

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN ASSESSING LEARNING ABROAD TRANSFER CREDIT

As every academic program and international partnership is unique, transfer credit approaches must be at once flexible and consistent. Towards this end, communication between partners and strong coordination within institutions is essential. Here we highlight seven typical challenges related to the transfer credit process for the mobility of students, describe enabling conditions for each and providing examples of successful Canadian institutional approaches.

This resource supports institutions to assure quality of transfer credit in learning abroad partnerships. It is just one chapter in CBIE's capacity-building series *Assessing and Implementing Credit Transfer in Student Mobility Partnerships: A How-to Guide for Post-Secondary Institutions* as part of the national *Learning Beyond Borders* campaign.



I. FLEXIBILITY IN ASSESSING CREDIT FOUNDED ON STRONG AGREEMENT PRINCIPLES

In a perfect world, there would be detailed course outlines in Canada's official languages available for all courses at partner institutions. In reality, this is rarely the case. In spite of this challenge, an international student mobility partnership should, in principle, already have established that the partnership will be appropriate for granting transfer credit both ways.

It is the institution, and not the student, that should bear the risk in testing new transfer credit processes. Students who participate in new student exchange partnerships should be granted transfer credit based on partnership agreement even in circumstances where complete course outline information is not yet available.

All students in turn should be required to return with full course outlines and assignments in order to support credit transfer verification. This may become less necessary as quality is assured consistently over time and resources documenting courses at the partner institution are developed.

II. TIMING OF CREDIT TRANSFER

It is imperative to minimize the sense of risk and uncertainty in credit transfer for students. Ideally students should have a good idea of their transfer credit options before applying for an international experience and should be able to access pre-approval for their credit transfer well in advance of leaving. Formalizing this process is an investment that will pay over time and must include flexibility and contingency processes accounting for unexpected host institution shifts. The pre-approval document can also list the courses recommended for the student to take on return to their home institution to assist in academic re-entry planning.

III. TRANSPARENCY IN COURSE TRANSFERABILITY

Several institutions make their partnership course transfer listings widely available to students, both in terms of academic planning and the application and course pre-approval process. While this requires institutional commitment to maintain, it significantly assists in the planning and decision making process for students and shows a strong institutional commitment to learning abroad.

IV. GUIDELINES AND COURSE CONTENT MATCHING FOR THE TRANSFER OF LEARNING ABROAD CREDIT

Working with informed faculty to establish course-matching guidelines can enable an inclusive, systematic approach to the transfer credit process which creates consistent messaging for students over time. General good practice in course matching requires 65-70% of overlap in course content for course transfer to be approved. Alternatively, some institutions provide general credit but with a note saying the student is exempt from taking a similar course when they return home.

Assigning credit even if the course is not identical is part of the flexibility of this form of transfer credit process. It recognizes that the experience is valued by the institution and the academic program.



V. APPROACHES TO ASYMMETRICAL COURSE CREDIT VALUES

There may be a very good match in terms of topics covered in a partner course but the credit value does not fit easily into an institution's credit framework. In these cases it's recommended to group learning abroad courses together or split them apart as suits the home institution structure.

For most European partnerships, credit is assigned under the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Under the ECTS 2 credits are equivalent to 1 credit used widely in the North American system. Courses are typically offered in 2, 3 4 and 5 ECTS credit blocks. In this case it is often necessary to group some courses together for equivalency. Bundling ECTS credits is commonly done as there is a less standard formatting in Europe for teaching subjects. Many European schools determine how much time it should take for students to gain some mastery over a subject and then assign hours and credits accordingly. In North America, we start with a time block and then fill it with material.

These complications are examples of why the subject specialist needs to work with the system specialist from the international office so that reasonable transfer credit arrangements can be achieved.

IN PRACTICE: Thompson Rivers University provides a guide as to how credits work in their major destination countries and recommends that students focus on credit equivalencies rather than courses since credit varies across institutions.



IN PRACTICE: A 2 ECTS credit course in European banking systems and a 4 or 5 ECTS credit course in International Financial Management could transfer into a North American program as International Finance 300 level, 3 credits or Business 300 level, 3 credits or Finance 360, the course on these subjects in the home school curriculum.

VI. RECOGNITION OF THE LEARNING ABROAD EXPERIENCE

In addition to direct course transfer there should also be the recognition that a learning abroad experience is a valuable experience unto itself. Several institutions have created a learning abroad course, often offered in an online learning environment, to both prepare and help students reflect on their experience. This can enable deeper learning and assist in rounding out academic offerings at the host institution.

VII. PRE-REQUISITES AND COURSE AVAILABILITY ON RETURN

Sometimes the timing of a student's learning abroad experience will put them in difficulty because of course pre-requisites or core program requirements that are only offered in a single semester. These challenges highlight the importance of faculty content experts to not only provide transfer credit advice, but also to be involved in preparing a pathway for students about what to take pre and post learning abroad. For a robust partnership, it should be possible to develop a pathway that does not delay graduation. If this cannot be achieved, it should be clearly communicated to students.



IN PRACTICE: The University of Alberta offers an online course on Global Perspectives that can be taken by students while away on a learning abroad experience.



IN PRACTICE: The University of British Columbia's Faculty of Land and Food Systems offers three courses as part of its Global Resources Systems program. The first explores global themes prior to an international experience, the second is an online course "Global Issues in a Cultural Context" that can be taken during an international experience and the final course is designed to be taken on return. Each is worth 2 credits, for a total of 6 credits.

SUMMARY

As institutions take more ownership of credit transfer across functional areas to establish clear and consistent communication for students, the number of students choosing to pursue learning abroad will increase. This resource has identified and provided successful examples of Canadian institutions in this context with regard to transparency, timeliness, flexibility and clear communication to assist students in understanding the potential.

