

Erasmus Mundus and credits

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UK systems

- 1 Credit is used extensively in the UK. HE institutions in England and Northern Ireland widely follow the credit guidelines which have been prepared by national credit bodies (CQFW, NICATS et al. 2001). The guidelines describe 1 UK credit as equating to 10 notional hours of successful learning activity. The guidelines also set recommended minimum credit values for qualifications: for example, 360 UK credits for an honours degree and 180 UK credits for a masters degree. Scotland and Wales each have credit and qualifications frameworks.
- 2 A full-time undergraduate student would normally study 120 UK credits per year equating to 1200 notional hours of learning time, typically over two semesters of 60 UK credits each. A full-time taught Masters student would normally study 180 UK credits per year equating to 1800 notional hours of learning time, typically over the equivalent of three semesters of 60 UK credits each.

ECTS

- 3 ECTS (the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) is widely used to across Europe and in many countries is part of their own higher education system (Europa 2005). It is used by UK institutions for the purposes of student mobility and exchange as part of the Erasmus framework.
- 4 The ECTS Users' Guide (Europa 2005) explains that the system is based on the principle that 60 ECTS credits measure the workload of a full-time student over one academic year of around 1500 to 1800 hours, so that one ECTS credit stands for around 25 to 30 learning hours. A student would normally acquire 60 ECTS credits over the full year, 30 ECTS credits over a semester (two per year) or 20 ECTS credits over a trimester (three per year). The Guide also says that where, in exceptional cases, a course of study clearly exceeds the figure of 1500 to 1800 hours an academic year could contain more credits: a programme of 52 weeks full-time study without holidays would normally lead to 75 ECTS credits. The system does not set minimum numbers of ECTS credits for qualifications.

Erasmus Mundus

- 5 Erasmus Mundus is a European Union programme which supports shared masters courses offered by a consortium of at least three institutions in at least three countries. An Erasmus Mundus Masters Course carries between 60 and 120 ECTS credits at masters level and lasts from one to two academic years (Europa 2004).

Issues and directions

- 6 At undergraduate level the UK has adopted an exchange rate of 2 UK credits = 1 ECTS credits so that one UK full-time undergraduate academic year is worth 60 ECTS credits. Student mobility between the UK and mainland Europe has proceeded smoothly on this basis for some time. However, the exchange rate incorporates a discrepancy: 1200 hours in the UK is treated as equivalent to 1500 – 1800 hours in mainland Europe.
- 7 At postgraduate level a problem arises when an attempt is made to express a UK one year full-time masters, which comprises 180 UK credits and 1800 hours learning time, in terms of ECTS credits. It is sometimes said that this is because the majority of Masters degrees in Europe are two years in length. However, the problem can also be seen as a consequence of the discrepancy at undergraduate level. If the same exchange rate is applied then 90 ECTS credits will be delivered over a full-year which clearly exceeds the ECTS limits on the maximum number of credits per year. If the 90 ECTS credits are delivered over a year and a half then this substantially lengthens the course. If the course is considered to comprise 60 ECTS credits over the full year, which is compatible with the Erasmus Mundus scheme, then a different exchange rate of 3 UK credits = 1 ECTS would need to operate.
- 8 The Europe Unit (2005) has argued on behalf of the UK that credit should take into account the outcomes of periods of study and not simply workload or hours studied. It was suggested at the Erasmus Mundus Workshop in March 2005 (Morris 2005) that a distinction between the academic year and the calendar year might provide sufficient flexibility to allow a UK masters of 90 ECTS credits to be delivered over one year. Nevertheless, it is not clear that these views will resolve the problem identified above.
- 9 The call for Erasmus Mundus proposals (Europa 2004) describes an Erasmus Mundus masters course as an integrated study programme and describes the detailed features of the programme. These include the requirement that the degree is issued by at least two institutions involved and that the participating countries should recognise the degree. This may have implications where countries or institutions potentially involved in the consortium have different credit requirements for a masters degree. It was suggested at the Workshop (Morris 2005) that the credit value of the course might be set by the lead institution.
- 10 At the Workshop (Morris 2005) Reading University presented a model of 90 ECTS credits delivered over 18 months: Semester 1 at Reading (20 ECTS credits); Semester 2 at Partner 2 (20 ECTS credits); Semester 3 at Partner 3 (20 ECTS credits); 6 months work placement (30 ECTS credits). If the model is operated without the work placement then it would comprise 60 ECTS credits over one full year, which, as mentioned earlier, would be compatible with Erasmus Mundus but would require an exchange rate of 3 UK credits = 1 ECTS credit.

References

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