

Subsection 3.1: Defining the Credit Hour

Considerations:

Phase 1 of the project and subsequent research indicates the credit hour continues to be the predominate form of representing academic studies at Canadian colleges, institutes, and universities; therefore, it is reasonable to ensure that successful practices are in place.

First, there are numerous definitions for 'credit' in use in Canada although many share themes. Further, a select few institutions use the term 'unit.' Secondly, the research from Phase 1 indicates that institutions maintain different degrees of transparency and coherency when describing credit weight on the transcript key (i.e., the basic unit of measurement per hour). We learned in the first phase that the situation was impeding successful assessment for admission and transfer. To this point, we also heard an interest in greater transparency regarding course mode of delivery.

Finally, we learned examples do exist in Canada where institutions translate other learning into a credit model, thereby ensuring that transparency and coherency are achieved for a student on their transcript and for their progression. Examples include 'credit for experience' and 'level credit.' Therefore, the findings suggest that standards need to be developed with a specific focus on transcribing the credit hour.

Online Survey Questions

The following questions are embedded within the online survey accompanying this Consultation Document. They are provided below to facilitate advance reflection.

1. Do you agree that how your institution defines credit, credit hour, and credit weight should be identified on an institutional transcript key/legend to facilitate assessment and transfer? Please provide a rationale. (Response categories: Agree, Disagree)
2. Confirm your agreement with the following: at minimum, institutions should specifically define within the transcript key/legend the predominant unit of measurement for learning. This should describe the unit value and the number of hours of instruction per unit/credit, per week, and per term for each unit/credit value and how the unit/credit value relates to a course (or equivalent). If you disagree, please provide a rationale.
3. Phase 1 findings suggest there is very selective interest in including mode of delivery on a transcript; in contrast, some jurisdictions and institutions focus on learning outcomes and consider mode of delivery irrelevant. In your opinion, what are some of the considerations that should drive whether or not mode of delivery should be identified on a transcript? What is the rationale for your response?

Background:

Research is emerging regarding the concept of the credit hour and the "Carnegie Unit," originally a metric for faculty workload for pension benefits, now a proxy for student learning that is embedded in institutional culture, systems, and more.¹ While having a slightly longer history in the US, in the early 1900s, the credit hour was first introduced in Canada at McGill University. Over the past 100 years, the credit hour has become so deeply entrenched in Canadian (and North American) postsecondary

¹Laitinan, A. (September, 2012, Cracking the Credit Hour. Washington, D.C.: New America Foundation. Retrieved March 26, 2015 from <http://www.educationsector.org/publications/cracking-credit-hour>

education that it has become the core driver for the shape of institutional student information systems, the postsecondary transcript, and more. Table 2 outlines examples of definitions for credit hour in use in Canada. While somewhat different, the definitions offer similar themes most of which are focused on counting the credit hour.

Table 1: Sample of Definitions for Credit, Unit, and Course in use in Canada

Credit	A unit used to express the value of a course or other training activity in relation to the total requirements for a degree, diploma, or certificate, usually measured in hours of study or achievement of threshold standard or both.
Credit	The value assigned to a course. For example, many courses are valued at three credits. Most credentials specify the number of credits to be earned for the credential to be awarded. See also Unit.
Credit	The value given to a course. May be related to the number of hours of instruction. The majority of academic courses are worth three credits. Many degrees require 120 credits. (See also Unit)
Credit	A unit of value assigned to a course for the purpose of counting its value towards a credential such as a certificate, diploma or degree. The number of credits received by students for a course varies widely among Institutions.
Credit	1. The unit of value attached to a given course. 2. The recognition awarded to a student for successfully completing the course's requirements.
Credit	The value given to a course; may be related to the number of hours of instruction.
Credit Course	A course carrying a unit value which can be applied against a program of study's requirements, if the course is completed successfully.
Credit for Experience	The credit awarded for one's work or life experience.
Credit Hour	The unit of value that expresses the quantity of course work required. The number of credit hours of a course is usually determined by the number of hours per week multiplied by the number of weeks in the term or session. One credit hour is usually assigned for each hour which meets per week over a term or session.
Credit hour	The measure used to reflect the relative weight of a given course toward the fulfilment of appropriate degree, diploma, certificate, major, minor, or other program requirements. A weight of one credit hour normally means that the course meets for lectures one hour per week for the duration of a semester or two hours per week for the duration of a session. Unless otherwise indicated, a course normally has a credit value of three credit hours.
Course	A single unit of study offered by an educational institution.
Course	Single unit of study, identified by a title, description and credit value, as well as a unique course number and/or code.
Course	A discrete unit of instruction which is part of a program leading to a credential
Unit	Select institutions in Canada have used a unit rather than credit system to define the value assigned to a course toward a program or credential (3 credit hours = 1.5 institutional units).
Unit	One unit = two credits.

Concepts such as “credit for experience” extend the possibilities and move the definition towards a mobility framework nested in the concept of portability and recognition of prior learning (similar in methodology to the European Credit Transfer System - ECTS). At all levels of credentials there are other examples of learning and concomitant methods to recognize learning such as field work, experiential learning, co-op, PLAR, challenge exams, etc. The findings from Phase 1 confirm evidence exists of these various practices.

The research in Phase 1 also notes that institutions employ different methods to define credit weight and that transcripts are not always sufficiently detailed. This situation is causing problems in the areas of transfer credit and admissions assessment. In addition, it is impeding efficiency as assessors are often required to conduct further research in order to clarify institutional practices. While regulatory and accreditation bodies were not surveyed for this research, it stands to reason that the lack of transparency is also likely impeding at times assessment of credentials towards final accreditation. Therefore, we suggest that institutions should be more transparent on their transcripts and websites about how they assign credit weight.

Mode and method of delivery also arose as discussion topics although opinions in terms of transcription are not known. Institutions are delivering learning in-person, online, and in hybrid formats, and are experimenting with alternative approaches such as MOOCs,² experiential learning, flipped classrooms, collaborative learning using learning platforms, and more.

² Arizona State University MOOCs example: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/23/arizona-state-edx-team-offer-freshman-year-online-through-moocs>