

Using the European Credit Transfer System in the U.S.

by WES staff members

Calculating U.S. credit equivalents for studies completed in Europe can be a difficult task. This is especially true when courses are listed on academic records without any indication of their relative weight in terms of units, credits or instructional hours.

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is a new tool that can help American evaluators convert European university courses into U.S. semester credits.

What is ECTS?

ECTS was developed by the European Union to establish common procedures for recognizing studies completed abroad.

The main goal of ECTS is to promote the exchange of academic information among European institutions of higher education in order to facilitate student mobility.

How does ECTS Work?

The system was largely established on the basis of mutual trust and confidence among member institutions. Students participating in ECTS receive full credit for all academic work successfully carried out at any of the ECTS partner institutions.

ECTS Credits

ECTS is a credit system based on a definition of what constitutes a full-time academic course load. Credits are assigned to all academic work (lectures, laboratory work, seminars, private study and theses) that comprises an integral part of the program of study.

Credits are awarded only when the course has been completed and all required examinations have been successfully taken.

In ECTS terms, **60 credits** represent the work load of one year of full-time study, **30 credits** are given for a semester and **20 credits** for a trimester. Within this framework, each institution allocates credits among its various courses.

Since it was established some 10 years ago, ECTS has been widely adopted. The following examples illustrate how different universities are using the system.

The University of Bern (Switzerland)

The *Lizentiat* (Lic.Phil), offered by the Department of English at the University of Bern, requires a minimum of eight semesters of study in one major

and two minor subjects.

The subject area of English is comprised of the following: medieval English language and literature (MELL); English and American literature (EAL); and modern English language (MEL). Each of these can be studied as either a major or minor subject.

The *Lizentiat* requires 300 ECTS credits. This description is translated into ECTS terms in the table below.

Lizentiat study requirements		
Major / Hauptfach		
Basic studies/ Grundstudium (1st - 4th semesters)	7 proseminars 2 proseminar paper Writing skills 1-3 Phonetics & Phonology	42 ECTS 10 ECTS 3 ECTS 2 ECTS
Main studies/ Hauptstudium (5th - 8th semester)	4 seminars 2 seminar papers	28 ECTS 14 ECTS
Basic & main studies	Option courses	21 ECTS
Lizentiat	Thesis & exams	30 ECTS
TOTAL (8 semesters)		150 ECTS
1st Minor / 1. Nebenfach		
Basic studies/ Grundstudium (1st - 4th semesters)	5 proseminars 1 proseminar paper Writing skills 1-3 Phonetics & Phonology	30 ECTS 5 ECTS 3 ECTS 2 ECTS
Main studies/ Hauptstudium (5th - 6th semester)	2 seminars 1 seminar paper	14 ECTS 7 ECTS
Basic & main studies	Option courses	14 ECTS
Lizentiat	Exams	15 ECTS
TOTAL (6 semesters)		90 ECTS
2nd Minor / 2. Nebenfach		
Basic studies/ Grundstudium (1st - 3rd semesters)	3 proseminars 1 proseminar paper Writing skills 1-3 Phonetics & Phonology	18 ECTS 5 ECTS 3 ECTS 2 ECTS
Main studies/ Hauptstudium (4th semester)	1 seminar	7 ECTS
Basic & main studies	Option courses	20 ECTS
Lizentiat	Exam	5 ECTS
TOTAL (4 semesters)		60 ECTS

ECTS Grades

Another useful feature of the ECTS is the common grading scale. It allows institutions to award grades using the home scale and also gives them the option of converting that grade into a common ECTS grade.

The University of Bern has adopted the system as follows:

BERN Grades

- 6 Excellent = outstanding performance in every way
- 5.5 Very Good = outstanding work with a few minor errors
- 5 Good = work of high standard but containing few serious errors
- 4.5 Satisfactory = work of middling quality, containing serious flaws
- 4 Sufficient = work that satisfies the minimum requirements
- 3.5 Fail = work requiring minor revision before it can pass
- 3 Fail = work requiring major revision before it can pass
- 2 Fail = work needs to be repeated
- 1 Fail = unacceptable/no work submitted

ECTS

- A
- B
- C
- D
- E
- FX
- F
- N/A
- N/A

240 ECTS credits. The table at the bottom of this page shows a sample program.

Vienna University of Economics (Austria)

The university has adapted the ECTS credits as follows:

Type of Course	Weekly Hours	ECTS Credits
AG <i>Arbeitsgemeinschaft</i> (study group)	1	2
PS <i>Proseminar</i>	1	1
SE <i>Seminar</i>	1	4
UE <i>Uebung</i> (lab/practical)	1	2
VO <i>Vorlesung</i> (lecture)	1	1

In this particular case, the number of ECTS credits allocated per course is determined by the nature of the course itself (for example, lecture, tutorial, pro-seminar) and not by the number of hours of weekly instruction. A one-year, full-time program is still 60 ECTS credits.

Stockholm University (Sweden)

Stockholm University has its own point system. The academic year is divided into course units and each unit is worth a certain number of points (*poangs*). A point is equivalent to one week of full-time work (40 hours per week), which includes lectures and independent study. One academic year consists of 40 points.

The bachelor's degree (*kandidatexamen*) requires a total of 120 points (three years of full-time study) including 60 points in the major subject and an independent thesis of 10 points.

The master's degree (*magisterexamen*) requires at least 160 points (four years of full-time study) including 80 points in the major and an independent thesis of 20 points or two shorter theses worth 10 points each.

Each point at Stockholm University is equivalent to 1.5 ECTS credits. Thus a student who completes one year or 40 points at Stockholm will have earned 60 ECTS credits.

The bachelor's degree therefore requires a total of 180 ECTS credits while the master's degree requires

University College Cork (Ireland)

University College Cork has simply adopted the ECTS credit system as its own. The courses, known as modules, are given credit values ranging from 5 to 20 (credits) depending on their relative importance in the program of study. The combined credit values assigned to all courses add up to a total of 60 credits per academic year.

Conclusion

As the above examples illustrate, the ECTS system has been adapted differently from institution to institution. The ECTS provides a common gauge of what constitutes a full-time annual or semester credit load and makes the conversion of courses completed in Europe into U.S. semester credits a simple arithmetic exercise. For American evaluators to benefit from this system, it is important to find out how a particular institution applies ECTS to its courses.

Sample master's and bachelor's programs at Stockholm University

	Bachelor's Degree				Master's Degree			
	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3		Year 4	
Subject:	A	B	A	C	A	A	B	A
Level:	Basic	Basic	Inter.	Basic	Advanced	Advanced	Inter.	Special
Points:	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
ECTS Credits:	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Optional Courses?	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Special Projects?	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes