

ESIB

'The National Unions of Students in Europe'

Survey on ECTS

Foreword:

The following document is the final result of a survey on the implementation of ECTS from the student perspective. The survey has been based on the experiences of the National Unions of Students that are members of ESIB. The set of conclusions which are presented in this document are a synopsis of the survey results which have already been compiled and analysed by the Bologna Process Committee (BPC) of ESIB. The document is based on the completed surveys of 27 National Student Unions from 23 different countries.

ESIB:

The National Unions of Students in Europe has existed since 1982 to promote educational, social, economic, and cultural interests of the students at a European level and towards all relevant organisations and institutions. ESIB currently has 50 member organisations from 37 countries throughout Europe and represents over 11 million students.

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ESIB SURVEY

QUESTIONNAIRE ON ECTS

Introduction

When introducing ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) the European Commission issued a guide, which concentrated on the value of ECTS for students.

Under the title “What does ECTS offer to the students?” the following suggestions can be found:

- ECTS guarantees academic recognition of studies abroad.
- ECTS enables access to regular courses alongside local students, with the benefit of full participation in the academic life of the host institution. This characteristic of ECTS distinguishes it from many other student mobility programmes.
- ECTS enables further studies abroad. A student may prefer not to go back to the home institution after the study period abroad, but rather to stay at the host institution -- possibly to gain a degree -- or to move to a third institution. The institutions themselves decide whether or not this is acceptable and what conditions the student must fulfil in order to get a diploma or transfer registration.

This survey will attempt to answer:

- How can these goals, set by the Commission, be achieved?
- What might be the possible obstacles?
- Are they really accurate objectives?
- Does the reality differ from the goals?

I OVERVIEW

1.1. National credit system

Before starting to sum up the answers it is necessary to know the status of ECTS: is it connected with the national credit systems? Has ECTS replaced national credit system etc?

Albania has a national credit system, which is connected to ECTS, while the Netherlands have a national credit system, which is in the process of been replaced by ECTS at the moment. The system applies to the universities in Denmark where it is homogenous while the polytechnics don't use ECTS system. National credit systems exists in Lithuania, Estonia, Sweden, Finland (1 national credit equals 1,5 ECTS points), Iceland, Austria and Norway (1 national credit equals 2 ECTS points) and there is no national credit system in Hungary, Slovenia, Serbia, Flanders, Iceland and the Czech Republic. Countries like Kosovo, Croatia, Cyprus, Portugal, Germany and Switzerland, meanwhile, are planning to implement a national credit system based on ECTS.

1.2. How are credits/workloads measured?

ECTS is commonly used in Europe, but before accumulation there has to be something to transfer. The ways of measuring credits before transferring them differs from country to country.

Some countries use set criteria (Hungary, Kosovo, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Flanders, Czech Republic and Cyprus). In some countries like Germany there are big problems with measuring the actual workload, since many institutions use contact hours as the basis for the measuring. In Ireland workload is measured in national hours, which means that workload depends on the time spent in classroom. However in Austria credits are not linked to workloads. Most of the universities in Austria divide the total amount of credits by the number of courses one has to pass for the academic degree to get the single credits for one course.

1.3. Credit accumulation and used methods

The answer to this question can be divided on two parts - have and have not:

Countries who have credit accumulation system:

- Based on national credits;
- Based on ECTS.

Countries without credit accumulation system:

- About to have an credit accumulation system;
- Without any particular activities.

In Germany there is no uniform credit accumulation system, since there is no national credit system. However, ECTS is used for the accumulation in a few study programmes, but mostly for Bachelor/Master (BA/MA) study programmes. The same applies for Cyprus, where unified credit accumulation system also is missing. Universities are using different systems and some of them are based on ECTS.

In the Netherlands ECTS replaced the national credit system this year. The system is still new and will be fully implemented by the year 2004. Since ECTS is the national credit system, Dutch students cannot see any problem at the moment any problem with the credit accumulation in Holland.

An active implementation of the Bologna process has led Albania to the situation where they started to use a credit accumulation system.

Portugal uses ECTS for accumulation, but besides this there are two more systems. The first and more common system is where credits are based on the number of hours passed in the classroom. The second, older, system is based on number of disciplines of a course

adapted to a credit system based on classroom spent hours. The variety of methods on national level makes the system less transparent and creates obstacles for mobility.

Almost the same system exists in Switzerland, where the situation with credit accumulation is incoherent. Some universities have already implemented ECTS (Bern), others have developed system of credits that are similar and compatible with ECTS (Zurich), others don't have any credit system. This all leads to different ways of credit accumulation, but without any credit system at all there is nothing to accumulate. Still there have been some activities to make the systems compatible.

In Hungary and the Czech Republic there is no integral credit accumulation system. Every university has its own method.

Mostly, North-European countries are using their own credit system for the accumulation. Iceland has its own credit accumulation system, which differs, from the other Nordic countries. Lithuania, Estonia, Finland and Sweden all use the same credit system (1 credit point = 1 week of study = 40 hours of work), thus the same measures for the accumulation. However in Lithuania students have to pay close attention to number of credits achieved by passing the free courses. The number of credits should not exceed the number of credits gained by the free choice courses within the main study programme of a student. In this case accumulation rules can create a credit waste.

In Denmark universities and a few polytechnics use the credit accumulation system, but with the help of the ministry of education they will try to introduce a common credit accumulation system for polytechnics.

In Serbia some university faculties did experiments on using credits, accumulation and ECTS, but it is still too early to talk about the efforts to establish a national system.

Kosovo, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, Ireland and Flanders are planning to introduce the credit accumulation system in near future.

1.4. ECTS legislation

Answers can be divided into two blocks:

- Countries where ECTS is legislated;
- Countries where ECTS is not legislated but used voluntarily by the institutions.

In Albania, Hungary, Kosovo, Denmark, Austria and the Netherlands ECTS is legislated by law. In Norway ECTS is acknowledged by the new law on higher education.

In Germany ECTS is legislated but not in a uniform way. Bachelor/Master (BA/MA) studies will only get accredited if they use a credit system compatible to ECTS. For other study programmes the use of ECTS is only required in a few number of states. For newly introduced study programmes (since 2003) the use of ECTS is required.

Countries like Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Slovenia, Serbia, Czech Republic and Portugal have not yet legislated ECTS systems. In Norway ECTS is acknowledged by the government.

Improvements for ECTS legislation are made in Cyprus, Flanders and in Switzerland, where the system is based on the goodwill of the universities.

In most of the countries so far surveyed ECTS is not legislated, but universities are using the system voluntarily, mostly for Erasmus students.

1.5. ECTS obligation for institutions

In Albania and Austria ECTS is obligatory for institutions, while in Denmark it is only obligatory for the universities and not for the polytechnics. In the Netherlands ECTS replaces the national credit system, thus is obligatory of the institutions.

In Kosovo, Croatia, Serbia, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, the Czech Republic and in Portugal ECTS is only voluntary for institutions, sometimes suggested by the government.

Countries like Hungary, Slovenia, Cyprus, Switzerland and Sweden are in process of making ECTS obligatory for the institutions.

Key points:

- **In order to promote student and staff mobility every institution should use a credit accumulation system.**
- **The variety of methods of credit accumulation on national level makes the system less transparent and creates obstacles for both horizontal and vertical mobility.**
- **Should ECTS be obligatory or voluntary for institutions?**

II CURRENT OBSTACLES

2.1. ECTS implementation on lifelong learning and extracurricular activities

2.1.1. Lifelong learning

In Sweden, Norway, the Czech Republic and Estonia ECTS is used for points granted by higher education institutions. It is useful when later continuing your studies in the area of the formal education. In Lithuania the system is the same, but instead of ECTS they use a national credit system.

In Denmark the adult and further education system uses ECTS.

Countries like Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, the Netherlands, Flanders, Portugal, Iceland, Ireland, Austria and Finland do not have any connection between lifelong learning and ECTS.

Improvements in starting ECTS in this area can be seen in Kosovo, Switzerland and Germany.

2.1.2. Extracurricular activities

In Albania, Hungary, Kosovo, Slovenia, The Netherlands, Estonia, Switzerland and in Denmark, ECTS points are given for some extra curricular activities. In Germany it differs from faculty to faculty and usually, when students get some credit points for extra-curricular activities, it will not be taken into account with regards to obtaining a degree. In Lithuania, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Czech Republic, Flanders, Ireland, Austria and Portugal there are no ECTS usage in this field.

2.2. Problems with credit accumulation

2.2.1. Structure

After analysing the answers received thus far, the biggest problem still was the structure of the credit; i.e. how to ensure those x hours of study equal one credit.

In some countries, the time of validity of credits is not regulated (Germany). In Finland, The Netherlands and Slovenia the question how to measure the real workload with the credits received is still unclear for students. This makes the system difficult to trust. In Portugal it leads to constant disputes between professors to establish consensus which discipline should be worth more credits within a course. Also the distribution of credits is inadequate as per the importance of a discipline in a course. Portuguese students also mention that the credit system is very rigid, since they are obliged to attend a fixed panel of disciplines and classes. They also mention that liberty of choice associated with the credit system is an illusion.

In Finland the 'study weeks' are not fully comparable in between institutions or faculties. In some faculties more work may be required for the same amount of study weeks than in another faculty. It is also not uncommon that when developing the curricula nothing is

taken out of the course requirements but new things are simply added making the study weeks exceed the 40 hours of work they should contain.

The biggest problem is the workload connection with a credit point. Measuring the amount of work and studies done through any credit accumulation system can never be completely fair, some students simply learn from a book faster, while others require more time.

In Estonia there are too many small content subjects where you can only receive 1-2 Estonian credits (1,5-3 ECTS credits). In Lithuania there are too few credits for free choice courses, this is due to the wish of academic staff to keep their students within the boundaries of one faculty or a department.

2.2.2. Recognition

Many countries still seem to have problems with recognition of credits between different institutions and also within the institution. This result was a bit surprising, as the area of recognition is still the most legislated and agreed one.

In Cyprus there have been some problems concerning the credit transfer from one state higher education institution to another (e.g. Higher Technical Institute to University of Cyprus). There wasn't satisfactory recognition of all credits accumulated by the students from their previous courses, thus leading to the repeating of some. The same problems applied for Denmark, Austria and Estonia.

Sometimes it is problematic to transfer study weeks in between institutions or faculties inside Finland. It is also possible that one law school doesn't acknowledge the studies completed in another law school and you lose a number of study weeks when changing schools.

2.2.3. Other problems

There is still a huge lack of information about credit accumulation, i.e. how it is done, what the students' rights are concerning the accumulation process, where do appeal if you disagree with the results etc. The lack of information does not only apply for students but also among teachers. As credit accumulation systems are quite new in many countries, the lack of information leads to a lack of transparency.

In Germany there is often a contradiction to examination regulations, since there is no uniform system for credit accumulation. The Slovenian students also see the lack of a national co-ordination in introducing the credit accumulation system.

The Dutch students think that students do not study for the sake of studying, but merely to get ECTS credits. A sufficient grade is enough, but they are not really involved in the study material any longer. The intrinsic value of studying is lost. Danish students also fear that an uncoordinated system could easily turn into a hunt for easy points.

In Austria, extracurricular activities cannot be used in credit accumulation. Austrian students also feel that there is a poor connection to non-university type of institutions.

2.3. Problems with ECTS

The same problems apply to ECTS as to credit accumulation. The main concerns are related to the structure and recognition issues.

2.3.1. Structure

In Germany there is no uniform and compulsory system for ECTS and no regulation of how workloads should be measured.

For Icelandic students, the main problem is when taking courses abroad which are, for example, 5 credits, they count as 2,5 credits in Iceland. Thus, when taking a major where you need 90 credits to graduate, students can be in the position of having finished 89,5 where there are no half-credit subjects available.

In Ireland the usage of ECTS differs from institution to institution.

When credits from abroad are transferred to Finnish study weeks through ECTS, credits are sometimes 'lost' in the process: the multiplication/division system is not always fair e.g. because the formula a university or faculty uses is adapted to the needs of incoming rather than outgoing students. Sometimes - more often for incoming exchange students - it can be problematic that universities and faculties use different multiplication formulas for ECTS.

2.3.2. Recognition

Even if credits are translated into ECTS there are still many problems with the recognition of those points.

Swiss students have experienced that sometimes for the universities "a credit point is not a credit point", because some points are cheaper, depending on the reputation of the university where those credits were gained.

Sometimes it is very difficult to have studies undertaken at a foreign university transferred to Finnish diploma. Courses agreed on in a Study Agreement may not have been organised in the foreign university and as a result, the student cannot use the studies completed abroad as a part of a Finnish diploma. On some occasions, the home faculty hasn't acknowledged the studies abroad at all.

In Ireland there seem to be problems in getting the results of the Erasmus year abroad recognised by the home institution.

2.3.3. Other problems

Lack of information is still a top problem. Lithuanian students feel that there is a lack of information about the student rights and obligations when ECTS is applied for study periods abroad. Estonian students fear that because of the lack of information, many institutions are not interested in joining ECTS system. It is a sign of poor co-operation, which also proves to be the case for Germany and Switzerland.

In Austria, universities introduced ECTS because it is obligatory by law, but usually the real need and understanding is lost. The problems lie in the on implementation of the system.

In Denmark there is no ECTS system in polytechnics, while in Finnish polytechnics use ECTS but it is not self-evident.

Still it is obvious that the weakness or even absence of national credit systems causes most of the problems with ECTS. In countries where there is no national credit system and ECTS is introduced, it leads to major difficulties and misunderstandings as to whether ECTS should be seen as one of the tools for harmonisation of the education.

Key points:

- **More improvement needed for using ECTS on lifelong learning and extra curricular activities.**
- **No common understanding of how the real workload of a student should be measured.**
- **Lack of information about the credit accumulation as such, partly caused by low student participation on decision making.**
- **Since there are no common credit systems in some countries, the methods of accumulation are not understandable.**
- **Even if credits are translated into ECTS there are still many problems with the recognition.**
- **Some countries still do not use an ECTS system.**

III NATIONAL ACTIVITIES REGARDING ECTS

This paragraph consists of information on national activities regarding ECTS, what students in co-operation with national authorities try to achieve.

Albania: The ministry of education in co-operation with students and international partners are trying to implement ECTS in practise.

Austria: ÖH (National Union of Students in Austria) and the ministry of education are informing students, institutions etc about ECTS and its usage.

Croatia: New Higher Education Act will introduce a credit system in Croatia, which will be based on ECTS. In practice it means that ECTS will be in use in the academic year 2004/05, but more realistically in 2005/06.

Czech Republic: Current law defines the credit system as a system for transferring credits between the higher educational institutions. More and more universities accept ECTS. About 50% of them use ECTS at the moment. It is planned that ECTS will be used all over the country in a short future. The government doesn't organise this process.

Denmark: The ministry is planning on introducing ECTS for all polytechnics. It is only being discussed on the ministerial level.

Finland: SAMOK (National Union of Finnish Polytechnics Students) is planning to raise ECTS issue to discussion because they feel the use of ECTS system in the polytechnics should be self-evident and students should know about it before they go to study abroad. SYL (National Union of Finnish Students) is continuously encouraging the student unions to participate in ECTS discussions in their universities and to take initiative to improve it. SYL's goal is to have a well functioning ECTS system in all the universities. The importance of ECTS is widely acknowledged. Also the problems and shortcomings of ECTS and of ECTS in Finland are somewhat discussed, however, SYL is pressing for more discussion.

There are also plans to possibly abolish the national system and replace it with ECTS.

Flanders: A complete new law/decreed is planned.

Germany: After the ministers' conference publication of guidelines concerning the use of ECTS, no efforts have been undertaken to put pressure on the higher education institutions to implement the use of ECTS according to the guidelines. Concerning the extension of ECTS there are no plans, there are only discussions about its use in the context of LLL. There are no further concrete actions undertaken.

Hungary: The changing legal framework is preparing to make ECTS obligatory from the academic year 2003/2004.

Iceland: No major activities at the moment, mainly ECTS system works very well in Iceland and students support what is being done.

Ireland: The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is developing a policy, however individual colleges are forging ahead. The intention would be to follow in line

of European developments turning ECTS more credit accumulation and deepening of ECTS.

Kosovo: In the faculty level rectors and the academic along with the political commission to the Education ministry formed the councils, which evolves the system of ECTS for the institutions.

Lithuania: National Socrates Agency through the National ECTS co-ordinator periodically informs Institutional Socrates co-ordinators on the newest developments on ECTS. A seminar on ECTS is planned for November 2002 by the same agency.

The Netherlands: Dutch students are glad that they have ECTS as a national system. However it is not a very big change, because ECTS system is only a simple calculation

Norway: Is in the process of implementing the new A-F scale. All the higher education institutions are supposed to have the new scale up and running by 2003.

Portugal: Some institutions are taking into their own hand's the implementation of ECTS, while the state is (was) discussing some diplomas regarding ECTS.

Serbia: Student Union of Serbia (SUS) is participating in the drafting of ECTS institutional guide for Serbian universities. Also in the last semester the educational office of SUS organised several public presentations on ECTS. They also plan to organise five-day training events about practical aspects of the higher education reform including implementation of ECTS for students and teachers from all faculties in Serbia in November this year. In general Ministry of education supports ECTS, but due to the autonomy of the universities and faculties, implementation of ECTS is in their hands.

Switzerland: The rector's conference CRUS has now built an "ECTS-steering-group" that should provide some code of best practice and an "ECTS-Network" that is supposed to take these recommendations to the universities. There won't be any legal framework especially for ECTS.

Summary

ECTS implementation differs from country to country, mainly depending on the existence or non-existence of a national credit system and on the lack of information about the consequences. When governments are trying to introduce ECTS without first having a national credit system, the whole process feels forced and rather untransparent.

One of the main ECTS aims set by the European Commission - “ECTS guarantees academic recognition of studies abroad” - is still not fully achieved. Sometimes, institutions still think that courses from certain universities are better than those from others – with no objective criteria to underpin these claims. This all leads to a need for more solidarity and trust between institutions.

Lack of information seems to be a continuing concern Or should we rather say a lack of co-ordination between different actors? Even if the reader may find some of this material a little contradictory with the knowledge the reader has, it might be useful to ask if students have access to correct information to form their opinion?