European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System – Measuring student workload based on learning outcomes

What is ECTS?

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a learner-centred system for credit accumulation and transfer. ECTS is one of the main European Higher Education Area (EHEA) tools for designing, describing, delivering, and comparing programmes and awarding qualifications. It can be applied to all types of programmes, modes of delivery (school-based, work-based), learners’ status (full-time, part-time), and all kinds of learning (formal, non-formal and informal).

Why is the ECTS of importance?

The use of ECTS within the framework of learning outcomes-based qualifications frameworks makes programmes and qualifications more transparent and facilitates their recognition. This in turn allows ECTS to be used for four main purposes:

- Program design, delivery and monitoring;
- Quality assurance;
- Lifelong learning; and
- Mobility and credit recognition.

By increasing transparency and readability of courses, the application of ECTS can facilitate modernisation in programme design. Furthermore, the use of learning outcomes and workload in curriculum design, shifts the focus of education on the learner contributing to a student centred approach which gives more choice, autonomy and responsibility to the learner.

Since ECTS allows recognition of prior learning through transfer and accumulation of credits obtained elsewhere, mobility across countries, institutions, study programmes and sectors is facilitated.

This system also allows integrating different types of prior learning and experience into flexible learning pathways which encourages higher completion rates and wider participation in lifelong learning. The use of ECTS for credit transfer and accumulation has paved the way to creating individualized learning pathways that cater for the diverse needs and interests of the student body.

Given these various ways in which ECTS may contribute to promoting the quality of the educational provision, its use can be a requirement for accreditation of higher education programmes or qualifications in national legislation.

How did the ECTS develop in the Bologna Process?

ECTS was initially created in 1989 within the framework of the Erasmus programme as a tool to facilitate the recognition of study periods spent abroad. It was adopted in the Bologna Declaration in 1999 as a transparency tool to promote mobility within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Since then, the use of ECTS was encouraged in different education contexts, programmes, institutions types and lifelong learning. The official guide for the use of ECTS in the EHEA is the ECTS.
What is the state of implementation of the ECTS in Malta?

The vast majority of the EHEA countries including Malta use ECTS for all their higher education programmes. However, the extent to which ECTS credits are linked with learning outcomes in higher education programmes is still not universal and Malta is one of the 19 EHEA countries that still need to achieve further progress in this respect. ¹

Figure 1: Stage of implementation of the ECTS system, 2013/2014

How does ECTS work?

ECTS credits represent the workload and defined learning outcomes of a given course or programme. One ECTS is equivalent to 25-30 hours of total learning, including contact hours, self-study and assessment hours.

60 credits are the equivalent of a year of full-time study or work. A "first cycle" qualification (or Bachelor) consists of 180 to 240 credits, whereas a "second cycle" qualification (or Master) consists of 90 to 120 credits. The allocation of ECTS for the third cycle (PhD) Degree is variable across countries.

ECTS is also used in other key documents to help organize and follow a student’s learning path and mobility. These include the Course Catalogue, the Learning Agreement, the Transcript of Records, and the Diploma Supplement.

Further Information

For the ECTS User’s Guide:

For videos on ECTS:

For the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET):