

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System: The UDLA Case in Chile

Pilar Armanet*

Universidad de las Américas, Chile

Abstract: Universidad de Las Américas - UDLA, is a Chilean University with 30.000 students located on 6 campuses. One third of students are working adults. A university like UDLA requires a flexible educational model to fulfill the learning requirements of different kinds of students and of the ever-changing conditions of the labor market that its graduates face. Following the ETCS, Credit System of Universidad de las Américas (SCUDLA) is a student-centered system based on transparency of outcomes and learning processes, which facilitates the planning of teaching, the evaluation of learning, and the recognition and validation of qualifications. SCUDLA is a tool that helps to design, describe and provide programs leading to an academic degree or a professional title. SCUDLA can be applied to all kinds of programs, regardless of the status of the students and the modality of learning.

Keywords: UDLA, SCUDLA, ETCS, accreditation, higher education, Chilean universities

Background

In 1988, at the celebration of the 800th anniversary of La Sorbonne University in Paris, four education ministers shared the view that the segmentation of the European higher education system was outdated and harmful. The decision to engage in a voluntary process to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was formalized on June 19, 1999 in The Bologna Declaration¹, signed by 30 countries.

The Bologna Declaration's main objective is to establish the European area of higher education and to promote the European system of higher education world-wide. It is a commitment signed by the Ministers of Higher Education of the member states of the European Union, in favor of the...

"...Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees.

"...Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. [...] The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labor market as an appropriate level of qualification.

"...Establishment of a system of credits –such as in the ECTS - as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility.

"...Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement.

"...Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view of comparable criteria and methodologies.

"...Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional cooperation, mobility schemes and integrated programs of study, training and research." (Bologna Declaration, 1999)

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement are the fundamental tools introduced to strengthen the development of comparable and understandable degrees (Eurydice, 2010).

¹ The Bologna Process, launched with the Bologna Declaration of 1999, is one of the main voluntary processes at the European level, as it is nowadays implemented in 47 states, which define the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Members of the Bologna Process are the 47 countries, together with the European Commission, and the consultative members, namely the Council of Europe, UNESCO-CEPES, EUA, ESU, EURASHE, ENQA, Education International and BUSINESSEUROPE (www.ehea.info).

* Corresponding author (pilar.armanet@udla.cl)

Suggested citation: Armanet, P. (2012). The European credit transfer and accumulation system: The UDLA case in Chile. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 2(3), 52-56. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v2i3.74>

ECTS is a learner-centred system for credit accumulation and transfer based on the transparency of learning outcomes and learning processes. It aims to facilitate planning, delivery, evaluation, recognition and validation of qualifications and units of learning as well as student mobility. ECTS was developed at the end of the 1980s to facilitate credit transfer in the Erasmus programme and thus to foster student mobility.² The decision to establish a European Higher Education Area came a decade later and, since then, ECTS has become a core element in its implementation.³ (Eurydice, 2010).

The *Diploma Supplement* is “the second important Bologna 'tool', was developed by the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and UNESCO-CEPES in the 1990s. It is a standardised template containing a description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies completed by the individual noted on the original diploma. The goal of the Diploma Supplement is to increase transparency of education acquired for the purposes of securing employment and facilitating academic recognition for further studies (Berlin Communiqué, 2003)” (Eurydice, 2010).

As defined by the European University Association (2002):

- The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a student-centred system based on the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a programme, objectives preferably specified in terms of learning outcomes.
- ECTS is based on the convention that 60 credits measure the workload of an average full time student during one academic year. This includes the time spent in attending lectures, seminars, independent study, preparation for and taking of examinations, etc.
- Credits are allocated to all educational and training components of a study programme (such as modules, courses, placements, dissertation work, etc.) and reflect the quantity of work each component requires in relation to the total quantity of work necessary to complete a full year of study in the programme considered.
- Credits can be obtained only after completion of the work required and appropriate assessment of the learning outcomes activities.

Universidad de las Americas (UDLA) Credit System

In the globalization era, internationality has become a sign of quality for higher education institutions. A credit system which is recognized worldwide increases mobility opportunities for students in different countries and also between institutions at the national level. At the same time, ECTS, being a learner-centred system, facilitates innovations in programs and courses, adapting them to different kinds of students in different learning environments. Changing focus from credits granted for face-to-face courses to students' learning time requirements facilitates

² The Erasmus Programme is an EU exchange student programme that has been in existence since the late 1980's. Its purpose is to provide foreign exchange options for students from within the European Union and it involves many of the best universities and seats of learning on the continent (Eurydice, 2010).

³ Today, 24 countries report using ECTS as a credit accumulation and transfer tool in more than 75% of higher education institutions, while 29 report this for programmes. In the majority of countries/regions, ECTS has been introduced through national legislation (Eurydice, 2010).

the utilization of different methodologies specially related with the introduction of ITs in education.

Universidad de Las Américas - UDLA, is a Chilean University with 30.000 students located on 6 campuses. One third of students are working adults. A university like UDLA requires a flexible educational model to fulfill the learning requirements of different kinds of students and of the ever-changing conditions of the labor market that its graduates face.

Taking into account these challenges, UDLA began in 2010 a deep restructuring of its academic model. The central objective of this process is to configure a grid for each program that contains the relevant knowledge, keeping focus on the essential and avoiding unnecessary lengthening of studies. The second line of work is the implementation of a credit system whose calculation is based on the effective time that a student requires to meet the learning objectives of each course.

The Credit System of Universidad de las Américas (SCUDLA) following the ETCS, is a student-centered system, based on transparency of outcomes and learning processes, that facilitates the planning of teaching, the evaluation of learning, and the recognition and validation of qualifications. SCUDLA is a tool that helps to design, describe and provide programs leading to an academic degree or a professional title. SCUDLA can be applied to all kinds of programs, regardless of the status of the students and the modality of learning.

UDLA credits are based on the effective work students require to achieve the expected learning results defined in the graduate's profile. These results, indicated in the description of each course, specify the knowledge, skills and competencies that the students must have gained or achieved, after having successfully completed a certain subject.

Workload indicates the time students need to carry out the necessary learning activities (classes, seminars, practices, autonomous learning, examinations, etc) to achieve the expected learning outcomes. 60 SCUDLA Credits represents the annual workload that a full-time student needs to achieve the desired outcomes of the subjects laid down in its curricular grid. In most cases, a student's load of work ranges between 1.500 and 1.800 hours per academic year, therefore a credit is equivalent to between 25 and 30 hours of work time.

Using SCUDLA Credits

UDLA is an institution that puts the student at the center of the teaching/learning experience with an approach that adapts to his or her learning needs. SCUDLA credits facilitate the execution of this principle.

- Credits are allocated to all subjects and activities of the program. The number of credits for each component is related to the time to be used by the students to achieve learning outcomes declared in the program.

- Credits are assigned to individual students (full- or part-time) after having completed the required learning activities and after a favorable assessment of the achieved learning outcomes.
- Credits that are granted in a program can be transferred to another program offered by the same institution.

Learning outcomes describe what students are expected to know, understand and be able to do after successfully completing a learning process. Learning outcomes are verifiable statements of what a student should know, understand and be able to do after obtaining a full qualification or after completing a program or its components. In this way, credits represent the link between teaching, learning and assessment. Evaluation strategies of learning outcomes, including soft skills, must be specified in the curriculum in order to assure that the students have effectively achieved expected results.

The workload is adjusted from time to time using information that allows students to correct possible distortions in the distribution of credits between different academic activities considered in the curricula. The program “profile” and the specific learning outcomes must be established before assigning the credits. At the time of calculating the students’ workload, the entire time that the students need to reach the learning results must be included. Normally the workload is the result of:

- Face to face activities (Number of hours per week per number of weeks).
- Time destined to individual study or to group-work activities. For instance, the time necessary to prepare in advance for a class, a seminar or a lab, to review notes, to read the recommended bibliography, to write a paper, to prepare a presentation, or to perform practical chores, for example, in a laboratory.
- Time to prepare for and to take a test or examination.
- Time required for professional practices.

Students receive credits only when the corresponding evaluation showed that they have achieved the learning outcomes expected. The number of SCUDLA credits is equal to the number of credits assigned to the component in the curriculum and the grid and is not related to the student’s performance.

The use of the system of SCUDLA credits allows students who have achieved learning outcomes in other contexts or periods of learning (formal, non-formal or informal), to receive credits after an evaluation, validation or recognition of these learning outcomes.

Not all students are full-time students enrolled in traditional learning programs. Frequently, students resume their studies at different stages of life to obtain a degree or professional title for the first time, obtain a different degree, or acquire skills necessary to progress in their careers. SCUDLA allows students to adapt their studies to their interests and time availability.

ECTS, a Tool for Internationality

An international experience is a very important component for a quality higher education program. More and more frequently programs include a semester in a foreign university. An international credit system facilitates mobility, particularly when different institutions share parts of a program.

UDLA is a massive university and for that reason it is often difficult to include a semester abroad. Innovative forms must be established to facilitate the international experience for all students. Short-term certificates, joint programs, shared e-support instruments, and shared components for different courses could be explored to intensify internationality.

All these activities must be translated into credits to be included in a program. A learner-centered system is a powerful instrument for these kinds of innovative initiatives. As more higher education institutions move to a more readable and transferable credit system, mobility could be greatly improved for students, faculty, and programs.

References

Bologna Process of the EU - Joint Declaration of the European Ministers. (1999, June 19). Retrieved from <http://www.ehea.info>

European University Association. (2002, October). *Credit transfer and accumulation – The challenge for institutions and students*. Presented at the EUA/ Swiss Confederation Conference, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) Zürich, Switzerland.

Eurydice Network. (2010). *Focus on higher education in Europe 2010: The impact of the Bologna Process*. Brussels, Belgium: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, European Commission. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2797/38158>