

Evaluation of the credit transfer practice in Business and Academies and University Colleges – a summary

Martin Sørensen and Thomas Rasmussen

In 2009 -2010 The Danish Evaluation Institute completed an evaluation of the credit transfer practice at Business Academies (short cycle degrees) and at University Colleges (first cycle degrees). The evaluation is the first to examine and chart the actual extent of credit transfer cases within the programmes offered at the Business Academies and University Colleges. The evaluation is based on four blocks of data. Firstly the institutions' own account of how many credit transfer cases they registered in 2009 -2010, secondly the institutions' own written description of their credit transfer practice, thirdly a questionnaire among students who have applied for a credit transfer in 2009-2010 focusing on their experiences with credit transfers and fourthly eight group interviews with programme leaders and student advisers at 8 different programmes representing both short cycle and first cycle degrees. The evaluation's analysis is mainly focused on what the Danish legislation decrees about the credit transfer system and the institutions actual organization and practice. This publication is an attempt to summarize the full evaluation. Firstly the context for the evaluation will be described secondly the evaluation's concluding points will be presented and thirdly in the additional findings the main chapters of the evaluation will be summarized.

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1 Context

Why evaluate the credit transfer system?

The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) initiated the evaluation of the credit transfer system in order to examine to what degree the credit transfer system creates flexibility in the educational system, whether the credit transfer system is transparent for the students and whether the institutions assess the credit transfer cases uniformly. Additionally the evaluation looks at what value the flexibility created by the credit transfer system has for the students and for society. The premise for examining these questions is deduced from the Danish legislation and is based on the assumption that flexibility can only be of value to both students and society if it is possible to have confidence in the qualifications that the students obtain transferred credits for.

The background for undertaking this evaluation is that the credit transfer system is politically supposed to contribute to the creation of a flexible educational system which ensures that students do not double educate themselves and that society doesn't waste resources educating students that already have proficient qualifications. To ensure this, it is important that the institutions organise their credit transfer practice in such a way that the students who are entitled to be granted credit transfers also get them. The Danish legislation on credit transfers clearly states that the institutions must have a unified system to handle the credit transfer cases and accordingly the assessments must be of a uniform nature.

Panel of experts

The evaluation was completed in cooperation between EVA and a panel of experts from the University Colleges, the business academies, the students, the employers and a chairman from Aalborg University with special knowledge in education and learning.

The boundaries of the evaluation

The evaluation deals with the credit transfer practice in the educational programs under the University Colleges (Professional Bachelor Degrees, first cycle) and Business Academies (Academy Profession Degrees, short cycle) .

The evaluation does not deal with the following types of credit transfer:

- The evaluation does not deal with the following types of credit transfer:
- Assessment of non-formal and informal learning
- Pre-approved credit transfer agreements
- Credit transfer via administration (Credit transfers without an actual assessment)
- Credit transfers for teachers training and social education programmes with award of credit for prior learning
- Credit transfers to or within the universities
- Credit transfers within the further adult education system.

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The evaluation acknowledges that above mentioned ways of credit transfer are essential ways of transferring credits within the educational system and thereby also ensuring flexibility.

2 The evaluation's concluding points

Credit transfers supports flexibility

The evaluation shows that the transfer of credits supports the flexibility in the educational system. This conclusion is based on quantitative data from the institutions which shows that credit is granted to 95 % of the students who apply for a credit transfer.

The confidence in the credit transfer system could be in danger

The evaluation also shows that there is room for improvement in the institutions practice if the confidence in the credit transfer system is to be maintained. This is due to the institutions' different interpretations of the legislation that forms the basis for how the institutions are supposed to handle and assess the credit transfer cases. Accordingly this has resulted in the institutions implementing their practice of credit transferring differently.

The institutions have not organized the handling of credit transfers according to the legislation. The legislation clearly states that the handling of credit transfer cases should be processed in a unified system. The unified system is described in the legislation as having to be transparent and coherent hereby ensuring the students a uniform and quick processing of the case. A possible explanation for this is that the institutions have just gone through a merging progress, where all the educational programmes have been gathered under one

managing institution instead of being independent institutions themselves. As a result the institutions are in a situation where their credit transfer systems do not fully reflect the intentions of the legislation. The institutions' management is decentralized and accordingly the practice of credit transfer differs between the institutions' different programmes. The transparency of the credit transfer system is hereby challenged as the institutions' decentralized organization means that the same programmes under the same institution do not necessarily have a uniform practice.

In addition the evaluation shows that the assessments are based on different interpretations of which conditions have to be fulfilled before a credit transfer can be granted. It is clear that there are two ways of understanding the conditions at several of the institutions. The institutions' decentralized organization means that the possibility arises for different interpretations of the legislation between the same programmes at the same institution. Some programmes are of the understanding that a credit transfer should be granted when the programme elements that are being applied for a credit transfer are identical to elements that are to be replaced, whereas others are of the understanding that the elements that are to be replaced are equivalent or similar to each other. When the programmes interpret the legislation differently it results in a heterogeneous practice across the same programmes within the institution which subsequently means that the basis for the programmes assessments of the credit transfers varies.

When the basis for the assessments of the credit transfers varies between the programmes inside the same institution, there are two consequences. Firstly the students' legal rights come under pressure, and secondly the value of the flexibility that the credit transfer system is supposed to support is in danger of being weakened. The students' legal rights come under pressure when the variation in the basis for assessment creates uncertainty about if the same credit transfer case can result in different decisions depending on which programme is processing the case. When the assessments are based on different conditions and the assessments as a result vary, there is a danger that confidence in the credit transfer decisions will be lost and this will subsequently affect the diplomas that include the results that are achieved by credit transfers.

Recommendations for improvement of credit transfer practice

The evaluation outlines three areas where the institutions can develop their practice:

- Strategic communication
- Case processing
- Evaluation and development of credit transfer practice.

Strategic communication

The credit transfer system in its present state must be assumed to support flexibility in the educational system when it is taken into consideration that 95 % of all the students who apply for credit transfer are granted a credit transfer. The evaluation does however not show whether all the students who are entitled to a credit transfer also apply for it. It is accordingly recommended that the institutions communicate the possibility for credit transfers to all students.

Case processing

The evaluation underlines that the institutions should work to ensure uniform procedures through their case processing and thereby minimize the risk of varying assessments of credit transfer cases between the same programmes under the same institution. Furthermore it is recommended that the institutions make the case processing more transparent amongst others by ensuring that substantial explanation is given in the cases where a credit transfer is not completely granted. In addition there should always be an enclosed complaint guide when credit transfer applications are not completely granted.

Evaluation and development of credit transfer practice

To ensure the positive development of the individual institutions' credit transfer practice it is recommended that the institutions themselves evaluate their credit transfer practice. A permanent evaluation practice would amongst others enable the institutions to minimize the variation in the credit transfer assessments, and thereby the individual institution will have a better basis for planning the organization's credit transfer practice.

3 Additional findings

In the following sections the main chapters of evaluation will be summarized.

Credit transfers and flexibility

This section summarizes the chapter from the evaluation that deals with the institutions registered credit transfers and the questionnaire among the students who applied for credit transfers.

Most credit transfers are given at the University Colleges

Apart from showing that the major part of students who apply for a credit transfer get it, the evaluation also shows the applications for credit transfers primarily come from students from programmes at the University Colleges. As the table below illustrates 98 % of the credit transfer applications concern programmes at the University Colleges.

Tabel 1
Credit transfer cases at the University Colleges and Business Academies

	Total credit transfer cases	Rejections	Approvals
University Colleges	584	26	554
Business Academies	6	-	6
Total	590	26	560

Source: The institutions statements from 2009. EVA 2010

Credit transfers increase flexibility for the students during their education

The credit transfers mostly result in a shortening of the programme. In 59 % of the credit transfers the programme has been shortened in completion time and in 37 % it has not. Credit transfers also give the students an increased flexibility during the course of their education. The questionnaire that was completed among the students who have applied

for a credit transfer shows that 73 % of the students have to a high or some degree applied for a credit transfer in order to shorten the completion time of the programme. In addition to this the questionnaire also showed that 57 % of the students who applied for a credit transfer applied in order to decrease the work load.

What elements do the credit transfers cover?

The quantitative data from the institutions also shows that most of the students are granted credit transfers for a whole module or semester, or several modules and semesters. In all 46 % of the credit transfer cases fall in to these two categories.

The amount of credit transfers is relatively small compared to the student population

Finally it is evident that the total sum of credit transfer cases is relatively small when compared to the population of students at the University Colleges. The table below shows the population of students on the five programmes with the biggest admittance of students and what percentage the credit cases amount to in relation to the admitted students.

Tabel 2

Credit transfer cases at the five biggest programmes at the University Colleges

Programme	Population	Credit transfer cases	Approved cases	Approved cases in %
Social Education	15.351	102	95	0,6 %
Teacher Education	12.718	54	49	0,4 %
Nursing	9.119	323	317	3,0 %
Engineering	6.275	1	1	0,0 %
Social Work	3.498	32	32	0,9 %

Total population of students at all the University Colleges in 2008: 62.460.

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The institutions' organization of credit transferring

This section summarizes the chapter in the evaluation that describes the institutions organization of credit transferring. This chapter is mainly based on the institutions own accounts of their own practice.

The knowledge to asses lies within the programmes

As described above almost all of the institutions have a decentralized organization of their credit transfer practice. This means that it is the individual programme that has the right to make the credit transfer decisions and to organise the processing of the credit transfer cases. The reasoning behind this organization is that the professional competence to make the assessment in the credit transfer case exists within the programmes. All knowledge about the programmes' structure, learning outcomes, teaching methods etc. is located within the programmes which is why they are the best qualified to make the assessments. As already described this form of organization has resulted in a lack of uniformity in the institutions' and the programmes' credit transfer practice.

The sharing of knowledge creates a possibility for unifying the processing of credit transfer cases

The evaluation shows that there already exist good conditions within the institutions for sharing knowledge about credit transfer cases. Many of the institutions' student advisors from the individual programmes participate in organized networks that involve other programmes from other institutions to discuss how credits should be granted. The discussions' point of reference is the national programme regulations. The sharing of knowledge gives the participants insights into how credit transfer cases are processed at other programmes at different institutions. The sharing of knowledge between programmes within the same institution is essential if the institution as a whole is to achieve a uniform practice in the processing of credit transfer cases.

Different registration practice within the institutions

The evaluation shows that the individual institutions have various practices when it comes to registering information about credit transfer cases. Because of the decentralized organisation it is mostly the individual programmes that are responsible for the registration of the credit transfer cases. This means that the different programmes very often register different information and this is not always accessible for the institution.

Transparency in the processing of credit transfer cases exist but there is still room for improvement

The institutions have a lot of initiatives to ensure that their credit transfer assessments and case processing are transparent. Most of these are assessed positively by the students and shows that the institutions are successful in ensuring transparency. However some institutions do not enclose a written explanation for the refusal of getting a credit transfer which undermines the transparency of the assessment.

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The case processing time is in general quick

The evaluation shows that the case processing of a credit transfer case in general takes between one and two weeks. However some cases can take longer especially cases involving foreign credit transfers which often need a lot of pre investigation.

Assessments and professional identity

It has already been described in this publication how the institutions' different interpretations of the credit transfer legislation leads to varying assessments. There are however further interpretations of other paragraphs in the legislation that also challenge the principles of the credit transfer system. These will be described in the following section which is a summary of the evaluations chapter that deals with the term "professional identity" and what implications this has for credit transfer assessments.

Overall assessments and transparency

The legislation enables the institutions to include the programmes' professional identity as a criterion for the credit transfer assessment. Identity refers to the profession the programme is directed towards for example nursing or teaching. According to the legislation the institutions are only allowed to include the programmes' professional identity when the credit transfer application is for an entire programme or central parts of the programme. When the institutions include professional identity in their assessments they call it an overall assessment. Several institutions describe performing overall assessments in credit transfer cases where professional identity and personal qualifications play a central role in the as-

assessment. This presents two problems. Firstly it is a problem when the institutions subject smaller elements or modules to an overall assessment, which several of the institutions own accounts show. This practice is against the principles of the legislation and because it can lead to an overly restrictive credit transfer practice where the programmes professional identity actively prevents credit transfers. Secondly it presents a problem when a criterion as personal qualifications is included as criterion for assessment because this does not figure explicitly in the legislation. Additionally it becomes a problem when the circumstances for assessment are not accentuated in the credit transfer decision. The documentation that supplements the credit transfer decision is the only means the student has of seeing which circumstances the decision is based on. So if it is not apparent to the student what the specific circumstances are, there is in reality no transparency in the credit transfer assessment which accordingly is a violation of the students' legal rights. It is however unlikely that the problems described above figure as a real barrier for granting students credits. If we take the 554 granted credit transfers into consideration it only leaves 26 cases where it is a possibility that the assessments were made on the grounds described above.

The teaching arrangements complicate the credit transfer assessments

The programmes arranging of the teaching can complicate the credit transfer assessments. This especially occurs when the teaching is arranged as integrated teaching where the profession of the programme is merged with one or more subject areas, for example psychology, or when the subject area is taught in a specific professional context.

The complications arise when there is a credit transfer application for a part of an integrated element that has been arranged as a whole. This means that the programme has to assess whether the element can be split up into separate elements so that a credit transfer is possible. The assessments are made even more complicated when the credit transfer application is about elements that involve a subject area taught in a specific professional context. For example a student who applies for a credit transfer for psychology taught in a nursing context to psychology taught in a teaching context.

Obviously the integrated teaching possesses a challenge to credit transfer assessment but it should not lead to restrictions in the institutions' possibilities for granting credit transfers. It does however require that the institutions thoroughly assess which subject areas are central and when the professional identity is central for a specific element.

One of the diverted effects of the integrated teaching is that some students choose not to make use of their possibility to apply for a credit transfer. This situation arises when the integrated elements have to be completed with integrated exams. This means that the student can risk being examined in an area that he or she already has been granted a credit transfer for. In these cases the possibility of being granted a credit transfer is worthless for the student.

Expected learning outcomes can make the credit transfer assessments easier

The evaluation also shows that the institutions in several cases use the expected learning outcomes for the individual elements as a tool to reduce the complexity of the credit transfer assessments. The institutions can use the expected learning outcomes to examine whether the credit transfer applicant's documented qualifications are equivalent to a specific element.