

**Report on the Workshop ‘Towards a National Approach to  
Credit in Higher Education - benefits, principles and  
operational guidelines’, Dublin, 28th January 2004**

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# **Report on the Workshop ‘Towards a National Approach to Credit in Higher Education - benefits, principles and operational guidelines’, 28th January 2004**

## **Introduction**

The workshop was opened by Dr Anna Murphy, Director of Framework Development, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. She indicated that the purpose of the workshop was to inform and update participants on the progress being made with regard to the development of a national approach to credit for higher education and training in Ireland. In particular, the workshop provided an opportunity to discuss a draft document produced by the Authority, in association with higher education stakeholders – through the Authority’s Technical Advisory Group on Credit (Higher Education Track) – which sets out the objectives, principles and possible benefits of such an approach, and the general operational guidelines that will facilitate its implementation. In addition, she also noted that the workshop would also provide an opportunity to consider issues for the implementation and further development of the national approach and to consider international developments and emerging issues on the credit agenda. These include debates about level referents for credit in higher education and the development of a credit system for vocational education and training at the European level. Finally, the workshop would also provide an opportunity to hear about the experiences and perspectives of individual higher education institutions concerning the unitisation of learning and its relationship with credit accumulation.

The format of the workshop involved participants being updated on the work of the Authority’s Technical Advisory Group on Credit (Higher Education Track), including an introduction to the document ‘Draft principles and guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training’, and the relationship of the proposed national approach to the National Framework of Qualifications. This was followed by perspectives on developments in credit at the European level, both within the contexts of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes; and with a series of presentations dealing with the various experiences and perspectives of individual awarding bodies and providers in relation to the issue of unitising learning and credit accumulation. All of the presentations were followed by open discussions, which gave the participants an opportunity to debate the issues raised.

In this report on the workshop, summaries of the contributions of all the presenters are set out, followed by an overview of the issues raised in the subsequent open discussions.

## **A national approach to credit in higher education and training: contexts, benefits and proposed principles and operational guidelines**

[Presentation by Dr Jim Murray, Development Officer, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland]

This presentation set out the contexts in which a national approach to credit in higher education and training is being developed, and the benefits that will be derived from the same. It also set out some proposed principles which might underpin the national approach, and some draft operational guidelines that would facilitate its implementation. In conclusion, it raised a number of issues affecting credit that will need to be explored in further developmental work relating to the national approach.

The first context in which a national approach to credit is being developed is in relation to the development and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. The Framework will be the basis of a new, more flexible and integrated system of qualifications that focuses on the needs of learners. In particular, it aims to bring coherence and transparency to the wide variety of awards available in Ireland, thus enabling learners to identify the most suitable awards for their needs. It also offers learners improved chances to reach their full potential through provisions for access, transfer and progression, and is designed to support the further development of prior learning recognition as a broad concept that can enable entry to a programme, credit towards an award or even eligibility towards a full award. The design of the Framework will facilitate the development of a national approach to credit accumulation and transfer, based on units of learning. This approach will open up the Framework for learners, as it will enable them to accumulate credit at varying rates of progress – including credit for prior and experiential learning – towards the achievement of awards.

The second context in which a national approach to credit is being developed is in relation to the major European initiatives in higher education and training (the Bologna process) and vocational education and training (the Copenhagen process). Both processes view credit as an important tool in facilitating learner mobility, in aiding curriculum development and in providing accumulation functions that will ultimately contribute to the development of a lifelong learning society in Europe. In the sphere of higher education and training, European education ministers have identified the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) as an appropriate medium for achieving these ends and in their recent meeting in Berlin they encouraged ‘further progress with the goal that the ECTS becomes not only a transfer but also an accumulation system, to be applied consistently as it develops within the European Higher Education Area’ (Berlin Communiqué, 2003).

It is in these contexts, then, that the Authority – in partnership with educational stakeholders, through its Technical Advisory Group on Credit – has begun work on facilitating the development of a national approach to credit. A twin track approach has been pursued (one for further education and training, the other for higher education and training) because, at this juncture, the way forward on credit is more clearly signposted for higher education and training within the context of the Bologna process and the general acceptance and use of ECTS. For further education and training, developments

need further clarification at both national and international levels. It is envisaged, however, that both tracks will ultimately be reconnected in the finalised national approach. Adopting a consultative and developmental approach, the Higher Education Track of the Technical Advisory Group on Credit considered the domestic and international contexts of the credit agenda, and produced a set of 'Draft principles and guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training'. The document was presented at the workshop in order to consider and discuss, amongst a wider group of stakeholders, the broad thrust of the objectives and principles outlined in the document, and to listen to any inputs which they might have in regard to the same.

### **Benefits of a national approach to credit**

The main benefits to be derived from the development and implementation of a national approach to credit are set out in the draft document as follows. The national approach will:

- *Support and complement the National Framework of Qualifications* – In particular, it will meet the needs of learners in a lifelong learning context by facilitating credit transfer and credit accumulation across all sectors of Irish education, and by enabling processes for the recognition of prior learning, new modes of learning and learning achieved in many non-formal and informal contexts. In addition, it will also support the attainment of awards, and indicate the achievement of outcomes in smaller units of learning, i.e. the achievement of credit will indicate progress towards an award.
- *Will be compatible with ECTS* - The adoption of a system of credits is a key component of the development of the European Higher Education Area under the Bologna process. ECTS is becoming a generalised basis for credit systems in higher education, and it has a proven track record in facilitating student mobility and international curriculum development, and is developing into a credit accumulation, as well as a credit transfer, system. Thus, in line with Ireland's commitment to and participation in the European Higher Education Area, the national approach to credit will be compatible with ECTS.
- *Will encourage institutions to unitise learning* – The national approach will encourage higher education institutions to adopt a unitised structure in the design of their education programmes. This, in turn, will give them flexibility to be innovative and responsive to the needs of learners and employers both in terms of the design of curricula and delivery.
- *Will establish a stable and clearly understood national currency in learning* – This will benefit both learners and recruiters in education and employment. In particular, it will foster mobility amongst Irish learners both nationally and internationally, and enable education providers to attract international students more readily. It will also enhance the readability, the comparability and the

recognition of Irish higher education and training awards both nationally and internationally. This will be reflected in such instruments as the Diploma Supplement.

### **Principles of a national approach to credit**

The proposed principles for a national approach to credit are set out in the draft document as follows. Credit systems or arrangements in higher education will:

- *be simple, clear and comprehensive*
- *be cost-effective, and involve as little bureaucracy as possible*
- *be compatible with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)*
- *encourage learner participation and mobility by facilitating access, transfer and progression*
- *support the attainment of awards as well as indicating achievement of outcomes in smaller units of learning (i.e. the achievement of credit will indicate progress towards an award)*
- *maintain the quality of standards of awards in the national framework of qualifications*
- *support the comparability and recognition of higher education and training awards*
- *facilitate, as appropriate, the development of the education and training systems including the design and/or redesign of learning units and awards*
- *accommodate and facilitate change in curricula and in delivery systems*
- *enable stakeholders (including funding bodies, awarding bodies and providers) to exercise their rightful responsibilities*
- *respect the autonomy of providers and/or awarding bodies in the design of their programmes and awards systems and awards regulations.*

### **Operational Guidelines for a national approach to credit**

In order to achieve coherence, clarity and complementarity between credit systems and the National Framework of Qualifications, the following operational guidelines are proposed in the draft document:

- *Credit will only be earned by the learner after appropriate assessment and the successful achievement of the specified learning outcomes*
- *It is recommended that all credit systems in institutes of higher education should operate on the basis that one credit equals 25- 30 hours of notional time (or equivalent)*
- *Credit shall not be earned twice for the same learning achievement (in the sense that this should not lead to two awards for essentially the same learning)*
- *It is recommended that a minimum overall credit volume or credit range be established for each award-type from levels 6-8 in the Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education system:*

Level 6 Higher Certificate	= 120 Credits
Level 7 Ordinary Degree	= 180 credits
Level 8 Honours degree	= 180-240 credits

- *In order to facilitate progression, it should be possible for a learner to use some credit earned toward an award at one level in the Framework toward an award at a higher level in the framework*
- *In line with the Authority's policies and procedures for access, transfer and progression, it is recommended that higher education institutions will provide clear, transparent information to learners about their credit systems and arrangements for transfer and accumulation within and across institutions. This will include statements about the recognition of prior learning. It is also recommended that credits achieved will be recorded in student transcripts and in the Diploma Supplement.*

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the presentation raised a number of issues that will require further developmental work by the Technical Advisory Group on Credit (Higher Education Track). These included the issues of assigning credit to award-types at Levels 9 and 10 in the National Framework (i.e., Bologna second and third cycles), and to 'non-standard' bachelor degrees (ie, where the inputs extend beyond the typical 3-4 year model, and thus, in ECTS terms, require the assignment of more than the standard 180-240 credits). They also included the issues of how different levels of credit will relate to the levels in the National Framework of Qualifications, and how the national approach to credit for higher education and training would interface with its further education and training equivalent.

Finally, a number of questions were posed for the consideration of the workshop as follows:

- Is the emerging approach appropriate?
- Is it addressing the right issues?
- Will providers/awarding bodies support it?
- Are any important considerations being overlooked?

### **Developments in ECTS post-Berlin**

[Presentations by Mr Danny Brennan, Registrar, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, ECTS/Diploma Supplement national co-ordinator; Professor Don McQuillan, Chief Executive, Irish Universities Quality Board, ECTS counsellor]

Mr Danny Brennan discussed a number of developments that are currently taking place in the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Amongst these is the ECTS label. An ECTS label will be awarded to institutions which apply ECTS to all first and second cycle degree programmes. The label is intended to raise the profile of the institution as a transparent and reliable partner in European and international cooperation. The criteria for the label will be: a Course Catalogue (online or hard copy) in two languages; use of ECTS credits; samples of Learning Agreements; Transcripts of Records and proofs of academic recognition. He noted that the pursuit of the ECTS label could represent a major overhead for large institutions in terms of developing course catalogues, but that Irish and UK higher educations had an advantage in terms of their use of the English language. About 90 institutions have applied for the ECTS label, and those who are successful will become part of a pilot project concerning the development of ECTS for lifelong learning.

Another important development concerns the allocation of ECTS credits to the major qualifications in the first, second and third Bologna cycles. A general consensus is emerging that the first cycle degree (Bachelor Degree) will have a credit range of 180-240 ECTS credits, and that the second cycle degree (Masters Degree) will have a credit range of 90-120 ECTS credits. With regard to the latter, it is generally recognised that some credit obtained at the level of the first cycle might be used towards the attainment of awards (less than 15%) at the level of the second cycle. ECTS coordinators are also beginning to consider the issue of assigning credit to the main third cycle qualification (the doctorate). This debate is still in its infancy though an assignment of 270-300 ECTS credits has already been mooted.

The ECTS Co-ordinators Group is also working on other issues. A revised ECTS Users Guide, outlining, *inter alia*, examples of good practice and providing a set of Frequently Asked Questions, is being finalised and will be launched at the ECTS National Coordinators meeting in Letterkenny in late February. The Coordinators are also examining the issue of linking ECTS credit to 'levels'. This debate is related to the

whole issue of the development of an overarching European Framework of Qualifications, and the implicit creation of levels within higher education awards (cycles) under the Bologna process. It is generally recognised that in terms of credit there is a need to further sub-divide the cycles, as no higher education institution would award a first cycle degree with credits accumulated solely from the first year of study. Current thinking among the group is to have 2 'levels' of credit for each cycle distinguished by descriptors (level descriptors), and that general rules should be established governing the amount of credit that needs to be accumulated from each level in order to achieve a first cycle degree. The possibility that some first cycle credit might contribute to a second cycle award is also being considered. The latter approach might be adaptable to enable some Further Education credits to be accumulated towards Higher Education awards.

In conclusion, the speaker also gave some reflections on the use of credit in the HETAC sector. In general, the HETAC system is compatible with ECTS. Credit is allocated to all component subjects of programmes, on the basis of 30 credits per semester, and 60 per academic year. He suggested, however, that there may not be sufficient emphasis on fine-tuning credits after their initial assignment, and that it might be useful to ask students whether assigned credits actually reflect the workload they undertake. Another important issue raised, and one which has wide relevance in terms of the National Framework of Qualifications, is the issue of the Honours Bachelor Degree award-type having different credit allocations (180 or 240) based on their differing durations (3 or 4 years). The question was posed in terms of the fairness of such a system to learners: why should it take student 'A' four years to achieve the learning outcomes associated with an honours degree when student 'B' can do it in three years?

Professor Don McQuillan looked at the issue of implementing ECTS in the wake of Berlin from the perspective of the Irish universities. He noted that there was broad acceptance of ECTS in the sector and that there would be no problem about introducing the system in accordance with the ongoing Bologna process. He also sounded a note of caution however. The universities are fearful of the bureaucracy associated with the administration of credit systems, and would hope to minimize this in terms of the introduction of ECTS across the sector. There are also some technical issues that will need to be addressed. One of these relates to the assignment of credit to modules or courses that are provided on more than one programme. On account of the current design of some of these programmes, some universities would be faced with the prospect, as things stand, of having to assign different volumes of credit to the same module, depending on the programme. He also noted that both 'Bologna models' – the 3 +2 and 4 +1 systems – are embedded in the universities, and that there would be a reluctance to move away from either simply to facilitate the requirements of a credit system. Finally, he noted that the universities are interested in the concept of students transferring from one institution to another, but believes that there is little evidence of much demand for such transfers amongst learners.

## **The unitisation of learning and credit accumulation in higher education and training in Ireland – some experiences and perspectives**

[Presentations by Ms Karena Maguire, Head of Awards Management, Higher Education and Training Awards Council; Mr Dermot Finan, Registrar, Institute of Technology Sligo; Dr John O'Brien, Associate Vice-President, Academic Services, University of Limerick; Dr Tom Duff, Academic Registrar, Dublin Institute of Technology]

Ms Karena Maguire spoke about the ACCS system (Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects), which is in use among the recognised institutions and other providers under the remit of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. Originally introduced in 1989-90, ACCS is a credit system based on ECTS which allows part-time learners to accumulate and transfer credit in respect of individual subjects or modules from programmes approved by the Council. Learners receive subject (module) certification for all subjects (modules) successfully completed. ACCS was developed to facilitate a more diversified and decentralised higher education system, to facilitate part-time learning and to facilitate mobility initiatives in Europe. The system has many advantages for learners and providers. These include its flexibility in terms of allowing diverse learners to accumulate credit towards awards at varying rates of progress, and the formal recognition it provides for smaller packages of learning achievement below the level of full programmes. It also facilitates prior learning recognition, and the establishment of greater links between providers and industry.

ACCS has grown significantly since its original introduction. Registered ACCS students have grown from 371 in 1990 to 6,990 in 2001, while the total number of ACCS modules has multiplied from 1,012 to 32,751 in the same period. In addition, the number of full awards accumulated has grown from 57 in 1992 to 1,485 in 2001. It is recognised, however, that the system will evolve in the future as it responds to new developments associated with the ECTS system and the National Framework of Qualifications.

Mr Dermot Finan spoke about the experience of the Institute of Technology Sligo in applying ECTS in the context of implementing the ACCS scheme. He highlighted, in particular, the flexibility that ACCS allows in terms of the way programmes are offered and designed: they can be offered in modules or groups of modules, and can be designed from approved suites without seeking a further validation of modules. The system also allows the tailoring of learner assessment to suit both the provider, the learner and, where appropriate, industrial/business sponsors of particular programmes; and makes it easier to award credit for prior experiential learning and to decide upon exemptions. Overall, it greatly enhances and facilitates part-time participation in higher education and training.

A number of the Institute's programmes were described, in which the ACCS scheme has been very successfully applied. These included inter alia the National Certificate/National Diploma/Bachelor Degree in Business Studies, the MSc in Environmental Health and Safety Management and the BSc in Occupational Safety and Health. A particularly interesting example of ACCS in operation concerns the National Certificate in Engineering in Combined Studies. This programme was agreed in co-operation with Masonite Ireland, a producer of timber compounds, and was designed to

meet the specific needs of Masonite employees from operative to apprentice to management of function. Its modules were taken from four approved full-time National Certificate courses in Engineering. A flexible delivery system has been put in place to satisfy the stakeholders, including delivery on-site and the delivery over a period of 2.5 years of modules of varying duration.

Dr John O'Brien spoke about the University of Limerick's credit system, which is known as the Quality Credit Average (QCA). In the system, the quality and standard of a student's academic performance is expressed as a numerical average of that performance in the credited modules attempted. It is this average which is termed Quality Credit Average (QCA) and is calculated on a semester and on a cumulative basis for each programme or for each part of a programme (the first part of a programme is usually the first year of the programme, the second part is usually the remaining three years).

The University of Limerick has a modularised system. A module is a unit of study extending over a semester. These are described in a standard template used in the academic approval process. Contact hours for particular modules vary with the discipline, as do the number of modules undertaken by learners per semester. Credits are assigned to modules in multiples of three. These are not ECTS credits, though the University has established a task group to advise Academic Council on how to move to ECTS for all modules. On any programme exemptions can be requested for previous study undertaken. Each request is considered on its merits, and the system is intended to support transfer between fairly similar programmes when other conditions are met. A few of the University's programmes allow exemptions for prior experience and have been built into the programme design.

Dr Tom Duff spoke about the perspectives of the Dublin Institute of Technology on the unitisation of learning and credit accumulation. At present the Institute operates both traditional year-long and semesterised approaches to programme delivery. All of the Institute's 100 or so programmes have ECTS credits assigned on the usual basis, i.e., on the 60 credits per academic year model, and all students receive transcripts on completion of their programmes indicating the credits achieved. The Institute is about to move to a fully modularised and semesterised system. ECTS credits will be assigned to modules in multiples of 5.

A number of important questions were raised by the speaker in relation to the unitisation of learning and the assignment of credit. One of these concerned the question of achieving balance between core, optional and elective modules. If the core modules are too few, he suggested, there is a danger of losing the professional integrity of the programme. As in a number of the previous papers, the issue of distinguishing between credit at different levels or stages of programmes was also raised, as was the question of whether there is a need to develop a common standard for modules across institutions, and whether learners would then be enabled to 'dip in' into units from more than one institution in accumulating credit towards awards. Another important issue that will need to be explored is how the right of higher education institutions to determine their own entry standards can be reconciled with facilitating learner transfer and the recognition of

credits accumulated elsewhere. Finally, he highlighted the need for a credit system to link the further education and higher education systems to enhance progression opportunities for learners on further education programmes, and the need to develop a more formalised system for the accreditation of prior learning.

### **Towards a credit system for vocational education and training in Europe – implications for higher education**

[Presentation by Mr Edwin Mernagh, Development Officer, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland]

Mr Edwin Mernagh spoke about the work of one of the Technical Working Groups that have been set up to implement the programme – the Copenhagen process – agreed by European ministers of education in November 2002 to increase voluntary cooperation in European vocational education and training. This particular group is charged with the task of investigating options for the development of a system of credit transfer, taking into account ECTS, for European vocational education and training at the European level. Parallel with this, it will also investigate the role and character of common reference levels for competences and qualifications, and common principles for certification.

The key objective of the Group is to develop a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), which will facilitate the transfer of recognition for learning, both between the existing national VET systems and between non-formal/informal and formal systems of learning. ECVET is also intended to facilitate credit accumulation within vocational education and training, and the mobility of learners and workers through the enhancement of the transparency of learning processes and outcomes, and through improving the description of the complete qualification. The work undertaken to date has explored some of the difficulties surrounding the definition of qualifications and how credit is measured. It is also looking at and trying to resolve the differences of understanding that exist around such concepts as unitisation and modularisation. A key concept to have emerged from the work of the Group is the idea of ‘zones of mutual trust’ – the notion of establishing zones of acceptance which will accommodate the differences between national systems. These need to be developed vertically (between levels of learning) and horizontally (between fields of learning).

The Group’s strategic aim is, in the short term, to undertake small-scale investigations of zones of mutual trust in such areas as the link between credit and learning outcomes, and in defining levels of learning. In the intermediate term, it hopes to develop an operating scheme for ECVET, and in the long term it hopes to work towards the development of a European credit and qualifications meta-framework in vocational education and training.

The developmental process for a credit system in European vocational education and training has some important implications for the credit agenda in higher education and training. It enhances, for example, the status of ECTS, for the ECVET project explicitly acknowledges ECTS to be an exemplar or reference point for the development of a European Credit system for VET. Moreover, it also views ECTS as a fixed point, to

which the emerging credit system for vocational education and training will need to be compatible. In this regard, it is already clear that in most countries, certain aspects of vocational education and training overlap with higher education and training and that certain elements can therefore adapt to using ECTS. It is also the case, however, that in every country some elements of vocational education and training will need an approach to credit that differs from ECTS. This issue is of particular relevance to Ireland in terms of the development of national approach to credit. The effort to find a solution that will meet the complex needs of vocational education and training at a European level will no doubt feed into the debate about linking further education and training and higher education and training credit systems into a coherent national approach that supports and complements the National Framework of Qualifications.

### **Issues emerging from the Open Discussions**

After each of the presentations, there were lively debates amongst the workshop participants, which touched upon a wide range of topics associated with the development of a national approach to credit and the wider credit agenda in Europe. In broad terms, the general thrust of the developing national approach was welcomed, particularly the emphasis which it places on supporting learners in their efforts to acquire and secure recognition for learning in a lifelong learning context. There were, however, a number of inputs from participants which highlighted certain issues that they believe have not been addressed adequately in the draft document, or which have been addressed in such an ambiguous manner that they might cause problems for learners and/or providers of education and training, when a national approach to credit is finally implemented.

The main issues to have emerged from the discussions are set out below, as follows:

- *Representativeness of the Technical Advisory Group (Higher Education Track)*  
A number of participants remarked upon the fact that the Technical Advisory Group on Credit is a markedly provider-centred group. The feeling at the workshop was that there is a need to open consultation up to a broader constituency, including employers, different kinds of learners and the general public. It was felt that such an approach would prevent the national approach to credit from degenerating into an ‘internal accounting mechanism’ for education and training providers.
- *Recognition and accreditation of informal and non-formal learning*  
The view was expressed at the workshop that the issue of recognising, and awarding credit for different types of experiential learning is rarely dealt with other than in a rhetorical manner. Some of the participants felt that there was a need, possibly within the context of the development of the national approach to credit, to develop, clear and practical solutions to the problem of quantifying and recognising such learning and that would be applicable across the entire higher education and training system.

- *Assigning credit to Honours Degrees of differing durations*

In the draft operational guidelines it was proposed that the Honours Degree award-type in the National Framework of Qualifications should be allocated ECTS credits in the range of 180 to 240. The rationale behind this proposal was that it would cater for the widespread existence of 3 year and 4 honours degrees in Ireland, and allow for general compatibility with the ECTS convention of allocating credit on the basis of 60 credit units for an academic year.

A number of participants in the workshop argued that such an approach was in conflict with the learning outcomes approach underpinning the National Framework of Qualifications, given that the ECTS convention looks at credit largely in terms of inputs, i.e., credit is allocated on the basis of notional learner workload. It was suggested by some, therefore, that for three year honours degrees, the ECTS convention should be dropped and that more credit should be allocated (70-80 credits) to each year of the three years honours degree to ensure that all honours degrees are awarded 240 credits, which would more clearly reflect the achievement of a higher level of learning outcomes than those achieved for the lower level three year (180 credit) Ordinary Bachelor degree.

Other participants suggested that it might be better to make all three year honours degrees four year degrees, on the grounds that it was problematical that some learners could achieve the generic learning outcomes associated with the Honours Bachelor degree award-type in only three years, while it would take other learners four years. The main argument in favour of such an approach was that it would ensure greater equity for learners across the system.

The latter point was disputed by other participants who argued that differences in the nature of provision often dictated the different durations of honours degrees. It was noted that many four year degrees were awarded in the Science and Technology disciplines, and had large laboratory components which required additional provision time. In contrast, it was argued that Humanities and Social Sciences learners could achieve comparable learning outcomes in their fields of learning in the shorter time, because they did not have to undertake the same kind of laboratory and time intensive learning that was intrinsic to the scientific disciplines. Other participants noted that there were also longstanding traditions of variation in the volume of learning outcomes associated with awards in different fields of learning.

The question of different durations for Honours Bachelor degrees, and how this impacts upon the assignment of credit, was also raised in relation to degrees that exceed both the typical three and four year durations, e.g., degrees in medicine and architecture. A number of participants suggested that this issue would also have to be addressed within the context of the development of a national approach to credit.

All acknowledged that this was a complex problem, as the variety in durations of honours degrees were deeply embedded in the system.

- *Inputs versus Outcomes – the influence of ECTS*

A number of contributors to the discussions argued that the national approach to credit ought not to be unduly influenced by the inputs based approach to credit inherent within the ECTS system. They argued that the national approach to credit should adopt or develop a system that meets or articulates with national needs. For some, this would mean that the national approach to credit should closely reflect the outcomes approach of the National Framework of Qualifications, and that an outcomes based approach to credit should be advocated by those involved in discussions on credit at the European level. This view was also supported by colleagues from the UK, who were concerned that the ECTS approach to credit might ultimately drive the UK credit systems.

Against this, others argued that the inputs approach to credit was much easier to understand and implement, and that the attempts undertaken hitherto to reconcile the two approaches within the context of the continuing development of ECTS had been fraught with difficulty. It was also noted that student unions across Europe are very supportive of the inputs approach on the grounds that it provides a disciplining mechanism that prevents the overloading of students by providers.

Questions were also raised about the source from which the draft principle ‘that institutes of higher education should operate on the basis that one credit equals 25-30 hours of notional time’ had come from. It was noted that the source was the description of ECTS on the European Commission’s website.<sup>1</sup> A number of participants felt that this notional figure was too high as it would imply that the total notional workload of a learner could add up to as much as 1800 hours in a single academic year, which would well exceed any realistic assessment of the typical notional workload of any student in an average academic year.

It was also highlighted by some participants that we are constrained in our approach to credit by our commitments under the Bologna process, and the view taken by European ministers of education that ECTS, or ECTS compatible systems, are the best way forward on credit. In this connection, it was also noted that ECTS was not standing still and that the ECTS coordinators are attempting to address some of the issues that had been raised in this workshop, such as the issue of reconciling the inputs and outcomes approaches to credit, and the issue of establishing different levels of credit, especially in the context of the first cycle degree.

- *Inputs on the ACCS system*

There were a number of comments on the ACCS system. All agreed that it had been a very successful system and that it had great potential to develop further, and to inform the development of a national approach to credit. However, some participants considered that it still had a number of rigidities attached to it, which it needed to break out of, most notably, the emphasis on inputs as opposed to outcomes. Some participants felt, too, that the level of bureaucracy associated with the scheme would

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<sup>1</sup> [http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/ects\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/ects_en.html)

need to be reduced as it moves forward. Finally, some participants, both those who work outside the HETAC sector and those within it, saw potential in the system for further development in terms of assigning credit to work-based learning achieved outside the formal constraints of education and training programmes and, indeed, other kinds of non-formal learning.

- *Flexibility*

There was general consensus that whatever shape or form the national approach to credit ultimately takes, it should ensure that the problem of reaching out to non-traditional learners is adequately addressed. In this connection, it was argued by some participants that rigidity in the system would have to be avoided. It would have to be sensitive to the modalities of the learning required by non-traditional learners, including adult learners. To this end, the national approach to credit would have to be dynamic and capable of responding to diverse learning approaches.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding the workshop, the Chairperson thanked all of the participants for the many, thought-provoking contributions they had made during the various sessions. All of the inputs will be actively considered by the Technical Advisory Group on Credit (Higher Education Track) in its future deliberations, and will thus contribute to the ongoing development of a national approach to credit in higher education and training. She indicated that the presentations would be made available on-line on the Authority's website, as would a report of the workshop proceedings.