

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) conference
Summary and main conclusions
Bologna peer group on Qualification Frameworks and ECTS
Prague, 4 June 2019

Background and objectives

The conference was organized within the framework of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group A on Qualification Frameworks and gathered about 80 participants, mainly representatives of national authorities of the European Higher Education Area, representatives of national agencies of the Erasmus programme, quality assurance agencies, ENIC-NARIC representatives, higher education institutions and students.. The Bologna Follow-Up Group established this peer group to help member countries of the Bologna process and higher education institutions to promote the implementation of the Bologna three-cycle system and to foster the correct use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The correct implementation of ECTS is a cornerstone of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad¹.

The conference focused on improving the way how ECTS is used in the 48 countries of the European Higher Education Area. Higher education institutions could learn and exchange on related topics: the definition of learning outcomes and workload, using ECTS to improve programme design (e.g. embedding mobility windows in the programme structure), foster the mobility of students by making available an up-to-date course catalogue, concluding learning agreements etc. ECTS can also be used for continuous learning and can enhance provisions for the recognition of prior learning and experience.

The conference started with a number of presentations (Karolina Gondkova, Ministry of Education in CZ; Klara Engels-Perenyi – DG EAC; Robert Wagenaar – University of Groningen; Anita Kremó – Eurydice; Monika Skadborg - ESU) outlining the successes of ECTS and what areas need improvement. Then, Azerbaijan (Vusala Gurbanova, Ministry of Education and Research) and Estonia (Janne Pukk; Ministry of Education) presented their different experiences. Parallel sessions discussed the following topics in more detail: developing course catalogue; grade conversion; credit recognition procedures; quality assurance of ECTS in Georgia.

¹ http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13955-2018-INIT/en/pdf?fbclid=IwAR3-sp1kXQ_S12trJfpea9hitXlhhqcqveXP7goEli68y5krYyFdbolpr74

Main messages:

- ECTS emerged as a **building block of the Bologna process**, with a key role in recognising, transferring and accumulating learning. Growing from a small experimental action of the Erasmus programme 30 years ago, it is now the national credit system in the vast majority of EHEA countries.
- In 2015 the **ECTS Users' Guide has been adopted** as an official document of the European Higher Education Area.
- ECTS is linked to the Qualification Framework of the European Higher Education Area.
- National authorities have a basic role in the implementation of ECTS: they provide a normative framework, based on discussions and in agreement with stakeholders.
- ECTS enabled that pathways could become **more flexible**. Although there is still resistance, the idea of reaching the same outcome with different learning methods is accepted more and more. **Cooperation among countries helps overcome distrust** on the value of programmes coming from other institutions or countries.
- **Recognition** across Bologna countries **is improving, also thanks to ECTS**. According to Eurydice, recognition within mobility programmes is often more successful than between HEIs in the same country.
- Programmes not using ECTS are often those of regulated professions.
- ESU reported that students in 19 countries were very satisfied for the recognition of their learning abroad, while 12 were very dissatisfied. Other data show that 82 % of students got full academic recognition. Among the causes of non-recognition: the course content was not accepted by the sending institution or a lower number of credits was recognised. It is important to regularly verify the allocated workload, based on student feedback loops. Learning outcomes are often not properly assessed (too old-fashioned and sometimes not fully relevant methods).
- The **quality of LOs descriptions** was underlined by speakers and participants. This is crucial to ensure comparability and have recognition. However, LOs formulation is still a challenge. Clear LOs empower students to take responsibility for their learning. The importance of training staff on new concepts was emphasized (assessing LOs is still a major issue).
- Because of the **voluntary nature** of the process, the risk of picking and choosing has always been present, leading to **differences in implementation of ECTS** (even in different institutions of the same country). Big differences in the length of study programmes and credits (Estonia vs Azerbaijan) can cause difficulties in recognition (but if there is cooperation and trust obstacles are usually overcome).
- Main challenges are: contact hours are still too often used instead of workload; HEIs often find it difficult to calculate workload correctly; defining measurable learning outcomes for programmes and course units; HEIs still don't use ECTS for programme planning; learning-teaching-assessment are still not sufficiently aligned, methods outdated. Academics should be better trained about the concepts of learning

2



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



outcomes and workload (but training does not happen in many countries and there is a clear lack of trainers.)

- **Associate hours to credits causes problems.** Also because in some cases the pay of teachers is linked to the hours of teaching, while it would be better to calculate their pay on the bases of credits (time for preparation and evaluation)
- Some participants supported the idea of including **ECTS in national legislation** so to use it to its full potential (while others argued that this was unnecessary because ECTS are already used). Bottom-up approaches are crucial to ensure that interested parts are on board, but it is also useful to integrate them with a top-down approach to encourage and clarify ECTS uses and applications.

Conclusions & Recommendations:

- Experience shows that many aspects of the ECTS Users' Guide are not properly implemented and further work is needed to spur up implementation.
- Countries can and should share what is working and what challenges they encounter.
- The ECTS Users' Guide should be referred to explicitly and clearly in legislation. It should be recognised that the ECTS Users' Guide is more than just credits – it includes guidance on:
 - programme design serving better recognition of learning outcomes, credits and qualifications;
 - learning, teaching and assessment;
 - the necessary instruments for planning and performing mobility activities (the course catalogue, learning agreements, traineeship agreements, transcript of records, work placement certificates, grade distribution tables etc.);
 - recognition of prior learning and experience and learning outcomes stemming from continuous learning and from open learning opportunities;
 - quality assurance of ECTS implementation.
- A European network of ECTS (and recognition) experts would be needed to counsel higher education institutions, governments and stakeholders in the broader sense in the implementation of ECTS.
- The different aspects of ECTS should be included in the initial training of academics, and wherever possible, in their continuous professional development.
- As regards quality assurance: monitoring of ECTS implementation should be part of both internal and external evaluation procedures, as this requirement is part of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European higher education Area (ESG). The ECTS Users' Guide lists the most relevant aspects for monitoring. Experience shows that both quality assurance experts in higher education institutions and in quality assurance agencies would need further exchange and training opportunities on the correct use of ECTS.

- The current trends in higher education point to the necessity of further developing the existing transparency tools, such as ECTS, to ensure the more frequent use of continuous learning and the recognition of short learning programmes and “micro-credentials”.
- Grade conversion often remains intransparent and arbitrary. The ECTS Guide requires higher education institutions to provide information about grade distribution in their different programmes, which form a more transparent and fair basis for grade conversion than the outdated grading scales (A, B, C etc.).
- The Erasmus Charter for Higher Education should be revised to reflect the new obligation of countries of the European Higher Education Area to implement ECTS, with all its aspects.

