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RIGSREVISIONEN



Extract from Rigsrevisionen's report on

# the management of ECTS credits in institutions of higher education

submitted to the Public Accounts Committee



1849  
147.281  
237  
1976  
114.6  
22.480  
908

August 2018

# 1. Introduction and conclusion

## 1.1. PURPOSE AND CONCLUSION

1. This report is about the Ministry of Higher Education and Science's management of the ECTS system and the time Danish students spend on their studies at business academies, university colleges and universities. Rigsrevisionen initiated the study in November 2017.

2. Using the ECTS system has been mandatory at institutions of higher education since 2001, and the use of the system was incorporated in the Danish University Act in 2003. Since 2007, the ECTS system has also been incorporated in the annual Fiscal Act, as educational grants are based on ECTS credits obtained by the students. In 2017, grants for higher education totalled DKK 13.5 billion. This amount did not include study grants (SU) or basic research funding that also supports higher education.

3. Denmark has adopted the ECTS system (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). The system provides a common international framework for education. The purpose of the ECTS system is to increase the students' mobility and opportunities to study in other countries. The ECTS system sets a standard for full-time studies – not only in order to facilitate recognition of qualifications across national borders, but also between Danish institutions of education.

4. Research shows a positive relationship between the amount of time students' spend on their studies and their academic achievement. This finding was also confirmed in a report by the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) from 2014 and in a report published by The committee on better university programmes from 2018.

Since 2010, however, a number of studies have indicated that the students do not study full time. For instance, The expert committee on quality in higher education concluded in its report from 2015 that some types of education could be managed on a part-time basis, and that the time students spent on their studies should be increased by 20 % on average in order to qualify as full-time studies (varying from a few percentage points to 50% depending on type of programme). Furthermore, in its report from 2018, The committee on better university programmes finds that overall Danish university students do not spend full time on their studies.

### THE ECTS SYSTEM

The ECTS system is an international credit system, where one year of full time studies equals 60 ECTS credits. Thus ECTS credits express the workload associated with completion of a specific course or programme. In a European context, this means that, in order to achieve the learning outcomes defined for a specific programme, the workload of a typical full-time student is expected to be between 1,500 and 1,800 hours in one academic year.

Source: Ministry of Higher Education and Science.

*The expert committee on quality in higher education and The committee on better university programmes were both established by the government and published their reports in 2015 and 2018, respectively.*

### SECTION 19.22 OF THE FISCAL ACT

Most government funding for full-time education is allocated based on the taximeter system. Taximeter rates are awarded per full-time-equivalent student. A full-time-equivalent student corresponds to passed exams equivalent to one full-time academic year (60 ECTS points.)

5. The Ministry of Higher Education and Science and some of the institutions of higher education hold the view that the institutions provide full-time education programmes, when these have been organised based on the assumption that the students must study full time to complete the programmes. Rigsrevisionen finds that managing educational funding appropriately requires knowledge of the actual time the students spent studying. According to the Fiscal Act, funding is allocated per full-time-equivalent student, which is a unit indicating that a student has completed a full-time programme and obtained 60 ECTS credits. The ECTS credits express the estimated student workload required to complete a programme. Because the workload required to complete a programme is based on an estimate, the institutions need to monitor and substantiate the actual student workload on an ongoing basis. Knowledge of discrepancies between the estimated and the actual workload should be considered in the organisation of future programmes in order to achieve a better balance between the two.

6. The purpose of the study is to assess whether the Ministry of Higher Education and Science has ensured satisfactory management of ECTS credits at institutions of higher education. The report answers the following questions:

- Has the Ministry of Higher Education and Science established a framework for the institutions' management of ECTS credits?
- Are the educational institutions monitoring the student workload on a regular basis, and are the institutions able to substantiate (and document) the classification of the education programmes offered as full-time studies?
- Do selected educational institutions draw on knowledge of the student workload in their organisation of the education programmes

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## CONCLUSION

It is Rigsrevisionen's assessment that the Ministry of Higher Education and Science has not ensured satisfactory management of ECTS credits at the institutions of higher education. The ministry cannot be certain that all higher education is organised as full-time programmes, and thus meeting the requirement that a full-time workload of one academic year corresponds to 60 ECTS credits. Therefore, the ministry cannot be certain either that it achieves value for money through educational funding, cf. the provisions of the Fiscal Act in this respect.

The study shows that for the past 17 years with mandatory use of ECTS credits at the educational institutions, the Ministry of Higher Education and Science has been too passive in its approach to the institutions' management of ECTS credits. It appears from the legislation governing the institutions of higher education that they must provide, for instance, master programmes worth 120 credits. It also appears from the legislation that 60 ECTS credits corresponds to a full-time academic year. However, the ministry has not determined the number of hours that a typical student should use per ECTS credit point, nor has it instructed the institutions of education to follow up on the students' actual workload and substantiate that they provide full-time education programmes. This in spite of the fact that the ministry, at least since 2010, has been familiar with clear indications that the student workload in many of the programmes does not correspond to a full-time academic year.

Rigsrevisionen has examined 25 educational institutions' data on student workload. Our examination shows that the institutions monitor the student workload very differently, and some fail to monitor the workload entirely. Moreover, Rigsrevisionen's examination of measurements of student workload indicates that many education programmes are not full-time studies, and some cannot remotely be characterized as such. On the basis hereof, it is Rigsrevisionen's assessment that neither the Ministry of Higher Education and Science nor the educational institutions are able to substantiate that these programmes are full-time education programmes.

Furthermore, Rigsrevisionen has scrutinised the management of ECTS credits in 16 specific education programmes in four different educational institutions. This review shows large differences in the way the institutions include ECTS credits in their planning of programmes, monitor the student workload and in the way management apply the results of the monitoring. The Metropolitan University College plans the programmes based on an estimation of the time it takes for the students to achieve the learning outcomes. Through subsequent monitoring, it is established whether the estimated workload was realistic, and any imbalances in the programmes are then adjusted. As an example of the opposite, the University of Copenhagen has chosen to use ECTS credits in their planning of programmes, but decided not to monitor the student workload. Rigsrevisionen finds that to achieve satisfactory planning of the education programmes, efforts to balance the estimated workload with the monitored workload should be ongoing.

Correspondingly, the studies carried out by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science show that often the workload does not correspond to a full-time academic year. It is Rigsrevisionen's assessment that the fact that the education programmes have been organised in a way that often allows the students to achieve the learning outcomes in less time than estimated, may result in a socio-economic loss as well as a loss to the students. The ministry has informed Rigsrevisionen that it will take steps to make the students spend more time studying, because it must be assumed to have a positive impact on their learning outcomes. The ministry shares Rigsrevisionen's perception that there is still – in spite of increased focus – potential for improvement in this area at both the universities, university colleges and business academies.