

## 3 Presentations on credit point systems featured at AEC events

### “Credit Guidelines for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland”

by Jeremy Cox (Royal College of Music, London), presented at the AEC Meeting for International Relations Coordinators 2002 in Paris, France

*‘Within the European context, a coherent UK approach to credit will be critical in helping us to meet our obligations under the Bologna Declaration. The Declaration calls for reformed structures within higher education to enable compatibility and comparability between the different systems of the member countries and to foster employability and mobility within Europe. A common framework of qualifications [within the UK], supported by a consistent approach to credit levels and by ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) compatible credit systems, is essential if this is to be achieved effectively and efficiently.’* [Paragraph in Introduction to Booklet]

### ECTS and ECTS Compatibility

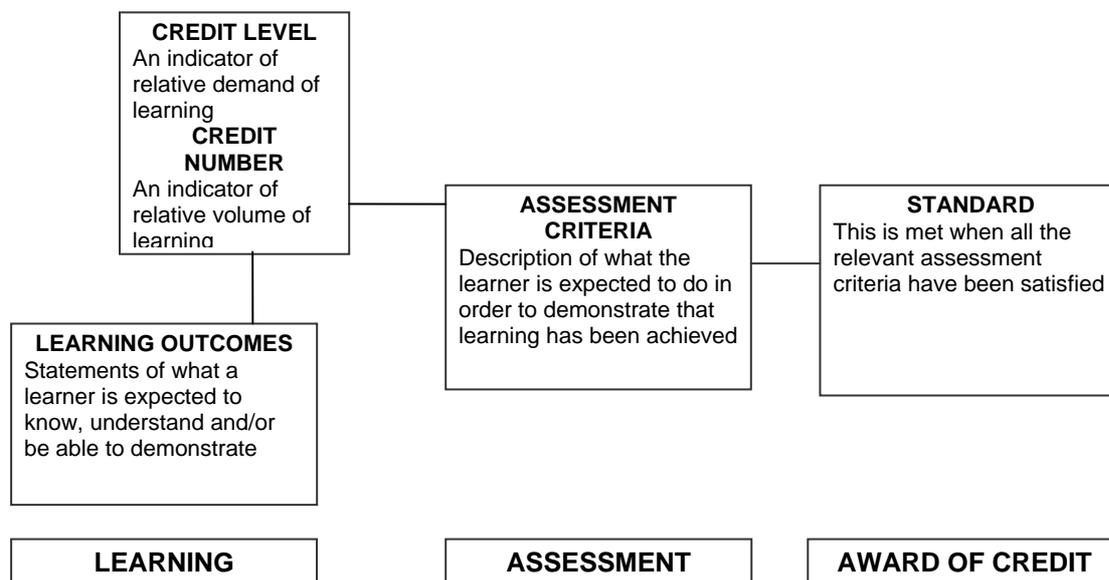
The ECTS System began as a conversion tool. By converting a student’s results from one national system into ECTS, they could then be re-converted into any other national system. ECTS was therefore like the international adaptors which can be bought for electrical appliances – or like the ECU currency system. Some national systems are readily compatible with ECTS: The UK CATS System has 120 credits per year. Compared with 60 ECTS credits, 1 UK credit = 0.5 ECTS Credits. In other systems the conversion is not quite so straightforward: The Dutch system has 42 credits per year - 1 Dutch credit = 1.4 ECTS credits. Countries and institutions developing credits systems more recently are increasingly adopting the easiest conversion of all: 1 new credit = 1 ECTS credit. As a result, ECTS is gradually becoming the system used internally in many institutions – not just a conversion tool. The progression is rather like that from the ECU to the Euro and prompts some of the same worries in many people’s minds!

### What is a credit framework?

Credits and levels are merely useful tools to represent learning for the purpose of measuring equivalence; they do not, in themselves, affect the nature and content of what is being learned. A credit framework provides a standardised means of representing learning achieved: enabling comparison of learning required in different programmes and qualifications, and facilitates the building up of credit by learners, transfer of learners between institutions and the linking of credit and academic standards.

Much of the talk about the Bologna Declaration becomes bogged down in worries about relative standards; a system with standardised durations of study linked to standardised credit values and levels seems to imply that we must all move towards one equal standard of quality, but levels and credit values alone cannot be regarded as sufficient measures of academic standards. Academic standards are ultimately set by the curriculum – what is taught and how it is taught. However, credits *can* have a role in defining standards. This only really becomes meaningful, though, when they are lined with some measurement of quality. This measurement increasingly takes the form of an identified series of formal Learning Outcomes and associated Assessment Criteria. The Bologna Declaration ultimately almost

implies the development of compatible systems in these areas too (!). The relationship between these elements is something like this:



## “Credit Points: Means to an End”

by Evert Bisschop Boele (North-Netherlands Conservatoire), presented at the AEC Congress 2002 in Vilnius, Lithuania

### Introduction

About 60% of AEC member institutions already make use of a credit point system. For most of these institutions, their credit point system is hardly an exciting subject; it is tolerated but that is all. For quite a few of them it is even less than that: a rather boring, administrative and bureaucratic exercise. For many of the institutions not having a credit point system, introduction of such a system may not feel to be a very exciting task. It may even feel as something contrarious to what a conservatoire should spend its time at: musicianship at the highest level. However, there are certain benefits as well. Below, I will introduce two subjects: the implementation of a credit point system within a conservatoire, and the role of credit points in international comparability.

### Implementing a credit point system

If we want to introduce a credit point system in a conservatoire, where do we start? Basically, there are three possibilities.

The best method to define a credit point system is to start defining the workload per subject and to convert that into credit points. This is relatively easy if you construct a new curriculum. You define how many hours the average student should work per year. Then you define which hours go to which subject and you calculate the credit points. But what do we do with an existing curriculum? It may be wise to undertake a little research. For example, ask every teacher how many hours an average student is supposed to work for his or her subject. This

will quite often, I can assure you, lead to the average student spending sixty weeks per year of 70 or 80 hours per week studying. Also ask your students how many hours they work in reality per week for each subject. Or, even more precise, ask a selection of students to keep a diary for a month. Then, compare the outcomes of teachers and students. You will then find yourself obliged to discuss with staff (and if possible students) many questions:

- do we teach too many (or too few) subjects?
- do we unconsciously compensate for low entrance levels in some subjects?
- are we doing things double in different subjects, or are there big gaps?
- are there possibilities for integration of subjects, or for more cooperation between teachers?
- who is the average student?
- how can we capture the natural differences in workload between different instruments?
- how do we handle optional subjects and individual study routes?
- etcetera.

All those questions are not 'caused' by the introduction of credit points. The questions have always been there, a credit point system only makes them more manifest. This way of working with credit points takes time and effort, but may in the long run lead to a realistic credit point system. I say in the long run, because a credit point system in this definition is never finished. It is in fact an important part of the curriculum development process that takes place constantly in every teaching institute.

### **Exchange and comparability**

There are many different credit point systems, which makes comparison a often difficult at present. This will, however, probably change, because the Bologna declaration recommends the use of ECTS with its credit point system counting 60 credits.

Any credit point system may play an important role in relations between conservatoires. For example, taking a look at a credit point system of any unknown institute directly provides some basic information on the relative importance of different subjects in the curriculum of that institute. It therefore tells something about its artistic view and its teaching philosophy.

However, sometimes we want more than broad information. For example, if we want to send a student to another institute for a period time, much more information than only a credit point system is needed for a good comparison of the two curricula. In fact, credit points can only play a role in student exchange if we are sure about two other important things: the workload behind the credit points, and the level attached tot the credit points.

As for the workload: ECTS defines a workload of a year fulltime study to be 60 credit points. It does, however, not define what exactly a year of fulltime study might mean. For example, we just heard that in Norway an average student is expected to study 40 weeks of 40 hours, so the workload of a study year is 1600 hours. In The Netherlands, the workload of a study year is 1680 hours: 42 weeks of 40 hours of study. I know there are institutes who do not use a credit point system and have for example two semesters of each 13 weeks of education. You can then get a situation where the same amount of credit points for example for the

main instrument in one semester stands for 21 weekly lessons or 20 lessons or 13 lessons. Do less lessons mean more practising? What about the workload behind the points? What about comparison?

Questions about level are just as serious. Even if the workload behind credit points is the same, how can we be sure that the work required is of the same level? In other words, what is the supposed level of the famous 'average student' who is at the heart of the system? Credit points will not give you a clue. Even the reassuring thought that we are all institutes of higher education level does not per se mean that we always agree on questions concerning for example examination levels, be it entrance examinations or final examinations.

This may seem to be a reason to skip any credit point system whatsoever. If it does not clarify questions about work load and level, what is the use? Such a conclusion would, however, be short-sighted. We must keep in mind that a system of credit points as such is never able to solve questions like this on its own; credit points were never devised for that. Looking at the ECTS system, you will see that the credit-point system is only a small part of a bigger package, which should serve to make comparison possible. Other parts of this ECTS-package are for example:

- a system to make more or less exact and customized descriptions of the education in every subject you offer, including learning goals, didactics, content, ways of evaluating, et cetera;
- a general translation model to unite the many grading and marking systems we have in different countries; and
- a standardized 'diploma supplement' which gives information about the actual background of the diplomas you award.

Other tendencies, such as the Bachelor/Master system or, on a completely different level, learning agreements for exchange students within Socrates, are also parts of a big effort to make education more comparable. Credit points alone will never lead to easy comparability. They can be of help but other means must be added. The introduction of a general credit point system is helpful, maybe even necessary, but not sufficient in itself to make an end to all problems.

## **Quality assurance**

And even if we have introduced everything just mentioned: standardized curriculum descriptions, a credit point system based on a fixed work load, an internationally translatable grading system, a Bachelor/Master-structure, a standardized diploma supplement, do we then have enough information to be exactly sure what every institution has on offer? Probably not.

In the end, we are talking about artistic education, artistic level, artistic exchange and artistic comparison. Despite all efforts of our predecessors in the past, a system that has been able to completely objectively describe artistic experience has never emerged. We all know, however, that artistic experience can be evaluated; it is not completely subjective as well. We therefore have worked out a simple but strong evaluation mechanism: groups of high-level professional musicians formulating judgments together. Outsiders who do not understand why we do not develop a more economical system of evaluation sometimes ridicule it, but the simple truth is: such a system does not exist.

This mechanism also lies at the heart of international comparison and international exchange. It is very important that we together develop a descriptive system based on all the elements mentioned before, clarifying many unclarities will and in the end saving us all a lot of time. Such a system would, however, never be able to replace our own way of evaluating which lies at the heart of our education. That is the reason why we need to talk so much and why we need teacher exchange. That is also the reason why, more generally speaking, a quality assurance system for higher music education can only function if it gives the richness of our own artistic evaluation system a place.

Coming back to credit point systems: be aware that introduction costs time and effort. Do not expect it to solve all problems, but try to see it in the larger context of the many attempts to make communication between institutes and within institutes easier. Do not only introduce it because you have to, but also use it as a means in curriculum development you are undertaking anyway. If the introduction of a credit point system is linked to further curriculum development, it does not have to be boring or to be a threat. It becomes worthwhile. After some time you may even, rather surprisingly, find yourself starting to like your points.

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## “Credit points”

by Harald Jørgensen (Norwegian Academy of Music, Oslo), presented at the AEC Congress 2002 in Vilnius, Lithuania

Credit points were introduced in the curriculum at the Norwegian Academy of Music in 1975. The institution was established two years previously, when the Norwegian government took over the private Oslo Conservatory of Music, and transformed this institution into a state funded Academy. One of the first tasks addressed by an eager staff was the development of a written curriculum, describing all the courses in the Academy. In this process, we adopted the credit point system from the beginning. I will address some internal aspects within a music academy of the use of credit points, and try to present both advantages and dangers with the system.

All discussions about curriculum can be reduced to two basic and interwoven questions:

- what subjects and courses are we going to include, and
- how important will each subject and course be within the curriculum

In this presentation, the second question is the central one.

What is ‘important’? I am sure that all of you are acquainted with discussions of educational importance, where participants have a tendency to propose that their own subject is more important than other subjects. Formerly, these discussions were usually solved by allocating a certain number of lecture hours to each subject. In such a situation, teachers may feel free to demand whatever effort they regard is necessary from their students, no matter how this will influence the students’ time to concentrate on other subjects and courses. This fight between teachers for their students’ time is likely to be still more aggravated in institutions where most of the teachers are part-time, with little opportunity to cooperate with fellow teachers. In the end, this may lead to an intolerable situation for the students, who find themselves in crossfire of demands from their different teachers.

In our work on the curriculum nearly 30 years ago, we soon acknowledged that the central issue in our discussion of the importance of subjects was not how many lecture hours they were allocated, but: How much work do we want the students to invest in this specific course? In this way, we transformed a qualitative concept ('educational importance') to a quantitative concept ('workload'). And we changed our view from a teaching-centred view of education to a student-centred view. I will address these two transformations with some additional remarks.

Firstly, the student-centred perspective. We were, of course, not the first institution that used this way of thinking. The relative importance of the teacher's teaching efforts and the student's learning efforts will always be discussed and studied within education. In our institutions, we have a strong tradition for the most teacher-dependent of all teaching situations, the single teacher/single student relationship, and we belong to institutions where the quality of our teachers' teaching is of the utmost importance. Even so, we accept that the students' learning and development ultimately depends on their own efforts. This directs our concern to student workload.

Secondly, the problems of transforming a qualitative notion like 'educational importance' into a quantitative value 'workload'. In my recollection, we encountered two major challenges related to this transformation.

The first was on the symbolical or rhetorical level, related to the introduction of a quantitative mode of thinking in an area where we were used to qualitative discussions. Our main concern was to emphasize that qualitative aspects of learning are related to time aspects and effort on behalf of the learner, and that a discussion of quality is abortive without a consideration of how much time the learner is allowed to invest in his learning project. In an institution where both students and teachers have a biography with a high quantity of work on their major instrument, this type of argument is, for the most part, readily understood. What we had to do was to emphasize that quantity was not a substitute for quality, but a necessary condition for the attainment of quality.

We agreed that the total workload for a course included all activities the student engaged in related to this course, i.e. all aspects of self-study necessary for the course, as well as all lectures, rehearsals or whatever else was included. Now, the second challenge was to find a simple way to describe credit points in relation to this workload. At that time, the system in Norway was to allocate 20 credit points to a full year study for an average student. If a course was allocated 10 credit points for a study year, this meant, of course, that the student was expected to use half of her time on this course. Today's ECTS system stipulates 60 credits per year of study for a full time student.

In our use of credit points, the argument is like this: If we allocate 4 credit points to a course, we actually say that we expect that the average student will use approx. 110 hours to this course during a study year. The argument is that an average study year is 40 weeks and an average study week is 40 hours. This adds up to a study year of 1600 hours. Divided into 60 credit points, each point corresponds to approx. 27 hours work. And 4 points corresponds to approx. 110 hours. Now, if the lecture year is 30 weeks, and this specific course has 2 hours lecture each week, this totals 60 hours, leaving 50 hours for self-study.

Instead of looking at this quantitative way of reasoning as a negative aspect of curriculum development, more and more teachers used it for a constructive dialogue about the nature of each course. The quantitative calculations were used in discussions about the number of credit points that it is reasonable to allocate to a course, and the relative weight of lectures and self-study or other activities within the course. For instance, discussing a course in aural

training for first-year students, we have to take into consideration the general entrance level in aural training among our students, and the expected level at the end of the course. In view of this, we may ask: is there allocated sufficient time to the course? If we agree that too little time is allocated, what do we do: are we going to give the course a higher credit point, or do we lower our expectations of their examination level and keep the credit points?

Back to the curriculum: using credit points has also disciplinary effect on those who are responsible for putting together the courses within a study. Firstly, we are not any longer able to add new courses indiscriminately to the curriculum. For every curriculum revision, we are tempted to add new courses without removing old ones, a practice that will result in overcrowded and over-ambitious curricula. Now, we have to allocate a certain number of course points to each course, and the sum has to be 60 a year within the ECTS system. The paradoxical result is that the consequences of using quantitative credit points is that it triggers a debate about what is important to learn, in the qualitative meaning of the concept. Secondly, curriculum developers have to consider how many and how small courses a curriculum allows before it is fragmented and loses all aspects of coherence and wholeness. Critics of the credit point system have argued that many courses with individual exams and credit points are fostering fragmentation. In my experience, fragmentation is a danger, but not because of credit points, but because of isolated teachers and courses, with little concern for their subject's relation to other subjects. This is a problem that demands discussions and cooperation between teachers, not the abolition of the credit system.

A third aspect of curriculum decisions is the evaluation of each course. In our institution, the more credit points for a course, the more elaborate is the evaluation of the course. A fourth aspect is that the free choice of certain subjects is easier to carry out with credit points for courses. Students can substitute courses with other courses and build up more individual studies within a range of courses. I have mentioned that the credit point system is based on the workload of an 'average student'. Now, we all know that there is no average student in our institutions. On the other hand: To have an average student in mind does not imply that the credit point system is trying to make all students average. The credit point system is a sort of guide into the relative importance of subjects within a study program. It is not a straight-jacket that only allows the students to invest a certain amount of work and effort in a course. The students are still free to allocate their efforts according to ability, skill and motivation for each course.

To conclude, I will briefly remind you of some of the points I have made, based on experience in my own institution:

1. Credit points and a quantitative debate about workload has actually sharpened our thinking about learning quality, because we are forced to acknowledge the interrelationship between quality and quantity.
2. Credit points have had a disciplinary effect on teachers regarding their demands on students. This is especially the case in courses with relatively few credit points, since these were the courses where we had most complaints from students. We may still have examples of what I call 'course imperialism' from some teachers, but, mostly, this is not a problem any longer.
3. Credit points have also had a disciplinary effect on curriculum developers. They are not allowed to add new courses without consideration of the total work load for the students.
4. Credit points for courses make it easier for students to build up more individualised study programs, if they are allowed to choose among a number of interchangeable courses.

Allow me one last piece of advice. For those of you who are introducing credit points in your institutions, I am sure that you will benefit from contact with and advice from institutions that have already gone through this process.