

# PROGRAMME DESIGN AND ECTS

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This document is part of a set of guidelines that relate to accreditation. In particular it contains the *Guidelines for Programme Design and Using ECTS* that provide criteria and procedures that institutions should use in designing outcome-based programmes and in calculating learning activities and credits that align with common practice in the European Higher Education Area.

ECTE Review committee

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## 1. PROGRAMME DESIGN

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### 1.1 - Elements of learning design

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Learning outcomes, competences, learning activities and module descriptors design represent the starting point of programme design.<sup>1</sup>

#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning outcomes express what the student will be, know, understand and be able to do after completion of a process of learning. For theological institutions, learning outcomes are not limited to the areas of knowledge and understanding but also consider holistic aspects including practical skills, character, interpersonal attitudes and personal spiritual life.

#### COMPETENCES

Competences (general / transferrable and specific) express ways that graduates can be expected to apply a combination of learning outcomes (i.e. knowledge, skills, holistic formation) to life, work and ministry contexts. The choice of holistic learning outcomes and competences is crucial to curriculum building and influences all learning activities taking place in the institution. Theological education is a wide field with many possible learning outcomes. Graduates of theological institutions will be required to demonstrate competency in diverse range of ministries. In determining which learning outcomes and competences should

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<sup>1</sup> This section is taken from Appendix B of the SG-GETE

form part of the graduate profile, institutions must consider their own context, constituency, needs, mission statement and the cultural, ecclesiastical and social contexts of its graduates.

The process of defining learning outcomes and general and specific competences should include a consultation with the institution's constituency, internal and external stakeholders, employers, student representatives, alumni and the institution's faculty. Institutions should also consult international and national guidelines, level descriptors and higher education benchmarks.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

Learning activities are constructed in a curriculum to match all learning outcomes and competences. A good curriculum is focused, unified and relevant and institutions must be able to demonstrate that learning activities are mapped to learning outcomes and vice-versa.

A good curriculum also includes a variety of learning activities. Some learning activities will contribute to outcomes in knowledge and understanding and others will contribute to the areas of spiritual formation or character building. Others yet will help develop generic and subject-specific competences. In a holistic programme, learning activities should include a combination of lectures, module work, independent study, research papers, thesis writing, field studies, practical projects, group work, internships, habituation practices, spiritual direction, mentoring programmes, etc..

### **MODULE DESCRIPTORS.**

Updated standardised module descriptors should be available and include adequate information, such as:

- course learning outcomes and competences
- objectives of the different learning activities in the module
- explanation of the relevance and contribution of the module in relation to the competences expressed in the graduate profile
- number of credits awarded
- teaching and learning methodologies used
- evaluation and assessment criteria as related to the learning outcomes
- minimum passing requirements for the award of credit

Module descriptors must be written for all modules and include all the activities that contribute to achieving credit within the programme. Learning activities must be justified in terms of the requirements of the amount of credit given and in terms of the relevance to achieving and evaluating the learning outcomes of the module.

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## **1.2 – Overarching Framework of Qualifications in the EHEA**

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Using the Overarching Framework of Qualifications in the EHEA (formerly the Dublin Descriptors) to define learning outcomes. Learning outcomes as defined in above must cover different areas of competence that range from knowledge and understanding, to ability in problem solving, communication skills, etc. All these areas have been defined in a set of generic descriptors used in the EHEA.<sup>2</sup> These descriptors provide generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with any field of study at

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<sup>2</sup>n 2018, the earlier Dublin Descriptors were published as the 'Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area' [http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial\\_declarations/EHEAParis2018\\_Communique\\_AppendixIII\\_952778.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/EHEAParis2018_Communique_AppendixIII_952778.pdf)

the end of each of a Bologna cycle. The following descriptors provide a good framework for defining learning outcomes for each level of study and applied to the field of theology.

#### **DIPLOMA (AND CERTIFICATE) LEVEL STUDENTS:**

1. Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle (bachelor).
2. Can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts.
3. Have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems.
4. Can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients.
5. Have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.

#### **BACHELOR LEVEL STUDENTS:**

1. Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study.
2. Can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study.
3. Have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues.
4. Can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.
5. Have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

#### **MASTER LEVEL STUDENTS:**

1. Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context.
2. Can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem-solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study.
3. Have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements.
4. Can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously.
5. Have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

#### **GENERIC COMPETENCES**

It should be noted that, generally speaking, there is coherence among the five different areas covered by the descriptors in each level. The general areas of competence are:

1. Knowledge and understanding
2. Ability to apply knowledge and understanding

3. Ability to formulate judgments and solve problems
4. Ability to communicate
5. Autonomy in learning skills

While there is certain uniformity in these areas, there is also a progression in the descriptors as they move from one level to the next. Whereas, for example, a diploma graduate is required to be able to communicate understanding to peers, and a bachelor graduate must be able to communicate problems and solutions to specialist and non-specialist audiences, a master graduate needs in addition to unambiguously communicate and defend his/her own conclusions.

The descriptors are generic and are meant to be used within all fields of study. It is up to the theological educator to apply each descriptor to theological studies. Resulting key questions will give focus to learning outcomes, i.e.:

- "What kind of knowledge does our graduate need to have?"
- "Where should he/she be able to apply knowledge?"
- "What kind of judgments should he/she be able to formulate and how?"
- "What kind of problems and solutions should our graduate be able to communicate, and what kind of audience will he/she will deal with?"
- "What learning skills should he/she develop?"

As theological institutions use these descriptors to define their learning outcomes, they must take particular care to incorporate an evangelical ethos of being and doing in addition to the more academic category of knowing. Theological education, unlike other areas of study, aims at transforming the life of the students through a living relationship with God and His truth. The Dublin Descriptors offer a framework within which this can be formulated, and special attention should be given in doing so.

Although the use of the Dublin Descriptors is not binding, the ECTE encourages their use and will be thorough in assessing the procedures used to define the learning outcomes and the curriculum set in place to achieve them.

## 2 - USING ECTS

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All institutions pursuing ECTE Accreditation must use the European Credit Transfer System.<sup>3</sup> These guidelines will be helpful in understanding and implementing ECTS.

### 2.1 - Calculating ECTS credits

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#### WORKLOAD

The ECTS is based on the general assumption that the global workload of an academic year of study is equal to 60 credits. These credits are allocated to learning activities to describe the proportion of the student workload. Generally speaking, sixty credits (36-40 weeks per year of full-time study) corresponds to 1680 hours of learning related activities. This means that one ECTS is quantified in approximately 25-30 hours of learning activity. Workload refers to the notional time in which an average learner might expect to complete the required learning outcomes.

#### CREDITS FOR NON-ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Ministry experience and internships are part of the total learning experience a theological institution offers, and therefore must be quantified as ECTS credits. Since ministry can take different forms and occur in different time frames, the same general ECTS rule must be applied: one ECTS credit is awarded for 25-30 hours of learning activity. Since these learning activities include preparation, execution and follow up, those hours should also be counted in calculating credit. In the case of internships that last several consecutive weeks, each week of full-time work (40 hours) will be quantified as 1½ ECTS credits.

Formational activities, such as spiritual formation and character education, must also be quantified in terms of ECTS credits.

#### COUNTING DISTANCE EDUCATION/ONLINE CREDITS

Some educational systems (e.g. in the USA) count credits in relation to classroom hours which evidently poses a problem with distance education.

In line with the EU definition of the ECTS credit system, the ECTE counts credits on the basis of hours of learning activities (usually about 25 hours per 1 ECTS). So, a module that is worth 10 credits should prescribe about 250-300 hours of learning activities. This is true both for residential and non-residential learning such as distance education and online education. The ECTE accredits within a freer space where institutions can design online learning in a variety of ways, with many different kinds of learning activities.

An online module submitted for accreditation needs to demonstrate why it has chosen determinate learning activities (linked to the outcomes) and that, in terms of time, those learning activities actually do add up to nominal amounts of time that correspond to the declared credits.

### 2.2 - ECTS quantity and duration

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmemes/socrates/ects\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmemes/socrates/ects_en.html)

The following list indicates the quantity and the duration<sup>4</sup> of ECTS credits for each level of ECTE accreditation:

- **Certificate** 60 ECTS, normally 1 year of full-time study or equivalent.
- **Diploma** 120 ECTS, normally 2 years of full-time study or equivalent.
- **Professional Bachelor** 180 ECTS, normally 3-4 years of full-time study or equivalent.
- **Academic Bachelor** 180 ECTS, normally 3-4 year of full-time study or equivalent.
- **Postgraduate Certificate** 10-60 ECTS.
- **Professional Master** 120 ECTS depending on national situation, normally 2 years of full-time studies. Some credits may be earned at the Bachelor level but a minimum of 60 credits must be completed at the Master level.<sup>5</sup> The completion of Bachelor and Master studies should not require a total of more than 5 years of full-time studies.
- **Academic Master** Between 90-120 ECTS depending on national situation, normally 1-2 years of full-time studies or equivalent. Some credits may be earned at the Bachelor level but a minimum of 60 credits must be completed at the Master level. The completion of Bachelor and Master studies should not require a total of more than 5 years of full-time studies.

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## 2.3 – Comparing International credit systems

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How can programs or degrees across countries and continents be compared? What degrees can count for access as students move internationally? How can credit systems be translated across international educational standards and practices? Is there something like a common currency? These are questions that particularly important in a global framework like the SG-GETE.<sup>6</sup>

### GENERAL CRITERIA

**Diversified international standards.** The first thing to notice is that there is no single international standard for the quantitative measurement of educational units (courses, programs, degrees). The transfer of credits from system to another is a matter of calculations and certain ambiguities cannot always be excluded. It is not possible, for example, to define globally applicable “total credit requirements for each degree program (i.e. MA, MDiv, etc)” or even to “identify an acceptable range” of credits. Nomenclature and regulations are different in the various educational systems.

For example, whereas the rule MA = 2 years, MDiv = 3 years, MTh = 4 years works in the American structure, in Europe there are different kinds of Master’s degree studies, which generally must comprise at least 300 ECTS and can mean either 5 years full-time; 3 years (180 ECTS) for the Bachelor level plus 2 years (120) ECTS; or 4 years plus 1. Also, in Europe, there is often no difference in duration between an MA and an MTh. The degree nomenclature is thus very difficult to compare.

**Need for careful calculations.** Since duration (credit requirements for degrees) and nomenclature differ in the various educational systems, institutions should be required to identify the duration of the programs (total credit hours). Transfer across educational systems should always require careful calculation (degree nomenclature alone is not a solid indicator for the duration of programs).

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<sup>4</sup> Duration is calculated for full-time programmes of studies that normally must not exceed the limits indicated. Students studying on a part-time basis or making use of alternative delivery methods may employ more time to complete the programme.

<sup>5</sup> Students that have earned between 210-240 credits in the Bachelor level can apply between 30-60 of those credits to the Master level. In general in the European Higher Education Area the minimum total requirement for an Academic Master is 90 credits of which at least 60 must be taken at the Master level.

<sup>6</sup> This section is taken from Appendix D of the SG-GETE

**Time based credits?** We also need to be aware of the fact that the concept of ‘time based’ credits has been criticized on educational grounds. The credit system puts the emphasis on duration, however in educational terms, achievement can only be measured by the demonstration of competences. How much time a student needs to acquire certain competences is a secondary issue. What ultimately counts are learning outcomes not hours of learning.

However, in the process of growing international mobility in Higher Education and an increasing number of part-time students, the need for comparability of duration emerged. A currency to at least measure tentatively the total learning time a student invests facilitates the comparison of modules and programs. But it should be kept in mind that this is only an auxiliary structure. Therefore, terms such as “notional hours of learning” or “average hours of learning” are often used. While credit systems are helpful tools to quantify educational processes, it should always be clear that the quality of education can only be measured by the assessment of learning outcomes.

### COMPARING CREDIT SYSTEMS

In what follows, two major credit systems (US and ECTS) will be introduced and the most common transfer practices will be explained.

**The US-Credit System** is based on the so called “Carnegie Unit”, a standard defined in 1906 “as a basis for measuring institution work.” The standard Carnegie Unit is defined as 120 hours of contact time with an instructor, which translates into one hour of instruction on a particular subject per day, five days a week, for twenty-four weeks annually.

In higher education, students receive “credit hours,” a metric derived from the Carnegie Unit and based on the number of “contact hours” students spend in class per week in a given semester.

A typical three-credit module, for example, meets for three hours per week over a fifteen-week semester. A student, then, might earn fifteen credit hours per semester (fifteen is standard full-time registration for a semester, thirty for an academic year) en route to a four-year bachelor’s degree requiring a total of 120 credits.

Because of the presupposition of contact hours, the Carnegie Unit, as traditionally defined, is difficult to accommodate to modes of distance education that do not involve face-to-face instruction, such as online and correspondence studies.

In 2010, the United States Department of Education issued a new definition of academic credit, required of US higher education institutions by law, that calls for a reasonable approximation of the amount of work required by the traditional Carnegie Unit, while not imposing or presupposing a particular model of instruction. Based on this definition the US federal regulations define one credit as follows:

- One hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out of class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or ten to twelve weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time; or
- At least an equivalent amount of work as required in paragraph (1) of this definition for other academic activities as established by the institution including laboratory work, internships, practice, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours.

The actual amount of academic work that goes into a single semester credit hour is often calculated as follows:

- One lecture (taught) or seminar (discussion) credit hour represents 1 hour per week of scheduled class/seminar time and 2 hours of student preparation time. Most lecture and seminar modules are awarded 3 credit hours. Over an entire semester, this formula represents at least 45 hours of class time and 90 hours of student preparation.

- One laboratory credit hour represents 1 hour per week of lecture or discussion time plus 1-2 hours per week of scheduled supervised or independent laboratory work, and 2 hours of student preparation time. Most laboratory modules are awarded up to 4 credit hours. This calculation represents at least 45 hours of class time, between 45 and 90 hours of laboratory time, and 90 hours of student preparation per semester.
- One practice credit hour (supervised clinical rounds, visual or performing art studio, supervised student teaching, field work, etc.) represents 3-4 hours per week of supervised and /or independent practice. This in turn represents between 45 and 60 hours of work per semester. Blocks of 3 practice credit hours, which equate to a studio or practice module, represent between 135 and 180 total hours of academic work per semester.
- One independent study (thesis or dissertation research) hour is calculated similarly to practice credit hours.
- Internship or apprenticeship credit hours are determined by negotiation between the supervising faculty and the work supervisor at the cooperating site, both of whom must judge and certify different aspects of the student's work. The credit formula is similar to that for practice credit.

Government recognized accrediting agencies basically follow this standard and require institutions of higher learning to apply this definition. Regarding the implications of the new legislation for online and emerging instructional models, the Department of Education has clarified that:

- the new credit requires an equivalent amount of work as that required by the Carnegie system, without requiring strict adherence to classic definitions of contact hours;
- the new credit is modality neutral, applying equally to face-to-face, blended, online and distance instructional models, that are oriented around contact hours, workload or any combination thereof;
- the definition of credit is sufficiently broad and encompassing so as not to exclude certain types of delivery;
- US institutions can structure their academic programs with whatever administrative credit system they choose, as long as the official definition of credit is used in applications for Federal financial aid;
- the new definition of credit is compatible with competency-based education and with programs that grant academic credit based on the demonstrated prior learning;
- the definition of credit allows for the assignment of credits by Direct Assessment under certain conditions without necessarily being linked to the fulfilment of a certain amount of clock hours (e.g. a student could receive credit for the module "Algebra 1" by passing an equivalency exam that demonstrates the mastery of the subject);
- the definition of credit does not contain any requirement of "seat-time."

In order to compare the US-System with the European ECTS-System, we have to look at the "total learning time" (comprising class work and all other learning activities). Based on the figures given in the statements above, we can conclude that one US-credit in higher education normally comprises 135 hours of total learning time (normally 45 hours lecture and/or seminar plus 90 hours).

**The European ECTS (European Credit Transfer System)** follows a different philosophy. It does not start the calculation with the class hours (contact hours) but with the total learning time including all teaching/learning activities. The standard defined in the context of the Bologna-Process is 25 to 30 hours of teaching/learning for one ECTS credit.

The official definitions are as follows: ECTS credits express the volume of learning based on the defined learning outcomes and their associated workload. 60 ECTS credits are allocated to the learning outcomes and associated workload of a full-time academic year or its equivalent, which normally comprises a number of educational components to which credits (on the basis of the learning outcomes and workload) are allocated. ECTS credits are generally expressed in whole numbers.

Workload is an estimation of the time the individual typically needs to complete all learning activities such as lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, work placements and individual study required to achieve the defined learning outcomes in formal learning environments. The correspondence of the full-time workload of an academic year to 60 credits is often formalized by national legal provisions. In most cases, workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, which means that one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work. It should be recognised that this represents the typical workload and that for individual students the actual time to achieve the learning outcomes will vary.

For our calculations this means:

- 1 ECTS comprises 25 to 30 hours of teaching/learning.
- One full-time academic year comprises 60 ECTS, equals 1,500 to 1,800 hours of teaching/learning.

The European countries have defined in their National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) how many hours per credit need to be calculated in their country.

### CALCULATIONS: SOME EXAMPLES

**Transferring from the US-System to the European System.** The table below illustrates how many hours of learning are entailed in 1 US credit and how to many ECTS this equates. The ECTS are expressed in a min-max range in reflection of the different amounts of hours that European countries allocate to 1 ECTS (this ranges between 25 and 30 hours per credit). These figures leave space for calculations between a minimal ratio of 1:1.5 and a maximum of 1:1.8.

According to these calculations, a common 3 credit US module counts between 4.5 and 5.4 ECTS credits.

US credits	US hours	European credits (min-max)
1 credit	45 hours	1.5 - 1.8 ECTS
30 credits (one full time year)	1,350 hours	45 - 54 ECTS

It should be noted that European universities quite often apply a 1:2 ratio (1 US credit = 2 ECTS). This practice is not based on the calculation of exact hours but on the comparison of entire semesters or academic years. The assumption is: If a European student studies in the US one full semester full-time, he/she will earn 15 US credits. One full-time semester in Europe comprises

30 ECTS. This leads to a 1:2 ratio.

**Transferring from the European System to the US-System.** The same calculations above can be made in reverse, from ECTS to US Carnegie units.

European ECTS	ECTS hours	US Carnegie credits (min-max)
1 credit	25 - 30 hours	0.55 - 0.66 US credits
60 credits (one full time year)	1,500 - 1,800 hours	33 - 40 US credits

## **OTHER CREDIT SYSTEMS**

Besides the US and the ECTS system, the UK credit counting is also widespread.

A document published by the UK government, based in the Higher Education Credit Framework for England, the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, and Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, states that “one credit is equivalent to 10 notional hours of learning (which includes time spent preparing for taught sessions, independent reading and study, completion of module work as well as time in formal taught sessions); and current practice equates one ECTS credit with two UK credits.”

These Guidelines have been approved by the ECTE Council, 28 November 2019 and are valid until their revision.

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