

The establishment of academic credit accumulation and transfer system: A case study of Shanghai Academic Credit Transfer and Accumulation Bank for Lifelong Education¹

Huikang Li

Shanghai Open University, China

Yaoting Sun

Shanghai Open University, China

Min Yang

Shanghai Open University, China

Zhihui Wei

Shanghai Open University, China

Abstract

Nowadays, the construction of lifelong education system has become the common trend of educational development in many countries. In China, credit accumulation and transfer as one of the effective measures to promote the lifelong education system was proposed in the National Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020). It certainly poses a new opportunity and challenge to open universities in China, most of which are in transition from TV and radio universities and expected to play more important roles in the construction of lifelong education system in China. The paper presents the initial research and practice of Shanghai Academic Credit Transfer and Accumulation Bank for Lifelong Education (SHCB), which is led by Shanghai Municipal Education Commission and operated by Shanghai Open University as one of the initiatives of open universities in China since 2010. Focusing on continuing education for Shanghai citizens and cooperating with other universities and related institutions, SHCB has been established with the organisational structure, accreditation criteria for credits, credit accumulation and transfer system, learners' learning portfolios, technology service platform, and the detailed operating mode. By now, accreditation criteria of learner's credits of 166 courses and 139 non-degree certificates, and recognition of 541 non-degree certificates and 1549 leisure courses have been completed. SHCB has been open to the public from 24 July, 2002 to promote the exchange and transfer among the academic education, even between academic education and non-academic education, and ultimately promote the construction of the lifelong education system in Shanghai.

¹The paper is the project “Strategies to open university in Shanghai” (B12602) funded by Shanghai educational science research.

Background

The idea of lifelong education and lifelong learning has important impacts on the international educational reform, one of which is the construction of academic credit bank system. In China, the transfer and accumulation of academic credit as one of the effective measures to promote the construction of lifelong education system was proposed in the National Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020) (Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, the State Council, 2010). Accordingly, the construction of academic credit bank was mentioned in Shanghai's Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020) (Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2002).

As one of the initiatives, Shanghai Academic Credit Transfer and Accumulation Bank for Lifelong Education (SHCB), which is led by Shanghai Municipal Education Commission and operated by Shanghai Open University, began its exploration in August of 2010, and has been open to the public from July 24, 2012. It is also a part of transition of open universities in China.

Literature review

There are several representative systems of recognition and transfer of learning outcomes in the world, such as recognition and transfer of academic credit in the United States (Wang & Liu, 2011), European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) (Viker, 2012), Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) in the United Kingdom (Yang & Gu, 2012), Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in Australia (Yang & Gu, 2012), and the Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) in South Korea (Jong, 2012). Apparently, the five systems have different features and focuses. For example, with the shared course code system, the recognition and transfer of academic credit in the United States focus on the transfer between community colleges and universities (SERB, 2002). ECTS aims to facilitate the planning, delivery, evaluation, recognition and validation of qualifications and units of learning as well as student mobility. QCF is a system for recognising skills and qualifications by awarding credit for qualifications and learning units. AQF emphasises the exchange and transition between academic education and vocational training. Moreover, ACBS focuses on continuous education with the support of the government. Apparently, the construction of SHCB is based on the investigation and analysis of these systems, as well as the context of Shanghai in particular.

Case study

With the rapid development of economy and society, the social structure in Shanghai is changing. Accordingly, continuous and further learning is needed to improve professional skills by the workforce so as to be competitive and flexible during the industrial restructuring. Learning is also needed by a large number of migrated people so as to adapt to the new living and working environment. With the increase of aged population, learning is again needed by more and more senior citizens to enrich their lives.

In 1999, Shanghai put forward a slogan of building learning city. Since then, Shanghai has established service platforms for lifelong education, held various cultural activities for the community, built information platform for lifelong education (<http://www.shlll.net/home/Index.do>), and formulated Shanghai Promotion Regulations for Lifelong Education in order to form legislative authority (Yuan, 2012). However, mutual recognition of different forms of education is needed among formal educations and between formal and informal educations (Zhang, 2012).

Based on the studies of recognition and transfer of learning outcomes in the world, this study will introduce the exploration of SHCB in the context of Shanghai, China, which is closely linked to the building of a learning society and a lifelong learning system since its establishment.

Focusing on continuing education for citizens in Shanghai and cooperating with other universities and institutions, SHCB has been established with the organisational structure, accreditation criteria for credits, credit accumulation and transfer system, learners' learning portfolios, and technology service platform.

The objective and functions of SHCB

Considering the economical, social and educational development in Shanghai, SHCB aims to become the centre for managing and serving citizens' learning outcomes in Shanghai, with the major function of credit recognition, credit accumulation and credit transfer in continuous education referring to academic degree, vocational training and leisure courses. 1) Credit Recognition: recognising and certificating prior learning and granting credits of academic degree; 2) Credit Accumulation: depositing learner's learning records and the recognised credits; 3) Credit Transfer: transferring recognised credits among different institutions.

Just like a flyover, it will facilitate lifelong learning and push the development of learning society in Shanghai, and try to break down the barriers between different forms of education.

Organisational structure

Figure 1 shows the organisational structure of the SHCB. Management Committee is the lead agency of the construction and operation of SHCB. Experts Committee and expert teams are in charge of providing guidance and counselling, establishing the criteria of accreditation of learner's credits, and carrying out credit recognition. Management Centre, which is located in Shanghai Open University, is in charge of construction and operation of the SHCB and is divided into five offices undertaking the detailed tasks: 1) Office for Recognition of Academic Degree; 2) Office for Recognition of Vocational Training; 3) Office for Recognition of Leisure Education; 4) Office for Information Service; 5) Office for Management. In addition, there are branches and cooperation institutions in the system of SHCB. Branches are responsible for opening the accounts for the learners, reviewing the credit recognition and disseminating

the related information about SHCB. These branches are located in most of the districts in Shanghai. On the other hand, cooperation institutions are in charge of depositing their students' learning records into SHCB according to the criteria for credit transfer.

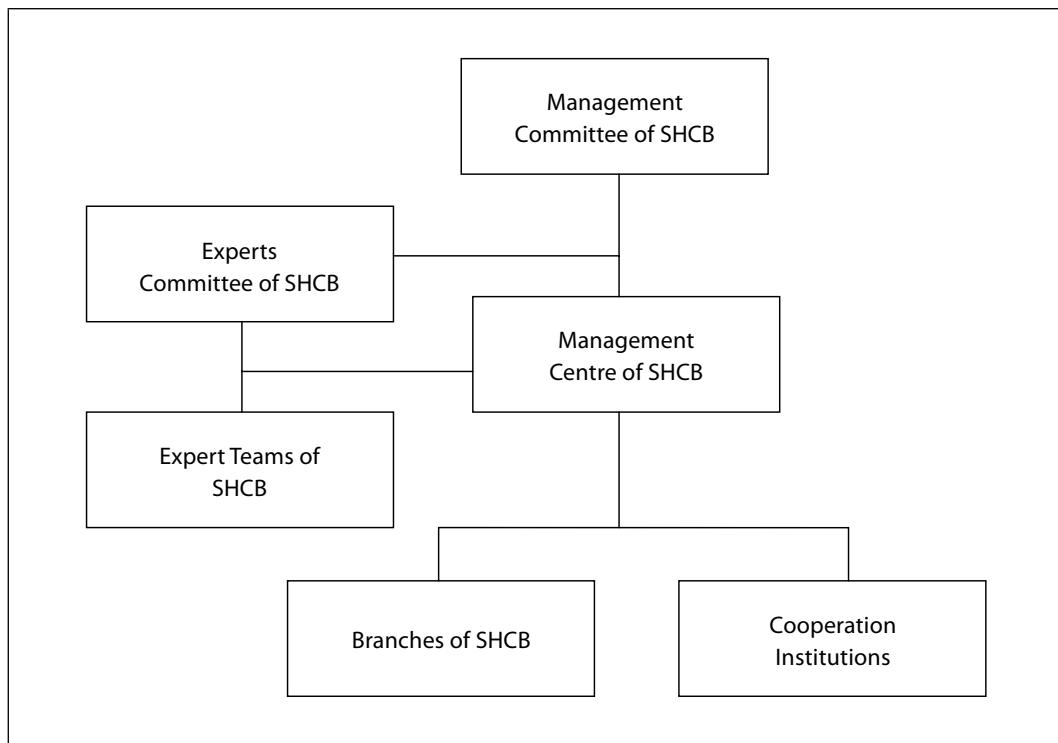


Figure 1 Organisation structure of SHCB

A system for three-level credits

The credits in the SHCB are divided into three levels: A, B, and C, which represent credits earned from the three approaches, such as academic degree (including associate-degree, bachelor degree, and graduate degree), vocational training, and leisure courses separately. Accordingly, there are three types of accreditation criteria for the above approaches.

1. Accreditation Criteria for Academic Degree Credits: 33 expert teams covering different disciplines have been set up to develop the accreditation criteria of academic degree credits, which involve the related recognition criteria for academic degree credits, certificates in vocational training, and the match between courses and programs.
2. Accreditation Criteria for Certificates of Vocational Training: Expert teams of the recognition of the certificates in vocational training develop the catalogue of the related certificates, and the match between the certificates and academic degree courses. It could replace the credits in academic degree, if the requirements and contents of the certificate cover more than 60 per cent of the related academic degree course.

3. Accreditation Criteria for Credits of Leisure Education: There are also some expert teams to form the accreditation criteria and catalogue for courses and activities in leisure education.

Cooperation with other institutions

SHCB collaborates with many colleges and universities in Shanghai, which are in charge of depositing the students' credits into the SHCB. Then SHCB will recognise and transfer the credits earned in these colleges and universities, and provide results of the credit recognition as well as proof of the grades and credit transfer. SHCB also cooperates with many social certificate-issuing agencies for vocational training, which will help to develop the accreditation criteria and deposit information of these certificates. In addition, community colleges in each district of Shanghai and Shanghai University for The Elderly could also apply for depositing their learning programs and learners' credits into SHCB.

Learners' portfolios

Any citizen in Shanghai could apply for opening the account in the SHCB with his/her identity card. Individual learning portfolio for each learner referring to the three areas, such as academic education, vocational training and leisure education, has been set up to record the information about the courses, grades and credit transfer of the learner. The learner could search personal portfolio, evaluate knowledge structure and formulate learning plan, etc.

Technology service platform

The technology service platform includes there parts: the website of the bank, individual learning portfolio, and back office system (see **Figure 2**).



Figure 2 The website of the SHCB (Shanghai Academic Credit Transfer and Accumulation Bank for Lifelong Education, 2012)

Operating procedures

1. Opening the account: The learner could apply for opening the account in the website of SHCB. He/she can open the accounts and sign the service agreements by visiting a bank branch with the identity card after his/her application passes the review.
2. Deposition and accumulation of learning outcomes: As for the individual learner, he/she could apply for the deposition of credits in one of the branches of SHCB, with the proof materials of the grades or certificates. After the review of the branch, the Management Centre will check the information and ask the certificate-issuing institution to review if needed. Then the learning outcomes will be stored in the learner's portfolio with the feedback to the branch, which will respond and return the proof materials or certificate to the learner. On the other hand, the related cooperation institutions will deposit the grades into the students' portfolios.

As far as the learning programs in leisure education offered by community colleges in each district and Shanghai University for the Elderly, these institutions should apply for the recognition of the existing programs. After the recognition of the SHCB, these programs will be involved in the catalogue of the bank. Then the lists and grades of the learners will be uploaded to SHCB in the beginning and the end of the semester separately, and will be stored into the learners' portfolios finally.

3. Credit recognition and accumulation: The learner could apply online or at the branches for the recognition of prior credit stored in the SHCB. After the review of the branch, it will be sent to the Management Centre for review. If the prior credits are recognised, they will be deposited and feedback will be given to the branch, which will give the whole review results to the learner. If the learner disagrees with the review results, he/she could reapply with extra evidences, and the Management Centre will invite the experts to re-examine the credits. If the credits are finally recognised, they will be deposited, and feedback will be given to the learner by the branches and the application materials will be returned. Figure 3 shows the procedure of credit recognition and accumulation.

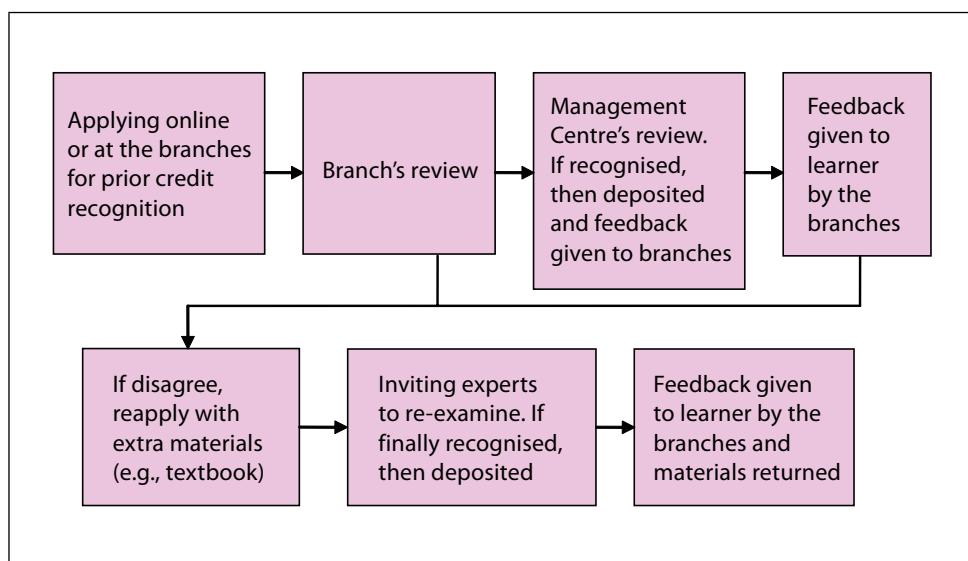


Figure 3 Procedure of credit recognition and accumulation

4. Credit transfer: The learner could apply for transferring of his/her learning outcomes into the credits of the specific cooperation institution of SHCB, and continue learning to achieve the required amount of credits as well as diploma of the institution.

Conclusion

By now, the accreditation criteria for credits of 166 courses and 139 non-degree certificates, and recognition of 541 non-degree certificates and 1,549 leisure courses have been finished. Some conclusions and lessons could be drawn from the case of SHCB.

Constraints: Firstly, higher education institutions in China that have authorities in enrolments, programmes, courses and management do not realise the importance of academic credit accumulation and transfer in the age of lifelong learning, which restricts the connection among different sections of education. Moreover, the construction of academic credit bank should be based on the credit system. However, there are academic credits combined with academic year in higher education institutions, which become the barriers to implement the credit transfer. In addition, there are a few incentive methods to enhance the higher education institutions to share the courses, transfer the learners' learning outcomes, and realise the importance of academic bank.

Difficulties: There is lack of explicit policies in the construction and operation of academic credit accumulation and transfer system in China, although they have been included in the National Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020). As for the SHCB, it is necessary to integrate the academic degree, vocational training and leisure education, which need the explicit policy support from the government.

Complexity of academic credit accumulation and transfer: It is a complicated project to construct a system for accumulation and transfer of academic credit, including the impacting factors of structural organisation, technologies, management and culture. The difficulties faced by SHCB involve setting up the accreditation criteria for courses in academic degree, vocational training and leisure education, recognising the credits, and transferring among the different types of credits. Besides, it needs the support from the external stakeholders, such as Shanghai Municipal Government, Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, Shanghai Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, and other higher education institutions in Shanghai.

Several supporting measures are needed. It is important to get the policy support from the government, including legislation and credit system. At the same time, it also needs the government's administrative approaches to push various kinds of educational institutions to engage in credit bank system, which will facilitate the exchange among academic degree, even between academic degree, vocational training and leisure education, and advance the construction of lifelong learning system.

Apparently, the core of the construction of system for credit accumulation and transfer is the operation of credit bank. Surely, it is necessary to establish the property and organisation structure of the credit bank, and be equipped with related professionals.

With regard to the funding, SHCB is funded by Shanghai Municipal Education Commission to meet the expenditure on staff, administrative affairs, information platform, management of expert teams, formulating the accreditation criteria of courses, and research.

Huikang Li (libk@shtvu.edu.cn) is the Vice President of Shanghai Open University, Shanghai, China.

Yaoting Sun (email: sunyt@shtvu.edu.cn) and Min Yang (email: yangm@shtvu.edu.cn) are with the General Affair Office, Shanghai Open University, Shanghai, China.

Zhihui Wei (email: huixuanwei@163.com) is with the Institute of Open Education, Shanghai Open University, Shanghai, China.

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