



OFFICE OF THE ASSOCIATE VICE-PRESIDENT, ACADEMIC

8888 University
Drive, Burnaby, BC
Canada V5A 1S6

TEL: 778.782.6654
FAX: 778.782.5876

avpacad@sfu.ca
www.sfu.ca/vpacademic

MEMORANDUM

ATTENTION	Senate	DATE	March 4, 2022
FROM	Wade Parkhouse, Chair Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies	PAGES	1/1
RE:	Course Units Definition (SCUS 22-17)		

Action undertaken by SCUS on March 3, 2022 gives rise to the following recommendation:

Motion:

That Senate approve the following interpretation of a unit:

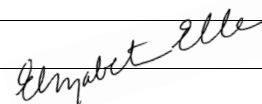
Units (formerly known as credits) should reflect student workload, including both time in classes (or synchronous online activities), and other aspects of academic effort. Each unit would generally comprise 2-3 hours of the combination of in-class and self-study time per week on average, such that a 3-unit course would generally comprise 6-9 hours per week on average, or approximately 78-117 hours over 13 weeks.

Courses with laboratories or a significant experiential learning component may require additional student work and should be expected to require some additional time. It must be recognized that learners vary in the self-study time needed for their courses, effective, Fall 2022."

*courses that do not follow typical term dates complete the same number of hours in fewer weeks.

MEMORANDUM

ATTENTION:	Senate
FROM:	Elizabeth Elle, Vice-Provost, Learning & Teaching; Vice-Chair, Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies
RE:	Course unit definition
DATE:	March 8, 2022



SCUS brings the following for approval of Senate; the motion passed SCUS unanimously at our March 2022 meeting:

Motion: that Senate approve the following interpretation of a unit:

Units (formerly known as credits) should reflect student workload, including both time in classes (or synchronous online activities), and other aspects of academic effort. Each unit would generally comprise 2-3 hours of the combination of in-class and self-study time per week on average, such that a 3-unit course would generally comprise 6-9 hours per week on average, or approximately 78-117 hours over 13 weeks.*

Courses with laboratories or a significant experiential learning component may require additional student work and should be expected to require some additional time. It must be recognized that learners vary in the self-study time needed for their courses.

**courses that do not follow typical term dates complete the same number of hours in fewer weeks.*

Background:

We have heard from students, who are well positioned to compare courses, that course workload varies and does not always seem to match the number of units assigned. These inconsistencies can indirectly encourage students to take fewer courses. A more consistent set of expectations of time per course will allow students to make better choices about the number of units to enrol in, and may shorten time to graduation. In addition, online and blended courses don't fit the "contact hours plus homework" model that is traditional (see below), and some faculty have expressed they would like greater clarity regarding expectations for a unit as it can impact aspects of course design. SCUS therefore agreed it was useful to clarify the definition of a course unit to support both students and faculty as they enroll in or develop courses, respectively.

SCUS (or the Policy Group subcommittee) discussed this issue multiple times over the past year (May 2021, June 2021, July 2021, September 2021, December 2021, March 2022). We explored definitions at other institutions, performed an informal audit to consider how well a definition might work within

Faculties, and consulted with the Disability and Neurodiversity Alliance on ways to capture individual student variation through appropriate wording in the definition.

What do other institutions do?

A recent literature review by [BCCAT \(2016\)](#) notes that historically, “credit hours” were based on the “Carnegie unit”. The Carnegie unit assigns a standard three academic units to an undergraduate course offered in a 14-16 week semester. A single unit assumes that successful completion requires three hours of learning per week, one classroom contact hour and two hours of homework or independent study; by extension a 3-unit course would have three hours of contact and 6 hours of homework or independent study per week. Another way to consider this is if students would normally earn 15 units in 15 weeks of full time study, a week of full time study earns a unit. BCCAT notes there are strong informal Carnegie model norms in the BC transfer system.

A search of Canadian universities discovered definitions that largely reflect the Carnegie definition of contact hours per week. Some institutions (notably Concordia and Guelph) are explicit about student workload outside of class, which SCUS found to be helpful in developing a definition for SFU.

SCUS criteria for a definition included:

- The need for transparency of expectations for both students and instructors
- The utility of proposing “general” or “average” expectations, while recognizing variation among students, from week to week, and among courses with different components such as laboratories
- A preference for moving beyond the historical contact hour definition to capture total student workload
- A need to capture expectations not only for in-person courses but also for blended and online courses
- A preference for aligning with expectations at other universities, and with the historical “Carnegie unit” definition