

Review of the ECTS Users' Guide

Report to the 4 November 2025 BFUG Board meeting
(draft report to the December 2025 BFUG)

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Key findings from the research	2
2.1 Programme design and delivery	2
2.2 Mobility, transfer and recognition	3
2.3 Lifelong learning	4
3. Key changes	5
3.1 Micro-credentials	5
3.2 Use of ECTS outside higher education	5
3.3 Mobility and recognition	5
3.4 Mainstreaming lifelong learning	6
3.5 Key features	6
3.6 Digitalisation	7
3.7 Technical and structural improvements	7
3.8 Status and Publication	7
4. Questions for the BFUG Board	8

1. Introduction

The use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a key commitment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). ECTS supports the learner-centred design and delivery of learning opportunities, and facilitates the transfer and automatic recognition of credits after mobility periods.

In recent years, the education landscape has been changing with the development of more diverse and flexible learning opportunities, including short stand-alone learning opportunities that lead to micro-credentials or similar formats. As a result, EHEA Ministers in Tirana (2024) asked to revise the ECTS Users' Guide 2015 in order to strengthen the key features of ECTS and adapt them to these current developments.

The revision has been informed by a study on the current use and implementation of ECTS. An Advisory Group, chaired by the European Commission and including experts from EHEA countries as well as stakeholder organisations, was consulted on the draft versions of the Guide. The draft Guide is now submitted to the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) for review before submitting it to Ministers for adoption at the 2027 Iași-Chișinău Ministerial Conference.

2. Key findings from the study

The study analysed the use and implementation of ECTS in a sample of 8 EHEA countries¹. Desk research and surveys covered 10 higher education institutions per country, while focus group discussions were held at 2 institutions per country with students and staff.

2.1 Programme design and delivery

In line with EHEA commitments, ECTS is used for full degree study programmes at all higher education institutions. For micro-credentials or other short learning opportunities, ECTS is only used in ca. 60% of those analysed (see below).

ECTS is widely valued for the **transparency and clarity** it provides in programme design for learners as well as staff. Understanding what ECTS credits represent varies, but a large majority of students are aware of credits being based on workload and learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes are widely used and understood by staff, who frequently use additional guidance or structured frameworks (e.g. Bloom's taxonomy) to formulate them. At the same time, students find learning outcomes generally useful but sometimes noted a lack of coherence of actual teaching and assessment practices with intended learning outcomes.

Workload as a basis for credit allocation is widely understood, but implemented differently (fixed workload ratios for specific teaching formats vs individual estimates for each course). Some countries and institutions allow flexibility within the 25-30 hours range, while others set a specific number of hours in national regulations.

With regard to workload, the main issue is that **monitoring of actual workload** is not always systematic and regular. Monitoring and review of credit allocation are typically integrated into quality assurance cycles, but frequency varies. Workload realities are not always captured in yearly end-of-course evaluations or student surveys. Students partially perceive workload monitoring as ineffective.

The **student-centred learning** (SCL) approach is welcome by students. While active, project-based and real-world-challenge-based learning are appreciated, traditional lectures and teaching approaches are still widespread in reality. The challenges reported by staff are resource constraints and large class sizes, which make SCL difficult to implement despite being committed in principle.

Students have access to **course catalogues** providing essential information on programmes and learning opportunities, both for general studies as well as mobility. There is variation to what extent course catalogues cover all items of the ECTS template, but students broadly feel sufficiently well informed. Students' information needs further depend on context: many programmes are highly structured with limited elective choice, in which case students rarely require information to choose courses.

¹Austria, Bulgaria, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Spain, Sweden.

The need for information is largest in the context of mobility. Students reported challenges in this respect: course catalogues are not always complete, available in English and in time for planning mobilities.

ECTS was generally valued as a common language facilitating the design and delivery of **joint programmes** by using the aligned principled and practices. Challenges reported include coordination difficulties across institutions, variations in module sizes, programme lengths, and differing interpretations of workload hours per ECTS credit.

2.2 Mobility, transfer and recognition

While ECTS is universally used as the building block for study programmes in general, its role in planning mobility and supporting recognition remains widely seen as a main function of ECTS.

Credit recognition is generally perceived as working well: most students report automatic recognition of credits according to their learning agreements. The ECTS standard process and documents (Course Catalogue, Learning Agreement and Transcript of Records) have facilitated the mobility and recognition process, and digitalisation with Erasmus Without Papers (EWP) has facilitated the use of these documents

The findings, however, show that rigid approaches persist: this includes one-to-one course matching, expectation of equivalence in detailed course content rather than comparable learning outcomes, or complex administrative processes that students need to accomplish.

The strong focus on **Learning Agreements** and automatic recognition based on those have largely hidden such issues at the stage of Learning Agreement preparation/negotiation. In other words: once the Learning Agreement is signed, recognition works smoothly – but the process leading up to it is not without obstacles.

Few institutions make **grade distribution tables** public or systematically use them for grade **conversion** in line with the Users' Guide methodology. The EGRACONS tool only covers a small number of higher education institutions. Instead, many institutions rely on internal practices instead, e.g. their own conversion tables. A majority of institutions continue to use the pre-2009 ECTS grading table (A-F). As a result, many HEIs actually perform no grade conversion at all in many cases and record only pass/fail results of credits transferred after mobility. The extent to which this is actually seen as a deficit differs between institutions and also among students.

Interestingly, based on the survey responses students widely perceive the grade conversion as fair. It can be assumed that this includes many grade conversions not based on the ECTS methodology. However, there are also instances where students perceived their grades to have been downgraded, or lament inconsistent rules and lack of clarity. Overall, both staff and students would welcome greater transparency, consistency, and fairness in grade conversion.

The practice of embedding **mobility windows** in programmes varies across institutions.

Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) are widely used and offered within European Universities Alliances, across all disciplines and levels. Their descriptions, however, generally provide limited detail on aspects such as learning outcomes, assessment, course content, and delivery.

BIPs typically award 3 ECTS credits and are often integrated into existing programmes, although some institutions regard them as supplementary activities that do not count towards degree requirements. While students generally view BIPs as enriching and more accessible compared to long-term mobility options, they express doubts about the value of surplus credits in those cases where BIPs do not count towards their degree.

2.3 Lifelong learning

The desk research covered 139 **micro-credentials** (MCs) or similar standalone short learning opportunities offered by the HEIs in the sample. While the term “micro-credential” is not always used for them, they were considered as MCs for the study when they fitted that rubric.

ECTS credits were only allocated to/indicated for ca. 60% of the MCs reviewed, based on the public Course Catalogue description. Otherwise, the descriptions generally included the basic information according to the ECTS template.

The uptake of MCs by HEIs varied between the 8 countries covered. Austria, Ireland, Netherlands, and Sweden showed more MCs being offered by institutions, while North Macedonia and Bulgaria reported limitations due to national regulatory/systemic constraints.

MC sizes ranged mainly from 1–15 ECTS, with some institutions offering micro-degrees of 15–40 ECTS. In focus groups, staff reported that using ECTS and allocating credits to MCs is generally straightforward in line with the same principles and rules that apply to programmes.

Assigning qualification framework levels remains a challenge in some cases. One challenge reported is that the same MC may be regarded at a different level in different disciplines. Another challenge was the absence of formal frameworks or mandates for level assignment.

Students' awareness of possibilities for **recognition of prior learning** (RPL) remains limited and hence does the uptake of these opportunities. Other barriers include burdensome documentation, restrictive procedures, or caps on credit recognition. While possibilities for RPL formally exist in most institutions, the extent to which these are promoted and encouraged by staff varies widely.

3. Key changes

Based on the study and the reflections of the Advisory Group, the draft ECTS Users' Guide 2027 includes the following main changes:

3.1 Micro-credentials

It is clarified throughout the Guide that ECTS should be used for all learning opportunities offered by education institutions, including micro-credentials and other short, standalone learning

opportunities. The wording of the guide has been updated to reflect micro-credentials as a standard education offer throughout.

To enhance transparency and clarity, and in line with existing policy recommendations around micro-credentials, it was clarified that a qualifications framework (QF) level should always be indicated for ECTS credits awarded.

3.2 Use of ECTS outside higher education

ECTS has already been used in other education sectors than higher education, in particular for vocational education and training (VET) since the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) was repealed in 2020.

The draft Guide positions ECTS explicitly as a universal credit system for lifelong learning, suitable for learning at all levels and in all contexts. As a consequence, higher-education-specific terminology was avoided as much as possible (e.g. “learner” instead of “student”, “qualification” instead of “degree”, ...).

ECTS is a key commitment of the EHEA and its use is obligatory only in higher education. ECTS thus remains “owned” by Ministers of higher education, but is fully open to use in all sectors.

Related to this, the right to award credits was specified in the key features with reference to robust quality assurance needing to underly credits at all levels, including a specific reference to the ESG as the framework for higher education.

3.3 Mobility and recognition

The draft Guide makes a clearer distinction between credit transfer – leading to credits being accumulated in the learner's record at another education institution – and recognition – meaning that credits are stacked and counted towards a degree or qualification.

The Guide was reorganised to reflect the practical stages of learner mobility – information, planning, transfer and recognition.

The 2015 version of the Users' Guide exclusively described the scenario of individually pre-agreed learning mobility, based on an individual Learning Agreement and ensuring automatic recognition on that basis. While this remains the predominant form of mobility, especially under the Erasmus+ programme, the draft Guide also covers additional scenarios:

- Free individual mobility without any prior agreements – while this scenario cannot guarantee recognition, ECTS principles should be used to enable recognition based on learning outcomes, level and credits;
- Embedded mobility pathways – pre-defined mobility options available to all students, e.g. in the context of European Universities alliances or mobilities structurally part of a joint programme, lead to automatic recognition without individual agreements.

To facilitate grade conversion where needed, the draft Guide proposes a simplified approach to providing grade distribution information (integrated within the Transcript of Records without additional tables or tools) as well as a reference grading table, which can be used by higher education institutions to map their local grades against a common European reference. This can ease translation where the statistical approach is not feasible, in a way similar to the European qualifications frameworks or the common reference framework for language skills.

3.4 Mainstreaming lifelong learning

In order to mainstream lifelong learning as a main use case of ECTS rather than an add-on, the content of the previously separate chapter has been mainstreamed throughout the Guide.

In line with EHEA commitments, wording around recognition of non-formal and informal learning was strengthened, including in the key features. Further guidance on this issue was integrated with the sections on awarding and accumulating credits through formal learning, in a new separate chapter. This is a conceptual shift to better reflect the diversity of learning contexts and to emphasise that learning outcomes can be documented and recognised through ECTS regardless of the context in which they were achieved.

3.5 Key features

The section on key features was thoroughly reviewed to ensure that it includes all essential elements of ECTS as a system and to ensure that the remaining Guide clearly serves as an explanation of the key features.

In addition to changes resulting from the above-mentioned changes, the learner-centred approach, the monitoring of workload and credit allocation, as well as grade transparency and conversion were added to the key features.

3.6 Digitalisation

The draft Guide takes into account the advances in digitalisation of institutional processes as well of artificial intelligence (AI). Basic principles regarding the use of AI have been added to the principles chapter.

The role of digital tools (structured course catalogue data, digital system for organising mobility, digital credentials) has been made more prominent and the key Europe-wide standards and ecosystems are referenced in the Guide where relevant.

3.7 Technical and structural improvements

In addition to these changes, a couple of structural and technical improvements were made in the draft 2027 Guide. Most notably, the language and terminology were clarified and made consistent, also with a view to words implying different levels of requirements. The relevant key features are quoted at the top of the explanatory sections to avoid repetition or contradiction. It also already

foresees possible format such as a website or a more user friendly visualisation than a PDF document (cf. below).

The chapter on quality assurance was streamlined to focus on the aspects with specific relevance for ECTS, namely the indicators for ECTS implementation for use in internal and external quality assurance processes.

The glossary was simplified by referencing the key features for terms defined there and by omitting terms that are not essential for the reading of the Guide and the use of ECTS.

3.8 Status and Publication

The Advisory Group considers that publishing the ECTS Users' Guide as a single, monolithic PDF document is not the most accessible format. It was proposed that the 2027 Users' Guide could be published in a web-based format to be more easily searchable and accessible, including from mobile devices. This could be part of the EHEA website, for example.

Related to this, it could be advantageous to make certain parts of the Guide easier to update in line with developments in the EHEA. To balance stability and agility, the following modalities could apply:

- The chapters “Principles and Objectives” and “Key Features” can only be changed by Ministers, as they codify the foundations of the ECTS system;
- Changes to the remaining, i.e. explanatory, chapters can be commissioned and approved by the BFUG when the need arises;
- Changes to the “further reading” boxes can be made by the European Commission and EHEA Secretariat in mutual agreement, while the BFUG shall be informed of any such changes.

It could be considered to translate at least partly to all EHEA languages, making it more accessible for users. While machine translation or AI-assisted translation can be easily generated by users, it may lack the precision and consistency that is necessary for proper application of the guide.

4. Questions for the BFUG Board

We would invite the BFUG Board to reflect on the following:

- Provide feedback on the key changes as outlined above;
- Review the clarified provisions on the award of credits at different QF-EHEA/EQF levels;
- Review the options for grade transparency and conversion;
- Consider the proposal to present the Users' Guide as a web page rather than monolithic document;
- Comment on the proposed modalities for governing future changes.