

*EUA contribution to the Consultation on a European Credit System for Vocational education and Training (ECVET)*¹

I. Introduction

1. Universities are major players in lifelong learning (LLL) which has been a policy line in the Bologna Process since Prague in 2001. However, it is fair to say that the main higher education focus has been on the reform of degree structures, and it is only now that the real challenges of LLL are being recognised and addressed. Major developments are also taking place, mainly in the EU context, in the framework of the Education and Training 2010 programme being implemented as a contribution to meeting the Lisbon objectives. The elaboration of the EQF for LLL and more recent discussions on the development of ECVET, a credit system specifically for vocational education and training are taking place within this framework. EUA regrets that these developments have so far taken place without any attempt to involve the higher education sector. EUA nevertheless welcomes this opportunity to voice the views of Europe's universities on the proposal.

2. The European University Association (EUA), as representative of nearly 800 universities and their rector's conferences in 46 countries considers that the development of ECVET is fundamentally misguided, and will prove to be harmful and counterproductive to achieving the goals of lifelong learning. This is because Europe already has a credit transfer and accumulation system – ECTS - that has been developed since the launch of the Erasmus Programme at the end of the 1980s. The principles of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) can be further developed to make them applicable to lifelong learning and thus also to VET qualifications. Rather than develop a separate credit system for the VET sector, if lifelong learning is the objective, both VET and higher education should be working together to produce a single system that meets the requirements of Europe's citizens.

II. ECVET

3. The EQF Recommendation² mentions that the EQF will “facilitate the development of ECTS and ECVET” without providing details on how this will be achieved. The current EC staff working document on ECVET claims to be the credit system for the EQF-LLL and thus for lifelong learning.

Different principles

4. The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) is based on one principle: learning outcomes. The credit system for higher education, ECTS, is based on two principles: notional workload and learning outcomes. A credit system for lifelong learning should be based on the same principles, so that credit transfer and accumulation

¹ Commission staff working document European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). SEC(2006) 1431.

² Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. COM(2006) 479 final

becomes possible across all sectors of higher education and vocational education and training (VET).³

5. It is unclear what the benefit and usefulness is of allocating credits to learning units according to their relative importance in learning outcomes of a qualification. Each education provider should have the autonomy to decide how to reach qualification learning outcomes. Transparency can only be achieved by combining learning outcomes with the notional learner's workload.

6. EUA takes note of the fact that the ECVET proposal is not based on the principles of learning outcomes in combination with workload, and that the ECVET proposal has been developed without considering the existing ECTS scheme. By developing two different systems of credit accumulation for VET and higher education, artificial barriers are being constructed, that will complicate mobility between the sectors at a time when the increasingly widespread use of ECTS has been facilitating such movement. The distinctions between those two sectors are often blurred, programmes that are part of VET in one country are part of higher education in other countries (e.g. kindergarten teacher, nursing) and thus already use ECTS.

Credits for lifelong learning

7. The European Commission claims that its objective is to create a single credit accumulation system for Lifelong Learning. Yet instead of considering the question of how to further develop the existing ECTS system, it has worked on the parallel introduction of a second credit system which appears to be incompatible. This has no sense. The existence of two European credit systems will at the least create confusion, and even more seriously will work against the goals of coherent development of lifelong learning provision and the very transparency that credit systems aim to create. This must be avoided.

8. The higher education sector has been addressing the challenges of ECTS since the late 1980s. Thanks to the Bologna process that has involved the anchoring of ECTS in legislation in many European countries, the implementation of ECTS has become widespread and it is crucial that this development continues. EUA members are committed to implementing ECTS. Since 2003 the number of institutions using ECTS as a transfer system has increased from 68% to 75%, whereas the number of institutions applying ECTS as an accumulation system increased from 50% in 2003 to 66% in 2006.⁴ These numbers indicate that it is a long and difficult road for higher education institutions to adopt a credit accumulation system, but that progress is being made. Moreover in a number of countries, there are important developments regarding the use of ECTS in professional and vocational institutions. Stalling this process, and deflecting attention from the challenges of developing ECTS in the context of LLL by proposing a new credit system would be a retrograde step, and a misguided policy development for Europe.

9. Furthermore, ECTS is perfectly capable of becoming a transfer and accumulation system for lifelong learning. The combination of learning outcomes and workload is fit for

³ Recommendation from EUA and the National ECTS counsellors regarding the role of ECTS in the elaboration of a European Qualifications Framework, 18 June 2004.

⁴ Data from the upcoming Trends V study

describing all types of learning and a single system is needed for the sake of clarity between educational sectors. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework provides a good example of what a credit system for LLL might look like. ECTS should therefore be further developed, together with the VET sector.

III. Conclusion

10. EUA believes that this ECVET proposal is fundamentally flawed. It is crucial that achievements with the implementation of ECTS be taken into account in this consultation, and every effort should be made to avoid two separate credit systems being developed within one lifelong learning strategy. This should also be the guiding principle in the forthcoming review of ECTS. It is unclear why higher education institutions and students, as important players in LLL, have so far not been involved in the development of the ECVET proposal, but EUA believes that this is a result of the lack of structural stakeholder involvement in education processes in the European Union. This is a major concern that needs to be addressed at the highest political level.

11. EUA therefore calls for a full stakeholder process, involving the key representative organisations and experts in both higher education and VET, to examine the way to develop a single credit system appropriate to meet the challenges of lifelong learning on the basis of the achievements made in this field during the past twenty years.