

WHY ECTS?

The European Community promotes interuniversity cooperation as a means of improving the quality of education for the benefit of students and higher education institutions, and student mobility is a predominant element of that interuniversity cooperation. The Erasmus program clearly demonstrates that studying abroad can be a particularly valuable experience as it is not only the best way to learn about other countries, ideas, languages and cultures; increasingly it is also an important element in academic and professional career development.

The recognition of studies and diplomas is a prerequisite for the creation of an Open European area of education and training where students and teachers can move without obstacles. That is why the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was developed in a pilot scheme established within the Erasmus program as a means of improving academic recognition for study abroad. The external evaluation of ECTS has demonstrated the potential of the system and the European Commission has decided to include ECTS in its proposal for the Socrates program, in particular in Chapter 1 on higher education (Erasmus). The ECTS system is now moving from its restricted pilot stage towards a much wider use as an element of the European dimension in higher education.

ECTS provides an instrument to create transparency, to build bridges between institutions and to widen the choices available to students. The system makes it easier for institutions to recognise the learning achievements of students through the use of commonly understood measurements - credits and grades - and it also provides a means to interpret national systems of higher education. The ECTS system is based on three core elements: information (on study programs and student achievement), mutual agreement (between the partner institutions and the student) and the use of ECTS credits (to indicate student workload).

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF ECTS

As stated in the introduction, the ECTS system is based on three core elements: information (on study programs and student achievement), mutual agreement (between the partner institutions and the student) and the use of ECTS credits (to indicate student workload). These three core elements are made operational through the use of three key documents: the information package, the application form/learning agreement and the transcript of records. Most of all, ECTS is made operational by students, teachers and institutions who want to make study abroad an integral part of the educational experience. In itself, ECTS in no way regulates the content, structure or equivalence of study programs. These are issues of quality which have to be determined by the higher education institutions themselves when establishing a satisfactory basis for cooperation agreements, bilaterally or

multilaterally. The code of good practice called ECTS provides those actors with tools to create transparency and to facilitate academic recognition.

Full academic recognition is a *conditio sine qua non* for student mobility in the framework of the Erasmus and Socrates programs. Full academic recognition means that the study period abroad (including examinations or other forms of assessment) replaces a comparable period of study at the home university (including examinations or other forms of assessment), though the content of the agreed study program may differ.

The use of ECTS is voluntary and is based on mutual trust and confidence in the academic performance of partner institutions. Each institution selects its own partners.

TRANSPARENCY

ECTS provides transparency through the following means:

ECTS credits, which are numerical values allocated to course units to describe the student workload required to complete them. They reflect the quantity of work each course unit requires in relation to the total quantity of work necessary to complete a full year of academic study at the institution, that is, lectures, practical work, seminars, tutorials, fieldwork, private study - in the library or at home - and examinations or other assessment activities. ECTS is thus based on a full student workload and not limited to contact hours only. In ECTS, 60 credits represent the workload of an academic year of study and normally 30 credits for a semester and 20 credits for a term.

ECTS information package which supplies written information to students and staff on institutions, departments/faculties, the organization and structure of studies and course units.

ECTS learning agreement covering the program of study to be taken and the ECTS credits to be awarded for their satisfactory completion, committing the student to undertaking study abroad as an integral part of his or her higher education, the home institution to guaranteeing full academic recognition of the credits gained abroad and the host institution to providing the agreed course units, subject to timetabling.

The ECTS transcript of records which shows students' learning achievements in a way which is comprehensive, commonly understood and easily transferable from one institution to another.

Communication and flexibility are also needed to facilitate the academic recognition of studies completed or taken abroad. In this respect the ECTS coordinators have an important role to play as their main tasks are to deal with the academic and administrative aspects of ECTS.

The full range of course units of the department/faculty using ECTS should in principle be made available to the mobile student, including taught doctorate course units. Students should be enabled to follow regular course units - and not courses specifically designed for them - and should not be precluded from the possibility of fulfilling the host institution's requirements for a degree or diploma. ECTS credits ensure that the program will be reasonable in terms of workload for the period of

study abroad, for example, a student whose choice of course units totals 120 ECTS credits for an academic year would have to work twice as much as an average local student at the receiving institution, and a student whose program totals 30 ECTS credits for a whole academic year would be undertaking much less work than the average local student and would in effect be studying part-time.

ECTS also enables further studies abroad. With ECTS, a student will not necessarily go back to the home institution after the study period abroad; he/she may prefer to stay at the host institution - possibly to gain a degree - or even move to a third institution. The institutions themselves decide whether or not this is acceptable and what conditions the student must fulfil to obtain a diploma or transfer registration. The transcript of records is particularly useful in this context as it provides a history of the students' academic achievements, which will help institutions to make these decisions.