ECTS in Romania – a regulated counterexample

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ABSTRACT

Building a grading system compatible of a uniform but performing university structure of the European Community was a good time subject of analysis, competition and criticism. Far for being abandoned, the idea must recur by means of individual initiatives but also by systematic applications. The present work resumes the principles of ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) grading in the conditions when these became in Romania the subject of a law. Further the principles are analyzed, also as the practical experiments and the baleful consequences of an obtuse and profound limiting law which restricts the progress and the university initiative. The analysis manner is a comparative one, emphasizing the close but also the lasting time consequences.

Keywords: ECTS, grading system, fairness, regulation.

INTRODUCTION

The grading in ECTS appears as one of the most sensitive points in the way to extend and make compatible the European high education system.

In accordance with its role the grading catches in the same time the level to fulfill some given school tasks (Dahlgren, 2009), a measure of exigency associated to a given teacher and a mechanism to harmonizing different university or school systems.

The issues to introduce the ECTS grading has a reach literature where from are to be selected (Dahlgren, 2009; Karran, 2004). Other literature tries to study the harmonizing of the traditional symbolic systems with the combined numerical-symbolic systems (Karran, 2005; Sintija, 2015).

This paper aims to analyze the effects of applying an excessive law of education on the real chances of compatibility of European education systems by means of a case study.

In the first part are made a series of some historical and legislative framing markers regarding the grading problem in the education system in Romania. The second part examines some aspects of the note as an indicator of quality in any training process. The third part makes the analysis of an experiment applied in an engineering school and then the fourth section is devoted to the analysis and interpretations of the studied situations. One can find here the new proposals which are determined by the jams of application of a conservative law and by the effects of the lack of practical experience enough motivated.

The paper concludes with remarks regarding both the given analyzed situation and the consequences of its uncritical extension.
ABOUT AN HISTORY BETWEEN CUSTOMS AND LAWS

Among the European countries the Romanian school builds its way by combining its own experience with the experience of more or less neighbor countries.

When it comes to scoring, Romania has inherited a system based on ten numerical values and a symbolic interpretation.

This combination assumes that the note is a fraction of the 1 to 10 domain so that the value of 10 means an entirely conformity with the requirement of the teacher and the value of 1 corresponds conventional of a simple presence in any teaching activity or is a manner to punish the ethics violation. Also conventional the 5 note means the admission level.

For example, in a situation where, for successive assessments graded with 5, 9, 7 the overall grading corresponds to the average value of $(5 + 9 + 7) / 3 = 7$. Similarly, for the situation characterized by the set of grades 5, 7, 7, the global grading corresponds to the value $(5 + 7 + 7) / 3 = 6.33$. Conventionally, the average score can be used, as such or by rounding, in relation to the median value of 0.5 of the interval between units. In this case, rounding is the value of 6. However, at the same time, there are situations in which the notes do not round off.

In an elegant and natural wording, the Romanian Instruction Law of 1995 specified at art.148 that “…in the national system of instruction and education the grading is done, as rule, from 10 to 1. It is recommended to use of transfer credits and their recognition both in the same institution but also between national and/or international institution…..”.

The changes followed the 1989 year, the intensive contacts with European university live had a strong impact which displaced the grading issue towards the political field.

By the provisions of National Education Law of Romania (2011), it is stipulated explicitly that “…art. 144. (1) The academic success of a student during a study program is given by summative evaluations of exam type and by continuous evaluation… (3) The outcomes by learning are appreciated at exams: a) with grades as entire notes from 10 to 1, where the note of 5 certifies the minimal competence level for a subject and the associated discipline and the passing of the exam; …”. The art.140 of the same law ascertains that “…the methodology to manage the exams, the competences, the verified knowledge, the relation between the learning outcomes and the grades, the study diplomas and certificates granted are identical for any instruction form corresponding to a study program in the frame of the same high education institution …. ”.

It is worth mentioning that, in Romania, university autonomy is recognized as recognizing the teacher's initiative to improve, innovate.

The set of legal provisions, their relativity, in the absence of systematic application, have led to and lead to the most significant contradictions.

In summary, it follows that the grading system in Romania is a mixed one: mathematical, in operational aspects and expressed through verbal constructions, most of the time understood, in the phases of interpretation.

This article analyzes and warns about the effects of an improvised grading system on the evolution of relationships that can provide the correct alignment and reporting between different education systems.

Traditionally, the grade is regarded as a numeric value to assess the approximation degree of a quality face to a given standard of that. In the most cases the approximation is more significant when
the grade is bigger.

The tendency nearby of European universities arises some problems typical to building large systems, stable and performing in a large domain, starting from elementary systems with local property of stability and performance. So, the vision and the local role of the grade, of the grading system, metamorphoses to performances indexes situated at a higher conceptual level.

When one examines the grade facets as quality index, the individual fingerprint of the teacher can not be avoided. Any school is defined by the serving teachers’ team. Each member of the team contributes to next specialist forming both by their professional competence and by their sum of specific individual features. With or without our will, these features manifest by affinities, by value judgments and, why not, by the whole range of expressions of the teacher's personality.

The individual specific manifests itself by means of options, by means of sensitivities, through requirements.

Even without suggesting possible harmful individual influences, the traits of the teacher appear as fingerprints that will help define a specific of the served school, together with all faculty members.

The effects of individual traits of each teacher, separately, appear by means of a medium value of the grade. It is obvious that an exigent teacher will offer to a group of evaluated students a grade of smaller medium value.

On this value, school, as an institution, can not be manifested and it is not good to manifest itself, and by the simple fact that, ultimately, this value is a part of the teacher's autonomy.

Changing the average grade value does not in any way mean changing the intrinsic value of the evaluated individuals. The change in the value of the average grade must be unconditionally subject to the principles of general ethics valid in university life and society.

At least two conclusions arise from here. The first conclusion is that the grade itself is relevant only to a particular relationship between a given student and a particular teacher, during a cooperative work, in relation to known standards in a specific academic environment. A second conclusion is that any assessment is all the more relevant as it is made with more abstract means, such as notes with numerical value and they are interpreted by removing too individual influences.

**PRINCIPLES AND MEANS OF AGGREGATED EXPERIMENT**

To compare the effects of grading in a given real case one choose to work with an aggregated grading way further completed with an interpretation stage based on the ECTS standards and with another interpretation based on a traditional, local standard.

The aim of the experiment is to put together principles and practice where from the details can offer answers and provoke new questions.

The basic principle of European credit transfer system, and beyond, is to define the competencies, skills and abilities to be acquired during the school and valuing them by assigning the minimum required workload to be developed.

It seems to be natural that the grading base on all the credited activities and the final outcome be like a mean value.

The effects are studied by treating a real situation comparatively using two grading ways: with grades as resulting from calculated means and with grades as integer values coming from rounding
or similar approximations. The qualitative or interpretation system traditionally explained is given
in Table 1.

Values in Table 1 are approximated as ECTS grade definitions. The rigid manner to convert is
more than obvious. No comment regarding the concrete manner to use the conversion table.

The ECTS is developed to keep equivalent the university studies in each stage and to ensure the
transfer conditions between schools of the same range of the countries with different instruction
systems. The system assumes two fundamental aspects: the credits and the grading scale.

**Table 1. Conversion traditional grading system / the ECTS grading system**

*University „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” of Iași, 2011*

| ECTS scale | Romanian grading scale | Describing the grading scale | Proportion in the group |
|------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| A          | 10                      | EXCELLENT - outstanding performance with only minor errors | 10                      |
| B          | 9                       | VERY GOOD – above the average standard but with some errors | 25                      |
| C          | 7-8                     | GOOD - generally sound work but with a number of notable errors | 30                      |
| D          | 6                       | SUFFICIENT - fair but with significant shortcomings | 25                      |
| E          | 5                       | PROMOTABLE – performance meets the minimum criteria | 10                      |
| FX         | 4                       | INSUFFICIENT - some more work required before the credit can be awarded | -                       |
| F          | 1-3                     | INSUFFICIENT (entirely unacceptable) - considerable further work is required | -                       |

**Credits.** The credits target the qualitative aspect of the instruction. The credit component part is solved by dividing the entire corpus of instruction with the aim to get a university qualification in credited subunits called activities or disciplines.

**Grading scale.** The grading scale or the set of ECTS rating marks are surprising the quantitative aspect of instruction, with strictly individual character. The grades set has as aim to seek the framing of quality effort developing by the student into equivalence classes beyond the traditional grading system of the country where the student is preparing.

The principle of using ECTS grading is to recognize some statistic grounds surprising the human nature and to put in suitable procedure a way to associate a unique frame of expressing of the results acquired by the student during the assessment process of its results.

In order to have a correct view on the manner to find the ECTS grading it is necessary to have in mind some aspects regarding the school and the specific student-teacher relation:

- The basic unit of transfer between universities and/or schools is not academic year or semester. The basic unit is the package of disciplines, in particular case, the discipline or activity of the curriculum (curriculum). This means that a student can attend and promote at least one subject (discipline) or activity in a university. Attending the chosen discipline is done without requiring the student to go through the entire package specific to a school or academic qualification if it fulfills the conditions imposed on that university duty.

- The ECTS rating, as a quantitative aspect, puts the student's individual component in the way it responds to the requirements, and the individual component of the teacher, through the way he has managed to impose his school standards and his own quality standard, often known as "exigency".

- ECTS grades, as quantitative aspects, recognize the Gaussian statistical distribution of the results of individual group and eliminate, from the very beginning, any deviation, which can
influence such distribution.

In this way the ECTS system respects the teacher's autonomy to establish the basis of assessment and to follow it. At the same time, the teacher's right to permanent individual perfection is implicitly acknowledged.

**Table 2. ECTS grading system (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009).**

| ECTS grade | A | B | C | D | E |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Associated group inside of overall qualified student number [%] | 10 | 25 | 30 | 25 | 10 |

Consequently of these principles is that for a grade in the existing discipline is applied the classification scale, subject only to ensure transparency and fairness face to the work of student-teacher duo as in Table 2. It is worth noting in this context that one can speak of "recognition of a grade" and not by "granting a qualifier" since this operation occurs as a recognition of a status quo.

In this way, it results, unequivocally, that the basis of any ECTS grading is a systematic and accurate numerical preliminary assessment.

**INTERPRETATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Taking and processing of experimental data are reproduced as in (Isoc, 2005) in a new comparative framework, summarized in Table 3.

In Table 3 is given a synthesis of some possible situations. Thus in column 2 is found the value of the real numerical awarded grade. Till the end, to this numerical grade, an ECTS grade will be associated as in column 5. The real grade will be expressed as a real positive value with two decimals.

For the sake of the study, the number of decimal is reduced in column 3 and to respect the regulation in column 4 the numerical values are rounded to integers. In columns 5 and 6 are given the symbolic grades in version established for the Romanian traditional system, and further the ECTS symbolic grading. As a reference, in column 7 are given the groups assumed by the ECTS grading system which is a base for the comparison.

The context in which this work was carried out contained a significant number of discussions with regard to various aspects that in fact concerned the school as a social institution and system in crisis.

A series of contradictory discussions were focused on the accuracy of student’s assessment with reference to values that meet in Table 3.

The main aroused problems were:

- It is useful a particular precision associated with the evaluation process of student’s activity?
- It is possible to assess accurately the results of student’s activity?
- If the accuracy of student’s assessment is a must, which is the price to be paid for this?

Following the study, the author finds that the accuracy of assessment of student achievement is a false problem. Evaluation has the same qualities you need to build any feedback measurement: reliability, sensitivity, relevance. Fidelity is the feature of the evaluation to capture the quality of
learning outcomes of students through the specific individual efforts in achieving them. Sensitivity is the feature of the evaluation to effectively capture in detail how to perform the tasks under evaluation. Relevance is the feature of the evaluation to be in the focus of interest for the person being evaluated, for the institution undertaking the assessment, and for stakeholders of the instruction.

The detailed situation in Table 3 reveals several significant issues:

- As principle, the both, by scoring, the traditional and ECTS grading systems should match. Whatever the compatibility situation between systems, their findings should not be inconsistent or incorrect in relation to the status quo.

- Using two decimal grading systems makes grouping very correct. There is no conflicting situations, ie grades of the same value that is contained in the symbolic grades, traditional respectively ECTS different.

- Using a single decimal leads to first conflicting situations. Although grades 17 and 18 are numerically identical, ie 7.1, ECTS grading encompasses them in two different groups, namely B, and respectively C.

- Use of integer value as grades, further complicate the situation and cause multiple conflicts for both, traditional and ECTS system. Examples: positions 3, 4, 5, or 6, 7, 8, 9 correspond to grade 8, but the first three are grouped to ECTS grade of A and B. The following four grades group to B. Around the position 17, respectively 18 for the same integer value of 7 for the grade, the grouping is done in C, respectively D.

- Using traditional grading system does not comply with ECTS grouping. It is emphasized here the idea that the grouping emerges from the results and is not an anticipated situation.

- An unwanted redundancy occurred. Thus, in Romania is practiced apparently a restrictive and unjustified legal provision that limits drastically an interpretation system based on local regulation such as that given in Table 1. The action of legal requirement distorts the interpretation and affects the fairness of assessment of members group.

Interpretation continues with answers to the main relevant issues presented in (Karran, 2004).

- Finding a right correlation between ECTS grading and local grades. As it considers other authors (Karran, 2004, 2005), correlation between scoring systems seems a simple problem but it turns out often insurmountable. The explanation is simple: the ECTS grading system is built with severity using two keys control: the size of the group and the value of the group reporting the results of cohort. Most of the local scoring systems have only one criterion or control key.

- Correspondence between local symbolic grading and ECTS grading is a subjective one. Subjectivism of grading holds both the person of examiner and how a certain type of assessment which corresponds to a given system of training.

- The cohort pseudo-problem. All articles that relate to ECTS grading point out that grading are possible by means of statistical approaches that assume the existence of a significant cohort. Our research reveals that the cohort is a false problem. Reasons are specific to a school. Basically, there are two situations that require the existence of the cohort.

  a) The first situation is one in which grading is made for the whole school in order to build a global qualification for a certain student during the studies. Such a situation has an integrative character and is valid for a certain student, in a specific framework, at some point
of time. The specific framework is determined by a particular school, a particular platoon of instructors and a specific set of disciplines.

b) The second situation is actually the situation provided by the European system and envisages the transfer conditions. Such a situation is determined by a certain instructor, working on a specific discipline, according to school standards, with a particular group of students. A necessary cohort statistics acts only to deny the right to independence and autonomy of the teacher.

- **The cohort amount selection.** In this paper we propose to reduce the cohort amount at each instruction training group. Arguments are of practical nature. Over time, the results of value groups have not special differences in term of instructor’s exigency which does not change.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This paper examines the implications of using a combined grading system: numerical, in using and descriptive or symbolic, in interpretation.

One gives an example of how can be used an exclusively numeric grading system without any distorting of the reality of the evaluation of training process. Further it is proposed the associating of a symbolic interpretation, like ECTS system, through a direct reporting to the numerical grades. In parallel is achieved an analysis of the effects of the introduction of rules aimed at preserving a custom by imposing the format of the grade and beyond professional competence of the teacher.

The main effect of the intervention of the politics in teaching process is the distorting of reality of assessment and occurrence of conflict situations where both conventional and any grading intention of compatibility are hindered.

A series of technical details are proposed to allow the building of ECTS grading from the results of assessments of student activity.

It is shown that the actual local grading is generating of abuse, corruption and confusion in places where fairness in the relationship with students is a absolutely necessary condition.

The paper confirms that excessive interference of politics in the regulation of teaching is harmful and generating of undue tension in the evaluation process, respectively of building a feedback necessary during the training process.

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Table 3. Numerical and symbolic grades – effects and comparisons.

| Real grades order (1) | Granted grades | Numerical grading using 1 to 10 values | Symbolic grades | ECTS grouping (7) |
|-----------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
|                       | Real value (2) | Rounded at first decimal (3) | Rounded as integer (4) | National (5) | ECTS (6) |
| 1                     | 9.09           | 9.1                                    | 9               |                  |        |
| 2                     | 8.78           | 8.8                                    | 9               |                  |        |
| 3                     | 8.42           | 8.4                                    | 8               |                  |        |
| 4                     | 8.07           | 8.1                                    | 8               |                  |        |
| 5                     | 8.00           | 8.0                                    | 8               |                  |        |
| 6                     | 7.75           | 7.7                                    | 8               |                  |        |
| 7                     | 7.70           | 7.7                                    | 8               |                  |        |
| 8                     | 7.67           | 7.7                                    | 8               |                  |        |
| 9                     | 7.64           | 7.6                                    | 8               |                  |        |
| 10                    | 7.40           | 7.4                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 11                    | 7.37           | 7.4                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 12                    | 7.25           | 7.2                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 13                    | 7.19           | 7.2                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 14                    | 7.18           | 7.2                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 15                    | 7.12           | 7.1                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 16                    | 7.10           | 7.1                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 17                    | 7.09           | 7.1                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 18                    | 7.07           | 7.1                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 19                    | 7.00           | 7.0                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 20                    | 6.94           | 6.9                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 21                    | 6.87           | 6.9                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 22                    | 6.86           | 6.9                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 23                    | 6.83           | 6.8                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 24                    | 6.83           | 6.8                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 25                    | 6.78           | 6.8                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 26                    | 6.70           | 6.7                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 27                    | 6.67           | 6.7                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 28                    | 6.64           | 6.6                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 29                    | 6.62           | 6.6                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 30                    | 6.58           | 6.6                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 31                    | 6.55           | 6.5                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 32                    | 6.50           | 6.5                                    | 7               |                  |        |
| 33                    | 6.45           | 6.4                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 34                    | 6.39           | 6.4                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 35                    | 6.38           | 6.4                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 36                    | 6.29           | 6.3                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 37                    | 6.27           | 6.3                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 38                    | 6.24           | 6.2                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 39                    | 6.13           | 6.1                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 40                    | 6.08           | 6.1                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 41                    | 6.01           | 6.0                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 42                    | 5.95           | 5.9                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 43                    | 5.93           | 5.9                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 44                    | 5.83           | 5.8                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 45                    | 5.78           | 5.8                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 46                    | 5.63           | 5.6                                    | 6               |                  |        |
| 47                    | 5.45           | 5.4                                    | 5               |                  |        |
| 48                    | 5.36           | 5.4                                    | 5               |                  |        |