

## Use of European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS) in Doctoral Programmes – Working discussion paper

In the current developments of the third cycle of the Bologna process, it has become apparent that the use of the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS) is a possibility to be applied to doctoral programmes in terms of grading the quality of their work. The guidelines on use of ECTS in doctoral programmes currently state the freedom to use ECTS as follows<sup>1</sup>:

*May the doctoral cycle carry credits?*

*Yes, ECTS can be applied both to taught courses and to research. Hence it can be applied to the doctoral cycle. The learning which takes place in the doctoral cycle, as in any other, can be described in terms of learning outcomes and work time expressed in ECTS credits.*

This matter is of importance to members of Eurodoc and the wider community delivering doctoral programmes since there is the open possibility that both the training and the research carried out in a doctoral programme. Such means of assessment in a doctorate therefore give the idea that a doctoral candidate is not necessarily learning through their own research experience but undertaking an assessment programme or project that is of no difference to a taught programme. However, the doctoral candidate is an active researcher contributing new knowledge based on their own findings. There are two questions to open up however in this discussion paper with respect to how ECTS are used:

1. A researcher will gain a successful doctorate by defending a thesis, though all that is examined is the originality and value of their research (to put it in short). If ECTS were applied in this situation they would then rate whether a suitable level of research has been achieved though it is extremely difficult to apply a grade or percentage in this instance.
2. During a researcher's doctorate they are required to find a way in which they can identify with their training needs and actively progress from where they were at the start and also enable their own learning process to continue further beyond their doctorate. This actual learning could be also measured by using ECTS according to the rules.

A further note to take with regards to awarding ECTS is that there is a need to complete a piece of work<sup>1</sup>:

*Credits in ECTS can only be obtained after successful completion of the work required and appropriate assessment of the learning outcomes achieved. Learning outcomes are sets of competences, expressing what the student will know, understand or be able to do after completion of a process of learning, long or short.*

Therefore to award ECTS for research there are clear defined goals that have to be identified throughout the course of the programme, which may restrain the scope of the research. There is also the possibility that ECTS can be used only to mark the training programmes that the candidate has undertaken, which the doctoral thesis or portfolio cannot assess. However, introducing ECTS in this way will begin to move the doctoral programme towards a taught programme if care is not taken.

There are three options Eurodoc is faced with regarding use of ECTS in a doctoral programme. It may be a question of whether ECTS should be used at all, whether they are acceptable for research/skills training that the doctoral candidate undertakes or whether they can be freely used depending on the specific programme. The following advantages have been so far considered regarding the use of ECTS:

- A standard marker to certify training courses received by a European researcher which is recognised throughout Europe.
- Clear standard measure of what a researcher should achieve.
- Something to show to an employer that they have actually developed something from the thesis.
- It better ensures that there is no need to repeat training when one can gain the same ECTS wherever they go.

However, the following disadvantages have also been identified:

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<sup>1</sup>[http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/socrates/ects/doc/guide\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/socrates/ects/doc/guide_en.pdf)

- ECTS only show what courses or training programmes a researcher has undertaken but no record of progress or training needs analysis is presented.
- The training becomes completely separate from the research, rather than showing how a researcher is developing as a consequence of their research.
- It does not demonstrate how a researcher is using their research to widely broaden their training skills beyond just what their research requires.
- ECTS do not normally accommodate or indicate the supervisor's role in the researchers training.

Therefore ECTS may provide advantage to identify common standards met by a doctoral candidate though there are several examples of where their structure does not fit into a doctoral programme in the same way that they would apply to a taught programme. It is therefore important to consider other methods of undertaking training and indeed measuring training of which the following suggestions are listed below:

**Personal Development Planning** – By use of this method, the researcher will keep a regular log of their research and experience in their doctoral programme. The log is used actively by both the supervisor and researcher to identify/analyse training needs and keeping regular updates in order to show evidence of how their training needs have been addressed and built upon.

**Regular updating and improvement of CV** – This would apply at any career stage, where the researcher would be constantly considering ways in which their CV profile could be built and added to.

**Filed written references from supervisors and/or graduate schools** – Some official note of recommendation that can be used when applying for posts beyond graduation, which a thesis or other documentation would not be able to demonstrate.

**An extra chapter to the thesis** – This would be used as an official report on gained experience, which has been an open discussion. Further to this it is not unknown that a candidate may be asked in their examination how they have developed their own learning through undertaking a doctorate and how they plan to further it beyond.

**A locally awarded certificate from the institution** – This may have no official recognition outside the institution though it will detail exactly what the candidate has gained while in the institution.

**A training portfolio** – Such documentation can be used as a reference for CV development or accreditation by a professional institution.

Considering all the above alternatives, they are addressing the point that the doctoral programme is contributing to an ongoing learning process, where many doctoral candidates are coming into a doctorate at several different stages of their career. Likewise a doctorate should best facilitate their means to develop their skills further in preparation for how they will continue their learning process beyond graduation. This particular point cannot be stressed enough as many graduates are moving to destinations not just in academia but several other sectors, where recognisable training needs to be developed.

In recognition of the alternatives, Eurodoc has to come to a decision on the questions raised in terms of whether there is any extent to which ECTS can be used to assess a doctorate. Further to this should ECTS be used at level D, what distinctive differences would they have in comparison to the first two cycles of higher education<sup>2</sup>.

*Tim Brown, 12/06*

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<sup>2</sup> Further references, presentation made in Borno, Czech Republic, by Eurodoc on ECTS: [http://www.eurodoc.net/file/20061003\\_brno-seminar-ects\\_francis.ppt](http://www.eurodoc.net/file/20061003_brno-seminar-ects_francis.ppt) (outcomes of the conference only available in Czech)