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Executive Summary

Guidance for the UK on
the new ECTS Users'
Guide

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UK HE Europe Unit guidance on the relationship between UK arrangements for academic credit and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

Introduction

1. This document provides updated guidance for the UK higher education (HE) sector on the relationship between UK arrangements for the award of academic credit and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The guidance reflects the following European and national developments:
 - Publication of new ECTS Users' Guide by the European Commission (February 2009)¹
 - Revision of the Framework for HE Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (August 2008)
 - Self-certification of UK qualifications frameworks as compatible with the Bologna Process Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (November 2008)
2. This document also follows the development and publication of the 'HE credit framework for England: Guidance on academic credit arrangements in HE in England'² in August 2008.
3. This Europe Unit guidance reflects and builds on existing practice in England, as well as in Scotland and Wales where integrated credit and qualification frameworks are in place.

¹ Available to download at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide_en.pdf

² See: www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit/creditframework.asp

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The development of ECTS

4. ECTS was launched in 1989 to support the European Union's (EU) Erasmus programme. It was initially designed to promote credit transfer on the basis of mutual recognition. The project 'Tuning Education Structures in Europe', as part of its approach to understanding curricula and making them comparable and compatible, later reviewed the role of ECTS as an accumulation system and focused in particular on understanding the comparative student workload required to achieve the intended learning outcomes.
5. Use of credit to facilitate greater mobility of students has become an important action line of the Bologna Process³. Ministers meeting in Prague in 2001 to review progress in implementation of the Bologna Process invited participating countries to adopt a "credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible, providing both transferability and accumulation functions". In seeking to enhance the employability and mobility of European citizens through greater transparency and recognition of qualifications, the Bologna Process promotes an overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)⁴. The FQ-EHEA comprises three cycles and sets out typical ECTS credit ranges for the first and second cycles.
6. At the Bologna Process ministerial summit in London in 2007, European HE Ministers called for the "*proper implementation of ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload*". Ministers also committed themselves to fully implement national qualifications frameworks compatible with the FQ-EHEA by 2010.
7. The 2009 Bologna Process Stocktaking report⁵ found that ECTS credits are widely used for both credit accumulation and transfer in many participating countries. 21 of the 46 participating countries were found to use ECTS for credit accumulation and transfer with credits demonstrably linked to learning outcomes. However, the report found that measuring credits in terms of student workload and linking them with learning outcomes remains a challenge in many countries. The report also noted a lack of integration at national level between qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes and ECTS in many countries.
8. The ministerial Communiqué from the summit in Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve on 28-29 April 2009⁶ states that, "*The development of national qualifications frameworks is an important step towards the implementation of lifelong learning. We aim at having them implemented and prepared for self-*

³ For more information on the Bologna Process please see:

www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/bologna_process/index.cfm

⁴ See: http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/Framework_qualificationsforEHEA-May2005.pdf

⁵ The Stocktaking report assesses implementation of Bologna Process recommendations in participating countries. A stocktaking report is prepared for each Bologna Process ministerial summit.

www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Stocktaking_report_2009_FINAL.pdf

⁶ See: www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve_Communique_April_2009.pdf

certification against the overarching Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area by 2012.” Self-certifying national qualifications frameworks to the overarching FQ-EHEA calls for Bologna countries to demonstrate how their qualification frameworks meet a number of criteria. With regard to ECTS, this requires indicating how the national higher education framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and how the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS-compatible credits.

9. Scotland successfully self-certified the national Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland as compatible with the FQ-EHEA in October 2006⁷. A revised version of the national Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ-EWNI)⁸ was published in August 2008. The revised version includes the qualification descriptors of the FQ-EHEA, known as the Dublin Descriptors, as an additional reference point and indicates the relationship between the levels of the FHEQ and the cycles of the FQ-EHEA. The FHEQ-EWNI was self-certified as compatible with the FQ-EHEA in February 2009⁹.

New European Commission ‘ECTS Users’ Guide’

10. The UK HE sector was concerned that the last edition of the ECTS Users’ Guide (published in 2005) did not take a balanced account of the learning outcomes of periods of study alongside workload or ‘hours studied’ when calculating academic credit. Following UK HE sector lobbying, the European Commission agreed to review ECTS in 2007. The review was carried out through meetings of national experts¹⁰ and three experts designated by the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in HE (EURASHE) and the European Students’ Union (ESU). A consultancy company, GHK¹¹, was also involved.
11. The review resulted in the publication by the Commission of a new ‘ECTS Users’ Guide¹² in February 2009 to update and replace the previous Guide (published in 2005). The new guide:
 - places ECTS in the context of Bologna reforms (section 1);
 - presents it as a learner-centred system (section 3.1), focused on learning outcomes linked to levels and level descriptors (sections 3.2, 3.3);
 - seeks to clarify the accumulation and transfer function (section 4.3 and 4.4);
 - is designed to promote lifelong learning (4.5); and
 - does not place any limits on the number of ECTS credits that can be awarded in a calendar year¹³.

⁷ See: www.enic-naric.net/documents/QF-Scotland_en.pdf

⁸ See: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08/default.asp

⁹ See: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/selfcertification09/default.asp

¹⁰ The UK national expert was Mr Stephen Adam, former Bologna Expert

¹¹ See: www.ghkint.com

¹² See: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide_en.pdf

¹³ The previous edition of the ECTS Users’ Guide stated that “a full calendar year programme designed to require 52 weeks of full-time study (no summer holidays) would normally have a work load of 75 credits”.

12. Although there was widespread consultation on this draft, the responsibility for the final text rests with the Commission. Many of the detailed comments provided by the UK, particularly the technical points, were taken on board by the Commission. However, Annex 3 of the Users' Guide provides the ECTS Grading Table and Annex 5 provides information on 'declared' workload hours associated with the completion of an academic year. UK HE sector representatives have argued that Annex 5 may be misleading because it implies that the 'declared' workloads are in some way comparable, yet there are major differences between countries as to whether or how workload is measured or estimated.
13. By including Annex 5 there is a danger of focusing on student workload in isolation from learning outcomes. This is disappointing when there is widespread engagement with learning outcomes as the focus of teaching and learning throughout Europe. Moreover, these are formal statements of workload and for the most part are not validated by objective research or by a statement of what workload constitutes. The variation in Annex 5 in the number of hours ascribed to an academic year (1,200-1,800 hours), even if we exclude the UK, suggests that care must be taken in any discussion of this subject. The tables in Annex 5 are based on an informal survey, and have not been endorsed by HE Ministers in the Bologna Process.
14. The table in Annex 5 shows the UK with 1,200 notional learning hours with 20 hours per credit. However, this notional workload relates to term-time only. It does not take into account, for example, project work in vacations, or preparation for, and taking of, examinations. There is no common European approach to this topic. Some Bologna countries include all the weeks from the beginning to the end of the academic year. For example the 1,800 hours would assume 45 weeks of continuous work at 40 hours per week. Different countries have different bases for calculating the number of hours formally associated with their academic year.
15. ECTS is now widely used through the EU and other Bologna signatory countries. Indeed in some countries ECTS is prescribed as *the* credit system in national legislation. The UK has not adopted this approach. However, it follows that UK institutions need to be aware of the basic elements of ECTS and familiar with the Users' Guide, particularly in discussion/meetings with colleagues and partner HEIs which have adopted ECTS. It should be stressed that the Users' Guide is exactly that, a guide, and should be respected as such, as is evident as the guide oscillates between prescription, advice and recommendations.

The Bologna Process and ECTS

16. The development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) makes it appropriate for a credit transfer and accumulation system to be based on learning outcomes with an indication of the associated notional student workload. Firstly, reforms to the structure of HE sectors across Europe are taking place with a view to making students more employable. In this respect employers wish to recognise students' qualifications on the basis of what they know, understand and can do, rather than the number of learning hours. Secondly, in view of the increasing importance of

lifelong learning, institutions need to be able to validate prior learning from outside formal HE settings, where learning may not be recognised on the basis of the amount of time a student has spent studying. Thirdly, the Bologna Process is bringing about a change in teaching style and methods, whereby curricula are becoming learner-centred rather than teaching-led.

17. For these reasons, the Bologna Process promotes the importance of learning outcomes in ECTS, alongside workload. The FQ-EHEA identifies the range of ECTS points *typically* associated with the completion of each cycle (see below). In referring to ECTS, the FQ-EHEA acknowledges ECTS practice that 60 ECTS points equate to one academic year, but no reference is made to the number of years or to the number of hours of study.

“Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications - approximately 120 ECTS credits; First cycle qualifications 180-240 ECTS credits; Second cycle qualifications - 90-120 ECTS credits – the minimum requirement should amount to 60 ECTS credits at second cycle level; Third cycle qualifications do not necessarily have credits associated with them”¹⁴.

18. The FQ-EHEA promotes the required learning outcomes identified with the three cycles in the ‘Dublin Descriptors’. The FQ-EHEA indicates that *“students work at unequal speeds and intensity, and that different learners will complete a similar workload in different time”¹⁵*. Detail on the time required for an average student to spend studying to achieve a certain award should be notional within a broad framework.

Guidance on how to relate UK HE arrangements to ECTS

19. Most of the elements of the Users’ Guide will not present difficulties for UK institutions because they represent good practice in curriculum, transparency and information and focus on a learner-centred approach. However, there are some features which may raise questions. The comments below seek to identify these, provide guidance and help in discussion on these.
20. Credit points provide a measure for describing the achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level. One UK credit point represents the learning outcomes expected to be achieved by the average learner at the relevant level in 10 hours of notional hours of learning. Credit is a measure of the volume of the outcomes, not of actual study time.
21. The new ECTS Users’ Guide indicates that in most cases student workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, with one credit corresponding to 25 to 30 hours of work. Current practice within the UK is to equate **one ECTS credit with two UK credits**. One UK credit equates to 10 *notional* hours. These ‘notional’ hours are based on the formal terms/semesters in a normal academic year. The emphasis must always ultimately relate to the achieved learning outcomes and their level for the awarding of academic credits.

¹⁴ http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

¹⁵ p.169 http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

22. Bachelor qualifications in EWNl, with a normal total credit value of 360 credit points, equate to 180 ECTS points provided that the learning outcomes are consistent with the Dublin Descriptor for that level. (Thus this equates to dividing 'UK' credits by two to arrive at equivalent ECTS value.)
23. Master's qualifications (on the basis of a *calendar* year) have a normal credit value of 180 UK credits which, again on the basis of notional learning time and meeting the Dublin qualification descriptor equate to 90 ECTS credit points. It must be stressed that the majority of UK Master's programmes last for a full 12 months and not a normal academic year. The FQ-EHEA stipulates that it is essential that second cycle (Master's) qualifications have a minimum of 60 ECTS credits (120 points from UK credit systems) at the second cycle level.
24. Table 1 of the Higher Education credit framework for England sets out the credit values typically associated with the design of programmes leading to the main HE qualifications in England. The equivalent ECTS ranges from the FQ-EHEA are shown alongside.
25. The difference in the number of notional learning hours attributed to an ECTS credit in the UK compared to countries in mainland Europe has led some commentators to argue that a 'UK ECTS' is of lesser value. Learning time is notional because it is inevitably based on the theoretical 'average' student. Student workload indications are in this way a proxy measure of the volume of effort required by the 'average' learner to achieve the required programme learning outcomes. As autonomous institutions, actual workload as opposed to 'notional' hours is a matter for individual HEIs in the UK to determine and describe. This approach of linking credit points of UK national qualifications frameworks was taken by UK stakeholders as they successfully self-certified the Scottish FQHE and the FHEQ EWNl as compatible with the Bologna Process FQ-EHEA. The well-established, and highly developed, UK credit practices are fully consistent with the agreed parameters of ECTS. UK credit practice has been successfully self-certified with the aid of independent European experts as in conformity with the Bologna Process.

Recommendation

26. The Europe Unit recommends that any document [Diploma Supplement, transcript, module catalogues, etc.] showing credit points from UK credit systems, would benefit from also indicating the ECTS credits awarded. HEIs may wish to award the required number of ECTS credits per qualification within the suggested FQ-EHEA cycle range, on the basis of one ECTS credit for every 2 UK credits.