

ECTS USERS' GUIDE

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Introduction

This ECTS Users' Guide provides guidelines for implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). It also presents the ECTS key documents. The Guide is offered to assist learners, academic and administrative staff in higher education institutions as well as other interested parties.

The 2009 Users' Guide elaborates on the previous version of 2005. It has been updated to take account of developments in the Bologna Process, the growing importance of lifelong learning, the formulation of qualifications frameworks and the increasing use of learning outcomes. It has been written with the help of experts from stakeholders' associations and ECTS counsellors, and submitted for consultation to stakeholders' associations, Member States' experts and the Bologna Follow-up Group. The European Commission has coordinated the drafting and consultation process and is responsible for the final wording of the Guide.

ECTS¹ is a tool that helps to design, describe, and deliver programmes and award higher education qualifications. The use of ECTS, in conjunction with outcomes-based qualifications frameworks, makes programmes and qualifications more transparent and facilitates the recognition of qualifications. ECTS can be applied to all types of programmes, whatever their mode of delivery (school-based, work-based), the learners' status (full-time, part-time) and to all kinds of learning (formal, non-formal and informal).

In the first section of the Guide, ECTS is placed in the context of the European Higher Education Area, created through the Bologna Process. This section also refers to the role of ECTS in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area² (referred to as the Bologna Qualifications Framework in this Guide).

The second section contains the ECTS key features. These constitute a concise overview of ECTS and its main functions, on which there is a broad consensus. The ECTS key features section is also available in a separate brochure.

Section 3 provides a detailed explanation of the key features. Section 4 gives guidance on how ECTS can be implemented in higher education institutions, while section 5 discusses how ECTS complements institutions' quality assurance tools.

The final sections present the ECTS key documents, suggestions for further reading on topics related to ECTS and a glossary of the terms used in this Users' Guide.

¹ ECTS was originally set up in 1989 as a pilot scheme within the framework of the Erasmus programme in order to facilitate the recognition of study periods undertaken abroad by mobile students.

² Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005) *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*; http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

1 ECTS and the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process)

ECTS is the credit system for higher education used in the European Higher Education Area, involving all countries³ engaged in the Bologna Process.⁴ ECTS is one of the cornerstones of the Bologna process.⁵ Most Bologna countries have adopted ECTS by law for their higher education systems.

Among other objectives, the Bologna Process aims at the *establishment of a system of credits as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility*.⁶ ECTS contributes to several other Bologna objectives:

- ECTS credits are a key element of the Bologna Framework for Qualifications,⁷ compatible with the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF).⁸ According to the Bologna Qualifications Framework, the first and second cycles have their own credit ranges (see section 3.3). Consequently, ECTS credits are used in formulating national qualification frameworks for higher education, which may contain more detailed national credit arrangements.
- ECTS helps institutions to implement the objective of quality assurance (see section 5). In some countries ECTS is a requirement for accreditation of higher education programmes or qualifications.
- ECTS is also increasingly used by institutions in other continents and thus plays a role in the growing global dimension of the Bologna Process.

³ In some countries national or institutional systems exist alongside ECTS.

⁴ The Bologna process currently has 46 signatory countries. For full list see:

<http://www.bologna2009benelux.org>

⁵ Website of the Secretariat of the Bologna process Benelux 2009: <http://www.bologna2009benelux.org>

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ For further information see: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/QF-EHEA-May2005.pdf>

⁸ *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning* (http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/rec08_en.pdf), 2008. The three levels of the Bologna Framework and the sub-level for the short cycle correspond to levels five, six, seven and eight of EQF for the higher education sector.

2 ECTS key features

ECTS

ECTS is a learner-centred system for credit accumulation and transfer based on the transparency of learning outcomes and learning processes. It aims to facilitate planning, delivery, evaluation, recognition and validation of qualifications and units of learning as well as student mobility. ECTS is widely used in formal higher education and can be applied to other lifelong learning activities.

ECTS credits

ECTS credits are based on the workload students need in order to achieve expected learning outcomes. Learning outcomes describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning. They relate to level descriptors in national and European qualifications frameworks.

Workload indicates the time students typically need to complete all learning activities (such as lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, self-study and examinations) required to achieve the expected learning outcomes.

60 ECTS credits are attached to the workload of a full-time year of formal learning (academic year) and the associated learning outcomes. In most cases, student workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, whereby one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work.

Use of ECTS credits

Credits are allocated to entire qualifications or study programmes as well as to their educational components (such as modules, course units, dissertation work, work placements and laboratory work). The number of credits ascribed to each component is based on its weight in terms of the workload students need in order to achieve the learning outcomes in a formal context.

Credits are awarded to individual students (full-time or part-time) after completion of the learning activities required by a formal programme of study or by a single educational component and the successful assessment of the achieved learning outcomes. Credits may be accumulated with a view to obtaining qualifications, as decided by the degree-awarding institution. If students have achieved learning outcomes in other learning contexts or timeframes (formal, non-formal or informal), the associated credits may be awarded after successful assessment, validation or recognition of these learning outcomes.

Credits awarded in one programme may be transferred into another programme, offered by the same or another institution. This transfer can only take place if the degree-awarding institution recognises the credits and the associated learning outcomes. Partner institutions should agree in advance on the recognition of periods of study abroad.

Credit transfer and accumulation are facilitated by the use of the ECTS key documents (Course Catalogue, Student Application Form, Learning Agreement and Transcript of Records) as well as the Diploma Supplement.

3 ECTS key features explained

The ECTS key features give a brief outline of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. This section provides more detailed explanation of concepts and functions related to ECTS. It also shows how these concepts and functions interact with and complement each other and thus enable the core functions of ECTS: accumulation and transfer (dealt with in section 4).

3.1 ECTS as a learner-centred credit system

[From the key features:]

“ECTS is a learner-centred system”

ECTS is a learner-centred system because it helps institutions to shift the emphasis in programme design and delivery from traditional teacher-centered approaches to approaches that accommodate for learners' needs and expectations. In traditional teacher-centered approaches, subject requirements, knowledge and the teaching process itself were considered the main elements of educational programmes. Learner-centred learning puts learning at the heart of curriculum design and delivery, and gives learners more choice in content, mode, pace and place of learning.

In such a learner-centred approach, institutions have the role of facilitating and supporting learners in shaping their own learning pathways and helping them to build on their individual learning styles and experiences.

By using learning outcomes and learners' workload in curriculum design and delivery, ECTS helps to place the learner at the centre of the educational process. By allocating credits to educational components it facilitates the creation of flexible learning pathways. Moreover, ECTS, in conjunction with outcome-based qualifications frameworks:

- establishes a closer link between educational programmes and labour-market requirements through the use of learning outcomes, thus enhancing informed learners' choices
- encourages wider access to and participation in lifelong learning, by making programmes more flexible and facilitating the recognition of prior achievement
- facilitates mobility within a given institution or country, from institution to institution, from country to country, and between different educational sectors and contexts of learning (i.e. formal, non-formal and informal learning).

3.2 ECTS and learning outcomes

[From the key features:]

“Learning outcomes describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning.”

Learning outcomes are verifiable statements of what learners who have obtained a particular qualification, or completed a programme or its components, are expected to know, understand and be able to do. As such they emphasise the link between teaching, learning and assessment.

Learning outcomes statements are typically characterised by the use of active verbs expressing knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, etc.⁹

⁹ Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005) *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*, p. 38 http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

The use of learning outcomes makes the objectives of learning programmes clearer and more easily understood for students, employers and other stakeholders. They also make it easier to compare qualifications and facilitate the recognition of achievements.

In ECTS, the formulation of learning outcomes is the basis for the estimation of workload and hence for credit allocation. When those responsible for designing educational programmes establish the qualification profile and the expected learning outcomes of the programme and its components, ECTS credits help them to be realistic about the necessary workload and to choose learning, teaching and assessment strategies wisely. Stakeholders, such as learners and employers, may provide useful input to the formulation of learning outcomes.

The successful assessment of learning outcomes is the pre-condition for the award of credits to a learner. Therefore, statements of learning outcomes for programme components should always be accompanied by clear and appropriate assessment criteria for the award of credits, which make it possible to ascertain whether the learner has acquired the desired knowledge, understanding and competences

Two approaches exist: learning outcomes may be either threshold statements (showing the minimum requirements to obtain a pass), or written as reference points describing the typical (showing the expected level of achievement of successful learners). In any case, statements on learning outcomes must make clear which definition is being used.

Learning outcome-based approaches also enable knowledge, skills and competences gained in contexts other than formal higher education (non-formal or informal learning) to be assessed, to have credits awarded and hence to be recognised for the purpose of awarding a qualification (see section 4.5).

Figure 1 – "Learning outcomes" and "Competences" as defined in European Higher Education contexts:

In Europe a variety of terms relating to "learning outcomes" and "competences" are used with different shades of meaning and in somewhat different frames of reference. In all cases however they are related to what the learner will know, understand and be able to do at the end of a learning experience. Their widespread use is part of the shift in paradigm that places the learner at the centre of the higher education experience. This shift is the foundation of the European Higher Education Area, the Bologna Process and ECTS.

1. In the Qualifications Framework for the EHEA (Bologna Framework) learning outcomes (including competences) are seen as the overall results of learning. The Framework is based on the "Dublin Descriptors", developed by the Joint Quality Initiative. These descriptors consist of generic statements of typical expectations or competence levels of achievement and abilities associated with the Bologna cycles. The word *competence* is used in this case in a broad sense, allowing for gradation of abilities or skills.

(http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf)

2. The European Qualification Framework for LLL instead distinguishes knowledge, skills and competence. It uses the following definition: "*competence* means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy". In this case the term competence is understood in a more limited way, as the capacity to transfer knowledge into practice.

(http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/rec08_en.pdf)

3. Tuning (Educational Structures in Europe) makes a clear distinction between learning outcomes and competences in order to distinguish the different roles of the most relevant players in the learning process: the academic staff and students/learners. For Tuning competences represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills, abilities and attitudes and are distinguished between subject specific and generic ones. Fostering competences is the object of a process of learning and of an educational programme. According to Tuning learning outcomes express the level of competence attained by the learner. Learning outcomes are formulated by academic staff, preferably on the basis of input from internal and external stakeholders.

(<http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu> or <http://www.rug.nl/let/tuningeu>)

3.3 ECTS, levels and level descriptors

[From the key features:]

“Learning outcomes relate to level descriptors in national and European qualifications frameworks.”

European and national qualification frameworks are based on agreed level descriptors, with learning outcomes and credits related to such levels. The Bologna Framework has agreed cycle descriptors with learning outcomes and credit ranges. The Bologna cycle descriptors are known as the ‘Dublin Descriptors’¹⁰, the Dublin Descriptors:

“offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle. They are not meant to be prescriptive; they do not represent threshold or minimum requirements and they are not exhaustive; similar or equivalent characteristics may be added or substituted. The descriptors seek to identify the nature of the whole qualification.”¹¹ (For further information on Dublin Descriptors see the references in the bibliography.)

The first two Bologna cycles are associated with the following ECTS credit ranges:¹²

- First cycle qualifications typically include 180-240 ECTS credits.
- Second cycle qualifications typically include 90-120 ECTS credits, with a minimum of 60 ECTS credits at the level of the 2nd cycle.

These credit ranges follow the ECTS key feature stating that 60 ECTS credits are attached to the workload of a typical full-time academic year¹³ of learning within a formal learning programme. This rule applies to all higher education qualifications independent of their level.

National qualifications frameworks may contain levels (or intermediate qualifications) within the three Bologna cycles (e.g. a short cycle within the first cycle). These levels allow institutions to structure a particular qualification and regulate progression through the qualification.

Credits are always described by the level at which they are awarded, based on the level of learning outcomes of the programme or component. Only credits awarded at the appropriate level can be accumulated towards a qualification. The appropriate level is stipulated in the national or institutional progression rules (see also section 4.3).

3.4 ECTS credits and workload

[From the key features:]

“Workload indicates the time students typically need to complete all learning activities (such as lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, self-study and examinations) required to achieve the expected learning outcomes.”

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 65

¹¹ Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005) *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*, p. 65 http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

¹² There is no consensus on the usefulness of credits for the third cycle, but technically it is possible to attach credits to any cycle.

¹³ In most cases, student workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, whereby one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work (see also Annex 5).

Prior to estimating the workload associated with a programme or an educational component, the learning outcomes should be defined. These learning outcomes are the basis for choosing suitable learning activities and for a consistent estimation of the workload necessary to complete them.

The estimation of workload must not be based on contact hours only (i.e. hours spent by students on activities guided by teaching staff). It embraces all the learning activities required to achieve the expected learning outcomes, including the time spent on independent work, compulsory work placements, preparation for assessment and the time necessary for the assessment. In other words, a seminar and a lecture may require the same number of contact hours, but one may require significantly greater workload than the other because of differing amounts of independent preparation by students.

The estimation of workload should be regularly refined through monitoring and student feedback.

4 Implementing ECTS in higher education institutions

This section provides higher education institutions with some guidelines and illustrations of how to tackle the main steps in implementing ECTS. The objective is to show how ECTS is best used to generate maximum added value for learners.

4.1 ECTS credit allocation

[From the key features:]

“Credits are allocated to entire qualifications or study programmes as well as to their educational components (such as modules, course components, dissertation work, work placements and laboratory work).”

Credit allocation is the process of assigning a number of credits to qualifications/programmes or to educational components. ECTS credits are allocated on the basis of the typical workload necessary to achieve the required learning outcomes.

The number of credits allocated to the entire qualification or programme depends on the national or institutional regulations and the respective cycle of the Bologna Framework (see section 3.3).

Based on the ECTS key feature that 60 credits are allocated to the workload of a full-time academic year, 30 ECTS credits are normally allocated to a semester and 20 ECTS credits to a trimester. Qualifications which have formal programmes lasting three full-time academic years are allocated 180 ECTS credits.

Each academic year, semester or trimester is split into educational components. An educational component is understood to be a self-contained and formally structured learning experience (such as a course unit, module, seminar or work placement). Each component should have a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes, appropriate assessment criteria, defined workload and specified number of ECTS credits.

4.1.1 Credit allocation to educational components

The allocation of credits to single educational components is performed as part of curriculum design with reference to national qualifications frameworks, level descriptors and qualifications descriptors. Generally it is the responsibility of higher education institutions and academic staff, but in some cases may be decided by external bodies.

Prior to allocating credits to individual components, an agreement should be reached on the ‘profile’ of the specific study programme and the associated learning outcomes. By profile is meant the description of the programme in terms of its main features and its specific aims. It is good practice to define this profile after consultation with relevant stakeholders.¹⁴

On the basis of the qualification profile, the academic staff design the curriculum by defining the learning outcomes and allocating credits to the programme components. Credit allocation to educational components is based on their weight in terms of the workload needed for students to achieve the learning outcomes in a formal context.

There are several approaches to credit allocation, and it is up to the institutions to decide on which method to use. The alternatives presented below illustrate two different approaches to allocating credits:

¹⁴ Experts in the field, social partners, labour-market representatives, student representatives, etc. See the Tuning approach for examples: <http://unideusto.org/tuning/> or <http://www.rug.nl/let/tuningeu>

1) The teaching staff define the learning outcomes of each programme component, describe the learning activities and estimate the workload typically needed for a student to complete these activities. Proposals are collected, analysed and synthesised and the estimated workload is expressed in credits.

Using this approach, all the teaching staff are involved in the process of credit allocation. They can put forward their proposals in terms of learning outcomes, and estimate the workload necessary to achieve them. Through discussion and defining of priorities they can come to a final decision on the basis of the credits available (60 for each year). This procedure may result in different numbers of credits being attributed to single components (e.g. 3, 5, 8).

By using this option, institutions allow for maximum freedom in designing each component with regard to the learning outcomes and related workload. On the other hand, components of different sizes may be problematic when it comes to multi-disciplinary or joint programmes or mobility.

2) Alternatively, the higher education institution or the faculty may decide from the start to standardise the size of educational components, giving each one the same credit value (e.g. 5) or multiples of it (e.g. 5, 10, 15), and thus predefine the number of credits to be allocated per component. In this case, the course units are often called 'modules'.

Within this predefined structure, the teaching staff define appropriate and feasible learning outcomes and describe the learning activities, on the basis of the standard size of the components. The estimated workload must be consistent with the number of credits allocated to that component.

By standardising the size of components, institutions allow for more flexible, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary pathways among programmes. On the other hand, the definition of learning outcomes within a component is constrained by the pre-defined number of credits that set a priori the workload for each component.

It is recommended that in either case components should not be too small, to avoid fragmentation of a programme. It is also advised not to make components too large, as that may inhibit interdisciplinary studies and restrict the choices available within study programmes. Very large components are problematic for mobile students at all levels – institutional, national or international.

Whatever the method for credit allocation, the main element determining the number of credits is the estimated workload needed to achieve the expected learning outcomes. The number of contact hours alone must not be used as a basis to allocate credits, since contact hours are only one element of students' workload. Proper credit allocation should be part of the internal and external quality assurance for higher education institutions.

4.1.2 Estimation of workload in ECTS

In estimating students' workload, institutions must consider the total time needed by students in order to achieve the desired learning outcomes. The learning activities may vary in different countries, institutions and subject areas, but typically the estimated workload will result from the sum of:

- the contact hours for the educational component (number of contact hours per week x number of weeks)
- the time spent in individual or group work required to complete the educational component successfully (i.e. preparation beforehand and finalising of notes after attendance at a lecture, seminar or laboratory work; collection and selection of relevant material; required revision, study of that material; writing of papers/projects/dissertation; practical work, e.g. in a laboratory)
- the time required to prepare for and undergo the assessment procedure (e.g. exams)

- the time required for obligatory placement(s) (see section 4.1.3).

Other factors to take into consideration for estimating students' workload in the various activities are, for example: the entry level¹⁵ of students for whom the programme (or its components) is designed; the approach to teaching and learning and the learning environment (e.g. seminars with small groups of students, or lectures with very large numbers of students) and type of facilities available (e.g. language laboratory, multi-media room).

Since workload is an estimation of the average time spent by students to achieve the expected learning outcomes, the actual time spent by an individual student may differ from this estimate. Individual students differ: some progress more quickly, while others progress more slowly.

4.1.3 ECTS credits and work placements

If work placements or internships are required to complete the programme (or a component) they are part of students' learning outcomes and workload and necessitate an allocation of credit. In such case, the number of credits allocated to the work placement should be included within the overall number of credits for the particular academic year.

As with any other educational component, the teaching staff should define the learning outcomes to be achieved through work placements when designing the curriculum. These learning outcomes should be accompanied by the appropriate assessment methods and criteria. It is important that the assessment methods be compatible with the nature of work placements (e.g. observation and evaluation by a tutor or production of a report by the student).

As with any other educational component, credits for work placements are only awarded when the learning outcomes have been achieved and assessed.

If a work placement is part of organised mobility (e.g. an Erasmus placement), the Learning Agreement for the placement (see the key documents in section 6) should indicate the number of credits to be awarded if the expected learning outcomes are achieved.

In the case of placement experiences undertaken during a formal learning process but not required by the programme, it is nevertheless advisable to define the learning outcomes and the workload in a Learning Agreement. The learning outcomes achieved through non-compulsory work-placements should then also be documented for example in student's Transcript of Records, the Diploma supplement (see the key documents in section 6) or Europass Mobility document. They can also be recognised by an award of corresponding ECTS credits which are in that case additional to the standard number of 60 ECTS credits for the academic year.

¹⁵ By "entry level" is meant the level of learning outcomes learners are expected to have already achieved when entering the programme.

Figure 2 – Good practice on learning outcomes and credit allocation for work placements¹⁶

Regarding the use of learning outcomes and credits for work placements, the following is considered a good practice:

- The Learning Agreement regarding the work placement (signed by the institution, the learner and the employer) should specify the learning outcomes to be achieved;
- Work placements should have clear procedures for assessing learning outcomes and awarding credit;
- The roles of higher education institutions, learners and employers in the process of formulating as well as assessing these learning outcomes should be clear;
- The teaching staff in higher education institutions may require training regarding supervision and management of work placements;
- If required for the programme, the work placements should be integrated in the curriculum.

4.1.4 Monitoring of credit allocation

The credit allocation to a new programme or component should be validated according to national and/or institutional rules. During programme delivery, the credit allocation should be regularly monitored to establish whether the estimated workload is realistic. Both validation and monitoring of credit allocation, like other aspects of a credit system, should be part of institutions' internal quality assurance procedures.

Monitoring can be managed in different ways. Whatever method is used, student and staff feedback should constitute an essential element for checking and revising credit allocation. Data on completion times and the assessment results of programmes and their components are also part of the monitoring of credit allocation.

It is important to inform students and staff about the purpose of the monitoring exercise and how it will be carried out, ensuring accurate answers and a high response rate.

If evaluations reveal a discrepancy between the anticipated workload and the time actually taken by the majority of students to achieve the expected learning outcomes, a revision of the workload, learning outcomes or learning and teaching methods becomes necessary. This revision should not be done during an academic year but should apply to upcoming academic years.

4.2 Awarding ECTS credits

Learners are awarded ECTS credits only when appropriate assessment has shown that they have achieved the required learning outcomes for a component of a programme or for the qualification. Credits are awarded by authorised awarding institutions. If the required learning outcomes are achieved in non-formal or informal contexts, the same number of credits as foreseen in the formal programme is awarded following the appropriate assessment. To validate non-formal or informal learning, higher education institutions can put in place different forms of assessment than those used

¹⁶ Tuning Dissemination Conference: Student Workload and Learning Outcomes: Key Components for (Re)designing Degree Programmes, *Key Questions, Debates and Conclusions of Workshops*, (21-22 April 2008, Brussels, Belgium) see:

www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/index.php?option=com_docman&task=docclick&Itemid=59&bid=92&limitstart=0&limit=5

for learners enrolled in the formal programme (see section 4.5). In any case, the assessment methods should be publicly available.

The award of credits certifies that a learner has complied with the requirements of the component. The number of credits awarded to the learner is the same as the number of credits allocated to the component. The full number of credits is always awarded if the student achieves a passing grade; it is never adjusted according to the learner's level of performance. ECTS credits do not express how well the learner performed in satisfying the requirements for the award of credit. The quality of the learner's performance is expressed by the institutional or national grading system.

Some national or institutional regulations foresee 'condoning'/ compensation procedures.¹⁷ In such cases, the details of that process should be transparent.

Individual learners may be awarded more or fewer than 60 ECTS credits per academic year if they successfully undertake more or fewer educational components than those scheduled in the learning programme.

4.3 ECTS credit accumulation and progression

[From the key features:]

"Credits may be accumulated with a view to obtaining qualifications, as decided by the degree-awarding institution."

At European level, the Bologna Qualifications Framework defines the credit ranges that a learner is required to accumulate in order to receive a qualification corresponding to the first and second cycle (see section 3.3). The credit ranges for qualifications within National Qualifications Frameworks are compatible with the Bologna credit ranges, even though the former may be more prescriptive and more detailed.

At national or institutional level, progression rules or programme requirements enable learners to progress within a given cycle in order to obtain a specific qualification. These stipulate the credits, for what learning outcomes, at what level, can be accumulated and how. Progression rules may be expressed in terms of the numbers of credits or credit ranges required at different stages within a programme of study (e.g. a minimum number of credits required to pass from one academic year/semester to another). They may also be formulated in terms of detailed rules on what components must and/or can be taken at what stage and of what level (e.g. compulsory courses, optional courses and prerequisites). The rules may be formulated as a combination of the above.

Progression rules also relate to the number of credits to be obtained at different levels within the National Qualifications Framework. Some qualifications frameworks are also credit frameworks, meaning that they define the number of credits per type of qualification (e.g. master). Such credit frameworks set the number of credits to be awarded after the achievement of required learning outcomes. Progression rules define how learners progress within the learning pathway to achieve this number of credits in a progressive manner.

Accumulation of credits is documented in an official institutional Transcript of Record, so that learners can have a record/ proof or confirmation of what they have achieved at each stage of their educational pathway.

¹⁷ Condoning is the term used when an examination board exempts a student from reassessment in a failed (or marginally failed) component if the other related components are passed with sufficiently high grades.

4.4 Credit transfer in ECTS

[From the key features:]

“Credits awarded in one programme may be transferred into another programme, offered by the same or another institution. This transfer can only take place if the degree-awarding institution recognises the credits and the associated learning outcomes. Partner institutions should agree in advance on the recognition of periods of study abroad.”

Successful credit transfer requires academic recognition of credits. Recognition of credits is the process through which an institution certifies that certain learning outcomes achieved and assessed in another institution satisfy certain requirements of one of the programmes they offer. Given the diversity of programmes and higher education institutions, it is unlikely that the credits and learning outcomes of a single educational component in different programmes will be identical. Therefore, a flexible approach to recognition of credits obtained in another context is recommended. ‘Fair recognition’ rather than perfect equivalence is to be sought. Such ‘fair recognition’ should be based on the learning outcomes – i.e. what a person knows and is able to do - rather than on the formal procedures that have led to the completion of a qualification or its component.¹⁸ The recognition process should be transparent.

The Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications¹⁹ as adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee states that:

Recognition of foreign qualifications should be granted unless a substantial difference can be demonstrated between the qualification for which recognition is requested and the relevant qualification of the State in which recognition is sought. In applying this principle, the assessment should seek to establish whether:

(a) the differences in learning outcomes between the foreign qualification and the relevant qualification of the country in which recognition is sought are too substantial to allow the recognition of the foreign qualification as requested by the applicant.

Recognition means that the number of credits gained for suitable learning outcomes achieved, at the appropriate level, in another context will replace the number of credits that are allocated for these learning outcomes at the awarding institution. For example in practice a 4 ECTS credit component in one institution can replace a 5 ECTS credit component in another institution if learning outcomes are equivalent. The student will then be awarded 5 ECTS credits.

Decisions on credit recognition and transfer are taken by the qualification-awarding institution on the basis of reliable information on the learning outcomes achieved, as well as on the means of assessment and their validation. Institutions should make their recognition policies known and easily accessible.

In ECTS, credit recognition for the purpose of accumulation and transfer are facilitated by ECTS key documents like the Course Catalogue, the Learning Agreement and the Transcript of Records (see section 6).

4.4.1 ECTS and periods of study abroad

In the case of agreed student mobility, the three parties involved – the home institution, the host institution and the student – should sign a Learning Agreement for mobility (see section 6.3.1) prior to

¹⁸ Adam, S (2004) Final report and Recommendations of the Conference: Improving the recognition systems of degrees and study credit points in the European Higher Education Area.

http://www.aic.lv/rigaseminar/documents/Riga_Final_ReportP_S_Adam.pdf

¹⁹ For the full document see: Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications¹⁹ as adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee at its second meeting, Rīga, 6 June 2001. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Recognition/Criteria%20and%20procedures_EN.asp#TopOfPage

the mobility period. In such cases, recognition of the credits by the home institution is automatic if the conditions stipulated in the learning agreement have been fulfilled.

All learning components to be followed abroad should be listed in the Learning Agreement. Where a student is awarded credits for learning components other than those specified in the Learning Agreement it is up to the home institution to decide whether or not to recognise these. In case of changes to the programme of study agreed with the learner, the Learning Agreement may be amended, but the amended version must be signed again by the same three parties concerned within an agreed period of time.

The recognition of credits in the framework of joint programmes is stipulated in the regulations of the programme. There may be no need for Learning Agreements for mobility in the case of joint programmes as the credits achieved in the partner institution are automatically recognised if the rules of the joint programme are followed and the conditions are satisfied.

Further guidance on how to organise periods of study abroad within the framework of bilateral agreements can be found in annex 2 of this guide.

4.5 ECTS and lifelong learning

[From the key features:]

“ECTS is widely used in formal higher education and can be applied to other lifelong learning activities. If students have achieved learning outcomes in other learning contexts or timeframes (formal, non-formal or informal), the associated credits may be awarded after successful assessment, validation or recognition of these learning outcomes.”

The use of ECTS for lifelong learning enhances the transparency of learning programmes and achievements not only when it comes to the main higher education degrees (bachelor, master or doctorate) but for all types of learning activities provided or learning outcomes recognised by higher education institutions. The fact that all learning achievements are documented and awarded a corresponding number of ECTS credits makes it possible for learners to have this learning recognised with a view of achieving a qualification, when these learning outcomes satisfy the requirements of the qualification.

4.5.1 ECTS and continuing education

Not all learners are full-time students enrolled in regular learning programmes. A growing number of adult learners follow ‘stand-alone’ training, without necessarily pursuing a specific qualification. Higher education institutions face increasing demands to satisfy the needs of adult learners and/or employers and to provide individual learning pathways.

When using ECTS for continuing education, the same principles for credit allocation, award, transfer and accumulation apply. Like for credits allocated to components which are part of programmes, credits allocated to continuing education are based on the workload typically needed to achieve the expected learning outcomes.

Credits awarded for continuing education may be recognised and accumulated towards a qualification or not, depending on the desire of the learner and/or the requirements for the award of the qualification. Some learners may only be interested in following a particular educational component without wishing to obtain the qualification.

4.5.2 ECTS and recognition of non-formal and informal learning

People often possess valuable competences acquired outside higher education institutions, through other types of learning activities, work or life experience. There is no reason why non-traditional learners should not benefit from the transparency and recognition which institutions can provide by using ECTS.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning opens up the possibility to achieve a higher education qualification to those who have not been able or have not wished to do so in the traditional way.

Higher education institutions should have the competence to award credits for learning outcomes acquired outside the formal learning context through work experience, hobbies or independent study, provided that these learning outcomes satisfy the requirements of their qualifications or components. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning should be automatically followed by the award of the number of ECTS credits attached to the corresponding part of the formal programme. The number of credits awarded should be the same as the credits allocated to formal educational components with comparable learning outcomes.

As with formal education, the award of credit is preceded by an assessment to verify the achievement of learning outcomes. The assessment criteria and associated methods should be constructed so as to measure the achievement of the required learning outcomes at the appropriate level, without reference to specific learning activities. For example, classroom discussion of the subject matter would no longer be considered in assessment, whereas the corresponding learning outcome of constructing arguments while interacting with a group would become relevant.

Institutions are encouraged to publish their recognition policy and practices for non-formal or informal learning prominently on their website. These policies should include elements such as feedback to learners on the results of the assessment or the possibility for learners to appeal. Institutions are also encouraged to create 'assessment facilities' for advice, counselling and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. These may take different forms depending on national and institutional practices (e.g. they may exist within single higher education institutions or as joint centres for several institutions).

By implementing procedures for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, the social dimension of higher education institutions is strengthened. Institutions fulfil the objective of facilitating access to learners from professional life and a range of non-traditional learning environments, and thus contribute to making lifelong learning a reality.

Figure 3 – Example of the use of credit for LLL – Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework (SCQF)²⁰

The SCQF guidelines encourage the use of validation of non-formal or informal learning:

- for personal and career development (formative recognition)
- for award of credit (summative recognition)

The latter involves assessing, and then *credit rating* learning gained through experience which took place before a learner embarks on a formal programme or qualification. Credit rating is the process through which the credit value of learning is established. In general this means that the receiving institution determines the number of credits a learner can be awarded within a particular programme within that institution or organisation.

The process of awarding credit to non-formal or informal learning has these three stages:

1. Initial advice and guidance (what does the process involve for the learner, what credit limits there are for non-formal/informal learning, what are the costs, roles and responsibilities of learner and tutor/advisor; and different learning pathways to qualification)
2. Support (reflective process; understanding learning outcomes; identifying own learning outcomes; evidence gathering and selection)
3. Recognition/assessment (assessment of evidence of achievement of learning outcomes and assessment criteria)
4. Award of credit (credit awarded through this process is of same value as credit gained through formal learning)

²⁰ This summary is based on the presentation by Ruth Whittaker, Caledonian Academy, Glasgow Caledonian University, made during the Bologna seminar on Learning Outcomes based Higher Education (21-22 February 2008, Edinburgh). The full presentation can be found on:

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/Edinburgh2008.htm>

5 Quality assurance and ECTS

The primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with each institution.²¹ Internal quality assurance involves all procedures undertaken by higher education institutions to ensure that the quality of their programmes and qualifications meets their own specifications and those of other bodies legitimately empowered to make specifications. External quality reviews undertaken by quality assurance agencies provide feedback to institutions and information to stakeholders. Taken together, internal quality assurance and external quality review aim to implement the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.²²

The use of ECTS is in line with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* and notably standards 1.2 and 1.7, which state that:

- Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.²³ The quality assurance of programmes and awards is expected to include:
 - development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes²⁴
 - careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content.²⁵
- Institutions should regularly publish up-to-date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.²⁶

The implementation and use of ECTS by higher education institutions should be quality assured through appropriate processes (e.g. internal and external quality reviews and students' feedback).

²¹ *Realising the European Higher Education Area*. Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003.

²² European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2005) *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*:

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/Standards-and-Guidelines-for-QA.pdf>

²³ *Standards and Guidelines*, p. 16

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 16

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 16

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 19

Figure 4 – Good practice on ECTS and quality assurance

Regarding the quality assurance of ECTS and of related processes, it is good practice that higher education institutions' quality assurance processes ensure that for all their higher education programmes:

- educational components are expressed in terms of appropriate learning outcomes, and clear information is available concerning their level, credits, delivery and assessment
- studies can be completed in the time officially allocated to them (i.e., the workload associated with a semester, trimester or academic year is realistic)
- annual monitoring examines any variations in patterns of achievement and results gained
- students are provided with detailed information and advice so that they have the appropriate prerequisites and co-requisites for any studies undertaken and are not allowed to select educational components that are at an inappropriate level or that they have previously studied at the same level.²⁷

With regard to mobile students and recognition this means that:

- credit transfer processes are included in the normal monitoring, review and validation procedures
- appropriate staff are designated as responsible for credit transfer and recognition matters
- Learning Agreements are completed in all cases; their development, and any subsequent changes to them, should be subject to sensitive yet robust approval processes²⁸
- mobile students undertake normal educational components from the existing Course Catalogue; they follow the validated full assessment regime for those components and are graded alongside home students
- detailed transcripts are provided recording the credits and grades awarded
- recognition is given to all credits associated with successfully completed educational components undertaken as part of any approved learning agreement; results should be issued and transmitted promptly
- objective procedures exist for interpreting the grades awarded, so that also grades – and not just credits – are properly reflected in any final qualifications gained.

²⁷ Prerequisites: required prior knowledge, usually defined in the form of the successful completion of other (previous) educational components. Co-requisites: educational components which require that some other components be undertaken at the same time or immediately following the successful achievement of the learning outcomes corresponding to that component.

²⁸ The notion of sensitive 'fair recognition' and not strict equivalence should be used in developing learning agreements, as associated with the 1997 *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*, Explanatory Report: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/165.htm>

6 ECTS key documents

[From the key features:]

“Credit transfer and accumulation are facilitated by the use of the ECTS key documents (Course Catalogue, Student Application Form, Learning Agreement and Transcript of Records) as well as the Diploma Supplement.”

The ECTS key documents described in this section constitute a widely used and accepted way of communicating those elements of information which are useful for all learners (including mobile and non-mobile students), academic and administrative staff, employers and other stakeholders. Using ECTS key documents correctly ensures transparency and enhances quality in higher education.

Increasingly, institutions keep track of learners' achievements in a systematic way within a computerised student records system which integrates the data contained in the ECTS key documents and other documents such as the Diploma Supplement²⁹.

6.1 Course Catalogue

The first key document is the Course Catalogue. This is the regular guide for all students attending the institution.

The exact format of the Catalogue is to be decided by the institution. It may be considered more appropriate to separate the general information for students from the academic information. In any case, all information should be detailed, user-friendly and up-to-date. The Catalogue should be published on the institution's website so that all interested parties can easily access it. It should be published sufficiently in advance for students to make their choices.

A checklist of the recommended contents of the Course Catalogue is given below (section 6.1.1). The checklist indicates the full range of information which should be provided. It is essential that information about the qualifications offered, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures, the level of programmes, the single educational components and the learning resources available to students be well documented and easily understood.

All learners should be able to identify an individual who will be able to give them relevant advice, at either institutional or departmental/subject level. It is therefore important that the Catalogue should include the names of people to contact, with information about how, when and where to contact them.

Transparency and accessibility apply equally to language. The publication should be available on the website, not only in the local language, but preferably also in another widely-used language in order to enhance transparency at international level³⁰. Links to examples of Course Catalogues can be found on the following web page: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm

6.1.1 Checklist for the Course Catalogue

Part 1 – Information on the institution:

- name and address
- academic calendar
- academic authorities
- general description of the institution (including type and status)
- list of programmes offered

²⁹ The Diploma Supplement is also part of the package of Europass transparency tools.

<http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/europass/home/hornav/Introduction/navigate.action>

³⁰ The second language required for institutions applying for the ECTS label is English.

- general admission requirements
- general arrangements for the recognition of prior learning (formal, informal and non-formal)
- general registration procedures
- ECTS credit allocation based on the student workload needed in order to achieve expected learning outcomes
- arrangements for academic guidance.

Part 2 – Information on programmes

General description:

- qualification awarded
- level of qualification
- specific admission requirements
- specific arrangements for recognition of prior learning (formal, non-formal and informal)
- qualification requirements and regulations
- profile of the programme
- key learning outcomes
- occupational profiles of graduates with examples
- access to further studies
- course structure diagram with credits (60 per full-time academic year)
- examination regulations, assessment and grading
- graduation requirements
- mode of study (full-time, part-time, e-learning...),
- programme director or equivalent.

Description of individual course units:

- course unit title
- course unit code
- type of course unit (compulsory, optional)
- level of course unit (e.g. first, second or third cycle; sub-level if applicable)
- year of study (if applicable)
- semester/trimester when the course unit is delivered
- number of ECTS credits allocated
- name of lecturer(s)
- learning outcomes of the course unit
- mode of delivery (face-to-face, distance learning)
- prerequisites and co-requisites
- recommended optional programme components
- course contents
- recommended or required reading
- planned learning activities and teaching methods
- assessment methods and criteria
- language of instruction.
- work placement(s)

Part 3 – General information for students:

- cost of living
- accommodation
- meals
- medical facilities
- facilities for special needs students
- insurance
- financial support for students
- student affairs office

- learning facilities
- international programmes
- practical information for mobile students
- language courses
- internships
- sports and leisure facilities
- student associations.

6.2 Student Application Form

The ECTS Student Application Form has been developed for mobile students who will spend a limited study period in another institution. Students who intend to take complete their studies at another institution should enrol according to the regular procedures of the institution concerned and will fill in other types of application forms.

The Student Application Form contains all the essential information about a mobile student that a prospective host institution needs. If an institution requires further information (for example, regarding housing, special health requirements) from incoming students, it may request it separately.

The standard form and a filled-in example of a Student Application Form can be found here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm

Institutions may choose to adapt the standard form (adding their logo and other specific information), but they should ascertain that it contains all the elements and that, as far as possible, the sequence is respected.

6.3 Learning Agreement

In higher education institutions, students normally register for a programme of study and for a number of specific course units/modules on either an annual or a semester basis. In practice, this represents a Learning Agreement for home students. By registering the student, the higher education institution enters into an agreement to deliver the courses and to grant credits for the achievement of the expected learning outcomes.

6.3.1 Learning Agreement for mobile students

The ECTS Learning Agreement was originally developed for mobile students in order to provide a binding agreement before the mobility experience. When used for mobile students, Learning Agreements contain the list of course units or modules or other educational components the student is planning to take at the other institution, together with the code numbers and the ECTS credits allocated to the components.

An ECTS Learning Agreement is drawn up for a semester or a year of study and must be signed by the home institution, the host institution and the student. Those signing on behalf of the two institutions must be in a formal position of authority which allows them to commit the institutions. For the host institution, the commitment is to register the incoming student in the planned course units/modules and to provide the required learning activities; for the home institution, it is to grant recognition of the credits gained at the other institution. A student should not be asked to negotiate academic recognition with individual academic staff members. The Learning Agreement, together with the Transcript of Records, is designed to guarantee full recognition of the programme of study undertaken in the host institution.

A programme of study may need to be modified after the arrival of the mobile student. In such cases, the Learning Agreement should be amended as soon as possible and endorsed by the three parties: the home institution, the host institution and the student. Only in this way can the recognition of the period of study continue to be fully guaranteed.

The standard form and a filled-in example of a Learning Agreement can be found here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm

Institutions may choose to adapt the standard form (adding their logo and other specific information), but they should ascertain that it contains all the elements and that, as far as possible, the sequence is respected.

6.3.2 Learning Agreement for work placements - Training Agreement

Learning Agreements for work placements or Training Agreements are also essential for work placements that are a required part of programmes. They should contain the same basic elements as the standard Learning Agreement, although obviously there are differences.

The Training Agreement should indicate clearly the location of the work placement, the period of the placement, the work to be undertaken (job description), the learner's rights and duties, and the expected learning outcomes. It will also need to indicate what assessment and assessment criteria will be used in relation to the expected learning outcomes and who will be responsible for this, i.e. the role of the work placement provider (employer) and, whenever applicable, the host institution.

The Training Agreement should be signed by the three parties – the learner, the home educational institution and the work placement provider (employer). Where a host institution is involved it is also expected to sign the agreement. The primary responsibility lies with the qualification awarding institution. The Agreement should indicate the number of ECTS credits which will be awarded on achievement of the expected learning outcomes.

The standard form and a filled-in example of a Training Agreement can be found here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm

Institutions may choose to adapt the standard form (adding their logo and other specific information), but they should ascertain that it contains all the elements and that, as far as possible, the sequence is respected.

6.4 Transcript of Records

Many institutions produce a transcript of records for each student at the end of each semester or year. This is an important document for the student and institution. It ensures that students have an accurate and up-to-date record of their progress, the educational components they have taken, the number of ECTS credits they have achieved and the grades they have been awarded. The ECTS Transcript of Records is such a certification, in an agreed format. It is an important formal document, providing evidence of progress and recognition.

For mobile students, the home institution firstly issues the Transcript of Records and sends it to the host institution for each outgoing student before departure, to provide information about the educational components already completed, their level and the results obtained. Subsequently, the host institution issues another Transcript of Records for each incoming student and sends it to the home institution at the end of their period of study, in order to formally certify the work completed, the credits awarded, and the local grades received during the mobility period.

Since the Transcript is a vital document for recording the progress of all students and for recognising learning achievements, it is crucial to determine who is responsible for producing it, how it is issued and how it is delivered.

The standard form and a filled-in example of a Student Application Form can be found here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm

Institutions may choose to adapt the standard form (adding their logo and other specific information), but they should ascertain that it contains all the elements and that, as far as possible, the sequence is respected.

7 References for further reading

7.1 Credit and qualifications systems

European Instruments:

- *The framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area*
<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/QF-EHEA-May2005.pdf>
 Background report: *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*, Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2005
http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf
- *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning*
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF>
 Other information on the EQF:
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm#doc
- *Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region* (CETS 165, 1997)
<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=165&CL=ENG>
 Explanatory report on the Convention:
<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/165.htm>

Publications at European level:

- *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe* (2007)
http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/images/stories/template/General_Brochure_final_version.pdf
 Further information and outcomes of the Tuning project:
<http://unideusto.org/tuning> or <http://www.rug.nl/let/tuningeu>)

Relevant Bologna Seminar Reports:

- Bologna Seminar on 'Development of a Common Understanding of Learning Outcomes and ECTS' Porto, Portugal, 19-20 June 2008 *Final Report and Recommendations*
http://portobologna.up.pt/documents/BS_P_Report_20080915_FINAL.pdf
 Further information on the seminar (inputs, presentations):
<http://portobologna.up.pt/>
- Bologna Seminar on 'ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload' Moscow, Russia, 17-18 April 2008 Conclusions
http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/documents/Moscow_April2008_conclusions_final.pdf
 Wagenaar, Robert (2006) 'An Introduction to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)', in: EUA, *Bologna Handbook. Making Bologna Work*. Berlin: European University Association
<http://www.eua.be/publications/bologna-handbook/>

- Le Mouillour, Isabelle, commissioned by Cedefop (2005) *European approaches to credit (transfer) systems in VET*. Cedefop Dossier 12. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities
http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/424/6014_en.pdf
- Adam, Stephen (2004) *Improving the recognition system of degrees and study credit points in the European Higher Education Area*.
Bologna Seminar on Recognition, University of Latvia, Riga, 3-4 December 2004, organised by Latvian authorities and the Council of Europe, supported by the EU Socrates programme. Final report and recommendations of the conference.
http://www.aic.lv/rigaseminar/documents/Riga_Final_ReportP_S_Adam.pdf
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2005) *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. Helsinki: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/Standards-and-Guidelines-for-QA.pdf>
- Gehmlich, Volker (2006) 'The Added Value of Using ECTS' in: EUA, *Bologna Handbook. Making Bologna Work*. Berlin: European University Association
<http://www.eua.be/publications/bologna-handbook/>

7.2 Curriculum design

- Volker Gehmlich, Andy Gibbs, Raimonda Markeviciene, Terence Mitchell, Graeme Roberts, Anne Siltala, Marina Steinmann (2008) *Yes! Go! A Practical Guide to Designing Degree Programmes with Integrated Transnational Mobility*, DAAD
<http://eu.daad.de/eu/mocca/06493.html>

7.3 Learning outcomes

- Bologna Seminar on 'Learning Outcomes Based Higher Education - The Scottish Experience' Edinburgh, UK, 21-22 February 2008 *Conclusions and Recommendations*
http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/documents/Edinburgh/Edinburgh_Feb08_Final_Conclusions_and_Recommendations.pdf

Final Report

http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/documents/Edinburgh/Edinburgh_Feb08_final_report.pdf

Further information on the seminar (inputs, presentations):

- <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/Edinburgh2008.htm>
- Adam, Stephen (2008) *Learning Outcomes Current Developments in Europe: Update on the Issues and Applications of Learning Outcomes Associated with the Bologna Process*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government

Presented to the Bologna Seminar: Learning outcomes based higher education: the Scottish Experience (February 2008, Edinburgh).

http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/documents/Edinburgh/Edinburgh_Feb08_Adams.pdf

- Adam, Stephen (2004) *Using Learning Outcomes: A consideration of the nature, role, application and implications for European education of employing learning outcomes at the local, national and international levels*
<http://www.pedagogy.ir/images/pdf/using-learning-outcomes-eu.pdf>

- Kennedy, Declan, Hyland, Aine, and Ryan, Norma (2006) 'Writing and Using Learning Outcomes: A Practical Guide' in: EUA, *Bologna Handbook. Making Bologna Work*. Berlin: European University Association
<http://www.bologna.msmt.cz/files/learning-outcomes.pdf>

Presented to the Bologna Seminar: Using Learning Outcomes (July 2004, Edinburgh).

http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/Bol_sem/Seminars/040701-02Edinburgh/040620LEARNING_OUTCOMES-Adams.pdf

- Cedefop (2008) *The Shift to Learning Outcomes: Conceptual, political and practical developments in Europe*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

Synthesis:

http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/494/4079_en.pdf

The full report is to be published.

7.4 National publications

Each country has published, or is in the process of publishing, information on its national qualifications and credit systems. Two examples are Scotland and Ireland.

- The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
<http://www.scqf.org.uk>
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland – National Framework of Qualifications
<http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/index.html>
- HRK (2007) *Bologna Reader II, Neue Texte und Hilfestellungen zur Umsetzung der Ziele des Bologna-Prozesses an deutschen Hochschulen*, Bonn
http://www.hrk.de/bologna/de/Bologna_Reader_gesamt.pdf
- Gehmlich, Volker (2008) *Die Einführung eines Nationalen Qualifikationsrahmens in Deutschland – DQR – Untersuchung der Möglichkeiten für den Bereich des formalen Lernens*, Osnabrück : Universitaet., Fak. für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften 2008
- Meijers, van Overveld, Perrenet with the co-operation of Borghuis and Mutsaers (2005) *Criteria for Academic Bachelor's and Master's Curricula*
http://www.jointquality.nl/content/descriptors/AC_English_Gweb.pdf
- Hildbrand, Tremp, Jäger Tückmantel (2008) *The Curricula Reform at Swiss Institutes of Higher Education: An Analysis of the Current State and Perspectives in the Bologna Reform*
www.crus.ch/dms.php?id=5499

Glossary

The following glossary defines terminology for the purpose of this ECTS Users' guide.

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Accumulation | The process of collecting credits awarded for achieving the learning outcomes of educational components or other learning activities. |
| Allocation of Credit | The process of assigning a number of credits to qualifications/ programmes or to other educational components. |
| Assessment | The total range of methods (written, oral and practical tests/examinations, projects and portfolios) used to evaluate learners' achievement of expected learning outcomes. |
| Assessment criteria | Descriptions of what the learner is expected to do, in order to demonstrate that a learning outcome has been achieved. |
| Award of Credit | The act of delivering learners the number of credits that are assigned to the component or a qualification. The award of credit recognises that learners' learning outcomes have been assessed and that the learner satisfies the requirements for the educational component or the qualification. |
| Competences | A dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, ethical values and attitudes. Fostering competences is the object of all educational programmes. Competences are developed in all course units and assessed at different stages of a programme. Some competences are subject-area related (specific to a field of study), others are generic (common to any degree course). It is normally the case that competence development proceeds in an integrated and cyclical manner throughout a programme. |
| Condoning | Condoning is the term used in some national contexts when an examination board exempts a student from reassessment in a failed (or marginally failed) component if other related components are passed with sufficiently high grades. |
| Contact Hour | Hours (typically a period of 45-60 minutes) spent by students on activities guided by teaching staff. |
| Credit (ECTS) | Quantified means of expressing the volume of learning based on the workload students need in order to achieve the expected outcomes of a learning process at a specified level. |
| Cycle | All qualifications in the European Higher Education Area are located within three cycles. One of the objectives indicated |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| | in the Bologna Declaration in 1999 was the “adoption of a system based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate.” In 2003 doctoral studies were also included in the Bologna structure and referred to as the third cycle. |
| Cycle (Level) Descriptors | Generic statements of the broad expected outcomes of each of the three cycles. A good example of general cycle (level) descriptors are the so-called Dublin Descriptors, which have served as one of the foundations (along with ECTS) for the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. |
| Educational Component | A self-contained and formally structured learning experience (such as: course unit, module, seminar, work placement). |
| Formal learning | Learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective. |
| Informal learning | Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or “incidental”/random). |
| Learner | An individual engaged in a learning process (formal, non-formal or informal learning). |
| Learner-centred (approach or system) | An approach or system that supports the design of learning programmes which focus on learners' achievements, accommodate different learners' priorities and are consistent with reasonable students' workload (i.e. workload that is feasible within the duration of the learning programme). It accommodates for learners' greater involvement in the choice of content, mode, pace and place of learning. |
| Learning Outcomes | Statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning. |
| Level Descriptor | General statements of the typical achievement of learners who have been awarded a qualification at a certain level in a qualifications framework. |

| | |
|--|---|
| Module | A course unit in a system in which each course unit carries the same number of credits or a multiple thereof. |
| Non-formal learning | Learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective. |
| Programme (educational) | A set of educational components, based on learning outcomes, that are recognised for the award of a specific qualification. |
| Progression | The process which enables learners to pass from one stage of a qualification to the next and to access educational programmes that prepare for qualifications at a higher level than those he/she already possesses. |
| Progression rules | Set of rules that define conditions for learners' progression within qualifications and towards other qualifications. |
| Qualification | Any degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of a recognised programme of study. |
| National Qualifications Framework (higher education) | The single description, at national level or at the level of an education system, which is internationally understood and through which all qualifications and other learning achievements in higher education may be described and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between higher education qualifications. |
| Quality Assurance | The process or set of processes adopted nationally and institutionally to ensure the quality of educational programmes and qualifications awarded. |
| Recognition of credit | The process through which an institution certifies that learning outcomes achieved and assessed in another institution satisfy (some or all) requirements of a particular programme, its component or qualification. |
| Recognition of non-formal and informal learning | The process through which an institution certifies that the learning outcomes achieved and assessed in another context (non-formal or informal learning) satisfy (some or all) requirements of a particular programme, its component or qualification. |
| Student | Learner enrolled in a formal educational programme |
| Transfer | The process of having credits awarded in one context recognised in another context for purposes of obtaining a qualification. |

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|----------|---|
| Workload | Indication of the time students typically need to complete all learning activities (such as lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, self-study and examinations) required to achieve the expected learning outcomes |
|----------|---|

Annex 1 – Learners' perspective in using ECTS

One of the objectives of ECTS is to ensure that learners' achievements, aspirations and capacities are taken into account in the learning process. The implementation of ECTS should provide protection and fair treatment for learners.

In an institution using ECTS, learners are entitled to expect:

- **A Course Catalogue** clearly describing the curricula, with expected learning outcomes and their components, including the **allocated ECTS credits**
- **assessment methods** that are coherent with the expected learning outcomes and the workload
- **information** about these assessment methods that is available well in advance
- **award of the number of ECTS credits** allocated to each educational component after the required assessment procedure has been passed successfully
- participation in the periodical **monitoring and revision** of the estimated workload and thus of the credit allocation
- **participation** of student representatives in the process of ECTS implementation
- possibilities for **guidance** and support
- an opportunity to have **prior learning achievements**, such as non-formal or informal learning or credits from other institutions, taken into account for further studies
- the right to academic appeal if credits are not awarded for components that have been successfully completed.

In cases of mobility:

- for periods of study abroad or in another institution based on a Learning Agreement – **full academic recognition** from the home higher education institution for credits achieved during the study period abroad, in accordance with the Learning Agreement,³¹ without duplication of assessment procedures
- for periods of study abroad or in another institution without a Learning Agreement – **fair recognition** of credits awarded during that period of study and **consideration** of them with respect to the award of a qualification
- careful and fair consideration by the home institution of grades awarded by the host institution.

In cases of recognition of non-formal and informal learning:

- the award of **the same number of credits** as allocated to formal educational components with comparable learning outcomes.

³¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/archive/million/charter_en.pdf

Annex 2 –Suggestions for institutions on recognition of periods of study abroad in the framework of bilateral agreements

Selection of partner institutions

It is suggested to make exchange agreements with institutions:

- that offer adequate descriptions of their programmes, including credits, learning outcomes, teaching/learning approaches and assessment methods
- whose standards you consider adequate for your students, so that you can accept their teaching and assessment procedures without requiring any further work or assessment.

Agreements should not only be made with institutions offering similar programmes, but also with those providing programmes complementary to yours, thus making available further opportunities for your students.

Integration of mobility into programmes

In order to structure mobility into your curricula:

- identify the semester or year when a period of study abroad would best fit into the programme (mobility window)
- schedule in that semester/year the educational components the learning outcomes of which can be more easily achieved abroad (e.g. language courses, international or comparative courses, supplementary/elective courses, preparation of dissertation, work placements, etc)
- identify, within the partner institutions, departments or curricula where similar, complementary and coherent learning outcomes could be achieved.

Allocation of academic responsibilities

Appoint an academic in each department or subject area who has the authority to:

- approve students' programmes of study abroad and amend them as needed (sign the Learning Agreement)
- guarantee full recognition of such programmes on behalf of the responsible academic body (sign the Recognition sheet).

Interaction with single outgoing students

Before the departure of the student, the responsible staff member will:

- discuss with the student, and finally approve, a Learning Agreement containing a programme of study abroad for a semester or a year (about 30 or 60 credits); this programme will have similar, complementary or coherent learning outcomes in relation to the programme in the home institution, but it will not necessarily have the same content
- guarantee in advance that all credits gained abroad in the approved programme of study will be fully recognised, transferred into the home programme and used to satisfy the qualification requirements.

After the return of the student, the responsible administrator will:

- transfer all credits gained abroad in the approved programme of study (Transcript of Records) into the student's official learning programme at home, indicating the learning activities they refer to, with their original titles; the credits will subsequently be included in the Diploma Supplement, with a note specifying the institution where they have been gained

- use the credits gained abroad for accumulation purposes to satisfy specific curricular requirements, as previously agreed in the Learning Agreement; recognising credits gained abroad as additional credits would not fulfil the commitment to full academic recognition, and should only be done if the student brings back more than 30/60 credits.

Annex 3 – ECTS Grading Table

Introduction

The first section of this annex describes the attempts made to design a reliable system for the interpretation and conversion of grades. The second section describes a simplified system called "The ECTS Grading Table". The simplified system builds on the earlier version and, like before, it requires universities to keep track of their grading practice and culture, which is good practice in many institutions across Europe. The ECTS Grading Table allows universities to ensure fair transfer and recognition of grades of mobile students. User comments on the new version are very welcome.

Background

It is well known that European educational systems have developed different approaches to grading which are deeply rooted in their pedagogical and cultural traditions. It is to be pointed out, moreover, that not only do they have different grading scales, but they also use them differently in the various institutions and subject areas. While it is essential to respect these differences, it is also important to make them transparent within the European Higher Education Area, so that grades attributed in all countries, institutions or subject areas can be properly understood and when necessary compared by people with different cultural backgrounds. Mobile students have a right to a fair treatment of their grades when credits are transferred from one institution/country to another, as grants or other benefits may depend on their level of performance. Transparency of performance levels is equally important for graduates applying for a job in their own or in another country.

To tackle this problem, in the past years ECTS guidelines suggested that, in addition to their national scale, European institutions might use a European grading scale as a translation device into other grading systems. Such European scale was based on the statistical distribution of passing grades in each programme, which showed how the national scale was actually being used in that context and allowed for comparison with the statistical distribution of grades in a parallel programme of another institution.

As a first step, the implementation of the ECTS scale required the collection of statistical data in the institutions who were willing to participate in the scheme to make their grades more transparent. In educational systems where ranking of students in each course unit/module was a standard procedure, statistical data could be provided for the very cohort in which the grade had been obtained. In the other cases, the statistical distribution was based on the grades given over the previous two or three years to a specific reference group - a single programme or a group of homogeneous programmes – from which a consistent grading pattern could be derived. These data, collected in a large number of institutions in Europe, have shown how national grading scales are actually being used. For example, teachers in French institutions are more consistently using the lower half of their scale, while their Italian counterparts are making more use of grades in the upper half of it. As for the subject area, the data from many Italian institutions showed that teachers in Engineering tend to mark lower than teachers in Humanities. Although these patterns had already been perceived by practitioners on an impressionistic basis, it is interesting to find that they are supported by statistical evidence. The grade distribution table developed for a specific reference group allows for a single grade currently obtained to be positioned in its own context, thus making it easier to understand the level of the student's performance and compare it with that of students with a similar position in other contexts.

As a second step in the implementation of the ECTS grading scale, the statistical distribution curve for each reference group was split into five segments (Top 10%, next 25%, next 30%, next 25%, lowest 10%) also called A, B, C, D, E, which could become a device for the direct translation of grades from a degree programme in a given country/institution into a similar one in another country/institution. For example, if, based on the statistical data, in a French degree programme the grade 14 was obtained by the top 10% of the students, the ECTS grade A could be added into a student's transcript alongside

the grade 14. In this way the French grade 14 was understood as being one of the best grades obtained in that programme, comparable to the grade having a similar percentage in the same subject area in another country/institution, to which an A had also been attached – for example a 30 in an Italian institution.

In the light of the experience made with the ECTS 5-point grading scale in the past years, it can be said that the second step described above proved to be far too ambitious and difficult to implement, especially in those national grading systems with only five or fewer passing grades, which could hardly fit into the predetermined percentage structure provided by the ECTS scale. In fact, the use of the ECTS scale by European institutions has been rather limited.

Simplified system: The ECTS Grading Table

In order to simplify the procedure, while continuing to pursue the objective of making European grades more transparent, we propose using an "ECTS grading table", concentrating on the first step of the 5-point system. Thus institutions only need to provide in a standard table form the statistical distribution of their own grades. Therefore, the ECTS grading scale based on a predetermined percentage structure is to be replaced by a simple statistical table completed for each degree programme or group of homogeneous programmes.

In other words, instead of trying to fit existing grading practices in a standard distribution scale, universities need only to determine the actual percentage of students that receive each 'local' grade.

For example:

| National/institutional grade | Total number awarded in the reference group | Percentage of the total number |
|------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| 10 | 50 | 5% |
| 9 | 100 | 10% |
| 8 | 350 | 35% |
| 7 | 300 | 30% |
| 6 | 200 | 20% |
| | 1,000 | 100% |

This **ECTS grading table** can be produced for national grading scales of any size, from data concerning a given reference group which are easily available in institutional records. When included in the Transcripts of Records and Diploma Supplements of the students, the table will facilitate the interpretation of each grade awarded to them and will not require any further calculation.

The new **ECTS grading table** allows more straightforward comparison of two or more grading systems and cultures. This can be illustrated by another example:

| National/ institutional grade country/system A | Grading percentage* | | National/ institutional grade country/ system B | Grading percentage* |
|--|------------------------|--|--|------------------------|
| 30 lode | 5.6% | | 1 | 20% |
| 30 | 15.7% | | 2 | 35% |
| 29 | 0.5% | | 3 | 25% |
| 28 | 12.3% | | 4 | 20% |
| 27 | 11.8% | | | |
| 26 | 9.0% | | | |
| 25 | 8.2% | | | |
| 24 | 11.3% | | | |
| 23 | 2.7% | | | |
| 22 | 6.0% | | | |
| 21 | 2.3% | | | |
| 20 | 5.7% | | | |
| 19 | 1.9% | | | |
| 18 | 6.9% | | | |
| Total | 100% | | | 100% |
| | | | | |

* Based on the total number of grades awarded in the degree programme concerned during two preceding years.

From this example, we see that a 30 awarded in the scale of A should be converted to a 1 in the scale of B. The grade 2 of B will translate into the grades 26-29 (average 27) of the country or system A.

To sum up, **the ECTS grading table allows for simple, transparent interpretation and conversion of grades** from one system or context to another, and therefore does justice to the level of academic performance of all learners. Used correctly, it bridges different grading systems as well as different cultures in the European Higher Education Area and beyond.

To use the **ECTS grading table** the following steps should be taken:

1. Identify the reference group for which the grade distribution will be calculated (usually a degree programme, but in some cases a wider or different grouping of students such as a faculty or sector, e.g. Humanities).
2. Collect all grades awarded over a period of (at least) two academic years for the reference group identified.
3. Calculate the grade distribution in terms of percentages for the reference group.
4. Include the grading percentage table of your degree programme in every Transcript of Records/Diploma Supplement.
5. For transfer, compare the percentage table of the other institution's degree programme with your own. On the basis of this comparison individual grades can be converted.

The first four steps in the procedure concern all programmes and are purely administrative tasks. The academic responsible for credit transfer may get involved in step 5 when general guidelines for the conversion of grades are being established.

Annex 4 – Key documents

You can download all ECTS forms (the Student Application Form, the Learning Agreement; the Working Agreement; and the Transcript of Records) as well as completed examples, from the European Commission's website: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm

There you will also find examples for Course Catalogues, the Diploma Supplement Outline, as well as other useful documents that can help you e.g. in planning new modules or assessing student workload.

Annex 5 – Overview of national regulations on the number of learning hours per academic year

| Countries | Hours range/academic year | Hours range/credit | Status of the proclamation |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Austria | 1,500h | 25h | Law |
| Belgium (Fl) | 1,500/1,800h | 25/30h | Decree (law on the Flemish level) |
| Belgium (Fr) | 1440h | 24h | Decree(law of the French Community) |
| Czech Republic | 1,500/1800h | 25/30h | Good practice, recommendation of ECTS Key Features. |
| Cyprus | 1500h/1800h | 25/30h | New Law for Higher Education (under consideration in 2008) |
| Denmark | 1,650h | 27/28h | Letters from the Ministry |
| Estonia | 1,560h | 26h | University Act law |
| Finland | 1,600h | 27h | Act of the Council of State |
| France | 1,650h | 25/30h | Recommendation by the University Presidents' conference |
| Germany | 1,800h | 30h | KMK (Kultusministerkonferenz = Standing Conference of the Ministers of the Federal States). Element of Accreditation |
| Greece | 1,500/1,800h | 25/30h | Ministerial Decision |
| Hungary | 1,620/1,800h | 30h | Act on Higher Education and attaching Governmental Decree |
| Iceland | 1,500/2,000h | 25/33h | No proclamation, but understanding among universities |
| Ireland | | 20/30h | Recommendation on the principles and operational guidelines devised by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland |
| Italy | 1,500h | 25h | Ministerial Decrees |
| Latvia | 1,600h | | Law |
| Lithuania | 1,600h | | Law and Decree |
| Malta | 1,500h | 25h | In Educational Act, 2004 and subsidiary legislation |
| Netherlands | 1,680h | 28 | Law |

| | | | |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| Portugal | 1,500/1,680h | 25/28h | Decree 42/2005 of 22 February. |
| Norway | no range per academic year proclaimed/decision of universities | no range per credit proclaimed | Law |
| Poland | 1,500/1,800h | 25/30h | Decree |
| Romania | 1,520/1,640h | 25/27h | Order of the Ministry of Education (from 1999) |
| Slovakia | no range per academic year proclaimed | 25/30h | Good practice, recommendation of ECTS key features |
| Slovenia | 1,500/1,800 | 25/30 | Law (2004) |
| Spain | 1,500/1,800h | 25/30h | Royal Decree (law) |
| Sweden | 1,600h | 26/27h | Higher education ordinance (Government regulation) states full time studies during 40 weeks |
| Switzerland | 1,500/1,800h | 25/30h | Swiss University Conference (SUC) Regulation for the implementation of Bologna |
| Turkey | 1,500/1,800h | | Law |
| United Kingdom | 1,200-1,800h | 20h | national Qualification (and Credits) Frameworks |