

# Comparative Analysis of Credit Systems in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe: Implications for Academic Mobility and Recognition

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents an in-depth comparative analysis of the credit systems for degree and non-degree programs in the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), and Europe. It explores the definitions, structures, and functions of these systems, highlighting their differences and implications for academic mobility and recognition. The study concludes with an evaluation of which system is superior and provides recommendations for enhancing global compatibility and effectiveness.

**Keywords-** Academic Mobility, Academic Credit, Academic Mobility.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The credit system in higher education is a fundamental mechanism for quantifying student workload and learning outcomes. Different regions have developed unique systems tailored to their educational philosophies and requirements. This paper compares the credit systems of the US, UK, and Europe, focusing on both degree and non-degree programs. It aims to elucidate the distinctions among these systems and evaluate their relative advantages and disadvantages.

## II. DEFINITIONS AND STRUCTURES

**United States Credit System:** In the US, the credit system is predicated on the Carnegie Unit, which standardizes academic credit based on contact hours. Typically, one credit hour corresponds to one hour of classroom instruction and two hours of independent study per week over a 15-week semester, totaling approximately 45 hours of student engagement per credit (Carnegie Foundation, 2015). A bachelor's degree requires about 120 credit hours, while a master's degree requires between 30 to 60 credit hours.

**United Kingdom Credit System:** The UK's Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) measures academic credit in terms of total student effort. One CATS credit is equivalent to 10 hours of study, including lectures, seminars, and independent learning (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2020). Typically, a bachelor's degree requires 360 CATS credits, and a master's degree requires 180 CATS credits. The CATS framework facilitates flexibility in course design and assessment, promoting diverse educational pathways.

**European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS):** The ECTS is the predominant credit system across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), designed to standardize academic credit transfer and accumulation. One ECTS credit corresponds to 25-30 hours of total student effort, encompassing all forms of academic activity (European Commission, 2015). A bachelor's degree requires 180-240 ECTS credits, and a master's degree requires 60-120 ECTS credits. The ECTS system is instrumental in promoting student mobility and the recognition of qualifications across Europe.

### III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

#### *Degree Programs:*

• **Credit Value and Workload:** The US credit system is primarily contact-hour based, emphasizing in-class instruction, and prescribed independent study hours. In contrast, both the UK CATS and European ECTS systems account for the totality of student effort, including lectures, independent study, and assessments. This difference reflects broader educational philosophies: the US system prioritizes structured instructional time, whereas the UK and Europe aim to encapsulate a holistic view of student workload (Bologna Working Group, 2005).

• **Degree Requirements:** Degree requirements differ notably in their numerical values but are designed to reflect equivalent academic workloads. The US typically requires 120 credit hours for a bachelor's degree. The UK requires 360 CATS credits, and Europe requires 180-240 ECTS credits. These variations, while numerical, are aligned with the regional definitions of student effort and academic achievement (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2020; European Commission, 2015).

• **Transferability:** The ECTS is specifically engineered to enhance academic mobility across Europe, ensuring a transparent and consistent system that facilitates credit transfer among institutions within the EHEA. Similarly, the CATS system supports credit transfer within the UK, though it lacks broader international applicability. The US credit hour system, standardized nationally, presents challenges for international transfer due to its distinct focus on contact hours and varying interpretations abroad (Bologna Working Group, 2005).

#### *Non-Degree Programs:*

• **Structure and Flexibility:** Non-degree programs in the US, such as certificate courses, adhere to the same credit hour framework as degree programs, ensuring coherence across educational offerings. In the UK, non-degree programs are versatile, typically following the CATS structure but with more variability in credit assignment. In Europe, the ECTS is applied across a wide spectrum of educational programs, including short courses and professional training, thereby enhancing flexibility and cross-border recognition (European Commission, 2015).

• **Recognition and Value:** The ECTS's widespread adoption and standardization across Europe offer

significant advantages in the recognition and value of non-degree programs. The CATS system, while effective within the UK, does not benefit from the same level of international standardization. The US system, though robust within the domestic context, often necessitates additional evaluation for international recognition, which can complicate the global portability of non-degree credits (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2020).

### IV. CONCLUSION

*Evaluation of Systems:* The ECTS system stands out as the most comprehensive and versatile, designed to accommodate a wide range of educational programs and facilitate academic mobility across Europe. Its emphasis on total student effort and broad standardization makes it highly effective for both degree and non-degree programs. The UK's CATS system, while similarly holistic, is primarily effective within the UK. The US credit hour system, focusing on contact hours, offers a unique perspective on academic effort measurement but poses significant challenges for international recognition and transferability.

### RECOMMENDATION

The ECTS is recommended as the superior credit system due to its comprehensive approach, flexibility, and international recognition. Its design effectively supports academic mobility and the recognition of qualifications across diverse educational contexts, making it a robust model for other regions to consider.

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