

# **ESIB Policy Paper on 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 a European level, and towards all relevant organisations and institutions. ESIB currently has 50 member organisations from 37 countries and through these members represents over 11 million students.

## **Introduction**

The European Credit Transfer system (ECTS) 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 these exchange students when returning home to their own institution. However, under the framework of the Bologna Process it became a tool that should be used for all students, and not only for the purposes of recognition. It should however be noted that the implementation of ECTS has been fairly problematic in most countries. The current discussion surrounding the extension of ECTS from purely a transfer to an accumulation system as well has also posed new challenges. With this policy paper ESIB wants to outline what is essential for the successful and proper implementation of ECTS or ECTS compatible credit transfer and accumulation systems.

## **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 whereas the actual workload that is necessary to successfully complete part of study programme is often neglected. ECTS will 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**

ESIB is of the opinion that a full time student should have an annual workload of 1500 - 1800 hours for a full year of studies. It should be envisaged that a total of 1600 hours (40 weeks at 40 hours) is the average. This annual workload should be the equivalent of 60 ECTS 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. 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 last for one semester or an academic year.

It is necessary to find the right balance between the transfer and curriculum coherency, also taking account of the social component, e.g. credits connected to financial support for the students. Therefore the minimum number of credits for a course unit must neither be too small nor too high. Study programmes should be broken down into as small credit-giving units as possible. The number of credits for the parts of the programme must be in accordance with the actual workload that is required to successfully complete this part. Taking the workload as the basis is a change of paradigms for some educational system but is essential in order to facilitate transparency. The workload must be based on the investment of time in learning, not in teaching. 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 amongst the students and thus based on real figures and not just on 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 have to be granted at least for everything, which is required according to the examination regulations (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. Therefore ECTS should also be used both in two-cycle programmes and traditional degree courses as well as in doctoral studies.

### **Information / coordination**

The lack of information, which currently is a major problem, has to be solved. A reasonable number of people have to be responsible to inform about everything connected to the ECTS. The institutional and departmental coordinators have to advise and counsel students on the ECTS. Information about the ECTS should also be accessible via the Internet.

The coordination in the countries and the HEI must be improved. Therefore training seminars for the coordinators are essential.

### **ECTS Label**

The proposal of the European Commission to issue ECTS labels for the HEIs that implemented ECTS properly is welcomed by ESIB. However, it should be envisaged that the proper use of ECTS should not only be restricted to Bachelor and Master programmes but also for all programmes offered at the respective HEI. However, ESIB opposes the idea of connecting the ECTS label to funding of the HEIs, for instance granting institutional funding for the European Commission's mobility programmes only to HEIs, which received the ECTS label. Awarding of ECTS Label should be accessible also to the higher education institutions from countries which do not participate in EU mobility programmes.

### **Compatibility with other 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.

### **Tools**

The ECTS for itself is not more than a tool for the quantitative measuring of study achievements. Therefore the use of tools describing the content of the courses is an additional requirement. Such a course description has 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. However, 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. However, this need should 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. [1](#))

### **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.

### **Grading scale**

Grades should not be made part of the ECTS system. ECTS should just provide information on whether or not a student has passed a given course or unit.

### **ECTS as an accumulation system**

According to ESIB, credit accumulation that a student obtains a degree as soon as they achieved a given number of credits. In general, ESIB welcomes the use of ECTS as an accumulation system but expresses that also in this area certain criteria have to be fulfilled. These criteria are laid out in the following.

### **Hunt for easy points / education à la carte**

One of the biggest fears of using ECTS as an accumulation system is that students will only try to gain the easiest points. Another fear is that the complete structure of a programme is undermined by the students just picking parts of the programme which they like and thus establishing a system of "education à la carte". According to ESIB, a study programme has to be formed around a well-composed programme but giving the students the possibility of freely choosing some parts of the programme. The required parts of a programme can vary from one faculty to another. Students, researchers and teaching staff should create the programmes. This means that there are some required parts of the programme, which a student will have to pass in order to obtain a degree. There also have to be some optional parts amongst which the student can freely decide which ones to take. This will guarantee the right balance between a structured programme and the flexibility that a student must be allowed to have. In this way also the "hunt for easy points" is very limited and a system of "education à la carte" is prevented.

**Recognition of qualifications outside traditional learning paths**

The credits represent 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. 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.

**Validity of credits**

Competencies 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.

**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 certain 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 access to higher education is widened as much as possible.