

The structure of the High Vocational-Professional Education (HVPE) Area

Ideas for international common names and terms

Use of credits in the tertiary education area, linked to sectors

Part 6
January 2025

Preamble

This document concerns proposals relating to the international Tertiary Education Area, based on all types of formal and non-formal qualifications at levels 5 to 8 of the EQF. This TEA is divided into a number of sectors (areas). These can be clearly defined on the basis of a number of criteria and with the use of instruments that explicitly determine such a sector.

This is an approach that applies to the international classification of the TEA and the sectors indicated therein. In addition, English names are given that are proposed to be used in the international context. These can be used in international cooperation and agreements based on this between countries, institutions and organizations, as the associated sectors have their own defined characteristics.

Every country that wants to participate in this process in one way or another has complete freedom to design its own 'National Tertiary Education Area', with a self-chosen subdivision and appropriate criteria. Choices are made regarding having names for all kinds of concepts, often in the national language. If the government then uses English translations within one's own official communication about the national system, it can also choose one's own approach. There is no international body that can prescribe and enforce this.

We hope that in the coming years more and more countries will base themselves on our proposal and work with it. This can be compared to the Bologna Process that led to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Voluntary agreements have been established that people can adhere to in all kinds of partnerships. It is true that there are still countries that design certain deviating constructions, for all kinds of reasons. Countries can address each other within the EHEA about these matters, but never force each other to make the right adjustments. This can lead to misunderstandings and less transparent constructions and that is why we hope that our initiative will also lead to a form of harmonization for every National HEA.

In short, we work with international proposals and every country may and may participate in the process that we intend to initiate.

1 Introduction

Within the European Tertiary Education Area we have made a division in terms of areas within which qualifications at levels 5 and higher are offered. This includes two areas that focus on providing formal training:

- Higher Education – based on the European Higher Education Area
- High Vocational-Professional Education – within the HVPE Area, as we call it.

Specific attention is also requested for the so-called European Level 5 Area that runs straight through these two sectors, but also through the sector for non-formal qualifications called Business-Personal Education and Training (BPET).

Here are the corresponding diagrams.

TERTIARY EDUCATION AREA							
Level EQF			European Higher Education Area			Cycle	
8 7 6 5	BPET	HVPE	Unitary		Binary	Third Second First Short	
			HE		PHE		AHE

LEVEL 5 AREA					
Level EQF			European Higher Education Area		Cycle
5	BPET	HVPE	Unitary – HE	Binary – PHE – AHE	Short

In this document we discuss one of the important instruments that plays a role in all sectors, both nationally and internationally, namely the use of a unit for determining the study load and therefore for measuring the relative value of units on the basis of learning outcomes. This concerns a 'credit' or a 'study point' or a 'credit hour', or other names used for this.

The aim is to make a proposal regarding combining the systems for this within the areas. The starting point is to keep it simple, looking at the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) as it is used within the EHEA and therefore also in a NHEA, in case a country fully participates in the Bologna process.

2 Issue

Within an institution, in collaboration between institutions in their own country, but especially in collaboration between institutions in different countries, an important issue is the recognition of competences acquired earlier and elsewhere. These may be translated into learning outcomes for a specific unit. If a person has successfully completed this unit, it will formally count towards the exam for their own course. But there are several scenarios in which that unity plays a role.

We list a few of them here:

- Within an institution, the student transfers from one course to another during an academic year and wishes to obtain exemptions there on the basis of this unit;
- The same, but it applies to the transfer within your own country to another or equivalent course;
- The same, but this student completed that unit in an previous year, i.e. 'earlier', and wants to start a course for which that unit can provide exemptions;
- Within a partnership between institutions in a country, a course can be provided that has equal units at both institutions, as a 'joint programme' and then the question is how those units are handled;
- A student can take and pass a unit at an institution in another country within a partnership with his own institution, the question being how this will count within his or her own exam;
- The same, but there is no partnership between institutions and the student has completed units at a foreign institution.

It seems that an answer can always be given in an easy way, namely that the student in question submits proof of having passed the unit to the examination committee of the receiving programme. This person can make a judgment about what can count towards his or her own exam. This means a form of 'recognition of competencies acquired elsewhere'.

In formal partnerships between institutions, national and international, agreements can of course be made about the recognition and use of each other's units, based on a predetermined basic agreement. But these often apply for a certain period and only for the courses that fall under the collaboration.

A difficult situation can arise if the institutions belong to different education sectors and may not always reach the same level. It may also happen that an institution issues proof of having completed a unit with satisfactory results, but it is not clear what study load is associated with it. This is possible because in that country no formal study load is assigned to units or the system used for this differs clearly from that used in the student's own country.

Moreover, the certificate issued may be formulated in such a general manner that if there are no mutual agreements underlying it, it is virtually impossible for the receiving examination committee to do anything for the student.

The question is therefore how this can possibly be tackled if the aim is to set up the High VPE Area and also the European Level 5 Area.

3 Starting point for 'study load' of 'units'

With the documents in this series, we aim to start the discussion about the international transparency and unambiguousness of these two educational areas as much as possible. To achieve this, crucial aspects of a process must be identified as pillars of those areas. Instruments must be identified that can jointly maintain a well-functioning 'framework' for an educational area. National governments must also leave sufficient room for their own approach, in such a way that international partnerships can always be linked to this.

As we mentioned in the main document, number 1, the European Higher Education Area involves the following instruments within the framework of international agreements:

- a. Use of the term Cycle
- b. Use of the term Degree
- c. Dublin Descriptors for the cycles
- d. Use of the terms Professional and Academic (with a binary system)
- e. European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance, internal and external
- f. Basing the study load on the use of ECTS, and therefore credits
- g. Use of the diploma supplement, with a specific format.

Because all this already exists and has been further developed over the years, we in principle also use these instruments as the basis for a comparable framework for both educational areas. In this document we will look at what can result if we assume the ECTS with European Credits (EC) linked to it as a term for determining the study load of a course, an academic year and subsequently the units that are taken within it.

Moreover, we assume units that do not cross the boundaries between academic study years, to prevent complicated constructions from arising within international cooperation that can make everything confusing and unnecessary non-transparent.

4 The ECTS is connected to international higher education

We must make a clear agreement when it comes to the deployment and use of the ECTS. The system was developed for the international higher education area and is therefore firmly linked to institutions in countries where the NHEA is based on the EHEA. Then we are talking about the Universities and the Universities of Professional Education and Research (Universities of Applied Sciences), as well as higher education institutes that only offer in a formal context the Short Cycle, such as: Associate College, Business Academy and Higher Professional College.

This means that the ECTS as such cannot simply be used outside higher education, to avoid confusion, as the system as such is explicitly linked to all those other instruments within the EHEA. It would also mean that if adjustments are made within the ECTS in the Bologna process, they should immediately lead to adjustments elsewhere in other sectors and areas. It could also be the other way around, but the Bologna Process is simply autonomous internationally and has no formal connections with what is happening in the other sectors.

It should be noted that the last edition of the ECTS Users' Guide dates from 2015. There have therefore been no recent relevant developments that have led to an update of the system, although there is sufficient reason to do so, with all the adjustments in the other instruments and their use in all countries. But this situation has to be accepted – and there are now plans for such an update.

What is the ECTS

There can be a long review of what the ECTS entails. But we'll keep it as simple as possible here to avoid having to discuss all the details for a long time. The most important things:

- The ECTS concerns the use of 'ECTS credits', which can be abbreviated to 'credits' and then in practice to ECs. 'ECTS credit' is consistently used in the User's Guide.

- The academic year within the EHEA is set up in such a way for a full-time student that it normally has a study load of 1500 to 1800 clock hours. But that is not an obligation. A country may deviate from this.
- Units of learning outcomes are used.
- The units within an academic year have a combined study load of 60 EC.
- The diploma supplement lists the units completed and the EC per unit.
- The first three cycles (short, first, second) all have a lower and upper limit for the study load. It is up to a country to fit all this into its own system. The fourth cycle (PhD) does not have a fixed amount of ECs in the EHEA context.

The EC is therefore linked to units, within a program that has been tested against the Dublin Descriptors (or equivalent descriptors), the European Standards and Guidelines, the level and which as such results in a degree.

Problems in implementation and application

The ECTS is intended to enable international cooperation through the mutual deployment of units within the courses. But that is actually only what is concretely possible, i.e. 60 EC per academic year. There is quite a bit of freedom in national usage, with certain consequences:

- Number of ECTS for a cycle in a country, partly depending on the previous education and the orientation of the program;
- Study load per year in a country, even outside the borders of 1500 and 1800;
- The number of EC linked to a specific unit, to be determined by each institution itself, with its own standards and criteria, also to fit into an academic year;
- This means that the actual study load of a specific unit may differ per institution and per country - unless it has been agreed within a national or international partnership to equalize that study load, including in the case of 'joint programmes'.

Based on this, in practice there is no automatic way to recognize each other's units and take over the ECs. It is always a matter of an assessment by the examination committee of the learning outcomes and the awarding of the number of ECTS within your own study programme. This is completely logical to prevent, for example, a unit at institution A comprising 5 EC and at institution B a number of 8 EC, so that when transferring from A to B the student receives, as it were, 3 EC 'for free'.

The most important thing about the ECTS can be expressed as follows:

- The institutions involved are part of an NHEA based on the EHEA;
- They use a number of ECTS to determine the study load per year and for specific units;
- It is clear to which cycle the unit belongs and in which phase;
- It means that on this basis, the holder of proof that a specific unit has been completed with a satisfactory result will have access to a process whereby the examination board (in a formal sense, even if agreements have been made) determines how this unit counts towards the exam of the other study programme.

So it creates mutual trust, as it were. But again, there is no general automaticity of taking over the number of ECs linked to a unit.

The 'value over time' of a unit must also be taken into account. If a unit is immediately transferred elsewhere, that trust will come into play or it will be possible to fall back on the cooperation agreement that institutions have concluded, if applicable. But the longer a person waits before wanting to use the unit, the sooner the examination board will actually initiate an RPL (recognition of prior learning) procedure. It may be that at a certain point a unit no longer has any value because the learning outcomes are outdated.

In short, the desire to be able to recognize each other's EC within the EHEA under all circumstances is a utopia. It has, however, led to more respect for each other's education.

From outside the EHEA to an institution of higher education

No agreement has been made within the EHEA about dealing with 'credits' that are used outside higher education, i.e. the Bologna process. It was and is difficult to say anything about this in parallel with the EHEA, especially if completely different criteria were used. See further below at ECVET.

In a parallel education sector, it is also best to state, on one's own national initiative, within one's own regulations, that 'credits' are used and that they also fall under the ECTS. But that does require clarification, for example about the relationship with the national higher education area. For example, it is certainly possible nationally to choose a certain comparable approach, for example having qualifications that fall under Higher VET, i.e. HVPE. But by extension, all other EHEA instruments must also be used for that sector, such as descriptors, quality assurance and the like. Moreover, a government can decide to use the national organizations that also works for the NHEA.

The problem is then clear: what to do when the concrete situation is such that a distinction can no longer be made between the two sectors, but that they both fall under the national tertiary education area. It may then be decided at a certain point to include the relevant institutions in the NHEA, thus ensuring some form of merger. This means that a 'transfer' will take place and that is a quite drastic organization.

But if this is not done, the country may run into problems internationally. In other countries a different approach can also be chosen, with different names for those parallel sectors and also with their own use of a unit for the study load. One can also use the concept of 'credit', but on closer inspection it concerns a different type of unit.

It means that without having international agreements for sectors in addition to the EHEA, each country can arrange everything itself and can also use similar terms, but then there is no possibility to give each other that necessary trust in all circumstances.

Another situation is, for example, that a country can state that in such a parallel sector, in addition to the NHEA, only units of learning outcomes are used, without formally linking a measure of the study load. In such a case one is much further away from home, so to speak.

In short, in all these unclear cases, the receiving institution can only ensure a procedure in which the learning outcomes acquired elsewhere are examined in detail and how they fit into their own training. But don't worry, there are still scenarios that can work.

5 ECVET

Yet there was (is) another system within the international context, namely ECVET, the 'European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training'. In terms of the name, there was therefore a very clear similarity with the ECTS.

The ECVET system was developed by Cedefop on a project basis about ten years ago at the request of the European Commission, and is partly linked to, for example, the EQF and other frameworks. But with the exception of a few countries, it has hardly been used for the VET sector (levels up to and including 4), due to the fact that each country has its own unique approach. It was only very useful for internships lasting a semester, as 'half the study load of a year'.

In 2019, after various discussions, the European Commission pulled the plug out of the entire system, with the recommendation in 2020 to abandon this system. Reference is made to other initiatives considered more important for the VET sector, up to and including level 4 of the EQF.

ECVET was not originally intended for levels 5 and higher. Countries that have put a lot of effort into offering this have made use of the experiences, such as Malta and Estonia. But that approach was not strong enough to maintain ECVET at those levels.

It is of course obvious that in a coming process around the VPE sector and for the EL5A, the experiences with the ECVET can be drawn upon.

6 BPET (non-formal)

We will leave the BPET sector out of this for the moment. Other systems can be devised for the non-formal qualifications linked to an NQF, but with similarities with what we aim to achieve here. In line with this, we will return to this issue with 'micro-credentials'.

7 How to go on...

The aim is to explicitly look for a credit system for the HVPE sector, in any case aimed at the international context, outlined in a number of steps. We can then look at what is possible within that system for qualifications at level 5. They form the bridge between 4 and 6, as well as between secondary and tertiary education, and this means that we must look at how this all relates to what happens at level 4 – or not.

Approach and research

Because we are looking for a HVPE credit system that fits in as closely as possible with the ECTS and can count on the broadest possible support, the first phase of the approach could include the following steps:

- Inventory which countries have a formal sector in addition to their NHEA
- Find out which countries have introduced a formal system for that sector
- Make an analysis of these systems based on the criteria for the ECTS
- Inventory of the national organizations involved in the national system.

In parallel, consultations can be planned with:

- European Commission, looking back at ECVET and discussing current plans
- Committees involved in ECVET
- Desk research
- Cedefop on the experiences gained
- European associations for VET
- Possible other organizations that have an interest in this subject.

This can also be used for:

- Inventory among other countries regarding interest in joining in the future
- Check whether there are budgets for the approach or whether projects can be set up
- Consultation with the Bologna Follow-Up Group about further developments within the EHEA and the possibilities for collaboration.

In addition, several actions are certainly possible, but we will include them in an action plan in the coming year. The aim is also to set up a small steering group to draw up this action plan and supervise its dissemination.

At this stage, let us choose an abbreviation for the intended VP Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, i.e. VPCS for short. Of course, another – shorter - abbreviation may also be introduced as the process is underway.

8 Collaboration around VPCS and ECTS

As indicated, it is very important to connect as closely as possible to the ECTS when developing the VPCS. But it must also be taken into account that there are institutions in the HVPE sector that also offer qualifications up to and including level 4, thus connecting two sectors. ECVET as such failed because – as mentioned – almost all countries had no interest in such a system and therefore blocked its further introduction.

Within the VET system it is never possible to determine exactly how much time someone needs to master certain learning outcomes. Sometimes it is more than expected and sometimes less. Creating 'standardized' units was therefore seen as creating barriers in the pursuit of flexibility. Certain competences can also appear in multiple parts of a qualification, so that one unit can also cover a specific part of the other unit. One must also be able to accelerate, if that is useful.

A system will therefore have to be created that has its own character within the HVPE area, but which also fits in on important points with what is seen as important within a NHEA. This requires an attitude that is open to all comments from different quarters, possibly with some clear principles.

9 High VPE Area and a unit for study load

As such, the concept of 'credit' has acquired a very strong place in education at levels 5 and higher. This actually means that when using it, one immediately thinks of its use within 'higher education' and therefore of the ECTS. So that is the power of having an international understanding...

However, it is true that the 2015 ECTS guide always refers to 'ECTS credit', so it is stated in full. Countries then turn it into 'credit', to keep it simple. In addition, there are also institutions that use the term 'ECTS' (i.e. 'a unit with 5 ECTS'), but that is very special because this is the system itself and not a unit for the study load (and it is strange to speaking of '5 systems'). It is then absolutely advisable to use EC as the abbreviation, in all circumstances.

All this means that if a specific unit for the study load is also used within the HVPE sector, confusion must be prevented on all kinds of international fronts. This does not rule out doing something with

the concept of 'credit', as can be seen in various parts of the world. The point is that it is clear in which context this concept is used.

Because we propose, and also want to communicate this to the BFUG of the Bologna Process, that 'EC' is consistently used as a concept in the EHEA, something else must be devised for the VPCS as a concept for the unit.

The proposal is to use 'VPC' for this, i.e. the '*Vocational-Professional Credit*'.

We do not use the E for European because it is expected that this term can and will also be used in other countries, in the international context. 47 countries are members of the EHEA, so much more than we know for the EU. It can therefore be marketed in a more general manner, the VPC.

10 European Level 5 Area also

A process will therefore be initiated that focuses on setting up and shaping the HVPE sector, including the use of an international system for credits, the VPC. In addition, we want to see how a process can be started for the European Level 5 Area. The first step towards this is also planned for the coming year.

11 Role of the EQF

A specific role in all of this is reserved for the use of the EQF and therefore also the NQFs. In 2023 the last countries formally joined the EQF with their NQF so that in principle all qualifications can be compared in terms of level. The learning outcomes of a qualification are also taken into account. What is emphatically not (always) relevant to the EQF, although opinions may differ based on certain sources, are the following aspects:

- Scope of a qualification, measured in clock hours, i.e. for the study load;
- The type of provider, whether or not funded and whether or not also a provider of formal qualifications;
- The accreditation and quality assurance of the qualification, regardless of the status of the provider;
- Whether or not to offer a qualification supplement;
- The name of the qualification;
- The right to progress to other qualifications.

In addition, the EHEA does not include a formal and agreed condition that the four cycles belong to levels 5 to 8 of the EQF. It is up to a country itself to determine this, by using the descriptors of the NQF (also more or less an own version of the EQF descriptors) declared compatible with the Dublin Descriptors, if that is possible. But even then, a country may legally stipulate that the HEIs are not obliged to include the levels in the diploma supplement. This is of course recommended.

This situation must therefore be taken into account in the process, also because there are often separate regulations in a country for the progression from a parallel sector (such as Higher VET and our HVPE) to the learning paths in the NHEA.

12 Initial thoughts VPCS with features

Here are some suggestions when it comes to the features of the VPCS. These are features that everyone actually expects and that it will not be surprising if they are actually found in the system.

- A full-time study year has 60 VPC.
- Units are based on learning outcomes.
- The study load of an academic year in a country within the national context is equal to the number of clock hours used within the NHEA for each of the cycles.
- The full-time qualifications are linked to the NQF.
- Units are expressed in whole numbers of VPC.

13 Tertiary Credits?

Finally, one more thought that can be included in the discussions. As indicated, the intention is that the credit system for the HVPE Area also provides a connection between the VET sector (where Colleges can also offer level 5 and higher under the banner of HVPE) and the HE sector. But there is also an option in which only the HVPE Area and the HE Area are taken into account, so that the characteristics of the underlying credit systems are simply the same. The difference is that they are used for different areas.

A very creative idea is to tie in with the fact that both sectors fall under the Tertiary Education Area. Then one could also talk about positioning the VPC and the EC within a system for Tertiary Credits, or TC. The government can use this to show that 'the outside world' knows that there is no difference between the status of the VPC and the EC.

But hey, it's an idea that can be kept in mind. So first start the process and then see what is useful to take with you at a certain point.

The topics within this series are:

1. Classification of tertiary education, the positioning of the HVPEA and the use of international common names
2. A closer look at the division of tertiary education
3.
 - a Levels within the HVPEA
 - b Learning paths within the HVPEA
 - c Progression from 5 (HVPE - SCHE) to 6 (First Cycle)
 - d Top-up programmes at level 5
 - e Specific approach SCHE
4. Subdivision within the HVPEA and certificates
5. The positioning of the L5A
6. Use of credits in tertiary education, linked to sectors
7. Harmonization of instruments for the EHEA and the HVPEA – for example looking at the European Standards and Guidelines, the Dublin Descriptors and the ECTS for the EHEA, EQAVET, EQF-LLL descriptors and ECVET respectively.
8. Use of micro-credentials in the EL5A
9. Why having the EHEA and the VPEA next to each other...