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HÖGSKOLEVERKET
National Agency for Higher Education

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The directives issued to the National Agency for Higher Education by the Government include monitoring national and international circumstances and trends that are important for the way in which higher education functions. International monitoring is reported, for instance, in newsletters, reports and shorter memoranda, of which this is one. The contents of the National Agency's memoranda can include analyses, descriptions of circumstances in other countries and summaries of foreign reports. They are published only on the National Agency for Higher Education's website www.hsv.se.

Length of semesters and the ECTS¹

Introduction

In the third operational objective of the Bologna declaration the European states are urged to introduce a joint system of study credits. Swedish discussions of ECTS credits have mainly concerned the practical level, probably because Sweden has had a credit system for many years. It is simple to convert ECTS credits into Swedish credit points and vice versa² but at the same time several questions arise, such as what consequences the credit system will have on recognition issues and what relationship a joint credit system will have to the variations that exist in the length of semesters and systems of terms among the signatories of the Bologna declaration.

The purpose of this memorandum is to present a brief account of the ECTS and its relationship to what until now has been the established method of assessing programmes, which is that all semesters are equated with each other irrespective of their duration. But when a joint system of credits is introduced in which 60 credits is to be the norm for an academic year, there is also a need to be able to assess the work input for full-time study per semester and per week. Variations in the length of semesters and academic years in the European countries then also become interesting.

Only a minority of countries in Europe have developed a national system of credits. Instead, teaching has been assessed on the basis of programmes, which are considered complete when all the requirements for the award of a degree have been fulfilled. One of the operative goals in the Bologna process is the introduction of national credit systems, which are considered to be a requirement for the recognition of periods of study and entire programmes in the higher education sphere in Europe. This sphere – the European Higher Education Area – is to be created by 2010. In the Bologna declaration the concept of credits is exemplified by “ECTS credits”.

¹ This text is an adaptation of the material in the National Agency for Higher Education's Report 2005:12 R *The consequences of lengthening the academic year*.

² The issue of ECTS grades will not be raised in this article.

A number of states have introduced ECTS credits, among them Denmark, Norway, France, the Netherlands and Germany. On the other hand, uniform national credit systems still do not exist in, for instance, Bulgaria, Poland or England. In these countries, however, individual higher education institutions use ECTS credits. Finland is planning to replace its national credit system with ECTS credits from the autumn semester of 2005 and onwards.

The ECTS and the EU

The ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) was developed by the European Commission to enable effective student exchanges within the framework of the Erasmus programme. From the beginning it was intended to provide complete recognition of periods of study abroad. The ECTS is still a system that comprises three important documents: information packages containing syllabuses translated to another language, contractual commitments between the two higher education institutions involved and the student, and subject specifications defining the ECTS credits and grades. The basis of the credit system in the ECTS is that student performance during an academic year should correspond to 60 credits. This is assumed to require 1500-1800 hours of work in total. An ECTS credit would, in that case, correspond to 25-30 hours of work per week.

In its recently published ECTS guide the Commission includes a new element that may make it easier to change the system from an instrument to enable student exchange into a credit system within the Bologna process. Credits are linked to the outcomes of learning processes in the form of goals attained and skills acquired. The ECTS can now be used for postgraduate programmes as well. Even if the ECTS enhances comparability, the system still lacks indication of the level of courses, also an important element in the assessment of student results.

Development of the ECTS is continuing in the context of European exchange programmes. For instance the Commission has introduced ECTS labelling, which is intended to assist correct implementation of the system. A higher education institution can acquire a label of this kind after application and appraisal. Labelling is intended to encourage the use of the ECTS. The ECTS is also to be developed so that in the long term it can be used for the aggregation of all educational qualifications, which will then facilitate the free movement of labour in the union.

Academic years in different countries

In most European countries there are only general regulations on the organisation of the academic year and each higher education institution is free to plan this for itself. Over the years different traditions have developed in each country, although exceptions are numerous. Even in the same higher education institution there may be differences between different faculties, for instance. The length of the academic year, including examination periods, varies in Europe from 28 to 42 weeks. The shortest are found in Turkey and the United Kingdom, the longest in the Netherlands. In practice the European academic year begins somewhere between the latter half of August (Sweden) and November 1st (Italy). Teaching comes to an end between the beginning of June (Sweden) and the end of July (Germany). During the academic year there may also be brief or more extensive periods of self-study. Throughout Europe there is no teaching during the summer.

In the USA there are a number of different ways of arranging semesters. However, it is most usual to have two semesters of about 17+17 weeks, one running from the beginning of January until mid-May and the other from the beginning of September until the middle or end of December. In the USA and Canada there are sometimes summer semesters that are not compulsory but which are offered to enable reduction of the time required to complete a programme. According to the Swedish National Board of Student Aid (CSN) Australia has a two-semester system, with semesters

normally running from late February or early March to the end of June and from the end of July to late November. These semesters extend for about 19+19 weeks.

It can be determined that the academic year in Sweden is one of the longest in Europe and that Swedish students therefore normally fulfil the requirement of an annual work input of 1500-1800 hours. Turkish or English students, however, do not reach the required level if they study 40 hours a week for 28 weeks. Doubts could be expressed about whether students in countries with academic years of 35 or 36 weeks attain the ECTS norm. At the same time one may well ask how appropriate a quantitative norm is in comparing what is demanded of students.

Recognition of Swedish educational programmes in other countries

Methodologies for recognising educational programmes

Comparisons between studying in different countries are still based on the assumption that during one academic year a student can learn as much or acquire the same degree of skill at all recognised higher education institutions. One academic year, irrespective of the number of weeks of instruction offered, therefore serves as the standard unit for the transfer of study results. Only within the framework of the Bologna process did discussion start of the idea of using credits as the basis of comparison. There are a number of examples. In discussions of a new degree structure in the Bologna declaration it is stated that the first degree cycle should require at least three years of study. This criterion could not be fulfilled by a Swedish bachelor's degree, if lengthening the academic year were to enable their award after two and a half years of study.

In the long run the work of recognition will be based to a greater extent on comparison of the goals attained and skills acquired. A number of projects exist that are intended to develop these concepts. But it may take some time for these ideas to gain circulation.

Academic recognition in Europe

Academic recognition is used to refer primarily to the acknowledgement of studies and admission to the next level of the higher educational system. Academic recognition between the European countries is based on the Lisbon Convention. The premise adopted in the convention is that programmes of study are to be recognised if no *substantial differences* can be shown to those of the host country. The Lisbon Convention does not use any quantitative measurements for programmes of study and an extension of the academic year should not, in principle, affect its application. But as the concept of *substantial differences* is not defined in the convention, major variations in the length of programmes could justify a negative decision recognition.

Professional recognition and EU directives

The general system of the recognition of professional qualifications in the EU uses the number of years of study as a definition of level. One of the requirements made in the directive on the automatic recognition of seven concrete professions (doctor, nurse, midwife, dental practitioner, veterinary surgeon, pharmacist and architect) is that training programmes should comprise a specific number of years. For instance, nurses have to undergo at least three years of training and architects at least four. The impending recognition directive, which is to replace all the previous ones, is also based on the nominal length of training.

Today the requirements for the award of Swedish degrees are expressed in credit points and not in years. In our correspondence with other countries we apply a conversion factor of 40 weeks of study per year. Outside the EU, in the USA and Russia for example, it is already considered that Swedish programmes that lead to the award of advanced professional qualifications do not reach

“master’s” level or its equivalent, as they are regarded as too short. The same applies to Swedish master’s degrees which are nominally no longer than American “bachelor’s degrees” or Russian “bakalavi” even though the Swedish academic year is longer than in the USA, for instance.

The Bologna Process from a Swedish point of view

During 2004 the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science published a white paper called *Higher Education under Development – the Bologna Process in a Swedish Perspective*, Ds 2004:2. In it Sweden was to have an academic year comprising 60 ECTS credits. After the Bergen meeting in May 2005 a government bill was presented, *New World – New Higher Education* (2004/05:162) in June 2005 in which ECTS credits were one of the points raised.³

According to the bill, higher education was to be divided into three levels: basic, advanced and doctoral level. The proposal means that the basic and advanced levels would be formally separate so that students would be faced with a choice of opting to continue their studies for the award of an advanced level degree. Admission to the advanced level would demand completion of the 120 credit points required for a bachelor’s degree. ECTS credits were to be introduced from the autumn semester of 2007 and would apply to all higher education after June 2007.

The Government considers that automatic recalculation of credit points to higher education credits⁴ (högskolepoäng) could lead to the length of the academic year playing a decisive role in evaluations. For countries with a 40-week academic year, each week would be worth 1.5 credits, whereas in those with 30-week academic years the corresponding figure would be 2. In addition it would be difficult to establish joint exchange programmes if half credits are awarded in one of the countries involved. Nevertheless the Government considers that the credit points used currently should be translated to 1.5 higher education credits but that this conversion factor need not necessarily be used to determine how many higher education credits each course is worth. The Government also considers that opportunities should be provided of attaining more than 60 higher education credits in an academic year, with summer courses for 15 higher education credits, for instance, that could enable students to gain 75 credits. In its report *The consequences of lengthening the academic year* (2005:12R) the National Agency for Higher Education pointed out, however, that according to the ECTS guide, this interpretation is only possible in exceptional cases. Nevertheless, the Government is of the opinion that it is important to clarify the value of Swedish higher education credits by providing information about the length of the academic year.

As has already been seen, a great deal of work remains to be done if a more qualitative method of evaluating student attainment and results is to make any impact on the debate on recognition. It is possible that recognition processes may change when the ECTS is introduced, as it raises questions about the objectives of programmes and the material covered. The system will therefore make it possible to make less cut and dried comparisons and to take into account, for instance, the number of weeks of study, but at the same time the Government Bill shows that length of semester may continue to govern the application of ECTS credits. It is easier to go by rule of thumb than to make qualified evaluations.

³ The Swedish Riksdag had not reached any decision on the bill when this memorandum was published.

⁴ It should be noted that the Government is proposing that from now on ECTS credits should be called higher education credits (högskolepoäng) to distinguish them from the credit points used hitherto that are based on the number of weeks of study.