

Academic credit in Higher Education in England



Universities UK



QAA

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At the back of this booklet you will find a fold-out page explaining some of the terms, coloured in **red**, that are used throughout the booklet. The back page can be opened out and used as a quick reference as you read it.

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What is credit?

This booklet describes in general what academic **credit** is and how it can be used in higher education (HE) in England. Not all **higher education institutions (HEIs)** in England use credit and those that do often develop their own approaches to how they use it. Individual HEIs can be contacted directly to find out more about their particular approach.

Credit is used in HE to summarise and describe an amount of learning; it can help to identify 'how much' learning was involved and 'how hard' it was.

Students are awarded credits after they have successfully completed a 'block of learning'; that 'block' might be called a **module**, a **unit** or a **qualification**.

The number of credits awarded to a student is determined by the **credit value** assigned to a module, a unit or a whole qualification. It is a simple way of indicating, using numbers, the amount of learning expected and how difficult it is.

When is credit awarded?

Credit is awarded to students who have shown that they have successfully completed a module, unit or qualification. To do this, they need to meet the specific set of **learning outcomes** for the unit, module or qualification.

Learning outcomes outline what a successful student will know, understand and be able to do.

It is the achievement of the learning outcomes that is important for the award of credit, not how or where the learning took place, or how it was assessed, or how long it actually took.



Students usually demonstrate that they have achieved the learning outcomes of a module, unit or qualification by completing one or more pieces of assessed work.

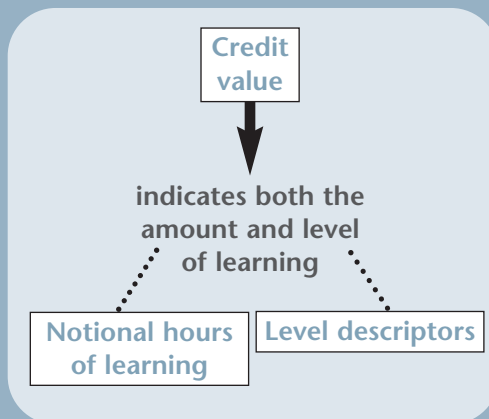
To be awarded the credits, a student must reach the minimum standard, also known as the threshold or pass, in the assessment(s). The minimum standard expected for a pass is set out in an HEI's **assessment regulations**.

Exceeding the minimum standard does not result in a student being awarded more credits as the credit value is fixed before assessment.

Credit value

The credit value indicates both 'how much' learning (the *amount*) is expected and 'how hard' it is (the relative *level of difficulty*). Each module or unit has only one level for its credit; qualifications may include modules or units, and thus credit, at more than one level.

Page 4 explains how 'notional hours of learning' are used to estimate the 'amount' of learning, and page 5 explains how the 'level of difficulty' is worked out.



The credit value is set before any student begins their studies for a block of learning. Once a student has successfully achieved the required learning outcomes they can be awarded all of the credits (the credit value) for that block of learning.

Credit and amounts of learning (how much?)

The amount of learning indicated by a credit value is based on an estimate that is worked out using the idea of **notional hours of learning**.

All modules, units and qualifications have learning outcomes that outline what a student will know, understand and/or be able to do once they have successfully completed the block of learning. The number of notional hours indicates how long it will take a typical student to achieve these learning outcomes. **All** types of learning are included in the estimate of notional hours of learning, including formal classes, self study, revision and assessment.

UK HEIs that use credit have agreed that one credit represents 10 notional hours of learning. HEIs use this estimate to set the credit value of a module, unit or qualification **before** any student starts learning.

If a student takes more or less time than estimated to complete the learning they will still be awarded the set credit value - not more or less.

If a student starts but does not complete the learning required they are not normally awarded any credits.

Example of how credit values are assigned to modules

A module that involves 150 notional hours of learning and has been designed with reference to the credit **level descriptors** of how challenging the learning is at level 4, will be assigned a credit value of 15 credits at level 4.

Once a student has successfully demonstrated that they have met the learning outcomes of the module they can be awarded the 15 credits at level 4 assigned to this module.

The diagram below also shows a module with 20 credits, involving 200 notional hours learning at level 7, and a module with 40 credits, involving 400 notional hours of learning at level 6.

Examples of modules with various credit values

20 credits at Level 7

40 credits at Level 6

15 credits at Level 4

Credit and levels of learning (how hard?)

Each credit value (see page 3) has a level that indicates the relative difficulty of the learning involved.

Eight credit levels are used in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; of these levels 4 to 8 represent the types of work undertaken in HE.

| Credit level | is typical of the learning expected of |
|--------------|--|
| 8 | a doctorate |
| 7 | a masters degree |
| 6 | the last part of a bachelors degree |
| 5 | the last part of a Foundation Degree; middle part of a bachelors degree |
| 4 | the first part of HE study |
| 3 | entry qualification for HE |

HEIs use credit level descriptors to help work out the level of learning in individual modules and units.

Credit level descriptors are **guides** that help identify the relative demand, complexity and depth of learning and learner autonomy expected at each level, and also indicate the differences between the levels.

They are general descriptions of the learning involved at a particular level; they are **not** specific requirements of what must be covered in a particular module, unit or qualification.

Many HEIs use the same credit level descriptors; this helps to ensure similar expectations about how difficult the learning is at each level in different places.

Credit and study programmes that lead to qualifications

Many HE qualifications, particularly those taken over a number of years, include modules or units of different sizes and at different levels of difficulty.

The credit values assigned to modules and units (and the qualification in total) indicate the different amounts and levels of learning involved.

The diagram below shows **an example** of the credit structure for a bachelors degree with honours. It includes modules of different sizes (10 credit, 20 credit and 40 credit) and of different levels of difficulty.

A bachelors degree with honours would normally include the equivalent of a minimum of three years full-time study, with most, if not all of the final year of study, at the honours degree level (level 6). Using credit, this would be expressed as a total of 360 credits, with 120 credits at level 6.

Example of a full-time three year programme for a bachelors degree with honours

| BA/BSc (Hons) | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 20 credits at Level 4 | 20 credits at Level 5 | 40 credits at Level 6 |
| 20 credits at Level 4 | 20 credits at Level 5 | |
| 20 credits at Level 4 | 20 credits at Level 5 | 20 credits at Level 6 |
| 10 credits at Level 4 | 20 credits at Level 5 | 20 credits at Level 6 |
| 10 credits at Level 4 | 20 credits at Level 5 | 20 credits at Level 6 |
| 10 credits at Level 4 | 20 credits at Level 5 | 20 credits at Level 6 |
| 10 credits at Level 4 | 20 credits at Level 5 | 20 credits at Level 6 |
| 20 credits at Level 3 | 10 credits at Level 5 | 20 credits at Level 6 |
| | 10 credits at Level 5 | |
| First year | Second year | Third year |

Credit and qualifications

Different qualifications reflect different levels of difficulty in the learning involved; for example, the learning for a doctorate is more complex than for a masters degree, which in turn is more advanced than an honours degree.

The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and its qualification descriptors summarise the general expectations associated with each of the main UK HE qualifications.

The amount and the difficulty of the work involved in gaining a qualification is also reflected in its credit value.

Clearly there is a close link between credit, and its level descriptors, and qualifications and their descriptors.

Typical* minimum credit values of some HE qualifications

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Bachelors degree with honours | total of 360 credits with a minimum of 100 at level 6 (many honours degrees include more than 360 credits) |
| Foundation Degree | total of 240 credits with a minimum of 100 at level 5 |
| Certificate of Higher Education | total of 120 credits with a minimum of 100 at level 4 |

* actual numbers can vary between particular awards

Credit accumulation

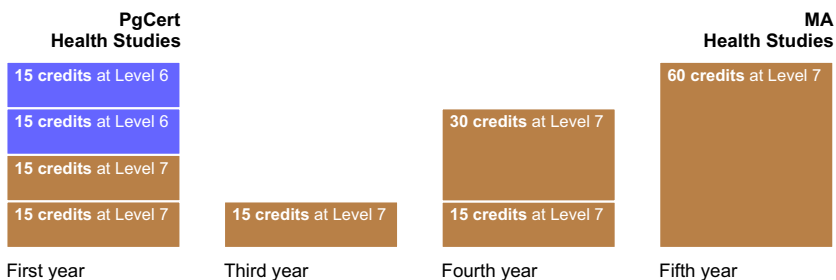
As students progress through a programme of study, they can **accumulate** the credit value of the modules or units they have completed successfully.

If they are working towards a qualification they will have to accumulate sufficient credit, at the appropriate levels, to gain the total overall credit value of the qualification. This credit value of the qualification, along with other requirements, is usually set out in more detail in an HEI's assessment regulations.

Example of accumulation of credits

Amanda enrolled on an MA Health Studies programme, with the intention of studying part-time over two years. During her first year she successfully completed four 15 credit modules (60 credits in total) and was awarded a postgraduate certificate. At the end of the first year Amanda chose to take a break from studying. After a one-year break, she successfully completed another 15 credit module. During the following year she was able to complete one 15 credit and one 30 credit module, and in her final year she completed a 60 credit module. Following four years of successful part-time study, with a one-year break in the middle, Amanda was awarded her MA degree.

Diagram of Amanda's credit accumulation



Credit transfer

HEIs also have arrangements that can allow students to **transfer** credits they have been awarded.

Students may be able to transfer the credits they have been awarded as part of one study programme to another, offered by the same HEI, and/or transfer credit when moving from one HEI to another.

The ways students can transfer credits is determined by each HEI's assessment regulations.

Some HEIs describe credit as either general or specific to a particular programme. This may be important if a student wants to transfer the credit they have been awarded in one programme, to a programme in a different subject area or a different HEI. Students will need to discuss any potential transfer possibilities with all HEIs involved.

Example of credit transfer

Transferring from one qualification to another within the same HEI

Poppy started a BA (Hons) Finance and Accountancy programme and completed one 15 credit level 4 module in 'Introduction to Business and Finance' before deciding to change to BA (Hons) Business Studies. As the 15 credit module was relevant to both degree programmes, she was able to transfer the credits into the new study programme.

Credit and other forms of learning

Learning that takes place outside of an HE setting, for example in the workplace or in the voluntary sector, can also be formally recognised (accredited) by an HEI. This is done through a process known as the **Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)**.

HEIs use credit to indicate how much and at what **level** they should formally recognise the learning achieved in a different setting.

Example of APL

After completing a BA (Hons) History of Art, Tejal worked for two years in a museum. She then applied to study for an MA Art, Architecture and Design. She was able to demonstrate, by using the HEI's APL procedures, that the learning outcomes of two 10 credit level 7 modules on this study programme matched the learning she had gained from her experience at the museum, so the HEI was able to award her the 20 credits (2 x 10 credit) for these modules, without the need for Tejal to study and take the assessment for these modules.

Each HEI can provide its student with a record of their accumulated credits. In many cases this is in the form of a **transcript** that is produced annually, on completion of the programme, or both. This record can be a particularly useful document for students who want to take a break from learning and return to study later, or transfer their credits.

Credit and quality assurance

It is essential that there is confidence in the way in which the credit value for each block of learning is set. The amount of credit awarded is based on the required learning outcomes, irrespective of the type of learning, the place or other context in which the learning takes place, or the way in which the learning is assessed.

HEIs that use credit follow the same national guidelines for awarding credit.

There must also be confidence in the quality assurance processes that underpin the teaching, learning and assessment that result in the award of credit. These assurances are provided by the HEI's own internal quality assurance mechanisms and externally by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) through its audit and review processes.

Open here for descriptions of terms in red

Credit nationally and internationally

Credit has been used by many HEIs in the UK for a number of years. This has led to groups of HEIs in England and Northern Ireland, called credit consortia, agreeing to adopt the same approach to using credit locally or regionally.

Similarly, nationally agreed approaches to using credit have been developed in Wales (the Credit and Qualifications Framework Wales (CQFW)) and Scotland (the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)).

Students can have their learning and awarded credits recognised by different HEIs in different parts of the UK. Students are advised to seek advice and guidance from the HEIs involved before seeking recognition or requesting a transfer.

The vocational education and training sector in England has also developed a credit framework and it may be possible for learning and credits awarded in this sector to be recognised by an HEI.

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

Many universities and polytechnics in several other European countries also use credit. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) was introduced to help promote student mobility in Europe through the use of credit.

Although there are a number of key differences between ECTS and the credit arrangements used in England, many HEIs are able to use credit to support international student mobility

The UK HE Europe Unit has produced *Guidance on articulation between ECTS and the UK credit systems* to help HEIs, staff and students understand these differences and how to use ECTS.

| Further information about... | Can be found at: |
|---|---|
| Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) | www.elwa.org.uk/ElwaWeb/elwa.aspx?pageid=1612 |
| Credit consortia guidelines | Credit and HE Qualifications: Credit guidelines for HE qualifications in England, Wales and Northern. CQFW, NICATS, NUCCAT, SEEC. November, 2001 |
| European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) | http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/socrates/ects/index_en.html |
| UK HE Europe Unit | www.europeunit.ac.uk/news/europe_note_archive/2006.cfm |
| The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) | www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/ |
| The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) | www.qaa.ac.uk/ |
| Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) | www.scqf.org.uk/ |

Diagrams on pages 4, 6 and 8 were prepared by Dr Chris Rivlin, University of Salford.

| Concept | Description |
|--|---|
| Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) | The identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement |
| Accumulate | Building up of credit to achieve a qualification |
| Assessment regulations | Rules governing assessment, including pass marks, number of credits needed to complete a module, attendance requirements etc |
| Credit | An indicator of the amount and level of learning that is expected or has been achieved |
| Credit value | Indicates both 'how much' learning (the <i>amount</i>) is expected and 'how hard' it is (the relative <i>level of difficulty</i>) |
| HEIs | Higher education institutions - universities and university colleges |
| Learning outcomes | Statements of learning achievement expressed in terms of what the student will know, understand or be able to do, on successful completion of a module, unit or qualification |
| Level descriptors | The generic outcomes of study at a specific level, used as reference points |
| Notional hours of learning | The number of hours a student will need to spend, on average, in a range of activities, to achieve the learning outcomes |
| Qualification descriptors | Exemplify the outcomes of the main qualification at each level, and demonstrate the nature of change between levels |
| Transcript | The formal record of a student's achievements issued by an HEI |
| Transfer | A way of using credit gained in one HEI to transfer to another HEI or from one study programme to another |
| Unit/Module | A block of learning with a coherent set of formally identified learning outcomes at a single level |

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