

Study on the use of credit systems in higher education cooperation between the EU and the US¹

Policy Context

The European Commission and the US Department of Education have been supporting cooperation in the area of education and training between the EU and the US since 1995. As part of this cooperation, the two parties fund student exchanges as well as development of joint and double degrees between EU and US higher education institutions.

Study objectives

Recognition of credit gained while studying abroad is an important feature for the quality and attractiveness of student mobility, especially when talking about mobility which lasts for more than a semester. Recognition of credit and of qualifications for access to further studies is also an important matter for EU-US cooperation in the area of education and training.

Approach

To understand better the issues in credit and qualification recognition between the EU and the US, the European Commission and the US Department of Education have commissioned two studies (one by a team in the US and another one by an EU team) resulting in a single set of conclusions and recommendations. A core goal of these studies was also to identify elements of good practice which facilitate successful recognition.

Different features of credit systems

The two studies were based on a qualitative methodology which combined extensive desk research and interviews. The EU study identified practices in 14 higher education institutions which were case studied based on 82 semi-structured interviews with international coordinators (28), staff in charge of credit recognition (22) and where possible students (32). The US 17 case studies were based on the analysis of websites and supplemented by semi-structured interviews with HEI representatives (10) to clarify inadequate website information. In addition, the EU study carried out 20 interviews with persons in charge of qualification recognition (ENIC/NARIC centres) or organisations supporting student mobility between the EU and the US.

The use of credit systems in higher education is widespread and long established in the US. In most EU countries a common credit system (ECTS) is being implemented since roughly two decades but its large scale implementation is less than a decade old in many EU Member States. There is a number of differences in the use of credit systems between the EU and the US. Furthermore there are differences in the way degrees are conceived and structured. These divergences influence the possibilities of credit recognition:

- 1) In the EU there is little distinction between the requirements for a specific programme (qualification) and the requirements for

¹ Main authors in the EU team: Daniela Ulicna (GHK Consulting), Rebecca Allinson (Technopolis)
US team: Jamie Myers (Penn State University), Sung Woo Yang (Penn State University)

Commonalities

the generic degree. In the US such distinction exists: all Bachelor degrees include distinct components of general education courses, and major/minor programme courses, with majors further broken down into required core, optional, and elective components. Consequently EU students studying abroad seek courses that fulfil the conditions of the specific programme while US students abroad tend to seek courses that satisfy the generic conditions of the degree (general education) or electives.

- 2) The basis for describing the learning content of a course or programme component differs. In the EU, programmes are increasingly described through learning outcomes which define the content of programme components in terms of what students will successfully perform as a result of the course, though descriptions of syllabi are also available. In the US course syllabi include curricula/teaching inputs expressed as topics to be studied, texts to be read, and assessments or evaluation procedures.
- 3) The amount/volume of learning as expressed through a numeric value (credit points) is different and the basis for quantifying credit also differs. In ECTS, the amount/volume of learning measured by credit points includes all learning time (in an out of a classroom or laboratory setting) typically needed for a student to reach the required learning outcomes. In the US the amount/volume of learning measured is only contact time in a classroom or laboratory.
- 4) In the US there is a standardised use of two levels of lower-division general education courses (100 and 200 courses), and upper-division major programme courses (300 and 400) at the Bachelor level. In Europe there is no such common approach to describe the level of courses within programmes, other than defining whether a course is a Bachelor or Masters level.

But the use of credit in the EU and the US has also a number of important commonalities:

- 1) The fact that both higher education systems use a credit system (though different) is an advantage for arranging recognised student exchanges;
- 2) In the EU as well as in the US, it is clear who within a HEI is in charge of credit recognition. Again, though the roles of these person vary and decentralised as well as centralised approaches exist, the fact that in each HEI there is a person who has this role facilitates practical arrangements;
- 3) In both systems courses are typically structured in semesters; and
- 4) In each of the systems there is a common understanding of the typical number of credits to be achieved by a student per semester (or full academic year).

The issues encountered by students and HEI staff

Characteristics of higher education institutions that successfully recognise credit from the US in the EU

Evidence from existing evaluations and surveys shows that:

- Recognition of credit achieved by students mobile between the EU and the US takes place but is not systematic;
- EU and US higher education institutions consider putting credit recognition and transfer as challenging (though funding and sustainability of exchanges is more challenging); and
- EU (three year) Bachelor degrees are not always recognised for entry to US Masters' degree though this is increasingly taking place.

The interviews for this assignment highlighted that:

- Higher education staff in charge of credit recognition in Europe and the US do not always have a good understanding of the differences and similarities of each-others' credit systems and degree structures nor of the ways to deal with these differences;
- The Lisbon Convention on recognition of foreign qualifications and periods of study abroad defines certain basic principles for recognition of credit concerning full qualifications or shorter periods of mobility. Non-recognition should be based on the principle of substantial difference. It is not clear whether the rules embedded in the Lisbon Convention are actually known and used at the level of higher education institutions;
- It appears more difficult (and rather rare – though possible) to recognise credit for core courses; and
- Students may be missing the appropriate information and guidance that enables them to choose courses that will be recognised on return before going abroad;

The case studies show that none of the differences between EU and US credit systems constitute obstacles that cannot be overcome. The principles of good practice identified by the analysis of institutional practice where mobility between the EU and the US is well established and recognised are also applicable to credit recognition and transfer between other countries and regions.

The following features of higher education institutions' (HEI) practice of mobility support successful credit recognition:

- All the HEIs studied in the case studies consider it as a norm that a mobility that lasts one semester or more would entitle students to credit recognition (though the way this is arranged differs greatly);
- All the HEIs have clear processes in place to support credit recognition and these processes apply to mobility within the EU, but also from anywhere else including the US. As European HEIs have strengthened their international focus over the past decade or two, they have also systematised and professionalised the management of student mobility;

Elements of
good practice

- The facility with which EU institutions arrange credit recognition from the US depends very much on the understanding the people in charge have of the US higher education system (including the credit system) and the level of trust (which is related to the volume and frequency of exchanges with the same university in the US) between the partner institutions.
- Credit recognition works best and more flexibility is given to students when mobility takes place between HEIs that have long lasting partnerships. HEIs tend to be more selective (for example not recognising core courses) when it comes to credit recognition for 'free movers' coming from HEIs they are not familiar with;
- A lot of the obstacles related to credit recognition from the US to Europe can be overcome when an understanding of the US higher education system, qualifications structures and the use of credit is developed. The differences between credit systems in the EU and the US are an initial obstacle because people on both ends have to get familiar with the way the other system works, but there are no systemic features of the two systems that would render credit recognition impossible.

In general, it is easier to recognise credit from abroad, especially from a system that has a rather different approach to degrees and conception of courses and credit, in programmes where students are given flexibility over the choice of courses in their home institution. When the programme of the home HEI is too narrowly defined students have limited choices abroad that enable them to choose courses satisfying requirements of the programme they follow in the home HEI. Great differences exist between institutions (both in the EU and the US) in how much flexibility they give to students. Such differences also exist within HEIs between disciplines.

The case studies also show that the obstacles created by the stringent nature of study programmes in certain systems, universities or disciplines, can be overcome and even credit for core major programme courses can be easily recognised if the HEIs ensure:

- Careful selection of partner institution to make sure that the quality and level of outcomes are coherent and meet the requirements of both institutions;
- Flexible comparison of courses based on the identification of substantial difference rather than looking for too strict equivalence;
- Good quality course description made available to the partner institutions; and
- Progressive development of mutual trust through exchanges of students and staff and continued communication.

The fact that the US credit system is based on contact hours rather than workload, as it is the case with ECTS, is not a structural obstacle and all institutions find solutions to translate the US metrics into the ECTS (or another) metrics. The solutions differ because the

How can credit recognition between the EU and US be supported through policy and stakeholder actions

ways credit recognition is envisaged and used in the home higher education institution vary greatly.

Higher education institutions and their staff are the key actors in enabling credit recognition and transfer. Trust and confidence are key in this process. These cannot be imposed from the outside but have to be built from inside the HEIs. Nevertheless, policy makers and stakeholders in the field of student mobility can support the trust building process by:

- Emphasising credit recognition and transfer when designing programmes that fund student mobility thus pushing HEIs to put recognition arrangements in place;
- Stimulating exchanges that take place between partner HEI which know each other rather than 'free movers' mobility;
- Providing guidance materials and information explaining the higher education system, degree structures and credit system of the other country(ies);
- Providing materials that give concrete examples of how credit recognition between the EU and the US can be organised (see examples of good practice in this study); and
- Promoting the understanding of the Lisbon Convention principles, in particular that of substantial difference, and giving examples of how this applies in practice.