# Course equivalencies: a barrier to student success in semester abroad experiences

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For many years, semester abroad experiences have been offered to MSU students. The participation rate in semester abroad experiences appears to be lower than the participation rate in faculty-led Education Abroad experiences, even though, in many cases, faculty-led programs are significantly more expensive.

Lower participation rate may be due to various barriers that interested students encounter, such as sub-leasing off-campus accommodation, leaving established campus social activities, leaving established on/off campus employment positions, leaving friends behind, …, together with on-site challenges related to social integration, language barrier, calendar and course disparities, …

One barrier that seems to create significant frustration is related to course “equivalencies” that interested students are required to establish before departure. It is likely that filing the famous Course Approval Form (CAF) may be the on-campus decisive point at which interested students are most likely to give up given the confusing process they need to navigate through.

A copy of the Course Approval Form can be found at <https://educationabroad.isp.msu.edu/files/9115/3557/1104/Course_Approval_Form_8.29.18.pdf> .

There are multiple stakeholders involved in the filing and processing of CAF: Interested students, unit advisors, college advisors, college education abroad representatives, Office of the Registrar, Office for Education Abroad... Stakeholders are not always in agreement regarding the purpose and content of the CAF. CAF can be interpreted as a record of newly established or to be established equivalencies in order to allow an interested student to take an abroad course. CAF can also serve as a record of courses to be taken abroad, whether those have been approved in the past or not. As far as credit/grade transfer is concerned, CAF can be used to determine the transfer modality from abroad to MSU.

To secure course equivalencies prior to departure, interested students are responsible for collecting abroad syllabi and submitting those documents for approval. Colleges forward syllabi to “interested” units, as best considered by college advisors/education abroad representatives. Units review the syllabi and reply with three options: No equivalency, GCU, or equivalent course #. Units are not always responding in a timely manner and “No’s” seem to be more frequent than others. GCU are next in frequency, followed by rarer equivalent course #. Equivalencies must be re-confirmed after some years although the timeline does not seem to be consistent among stakeholders.

Finally, the *Transfer MSU* platform is consulted by interested students to research equivalencies. However, *Transfer MSU* has not been updated for many semesters. It also appears that there is no available resources to maintain or improve *Transfer MSU*.

UCUE is asked to

* Review the guidelines (if any) behind what a course “equivalency” means in the context of a semester abroad experience. Should units prioritize “experiential” learning in place of “equivalent” learning?
* Review the current status of *Transfer MSU* and its role in helping students on their quest for abroad course equivalencies. How can MSU improve *Transfer MSU*’s transparency? Is *Transfer MSU* as relevant for semester abroad as it is for US transfers? Should semester abroad course information be available on a platform that is integrated into the existing Learning Abroad platform (Via)?
* Review the system in place with the Registrar Office to establish transfers in the students’ records. Do students face additional barriers upon returning to campus in transferring their abroad grades/credits?