



Information on the higher education system of South Africa: a guideline for interpreting "credits" and "grades" on Stellenbosch University academic transcripts

Context

Stellenbosch University is a public higher education institution that operates within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of South Africa. The NQF is a single integrated system for the "classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality assured national qualifications" as indicated in Section 4 of the NQF Act, 2008 (Act No 67 of 2008).

Within the field of higher education, the registration of academic programmes as qualifications on the NQF is governed by the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), as contemplated in the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act 101 of 1997). The HEQSF consists of level descriptors, qualifications routes, qualification types and their descriptors, qualification standards and designated variants and qualifiers for qualification specialisations. (The revised HEQSF is available [here](#).)

Credits and workload

The South African credit system is based on a learning-centred quantification of workload and is not a measurement of the number of lectures and/or practical sessions per week. The credit allocation for core, fundamental and elective modules in the programme design of a qualification will depend on the purpose of the qualification type and its characteristics as described in the HEQSF (DHET, 2014). Credits are *measures of the volume of learning* required for a module or qualification, quantified as the number of *notional study hours* required for achieving the learning outcomes specified for the qualification. *Notional hours* are the agreed estimated learning time taken by the *average* student to achieve the specified learning outcomes of the module or programme (DHET, 2021). The South African credit-rating system equates 10 notional study hours as equivalent to one credit.

Learning activities include any form of facilitated activities (lectures, tutorials, laboratory work, workplace-based learning, etc.) as well as the time required by the student for self-study purposes, or time required to complete assignments, projects, research as well as the preparation for and completion of formal assessment opportunities (examinations, etc.). The volume of learning (*total minimum number of credits*) required for a qualification on the NQF are expressed as *minima*. It is not recommended to exceed the total minimum number of credits prescribed for the qualification type, however, credit loads above the minimum could be necessitated, i.e., when prescribed by professional bodies. However, the prescribed total minimum number of credits for the qualification type may not be exceeded by more than 10%.

All qualification types with an exit level at NQF level 5 to 8 (i.e., Diplomas, Bachelor's degrees, Honours degrees, etc.) assume a minimum of a 30-week full-time academic year. Master's Degrees and Doctoral qualification types assume a minimum of a 45-week full-time academic year. An *average* full-time equivalent student is expected to study for a 40-

hour week, thus requiring a **minimum** credit-load of 120 credits per academic year for Certificate, Diploma, Bachelor's Degree, Honours Degree and Postgraduate Diploma qualifications and 180 credits per academic year for Master's Degrees and Doctorates. (Adapted from the Government Gazette, 17 October 2014, p16).

When contemplating the mobility of qualifications and the comparability of credits, workload and grading, an estimated guideline for the transfer of South African credits to European or American institutions would be as follows:

1 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) \approx 2 South African credits 1 United States of America (USA) credit \approx 4 South African credits

The standard workload for full-time enrolled undergraduate students is 60 credits per semester, i.e., 120 credits per year. A student enrolled for a three-year Bachelor's Degree therefore completes a minimum of 360 credits to obtain a qualification. (Four-year professional Bachelor's Degrees require a minimum of 480 credits.)

On completion of a bachelor's degree in most fields, students would be required to complete a Honours degree or a Postgraduate Diploma in order to qualify for admission to a Master's programme.

Stellenbosch University offers general, formative Bachelor's Degrees, as well as a wide variety of four-year Professional Bachelor's Degrees (such as Bachelor of Engineering programmes). After completing a general, formative Bachelor's Degree, graduates can articulate to a Bachelor Honours Degree which prepares students for research-based postgraduate study. Alternatively, a Postgraduate Diploma is offered at the same level of complexity as the Bachelor Honours Degree (NQF level 8) and is generally multi- or interdisciplinary in nature, serving to strengthen and deepen the student's knowledge in a particular discipline or profession. Graduates of a four-year Professional Bachelor's Degree can articulate to a Master's programme directly in certain disciplines, as these programmes are on the same exit level as an Honours degree.

The minimum total credits for a Master's programmes is 180 credits. These qualifications are offered on a NQF level 9 and will typically take one of three forms:

1. Master's degrees by research only (NQF level 9) which culminate in an externally examined thesis of 180 credits;
2. Structured master's degrees (NQF level 9) consisting of an advanced coursework component with a less heavily weighted research component contributing to the overall credit weighting. A Master's degree must contain a research component of no less than 60 credits, however, this component can be increased to total up to 120 of the allocated 180 credits.
3. A Professional Master's Degree (NQF level 9) which is aimed at preparing graduates for advanced and specialised professional employment. These programmes must be supported by a professional body and fulfil all or part of the requirements for professional registration or recognition. These programmes will consist of a combination of theoretical and practical learning as well as a smaller research or technical project of at least 45 credits.

Doctoral programmes are degrees by research only with an undifferentiated allocation of 360 credits for the doctoral dissertation, which is the report on research done by the doctoral candidate under supervision on one central and coherent research problem.

Doctoral dissertations are examined by an independent panel of examiners and the work is publicly defended by means of an oral examination.

Note: Stellenbosch University uses the term ‘dissertation’ when referring to the document that is produced by a doctoral student rather than thesis, which is the term for referring to the product of research for Master’s studies. A smaller research component, addressing the 30, 45 or 60 credit research component is usually referred to as a research project or research assignment.

Summative Assessments and Grading

The most used grading system for summative assessments is based on a mark given as a percentage and is the system used at Stellenbosch University. Stellenbosch University follows a flexible assessment approach, whereby each module allows for various assessments (methods and opportunities) to contribute to a final mark. Each programme and module consider an effective assessment strategy and the most appropriate assessment methods for their defined purposes. Students receive formative feedback on all assessments, but the final summative marks are expressed as a percentage. Performance in terms of percentages can be interpreted as follows:

Coursework grading scales	Thesis grades	PhD Dissertation
≥75% Distinction (Cum laude)	≥75% Distinction (Cum laude)	Pass
60-74% Good	60-74% Good	Fail
51-59% Average	51-59% Average	
50% Pass	50% Pass	
<50% Fail	<50% Fail	

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