

Recommendation from EUA and the national ECTS counselors regarding the role of ECTS in the elaboration of a European Qualifications Framework

1. The October 2002 Zürich 'Bologna Preparatory' Conference demonstrated the support of Europe's universities for the implementation of ECTS as a generalised credit system for the EHEA. In particular the importance of the further development of ECTS as a credit accumulation system was underlined as a means of facilitating mobility both inside systems and internationally, and allowing transfer from outside the higher education context. In this way attention was drawn to the major role the use of credits plays in facilitating lifelong learning and promoting greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes more generally.
2. For all these reasons it was agreed in Zürich that the use of ECTS makes a major contribution to the Bologna goals of improving transparency and comparability of study programmes and qualifications and facilitating the mutual recognition of qualifications. This can be considered in itself as an important step towards helping describe qualifications and making them more transparent.
3. Ministers in Berlin echoed these sentiments through their call to implement ECTS not only as a transfer but also as an accumulation system and by calling upon those working on Qualifications Frameworks for the EHEA to 'encompass the wide range of flexible learning paths, opportunities and techniques and to make appropriate use of ECTS credits'.
4. For these reasons the EUA and the ECTS Counsellors recommend that from the outset the European Overarching Qualifications Framework should be conceived of as an integrated Credit and Qualifications Framework, thus implying that cycles, levels and qualifications are described in terms of their 'worth' in ECTS credits. This recommendation is based upon the experience of some 15 years of piloting, with Socrates ERASMUS support, and now implementing ECTS across the vast majority of the Bologna signatory countries.
5. The decision to develop a credit based Qualification Framework at European level should be taken at the outset of the process. Although perhaps more complex a task initially, this takes account of the fact that broad agreement has already reached on the use of ECTS credits for the EHEA and indeed that a significant number of countries have introduced ECTS into their national legislation. It is therefore preferable, and indeed more useful to work being undertaken at national level, than the alternative of integrating them at a later stage.
6. This recommendation is made bearing in mind that the proposed overarching European QF must limit itself to describing a broad generic structure including those elements considered indispensable to ensuring comparable and compatible qualifications within the EHEA. We firmly believe that a credit based approach is one such indispensable element in this process.

7. The growing awareness of the importance of facilitating in very practical ways lifelong learning also speaks strongly in favour of conceiving of a Credit and Qualification Framework from the outset as a means of incorporating informal and non formal learning, and affording institutions a common language for describing all types of learning.
8. A Credit and Qualifications Framework places learners firmly at the centre, enabling them to gain credit for their learning and facilitating the process of the transfer and accumulation of credits between programmes and institutions. The utilization of a credit based system will thus facilitate the goal of reaching a single system of credit transfer and accumulation for lifelong learning compatible across all sectors of higher education and vocational education and training. In this way it takes account of the wider Lisbon Agenda and the recommendations made in the Spring 2004 Report "Education and Training 2010".
9. In a Credit and Qualifications Framework credits need to be linked to learning outcomes and expressed in terms of notional workload, thus making the learning outcomes easier to compare, and expressing more clearly their value or 'currency'. This in turn increases the transparency of and compatibility between diverse national systems.
10. The experience of ECTS leads furthermore to the strong recommendation that credits are linked to levels and cycles in order to distinguish them and give them precision. The importance of further investigating this link was already underlined in the conclusions of the Zürich Conference in October 2002.
11. It also follows that there is a need for a further subdivision of the existing Bologna 3 cycles into 'sub-levels' in order to be able to show progression through the higher education system. This is, for example, crucial in terms of increasing access which in turn means being able to define attainable goals within shorter periods than those envisaged for final first cycle qualifications, and also provides a response to the request by Ministers in the Berlin Communiqué 'to explore whether and how shorter higher education may be linked to the first cycle of a Qualifications Framework'.
12. The use of credits permits the necessary articulation between sub-levels and cycles each with their own specific learning outcomes. The elaboration of a European framework should therefore provide guidance on level and cycle descriptors in order to provide a structure and reference points for standards, learning, assessment etc
13. We strongly recommend further action on this question and are ready as experienced practitioners representing the main stakeholders to work further on the concepts involved, and in particular on the definition of learning outcomes in terms of level/cycle descriptors, with a view to providing practical advice to those involved in the elaboration of qualification frameworks in their particular national contexts.

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