being very diverse. There are few countries that have comprehensive national policies on RPL, and it is often at institutional level that this issue is tackled, with diverging practices in different fields of study. In theory, a switch to outcome-based learning and the definition of qualifications on the basis of learning outcomes, creates the premise for the recognition of prior learning to take shape. However, there is still a lot of opposition and in many countries there is a stance of recognising only those learning outcomes that are achieved in an institutional setting.

However, different trends can be identified across Europe, from the perspective of the students' unions. The following are mapped out, as based on the 2007 and 2009 *Bologna With Student Eyes* publications:

Countries where recognition of prior learning is possible and functioning

In some countries procedures for the recognition of prior learning are in place, facilitating life-long learning, and showing an open attitude towards outcomes-based and defined education. Students in some countries (examples include Sweden, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands and France) are able to get recognition for prior and alternative learning within public institutions, as a result of the existence of national policies on the issue. The procedures that are used for RPL vary from country to country. For example, out of twenty-five ESU unions which have reported some form of RPL in their countries, in 2009, eleven have reported that fees are attached to the recognition process.

Countries where RPL is accessible only partially or at institutional level

In some countries, (examples include the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and Belgium), progress has been made at the institutional level, and RPL is generally part of the public discussion on education (BWSE, ESU 2009). Whilst this creates the premise for a generalisation of RPL at the national level, at the present, students might still face problems in having prior learning experiences recognised in all higher education institutions. This lack of consistency means that potential students face differentiated recognition of their prior learning achievements, based on the institutions they apply for. Furthermore, the scope of RPL in these countries tends to be rather limited in scope, and to be largely used to facilitate access to particular programmes.

Countries where RPL is difficult and/or very limited

As previous *Bologna With Student Eyes* surveys have shown, students in most Central, Southern and Eastern European countries cannot expect much in the way of prior learning, as there is no national framework regulating it and institutions themselves have made very little headway on the issue of RPL (ESU 2009).

In many of these countries, even if RPL exists at the institutional level, the scope of prior learning recognition is much reduced, with usage often being directed as a waiver for entry conditions onto some programmes, or as a source for extra credits in the same programmes.

Methodological problems in the definition of and research on RPL, among national students' unions

A particular note is struck by the fact that there is no particular definition of what recognition of prior learning is. As such, ESU has used, in all of its previous *Bologna With Student Eyes* publications, references such as the availability of RPL in the legal context, or in institutional practice. However, many of the national unions have had problems with identifying the level at which RPL was common practice in their national setting. This indicates that there is a low level of information about RPL procedures, and a lack of consistency in tackling the issue. The controversial statute of RPL is further evidenced by the fact that there is no generally accepted high-quality way of implementing the process, either among policymakers or students.

Something else to note is the increasing perception that the recognition of prior learning is no longer deeply linked with the development of a comprehensive national qualifications framework. Indeed it can be seen that there is only limited correlation between the countries that have functioning National Qualification Frameworks in place and those that have RPL procedures set up. In the *Bologna With Student Eyes* 2009 survey, only fifteen percent of interviewed unions identified RPL as part of the development of qualification frameworks (ESU 2009).

3.3 CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

There needs to be a clear understanding of the fact that without proper recognition procedures for all types of learning, the mainstream goals of the Bologna process—or common European goals of increasing mobility, inter-institutional cooperation and increasing access to education—are going to be difficult to achieve.

ESU believes that for a truly social education, which reflects the needs of society, the recognition of prior learning is a particularly enticing tool in developing improved access to life-long learning and in assuring that no form of learning goes unnoticed in the formal settings of education.

3.4 CONCLUSIONS

Overall, recognition is older than the Bologna process itself. It has benefitted from a 'head start', but still faces many obstacles, despite the fact that many Bologna action lines (such as quality assurance and qualification frameworks) have created mechanisms that should enhance trust and streamline procedures.

- The recognition of studies has progressed considerably, but there are many challenges ahead. Students often cite this as one of the major barriers to mobility.
- The recognition of prior learning is a valuable tool for life-long learning, recognition of studies, outcomes-based learning and access to degrees. Lack of acknowledgement in some countries constitutes a major obstacle to the development of a socially cohesive education system.
- Recognition of prior learning is understood differently from country to country and is often used within a limited scope.
- The Diploma Supplement is a key achievement of the Bologna Process and remains absolutely necessary for all students graduating from higher education institutions in Europe.

3.5 REFERENCES

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