

A Credit Is A Credit...Or Is It?: Issues in Credit Transfer

HOW-TO

As both product and provocateur of mass enrollments and high rates of student mobility in US higher education, academic credit systems have a long history. The typical definitions of credit US colleges and universities employ usually refer only to units of time - most often a combination of hours per week in class and number of weeks per session - but in practice, credit hours are applied for purposes far beyond scheduling.

Credit systems offer colleges a deceptively simple and precise way to quantify educational achievement, to organize degree curricula, to assess tuition rates and salary scales, and to track facility costs. Despite their inadequacies as measuring tools, it is unlikely that credit systems will be abolished without an alternative mechanism in place to serve the same purposes.

Developing clear and flexible working policies for the transfer of equivalent or elective courses from programs at other US institutions is the best preparation for handling non-US credentials. Most experienced credit transfer officers recognize the value of a flexible approach, understanding credit as an administrative convenience rather than as an absolute value. Until recently, only a minority of colleges and universities outside the US even used credit systems. To illustrate, consider four common scenarios:

Non-Credit Systems: In many countries, such as the UK, students are required simply to study a range of subjects and pass examinations at the end of each academic year. Working solely with such transcripts, there may be no choice but to use the *average* credit taken by a full-time student at your institution as the basis for the total credit you will allot to each year's study at the non-US institution, distributing it to each subject on a *pro rata* basis. If you can obtain syllabus information about the content of each year's subject, you may be able to make more refined comparisons.

Systems That Account For Every Hour Of A Program: Some transcripts, such as those from Russia, present a detailed program of study containing the total number of hours of instruction, laboratory, tutorial and even independent study time on a per-subject basis. US credit definitions include an implicit assumption about time spent in study outside of class in relation to the time spent in class, usually on the order of two or three hours to one. These "invisible" hours are intended to fill out the schedule of full-time students who may spend 16 to 18 hours per week in class. In calculating credit you may also consider differences in the length of academic years, whether students are enrolled in special "intensive" programs of study (eg, in vocationally-oriented programs where both students and institutions may be committed to the most economical means of preparation for specific occupations), and of course the content of the curriculum, always a critical factor in transfer and placement decisions regardless of the number of hours a student can document.

Assessment Weight Systems: Most structured programs are characterized by an idea of cumulative achievement. Because the award of a degree depends on success in final examinations, and because a student's performance in final subject examinations is presumed to be built on stages of achievement, many institutions, as in India, will formalize this "cumulative" concept by giving more weight to grades earned at the end of a degree program than to those earned at the beginning. On some transcripts the greater weight of grades earned in the latter stages of a degree program will be indicated by a numerical value (i.e., a grade multiplier) assigned to individual courses. On other transcripts the same concept will be conveyed by a marking system in which final year courses have a much higher total grade value than first year courses. The important thing to recognize is that these grade multipliers may have only a marginal relationship to the credit value of the course in US terms. If your transcript review yields extremely lop-sided credit distributions (eg, half or more of the total credit appears in the final year), you're probably dealing with an assessment weight system. To get a better sense of the equivalent credit value of courses in the program, you should obtain a syllabus or program outline.

Simpler/Different Credit Systems: As mass higher education and increased student mobility reach significant levels in other countries, more colleges and universities have come to adopt modular-unit or credit systems in organizing degree programs.

Not every system, however, defines its credits with reference to time or in the same way. The Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) introduced in the United Kingdom during the last decade defines one full-time academic year as consisting of 120 credits, with a bachelor's degree made up of 360 credits. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), by contrast, arbitrarily assigns 60 credits to one academic year so that students may study in different countries and have their work recognized by home institutions. Individual Australian universities use an amazing variety of different credit systems, and most do not correspond to the systems in place at other universities in the country. And while many Canadian universities use credit systems similar to those with which US universities are familiar, they often assign the same credit values to courses with different time commitments (eg, science courses with laboratory requirements are not always distinguished from lecture courses by the presence of additional credit).

In all such cases evaluators should familiarize themselves with the basic terms of the credit system in use before deciding on a credit conversion formula; this is especially important for incomplete programs.

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