



**Transcribing Study Abroad: Facilitating Credit Transfer for U.S. Students**  
**Friday, November 3, 2006, 11:00—12:15**

**Chair: Jon Crawford**, Director of International Education, Roanoke College, USA

**Presenters:**

**Margarita Sianou**, Director of Evaluations, World Education Services, Inc., USA

**Marielle de Dardel**, Head of International Relations, Université de Fribourg, Switzerland

**Thomas Saville**, Associate Director for Study Abroad, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, USA

**Linda Stuart**, Senior Program Officer & J-1 Coordinator, ISEP, USA

**Louisa Morgan**, Transcripts Manager & Program Assistant, ISEP, USA

Despite policies, procedures and everyone's best efforts, U.S. students participating in integrated programs abroad often return home to face credit transfer challenges related to their coursework overseas. Using their experiences with U.S.-European exchanges, presenters will outline the most common challenges and offer resources and best-practice solutions to turn the challenges into successes.

**Margarita Sianou: Some Background--Overview of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)**

- **Historical context:** ECTS was originally used as a relative value to provide recognition of students' study abroad experiences. In 2004, the Bologna Process transformed higher education to a 3-cycle degree structure (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate) and within this Bologna framework, ECTS was assigned a specific, absolute value, thus becoming a transfer credit unit as well as an accumulation unit.
- **About ECTS:** This grading scale ranks students on a statistical basis. 1 academic semester = 30 ECTS credits. An example of a normal course load for a native student would be 5 courses, of 6 ECTS each. Thus, since an average course load in the U.S. is 15 credits, and 30 credits in the ECTS system, WES recommends dividing the ECTS by 2 to obtain a rough U.S. equivalent of credits.
- **A challenge:** The ECTS system is quite different from the U.S. system, and transferring credits along this 2:1 ratio does not always seem to be an accurate reflection of the credit a student deserves. ECTS does not count hours of classroom instruction to determine its credits, but instead bases hours on the entire student workload, including labs, lectures, independent and private study, preparation of outside work, projects, examinations, etc. Due to language barriers, etc., it is very difficult for non-native students to complete and/or succeed in 5 courses in order to get the typical 30 ECTS credits.

**Marielle de Dardel: Perspectives from an international university**

- **Regarding outgoing students:** The transition to the more structured 3-degree program decreased mobility for international students to study abroad. Those who do are frequently taking a gap year. Fribourg's outgoing students discuss courses to be



taken abroad with his/her advisor prior to departure and sign a pre-established learning agreement designating the worth of these courses.

- **Regarding incoming U.S. students:** Incoming students usually sign up to take courses in many different subjects, which may be with different faculties and at different schools within the university. This academic system is very different from a centralized registrar; it is not set up for—and electronically, cannot cope with—the automatic generation of transcripts that include this variety of courses. Thus, the process for generating transcripts for visiting students can be complicated and is more time-consuming.
- **Regarding ECTS:** As the 2:1 ratio is not always a fair representation of non-native students' work (with language barriers, etc.), Université de Fribourg multiplies the number of ECTS credits earned by 1.5 for these students. Sometimes students have the option to submit a paper rather than take an exam, but not as many ECTS credits will be given in these cases.

#### **Thomas Saville: Perspectives from a U.S. institution**

- **Regarding incoming international students:** Require students sign a transcript release form upon arrival, or during orientation. This ensures from the beginning that a copy of the transcript will get sent to ISEP, and no one will have to chase down a student to get his/her authorization for its release later.
- **ECTS or contact hours for outgoing students?** Most U.S. institutions find more information is always better; that is, it is helpful if international coordinators include ECTS credits *as well as* contact hours on the transcript—registrars can take all this into account when transferring credit values. And transcripts do not have to be translated!
- **ECTS vs. U.S. credit hours:** Although the U.S. system of assigning credit values is generally designated by the number of hours of class instruction per week (unlike ECTS), keep in mind that coursework completed outside of the classroom is not dismissed; for each U.S. credit hour, it is expected that at least another 2 hours be spent on outside work.

#### **Linda Stuart and Louisa Morgan: Perspectives from ISEP**

- **Discussion of ISEP's resources and protocols:** Coordinators should refer to the Coordinator's Page → Publications → Guidelines and Forms to find all transcripts-related documents. ISEP's Transcript Evaluation Guidelines offer suggestions on grade conversion specific to each country. For explanations of other transcripts-related questions, refer to the Transcripts Frequently-Asked-Questions handout. (Link below)
- **Regarding ECTS:** ISEP suggests taking into account both the 2:1 ratio and the number of contact hours when assigning transfer credits to U.S. students; use whichever option is higher to give the student enough credit for work done abroad (See Transcript Evaluation Guidelines for a discussion of this).
- **Regarding late transcripts:** ISEP sometimes encounters difficulties when U.S. students/registrars/parents demand transcripts but, due to the situation as described by



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de Dardel (academic systems with multiple schools, faculties, and dates for grade submission), transcripts simply cannot be generated yet. Although ISEP and the coordinators do their best to help the process along, patience, flexibility, and respect for cultural differences are always essential!

### **Handouts to be uploaded**

All handouts are in the conference envelope: The WES slide show is in the form of a handout booklet; ISEP's only handout to be uploaded is the Frequently Asked Questions document.