ECTS compatible Credit Transfer and Accumulation Systems

Preamble

ESIB - The National Unions of Students in Europe has existed since 1982 to promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level, and towards all relevant organisations and institutions. ESIB currently has 46 member organisations from 35 countries.

Introduction

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)1 was introduced as a tool within the framework of the ERASMUS/SOCRATES programme between 1988 and 1995. It was aimed that this would facilitate the recognition of the courses for exchange students when returning to their home institution (credit transfer). However, within the Bologna Process it became a tool that should be used for all students, not only for the purposes of credit transfer but also for the purpose of accumulation. It should however be noted that the implementation of ECTS has been fairly problematic in most countries. In a lot of countries ECTS is implemented only superficially. ESIB regards the correct measuring of student workload, being a core principle of ECTS, as the biggest problem in the implementation of ECTS. A learning outcome approach is still not widely used and ECTS is not always fully used for accumulation. With this policy paper ESIB wants to outline what is essential for the successful and proper implementation of ECTS.

Usefulness of a credit system

The use of a credit system can have various advantages, both academically and in the social dimension. Credit systems can be beneficial for achieving more transparency and compatibility between different educational structures. The current situation is often based upon the teaching input being the reference for the recommended duration of a study programme. The actual student workload that is necessary to successfully complete part of a study programme is often neglected. ECTS should change this into a system whereby the latter is taken as the reference for stipulating the duration of a study programme, the result should be that the duration can become more realistic. A credit system can facilitate recognition procedures and can also open the possibility for flexible learning paths and thus facilitates the access to higher education for non-traditional learners. By recognising experiences of prior learning and thus already constituting part of a programme, credit systems can facilitate the access to higher education. In order to achieve the advantages certain criteria must be fulfilled thus ensuring a proper implementation and use of a credit system. ESIB therefore welcomes the use of a credit system and stresses the importance of its proper implementation. ESIB also welcomes the use of credits as a transfer and an accumulation system. In order to achieve more compatibility of the use of credit systems ESIB calls upon the governments in Europe to introduce the ECTS as the credit system or in case of existing national credit systems to make them compatible with the ECTS under the conditions laid out in this document. In the following the term ECTS refers to both ECTS and an ECTS compatible credit transfer and accumulation system.

General requirements for the ECTS

Legal framework

The use of ECTS can only enhance the transparency and facilitate recognition if the ECTS is understood as one system, which is used in a consistent way in all HEIs in the countries. Therefore the introduction of ECTS has to be legislated for. Furthermore, in order to guarantee coherence it is necessary that also certain criteria are stipulated by law. However, the HEIs are responsible for the implementation of the ECTS. It is essential that ECTS is used for all study programmes.

Allocation of credits
The allocation of credits should be done by the HEI body on the departmental/faculty level, which is responsible for the structure of programmes and courses. In this body student and teachers must be equally represented. The allocation of credits should follow the top-down principle, meaning that the number of credits, which can be achieved in one year of studies, should be distributed along the different parts of the programme for the respective year. The course units for which ECTS points are given should in general not be too long, e.g. they should not last more than one semester or an academic year. In case one doesn't finish a study programme credits already obtained must be accumulated and recognised by HEI or other recognition authorities.
Taking the workload as the basis is a change of paradigms for some educational system but is essential in order to facilitate transparency and create a student-centred approach to teaching and learning. The workload must be based on the investment of time in learning, not only in contact hours. This implies that all activities are taken into account, not only the time students spend in lectures or seminars but also the time they need for individual learning and the preparation of examinations etc.. In order to measure the workload the use of teachers' experiences can be beneficial. However, it is absolutely essential that the measuring of the workload is the result of an evaluation based on students' questionnaires and thus based on real figures and not just on teachers' estimations. These evaluations have to take place regularly and the workload must be adjusted to their results. It must be precisely documented how the workload is measured.
Credits must be assigned for all parts of a study programme. This includes also internships, excursions etc..
The ECTS is just a tool for the quantitative measuring for the student's workload. The awarding of credits should only be linked to the completion of a part of the study programme. It must not be connected to the exact achievements of the student and therefore not take the individual grades into account.
There are different levels in the study programmes concerning the difficulty and the required competencies. Nonetheless, since the ECTS is only for quantitative purposes and the workload resembles the time necessary to achieve a certain learning outcome, no further distinction between the types of study effort regarding the number of awarded ECTS points should be made.
However, it is necessary that the ECTS is used throughout all post-secondary education, i.e. all higher education and VET.

Learning Outcomes
Learning outcomes are the second core principle of ECTS. Whereas ECTS credits represent student workload, all courses/modules of a study programme should be described in terms of learning outcomes to reach transparency of their content. Learning outcomes represent the basis of any study programme and should be clearly defined before the programme starts.
The principle of learning outcomes is of utmost importance to facilitate a shift from teaching to learning. A description in terms of learning outcomes must refer to what a learner is able to do upon completion of a course or module. It must not refer to input criteria, such as what exactly is taught and in which mode of teaching.

Information / coordination
The lack of information, which still presents a problem, has to be solved. A sufficient number of people have to be responsible to inform about everything connected to the ECTS. The institutional and departmental coordinators have to advice and counsel students on the ECTS. Information about the ECTS should also be accessible via the institutions' website.
The coordination in the countries and the HEI must be improved. Therefore training seminars for the coordinators are essential.

Compatibility with non-European Credit systems

In order to facilitate mobility and recognition beyond the borders of Europe it should in the long run be envisaged to make the different credit systems used around the world compatible with each other. However, until the ECTS is not properly implemented in Europe the focus should lie on achieving this.

ECTS as a Transfer System

The use of ECTS as a transfer system implies some specific requirements.
The ECTS for itself is not more than a tool for the description of study achievements in terms of student workload (credit number) and learning outcomes. Course descriptions have to be issued both in English and the language used in the courses. The course description should be available on beforehand and automatically issued once a student leaves the HEI as an annex to the transcript of records. Also the transcript of records has to be issued automatically by the HEI once a student leaves it. This transcript of records has to describe the individual achievements of the student. The transcripts of records should be issued following a standardised model. Furthermore the HEIs and the student have to sign a learning agreement, thus guaranteeing the academic recognition of course units, if no legal framework guaranteeing recognition exists. To allow students to setup a Learning Agreement and to prevent any unnecessary later changes, the Course Catalogue has to be created and published in due advance. However all of this can and needs to be overcome by a proper implementation and use of ECTS.
The ECTS is to be seen in direct connection with the Diploma Supplement and therefore they should be introduced together.

Recognition

The recognition of credits must be guaranteed. Within one HEI the recognition of credits must be granted automatically. Between HEIs recognition of credits is automatic when it concerns a student that is mobile in the framework of a mobility programme. If the student is a free mover then recognition depends of the appreciation of the receiving HEI.
The student nevertheless must have certain procedural guarantees. The number of credits they earned in another HEI cannot be questioned. A HEI can only judge for which of its courses the credits are recognised. Furthermore the student has a right to fair and equal recognition of his credits. The criteria used have to be public and objective. Refusal of recognition can only happen on the grounds of substantial difference and the burden of proof lies with the receiving HEI. The student must have the right to appeal. Decisions on recognition must be made within a reasonable time limit specified beforehand by the competent recognition authority. ESIB reinforces its support of the principles agreed upon in the Lisbon Recognition Convention and calls for their implementation.
Decisions on recognition should be based on learning outcomes, including interdisciplinary skills. Only a significant difference of the learning outcomes, as defined and described by the HEI awarding credits for which recognition is sought, from those learning outcomes described for the courses, for which replacement is sought, should be a reason for denial of recognition. Other criteria, such as the type of course or module, the type of HEI, the teaching staff or the standing of an recognition authority, must not play any role in recognition decisions.

Grading scale

Grading is a sensitive part of the learning process. It is strongly rooted in the diverse pedagogical and cultural traditions of the various educational systems in Europe. In the framework of ECTS a grading scale has been developed as a translation tool to allow comparison of grades given according to different national systems. The ECTS system initially divides students between pass and fail groups, and then ranks the students of the passing group in five subgroups using relative grading based on Gauss distribution.
Despite the effort to increase transparency of grading in different national systems ESIB is against making the proposed grading scale a part of the ECTS system. The grading focuses purely on a relative ranking of students.

This can be problematic in practice when it for example comes to grading a small population of students. Moreover it is problematic in its principle of ranking the students. ESIB therefore believes that ECTS should just provide information on whether or not a student has passed a given course or unit.

ECTS as an accumulation system

ESIB welcomes the use of ECTS as an accumulation system. According to ESIB, credit accumulation means that a student obtains a degree as soon as they achieved a given number of credits. However not every random sample of 180 ECTS is equal to a degree. According to ESIB, a study programme has to provide a student with learning outcomes which in overall give a degree. The idea of accumulation does not just mean a mathematical addition of credits, but also that the sum of the learning outcomes represents a meaningful degree.
Also in this area certain criteria have to be fulfilled. These criteria are laid out in the following.

Diploma Supplement
All credits obtained during a study programme need to be recorded in the final transcript of records. This also includes cases where more credits have been accumulated than the minimum required to obtain a degree.

Validity of credits
Once competencies are recorded in the transcript of records they cannot become "out of date". Such a view would be contradictory to the general understanding of education. Therefore the credits gained must not become invalid after a certain period. This will also allow the accumulation of credits throughout life and thus not undermine the concept of lifelong learning.

A credit system for Lifelong Learning

Recognition of qualifications outside traditional learning paths
The credits are assigned to a learning outcome and thus competencies. Therefore it is necessary that it is ensured that competencies and qualifications a student already gained are taken into account if they fit into the study programme. Students should have the right to have their prior learning evaluated by HEIs and / or recognition authorities for recognition for entry and recognition for ECTS purposes. Therefore credits have to be granted for achievements in prior learning and especially for competencies resulting from professional experiences. It should also be envisaged that competencies gained in non-formal and informal learning are recognised in the form of credits.[2]

Further development of ECTS
The principles of ECTS, student workload and learning outcomes as a basis of a credit system, are universal and not limited to the higher education sphere. Therefore ESIB strongly believes that any credit system applied in any educational sectors should be based in the same way on student workload and learning outcomes as ECTS.
To ease credit transfer between and accumulation across various educational sectors (such as vocational education and training, higher education, further education etc.) there should be one integrated credit system for lifelong learning in the long run. ESIB commits itself to contribute to a further development of ECTS into a system suitable for all sorts of education. This development should be done as a collaborative effort of key stakeholders from higher education and other educational sectors.[3]

Conclusion

ESIB welcomes the ECTS both as a transfer and as an accumulation system and demands its implementation throughout the European HEIs. However, the implementation of the ECTS has to fulfil aforementioned criteria and must not be done just for the sake of having ECTS as a credit system. ESIB calls upon the governments to

establish a legal framework for the use of ECTS and upon the HEIs to implement it properly. The ECTS has to be used for all students in all study programmes. The ECTS has to be implemented in such a manner that supports the lifelong learning.

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1 In the ERASMUS/SOCRATES programme ECTS was used only for transfer of credits, therefore the acronym initially stood for European Credit Transfer System. Within the Bologna Process credits could also be accumulated. The system got the new name, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, but the well-known acronym "ECTS" remained unchanged.
2 See also: ESIB policy paper on RPL
3 See also: ESIB strategy on ECVET