



UNIVERSITY OF TRÁS-OS-MONTES AND ALTO DOURO



ECTS

EUROPEAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM



WHAT IS ECTS?

The European Community promotes interuniversity cooperation as a means of improving the quality of education for the benefit of students and Higher Education Institutions (HEI's), highlighting the growing importance of Lifelong Learning in European qualifications frameworks. Student mobility is a predominant element of interuniversity cooperation, and the Erasmus programme has already clearly demonstrated that studying abroad can be a particularly valuable experience in student's lives, as it is not only the best way to learn about other countries and open the mind to new ideas, languages and cultures; but is also a relevant component in academic and professional career development.

The recognition of study programmes and diplomas is a requirement for the creation of an open European area of education and training where students and teachers can move around without obstacles. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was developed in a pilot scheme, established within the Erasmus Programme, in order to improve academic recognition for studying abroad.

The ECTS is a learner-centred system for credit accumulation and transfer based on the transparency of learning outcomes and learning processes (workload). It was developed by the European Commission as a means of changing the core of curriculum design and delivery to focus on learning. It is based on the workload students are required to undertake in order to achieve the objectives of a specific programme/course unit – expected learning outcomes and competences developed. Therefore, this system aims to facilitate the evaluation, recognition and validation of qualifications and learning units. It also provides common procedures for the academic recognition of studies abroad, and thus, student mobility.

In short, the ECTS creates transparency, allows institutions to build bridges between them and widens the choices available to students in what regards learning experience, since it offers a way for different institutions to acknowledge students' learning achievements in other institutions.

MAIN ASPECTS OF THE ECTS

The ECTS is based on three staple elements: information (regarding study programmes and expected learning outcomes), mutual agreement (between partner institutions and the student) and ECTS credits (defined by the student workload). ECTS is made operational through the use of four key documents: the Information Package/Course Catalogue, the Application Form, the Learning Agreement and the Transcript of Records; and also by students, teachers and institutions who want to make study abroad an integral part of the educational experience. ECTS itself doesn't regulate the content, structure or equivalence of study programmes in any way. These are issues of quality which have to be determined by the HEI's themselves when establishing a satisfactory basis for cooperation agreements, bilaterally or multilaterally. ECTS is merely a code of good practices, which provides those actors with the tools necessary to *create transparency* and to *facilitate academic recognition*.

Transparency is provided using the following means:

- **ECTS credits**, which constitute a numerical value assigned to each course unit to describe the student workload required to complete it. They reflect the quantity of work each course unit entails in relation to the total amount of work necessary to complete a full year of academic study at the institution. ECTS is

based on a full student workload and not limited to contact hours only, which means that the number of Credits allocated must include all activities demanded by the course unit, such as lectures, practical work, seminars, tutorials, fieldwork, self-study, examinations or other assessment activities. The ECTS determines that 60 credits represent the workload of a whole academic year, 30 credits represent a semester and 20 credits are attributed to a trimester.

- **The ECTS information package/Course catalogue** is a guide for all students who attend the institution. It supplies information on the institution itself, on departments/faculties and on the organisation and structure of studies and course units. It also provides general useful information about the country/city for students who wish to attend the institution for a study period.
- **The ECTS learning agreement** describes the study programme that will be taken and the ECTS credits which will be awarded upon satisfactory completion of the programme. This requires the student to comprehend study abroad as an integral part of his or her higher education, the home institution to guarantee full academic recognition of the credits gained abroad and the host institution to provide the course units agreed upon, subject to their calendars.
- **The ECTS transcript of records** ensures that the students will have a comprehensive record of their learning achievements (course units taken, number of ECTS and grades awarded) which is straightforward and easily transferable from one institution to another, providing evidence of the students' progress.

Full academic recognition is a prerequisite for student mobility within the LLP-Erasmus Programme. It means that the study period abroad in all its elements (classes, lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, self-study, examinations or other assessment tools), substitutes an equivalent study period at the home university (including all assessment procedures and tools), although the contents of the agreed study programme will differ from one study area to another, and according to the student's learning pathway. The academic and administrative aspects of ECTS, such as the recognition of studies taken abroad, are usually handled by ECTS coordinators of different study areas within the HEI.

ECTS credits ensure that the programme will be reasonable in terms of workload for the period of study abroad. For example, a student whose choice of course units totals 120 ECTS credits for an academic year would have to work twice as much as an average local student at the receiving institution, and a student whose programme totals 30 ECTS credits for a whole academic year would be undertaking much less work than the average local student and would in effect be studying part-time.

ECTS also enables further studies abroad, since a student will not necessarily go back to the home institution after the study period abroad; he/she may prefer to stay at the host institution – possibly to gain a degree – or even move to a third institution. The institutions themselves decide whether or not they accept this and what terms the student must comply with to obtain a diploma or a transfer. The transcript of records is particularly useful in this context, as it provides a history of the student's academic achievements, which will help institutions in the decision-making process.

ECTS GRADING SYSTEM

Over the years, the various European countries have developed vastly different grading scales and systems to evaluate students, and in the past, this has stood as an obstacle to student mobility, since it increased the difficulty of the equivalence processes. This situation has made it difficult to ensure transparency and full academic recognition of studies accomplished in foreign countries.

Taking these difficulties into account, a 5-point grading scale was developed within the framework of the ECTS that allows HEI's to ensure a transparent transfer and recognition of grades obtained by students at other European institutions. This scale is based on the statistical distribution of passing grades in a certain programme or institution, making it possible to compare those grades to the statistical distribution of grades in another programme or institution. Each institution can take the statistical distribution of their students' grades and apply it to a five point table (A, B, C, D, E), which can be used as a device for the direct translations of grades from a grading scale to another.

The ECTS grade is thus based on the percentile of a student's performance relatively to a statistically significant group of other students enrolled in the same curricular unit/course – rank of a student in an assessment that is how he/she performed in relation to other students in the same class (or in a significant group of students). It does not intend to replace the local grade but to provide a qualitative assessment of students' performance in the subjects attended at the host institution. In Portugal, the mechanism used to transfer grades from the host university to the home university is calculated following the ECTS procedures and the national legislation that regulates these principles.

In UTAD the statistical distribution curve for each reference group was split into five segments (top 10%, next 25%, next 30%, next 25%, lowest 10%), called A, B, C, D and E.

| ECTS Grade | % of successful students normally achieving the grade | Definition | UTAD Grade |
|------------|---|--------------|------------|
| A | 10% | Excellent | 17 – 20 |
| B | 25% | Very Good | 15 – 16 |
| C | 30% | Good | 14 |
| D | 25% | Satisfactory | 11 – 13 |
| E | 10% | Adequate | 10 |
| F | --- | Fail | 00 – 09* |

* In the Portuguese grading system, the results are represented on a scale of 0 to 20, and the minimum grade required for approval is 10.

It is important to highlight that the conversion scale presented might vary depending on the area, nature of course unit and assessment methods.

ECTS AT UTAD

The Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro University (UTAD) became a fully-fledged University in 1986. Today, after over 27 years of commitment to high quality teaching, research and community extension, UTAD has earned its rightful place among the new generation of Portuguese universities, and is striving to make a name for itself at both national and international levels as a centre of academic excellence and innovation.

UTAD recognized the significance of ECTS and its tools since the beginning, and one of the University's key challenges in the last years was to adapt its undergraduate and postgraduate courses portfolio to the Bologna Declaration proposals and to the rapidly changing requirements of the labour market, the shifts in economic and social priorities at national and EU levels, and to the teaching and research opportunities provided by new technologies.

In 1999, the University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro started applying ECTS Credits, and today, all of UTAD's study programmes/courses are in accordance with the ECTS, and all student mobility activities effectively use the ECTS for academic recognition.

With the good use of the ECTS tools in mind, the Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro University issues a Transcript of Records to all exchange students at the end of their study period. This document includes the grades achieved in each curricular unit/course in the national and ECTS scales, as well as the number of ECTS credits awarded to the student.