



European University Association

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Credit Transfer and Accumulation – the Challenge for Institutions and Students

**EUA/Swiss Confederation Conference
ETH Zürich, 11/12 October 2002**

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 the minimum level of cohesion” and ensuring that “efforts towards compatibility are not 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 the European Credit Transfer System (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 through Socrates ERASMUS. Initially designed to facilitate European mobility, ECTS has primarily been used so far on a small scale as a credit transfer system, with its impact limited to 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. It thus becomes of key importance to Europe's higher education institutions and students.

III. OBJECTIVES

As a credit transfer system, ECTS:

- facilitates the transfer of students between European countries, and in particular enhances the quality of student mobility in ERASMUS, thus facilitating academic recognition
- promotes key aspects of the European dimension¹ in Higher Education

As an accumulation system, ECTS:

- supports widespread curricular reform in national systems
- enables widespread mobility within institutions, national systems and internationally
- allows transfer from outside the higher education context, thus facilitating Lifelong Learning and the recognition of informal and non-formal learning, and also promoting greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes
- facilitates access to the labour market
- enhances the transparency and comparability of European systems, thus also promoting the attractiveness of European higher education towards the rest of the 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

- ECTS is a student-centred system based on the *student workload* required to achieve the objectives of a programme. These objectives are 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 time spent attending lectures, seminars, project and laboratory work, independent study, preparing for and taking examinations, etc.

¹ of the *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community, 1991*: which defines the European dimension as : 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.). They 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 the use of a minimum number of essential tools. First and foremost, this means respect for the *Learning Agreement*. For student mobility and credit transfer this 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 non-mobile home students for registering study options and programmes.²
- As an accumulation system, ECTS credits are used to describe entire study programmes on the basis of their official length. There is broad agreement that first cycle degrees lasting three to four years require 180-240 credit points.
- Credits are not automatically interchangeable from one context to another. They can only be used to obtain 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 missions and priorities.

EUA therefore recommends that its member institutions:

- commit themselves to implementing ECTS in line with the objectives and key features outlined in this document;
- ensure that they are fully aware of the potential of ECTS for supporting curricular reform, and not just as a support for international cooperation;
- assess the cost and benefits of developing and expanding ECTS, and allocate sufficient human and financial resources for its implementation and proper use;

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

- develop appropriate instruments to ensure adequate monitoring and regular evaluation of the use of ECTS.

The European University Association (EUA)

EUA will:

- Encourage and support its members in the implementation of the Zürich recommendations at institutional and European level;
- Through its Socrates-supported ECTS monitoring visits and the EUA institutional review 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: ECTS as an instrument for promoting transparency 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)

EUA December 2002