

ECTS: The American Perspective

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This presentation will focus on U.S. perceptions of the European Credit Transfer System and more specifically the implications for trans-Atlantic student mobility. The Bologna Process in general and the ECTS system are indeed receiving a fair amount of attention. NAFSA appointed two consecutive Task Forces to explore what admissions officers and administrators involved in student mobility knew about Bologna, needed to know about Bologna, and how best to provide the necessary communication. I served on the first one in 2005, and a second continued the work. NAFSA has published a special supplement to the *International Educator*; numerous sessions have been offered at regional and national conferences, a “webinar” was offered, and NAFSA’s website provides information. The Institute for International Education, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars, WES, and others have published information and guidelines, and the The Council of Graduate Schools has conducted research on practices in graduate school admissions.

Most of the attention in fact has been focused on the topic of whether or not to recognize European 3-year degrees for admission to graduate degree programs. International educators, however, have also looked at the implications for student exchanges. In the 1990’s there was some concern that 3+2 year degree programs might make it more difficult for Europeans to come to the U.S. as exchange students, but that does not in fact seem to have been the case. As far as the movement of American students to Europe is concerned, the ECTS system has been something of a mixed blessing. I assume that is the issue that most directly concern you, so I’ll begin by focusing on that and talk a little bit later about graduate school admissions issues.

The ECTS system has indeed achieved one of its objectives—making European higher education transparent—by providing detailed course descriptions. To the extent that American students can access these descriptions on-line, it is much easier for them to choose among institutions and programs and to get pre-departure approval for courses of modules that they want to take while abroad. With regard to facilitating credit transfer across the Atlantic, however, the benefit is not quite so obvious. Superficially the two systems would seem to be similar: European students are supposed to earn 30 credits a semester, U.S. students 15, so all you have to do is divide by 2. That indeed is what most U.S. institutions do, but this approach to conversion ignores that there fundamental differences between the two systems— the ECTS and the U.S. credit system in their approach to measuring student workload.

Credit systems are symbolic measures—they mean what you decide they mean, measure what you decide they measure. Once you have made that decision, you ignore what they do not measure. The U.S. Carnegie credit system assumes that there is a fixed correlation between time in class and total workload, but it only *measures* class time—and conveniently ignores variations in the time students spend outside of class. The assumption is that each hour of class requires 2 hours of preparation. Every one knows

that there is a great deal of difference between the amount of homework required for an introductory survey course and for an advanced seminar; yet both carry the same number of credits. U.S. institutions are used to credits = class time and since the system does not pretend to measure anything else, the other variables do not concern anybody.

As a system of measurement, the European system is, however, much more ambitious:

1. It attempts to measure total student workload
2. While the U.S. system simply measures “input” i.e. class time, the European system—as Dr. Schermutzki has just told us—measures “learning outcomes expressed as competences; the workload is based upon the sum of all activities expected within the framework of a study programme.” Or as an official description of the ECTS says: credits reflect *the quantity of work each component [of a study program] requires in relation to the total quantity of work necessary to complete a full year of study in the programme considered.*” In other words, the ECTS credits assigned are based on the value of a particular unit or module *in the context of a whole degree program.*

In the U.S., only professional undergraduate programs such as business, engineering and nursing resemble “programs” in this sense with a structured, sequential set of courses. In other fields, students earn bachelor’s degrees by earning 120 credits distributed more or less equally among

1. major requirements (equal to about 35 % of total coursework although many students take more courses in their major)
2. general education, distribution or core requirements, which ensure that students have a general background in the liberal arts, science and social sciences
3. electives that may be used to pursue interests in other fields or take additional courses in the major—necessary e.g. for students planning to go to medical school or law school.

Thus, each “course” in the American sense is an independent building block that can be used in constructing *any* degree program. Obviously, some courses have pre-requisites that limit access, but students pursuing degrees in different major fields find themselves in the same classroom. And a course in “U.S. Constitutional History” carries 3 credits regardless of whether you are counting it towards your history major, fulfilling a distribution requirement or taking the course as an elective.

This distinction has significant implications for U.S. exchange students earning credit at a European university towards a U.S. degree. They expect to be able to choose “courses” as freely as the do at home. A student might want to take a couple of modules in psychology as well as modules in art history, German language and literature. Not only is it difficult to schedule a program that involve different faculties, but since students are likely to select modules at the beginning level or modules designed for non-majors (to the extent that these are developed as part of the attempt to broaden undergraduate education that is part of the Bologna process). Such modules tend to have a higher ratio of class time to independent study time and thus carry a lower number of ECTS credits in proportion to class-time than more advanced courses. This doesn’t matter for students

taking a complete program adding up to the 180 credits required for a bachelor's degree. But it does matter if the student needs to transfer the credit into a different system and to maintain what counts as a full courseload for financial aid purposes. The official conversion ratio is 2 ECTS credits to 1 US credit. If that ratio is used, American students would have to take 30 ECTS credits (required by some universities) or at least 24 credits in order to be considered full-time.

I'd be interested in hearing of your experience. Are U.S. students in your programs able to carry 30 ECTS credits per semester? Can they manage 24? Do their home institutions in fact use the 2:1 formula, or are they willing to be more flexible? While most institutions officially use the 2:1 formula, I know of some that use a 1.5:1 conversion, and I have even seen a 1:1 ratio recommended. What is the practice of your partner universities?

ISEP advises U.S. member institutions *not* to convert ECTS credits earned by American exchange students to U.S. credit hours according to a strict 2:1 numerical ratio and recommends that European member institutions issue transcripts for ISEP participants that list the number of class hours (either per week or as a total for the semester) in order to provide a point of reference in evaluating transcripts that is closer to the U.S. credit system. We suggest applying the following formula:

- a. If the number of weekly class hours for a course is higher than the ECTS credits divided by 2, consider class hours to determine U.S. credits
- b. If the number of weekly class hours for a course is lower than ECTS credits divided by 2, use the result of the division to determine U.S. credits.

So far I've been talking about the implications of the different approaches to measuring workload on U.S. *undergraduates* attending European universities and earning credit towards their degree at home. What about *graduate* or *post-graduate* students completing part of the work for their degree in another country? In 2005-06, they constituted only 2.2% of the total number of U.S. students abroad – including all countries and all lengths of program. (This figure does not include U.S. students earning master's degrees abroad.) The small number is probably the reason why there has been little discussion of how to establish a ratio between ECTS and U.S. credits at the graduate level, where a full course load is 9 rather than 15 credits. That would require a completely different conversion table—something like 10:3 rather than 2:1.

It is unlikely that many U.S. graduate students will ever study abroad as free movers or exchange students for a variety of reasons. To the extent that there is mobility, it will probably be in the context of dual degree programs, where the credit issue can be resolved among partner universities. It might be interesting to talk about experience at your institutions with incoming graduate or post-graduate students—or dual degree programs. And, by the way, how do your institutions currently handle credit conversion for German graduate students returning from the U.S.?

Despite the problems, U.S. students do continue to attend European universities on direct enrollment, and they wouldn't if they didn't earn the credit they need! In fact, if ISEP

trends are any indication, the number of U.S. students on exchange at European member universities continues to grow—despite the attraction of more “exotic” destinations.

As mentioned earlier, most of the attention given to the implications of the Bologna process has focused on the question whether students with “Bologna compliant degrees” i.e. 3-year bachelor degrees can be accepted into U.S. graduate degree programs, which require 4-year bachelor degrees.

A November 2005 survey completed by the Council of Graduate Schools documented that practices differ widely among institutions (or even within institutions—although a majority of the institutions for which this was an issue had a single institution-wide international admissions policy regarding 3-year degrees). 63% of institutions responding to the survey indicated that accepting students with three-year degrees was an issue although only 19% called it a major issue. 37% reported that they evaluate the 3-year degree for equivalency. “We have made exceptions for excellent students from good education systems.” Less than a quarter of the responding institutions report that they only accept 4-year bachelor degrees.

From a European perspective American hesitation in accepting Bologna-compliant bachelor-degree holders into graduate programs may seem absurd. Clearly, these students have the necessary subject-specific knowledge for graduate work in their field—indeed, they are likely to exceed their American counterparts just in purely quantitative terms, having spent many more hours studying that field. And, it is argued, European students entering university already have the general background/liberal arts preparation from their secondary schools that American students acquire *in* college. So what is the problem?

Actually, there are two sets of problems—both of which are related to fairness issues rather than to the intrinsic quality of the Bologna-compliant degree:

1. If U.S. institutions accept 3-year degrees from Europe, what about 3-year degrees from India—and from at least 25 other countries? Does accepting European students imply discrimination against the others? (You can turn the argument around: U.S. graduate schools generally accept students with bachelor degrees from British universities—on the assumption that pre-tertiary education in the U.K. is 13 years; the same argument then would apply to students with a German Abitur . . .)
2. U.S. students are only considered eligible after completing a four-year degree. Even if, by the end of their third year of college, they had completed every course in the major field offered by their university with excellent grades, they would not be considered for admission. Admitting foreign-educated applicants with 3 years of university education (on the basis of their having sufficient background in the field of study for which they apply) while denying U.S. educated applicants with the same background is—some would argue—an arbitrary and illogical decision.

Americans are pragmatic. The difficulties *are* being resolved at the institutional level. There is not and will never be a single national policy regarding degree equivalents—

each university in the U.S. is autonomous. Each one determines for itself the requirements for admission and for graduation—and each one can decide for itself when and under what circumstances those requirements can be waived. American graduate schools, however, want well-qualified European students—as well as well-qualified students from the rest of the world. Universities are very entrepreneurial and market-oriented these days. Strict adherence to the 4-year bachelor degree requirement for admission to graduate school would put the U.S. at a disadvantage—not only in the competition for European students but for students from the much larger Asian markets, who may choose universities in countries that accept their 3-year degrees.