

“Student Mobility – Where are we going?”

European Conference organized by the
Pancyprian Federation of Student Unions (POFEN)
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Honorable Members of the European and Cypriot Parliaments

Dear Presidents of POFEN and ESU

Distinguished guests

Dear students

It is with great pleasure that I have accepted the invitation from POFEN, in my capacity as Chairperson of KYSATS, the Cyprus Council for the Recognition of HE Qualifications, to address your conference and say a few words on student mobility, challenges and prospects, from the perspective of recognition. But let me first congratulate POFEN, for organizing in Cyprus, in collaboration with ESU, this European conference on a most important topic, focusing on the key question “Where are we going in student mobility?”

Student mobility, both horizontal (within a study programme) and vertical (from one programme to another) remains a major objective of the Bologna process. As the process is entering its last phase, the need to improve the availability of data on both mobility and the social dimension across all countries participating in the Bologna Process is recognized. The Ministerial conference in London last May called upon Eurostat in conjunction with Eurostudent, to develop comparable and reliable indicators and data to measure progress towards the overall objective for the social dimension and student and staff mobility in the 46 Bologna countries and to submit a report to the 2009 Ministerial conference.

Matters relating to the recognition of degrees and periods of study continue to present obstacles for student mobility. The basic tools for recognition are the ECTS and the Diploma Supplement. Most countries participating in the Bologna process claim that their HE institutions have implemented ECTS and are issuing Diploma Supplements. Indeed

many countries have passed national legislations to that effect. However, often there is a gap between intension, as expressed through law, and reality. The reforms, underlying the vision of a European Higher Education Area, dictate both the ECTS and the DS must be implemented and reviewed on the basis of the correct semantics and in the broader context of today's realities concerning the internationalization and globalization of HE.

An old concept that is acquiring central significance in all these reforms and as such, the mobility of students, is that of "learning outcomes". I say it is an old concept because a number of countries within and outside the European region, notably North America, have been using this notion for a long time now. In particular, open type universities had learning outcomes as the underlying notion for their learning material. A student-centered learning paradigm is predominantly applied in open and distance learning, where the learner by definition must largely self-direct his or her learning in a relatively autonomous fashion and be able to carry out self evaluation of his or her learning process.

The term "learning outcomes" is now broadly used in many different but interwoven contexts. Study programmes and their component modules are related to learning outcomes. Qualification frameworks, at the European and national levels, are expressed through generic learning outcomes. Recognition issues are increasingly being discussed at the level of learning outcomes or subject benchmarks as they are invariably being referred to. So can learning outcomes be the solution to the various problems encountered in our strive for a truly harmonized European Higher Education Area, so that mobility of students and staff can at last be unhindered, at least from the perspective of the mutual recognition of their qualifications? Can learning outcomes lead to truly flexible learning paths throughout one's lifetime, where formal, non-formal and informal learning, including prior experiential learning, are coalesced into an integral whole? In other words can formal academic learning and vocational education and training be counterparts in a united framework of qualifications, where, while their distinctiveness is sustained, at the same time their equal value and significance is acknowledged, thus allowing the traversal of routes within and across these distinct learning tracks? Such a state of affairs, if ever obtained, represents a key aspect of the vision embodied by the Bologna process and the Lisbon strategy alike.

But having pointed out the promise of the so called learning outcomes, what is after all the definition of "learning outcomes", so that we can all understand the same thing when we are using the term? At present there isn't a unanimous definition of learning outcomes.

Many definitions have been coined with insignificant differences between them, such as “learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate at the end of a period of learning”. Learning outcomes can include both subject specific and domain independent competencies. The latter refer to transferable knowledge and skills, which in today’s multidisciplinary realities are considered especially important. Unboundedly the use of learning outcomes can bring transparency to HE systems and qualifications. They provide qualitatively meaningful points of reference for assessing the significance of differences in qualifications across different systems and countries. The traditional, purely quantitative metrics, such as length of studies, teaching hours and break down of curricula in terms of course units and lectures can only give rise to a syntactic rather than a semantic assessment of differences.

The adoption of learning outcomes is a challenging prospect for the recognition of qualifications based on varied learning paths, and thus the promotion of the mobility of learners. Time will show whether this approach will lead to the required convergence, or widen further the divergence. At present the specification of learning outcomes in a readable and comparable way is an open topic for discussion. The CoRe project in collaboration with the Tuning project and the ENIC/NARIC networks is directly concerned with this matter. As it turns out the majority of institutions have not yet specified profiles for their study programmes in terms of learning outcomes. Where such profiles have been specified, there appear to be substantial variations between different institutions and countries for the same subject. The development of relevant guidelines is therefore considered necessary.

The use of ECTS promotes a learner-centered approach, focusing on the teaching-learning-assessment relationship and the fundamental links between the design, delivery and measurement of learning. The proper application of ECTS therefore requires the explication of (a) learning outcomes, (b) the teaching methods and associated learning resources, appropriate for the particular outcomes, and (c) the assessment methods that are fit for assessing in a reliable, consistent and transparent way, whether a learner has or has not attained the given learning outcomes. Attaining the learning outcomes grants the learner with the number of credits corresponding to the expected typical student workload for successful attainment of the particular learning outcomes. The interpretation of ECTS credits in terms of absolute student workload has generated some skepticism as to the viability of ECTS as a credit system for Vocational Education and Training. Using the

argument that ECTS is primarily a workload-based credit system, and thus not suitable for assessing prior experiential learning, a new credit system, ECVET for Vocational Education and Training has been proposed outside the Bologna process, in connection with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. Strictly speaking this argument holds since a workload metric in a typical, formal, learning setting, is inapplicable to an informal, experiential learning setting, where learning experiences are acquired and accumulated in a work-based context, perhaps over a large span of years. However, given the presently wide understanding, acceptability and use of ECTS, a more rational solution would have been, instead of introducing yet another European system of credits, ECVET, with no apparent compatibility to ECTS, to extend ECTS to cover in an integral fashion the specific aspects of informal prior learning. The same thing can be said for the independent development of two separate frameworks for HE qualifications, namely within the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning in the context of the Lisbon strategy, and the overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area, in the context of the Bologna process. The links between these two frameworks should be made more explicit, so that there is no duplication of effort and no confusion is caused that would defeat the purpose of having such qualifications frameworks at the European and national levels, which is to enhance the mobility of European citizens. It is important to say that the voices of the students of Europe, through ESU, of the National Academic Contact Points for Recognition, and of the European University Association, were completely in unison in these matters. Going back to the recognition of prior learning, on the basis of learning outcomes and possibly a given span of minimum work experience, rather than workloads, the National Qualifications Frameworks must indicate the competent authorities, whether HE institutions, or VET authorities, or professional, or other bodies, responsible for accrediting learning outcomes and granting relevant qualifications for prior learning.

My university, the University of Cyprus, has recently gone through the motions of applying ECTS to all its study programmes, of all three cycles, both for transferring and accumulating credits. Being the coordinator of the implementation of these reforms gave me the opportunity to appreciate the concerns, some unfounded but others very justified, of our students and staff alike. We are a small university that already had in place the three discrete cycles and a modular system of credits. Yet a number of obstacles were encountered and there is still work to be done in validating the whole implementation. So although on the outset everything may seem to be in place, just because the relevant legislation has been passed in some country, I am sure there is still substantial work to be

done at the ground level, i.e. the institutional level, before the various reforms centering on learning outcomes are truly in place. This will take time. Following up the reforms during their first year of application was a necessary step of our methodology. Old students were also transferred to the revised programmes which created some difficulties, but the idea was that they should also benefit from the reforms. The matters that arose involved the coordination between departments, the use of ECTS for doctoral programmes, the initial validation of student workload, a critical aspect for the credibility of the reforms that gave interesting insights, and whether students should be allowed to take a higher workload. Other institutions of HE in Cyprus are now following our example and applying the ECTS requirements to their study programmes.

The other recognition tool, the DS, is intrinsically related to ECTS. At the recent meeting of the Committee for the Lisbon Recognition Convention, last June, various changes have been agreed on the wording of the explanatory memorandum of the DS, while maintaining the existing structure of the DS. The agreed changes aim for the supplementary information provided through the DS to be more analytical and to cover recent developments regarding the increased significance of learning outcomes as a principal means for assessing and comparing academic qualifications, as well as joint degrees, transnational education and National Qualifications Frameworks, where these exist.