

The German ECTS Experience

Bologna Seminar on ECTS based on workload and learning outcomes

Bastian Baumann, German Bologna Expert

This presentation is based on a personal opinion, not the official attitude to describing the implementation of ECTS in Germany. It largely focuses on the German case, but also make some connections to other European countries.

German universities started the implementation of ECTS in 1989/1990 in the starting phase of the ERASMUS programme. However, not all universities implemented it, actually only few and not consistently.

It was implemented only for ERASMUS students, not in a thorough way but rather superficially, as it was not embedded in the general HE system.

This lead to an attitude that ECTS works perfectly even if not much consideration is given to it.

The European Commission organised ECTS site visits to some HEIs, but the reports usually landed in the drawers of the international office rather than being used for improving the implementation.

In 1999 the Bologna process started and referred to ECTS in the action line on a credit system. The European Commission became happy, as ECTS had not worked out the way it had anticipated it. It was not a big priority even though the Commission gave a lot of financial support for the implementation.

As a consequence to the Bologna Process, the use of ECTS became obligatory in new study programmes (BA/MA) and is part of the items looked at during the accreditation of study programmes. This lead to some improvement, but not to much.

Why improvement?

ECTS moved a little higher on the agenda. Not only the international offices were dealing with it anymore, but all teaching staff, at least in theory.

Why not that successful?

The attitude to ECTS somehow remained not to put a lot of energy and time into the implementation.

Accreditation is rather looking at the surface (is it really 30 ECTS per semester etc.) than looking in depth into the way it is implemented.

It became only compulsory for the new study programmes (BA/MA), but only few students study in these new programmes, still.

HEIs started late with the implementation. My original university for example still only introduced it for ERASMUS students as a transfer system in 2003.

The concept of contact hours has prevailed and causes major problems in understanding the concept of workload.

Of course, there are also some good examples, often found at polytechnics or smaller universities or universities in the periphery.

Items that are usually not working well are:

The calculation of workload, often contact hours are used as measurement, multiplied by factors for types of courses. The calculation remains “notional” and not realistic, seldom based on information asked from students about the actual workload.

Other ECTS tools such as the Learning Agreement or the Transcript of Records are not properly used, if at all.

Learning Outcomes are still not widely known, let alone used as descriptors.

ECTS grades might be used. They are generally incompatible with the concept of learning outcomes and were never part of the agreements in the Bologna process.

However, where ECTS is properly implemented, you will find almost universal happiness. That is the case if workload is properly measured and credits are allocated accordingly, where learning outcomes are used and where the stakeholders are collaborating, at least staff and students.

The use of learning outcomes and workload at the same time does not cause any problem at all. ECTS comprises the workload that is needed to achieve set learning outcomes. There is no inconsistency.

ECTS is seldom used for the third cycle. However, you have both workload and learning outcomes at this level. Therefore, it is not really comprehensible why ECTS should not be used.

Why did I make all these negative remarks?

To show it is not that easy to implement ECTS thoroughly, a condition for its success, even in countries that started relatively early with the process.

Profound application / implementation requires time and effort.

Only profound, not superficial, implementation allows for the full benefits associated with ECTS.

ECTS is not just a technical tool; it implies a shift of paradigms in thinking about the structuring of HE (e.g. student financing, part-time studies, financing of HE etc.)

The shift of paradigms is difficult because of traditions and attitudes, but eventually it will lead to a student centred system, including learning outcomes and workload. It is a difficult exercise, but worthwhile and requires quality, not haste.