

## ASEM Seminar on Credits and Learning Outcomes: Comparing concepts and learning from each other

### Developing a common understanding of credit systems and learning outcomes between Asia and Europe (Workgroup 2 on 15 April 2010)

#### Summary

The workshop demonstrated a broad approach to credit system and learning outcomes in European and Asian countries which were represented.

- 1- Learning outcomes and credits are important instruments to achieve greater transparency and recognition of higher education qualifications. Within both Europe and Asia, system developments are at different stages but moving in the same direction.
- 2- In Europe, the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) was initiated in the late 1980s initially for transnational student mobility, later ECTS took on the accumulation function to serve both mobile and non-mobile students and to trigger curriculum reforms.
- 3- In the ASEAN countries there have been efforts from governments (e.g. memoranda of understanding on mutual recognition of qualifications, bilateral agreements) as well as university networks (e.g. ASEAN University Network and its student exchange scheme) to intensify regional cooperation in higher education, which is accompanied by a shift towards outcome orientation and credit system (ASEAN credit transfer system-ACTS).
- 4- Resulting from increasing emphasis on employability of graduates, there is a stronger focus on learning outcomes in both regions although the same jargons, such as student workloads, credit, semester, carry different meanings. One ACTS credit corresponds to 15-18 contact hours, whereas one ECTS credit corresponds to 25-30 hours of workloads including contact hours, self-study, group work, etc. This leads to major conceptual difference: in Europe academic credit is awarded only for the successful achievement of sets of learning outcomes (outcome-based), whereas in ASEAN credit is gained by attending specific number of teaching hours (input-based) independent of the outcomes or marks. Learning outcomes, converted into ECTS are congruent with qualitative approach, while contact hours, converted in ACTS are congruent with quantitative measurement.
- 5- Examples from England showed that active learning outcomes, which are specified in all sessions, modules, programmes and levels of study helped engaging students in learning as well as enhancing employers' understanding of graduate abilities and skills. Examples from China, however, illustrated that prestige of university (e.g. reputation and ranking of universities) and relevant working experience of graduate, recruitment examinations (e.g. civil servants) are of importance for employment, not specified learning outcomes.  
Given that the majority of students do not go to the most prestigious universities and league tables are ambiguous, it is worth revisiting the elitism approach.
- 6- There was a concern about whether learning outcomes increase vocationalisation of higher education or increase graduate employability. There was also a consensus that designing courses with specified learning outcomes may not create more jobs, making students employable may not guarantee them a job, but the university has a function to develop the skills, that are needed and will be needed by the labour market.

- 7- Learning outcomes are basic educational building blocks and are interlinked with overall architecture, such as ECTS, Dublin Descriptors of first and second cycle, Qualification Frameworks at regional, national and sectoral levels. In the Bologna Process, the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (OF EHEA), adopted in Bergen 2005, is a reference point for 47 Bologna process signatories. The overarching European Qualification Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), adopted by the European Council in 2008, serves as external reference point for 27 EU countries (and other Lifelong Learning Programme countries: Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey) to translate national qualifications and compare them across countries. Individual qualifications granted by HE institutions only relate to National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs).
- 8- Learning outcomes and student recruitment: admission officers/academics should take a holistic approach to look at learning outcomes, programme content, credits, quality assurance as they are integral parts representing both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Assessing student credentials or prior learning for admission requires also the consideration of student self-assessment, motivation and intercultural competence, especially for mobile students.
- 9- Despite an accord over the convention initiated by the Bologna Process in Europe, there are linguistic issues in formulating learning outcomes and detailed differences in implementation. In Germany, generally speaking, institutional cultures and traditions, academics' personal preferences, values and references still are more in the centre of attention than the 'modern' tools, such as ECTS, learning outcomes. In Austria, learning outcomes are still not the most important criteria for both student recruitment and graduate employability, learning outcomes are used to establish equivalence between academic and vocational routes in higher education. In England, unlike most other Bologna Process countries, a master degree consists of 90 ECTS instead of 120 ECTS. Despite the difference in number of ECTS, the master degree is of the same value in terms of qualification. Market-led education and employability of graduates make English 1 year master programmes an accepted norm in England. No change is foreseeable.
- 10- There are differences and also shortage of knowledge of quality assurance, accreditation and other tools (e.g. Register, NARIC) from Asian participants. This disparity also reflects in different emphasis on credit mobility of European students and degree-seeking mobility of Asian students.

## Suggestions and Open Questions

- A- It is essential to have a systematic approach, involving all stakeholders (students, ministerial policy makers, academics, employers, etc)
- B- In order to gain better and common understanding of learning outcomes and credit systems among ASEM partners, it is important to clarify and make collective agreement on the aims and objectives, what tools are available and appropriate for which objectives (e.g. whether it is to foster mobility or increase transparency, build trust, or increase employability)
- C- If the priority is student mobility, what kinds of mobility are we talking about: between universities within a country, or transnational mobility within and between regions, what do Asian and European higher education systems have in common to facilitate it, whether to invest more in bureaucracy or to prepare students to make informed choice? Do we talk about credit mobility or about degree mobility? Whereas European students are highly interested in the former, the Asian students feel more attracted by the latter. If employability is a priority, how do we make learning outcomes more transparent and understandable to employers through the use of diploma supplement.
- D- When designing curricula, emphasis needs to be placed on student ownership of learning, Assessment to be the first step in the entire learning experience (student-centred learning approach: Assessment, Learning and Teaching), Progression needs to be differentiated through active verbs to indicate levels of study and reflect complexity of cognitive skills.

