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UC San Diego Units and ECTS Credit Conversion

United States visa regulations require that a student who enters the U.S. on an F-1 visa must be enrolled in at least 12 units per academic term. Twelve units is considered to be a “full-time course load.” Apart from visa regulations, students who participate in the University and Professional Studies (UPS) program are recommended to enroll in only 12 units because this is considered a full schedule of classes here and because it is essential that UPS students achieve above-average final grades. All UPS students must obtain high final marks (“B” or better) in all courses in order to remain enrolled in the UPS program.

There are three quarters in the academic year at UCSD (Fall, Winter and Spring). The quarter system at UC San Diego moves at a much faster pace than the semester systems of most good universities in the U.S. In one quarter a course will typically cover the same amount or even a greater amount of course material as presented across the longer semester timeframe of other universities. UCSD’s “rule of thumb” is that 1 unit is equivalent to 1 hour of in-class work each week plus a minimum of 3 hours of homework per unit outside of class time each week. But in practice the total number of hours of study time usually exceeds 50 hours per unit per quarter because of the heavy outside reading requirements, research and writing requirements, study for quizzes and mid-term exams, special projects, etc. There is a lot of variation, depending upon course content and the professors’ requirements. There are 4-unit courses that require even more than 200 hours of work in a quarter for a typical student to complete all required work and finish well.

According to UCSD’s guidelines, one unit corresponds to 1 class-hour per week and 3 or more hours of homework per week, for a total of at least 4 hours of work each week per unit. Over the quarter this would correspond to a theoretical minimum of 40 hours of work per 1 UCSD unit. But in practice we know that a good student will spend 50 or more hours in total class work and out-of-class work per quarter-unit. This is why we urge our partners not to require their students to enroll in more than 12 units per quarter at UC San Diego.

The spirit of the ECTS system is to capture the reality of the time spent in class and the reasonable amount of time which a good student needs to spend outside of class in order to do well in the course. Therefore, we recommend using the more realistic figure of 50 hours per quarter as the amount of time needed per unit at UCSD. Below is our recommendation for equivalent ECTS credits based on 1 ECTS unit requiring 25-30 hours of work. It is important to note that although the content of a graduate course is more advanced than an undergraduate course, UCSD just counts units the same at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

UCSD unit	Hours to complete 1 unit	ECTS credit if total hours per ECTS credit is 30 hours
1 unit	50 hours	1.66 credits
2 units	100 hours	3.33 credits
3 units	150 hours	5 credits
4 units (typical UCSD course)	200 hours	6.66 credits
12 units (UPS full time student)	600 hours	20 credits
36 units (3 quarters = 2 semesters)	1,800 hours	60 credits