Principles of a Pan-European Credit Accumulation Framework: Good Practice Guidelines

Introduction

A fundamental aspect of the «Tuning of educational structures in Europe» project is to aid the development of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) into an over-arching pan-European credit accumulation and transfer framework. This is consistent with the Bologna process that seeks the creation of a European higher education area by 2010. Crucial to the construction of this area are the convergence of national educational structures and the exploration of points of similarity between academic subjects. The «Tuning» project seeks to help achieve this by exploring common learning outcomes and practices in five subject disciplines.

The good practice guidelines set out below are designed further to underpin the creation of a European credit-based framework, linked to learning outcomes. They are consistent with the specific requirements established in the Prague Communiqué where:

«Ministers emphasised that for greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes the adoption of common cornerstones of qualifications, supported by a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible, providing both transferability and accumulation

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1 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was created following a pilot project run by the European Commission 1988-1995 to promote student mobility and the recognition of periods of study abroad.
functions, is necessary. Together with mutually recognised quality assurance mechanisms such arrangements will facilitate students' access to the European labour market and enhance the compatibility, attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education. The generalisation of such a credit system and of the Diploma Supplement will foster progress in this direction." ²

The extension of ECTS to a fully operational credit accumulation framework is a process already underway by natural evolution but hampered by a lack of common approaches. It involves the creation of an extremely flexible pan-European credit-based system that encompasses all higher education activities. It must be: non-invasive; protect local and national autonomy; and be capable of widening access, fostering employability and enhancing the competitiveness of European education.

Currently, many European countries are adopting, or have already adopted national, regional or local credit frameworks to facilitate the modernisation of their education systems³. Indeed, increasing numbers have adopted the ECTS 60-credit per year credit-scale as the basis of their national systems. The drive to use credits is primarily for the reason that they provide flexibility to education systems. It is therefore sensible to develop an over-arching and common credit framework that serves to increase the transparency and comparability between diverse national education systems. Such a system could be adopted wholesale as the national credit framework (as in Italy, Austria, etc.) or just used as a translation device against which an existing system is expressed.

The following principles and guidelines are designed to foster good practice in the creation of a flexible European credit accumulation framework⁴. They have been discussed and agreed by the participating groups in the Tuning project.

**Aims of a Pan-European Credit accumulation Framework**

A European credit accumulation framework is a system that aims to:

— Enable learners (citizens, employers, etc.) across Europe to understand the full range and relationship between the various

² Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of higher education in Prague on May 19th 2001, paragraph eight.
⁴ Such a framework must have core definitions and principles for it to exist.
national, local and regional European higher education qualifica-
tions.5
— Promote access, flexibility, mobility, collaboration, transparency, recog-
nition and integration (links) within, and between, European higher education systems.
— Defend diversity, in the content and delivery of educational programmes and therefore national, local, regional and institutional academic autonomy.
— Improve the competitiveness and efficiency of European higher education.

The Nature of a Pan-European Credit accumulation Framework

A credit framework is simply a system that facilitates the measure-
ments and comparison of learning achievements in the context of different qualifications, programmes and learning environments.6 It provides a standardised means of comparing learning between different academic programmes, sectors, regions and countries. The needs of lifelong learning, together with the increasing pace of educational change, encouraged by globalisation, reinforces the necessity to build credit-based bridges that connect different European education systems. The use of a common language of credit provides the tool to facilitate this process.

Therefore, a pan-European credit accumulation framework is intended to provide transparency and links between different educational systems. It is difficult to portray the exact nature of such a framework but any such system would need to have certain characteristics.7 It would need to:

— Be applicable to all sectors of higher education and capable of articulating with other educational tiers.
— Cover all forms and modes of learning;
— Address all European educational systems and allow multiple exit points (bachelor/master);

5 This document centres on higher education but can also equally apply to all qualifications as nations build seamless, integrated educational systems that encompass lifelong learning, as in Italy and Scotland.
6 Including «on» and «off» campus learning.
7 Most of these were previously identified in the 2000, ECTS Extension Feasibility Project by Stephen Adam and Volker Gehmlich.
— Allow transference with other non-European educational frameworks;
— Promote the mobility of students and citizens and their qualifications;
— Facilitate student-centred learning;
— Permit the accreditation of prior learning (APL) and prior experiential learning (APEL);
— Enable the integration of new and developing units, degree programmes and modes of study;
— Distinguish between different levels and types of credit;
— Respect national and institutional academic autonomy and, therefore, be non-invasive and fully compatible with existing educational systems.

An over-arching pan European credit accumulation framework specifically refers to the introduction of a credit system that applies to all educational programmes and not just the parts that are currently offered in the ECTS framework for the purposes of international credit transfer. Therefore, under a credit accumulation system all study programmes are expressed in credits. It differs from a credit transfer system (ECTS) only in that it encompasses much more and has the potential to impact on all students and not just those few full-time students taking a small part of their first cycle qualification in another country.\(^8\)

**Credits in a Pan-European Credit Framework**

— Credits are just a system to express the equivalence (volume) of learning that takes place.
— Credits are only awarded for the successful achievement of learning.
— Credits that are awarded by one institution may be recognised by another, but the decision ultimately is always that of the (receiving) institution or national authority, which is being asked to recognise those credits for the purposes of access to, or exemption from, part of their own programmes of study.

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\(^8\) Put simply, ECTS is a sub-system of the more general pan-European credit accumulation framework. ECTS was originally designed to facilitate international credit transfer, whilst the pan-European framework is designed to assist the integration and transparency of all educational activities.
— Credits are calculated from the base position of 60 credits being equivalent to one average European full-time year of learning but such a yardstick is crude and requires further refinement.
— When credits are additionally linked to competences and learning outcomes they become easier to compare. Credits quantified in terms of learning outcomes gain a more sophisticated dimension and thus more clearly express their «value» or «currency».
— Learning outcomes are precise statements of what a learner can do once credits have been successfully gained. Learning outcomes can be divided into subject «specific» learning outcomes, and «general» learning outcomes that cover transferable skills.
— Credits are most effective when they are allocated to learning programmes and expressed in terms of «notional learning time», which is the average number of hours a student will take to achieve specified learning outcomes and thus successfully gain credits. Under the ECTS system credits are allocated using this sort of top-down approach based on 60 ECTS credits per full academic year derived from the total student workload (notional learning time) undertaken by a normal student to complete their studies. The increasing significance of non-formal (work-based) and informal (life experience) learning, recognised through Accreditation of Prior Experiential (APEL) systems, emphasises the importance of connecting time and competence-based approaches to credits.
— Within the Bologna process, first cycle (three or four years undergraduate) study would equate to 180-240 credits. Second cycle (one or two years postgraduate) study would equate to a further 60-120 credits.

Credits and Levels

— Credit levels provide information on the complexity, creativity, sophistication and depth of learning. Level descriptors are
statements that provide a general guide to the characteristics of learning that will be encountered. It is possible to identify various levels of credit in any educational programme as this can help to distinguish the progression of learning within a qualification and between different programmes.

— Credits provide little information on their own. They become more practical and useful when they are linked to «levels» of study that provide this further information on the relative complexity and depth of learning. So credits become more useful when they are linked to both «learning outcomes» and levels. This facilitates the process of recognition by those responsible for making judgements about them and potentially dangerous confusions can be avoided. The more information about credits that is provided the more useful they become.

— It is common for educational systems to differentiate qualifications and types of education provision in terms of the nature and volume of learning achieved at different levels. The development of any precise European-wide agreements about the nature of «levels» may only happen in the long term. However, it is useful to direct those concerned with levels to make reference to the existing broad definitions of «first» and «second» cycle (Bachelor and Master) identified in the Bologna process.

— Existing regional and national credit systems should be encouraged to explain their own precise level descriptors using the Diploma Supplement, transcripts and other devices. Furthermore, the Diploma Supplement is the essential tool, par excellence, to clarify the nature, type and level of credits associated with any qualification.

Credits and Quality Assurance

— It is essential to link credits to quality assurance mechanisms in order to give them real application and thus «currency» in the European area.

— Credits have a significant link to academic standards. In particular, the explicit identification of assessment criteria in

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13 Indeed, the Bologna process is developing agreement about the basis of a broad qualifications structure that is crucial to the development and understanding of levels and credits within Europe.
relation to learning outcomes and teaching/learning methods is essential for any credit system. The examination of the relationship and articulation between these elements is highly significant for the maintenance of quality.

— The explanation of credits (in terms of curricular context: levels, learning outcomes, notional time and assessment regime) aids the precise explanation and vindication of standards. Without such definitions and links credits remain simply crude statements about the volume of learning.
— International confidence in the quality of credits can only improve when national quality assurance mechanisms are rigorous, open, transparent and effective.

**Conclusion**

An effective pan-European credit accumulation and transfer system requires some common principles and approaches to credits. The more information and details that are given about the nature, context, level and application of credits, the more useful they become as a common currency for educational recognition.

Tuning Management Committee. Prepared by Stephen Adam.

**Reference Documents**


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