Statement on the Implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

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1. Introduction

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) has been a crucial instrument in shaping the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by promoting student mobility, academic recognition, and flexible learning pathways. However, despite significant progress, challenges persist in its implementation. As the European Students' Union (ESU), we emphasize the need for continuous improvement and rigorous monitoring of ECTS implementation to enhance student experiences and uphold the core principles of quality and equitable education, accessibility, and fairness. This statement outlines the current issues with ECTS implementation, provides targeted recommendations for updating the ECTS Users' Guide, and suggests broader reforms for improving the credit accumulation and transfer system.

2. Challenges in the Implementation of ECTS

Despite its broad adoption across EHEA countries, the implementation of ECTS differs significantly among institutions, leading to inconsistencies that negatively

impact students. Based on findings from the Bologna with Student Eyes 2024 (BWSE 2024) publication and the Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024, key challenges include:

2.1 Inconsistent Credit Allocation

Credit assignment varies between countries and institutions for similar courses, undermining comparability and student mobility. In some cases, similar courses across different universities have differing ECTS values, making it difficult for students to transfer credits seamlessly. This discrepancy particularly affects exchange students who often struggle with under- or over-credited courses that do not accurately reflect their workload or academic achievements (BPIR 2024).

2.2 Diverse Grading Systems

The lack of a standardised European grading scale complicates the transfer of grades alongside credits, leading to difficulties in academic recognition. Many institutions use their own grading systems without clear conversion guidelines, creating confusion and potential disadvantages for students moving between institutions. Without a common framework, students risk facing inequitable grade conversions that may impact their academic performance and future opportunities (BWSE 2024).

2.3 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Institutions often fail to recognize credits obtained through informal and non-formal learning and non-traditional learning pathways, affecting lifelong learning and professional development opportunities. Additionally, despite the EHEA's commitment to lifelong learning, many HEIs remain hesitant to acknowledge non-formal and in- formal learning, including prior experiential learning and internships as part of credit accumulation. This creates barriers for students seeking to diversify their learning experiences or enter higher education through alternative routes (BPIR 2024).

2.4 Workload Discrepancies

ECTS credits should reflect actual student workload, yet discrepancies exist in how workload is understood, measured and applied. In some cases, institutions allocate credits based solely on contact hours rather than factoring in independent study, assignments, and assessments. This inconsistent approach leads to situations where students in different universities or programmes experience vastly different workload expectations for the same number of ECTS credits, undermining the credibility of the system (BWSE 2024).

2.5 Transparency and Awareness

Many students and academic staff lack sufficient understanding about how ECTS functions, leading to confusion in its application. Institutions often fail to provide clear explanations about ECTS calculations, transfer policies, and their impact on student mobility. As a result, students are frequently left unaware of how their credits will be transferred or counted toward their degrees, leading to uncertainty and unnecessary bureaucratic challenges (BPIR 2024).

2.6 Barriers to Mobility and Recognition

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) was designed to promote student mobility across institutions and borders. However, its potential remains undercut by persistent administrative barriers such as bureaucratic procedures, vague guidelines and institutional resistance to recognizing externally earned credits. These obstacles not only delay or prevent credit transfers but also dissuade students from engaging in mobility programs. These issues discourage students from participating in mobility programs, thereby reducing opportunities for international exposure and academic enrichment (BWSE 2024).

3. Enhancing the Overall System for Credit Accumulation and Transfer

3.1 Digitalisation of Credit Transfer

ESU calls for implementation of standardised digital platforms for tracking and transferring credits to reduce administrative burdens and increase transparency. Digitized ECTS solutions should be developed at the European level to ensure cross-border compatibility and student-friendly interfaces. (BPIR 2024) Existing digital initiatives, such as the European Digital Credentials for Learning, could serve as models for future ECTS digitization efforts. Further development should include integration with national higher education systems and ensuring equitable accessibility for all students.

3.2 Improved Stakeholder Engagement

ESU calls for strengthening the cooperation between students, higher education institutions, faculties, and administrative bodies in shaping ECTS policies to ensure they reflect diverse needs. Higher education institutions must actively engage student representatives in discussions about ECTS reforms, monitoring and credit transfer policies (BWSE 2024).

3.3 Stronger Institutional Commitment

ESU calls for institutions to align their internal credit policies with EHEA standards to prevent discrepancies that hinder mobility. The Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024 calls for stricter adherence to the Bologna principles to ensure consistency in ECTS use. Institutions should also establish clear internal quality assurance mechanisms to track credit allocation accuracy.

3.4 Continuous Training for Academic Staff

ESU calls for providing the ongoing training on ECTS principles and their application to promote consistent understanding and implementation. HEIs should implement professional development programs to ensure faculty and staff accurately understand ECTS methodologies. This training should be mandatory and regularly updated to reflect changes in policy and best practices.

3.5 ECTS in Vocational Education and Training (VET)

ESU underlines the importance of the reestablishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET).To ensure comparability between ECVET and ECTS, the structures need to be aligned and enable the smooth transfer of credits, ensuring that students' learning outcomes are more easily recognized when transitioning between the two sectors and therefore enhancing lifelong learning. This allows for the necessary flexibility to move between systems in the same country, as well as between different countries.

4.Recommendations for Improving the ECTS Users' Guide

To address these issues, we advocate for an update to the ECTS Users' Guide with the following improvements, taking into account insights from BWSE 2024 and the Bologna Process Implementation Report 2024:

4.1 Revising the ECTS Users' Guide

The guide should be updated to fine-tune elements based on practical application and include emerging trends such as microcredentials, which play an increasing role in higher education and lifelong learning.

4.2 Standardise Credit Allocation

Establish clearer criteria for assigning credits based on student workload, learning outcomes, and acquired competencies to ensure uniformity across institutions. The European Commission and EHEA member states should coordinate efforts to develop a standardised framework that institutions must follow.

4.3 Harmonised Grading Scales

Encourage the adoption of a common grading framework or transparent conversion mechanisms to facilitate fair grade transfer and recognition. A European-wide grading conversion tool should be introduced to ensure fairness and consistency.

4.4 Clearer Guidelines on Recognition of Prior Learning

Strengthen guidelines on RPL to promote the recognition of credits earned outside traditional education settings, ensuring that lifelong learning and non-formal education are integrated into higher education institutions' credit recognition policies. Institutions should be required to publish clear RPL policies and ensure transparent processes for students.

4.5 Improved Monitoring of ECTS Determination

Implement external quality assurance (QA) mechanisms and use Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) monitoring to ensure accurate credit allocation for student mobility programs. National accreditation bodies and quality assurance agencies should be involved in regular monitoring to ensure transparency, reliability and compliance.

4.6 Enhanced Transparency and Student Involvement

Ensure that students are actively engaged in discussions on ECTS reforms and that institutions communicate credit-related policies more clearly. Student representatives must be given formal representation in discussions on ECTS policies and curriculum at institutional, national and European levels. This should include co-decision-making processes and structured feedback systems that integrate student input into ECTS policies and practices.

4.7 Quality Assurance in ECTS Application

Introduce stronger quality control mechanisms to monitor how ECTS is applied across different institutions to ensure consistent interpretation, implementation and recognition of credits across institutions and countries. These mechanisms should regularly assess and compare institutional practices to prevent disparities and enhance trust, transparency and mobility across the EHEA.

5. Conclusion

While ECTS has significantly contributed to the harmonisation of European higher education, addressing its implementation challenges is crucial for maximizing its potential. The system must evolve to accommodate the diverse learning experiences of students, particularly in an era of digital education, microcredentials, and increasing mobility. A well-functioning ECTS fosters transparency, fairness, and quality assurance, ensuring that students are not disadvantaged by inconsistencies in credit recognition and workload estimation.

By refining the ECTS Users' Guide, strengthening external monitoring mechanisms, and ensuring greater alignment with student needs, ECTS can remain a robust, student-centered tool that truly facilitates academic and professional mobility. ESU remains committed to working alongside policymakers, higher education institutions, and students to ensure that ECTS is implemented effectively and equitably across all member states.