

Harmonisation, Quality Assurance  
and Accreditation in Africa



# ACTS Pilot Phase

## MODULE 2

**Understanding and mapping  
mobility and credit transfer (CT):  
a quantitative or a qualitative  
problem?**



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Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst  
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European Association for  
Quality Assurance in Higher Education

## MODULE 2

# UNDERSTANDING AND MAPPING MOBILITY AND CREDIT TRANSFER: A QUANTITATIVE OR A QUALITATIVE PROBLEM?

*Supporting written document*

### **How to use this document**

This document is designed as a reading companion of Module 2. We advise you to read it before your participation in the live session (as a conceptual primer) and come back to it after the live session (for deeper engagement with the key arguments). It also includes self-reflection prompts to help you connect the content to your own institutional context.

## MODULE 2 AT A GLANCE

Module 1 has focused on the nature of an academic credit system (on the 'CS' of the acronyms: its history, what is its function in the design of curricula, the different credit systems that exist, etc.) as well as on the current situation in Africa and the different credit systems used in its different regions.

Module 2 focuses on the 'T' of the acronym. Transfer for Mobility. It examines two main issues:

- Understanding, using as a basis an analysis of the effective operation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), how a credit system can be used as an instrument to facilitate student mobility.
- Promoting the reflection on existing and possible future practices of student mobility at the African continental and regional level.

The main lesson to be drawn is that

- Legally, the main instrument of credit transfer are the agreements between specific Universities in the framework of their respective, different (i.e. non-harmonized) national legislations; and
- Politically, what is just needed is the openness of Governments to facilitate these agreements between Universities.

And it opens the door to Module 3, which will examine the practicalities of the use of ECTS/ACTS for student mobility.

### What does Module 2 explore?

- How the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was born as an instrument to facilitate mobility
- That the ECTS has one of the main functions of a currency (unit of account), but not the other one (generalized means of exchange)
- How the ECTS operates in real practice through agreements between Universities
- Which are the practices on student mobility in the different African regions and countries
- Whether there are prohibitions in African national legislations to agreements between Universities on student mobility

## SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING CREDIT TRANSFER: A QUANTITATIVE OR A QUALITATIVE PROBLEM?

### 1.1 HOW ECTS WAS BORN AS AN INSTRUMENT TO FACILITATE MOBILITY

HAQAA's Policy Brief n. 9 explains how ECTS was born as an instrument to facilitate mobility.

First, a Report commissioned by the European Council in 1985 to a group of senior officials (the *Adonnino Report*) in order to propose measures to build a "People's Europe" included a section 5 on Youth, education, exchanges and sport with a subsection 5.6 on University cooperation which pointed to

- a) implement, on the basis of the experience acquired, *a comprehensive European inter-university programme of exchanges and studies* aimed at giving this opportunity to a significant section of the Community's student population; and
- b) examine the possibility of introducing a European system of academic credits transferable throughout the Community (European Academic Credit Transfer System).. *This system would be implemented by means of bilateral agreements or on a voluntary basis by universities and higher education establishments which, by arrangement with one another, would determine the procedures for academic recognition of such credits.*

Second, in June 1987, the Council of the European Communities finally approved the European Commission's proposal to set up a *European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students* (Erasmus). In this framework, it was decided to promote a *European Community Course Credit Transfer System* (ECTS) that Universities, on an **experimental and voluntary** basis, could use to provide a means by which students undergoing or having completed higher education and training may receive credit for such training carried out at universities in other Member States.

THE 1985 ADONNINO REPORT		
Political logic	Integration policy	Facilitating instruments
Promoting “A People’s Europe”	Move Western European Integration closer to young people: Student Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A Student Mobility Programme</li> <li>- The ECTS as a (quantitative) currency to facilitate exchanges between (qualitatively different) courses in different Universities</li> </ul>

THE 1987 ERASMUS DECISION		
Main objective	Political framework	Facilitating instruments
Promoting “A People’s Europe” and move European integration closer to young people through student mobility	High level conversations leading to a final agreement between the European Commission (pushing the Erasmus initiative) and Governments of EC Member States meeting in the EC Council, reluctant at first but finally unanimous in accepting the launch of a Student Mobility Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Funding of small scholarships to stimulate Governments and families to allocate the needed additional funds</li> <li>- Creation of an ECTS that would facilitate quantitative comparisons between courses in different Universities.</li> </ul>

<b>Key insight</b>	ECTS was set up as an instrument for student mobility between universities pertaining to different national higher education systems subject to divergent national legislations ( <b>which remain divergent and not harmonized today</b> ).
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## 1.2 ECTS AS A “UNIT OF ACCOUNT” THAT ALLOWS A QUANTITATIVE MEASUREMENT OF QUALITATIVELY DIFFERENT CURRICULA AND THEIR COMPONENTS (COURSES)

Module 1 has already explained that the Credit System was invented by Carnegie to be able to assess quantitatively whether post-secondary schools (very different qualitatively and in its organization) could be considered “higher education / University” institutions whose lecturers could qualify to participate in the pension funding scheme Carnegie was envisaging.

The ECTS fulfills this function. Therefore, if we look at it as a mechanism to mediate the relations and the exchanges between different Universities (and not for the function Carnegie invented it), we can say ECTS fulfills **ONE** of the functions of a currency: being

a “unit of account” that allows a quantitative measurement of qualitatively different curricula and their components (courses).

However, we must be realistic: Such a “unit of account” must have some clearly identifiable basis. So, it is convenient to revisit the presentation, the discussion and the practical exercises of Module 1. Please review the criteria to define a credit in terms in “notional hours”:

- scheduled teaching (classroom plus lab hours),
- guided independent study, and
- assessment preparation and completion.

You will easily understand that, for students, lecturers and higher education authorities and managers alike, what really matters in practice, in order to determine the number of credits allocated to a course, is the first criterion: scheduled teaching (classroom plus lab hours). Who is able to control the other two criteria, which differ not only depending on the student but also on the lecturer? Do the other two criteria have any relevance in terms of a University budget? Therefore, do not be so worried if, in your African country or region, this is also the main criterion to attribute credits to a course.

<p><b>Provocative and very simple question</b></p>	<p>It was said, more than a hundred years ago, and it has been repeated since, that “the budget is the skeleton of the state (or of any Public Administration)”.</p> <p>Which is the criterion for the definition of academic credits that allows them to become one of the bones of the skeleton? What determines the budgetary cost of a credit?</p>
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### 1.3 BUT ACADEMIC CREDITS CANNOT BECOME A GENERALIZED “MEANS/MEDIUM OF EXCHANGE”

Higher Education is a highly regulated area of social reality. University diplomas have effects well beyond and outside the higher education system. Therefore, we cannot be surprised that the award of such diplomas is also a highly regulated area (both by governments and parliaments and by Universities themselves).

There is always a legal framework for the award of diplomas. This legal framework defines, in one way or another, which are the “curricula” to be completed (the pathways to be followed) for the award of diplomas. Universities cannot award diplomas if these qualitatively different curricula are not completed.

According to UNESCO, an education curriculum is an inventory of activities related to the design, organization and planning of an education or training action. **Any such inventory can be “counted” in a currency (credits) but remains qualitatively different from another inventory.**

<b>Key question and insight</b>	<p>Are you able to differentiate between:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “counting” curricula in <b>quantitative</b> terms (using a credit system), and</li> <li>- understanding them as <b>qualitatively different</b> pathways leading to the obtention of widely different diplomas?</li> </ul>
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<b>Key question and insight</b>	<p>Do you understand why, comparing them to a currency, academic credits can be a “unit of account” but not a “generalized means/medium of exchange”?</p>
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**1.4 WHO DECIDES IN THE EU /EHEA THAT THE “UNITS OF ACCOUNT” OBTAINED IN A UNIVERSITY FOR A SET OF COURSES (I.E. CURRICULUM COMPONENTS) ARE ABLE TO “BUY” ANOTHER SET OF COURSES / CURRICULUM COMPONENTS IN ANOTHER UNIVERSITY? WHICH ARE THE ONLY POSSIBLE ANSWER AND THE BEST FRAMEWORK TO FACILITATE THE “TRANSACTION”?**

Module 3 will discuss, more in detail, how diploma components can be “bought” in one University with the credits obtained in another University. This first section of Module 2 focuses on the facts in the EU / EHEA framework. And, in this framework, the answer is very clear-cut and obvious. It is in fact, the only possible answer if you think on your own: only Universities themselves can decide to “sell” their diploma components.

Of course, there is an aspect of curriculum design that does facilitate this “transaction”: optionality. Indeed, the more curricula are optional and include elective courses, the easier it becomes to “buy” diploma components with the credits obtained in another University. We should not be surprised that in a country so important as India the credit system has been baptized on this basis as CBCS: **Choice Based** Credit System ([https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/8023719\\_guidelines-for-cbcs.pdf](https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/8023719_guidelines-for-cbcs.pdf)).

And never forget that the transition to a modern credit system was initiated at Harvard University in the United States when, in the 1870s, its President Charles W. Eliot replaced the rigid classical curriculum with an **elective system**, allowing students to choose subjects based on personal interest rather than prescribed requirements. This shift eventually transitioned into the modern, modular degree and credit systems used today (Google “Harvard credit system history” and you’ll find many references).

<b>Key insight</b>	<p>Students cannot “buy” course components in University A with credits obtained in University B if University A does not “sell” them.</p> <p>The more curricula are optional, the easier it becomes to “buy” diploma components with the credits obtained in another University.</p>
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## 1.5 LEADING TO MODULE 3: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE OPERATION OF ECTS FOR STUDENT MOBILITY

We will present in Module 3 how ECTS is applied in practice for student mobility in order to facilitate the discussion on how ACTS can also have this function. To close the first section of this module it is sufficient to summarize some of the sections of HAQAA Policy Brief n.11, prepared to guide this ACTS Pilot:

The revision of the *2015 ECTS User's Guide*, led by the European Commission, that has been going on for quite a long time explains very clearly that there are three (and only three !!!) "different ways in which a mobility experience can be planned": **a) Individual Mobility Period Based on a Learning Agreement, b) Embedded Mobility Pathways, c) Open Mobility.**

Their analysis by the Guide's revision is crystal-clear:

- We can disregard the third way (**Open Mobility**), which is what many have been made to believe is the "normal case". In this way to mobility, "learners may ... decide to enroll in learning opportunities offered by other education institutions without coordinating with their home/sending institution specifically. **In this case, recognition cannot be guaranteed**, but can only be decided after the mobility has taken place".  
The student can certainly "transfer" its credits (in the sense of having them recorded) but have only the right to have them "considered" for recognition: the home institution may, or may not, recognize them. In fact, this possibility has always existed: students have always had the possibility "to ask for" validation or recognition of previous studies in other Universities (from the same country or from another one), or whatever name is used in national legislations for this validation or recognition, leaving to Universities whether to accept or not the demand.
- Let's turn to the first way (**Individual Mobility Period Based on a Learning Agreement**). In this way, "Learners should draft a proposal for the Learning Agreement with the support and guidance of both the sending and receiving institutions/organisations. A staff member should be appointed in each department or subject area and formally authorized to discuss the programme of study abroad with the learner. That staff member should be authorised to approve and sign the Learning Agreement on behalf of the sending institution".  
So, in real life, we can also disregard this way: Can you conceive that an individual student will be able to draft on his/her own a Learning Agreement and convince two Universities to agree to it? (and, in any case, what would ultimately really count is the agreement between the two Universities).
- **So, we are left as only viable way with the second one: "Embedded Mobility Pathways" (a nice nickname for "agreements between Universities for undergraduate mobility")**. Indeed, this is how the Guide's revision defines this way: "In this case, only the institutions enter into a general (bilateral or multilateral) agreement. This can be a dedicated agreement about the mobility pathway, a general cooperation agreement or any other suitable form. The agreement serves as a universal agreement and the pathways it

creates are generally open to all learners. It specifies agreed rules, conditions or requirements that apply”.

**In this case, [...] (there is no) need for individual Learning Agreements [...]** (If the agreement) specifies agreed rules, conditions or requirements that apply... individual Learning Agreements are not necessary”.

**Key insight and  
main conclusion of  
Section 1**

Do you understand that, in the EU and the EHEA, student mobility takes place in the framework of agreements concluded between universities, each one applying their respective national legislation?

## SECTION 2. MAPPING THE REAL FACTS AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF CREDIT TRANSFER IN AFRICA: A QUANTITATIVE OR A QUALITATIVE PROBLEM?

### INTRODUCTION

Addressing the issue of credit transfer between African Universities seems to require a clarification. It is often asserted that such a transfer is impossible in the absence of full harmonization of curricula, but the fact is that it does take place in some frameworks (when there is funding for Intra African Academic Mobility at Master and PhD level; when there is funding for some double diplomas with EU Member States Universities; when there are exchange programmes with countries in Europe, North America or Australia ...).

See, as an example, what Campus France says concerning exchanges for partial studies between Senegal and France:

*“This is a mobility for a semester or more in a higher education institution that is a partner of your home institution. During your mobility in France, you remain enrolled in your home institution in Senegal and the credits obtained during your mobility must be validated in your study course in Senegal. These mobilities require specific cooperation agreements between the Senegalese institution and the French institution. Joint degrees or double degrees are part of this.”*

Let’s see another example: the German Academic Exchange Agency (DAAD) announces exchange programmes for a semester in German Universities to which African students are able to participate.

Finally, Google’s AI says (let’s assume it is true) that “Many of the leading universities in SADC countries operate direct student exchange and study-abroad programs. These agreements allow students to study at a partner institution for 1 to 2 semesters, with credits transferring back to their home degree”. Indeed; we can check the University of

Pretoria, for example, and we see the following: “Exchange students (Outbound) refer to students from the University of Pretoria (the home institution) going to another institution (the host institution) under the auspices of a collaboration agreement between the two institutions”; and conversely, the same is said for Inbound students.

Therefore, this section (and the Module 3 that follows) has the objective of providing such a clarification by building on the conclusions of the first: Student Mobility in the EU and the EHEA is not the result of a magical wand that harmonized national legislations; it is the result of

- the willingness, interest and efforts of Universities (of their leaders, of some of their lecturers and of many of their students) coming to agreements between them and
- the cleverness of integration institutions providing a framework and incentivizing them.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>How to conceive Student Mobility in Higher Education (at least on the basis of the European experience)?</b></p>	<p>Student Mobility is not the result or the by-product of a magical wand that harmonizes national legislations.</p> <p>It is the result of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the willingness, interest and efforts of Universities (both of some of their lecturers and of many of their students) coming to agreements between them and</li> <li>- the cleverness of integration institutions providing a political framework and incentivizing agreements between Universities.</li> </ul> <p>The master word is “Empowerment”: to empower Universities and to empower students.</p>
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## 2.1 THE FACTS

Participating Universities and political authorities should first map the existing situation. This is the purpose of the first section of the Reflection Task prior to Module 2.

## 2.2 THE POSSIBILITIES: EXAMINING A HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE

Let’s assume that a political authority in a “province” of your country (i.e. not in the capital but quite far away from it) is appointed for a high-level position in the capital: for example, is appointed as Minister. Assume also that he or she has two twin daughters studying at a university in the province; they have just finalized the second academic year. Can he or she move to the capital with the two daughters so that they can continue their studies in a university based in the capital? Would the university in the capital recognize the two

academic years they have studied in the provincial University or it would oblige the two daughters to reinitiate their studies from scratch?

A parallel example can be construed for a foreign ambassador to your country and his/her two twin daughters.

The live sessions can provide a good framework for the discussion of these examples.

### 2.3 IDENTIFYING PROHIBITIONS

If the examination of the hypothetical cases in the previous section leads to the conclusion that there is no procedure to recognize the studies in another university of the two daughters and they must reinitiate their studies in the university in the capital, please identify the legal provision that forbids a University to recognize and validate the periods of study undertaken in another University.

Here again, the live sessions can provide a good framework for the discussion and the comparison between different legal frameworks.

The discussion should also address an extremely relevant question to which the HAQAA team has not yet received a clear answer: why there are no major obstacles for credit transfer and recognition at postgraduate level (for example, to participate in the Intra African Academic Mobility Scheme – MOBAF - and receive funding from it) but such problems seem to exist at undergraduate level?

<b>Key analytical questions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are there legal impediments to accept intra-African student mobility in the same way that student mobility with non-African countries seems accepted?</li> <li>- Why intra-African student mobility seems so easy at Master and PhD levels and so difficult at undergraduate level?</li> </ul>
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<b>Key political consideration</b>	Experience in all regional integration processes shows that it is very harmful to progress in Integration to couch as “legal impediments” what are simply political and practical difficulties.
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### 2.4 SORTING OUT A PROBLEM VERY EASY TO SORT OUT

The problem raised by student mobility between different Universities is very often formulated as a problem involving extremely difficult legal and political questions, when, in fact, it is much simpler than it appears (Module 3 will explain this in detail and provide real examples of documentation demonstrating what is asserted in the following paragraphs).

As HAQAA Policy Brief n.11 explains in its closing section, the terminology “Credit Recognition” can lead to a misunderstanding. It can give the wrong impression that the home University in country A accepts the courses passed by a mobile student in a host University in country B and introduces them in the student’s records (and in the transcripts resulting from them and given to the students).

This is not how “Credit Recognition” works in real practice. And it cannot be so because, in order to award the final diploma, the home University in country A must certify that the student has been enrolled in, and has completed, all the courses in the programme’s curriculum leading to the diploma; and, by hypothesis, the curriculum does not include courses passed and graded in foreign Universities.

What really does happen is that the home University in country A certifies as passed and graded **in it** courses that the student has not passed (and for which he has received no grades). In accordance with HAQAA’s research this can be done in three different ways:

- The home University simply certifies as passed and graded **in it** courses that the student has not followed (example from Spain).
- The home University certifies that these courses the student has not followed (but in which he/she has been enrolled) have been “convalidated”<sup>1</sup>, (example from Italy).
- The home University skillfully introduces in the programme’s curriculum a quite undefined “open course” (for example, “études de spécialisation”) that is considered passed and graded if the foreign host University certifies that the student has completed the requested courses there (example from France).

The credits obtained in the foreign University are not “stacked and counted towards a qualification ... replacing credits usually acquired through a course or module that is part of the programme”, as it is often asserted. The credits obtained abroad remain “credits abroad”; the home University does not integrate them in its records and transcripts as “its” credits. It simply uses them to “consider as passed and graded” the home credits in which the student has been enrolled but that he/she has never followed.

Therefore, the problem (and the solution) is entirely confined to the application of national law, and can be formulated as follows: Universities, all of them, and their Faculties, Departments and lecturers, have the capacity to assess whether a student can pass a course and give him or her a grade. Is there a legal impediment to do it on the basis of the studies followed in a fellow University?

**Key insight  
and main  
conclusion of  
Section 2**

When two Universities set up a student exchange agreement, the credits obtained in the foreign University are not “stacked and counted towards a qualification ... replacing credits usually acquired at the home University through a course or module that is part of the programme”, as it is often asserted. The credits

<sup>1</sup> The very revealing Spanish and Italian terminology of “convalidation / convalidated” does not find a right equivalent in other languages (English or French, for example).

obtained abroad remain “credits abroad”; the home University does not integrate them in its records and transcripts as “its” credits. It simply uses them to “consider as passed and graded” some courses of its own curriculum.

Is this prohibited? This is the simple and straightforward question.

## MATERIALS FOR MODULE 2

### RECORDING

- Prof. Ramon Torrent, President Obreal – Introductory remarks on academic mobility and credit systems
- ECTS credits as a currency: Minute 1 of the video: What is ECTS? European Commission - Jun 24, 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dmhtl2n1YVs> (3.21 minutes)

### WRITTEN MATERIALS

- HAQAA3 Policy Brief N° 7 – Understanding that Erasmus-like processes do not involve Higher Education Harmonization
- HAQAA3 Policy Brief N° 9 - The simultaneous conception and birth of Erasmus and ECTS: any lessons to be drawn in other continents?
- HAQAA3 Policy Brief N° 10 - The academic credits as a currency for inter-university mobility
- HAQAA 3 Policy Brief N° 11 – Are there lessons for the ACTS to be drawn from the ECTS User’s Guide revision that is being led by the European Commission?