

PROPOSAL

ASIAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM (ACTS)

**Asia e University
Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia**

BACKGROUND

The Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) was established to promote cooperation among its 30 member countries leveraging on the strengths and opportunities of each nation. It is targeted specifically towards human capital development, alleviating poverty and improving the quality of life, whilst developing a knowledge-based society within Asia and enhancing people empowerment. Its ultimate goal is the transformation of the Asian continent into an Asian community which seeks to increase the bargaining power of Asian countries in lieu of competition, and enhance Asia's economic competitiveness in the global market.

One of the steps towards this cooperation is the establishment of Asia e University (AeU), an initiative of Malaysia, as prime mover for e-education. With the support of the 30 ACD member countries as confirmed by the Islamabad, Doha and Seoul ministerial meetings, AeU seeks to work in collaboration with Asian Institutions of Higher Learning in providing academic programmes drawing on the collective expertise and prestige of member institutions through collective and strategic links.

Besides focusing on providing programmes and products that are of quality, affordable, accessible, and marketable; AeU is also proposing to be a facilitator for the mutual accreditation and recognition of degrees and academic programmes among Asian HEIs. Such a recognition and transfer system will encourage greater movement of students among Asian universities and colleges.

At the third ACD Roundtable meeting organised by Asia e University in cooperation with the ACD Secretariat in Bangkok, Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia and Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia on March 24 -25th March 2008, the the European Credit Transfer System(ECTS) which had created greater mobility of students and portability of credits and the impact it has had on the European Union and the creation of the European

Higher Education Area was as whole it was discussed. The participants of the ACD member countries at the 3rd Roundtable deliberated on the possibility of ACD member countries having an Asian Credit Transfer System (ACTS) similar to that of the ECTS. It is the hope of Asia e University that the ACD Summit Meeting to be held in Kazakhstan will endorse in principle the establishment Asian Credit Transfer System (ACTS) for facilitating greater cooperation in the field of Higher Education generally and e learning specifically.

THE EUROPEAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM (ECTS)

In 1989, European Union countries met in Italy and signed the Bologna Declaration with the aim of building a common space for higher education in the region. Among the steps taken was the introduction of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Later at the Salamanca Convention on Higher Education in 2001 and the Prague Conference of Education Ministers in 2002, there was agreement on the importance of a system for both the transfer and accumulation of credits, and on the need for progress on these issues. Participants at these two meeting consisted of European universities, student bodies, national ministries and international organisations agreed on the key features of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) which aims to (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2005).

- facilitate the transfer of students between European countries, and in particular enhances the quality of student mobility, thus facilitating academic recognition
- enable mobility of higher education students within institutions, national systems and internationally.
- promote the mutual recognition of qualifications and comparability of study programmes and qualifications,
- enhance the attractiveness of European higher education towards the rest of the world.

ECTS is the only credit system which has been successfully tested and used across Europe. The system was initially set up as a credit transfer system which facilitated the mobility of students in Europe. However, later the system developed in an accumulation system implemented at the institutional, regional and European level. Besides, European countries, the ECTS has been adopted in some Australian and Canadian institutions of higher learning (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2000). Many other countries are looking at the possibility of implementing the ECTS in their respective institutions. The ECTS has brought about greater mobility among students and greater cohesion and integration of the EU.

THE ASIAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM (ACTS)

What is the Asian Credit Transfer System?

With the advent of globalisation and increasing competitiveness, the need for a common space in higher education is most urgent. However, Asian countries with its diversity, faces significant challenges in allowing for mobility across international, cultural and social borders. In the field of higher education, the key towards building a common space, is to promote mobility of students across countries. To enable such movement, the Asian Credit Transfer System or ACTS, deriving the best of the European model as a benchmark is proposed. Such a system will provide instruments for understanding and comparing different education systems, the recognition of professional qualification, increase collaboration between universities and the convergence of educative structures (Tovar and others, 2006).

What are the objectives of the Asian Credit Transfer System (ACTS)?

The proposed ACTS consists of two components: a credit transfer system and an accumulation system.

As a credit transfer system ACTS seeks to:

- facilitate transfer of students between educational institutions in Asia, leading to student mobility and;
- facilitate the mutual recognition of academic qualifications
- As an accumulation system because of its greater transparency and comparability of programmes.

, ACTS seeks to:

- encourage curriculum development in national systems
- encourage greater cooperation amongst higher education institutions in Asia
- enable mobility of students within national systems (between institutions in a country)
- allow for recognition of prior learning (RPL), thus facilitating lifelong learning
- promote the attractiveness of Asian higher education to the rest of the world

What is the key feature of ACTS?

To facilitate mobility and recognition of educational programmes, there needs to be a systematic way of describing an educational programme by attaching 'credits' to its components. ACTS is a student-centred system in which 'credit' is given for work done by the student to achieve the learning outcomes of a course or subject.

What is a credit?

A credit is defined as the award given to a learner in recognition of the learning outcomes achieved at a specified level and verified accordingly.

What is a learning outcome?

Learning outcome is defined as the knowledge, skills and attitudes/value acquired by a learner after completion of a process of learning. Learning outcomes must be accompanied by assessment criteria stating the extent to which certain knowledge, skills, competencies and values have been acquired.

What is an ACTS credit?

ONE ACTS credit is equivalent to 'student workload' for defined number of hours eg. 24 to 30 working hours.

What is student workload?

It is defined as the time spent by a student to accomplish the specified learning outcomes at a particular level which involves:

- teaching methods – lecture, seminar, practical, laboratory work, tutorial, internship, fieldwork, project work and so forth
- learning activities – doing specific assignments, practicing technical skills, writing papers, reading books, article & papers, oral presentations and so forth
- assessment – oral examination, written examination, tests & quizzes, portfolio assessment, thesis, internship report, project report, field work report and so forth.

[NOTE: The 'real' time spent will vary according to the individual's capability, prior knowledge, mode of learning and so forth]

Can you give an example of how ACTS credits are applied?

For example, if a course is assigned a study load of 6 ACTS, students will be required to devote $6 \times 28 \text{ hours} = 168 \text{ hours}$ to the study of the subject. If students are required to attend lectures and tutorials for 4 hours per week during a 12 week semester; the contact hours is 48 hours. The remaining 120

hours (166 minus 48) is for students to engage in self-study and to prepare for examinations, to read the relevant material not explained during lectures, to prepare assignments, to make oral presentations, to participate in a practicum and so forth.

If students are required to do additional reading for the course, it should be determined how many pages a student can reasonably be expected to read and digest per hour. If the ratio is 5 pages per hour, a 6 ACTS course of 12 weeks with 48 contact hours leaving 118 hours of which 40 hours devoted to required reading = $40 \times 5 = 200$ pages.

Are work placement, practicum or internship covered by ACTS?

ACTS covers work placement, practicum or internship but they have to be described in terms of learning outcomes and given assigned credits.

How long is one academic year?

A full-time study programme will vary according to institutions. ACTS proposes 36 to 40 weeks per year.

- If there are two semesters per academic year, than each semester will be between 14 to 16 weeks long (inclusive of study week and examination week).
- If there are three semesters (trimester) per academic year, than each semester will be between 12-14 weeks long.

What is the workload for one academic year?

ACTS proposes 60 credits to be the recommended workload of a full-time student during one academic year. In other words, 30 credits are given for one semester and 20 credits for a trimester.

When are the credits obtained?

Credits can be obtained only after completion of the work required and appropriate assessment of the learning outcomes achieved.

Is there a specific ACTS grading scale?

Examination and assessment results are usually expressed in grades. There are many different grading systems used by institutions in Asia. Whatever, grading system that is adopted, it should be transparent and clear to serve as a basis of comparison.

Is the use of ACTS grading scale obligatory?

An ACTS grading scale is proposed but is not designed to replace national system but to act as reference point to enhance understanding of national systems. The use of ACTS grading scale is strongly recommended but is not obligatory. Higher education institutions make their own decisions on how to apply the ACTS grading scale to their own system.

How do students benefit from ACTS?

ACTS enables students to study part in their own country and further their studies in another country should they so desire. For example, a student pursuing a Bachelor of Management degree in country X may continue his or her final year or do an internship in country Y. The institutions involved decide whether or not this is acceptable and what conditions the student must fulfil in order to get a degree or transfer registration.

ACTS also enables access to programmes in local universities. For example, a student pursuing a degree in one institution may move to a another

institution in the same country. Currently, this may not be possible in some countries.

How do universities benefit from ACTS?

ACTS makes the comparison of local and foreign programmes much easier and facilitates academic recognition. It is possible that with ACTS, institutions in Asia may be prompted to reflect and even review their curriculum so as to be more transparent, more clearly explicated and easily understood by others. This will make Asian higher education more attractive for students in the region and even outside the region.

ACTS may be applied to many different modes of delivery. For example, it may be adopted by distance learning institutions whose students are mostly part-time as well as conventional universities whose students are mostly full-time.

For institutions who have not adopted the "credit" system, ACTS may encourage these institutions to consider using the 'credit' system. It may also encourage higher education institutions to reflect on their curriculum, student workload and learning outcomes.

With ACTS, higher education institutions in the region, maintain their autonomy as they decide on the modifications and changes that should be introduced with regards to programme structure.

How does ACTS promote lifelong learning?

There is a growing population of adult learners returning to school. Their valuable skills, competencies and experiences acquired outside mainstream education and training can be expressed in the form of credits. Every type of adult learning can be expressed in the form of learning outcomes and

workload which can be translated into ACTS credits. This will promote lifelong learning as more people from professional life and non-traditional learning environments are motivated to return to school.

What tools are required for implementation of ACTS?

To facilitate implementation of ACTS, certain specific tools have to be developed:

1. Information Package/Course Catalogue

It is the most important tool in which is recorded relevant information which is easy to understand and compare for students and staff, locally and foreign. It contains information about the respective institution, information on degree programmes, description of individual courses, and general information for students such as cost of living, facilities, regulations and requirements for studying at the institution concerned. It is recommended that the document be available on the web and updated accordingly.

2. The Learning Agreement

It contains the list of courses the student plans to take which must be agreed by the student and the two institutions concerned. It guarantees the transfer of credit for courses passed successfully by the student. The Learning Agreement helps to ensure that the student is subjects that which meet the requirements of the degree sought.

3. The Transcript of Records

It documents the performance of a student by showing the list of courses taken, the local grade obtained and the corresponding ACTS grades awarded.

What is the Diploma Supplement?

Besides, the Transcript of Records, students are provided with the Diploma Supplement which is a document attached to the degree providing additional

information. It is a document which provides a standardised description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies successfully completed by the graduate. The supplement provides transparency and facilitates academic and professional recognition of qualifications (diplomas, degrees, certificates).

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore proposed that ACD member institutions:

- recognise the importance of an Asian Credit Transfer System for the development of higher education among member countries,
- agree in principle to the concept of an Asian Credit Transfer System (ACTS).
- agree to meet to discuss in detail:
 - the application of ACTS in a transparent but flexible way, taking into account specific priorities of countries concerned
 - the potential of ACTS for supporting curricular reform and enhancing international cooperation;
 - assess the cost and benefits of ACTS and allocation of adequate human and financial resources for its implementation and proper use;
 - develop appropriate instruments to ensure adequate monitoring and regular evaluation of the use of ACT

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