

BOLOGNA WITH STUDENT EYES 2009

The European Students' Union



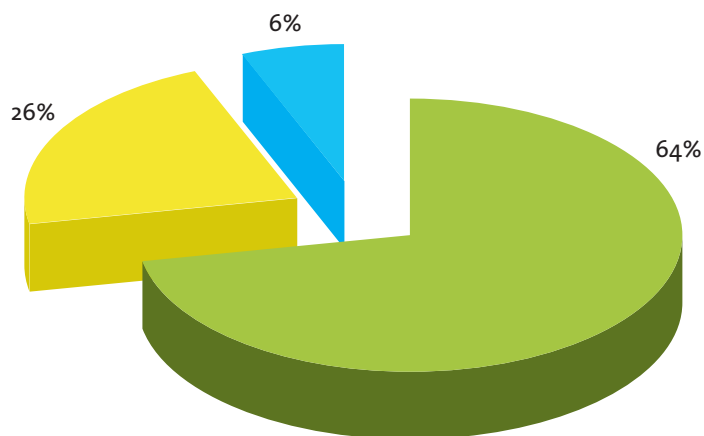
It seems that even in cases where unions support the idea of reforming the degree structures, they remain critical about many of the elements of it, as well as the way the reform has been undertaken at the national level. The answers provided below on the way credits are understood and used, and their negative effects, help to explain this position and constitute a reason for great concern and attention.

7.7 CREDIT SYSTEMS

ECTS has become the credit system of the European Higher Education Area, adopted nationally by most countries. There are however still 6 countries that use other credits systems because these were implemented before the Bologna Process itself (e.g., the Baltic states and the UK), while others were in the process of reforming them during the time of this survey (Spain). Two other unions were unclear regarding this, as their system was undergoing reform at that particular time.

fig. 27—ECTS adopted by national law as the credit system for the higher education institutions

- ECTS in the law
- Other credit systems
- Unclear



Public authorities took leadership of the process of instituting ECTS as the credit system and defined its features within a regulatory framework. These legal provisions are mainly either a definition of ECTS credits and/or the value for an ECTS credit in terms of workload, fixing the workload per ECTS credit usually within a range of 24 to 30 hours. Countries themselves use different ranges according to the ECTS User Guide, allowing some flexibility for institutions to elaborate on their study programmes and allocate workload between the different modules or courses. Officially, the majority of countries use ECTS as a credit transfer and accumulation system, although significant gaps can be observed between theory and practice according to national unions of students.

7.8 STUDENT WORKLOAD

When it comes to the analysis of progress regarding measuring student workload, it seems again that there has been little evolution. The BWSE 2007 report stated that *a correct measuring of student workload, being a core principle of ECTS, has proven to be the most significant problem in the implementation of ECTS*²³ and the answers provided for this edition's analysis reiterate the same concern.

Although 92% of the respondents that had ECTS in place declared that, in their country, this was formally based on workload, most of the unions commented that this was more in theory than in practice. According to the ECTS Users' Guide, *the estimation of workload should be regularly refined through monitoring and student feedback*²⁴. However only 12% (4 countries) of unions reported that the workload was being estimated and re-adapted according to student surveys, which is practically the same situation identified in the BWSE 2007. The unions from Denmark, Finland, Flemish community of Belgium and the Netherlands report that the calculation of workload has been generalised. In these countries, the workload of courses and modules has been estimated and is regularly readapted according to surveys completed by students. Nevertheless, the respondents reflect that some improvements are both possible and needed, such as the way students are asked to estimate their workload. There are other cases in which calculation occurs on the basis of the policy of individual higher education institutions: some collect data systematically and others continue to base ECTS on teachers' estimation of the workload.

Unions from different countries (e.g., France, Poland and Serbia) confirm that ECTS credits are often assigned to modules on the basis of their prestige or importance, disregarding any estimation or calculation of the workload. In Georgia, Poland and Romania, contact hours are still the main method for establishing credits and in cases like the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden there were attempts to translate old credit systems based on contact hours into ECTS through the use of a formula, without proper measurement of the real student workload. This apparently remains one of the misconceptions of the idea of ECTS credits that they should be clearly associated with workload. Only through that can ECTS be used as a means for planning the curricula in a way that is feasible for students to achieve the desired learning outcome in the correct timeframe, and therefore be a tool for the promotion of student attainment and the completion of studies.

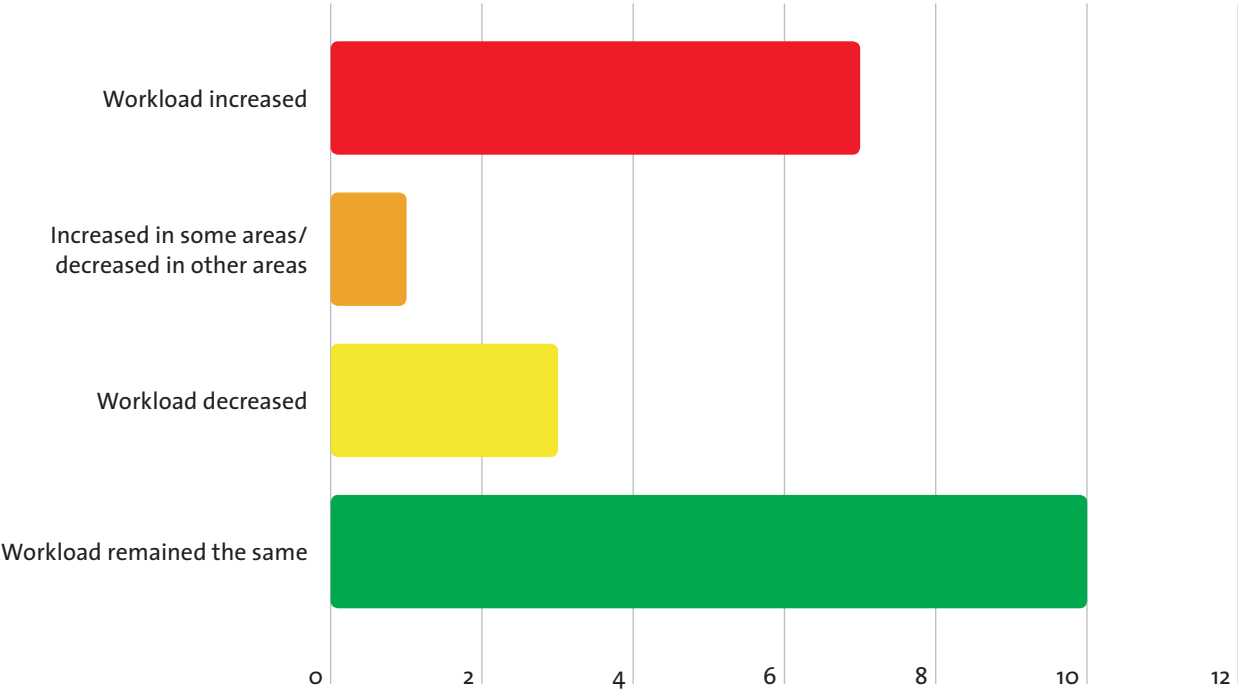
²³ ESIB, *BWSE 2007*, p. 38.

²⁴ EU Commission, *ECTS User Guide 2009*, p.10.

Following the introduction of ECTS, most unions observed that the workload has more or less remained the same, whilst a few have commented that it has increased. Only in three countries (Belgium—French community, Italy and Serbia) has there been a perceived decrease in workload. In the case of Italy, it was noted that the workload has decreased per module, but the overall number of assessments increased dramatically in many cases. It seems that the poor concept of learning outcomes has given ground to the multiplication of assessment procedures, namely exams. This is the case of a perverse effect resulting from incorrect implementation which has led to an increase in workload. However, it should be noted

fig. 28—Changes to student workload after the implementation of ECTS

that several other unions chose not to answer this question. It is a fact that, when the reform is yet to occur or did occur some years ago, they had no experience of this, sufficient reporting or means of assessing the effect of ECTS in terms of overall student workload.



Some other unions also state that curricular reform, frequently disconnected from the introduction of ECTS, had the effect of increasing student workload. Estonia is a clear example of this, but Romania also claims that ECTS had quite different effects in terms of student workload, depending on the scientific area and institution. Nevertheless, some other examples pointed out don't really refer to ECTS credits but to other factors such as the introduction of semesters and of new learning methods.

7.9 LEARNING OUTCOMES IN THE EHEA—TOWARDS STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING?

The definition of learning outcomes is still a rather big challenge for the higher education institutions in most countries in Europe. Although several unions state that this is a mandatory element of the reform, that higher education institutions should define learning outcomes and that debates have started, the large majority also concur that the concept is not used or is poorly understood.

Nine respondents said that no outcome approach was instituted in their country and an additional 4 claimed that it depended significantly on the higher education institutions. Although a majority of 15 respondents claim that descriptors have been created, their main reference is “learning outcomes” for the degree or cycle level. The Dublin Descriptors are mentioned several times and quite often cycle descriptors, “learning outcomes” and course or teacher objectives/expectations are referred to without distinction. It seems that the true sense of learning outcomes is yet to be established in debates held at the national and institutional levels. Amongst these positive respondents, at least 3 highlighted the fact that ECTS had not implemented; and 4 other respondents were very concerned with stating that they only meant cycle descriptors instituted in legislation without significant impact in terms of institutional behaviour or concepts.

In fact, defining the learning outcomes of a course or module is still not widespread in Europe. In only around 33% of countries, there are institutions that define their courses and modules in terms of learning outcomes (mainly in Northern Europe), whilst around 50% defined degrees in terms of learning outcomes. This clearly indicates that the implementation of ECTS has been done in a very formal manner without reference to concrete curricular reform and reconsideration of the role of students and of the institution in the learning process.

On the contrary, teacher-centred provision is the dominant feature of the curricula and some confusion between accountability (stating clearly what the learning objectives are, and providing prescriptive checklists of competences) and a real student-centred approach (designing a module with a view to spe-

cific learning outcomes and assessing their real achievement) is sometimes also present in the answers presented by respondents.

A very interesting element is the fact that one of the respondents stated that the introduction of the Diploma Supplement itself promoted the discussion of the concept of learning outcomes, although again these were defined in terms of cycles. Two other respondents also mentioned that the introduction of qualifications frameworks in the future would allow for further clarification of the meaning of degrees and elaboration of the respective learning outcomes at module level.

7.10 IMPACTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF A POOR IMPLEMENTATION OF ECTS

The feedback from the national unions is quite clear: 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.

Mention has to be made of the number of ECTS that a student can take every year. The agreed reference point for an academic year of a full-time student is 60 ECTS in Europe. This enables students and academics to plan their year and protect the former from being overburdened in terms of workload. However, this reference point is sometimes taken both as the limit a student can enrol for, and the minimum a student must attend, which has consequences for the way students might plan their degree. In Denmark, students were unhappy about being prevented from progressing between cycles that are interlinked in case a single credit point is still missing. But a worse situation happens in the cases of a very rigid implementation of the same cycle, where students cannot progress from one year to the next without having all their credit points taken. France and Norway are good examples of countries where failing some modules is compatible with progressing to the next year and exams from those modules can be redone in the following year.

These regulations are particularly important not only when it comes to the most effective use of the student's time but also regarding the concept of student-centred learning. Unless there is a clear chain between the different modules that prevents them from being taken as the student sees fit, a maximum amount of flexibility should be allowed regarding the time in which the module is taken. Such flexibility has also implications in terms of the policies regarding the social dimension, since governments and institutions are more commonly linking the achievement of credit points with the allocation of funding and support for students.

In addition, in terms of the validation of prior learning there are signs of significant conservatism from the institutions. Although one can witness that the recognition of prior learning, regardless of its nature (most commonly formal and non-formal) is becoming more commonly used, leading to mechanisms for access into, and credit within, study programmes and exempting students from taking several modules and their credits points, it is also becoming clear that there is a move to limit these mechanisms to a maximum of ECTS. This is further explored in the chapter dedicated to lifelong learning.

7.11 ECTS FOR ACCUMULATION PURPOSES?

Achieving the learning outcomes expected should lead to the award of a degree built upon those same outcomes. However, as identified continuously by ESU and other reports, this remains to be established. In fact, many respondents were explicit about the fact that a majority of institutions continue to rely on traditional end-of-year examinations to assess student knowledge. As the assessment of learning outcomes is required for credits to be awarded, this raises questions about how profoundly programmes have been restructured when introducing ECTS. Trends V already raised this question and mentioned the existence of a group of institutions *which have so far engaged in more cosmetic and superficial implementation—often to meet the basic requirements of compliance with new legislation*²⁵. It seems that, contradicting the best expectations regarding the Bologna Process, a process of transformation of higher education purely driven by legislative reform is not sufficient to ensure the creation of a student-centred learning concept of education.

7.12 ECTS AS A TRANSFER TOOL

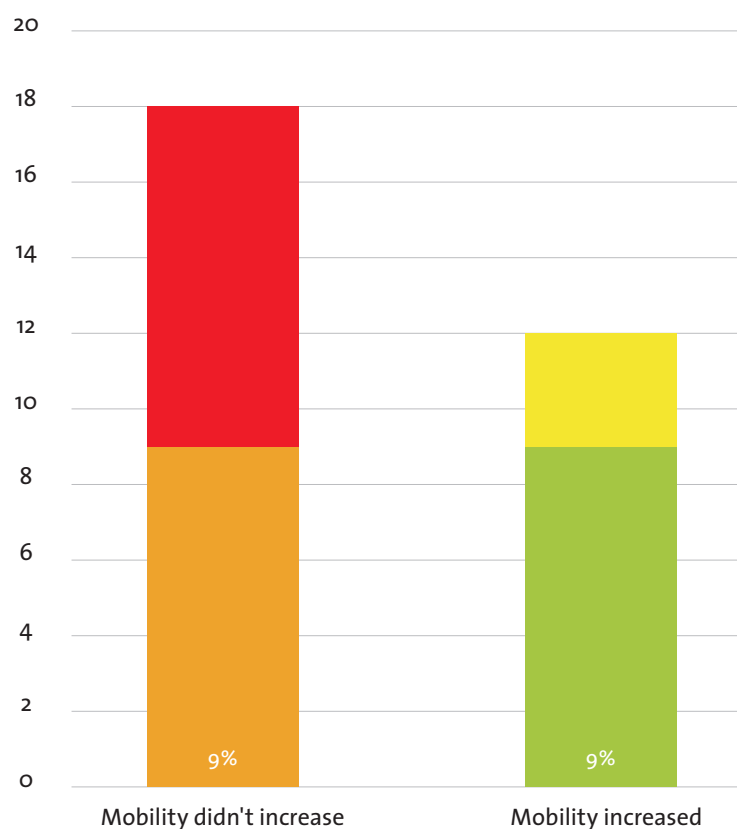
The results are usually more positive when it comes to the use of ECTS as a transfer tool, since this was its primary purpose on creation and institutions have grown accustomed to dealing with it. In fact, the majority of respondents (18) claim that no outstanding issues happen in cases of Erasmus mobility, when a learning agreement provides the framework for this period of studies abroad. The fact that ECTS is in place doesn't necessarily imply an increase in the overall level of outward mobility, as half of these respondents (9) also signal that there was no significant increase in mobility, despite the fact that the credits used would have been recognised. In those cases, the socio-economic conditions of students and an academic culture that depreciates horizontal mobility are some of the explanations provided. On the

²⁵ EUA, *Trends V*, p. 21.

other hand, 40% of respondents claim that students still face several problems when trying to recognise their studies abroad, and although 10% mention that mobility has increased in spite of these problems, the remainder are clear about the lack of an increase in the levels of outward mobility. A correlation between the two indicators becomes clearer in this case.

fig. 29—Use of ECTS for transfer and recognition of studies abroad and its effect on mobility

- No major problems identified in the use of ECTS and mobility increased
- Major problems identified in the use of ECTS but mobility increased
- No major problems identified in the use of ECTS but mobility didn't increase
- Major problems identified in the use of ECTS and mobility didn't increase



It should be noted that, both in terms of the group of respondents identifying many challenges in ensuring the recognition of ECTS and in the ones claiming that students don't usually face big problems, several real cases of difficulties were mentioned as examples. Despite the anecdotal nature of these statements, they are relevant as they allow an understanding of the fact that it is sometimes not a systemic issue, but rather a problem of the attitude of some institutions regarding the learning achieved elsewhere. In many other cases, the curricula is analysed instead of the learning outcomes of the modules and courses, and at least two unions claim that requests for recognition have to go through a round of appeals until they

are accepted. And if it becomes clear that institutions are mostly suspicious of the quality of the education taken abroad, and there is already a tendency for building networks that somewhat limit the range of students' opportunities to become mobile, there are also cases in which mobility within the same country faces exactly the same obstacles.