

**REPORT FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION**  
**ECTS EXTENSION FEASIBILITY PROJECT**

(January 2000)

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## *Contents*

<b>THE REPORT</b>	<i>Page</i>
1. Introduction to the Report	3
1.1 Background to the Initiative	3
1.2 Establishing the Steering Group	3
1.3 Main issues for Consultation	3
2. Methodology	5
2.1 Approach	5
2.2 Organisation of the Report	5
3. Main Findings	6
3.1 Introduction	6
3.2 The Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations	6
3.3 Lifelong Learning in Europe	6
3.4 Issues Associated with Developing a Credit-Based Lifelong Learning Framework	15
3.5 Credit Systems in Europe	18
3.6 Features and Principles of a European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System	18
3.7 The Evolution of ECTS	19
3.8 Advantages of a Credit-Based Approach to Lifelong Learning	19
3.9 Summary of Main Findings	20
4. Conclusions and Recommendations	21
4.1 Introduction	21
4.2 General Recommendations	21
4.3 Pilot Projects for Future Consideration	22
4.4 Final Observations	24
 <b>APPENDICES</b>	
1. Membership of the Steering Group	27
2. Project Terms of Reference	30
3. Feasibility Study Information Package and Questionnaire	32
4. Reports from States, Regions and Organisations	40
4.1 Austria	41
4.2 Belgium (Flemish Community)	44
4.3 Belgium (Francophone Community)	56
4.4 Germany	89
4.5 Denmark	101
4.6 Finland	108
4.7 Spain	124
4.8 France	148
4.9 Greece	164
4.10 Italy	167
4.11 Netherlands	174
4.12 Portugal	194
4.13 Sweden	201
4.14 United Kingdom	207
4.15 Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers	215
4.16 European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)	216

# THE REPORT

## 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT

### 1.1 Background to the Initiative

In February 1999 the European Commission (DGXXii) established a steering group to undertake a light-touch feasibility study into the possible development of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The project involved members of the steering group consulting appropriate individuals, organisations and institutions within their respective countries. The consultation took place in order to see how education, vocational training, professional development and therefore, lifelong learning might be made more transparent by the application of credits. Put simply, the task was to see how ECTS principles and approaches might facilitate the development of European lifelong learning.

The broad aim of the initiative was to investigate the possibilities of widening and deepening ECTS. In the last ten years many European member States have introduced their own different national credit-based education innovations. Most European States have also introduced reforms to their education and training systems, designed to adjust them to the realities of the global market. In addition, ECTS is being introduced in well over one thousand European higher education institutions. In the light of the successful introduction of ECTS it is sensible to examine its potential application to the sphere of lifelong learning.

National governments, the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council of Ministers are increasingly concerned with promoting lifelong learning and improving the education and training of citizens. They seek to reduce the national and international barriers that prevent mobility and restrict the full recognition of educational and vocational awards.

Against this background of change it is appropriate to investigate the potential of the ECTS mobility scheme to form the basis of a genuine European credit-based lifelong learning framework designed to aid local, regional, national and international recognition.

### 1.2 Establishing the Steering Group

The project steering group was established on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1999. The group was composed of a variety of experts, including ECTS counsellors, academic and professional recognition specialists, together with representatives from higher education, general educational, ministries and professional organisations. The full list of the steering group members can be found in Appendix 1. Three new members augmented the steering group in September 1999.

### 1.3 Main Issues for Consultation

The steering group had a number of tasks on which to research and report. The work mainly concentrates on higher education (lifelong learning and continuing education within the framework of higher education institutions). The full terms of reference for the steering group can be found in Appendix 2. The steering group consultations covered a wide range of inter-connected issues including the following:

- The opportunities for, and barriers to, developing an integrative common European credit framework, derived from ECTS, designed to encompass education, training, professional development and, therefore, to promote lifelong learning.
- The benefits in developing the European credit framework to facilitate: accumulation in higher education programmes; post-school adult and vocational education; different modes of education (part-time, full-time, open and distance, etc.); and professional education and training.
- Identification of the main national, regional and local issues (political, legal, social, technological, economic, etc.) to consider for the further development of a European credit framework.
- How to develop European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

- The possible design of pilot projects to refine and implement ECTS as a system that covers education, vocational training, professional development and therefore lifelong learning.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Approach

The project was conceived as a light-touch feasibility study designed to be completed in a relatively short period. Each steering group member was responsible for getting feedback from his or her respective country/region or organisation in the way they thought most appropriate. Steering group members consulted a wide range of key individuals and organisations. The full list of all individuals and institutions consulted can be found in the individual working party reports reproduced in Appendix 4 (4.1 - 4.16). In all, over two hundred individuals and organisations were consulted.

The raw material for the report was gained in a number of ways, via individual meetings, conference items, formal presentations, telephone conversations, Email, and a questionnaire. In addition, the current ECTS Counsellors were consulted at their meeting in July 1999 at Aveiro, in Portugal. A major tool to aid the consultation was the production of an 'ECTS Extension Feasibility Information Package'. This was designed to help the process of gaining feedback for the project. It contained: information on the context of the initiative; the main issues for consultation; features and principles of a European credit system; ECTS – a brief introduction; and a Questionnaire. The full *Feasibility Study Information Package and Questionnaire* is reproduced in Appendix 3.

The steering group met in Brussels on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1999, the 10<sup>th</sup> May 1999 and 4<sup>th</sup> November 1999. The deadline for the completion of the project was extended from November 1999 to January 2000.

### 2.2 Organisation of the Report

The report contains four sections: *Introduction to the Report*; *Methodology*; *Main Findings*; and *Conclusions and Recommendations*. The report is organised so that Section Three, *Main Findings*, reflects on the overall pattern of evidence from the individual working party reports and includes a brief synopsis of the key aspects found in each report. It also concentrates on common national developments, problems and experiences as well as common matters of concern raised for discussion. Section Four, *Conclusions and Recommendations*, is a summary of agreed conclusions and recommendations drawn from the preceding analysis. This includes general recommendations, and a summary of suggestions for future pilot projects designed to facilitate lifelong learning.

There is also a full set of Appendices that contains information on the membership of the steering group (Appendix 1), the project terms of reference (Appendix 2), the feasibility study information package and questionnaire (Appendix 3), and the full set of steering group reports (Appendix 4). Some of the individual steering group reports contain suggestions for future pilot projects, these can be found at the end of the relevant report.

## 3 MAIN FINDINGS

### 3.1 Introduction

The evidence from the majority of the individual steering group reports clearly supports the need for the development of ECTS as an approach to promote lifelong learning. It does this in a variety of compelling ways. Several countries are developing systems to promote lifelong learning but they are all in the early stages. The most advanced are Italy, Spain, France, UK, Sweden and Finland. From the evidence provided, all countries (whatever their stage of development) suffer from similar problems associated with the need to improve the skills and knowledge of their citizens in the context of a highly competitive global economy. The creation of an effective pan-European credit-based framework for lifelong learning would benefit all European citizens. Currently, there is no commonality of approach and hence a common framework would provide transparency by linking disparate (emerging) systems. Another benefit would be that where systems do not currently exist the ECTS framework would probably act as a template and spur for development. The pilot projects identified in some of the national reports (see section 4.3 of this report) propose ways in which lifelong learning can benefit from credit approaches by building on existing ECTS practices.

The negative opinions that were raised in some reports should not be dismissed, but it should be noted that they were of a nature that emphasised structural difficulties and long-term practical problems. Although these reports contained this negative feedback it was mixed with many positive points and an overall agreement that ECTS should be extended. Furthermore, the main concern that was raised was based on a misconception. This was the opinion that the introduction of credit accumulation creates an ‘à la carte’ framework in which the student has complete freedom to mix credits/units (different types and levels of education) at will, and then demand a recognised qualification. It must be emphasised that this is not possible, nor envisaged. It is for each State to determine how educational programmes are validated and constructed. The introduction of credit accumulation is to bring more (national and international) transparency and flexibility to existing programmes. It is designed to promote academic and professional recognition, never to lower quality or standards. The three reports that raised these serious negative aspects and problems were those from Belgium (Francophone Community), Germany and the Netherlands. For further details see the summaries below, or the full reports in Appendix 4.3, 4.4 and 4.11.

### 3.2 The Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations

The creation of a common European higher education area was clearly envisaged by the Sorbonne and Bologna declarations. The Bologna Declaration<sup>1</sup> specifically mentions the establishment of ‘a system of credits – such as in the ECTS system’. It also suggests ‘Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, providing they are recognised by receiving Universities concerned.’ The work of the steering group confirms that this aspiration is feasible. The application of a credits-based approach to lifelong learning will aid the harmonisation of the architecture of education systems in Europe. It would improve academic and professional recognition, transparency and mobility. It would act as a major structural improvement that would dramatically increase the range of learning opportunities open to the citizen. Furthermore, lifelong learning includes a much more diverse group of students than the traditional cohort. Many are self-supporting, mature students who requires flexible, multi-mode programmes of learning. Credit-based systems are ideal at providing this type of framework.

### 3.3 Lifelong Learning in Europe

What is clear from the evidence is that European States face similar problems but employ different solutions to lifelong learning. The development of integrated national systems for lifelong learning are in their infancy in Europe. There is very uneven progress at the moment. Some States are much more advanced than others. There is no common agreement about what constitutes lifelong learning. Consequently no common approaches exist, yet where

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<sup>1</sup> The Bologna Declaration: The European Higher Education Area. A joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on th 19<sup>th</sup> June 1999.

developments have taken place the systems are not incompatible. However, there is a growing common recognition by policy makers that lifelong learning is very important. This situation means that, at the level of the Community, barriers to recognition are increasing and there is a need to introduce more transparency. So far, most European traditional universities do not apply credits to vocational or professional training. Most exceptions to this are found in the Scandinavian countries. The following summarises the current position of lifelong learning identified by each report. The full reports are in Appendix 4.

### 3.3.1 *Austria*

The Austrian Fachhochschulen are very open to ECTS as an accumulation system. However, the development of ECTS in continuing education, training and lifelong learning approach are seen only as future possibilities. The report is positive about the use of ECTS as an accumulation system and something that could form the basis for lifelong learning.

### 3.3.2 *Belgium (Flemish Community)*

All the Flemish undergraduate programmes use a system based on 60 credits per year. Credits are used in higher education for credit transfer, vocational education and professional education. They are not used for lifelong learning or for purposes of accumulation. An important legal barrier is that pure credit accumulation is not possible under current Flemish law. Credits in Belgium are awarded on the basis of achievements in a one-year educational programme. Flemish higher education institutions are established by law, publicly funded and issues recognised diplomas. This is not the case for other providers of education and training. It is suggested that a (national or international) system for the accreditation, certification and quality control of training would need to be established. The extension of the ECTS system would lead to collaboration of completely different providers from different systems. This will not be simple.

Many advantages were identified with an extended ECTS system. These were grouped into those which benefited the student, the provider and the employer. The report also identified ways that current ECTS elements would need to adapt. Credits may need to reflect student competencies, not just workload. The Information Package needs to take account of this and move from a simple descriptive tool to a device to aid quality control. The Diploma Supplement could also augment the lifelong learning approach. The links to the EUROPASS pilot should also be investigated.

The Flemish report concluded that it was timely and worthwhile to develop a European credit-based lifelong learning network and suggested that a pilot in the field of health care and medicine would be a useful first step (see part 4 of this report and Appendix 4.2).

### 3.3.3 *Belgium (Francophone Community)*

Clearer definitions of the project and its concepts are required, as currently the ECTS extension project is too imprecise. The report stresses that credits previously gained by students are not automatically recognised unless there is a pre-existing agreement as under the existing ECTS system. Under a credit accumulation system this would not necessarily be the case. ECTS is a good measure of student workload but not necessarily of the level and precise content of curricula/courses nor of a students' knowledge, vocational abilities and technical competencies.

ECTS today is used for international credit transfer. If it also becomes a system internally adopted by the French speaking community of Belgium, it could not become a generalised system of '*passerelles*' (bridges) as these are governed by strict legal rules. It is essential that public authorities remain the guarantor of standards and awards through educational establishments accredited by public authorities. All students must complete structured and approved study programmes, approved by awarding institutions. A new credit accumulation system must avoid '*à la carte*' credit systems. The majority of those consulted wanted the extended ECTS system restricted to establishments accredited by public authorities.

In 1999 Minister Hervé Hasquin indicated that a coherent credit accumulation system would involve the effective evaluation of different studies. In this framework the government would validate and recognise skills acquired outside the purely academic environment. This would

help to open education to all by introducing modules, and by developing opportunities for continuing education. The government would oversee the validation of appropriate competencies including experience acquired in a non-formal manner.

The report was in favour of a controlled extension to ECTS within a coherent and structured system. It firmly rejects any sort of ‘à la carte’ education.

#### 3.3.4 *Germany*

ECTS is an essential part of university life in Germany. It is used by about 50% of all German higher education institutions as a transfer tool, not as an accumulation system. However, following recent educational reforms there is a clear tendency to introduce a credit-based modular accumulation system based on the 60 credit per academic year format (with academic year being seen as 1600-1800 working hours long). This process of introducing credit accumulation encounters strong reservations when applied to areas outside traditional higher education. For the areas of continuing education, training, part-time and distance education this is not seen as possible in the near future. Many official organisations were reserved about such development and concerned with the cost and bureaucracy of any new system.

A number of particular issues were highlighted concerning the application of ECTS principles to lifelong learning. These included the need to: link credits with levels; define credits in other ways than just simply working hours in order to guarantee their quality (especially as in some countries as few as 900 hours is recognised as a year of study); separate credits acquired in vocational training from those achieved in higher education. Ministries were less pessimistic than the academic institutions but did emphasise the structural problems associated with the Federal system and the split of authorities responsible for vocational education, training, and higher education. They recommended that ECTS should be linked to the EUROPASS initiative. They also cautioned against the introduction of a credit-based lifelong learning initiative as it might endanger the current introduction and acceptance of ECTS.

Other important issues raised included problems with the lifecycle of credits, the organisation of study programmes, and the implications for staff development. A long-term, patient, management of change was advocated. A number of advantages were also identified and these stressed the development of a compatible European-wide system that increased citizen mobility, career opportunities and the internationalisation of programmes.

Finally the report contained proposals for a number of future pilots (see section 4.3 below and Appendix 4.4).

#### 3.3.5 *Denmark*

ECTS is well-accepted in Danish universities. In the non-university sector the position is less well advanced but improving. The Danish Minister of Education recently stated that ‘*Transparency, continuity and merit shall be supported by introducing ECTS at universities, institutions of higher education and adult education*’. Specific problems exist in Denmark concerning the ECTS grading scale. Future pilots to eradicate these difficulties are proposed, along with pilots to solve the problems of quality and level associated with credits.

#### 3.3.6 *Finland*

The report on Finland included comment and analysis of the Swedish system, which is also covered by a separate report. The formation of the Finnish non-university sector was launched in 1991 when polytechnics were established to raise the standards of higher vocational studies and to rationalise the structure of the education system. The degrees awarded by polytechnics are vocationally oriented and designed to meet the requirements of the workplace. The university sector in Finland is distinct from the polytechnics and a feature of universities is the close connection they have between research and teaching. Adult education in Finland is closely connected to higher education, and can act as an entry route to university.

Finland and Sweden have programmes defined by credits. One credit is equivalent to 40 hours total student workload (including lectures and independent studies). Finnish universities enjoy a high degree of autonomy.



ECTS is widely used in Finland and almost all universities and polytechnics are familiar with it. However, there are some difficulties with its correct implementation due to structural features in the Finnish system. There are no legal barriers to prevent the development of ECTS as a European credit system to facilitate education, vocational training and professional development. In Finland credits are used in continuing education.

The report raises a number of issues that would need solution when ECTS is extended. These include problems of identification of different types of credit e.g. from secondary school, vocational education, adult education, university, polytechnic etc. How long credits should be valid, is also raised as a matter for decision.

Finally, the report suggests a pilot project centred on work-based learning (see part 4.3 of this report and Appendix 4.6). This pilot is designed to refine approaches and conventions for the recognition of work-related study units and work placements.

### 3.3.7 *Spain*

Most of Spanish higher education is undertaken by universities and university-like institutions that provide a diverse set of programmes ranging from general academic degrees to professionally-oriented courses. Spain has had a national credit system since 1987. One credit corresponds to 10 hours of teaching or theoretical practical education. Part of the reason for this reform was to rationalise the excessive teaching hours, the length of degrees and to link education with social and professional needs. The Spanish system is a credit accumulation system. It avoids the risk of an '*à la carte*' system by stipulating study into national core subjects, university-determined subjects and student free choice subjects. So the credit system has created a flexible approach that includes different elements relevant to professional education, university specialisation and student choice. However, the proliferation of credits in the system has confused and weakened it. Many universities are pushing in the direction of using the minimum of regulated number of credits (60 per year, 120 per 2-year cycle, 300 for a 5-year *licenciatura*.)

All Spanish universities use ECTS for international mobility and this has proved very advantageous. There are no other systems of credits in terms of vocational or professional education outside the university sector. Lifelong learning and distance learning exist within the university sector only.

The credit system in Spain is compatible with ECTS but difficulties exist due to the variability that exists in the number of Spanish credits per year and per degree. This can be close to 60 or as high as 90. This is currently an important reform issue. The two systems might stay separate or converge. The debate concerning the extension of ECTS as a system for credit accumulation comes at an important time in Spanish educational reform. These difficulties apply equally to university level lifelong learning and distance education. Spain also experiences difficulties with the current ECTS grading system.

Those consulted in Spain were positive concerning the advantages of extending ECTS to lifelong learning. In Spain two definitions of lifelong learning exist, the way it is organised and controlled is also highly complex. Many of those consulted underlined the importance of having a harmonised unit in this area that includes the measurement of competencies, general skills, professional capabilities, etc. A European approach to such aspects would be welcomed in Spain at this time of reform.

The report stresses that the ECTS initiative is viewed positively but that any new initiatives must take into account national characteristics and requirements.

### 3.3.8 *France*

The extension of ECTS to encompass lifelong learning is important in the context of the Sorbonne and Bologna declarations. The Conference of French University Presidents noted this and underlined the possible future transformation of ECTS from a system of credit transfer into a credit accumulation system. This will allow it to cover all types of apprenticeship, part time training and lifelong learning.

There is a need for very clear definitions of the basic terms and concepts in this area

Formerly, further education in France was designed to aid promotion, but now the emphasis is on retraining and professional development and updating.

There is no national system of credits in France. There is no credit culture that links education and training. In higher education the great success of ECTS has familiarised all those involved with its concept and advantages. There are no insuperable psychological or intellectual barriers to the extension of ECTS to other programmes and fields. ECTS as a system of accumulation is perfectly in keeping with national legislation on the delivery of diplomas.

A number of obstacles and difficulties associated with the extension of ECTS were identified including problems associated with the understanding of 'workload' and the assessment of prior experiential learning (skills, knowledge and competencies). In particular the concept of 'competence' is at the heart of the problems to be overcome.

Several advantages of a credit accumulation system were identified. It allows the breaking up of training courses in coherent units, and makes training programmes more transparent and flexible.

The world of enterprise has introduced competencies and so it is important for continuing vocation education in France. Current reforms aim to improve the certification and validation of less qualified citizens. The creation of a '*licence professionnelle*' is a new and interesting attempt to combine initial and continuing education. The Secretary of State for Professional Training recognises that the present system of certification and validation for prior experiential learning has several significant defects. It is therefore proposed to establish a new system for the certification of qualifications involving the state, social partners and professional bodies.

Those engaged in open and distance learning were in favour of the introduction of an extended system of credits based on ECTS. They also emphasised that the award of diplomas without European recognition or equivalence is unrealistic.

There is still some distance between trainers and employers despite the efforts and progress achieved so far. Nothing can be done if all parties do not accept a proposed new system. There is a need for a tool that allows for national and European harmonisation and transferability. Past successful initiatives and projects should encourage us to adopt a systematic approach. New systems, to suit the students' requirements, must accommodate a diversity of pathways and methods, improve access and the develop competencies.

Due to the complexity and nature of the area it is recommended that the new project could not be done within SOCRATES 2 (with due emphasis on Grundtvig) unless it is enlarged to include LEONARDO.

In France there is a legal system for the assessment of prior experiential learning known as '*validation des acquis professionnels*' (VAP). This is becoming more important especially for adult students returning to higher education.

Finally, details and documentation (not available in electronic form) of an existing Anglo-French joint project for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) were included. This is a LEONARDO project (Project 188) involving, the Université des Sciences et Technologies de Lille (France), City University (UK), and Glasgow Caledonian University (UK). It is suggested that this APEL/VAP project might be adapted to form the basis of a future European-wide pilot project.

### 3.3.9 Greece

The report from Greece is based on limited information and feedback. All Greek higher education institutions use a credit accumulation system by law. This system does not allow for credit transfer between institutions. International credit transfer takes place using ECTS but this is implemented in a very limited way. The Greek credit system is based on teaching hours

where one teaching hour correspond to one credit per week and semester. However, the number of credits varies according to the type of contact hour (laboratory work, seminar work, etc.). Overall, the Greek system is comparatively undeveloped in its use of ECTS and no feedback has been gained on the possibility of applying ECTS to lifelong learning. It must be assumed that this would be difficult for the same reasons that the introduction of ECTS has been so problematic.

### 3.3.10 Italy

Italy has a new and very sophisticated credit-based education system since 1999. Credits have been introduced in all sectors including higher education, higher secondary education, vocational education/training, and professional training. Credits can be used both for credit accumulation and credit transfer. However, the implementation of this new system is in its early stages.

Higher education institutions have adopted ECTS as the basis of their national (student workload-based) credit system. In vocational education/training and professional training, credits are based on competencies or '*crediti formativi*' rather than student workload. The two criteria do not seem to be incompatible but rather complement each other. The only difficulties foreseen are the obvious technical and cultural ones associated with the introduction of any new system. One of the main aims of the reforms is to produce an integrated system that encompasses vocational education, professional training and work. Credits gained within this framework (*Formazione tecnica-professionale superiore integrata*) can be flexibly used for the continuation of studies in universities that have agreed to recognise them, for recognition of professional qualifications, for further professional training, and for entry into the labour market. A basic distinction is made between '*credito didattico*' or learning by studying and '*credito formativo*' which is learning by doing.

Higher secondary education has also been reformed in 1997/1998 and these reforms were implemented 1999. The reforms introduced the notion of '*credito scolastica*' (course-based credits and '*credito formativo*' (experienced-based credits).

Many advantages are associated with the development of a European-wide system including increased transparency between national systems, more flexibility in the development of joint curricula and more mobility. The principles of the simple credit model developed for this investigation are agreed and it also is suggested that a common language for the classification of competencies needs to be developed. The report also recommends the introduction of a common agreement on the notion of levels.

The report concludes with a strong recommendation that a new European credit system will require some convergence at national and international levels. The report also recommends an existing national pilot project, funded by the Toscana region of Italy, as a basis for development of a future international pilot project. The project is designed to solve the problems raised by the introduction of a credit accumulation system.

### 3.3.11 Netherlands

The Dutch report focuses on higher education and professional and adult education (the *BVE-sector*). Since 1993 the study load of regular higher education programmes offered by universities and universities of professional education has been quantified by means of credit points (*studiepunten*). One credit point represents one week of full time study (40 hours including contact hours, laboratory and independent work). One year is 42 weeks and worth 42 credit points. The BE sector, professional training and adult education does not yet have a national credit point system. The Netherlands has a binary system of higher education with traditional universities and universities of professional education. In addition there is an Open University and the international education sector.

In the Netherlands some limited credit accumulation is possible between different sectors of education. ECTS is widely used in Dutch higher education for credit transfer. However, recent research has highlighted widespread problems associated with the information obtained by students before going abroad.

Professional and vocational education heavily involves trade and industry. In this sector over 700 different qualifications exist at four levels. Each qualification is based on partial qualifications, themselves divided into attainment targets. For each partial qualification a number of credits is awarded. The levels are: 1-assistant; 2-basic employer; 3-skilled professional; 4-specialist/middle manager.

There have been reforms to develop a national qualifications structure with national standards for the whole sector of vocational training and adult education (BE-sector). Various projects have tested the implementation of the accreditation of prior learning (APL).

Overall, the reactions to an extension of ECTS varied from the positive to the very negative. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science regard ECTS as an important tool to stimulate international student mobility and as a conversion system for credit points. They do not regard it as an accumulation system or that it can easily function as one. In particular the Directorate for Higher Professional Education remarked *'Extension of ECTS, in the existing form, towards other parts of education is, in our opinion, only desirable, provided that somehow the divisions between different educational levels are closely guarded. If not, extension will only lead to confusion, because the distinction between higher education and other levels of education will get blurred. ECTS does not say anything about the kind of education and the level thereof'*. The Association for Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) reacted in a similar way *'...there is not yet a basis for extending ECTS towards other sectors of education....ECTS is only a conversion system. ECTS does not say anything about the kind of education, nor about the level thereof'*. There were many other Dutch negative, mixed and positive responses to the proposals. The Association for National Bodies for Vocational Training (COLO) saw the introduction of ECTS into vocational education as helpful in providing Dutch employers insights into foreign diplomas. However, they did have concerns about the approach, content and skills of foreign qualifications. In the future the focus will need to be on skills and competencies and less on educational content.

Overall, many Dutch respondents stressed the need to guard and maintain the quality of education. The potential relationship of ECTS to the EUROPASS initiative was also raised. The extension of ECTS to other sectors of education was seen as possible but only if clear barriers existed between the sectors. More intra-sector movements and transparency was seen as beneficial.

### 3.3.12 Portugal

The Portuguese report identifies a growing concern by different professions about the need to develop continuing education. The engineering professional body, *Ordem do Engenheiros*, is in favour of a European credit system. The crediting of competencies for advanced professional education is seen as important. Both the engineers and the nursing profession show interest in adopting a European credit system for lifelong learning. In the field of adult education the need for the recognition of competencies acquired outside the formal learning process is an important current topic of debate.

In Portugal most public universities use the national (contact-hour based) credit accumulation system. This does not have a credit transfer dimension and ECTS is used for this purpose. The Rectors Council is promoting a study to examine the adoption of ECTS, as an accumulation system, in place of the national credit system. The Open University (Universidade Alberta) also uses ECTS for distance learning programmes.

The extension of ECTS to lifelong learning is considered a serious matter that should be positively encouraged. There is a possibility that the Portuguese Ministry of Education might take up the issue for promotion during the forthcoming Portuguese Presidency of the EU.

### 3.3.13 Sweden

Lifelong learning has been an important issue for Swedish education for several decades, especially since the higher education reform of 1977 in which access for adult students to higher education was widened and stimulated. One important feature is single-subject courses which are suitable for recurrent education and which facilitate accumulation of credits for adults who go between working life and further studies.

In Sweden there is no distinction between university and non-university tertiary education. There are, however, long-term programmes designed to train scientifically-oriented professionals and short-term programmes designed to train professionals capable of performing or supervising tasks with a high scientific content. The amount of studies required for the completion of a degree is defined in terms of credit points where one credit point means a workload of 40 hours per week including lectures and independent studies.

ECTS is widely used in Sweden by almost all higher education institutions. There is no legal barrier to developing ECTS as a European credit system to facilitate education, training and professional development. In Sweden existing regulations already cover the recognition of skills and knowledge gained at work for the purpose of access to, and exemption from, studies.

The report strongly suggests that NARIC should be the key group to promote the ECTS extension as they have responsibility for academic and professional recognition. The Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO) agrees with the extension of ECTS and wants to actively support it as its members give a high priority to the promotion of lifelong learning. SACO together with its sister organisation in Denmark has launched a project in the Öresund area to promote science-based further education. The application of ECTS to the growing number of science-based further education courses in the area would aid the recognition and integration of the awards. It is suggested that this could become a useful pilot project. In addition, it is suggested that as SACO (and other trade union confederations) is actively involved in the preparatory work for the new structural fund Objective 3, that links between this and ECTS should be investigated. Part of Objective 2 focuses on human resource development and therefore lifelong education and training.

#### 3.3.14 *United Kingdom*

In the UK there have recently been a large number of ambitious initiatives to promote lifelong learning and reform the educational system. A number of organisations are active in the area and there are some variations in Ministries and bodies responsible for it England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A result of this, and the numerous reforms, is that the situation concerning lifelong learning is highly complex in a devolved UK. Within the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) there is a separate division with a Minister in charge. A range of separate publications exists for different areas of the country. However, the thrust of all developments is in a similar direction. In England and Wales much of the impetus for reform has come out of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education report '*Higher Education in the Learning Society*' 1996, known as the '*Dearing Report*'. There was a similar report for Scotland, the '*Garrick Report*'. These were undertaken to review the conditions of higher education in the UK and to make recommendations for the next two decades.

In the UK there is a great deal of experience, particularly in higher education, of credit accumulation and transfer systems. The country is in the process of creating a unified, integrated national credit system.

Progress has been most pronounced in Scotland. It has a blueprint for a national framework covering all qualifications from those for people with learning difficulties through to postgraduate degrees. The Green Paper on lifelong learning '*Opportunity Scotland*', confirmed the importance of creating a comprehensive Scottish Credit and Qualifications framework (SCQF). This framework is intended to widen access to, and increase participation in, lifelong learning and to improve the skills of the Scottish workforce. It is designed to relate different qualifications to each other (including further, higher, vocational and academic education) and assist with the transfer of relevant credits from one qualification to another. It is also intended to help employers and educational institutions assess an individual's qualifications. SCQF will be implemented from 2000 onwards.

The publication of the QAA *Consultation Paper on Higher Education Qualifications Framework for England Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI), and for Scotland* (1999), marks a significant step forwards towards a UK unified credit system. It is designed to position all

UK higher education qualifications relative to one another, underpin standards, clarify progression routes and establish a common currency for credit accumulation and transfer. All qualifications should be defined in terms of minimal amounts of credits at certain levels. Each module should be defined in terms of outcomes, credits and levels.

Existing credit-based programmes in the UK offer intermediate qualifications after each year of full time study during a Bachelor's programme. They also have wide access through APL and APEL and often build in many opportunities for returning adult learners. In the UK credits normally provide a measure of learning outcomes as quantified by the notional number of study hours required for achieving the outcomes. Most higher education institutions assign a single unit of credit to the learning outcomes at a particular level that are typically achieved in 10 notional hours of study. A great deal of practical experience has been built up in the UK concerning all aspects of credit accumulation and transfer. The development of a credit framework for lifelong learning in Europe mirrors the developments taking place in the UK.

The government and other agencies have recently produced a number of publications. These are indicated in the full report in Appendix 4.14. This also includes the key UK Web sites where further information can be obtained.

The main feedback raised the following points:

- Credits are becoming more linked to outputs/outcomes.
- The development of subject benchmarking linked to generic level descriptors is the way forward in the UK. Work should be encouraged to lead to more convergence concerning level descriptors across Europe.
- In the short-term ECTS credit should be linked to the local explanations of their level.
- More co-operation and transparency between organisations responsible for quality is an essential pre-requisite for the development of the ECTS credit system for lifelong learning.
- Lifelong learning developments should not neglect projects that focus on the needs of those groups that are excluded from education.
- Future pilot projects should be in the area of Continuing Professional Development (CPD).
- When an individual wishes to transfer credits from one qualification to another some of the learning may be irrelevant. Therefore, the distinction between 'general' and 'specific' credits should be made to ensure that 'à la carte' credit systems do not develop.
- Better transcripts would help reduce the problems associated with understanding and recognising credits. National transcripts should follow the model developed by the Diploma Supplement and current UK national transcript project.

To summarise, there has been a host of initiatives concerning lifelong learning in the UK. The key government initiatives towards lifelong learning include: the establishment of the University for Industry (Ufi Ltd); the 'New Deal' programme designed to get different groups of unemployed people back to work; establishing 'Learning Direct' the national lifelong learning help-line; the government review of post-16 education and training; and the development of 'Individual Learning Accounts'.

The responses to the ECTS extension project were generally positive. Meetings with representatives of the Open University, Open Learning Foundation, European Access Network (EAN) and other organisations raised a number of important issues associated with credit-based lifelong learning. Three possible pilot projects were identified. Further details of a project to investigate the application of the Ufi model across Europe can be found at the end of Appendix 4.14.

### 3.3.15 *Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers*

The Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers consider the mobility of students a very good thing. Employers support this by offering training places to foreign students. They also support the Diploma Supplement initiative and want a system where studies abroad are accepted as credits recorded in a Diploma Supplement. However, it is not of vital importance for employers to know much details about the nature and value of credits. The report supports

the aspiration of the Bologna Declaration to simply the pattern of studies and the meaning and details of credit in different systems.

### 3.3.16 *European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)*

EADTU representatives from Austria, Belgium, France (FIED), UK (OU and OLF), Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, Germany (Fern Universität), Sweden, Denmark and the Czech Republic completed the ECTS extension questionnaire. In addition, the EADTU report was discussed and confirmed at the EADTU Board meeting, held on November 11<sup>th</sup> 1999, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom

From the outset, open and distance universities have used credit systems, expressing workload in credit values and describing courses using a set of educational descriptors. Generally, they also use credits for their vocational and professional education. All this is compatible with ECTS. However they seldom apply ECTS as traditional universities do. In applying ECTS some problems occur. In practice, some institutions have not always modularised their educational programmes (i.e. Germany) or the programmes have not been described in terms of workload, but only in terms of content/performance (i.e. Denmark). The ECTS grading system (A-F) is often felt to be a difficulty, as it does not differentiate achievements in the top segment of the scale in such a way as it does in the middle. The report stresses the need to emphasise more the qualitative description of credits focussing on academic content, level descriptors, competence, and taught outcomes.

EADTU members refer to mobility as one of the main advantages of the system. ECTS promotes the exchange of conventional students but it should also be a tool for the virtual exchange of students i.e. either before or instead of, a semester abroad, or as a complement for a course at a home university. This can be particularly useful in a lifelong learning context. EADTU members emphasise the use of ECTS as a tool for the exchange of courses to widen students' choice and promote a European dimension in their profile. A virtual ERASMUS scheme is possible but not one that allows an 'à la carte' educational model.

From an institutional point of view, EADTU members see ECTS as crucial for promoting academic collaborations on a comprehensive and multilateral basis. It also stimulates institutions to enhance their own quality assurance arrangements, to benchmark best practice and evaluate the value of qualifications. In the distance learning context across Europe, adult learners could accommodate a portfolio of several competencies and skills, according to their career objectives. This will facilitate the free circulation of people. The EADTU are well placed to undertake applied research into the practicalities and problems of developing an extended ECTS system.

## 3.4 **Issues Associated with Developing a Credit-Based Lifelong Learning Framework**

The research identified the following significant issues associated with the development of a European credit framework for lifelong learning:

### 3.4.1 *Terminology and Definitions*

In Europe there is no common language for, or clear set of definitions of, such terms as 'lifelong learning' or the subsets that it can include. Many different national definitions and understandings of lifelong learning exist. It can include all learning from 'cradle to the grave'. Professor Edward Thomas, Secretary General of the Universities Continuing Education Network (EUCEN) indicates that '*Lifelong learning includes all learning from pre-school education at one end of the scale to education for retired adults at the other. Included within this is the initial education taking place in schools and higher education institutions (generally ending in the late teens or 20s) and the much more fragmented continuing education, coming from many providers which continues for the rest of life*'.<sup>2</sup> In the context of higher education, continuing education has been defined (EUCEN Conference Proceedings, 1991) as '*any form of education, vocational or general, resumed after an interval following*

<sup>2</sup> See '[Increasing Lifelong Learning in European Higher Education](#)' by Professor Edward Thomas. This paper was produced for the European Higher Education Expert Forum in Brussels 24-25<sup>th</sup> January 2000.

*the continuous initial education*'.<sup>3</sup> So the field of lifelong learning is necessarily very wide and includes many different levels, aims, outcomes, types and modes of learning. This diversity is both a strength and a weakness. It would certainly benefit from a unifying credit-based framework that would promote much needed transparency. Furthermore, it is important that some common understanding and terminology is developed. This is an important prerequisite for the development of any European credit framework than encompasses lifelong learning.

#### 3.4.2 *Credits, Competencies and Lifelong Learning*

The extension of ECTS to incorporate vocational education and training raises serious questions concerning the nature of credits (see the reports from Italy, France, Belgium [Flemish Community], Finland, EADTU, Portugal and the UK). So far, most European traditional universities do not apply credits to vocational or professional training. There is a need to develop a credit system that takes into account competencies (widely used in vocational education/training) that is compatible with a credit system based on workload (currently used in higher education). The latter approach used by ECTS should not be viewed as contradicting the first, but rather as enriching it, because it would combine the objective of the educational/training experience (the competence to be acquired) with the effort required to acquire it. The development and testing of a definition of credits capable of being more focussed on outputs and outcomes is not necessarily such a radical proposal, since this approach is already being adopted in Italy and the UK. Furthermore, within traditional academic education there is a trend in many countries towards a more output-focussed, outcomes-based approach.

Credits only reflect the quality of achievement in the context of an educational programme. They do not express any evaluation of the content and the academic level or the quality of the programme. That is because ECTS has mainly been used in the context of bilateral student exchange in the framework of ERASMUS/SOCRATES. These bilateral agreements, often within small networks, are based on mutual understanding and trust, which over the years is confirmed by practice. In particular, the report from EADTU members emphasises this formal quantitative character of credits, but they also stress the need for a qualitative descriptor (academic content and level, competencies, taught outcomes, etc).

Differences in student workload and the 'notional time' taken to gain credits exists across Europe (for details see the German report, Annex 4.4). There are considerable variations in what 'one year of study' actually means in different countries. The imprecision and confusion of such approaches should be supplemented by more sophisticated measures of credits. The allocation of credits on the basis of total workload does not sufficiently reflect the quality of those credits. Furthermore, education is increasingly being delivered in different ways - in short courses, by open and distance learning, by intensive programmes, etc. In the case of APEL, for example, a workload-based approach is not appropriate. This makes notional time measures of credits increasingly problematic. However, despite these shortcomings, the student workload approach to credits must remain as the core of any future system. The problems associated with it must be made explicit so that they can be overcome. The current ECTS quantitative measure of credits needs to be supplemented by a more qualitative measure that emphasises level, competencies and taught outcomes. It is probable that this can only be achieved by building in appropriate links between ECTS credits and the explanation of level, competencies and outcomes as expressed in the relevant individual national educational system.

A consequence of developing an over-arching European credit system is that credits gained from different types and levels of educational experience must be clearly labelled, identified and understood. It must not be possible to confuse different types and levels of credits. The acknowledgement of this principle is essential for the effective national and international use of any extended credit system (see the Flemish and Dutch reports, Appendix 4.2 and 4.11). The Diploma Supplement has a major role to play in this process. Furthermore, efforts should be made to develop a common language for the classification of competencies, in order to

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<sup>3</sup> EUCEN Conference proceedings (1991), Towards a European Universities Continuing Education Network.



facilitate mutual understanding. There would also have to be a Europe-wide agreement concerning what exactly constitutes different types of education.

The mixing of different types of credits within education or training programmes is a matter of judgement by the institution or body awarding (or recognising) a qualification. It must be emphasised that autonomous institutions will always decide what they accept. A credit system is just designed to facilitate such decisions by increasing transparency and reducing confusion.

#### 3.4.3 *Credits, Levels and Lifelong Learning*

There was no agreement concerning the notion of levels within specific types of educational programme. Some recommended the development of agreed European levels, whilst others rejected it. Many sophisticated credit systems identify different levels so the progression within the structure of qualifications is clear. In the long term, European agreement about levels might emerge. Currently in the UK, there is the pioneering investigation and development of levels linked to outcomes; national generic (level) subject descriptors, and national benchmarking standards. However, the use of the Diploma Supplement, national transcripts, and other internal national systems should provide sufficient information on the local system of levels linked to credits. Furthermore, outcomes-based and competencies-based approaches should also help clarify the level of any qualification.

#### 3.4.4 *Quality Assurance Issues*

The Belgian (Francophone Community), German and Dutch reports raised strong reservations (discussed previously) concerning the dangers of 'à la carte' credit accumulation systems with the possibility of students demanding qualifications after simply collecting enough disparate credits from a range of different sources. These concerns are misplaced. Regulated professions will stay regulated. Unstructured and educationally incoherent academic programmes of study are not what is proposed. Local, regional or national autonomy is not compromised by external credit systems. The national power to approve, recognise, accredit or validate does not transfer. However, it is suggested that hard evidence from future pilots should lay these worries to rest. The useful distinction between 'general' and 'specific' credits will also help to achieve this. Ironically, credit systems open the door to all sorts of quality control and quality assurance mechanism simply by making things more transparent.

In addition, a number of problems were raised concerning quality. Several reports raised issues concerning the guarantee of quality of the credits associated with the education gained under such a system. It is obvious that the relevant national quality assurance system guarantees the quality of the credits associated with it. More links need to be built between the different national quality assurance systems. Several other suggestions for the way forward were made, including the need for some sort of international system for accreditation and the restriction of the system to public education only (see the Belgium reports, Appendix 4.2, 4.3).

A further complication is that the key notion in the current ECTS approach is 'mutual recognition'. Expanding the system would lead to collaboration, or non-collaboration, between completely different providers from different systems. Mutual recognition will be more difficult to create in these situations. Therefore, it is recommended that the development of a European credit-based lifelong learning framework should be connected to existing Commission initiatives to link existing national quality assurance mechanisms. Without more transparency and knowledge about the quality of each other's systems the development of a credit-based lifelong learning framework will be very slow.

Finally, credits indicate nothing about the quality of attainment except in the broadest sense. The precise explanation and identification of credits (nature, type and level) must be a feature of any new system for lifelong learning. Therefore, it is recommended that any future pilot must pay attention to this and link credits with the Diploma Supplement, existing national transcripts, ECTS transcripts and other systems that give this sort of information.

### 3.5 Credit Systems in Europe

Some European countries have sophisticated national credit systems covering different types of education, whilst for others, ECTS was their only experience of credits.<sup>4</sup> ECTS is also compatible with the higher education systems in all of the countries/regions consulted.<sup>5</sup> However, in practice there existed a number of practical difficulties concerning credit allocation. None of these problems are insurmountable.

The majority of EU/EEA countries share in common the fact that they have undertaken major reform of their higher education processes in the 1990s. As part of this process many have introduced credit systems. In the European Union various types of credit system exist with each being designed to achieve different local, regional, national or international objectives. This is because the economic, social and political reasons for creating credit systems have been different. Systems have been introduced for many reasons including: to increase flexibility, improve learning, introduce mobility, save money and promote efficiency, rationalise, promote market forces, introduce more competition, improve citizen choice, reduce barriers between academic and professional education and to improve the workforce in the context of the global economy. The resulting diversity of systems leads to the conclusion that an over-arching European credit accumulation and transfer framework is needed now more than ever.

Several reports contained mixed reactions to the notion of credit 'accumulation' in higher education. Many reactions were favourable (Germany, UK, Spain, Italy, etc.) but a strong exception to this was the Belgian Flemish community where this is not possible according to law. Their system also regulates the number of credits (60) to be gained in one year to progress to the next. Similarly, in the Dutch system of higher education limited use is made of accumulation of credits between different levels or sectors of education. A number of Dutch organisations and institutions opposed the development of ECTS into an accumulation system. However, it must be emphasised again that any European credit framework could not impose new rules or override the domestic arrangements for study.

ECTS is currently designed to act as a framework to facilitate credit transfer. Systems for credit transfer can be distinguished from those for credit accumulation. In the latter the students' entire educational programme is expressed in terms of credits, not just a small part of it. The importance of levels, progression and the academic coherence of the complete programme become more significant for systems of credit accumulation. Consequently, the tools and procedures associated with ECTS will have to evolve when it is applied to credit accumulation. The implications of this are discussed further in section 3.7.

The most developed credit systems are in the UK, Scandinavia and Italy. The recent Italian reforms are creating a system with credits in all sectors, including higher education, higher secondary education, vocational education/training and professional training. Credits can be used both for credit transfer and credit accumulation. In vocational education/training and professional training, credits are often based on competencies rather than workload. It is recommended that any future pilot projects should pay particular attention to the experiences and most recent developments in these countries.

### 3.6 The Features and Principles of a European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System

The 'features and principles of a European credit system', reproduced in Appendix 3, were agreed by those consulted as appropriate and useful. Across Europe there exists such a range of credit systems designed to achieve a variety of different national objectives. The rich diversity of European educational provision should be maintained and improved with a

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<sup>4</sup> The most recent survey of European and other credit systems can be found in the report by Professor Fritz Dalichow, 'A Comparison of Credit Systems in an International Context.' Published in 1997 by the German Federal Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Technology.

<sup>5</sup> Evidence for this can be found in the Draft Synthesis report by the European Commission 'Academic Credit Systems and Modularisation in EC and EFTA Countries – Compatibility with ECTS'. Published 1993.

common credit framework that could link them all. These principles should be further developed and augmented to form a clear basis for the credit-based lifelong learning framework.

### 3.7 **The Evolution of ECTS**

The current state of the SOCRATES/ERASMUS ECTS is relatively healthy and buoyant. It is accepted and used by over one thousand higher education institutions. The tools it uses are tried and tested and have been shown to be effective. The principles on which it is based are sound. Its application as a credit transfer framework needs only minor refinement. However, it is strongly recommended that support for its implementation is maintained as ECTS is not always consistently applied, nor is it always properly understood. It does require further embedding within institutions.

For the current purposes of credit transfer ECTS works well. No changes to its procedures and processes are necessary. The principles that underpin ECTS (as a credit transfer system) would also serve to underpin a broader European credit (accumulation) system. However, a number of adaptations and developments to the existing ECTS tools and procedures would be necessary for its application to lifelong learning. The current situation is that ECTS is an important but often peripheral activity of higher education institutions. The extension of ECTS to lifelong learning would require institutions to locate centrally the responsibility for co-ordinating their systems. It would become a core activity of many institutions. Particular changes and refinements would also be necessary to Transcripts, Information Packages/the institutional prospectus, the definition and allocation of credits, and mechanisms for explaining levels, grades and award classifications.

### 3.8 **Advantages of a Credit-Based Approach to Lifelong Learning**

There was a large measure of agreement concerning the advantages of adopting a European credit-based approach to lifelong learning. Many different advantages were identified including the following:

#### 3.8.1 *Flexibility*

Credits have the flexibility to take into account the potentially enormous range of study opportunities open to citizens in the EU/EEA. Credits allow bridges and links to be built between different forms, modes and types of education. They allow multiple entry and exit points to education. No distinctions were identified regarding the use of credits for full-time and part-time education. In many countries the distinction between the two is becoming blurred. Credits are equally applicable to both. In particular, for open and distance learning, the development and application of information technologies imposes new methods of teaching and examination. The delivery and development of such programmes would be greatly facilitated by an international credit-based system of recognition.

#### 3.8.2 *Mobility*

Credit systems facilitate regional, national and international mobility. They achieve this by improving transparency between different educational systems and therefore promoting academic and professional recognition. This mobility (whether it is real or virtual distance learning) widens student choice.

#### 3.8.3 *Promoting Continuing Education*

In particular, highly fragmented in terms of time and place, Continuing Education is delivered by a host of providers in many different modes. Here, a system for the accumulation of credits is obviously of benefit. Students study in a variety of different settings (home, workplace, academic institution) and move between them and different countries. A credit system would facilitate this and make the recognition of prior learning much easier. Indeed, lifelong learning accounts, work-based learning, negotiated individual programmes, and employment-based schemes would all benefit from a common credit framework. Credit accumulation, credit transfer and credit recognition are all essential to this process, and ECTS has developed most of the necessary tools to make it work. The extension of ECTS will require the involvement of higher education institutions, initial education providers, professional bodies and employers.

#### 3.8.4 *Facilitating Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning*

There are particular benefits to using credits when expressing learning and competencies associated with the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). This is important for purposes of access and exemption from study, as well as the recognition of learning that has taken place in the workplace. Credits are a useful tool to help the recognition of learning wherever it has taken place.

#### 3.8.5 *Collaboration*

Finally, an extended ECTS credit system would be essential for promoting comprehensive and wide multilateral collaboration (joint curricula etc.) between the main stakeholders involved in lifelong learning. It also stimulates institutions to enhance their quality assurance arrangements, to benchmark best practice and evaluate the value of qualifications and competencies.

### **3.9 Summary of Main Findings**

Overall, a broadly favourable consensus of opinion emerged from the research. All of the reports were favourable about proceeding with the initiative and all raised significant issues that have to be overcome in this highly complex area. The majority of individuals and organisations indicated that it is timely and worthwhile to develop a credit-based European lifelong learning credit framework of some sort. The development of national lifelong learning systems is clearly in its infancy. However, the difficulty of such an endeavour should not be underestimated, it will be a long and complex process.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Introduction

It is timely to go ahead with the development of pilot projects to facilitate the development of lifelong learning. The majority of those consulted enthusiastically agreed with the development of ECTS to achieve this end. Those who had reservations were concerned about legitimate issues associated with quality, institutional autonomy, and the potential for mismatching units and programmes (*'à la carte'* credit systems). The steering party urges that there are considerable benefits in the promotion of a series of pilots that are part of a common credit-based framework promoting lifelong learning. Part of the task of such projects must be to prove that the concerns expressed in some reports are unfounded and can be overcome. The evidence from experience in those countries more advanced in the development of lifelong learning systems does indicate that this is possible.

The following conclusions and recommendations are of two main types. Section 4.2 (General Recommendations) draws together all general strategic research findings, recommendations and conclusions concerning issues, problems, and good practice associated with the way forward. The second section 4.3 (Pilot Projects for Future Consideration) summarises the suggestions for possible future pilot projects. Section 4.4 makes some final observations.

### 4.2 General Recommendations

The development and introduction of a ECTS credit-based lifelong learning framework will be a complex process, best achieved at the strategic policy level through processes enabling a wide dialogue between European higher education institutions, initial education providers, professional bodies and employers. At the tactical level there is a strong argument for short, well-focussed follow-up projects, involving these bodies. This would help achieve a big step forward towards the Sorbonne/Bologna objectives. The design of such projects should pay particular attention to the experience of lifelong learning and credit developments recently undertaken in Italy and the UK.

- 4.2.1 Future pilot projects should seek to test and overcome anxieties raised in this report concerning the possible mismatch of credits from different types of education. The quality, type and level of different credits must be clearly identifiable along with systems to prevent the creation of an *'à la carte'* type credit accumulation framework.
- 4.2.2 Due to lack of common definition and understanding of lifelong learning and associated terms it is recommended that projects develop appropriate common terminology. This is an important prerequisite for the development of any European credit framework that encompasses lifelong learning. There would also have to be a Europe-wide clarification concerning what exactly constitutes different types of education.
- 4.2.3 The development of ECTS should lead to a credit-based lifelong framework that is kept as simple and transparent as possible and created to:
- Include professional, vocational and corporate qualifications;
  - Address educational systems outside the European Union, in particular, the Eastern European states currently seeking membership;
  - Allow transference with other non-European educational frameworks, especially those of the United States, given the high demand for student exchange programmes between the USA and European states;
  - Promote mobility of students between single mode distance, single mode campus, dual mode and virtual universities;
  - Permit advanced standing into degree programmes on the basis of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL);
  - Enable the integration of new and developing units, degree programmes and modes of study.

- 4.2.4 Several of the proposed pilot projects have common features. There is merit in the further detailed consideration of these to identify and combine their strengths. The areas of ‘initial’ and ‘continuing professional development’ are both likely to become increasingly important in the future. Certainly, pilots could usefully be developed to create a credit-based system to record lifelong learning achievements incorporating APEL. The accreditation of prior learning (APL) and of experiential learning (APEL) is a process that would easily benefit from standard approaches to measure the skills and learning (throughout life; in the workplace, the university, etc.) achieved by the citizen and expressed in ECTS credits. APEL was a feature mentioned in many of the steering group reports.
- 4.2.5 Credits indicate nothing about the quality of attainment except in the broadest sense. The precise explanation and identification of credits (nature, type and level) must be a feature of any new system for lifelong learning. Therefore, it is recommended that any future pilot must pay attention to this factor, and link credits with the Diploma Supplement and other systems<sup>6</sup> that give this sort of qualitative and quantitative information. Credits and qualifications are difficult to understand if they are not explained in the context of the educational system where they were obtained.
- 4.2.6 A competencies-based approach to credits should be explored and tested to supplement the existing ECTS student workload-based approach. Such a definition is necessary for lifelong learning where learning is primarily based on the acquisition of skills and competencies. Certainly, in the case of APEL, a workload-based approach is inappropriate. However, despite these shortcomings, the student workload approach to credits must remain as the core of any future system. The problems associated with it must be made explicit so that they can be overcome. The current ECTS quantitative measure of credits needs to be supplemented by a more qualitative measure that emphasises level, competencies and taught outcomes. It is probable that this can only be achieved by building in appropriate links between ECTS credits and the explanation of level, competencies and outcomes as expressed in the relevant individual national educational system. In addition, efforts should be supported to develop a common language for the classification of competencies, in order to facilitate mutual understanding. This should be linked to the encouragement of convergence of level descriptors in higher education. A close examination should be made of current UK and Italian experience. In Italy there are two separate types of credit, one workload-based and one competency-based.
- 4.2.7 The simple ‘*Features and Principles of a European Credit System*’ reproduced in Appendix 3, should be further developed and augmented to form a clear basis for any new credit-based lifelong learning framework.
- 4.2.8 The synergies and links between the development of ECTS and EUROPASS system of gaining recognised training in another Europe State project, should be investigated.
- 4.2.9 It is recommended that the development of European credit-based lifelong learning framework should be connected to current Commission initiatives to link existing national quality assurance mechanisms. Without more transparency and knowledge about the quality of each other’s systems, the development of a credit based lifelong learning framework will be severely inhibited.

### 4.3 Pilot Projects for Future Consideration

A number of different pilot projects have been suggested, in some of the steering group reports, to promote the next stage of development. All the projects that were identified are briefly summarised below. There has been no attempt to rank or evaluate these although it is suggested that the previous comments in this report (particular section 4.2 above) be taken into account when this is done.

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<sup>6</sup> The LEONARDO ‘Infomodel/EuroCert’ creates a certificate supplement to explain vocational qualification.

4.3.1 *Belgium (Flemish Community) – Extension of ECTS in the Healthcare Sector*  
 This pilot proposes the extension of ECTS to the Healthcare sector. It involves the accreditation of different types of continuing education and training initiatives for healthcare professionals (medical doctors, nurses, etc.). It would involve higher education institutions, practical work and credit accumulation. The project would test the use and implementation of a credit accumulation system throughout Europe. More details of this proposal can be found at the end of Appendix 4.2.

4.3.2 *Germany (3 projects) –*  
*(1) Project for the Accreditation of Language Achievements*  
 An international project to develop jointly (Schools and higher education institutions) and accredit foreign language (competence based) School programmes that will gain exemption and recognition in specific higher education programmes.  
*(2) Project for Co-operation of Vocational Schools and Higher Education Institutions*  
 A project to identify elements of Vocational School curricula that should gain recognised ECTS credits, using APEL techniques that are subsequently given recognition in higher education institutions.  
*(3) Project to link EUROPASS and ECTS*  
 Project to link the EUROPASS certificate, that outlines a trainee's activities whilst on placement in another country, with an ECTS credit-based format.

Further details of these projects can be found at the end of Appendix 4.4.

4.3.3 *Finland – Work-Based Learning as Part of a Study Programme*  
 It is suggested that a useful international project could collect information about the best conventions and processes to use in making work placements and work-related study units an integral part of a student's degree. The project will not launch any new research on work-based learning. This project will only gather information about the conventions used and survey the existing conventions. The survey would be made both in upper secondary education and in higher education institutions. It would explore how work placements are organised, how it is measured, how skills and knowledge are graded, etc. Further details can be found at the end of Appendix 4.6.

4.3.4 *France - Extension Project to Develop Accreditation of Prior Learning (APEL)*  
 An extension project based on the Université de Science et Technologies de Lille APEL project. This would broaden the project designed to establish frameworks to recognise different forms of learning. This gives recognition to existing learning (gained in the work place or elsewhere) in the form of access or credit.

4.3.5 *Italy – Development of the Toscana Region Project that Links Credits and Competencies.*  
 This project seeks to address the problems raised in the development of credit accumulation systems. It seeks *inter alia* to explore how a credit system based on competencies (used in vocational education/training) can be compatible with one based on workload (used in higher education). Further details can be found at the end of Appendix 4.10.

4.3.6 *Portugal – Continuing Education Engineering Project*  
 A continuing education project involving the Portuguese professional body (ordem dos Engenheiros) and EUCEN. This would involve the application of ECTS credits, open and distance learning, and APEL

4.3.7 *Sweden – Extend the Öresund Project to Promote Science-Based Further Education*  
 The Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO) agrees with the extension of ECTS and wants to actively support it as it gives a high priority to the promotion of lifelong learning. SACO together with its sister organisation in Denmark has launched a project in the Öresund area to promote science-based further education. The application of ECTS to the growing number of science-based further education courses in the area would aid the recognition and integration of the awards. In addition, it is suggested that as SACO (and other trade union confederations) is actively involved in the preparatory work for the new structural fund objective 3, links between this and ECTS should be investigated. Part of Objective 2

focuses on human resource development and therefore lifelong education and training. Further details can be found at the end of Appendix 4.13.

#### 4.3.8 *United Kingdom (3 Projects) -*

##### *(1) Pilot to Explore ECTS as an Accumulation System in Higher Education Institution*

This pilot would explore and refine the application of existing ECTS tools and processes applied to credit accumulation in higher education institutions. This could similarly be done for Adult Education centres.

##### *(2) Pilot to Target Key Professions to Apply ECTS to Record Continuing Professional Development*

This pilot would target key professions, professional bodies and appropriate Thematic Networks to apply ECTS as a credit accumulation framework to record a) initial professional development and b) continued professional development.

##### *(3) Feasibility Study for a European Framework to Support Lifelong Learning*

This project would be modelled on the UK's internet-supported Continuing Development Award for work-based learning. The University for Industry (Ufi) model is at the heart of the UK approach to lifelong learning. The UK government has established it, to promote lifelong learning among businesses and individuals in employment. The precise nature of each programme and the overall learning objectives is specified through a Learning Contract. The framework will support a consistent approach to the accreditation of prior experiential learning and the construction of customised learning through work-based projects and other work-related activities. This approach provides a model for contract-based learning and internet-based guidance and support that has the potential to be extended outside the work-based context. The vision is that it could support a consistent Europe-wide approach to contract-based lifelong learning that is customised to the particular needs and learning contexts of individuals. The proposal is for a trans-national feasibility study to consider the potential for transferability and adaptation of the Ufi Ltd framework. Further details of the project can be found at the end of Appendix 4.14.

#### 4.3.9 *EADTU – Potential Project to Allow Distance Learners to Accumulate a Skills Portfolio*

In the distance learning context across Europe, adult learners could accommodate a portfolio of several competencies and skills, according to their career objectives and interests. This will particularly facilitate the 'free circulation of people'.

### **4.4 Final Observations**

The research reveals many advantages and much support for the development of a European credit framework for lifelong learning. It also points out the serious issues that such a development raises. A new system would increase the transparency of national systems, encourage flexibility in the development of joint curricula and facilitate agreements for the mobility of learners, not only between educational sectors in the same country, but also between those of different countries. Credit systems are powerful enabling devices, which aid mobility between various forms of education and training. The application of ECTS to different systems and types of education will facilitate the recognition of learning gained both nationally and internationally.

It is difficult to envisage a European system that did not require some convergence at national/institutional level. Like ECTS, a more comprehensive European credit-based system for lifelong learning should be developed on a voluntary basis, first in pilot projects and then with the participation of all countries and institutions interested. The experience with ECTS has shown that countries and institutions may at first resist change but then will slowly adjust to a system that facilitates mutual benefit, understanding and mobility. The Bologna Declaration is an indication of the political support offered by European governments to such a process.