

ASEM SEMINAR
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**IMPLEMENTING CREDITS AND
LEARNING OUTCOMES
IN ROMANIAN
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

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Part I: Implementation of ECTS (1)

The European perspective:

- - Originally set up in 1989, ECTS = a scheme for transfer of credits facilitating international mobility of learners and recognition of study periods abroad
- - Currently, ECTS is used as a generalized accumulation and transfer scheme of learning achievements
- - The Diploma Supplement provides information on the credit points accumulated during the study programme

Part I: Implementation of ECTS (2)

The Romanian experience:

- Until 1998, a *learning by doing* process in those HEI s involved in international projects with European financial support
- M.O. of 1998 sets the general framework for the implementation of ECTS in all the HEI s
- University Senates adopt and implement their own ECTS regulation and disseminate information to students

Part I: Implementation of ECTS (3)

The Romanian experience:

2004 - Law on the three-cycle higher education

M.O. of 2005 - full implementation of ECTS:

- HEI s networking to harmonize distribution of credit points in similar study-programmes
- Comprehensive Information Package for students
- Study and Career Guidance Departments

ECTS in the Quality Assurance

- Management tool in the institutional monitoring of QA of the study programmes
- Standard in the external evaluation performed by ARACIS

Part II: Implementation of Learning Outcomes (1)

The European perspective:

- From objectives and aims of education to the need to express in a more transparent manner the learning outcomes
- Contents and results gained in the Diploma Supplement
- Learning outcomes in the Overarching EQF in HE and EQF from an LLL perspective

Double role of a clear statement on learning outcomes:

- Gateway for further education and learning;
- Entry tool in the labour market.

Part II: Implementation of Learning Outcomes (2)

The Romanian experience:

- Key methodological units for the design of learning outcomes were developed and tested through a da Vinci project in 2006-2008
- Starting with 2008 a complete Diploma Supplement (mentioning the learning outcomes in Chapter 4) is delivered to all the graduates of a first cycle programme
- Starting with 2010 the second cycle graduates also benefit of a complete Diploma Supplement.
- Romanian Register of Qualifications in Higher Education is currently developed by using eight descriptors for the learning outcomes. By 2011 the Register will be functional

Part II: Implementation of Learning Outcomes (3)

“Quality Education for Labour Market”

Search for a more student centered higher education via:

- Review + improvement of Quality Evaluation Methodology: more emphasis on the teaching/learning contents and learning outcomes of the study-programmes (standards and performance indicators in educational efficacy)
- A improved Syllabus specifying for each discipline the assessment methods of learning outcomes expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competences for the professional life and for personal fulfillment.

ECTS and Learning Outcomes in Joint Degrees (1)

Basic principles for developing Joint Degree programmes:

- Institutional compatibility.
- Mutual trust.
- Transparency.
- Common interest.

ECTS and Learning Outcomes in Joint Degrees (2)

Partners negotiate an Institutional Agreement:

- ❑ Objectives and aims of the joint programme expressed in form of learning outcomes
- ❑ Curriculum design + mobility and passage conditions (pre-requisites and ECTS)
- ❑ Grading system and assessment of learning outcomes
- ❑ Language of teaching and learning

ECTS and Learning Outcomes in Joint Degrees (3)

Partners negotiate an Institutional Agreement:

- Internships
- Graduation exam
- Marketing strategy
- Delivery of Graduation Diploma and of the Diploma Supplement

Need for flexibility and mutual understanding

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Thank you !

**ASEM Seminar on Credits and Learning Outcomes
Berlin, 15 – 16 April 2010**

**Implementing credits and learning outcomes
in Romanian higher education institutions**

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We witness a continuing process of improvement and adjustment of the various instruments and tools which promote and deepen cooperation in the European Higher Education Area. It is a continuing process of learning and sharing experience and good practice.

This Seminar proves that European and Asian universities are willing to exchange information aiming at developing better understanding of credit systems and learning outcomes which support the further growth of student and teaching staff mobility as well as of mutual recognition of learning achievements. The joint degree and double degree programmes represent one of the instruments that facilitate this lasting process.

In the next paragraphs the Romanian experience will be presented as a continuing process of fine tuning and improvement of the use of ECTS and Learning Outcomes as quality management instruments as well as visibility and mobility enhancement tools.

Implementation of ECTS in Romanian universities

As known, ECTS was originally set up in 1989 as a pilot scheme within the framework of the Erasmus Programme in order to facilitate the recognition of study periods undertaken abroad by mobile students.

ECTS is now recognized as a learner-centered system for accumulation and transfer of personal achievements in education and training, a powerful instrument that backs the Bologna Process, in making learning achievements more transparent, in enhancing cross-border mobility and in improving the permeability of the higher education systems when it comes to the recognition of prior learning achievements in non-formal and informal education and training.

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In my opinion, ECTS is still insufficiently used in making more understandable the Bologna three-cycle higher education for the non-academic world and in promoting employability of the graduates, mainly of those graduating the first cycle. The *Diploma Supplement* is mentioning the credit points accumulated for each of the disciplines provided in the study programme, but a short notice concerning the significance of the credit points is still missing from the recommended template.

Romanian universities started to implement the ECTS as they were more and more invited to participate in Erasmus/Tempus projects. In the beginning it was mainly a “*learning by doing*” process. Romanian universities learned from the partner institutions and adopted in their own academic management the kind of regulation and of documents that allowed for a more or less “friction free” cross-border mobility of the students. It is a period when decisions of each Romanian higher education institution resulted in a variety of understanding and of implementation of the ECTS. Even inside each university, the conduct of the departments could vary at that time generating differentiated treatment for the students returning to their home universities in Romania after a period of study abroad or for the foreign students leaving after a period of study in a Romanian university. In 1995 a new *Education Law* was enacted in Romania but the ECTS issue was not touched in this legislative text.

The increasing number of students moving from one to another university of the country and (in some of the old traditional universities) the freedom of students to choose courses taught by different professors in the same university but in different faculties raised the problem of documented transfer of the learning achievements. Alongside the growing international mobility of students, this is one of the “internal/local” reasons why the first methodological recommendation on how to implement a system of credit accumulation and transfer was issued in 1998 in form of a Ministerial Order. In other words, starting with the academic year 1998/1999, Romania has formally adopted the ECTS not only as an instrument to support the international mobility of outgoing and incoming students, but as a general tool for a more transparent evidence of the learning achievements of all the students.

A third motivation of the above mentioned Ministerial Order on the implementation of ECTS by Romanian universities originates in the ratification of the *Lisbon Recognition Convention* by the Romanian Parliament.

According to the provisions of the Ministerial Order of 1998, the workload of a student during an academic year was established between 1520 and 1640 hours leading to the accumulation of a minimum of 60 credit points per year distributed by disciplines in two balanced semesters. That means a range of 25 to 27 hours per each accumulated credit point. Each university senate has adopted its own implementation rules,

How were the ECTS Guidelines implemented in Romania? Based on the provisions of the Ministerial Order of 1998, each university senate has issued and disseminated to students and members of the teaching staff its own ECTS Regulation, as Romanian universities are fully autonomous institutions.

A comparative analysis of these first institutional regulations accompanied by the revised study programmes and syllabi of the courses – mentioning the number of credits for each discipline – show a large variety of conducts. On one hand, the leading traditional universities have promoted total transparency in adopting the ECTS. Details explaining the number of credits attributed to each of the disciplines were offered and the total workload per discipline was distributed according to the type of activity a student is asked to normally perform in order to get the grade showing the level of personal achievement in the given discipline. On the other hand, some of the newly established public and private higher education institutions have tried to postpone the introduction of the ECTS in an attempt to stop the transfer of their students to other universities. In between the two extreme conducts, there were those institutions that introduced a formal distribution of the credits among the disciplines, neglecting the real workload of students preparing for examination.

The 2004 *Law on the three-cycle higher education* and the full implementation of its provisions in all Romanian universities starting with the academic year 2005/2006 and the advanced experience gathered in Romanian and in other European universities concerning the use of the ECTS as an accumulation and transfer tool have determined the issuing of a new Ministerial Order in March 2005. This text is in fact a reminder of the main provisions of the *ECTS Users' Guide* and offers the legal framework aiming at a more effective and transparent use of the instrument by Romanian universities.

Higher education providers were invited to develop networks or to enter in peer-consultations in order to better harmonize the distribution of the credit points among the disciplines of a study programme which gives the same or a similar qualification.

The Ministerial Order insists on the obligation of universities to develop and disseminate a comprehensive *Information package* which should guide the presence and work of students in the campus from his or her attempt to apply up to the graduation exam. The role of the *Study and Career Guidance Department* is also underpinned. Finally the above mentioned new Ministerial Order on ECTS invites universities to post on their web-pages the Information package in Romanian and in English or in another frequently used language in order to attract students from the country and from abroad.

To conclude this first part, it is to be stressed the use of ECTS as a reference in the internal continuing process of monitoring the quality of teaching and learning.

In its *External Evaluation Methodology*, the *Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ARACIS* – is also focusing on the use of ECTS as a management instrument. Each higher education provider has to document the way it has introduced and disseminated information concerning the ECTS.

This Methodology is currently undergoing an extensive revision and – according to circulated information – new performance indicators will be introduced in the external evaluation procedure in order to better put in the spot light the content standards achieved by the respective provider.

Use of learning outcomes as a management and as a marketing tool

According to the traditions of Romanian higher education institutions and similar to the practices in many other countries, *objectives and aims of education* are introducing a study programme. Objectives and aims are also a compulsory part of each and every discipline file (syllabus). Before the details on academic contents, bibliography, evaluation methods and grading, a syllabus offers information on the educational objectives and aims of the respective course. One has to recognize that the educational objectives and aims are expressed more from a teacher interest perspective than from a learner perspective. For a student or for an employer seeking to hire a graduate it is less understandable what the practical benefits of the learning are.

It was the meeting of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 on new strategic goals to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion as part of the knowledge based society that revealed the need to have more information on the *learning outcomes* presented in an easy understandable manor for all the stakeholders.

Later on, as a pro-active measure, European universities were invited to generalize the use of the *Diploma Supplement* with its eight chapters of information (identification of the holder, identification of the qualification, level of qualification, *contents and results gained*, information on the function of qualification, other additional information, certification of the supplement and information on the national higher education system). It was recommended to deliver it for free starting with 2005 to all the graduates and, where possible, in a bilingual format in order to support the international mobility of the diploma holder.

Since 2008, Romanian universities replaced the delivery of the simple transcript of grades for each diploma holder with the Diploma Supplement. Just like in many other European countries, the field reserved to Chapter 4 of the new document: “*contents and results gained*” was initially poorly covered with useful information.

When describing learning contents and results, universities should introduce in the Diploma Supplement learning outcomes from a double perspective:

- Learning outcomes as a *gateway for further education and training*;
- Learning outcomes as an *entry tool in the labor market* of the country or across border.

Different terminology is used Europe-wide for the definition of learning outcomes. But terminology differences are less important for the student or the diploma holder and for the employer because, from a pragmatic point of view, “*learning outcomes describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning.*” This definition applies both at the level of a study period or study programme and at the level of each component, module or discipline provided in the given period or programme.

Well formulated, accurate *learning outcomes make the educational objectives and aims clearer and more easily understood* for students, alumni, employers and other stakeholders. Learning outcomes are also supportive information for the comparability

and compatibility between qualifications inside each educational system and facilitate recognition of learning achievements between different frameworks.

To be easy to understand, learning outcomes are expressed in form of *knowledge, skills, competences*, as well as *values and aptitudes* developed through the successful completion of studying a discipline, a module or a full study-programme.

The three Bologna cycles presuppose distinctive levels in terms of knowledge, skills and competences which generate also distinctive entries in the labor market. All these aspects are clearly structured in the national qualifications framework in higher education (NQF).

A special working group on qualifications frameworks in the European Higher Education Area has been set up by BFUG, aiming to offer methodological guidelines in the design of the national qualifications frameworks in this sub-sector of each educational system. On the other hand, the European Commission has fostered the design and implementation of the European Qualifications Framework from a lifelong learning perspective, which is a meta-reference facilitating the recognition and correspondence between the various national frameworks.

In order to become familiar with the requirements and the standards of a sound and systemic description of the learning outcomes as reference points for the future *Romanian Qualifications Framework, the National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with the Social and Economic Environment – ACPART* – has coordinated the design of key methodological units and of competence grids in a sample of first and second cycle study programmes. It was followed by the testing, correction and validation of the methodological tools. The financial support was provided during 2006-2008 through the Leonardo da Vinci project “*EQF by NQFs*”. Partner institutions in that project were originating from: France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Romania (project promoter), Spain and the United Kingdom. The tangible outcomes of the project were at the origin of two positive consequences:

- Romanian higher education institutions are currently making full use of the information fields of the Diploma Supplement, including the chapter dedicated to “contents and results gained”, which are now expressed in terms of learning outcomes.
- ACPART is empowered to apply a complex methodology for the design and administration of the *Romanian Register of Qualifications in Higher Education*. This data base will include integrated and extensive description for all the accredited study-programmes in the country.

To build-up such a Qualifications’ Register, the ACPART Methodology recommends the use of two grids. A first grid presents the *learning outcomes* in terms of professional and transversal competencies by making use of eight level descriptors. A second grid shows how these learning outcomes are covered by the contents of the disciplines that define the curriculum.

In a first stage, 2010-2011, ACPART concentrates the effort of hundreds of experts on the bachelor degree programmes, but the educational offer in the other two higher education cycles will also be subject of registration in 2011 and 2012.

Besides its information role for the local labor market, the Register will be also a credible tool for the quick verification of the compliance of a Romanian qualification with the principles and levels of the *Overarching EQF Higher Education* and with the *EQH in a lifelong learning perspective*. In other words, once operational, the Romanian Register of Qualifications in Higher Education will be a means of self-certification against the European references.

“*Quality Education for Labor Market*” was another 2008/2009 Romanian project focusing on the development of appropriate management tools at university level. They aim to assist the full implementation and the continuing internal monitoring of the use of *content standards* and *learning outcomes* at programme level discipline level. Among the main outcomes of the project, one has to mention two recommendations:

- To review the methodology of internal and external quality assessment in terms of criteria, standards, performance indicators and measurement tools referring to the educational efficacy of a study programme. More emphasis should be put on qualitative aspects related to the contents of the teaching and learning process as well as on the diversity of the learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and competences that a graduate should be able to demonstrate and use in his or her professional life and in his or her involvement in the active citizenship of a democratic society.
- To improve the template of the syllabi of the disciplines. Detailed and up-dated information should be provided to the students and to the teaching staff in a context that drives more and more towards certified competencies expressing the learning outcomes of each course.

The simple examination of the knowledge acquired proves to be unsatisfactory today, “*with labor markets increasingly relying on higher skill levels and transversal competences, higher education should equip students with the advanced knowledge, skills and competences they need throughout their professional lives*”. This is an excerpt of the 2009 policy statement of European ministers responsible for higher education in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve. It is fully endorsed by the empirical findings in the above mentioned Romanian project. As a consequence, the project suggested a more complex evaluation of students during their learning period instead of a single examination in the end of a semester.

In leading Romanian higher education institutions some of the departments have valuable examples of good practice in this domain. What we were suggesting is to consider the advantages of such a complex evaluation of the learning achievements and, where appropriate, to generalize it.

Currently, the two agencies responsible for quality assurance and qualifications in the Romanian higher education – ARACIS and ACPART – coordinate their efforts in order to offer to the higher education institutions the appropriate guidance for developing their own management and monitoring tools.

ECTS and Learning Outcomes in Joint Degrees

Under the aegis of the Bologna Process, Joint Degrees and Double Degree were implemented with multiple aims as they:

- Foster international mobility of students, teaching and administrative staff;
- Smooth mutual understanding and recognition of the diversity of ways and means to provide education and training;
- Facilitate insertion in the local and across border labor market;
- Support continuing enhancement of quality assurance both at program and at institution level;
- Promote in the globalizing world the attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area.

The building-up of a joint degree program is based on institutional *compatibility*, *common interest*, *mutual trust and transparency* in the conduct of partners and in the delivery of the program.

Institutional compatibility refers first to the legally recognized status of each of the partners in its home country and secondly to the level (cycle) of higher education, fields of academic specialization, entry factors (resources) to be involved in the joint programme and common interests. The compatibility verification is part of the preliminary discussion of the representatives of the interested institutions.

The concrete manner of academic interaction leading to a Joint Degree or a Double Degree program is described in an *institutional agreement* which provides all the technical details concerning admission, educational pre-requisites at entry, basic requirements of the joint curriculum, language of teaching, presence of teaching staff of the partner university in the host country, syllabi of the disciplines specifying the number of credit points and of the expected learning outcomes, internships and/or study periods in the partner institution, funding policy, sharing of costs, etc.

Romanian universities started in the early 1990's negotiations with European and North-American higher education institutions aiming at developing joint degree programs and, where possible, at delivering double diplomas for the graduating students. Not all the initiatives were successful, but the first double degree programs were registered in 1994/1995 as an outcome of cooperation with French and Canadian higher education institutions. For these early initiatives the common denominator was the international mobility of the teaching staff. Only for the best ranked students the joint degree programme covered the costs of mobility in the partner country in order to get temporary placement or to have an internship in an organization. Later on, joint degree programs were established with Dutch, English, German, Norwegian, Spanish and Swiss higher education institutions.

The teaching language was from the start not a burden as many of the Romanian universities offer since the early 1990's full study programs not only in Romanian, but also in English, French or German.

The development of teaching capability in foreign languages was in the beginning fully supported by both sided mobility of the teaching staff within European Programmes like Tempus, Socrates, Erasmus. Currently, leading Romanian universities have introduced teacher training programmes in foreign languages.

As directors of Joint Degree programs recognize, *negotiations* between the Romanian universities and the partner institutions start with a clear statement of the expected learning outcomes and of the addressed candidates. What is the programme offering to students in terms of knowledge and skills? What are the cognitive and functional competences gained after successful completion of the programme? Who is addressed to enroll in the programme? What are the employment opportunities for a diploma holder? Afterwards, partners concentrate on curriculum design, content standards, workload of students associated with the number of credits accumulated in case of successful promotion and the way learning outcomes are expressed and assessed.

Partners have in depth discussions on the way *objectives and aims of education* are achieved through the content of disciplines, the minimal bibliography recommended and the level of student involvement in teaching and learning, the means of assessment during the module or course provision, the grading system, etc. In respect of the principles of diversity of study programmes and of individual learning pathways, partners always insist on the minimum pre-requisites for each discipline as a guarantee for the successful achievement of the learning outcomes. After having established the components of the student workload per each course, it is relatively easy to agree upon the number of credits associated to each discipline during the academic year.

In some master's degree joint programs, even the progress from one semester to the other is subject of negotiation. Students are not allowed to enroll in the next semester of a given programme if they were not attending some special topics in the previous learning periods. With a flexible attitude during the negotiation process and with the full implementation of ECTS, these issues are tackled in an acceptable manner for all the involved institutions. Students are early prevented on the requirements they have to meet when enrolling in/passing to new semester.

After completion of the Joint Degree or of a Double Degree program, the graduate obtains either a diploma from each of the partner institutions or a diploma from the university where he or she had the graduation exam and a certificate from the partner university, with a detailed presentation in the Diploma Supplement of the involvement of the partner institutions in the programme.

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