

Joint Forum for Higher Levels:

Overarching principles and operational criteria
for a common approach to credit



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Background

The Joint Forum for Higher Levels (*the Joint Forum*) is an established discussion forum designed to promote better understanding of the relationship between the various credit and qualification frameworks in the UK, and encourage lifelong learning and its recognition. The Joint Forum has an independent chair, Dick Coldwell, and comprises representatives of organisations with responsibility for the various frameworks (CCEA, SQA, QAA, QCA, WAG), sector representative bodies (GuildHE and UUK), funding councils (HEFCE and LSC), organisations working across the FE and HE sectors (fDF, LLNs, and PSRBs), government departments (DIUS, DCSF) and individual experts and practitioners.

In November 2005, Bill Rammell, Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education asked the Joint Forum to take a lead role in establishing a set of “overarching principles and shared operational criteria for a common approach to credit” that could support the work being undertaken, at that time, to develop the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and consolidate existing credit practice in HE into nationally agreed arrangements for credit in HE in England (subsequently published as the Higher education credit framework for England).

Introduction

The overarching principles and operational criteria outlined in this paper are the result of a programme of work undertaken by the Joint Forum to promote a clear understanding of how credit is used in Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). The overarching principles describe, in general, the key aspects of credit practice in both sectors. The operational criteria outline the ways in which these aspects can be implemented.

The aim of the Joint Forum’s work in developing the overarching principles and operational criteria is to help those working at the interface between FE and HE to develop a common understanding of how credit is used and can support HE institutions and FE providers in their approaches to learner progression and lifelong learning.

The Joint Forum has sought the advice of practitioners, experts and stakeholders working in, and across, the two sectors and considered current developments and existing practice in the use of credit in both FE and HE. The overarching principles and operational criteria have thus been developed to complement and support, the QCF and the *Higher education credit framework for England*, not replace them.

Context

The Joint Forum recognises that credit practice is slightly different in HE from that proposed for FE. The overarching principles and operational criteria respect these differences and have been designed to be applicable within both FE, in which qualifications (and Awarding Bodies) are regulated, and HE where autonomous institutions are solely responsible for the standards of their awards, determining and overseeing the content of the programmes leading to those awards, and the quality of provision that supports those programmes of study.

As such the Joint Forum, has identified the following shared aims in using credit:

- to provide a straightforward, simple and transparent means for describing learner achievement;
- to support simplicity and transparency in the representation of learner achievement for institutions (FE providers and HEIs), employers and others;
- to provide for the consistent application of credit across the widest possible range of learning contexts and levels;
- to assist learners where possible by maximising opportunities for accumulation and/or transfer of credit in support of lifelong learning.

In developing principles and operational criteria for a common approach to credit that meet the shared aims described above, the Joint Forum has identified key areas of activity to be addressed by the principles. The key areas of activity covered by the principles include:

- the relationship between credit and learning,
- the award of credit to individual learners,
- the relationship between credit and qualifications, and their component units or modules,
- the determination of credit value of units of learning, awards and qualifications, and
- the accumulation, and transfer, of credit towards a qualification or award.



These key areas have been developed in more detail in the operational criteria. In considering the shared approach to operational criteria, the Joint Forum has taken the view that the criteria should:

- be formulated as guidelines that can contribute to supporting learner progression both within and between sectors
- include the minimum necessary and sufficient guidance to fulfil the primary purpose of supporting learner progression
- be flexible in their interpretation and application, depending upon the learning context
- not be considered as prescriptive nor used as such
- be sufficiently rigorous to support any relevant quality assurance.

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I. For consistency in the award of credit

Principle 1: Credit is awarded to a learner in recognition of the assessed achievement of identified sets of learning outcomes.

Operational Criterion 1:

The award of credit recognises achievement of the required sets of learning outcomes; achievement above this threshold does not result in the award of additional credit.

Operational Criterion 2:

Credits are not graded.

Operational Criterion 3:

Achievement may be described additionally through the award of marks or grades.

Operational Criterion 4:

Learners should be provided with a verified record that clearly identifies the credits they have been awarded.

Principle 2: Credit may only be awarded by those bodies and organisations that have the formal powers to do so.

Operational Criterion 5:

Organisations that award credit must be able to demonstrate, by statute, charter and/or regulatory body approval, that they have the formal power to do so.

II. For consistency in the determination of credit value

Principle 3: The credit value of qualifications and their component units or modules, where relevant, is determined with reference to consistent and transparent criteria

Operational Criterion 6:

Credit value describes the number of credits that may be awarded to a learner for the successful achievement of the identified learning outcomes of a unit, module or qualification.

Operational Criterion 7:

The credit value of a unit, module or qualification is determined against identifiable criteria.

Operational Criterion 8:

One credit represents the achievement of those learning outcomes within a unit, module or qualification that a learner would be expected to achieve in 10 notional hours of learning.

Operational Criterion 9:

Credit is awarded at a particular level.

Operational Criterion 10:

Credit level is determined by reference to identified level descriptors.

Principle 4: The descriptors of qualifications, and of their component units or modules where relevant, include a credit value determined with reference to consistent and transparent criteria

Operational Criterion 11:

The description of units, modules or qualifications includes their credit value.



III. For credit accumulation

Principle 5: Credit can be accumulated towards a qualification or award, subject to transparent criteria consistently applied.

Operational Criterion 12:

Where bodies approved to award credit and/or qualifications allow learners to accumulate credit towards a qualification; this must be on the basis of transparent criteria consistently applied.

IV. For credit transfer

Principle 6: Credit that represents assessed achievement relevant to a learner's programme of study, may be transferable between qualifications and awards, subject to transparent criteria consistently applied by the receiving institution.

Operational Criterion 13:

Where bodies approved to award credit and/or qualifications permit learners to transfer credit; this must be on the basis of transparent criteria that are consistently applied.

The Joint Forum for Higher Levels comprise of representatives from the following organisations:

- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS)
- Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
- Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual)
- GuildHE
- Universities UK Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
- Learning and Skills Councils (LSC)
- Foundation Degree Forward (fDf)
- Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN)
- Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB)
- Department for Innovation, University and Skills (DIUS)
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

QCA has produced this document on behalf of the Joint Forum for Higher Levels



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