



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority



Learning+Skills Council

Principles for a credit framework for England

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List of abbreviations

ACCAC	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for Wales
CCEA	Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland)
CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
ELWa	Education and Learning Wales
FEU	Further Education Unit
FEDA	Further Education Development Agency
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
NICATS	Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (England)
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority

Purpose

Aim

The aim of a credit framework for England is to provide a means by which credit can be gained by learners for their achievement. The framework will provide a set of specifications for recognising, measuring, valuing and comparing achievement by providing learners with credit, based on a consistently derived value. When a credit system for England is fully established, it will provide flexibility and choice for learners and employers and support the government's skills strategy. A credit system will make it simpler for people to plan their learning and represent their achievement to employers and others.

A unit-based credit system will be capable of recognising diverse achievements and supporting the flexibility needed to promote lifelong learning.

Dr Ken Boston, Chief Executive, QCA
Learning and Skills Development Agency summer conference
11 June 2003

Credit: a single concept with several applications

The credit framework can be used for several purposes and applications, providing a common and consistent way to recognise, measure, value and compare achievement.

A major use of credit is to enable progression and transfer. The credit framework for England has the potential to enhance the transparency, flexibility and accessibility of units and qualifications within and beyond the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

Credit allows learners to achieve qualifications and units through gaining credit at a time, place and pace which meets their needs. It also allows learners to gain credit for their learning to suit individual or employer needs if the achievement of a full qualification is not appropriate or possible. It should support parity of esteem between different types of achievement and can be used to encourage choice for learners and to increase recognition of their achievements.

To achieve all these purposes, credit should become an integral part of the design of qualifications and units.

Scope and application of credit

Credit value and level of the award of credit may apply to achievement:

- across all fields – vocational/specialist, general/academic, applied, and so on
- at all levels of achievement from entry to higher levels
- within and outside of the current scope of the NQF.

Achievements can be described and measured in a consistent and reliable way. Credit value makes no requirement for units or qualifications to be of uniform size. The design

of the unit or qualification can therefore be fit for purpose and the credit value will indicate the size of achievement while the credit level will indicate the demand.

Benefits of credit

Who benefits?	Credit will help to:
Everyone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognise achievement wherever, whenever and however it is gained • enable accumulation and transfer of credits towards a qualification or other goal • allow flexible accumulation and transfer to meet individual's needs
Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help explain the relative value of an individual's achievement • help transfer an individual's knowledge and skills between routes to achievement throughout the UK and potentially internationally • help adults in particular to plan their own learning to meet their own goals
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourage more people in England to develop the skills needed to meet employers' requirements through targeted, credit-based learning • offer opportunities to employees to develop skills to gain credit without necessarily needing a full qualification • make clear the amount and level of learning already achieved by potential employees, especially those without standard full qualifications • help employers compare the achievements and plan future training for potential and existing employees
Key players, such as providers of education and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promote progression and transfer • create relevant and tailor-made learning opportunities • respond to change swiftly and incrementally

Credit in the UK

The credit framework will build on many years of credit practice in England and the rest of the UK and will for the first time create a national approach to credit in England. Credit has been used by many different organisations but a single, consistent approach has never been adopted. A credit framework will provide the means to do this effectively.

The devolved administrations of Wales and Scotland are establishing credit and qualification frameworks. In Northern Ireland, work on credit has been undertaken over a period of several years. This document therefore draws upon definitions already agreed in the implementation of credit within the UK. It provides the basis for working cooperatively across the UK, building on the shared ownership and processes of the NQF, and aligning with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and higher education credit principles.

Credit in Europe

Co-operation at European level within education and training has come to play a decisive role in creating the future European society... Strategies for lifelong learning and mobility are essential to promote employability, active citizenship, social inclusion and personal development

The Copenhagen Declaration

On 30 November 2002 the education ministers of 31 European countries and the European Commission adopted the Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced cooperation in European vocational education and training. The member states and the Commission have begun cooperation at a practical level, focused on a number of concrete outputs including the development of a system of credit transfer for vocational education and training.

The development of a credit framework for England needs not only to take account of developments across the UK, but also should aim to be consistent and coherent within the context of developments across Europe.

Principles

The following principles for a credit framework aim to provide a credible and lasting basis for assigning credit to qualifications and units within the NQF for awarding credit to learners. The principles may be capable of application to other assessed and quality-assured provision.

Principle 1

The credit framework for England will be based on the assignment of credit value and level to units.

Within the credit framework units will be assigned a credit value and level. The levels of the credit framework for England will be those adopted by the NQF for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each level will have a descriptor that will provide the basis for assigning levels to units and qualifications. Credit values and level will be capable of application to units outside the current scope of the NQF.

Principle 2

The credit framework will provide a valid and reliable measure of achievement based on a shared approach to credit.

The credit framework will support processes to recognise, measure, value and compare these achievements. The assignment of credit value and level to units will be based on a common set of technical specifications and subject to regulation and quality assurance systems.

Principle 3

The credit framework for England will align with other frameworks.

The credit framework for England will utilise key features of existing credit frameworks wherever possible. The aim is to build on the shared ownership and processes of the NQF, aligning with the SCQF.

As the use of credit in higher education evolves, it is planned that the relationship with the credit framework for England will become stronger.

Work in Europe is proceeding on credit systems and transfer in vocational education and training and this work will inform the longer-term development of the national credit framework.

Principle 4

Credit value and level will be assigned consistently and reliably to units across all NQF levels and key features will be applied consistently.

The assignment of credit value and level will be based on common procedures, technical specifications and regulation. The responsibility for assigning credit value and level to units will lie across key partners including awarding bodies, sector skills councils and others with a legitimate interest in the recognition of learning and skills.

The key features of the credit framework for England are laid out in the next section. These key features provide the basis for a consistent and common approach to the assignment of credit value and level.

Principle 5

Credit will be awarded consistently and reliably as the basis for the mutual recognition of achievement to support progression.

Credit will be awarded consistently and reliably in order to provide a basis for mutual recognition of achievement to support learner progression. Mutual recognition will support the flexibility and transferability that learners and employers value.

Key features

The key features of the credit framework are designed to describe the main concepts and processes used to form the basis of the framework. Much of this section draws on the Credit Common Accord (CCA) of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW).

Credit value and level

Credit value and level form the two basic features of the credit framework. The level of a unit is determined by the level descriptors that seek to represent the intrinsic demand of a unit or qualification. The level of a unit is not determined by the qualification of which it is a part.

A unit can only be assigned **one** level whatever qualification it is part of or how or wherever it is assessed.

Credit levels will be identical to the levels of the NQF. The levels of the NQF are being revised. Appendix 2 contains the level descriptors to be used in assigning levels. These level descriptors align with work in Wales and Northern Ireland, and the new NQF levels.

Qualification levels are defined by the regulatory authorities for England, Northern Ireland and Wales (QCA, CCEA and ACCAC respectively) check for the NQF and by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) for the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF).

Units and credit

Unit is a term used to describe a coherent set of specified learning outcomes. The unit definition used in the *Terms and definitions* section refers also to the status of units in relation to the NQF. The programme of work on the unitisation of qualifications within the NQF is ongoing. In order for credit value and level to be assigned to a unit, it must include the following features:

- title
- credit value
- level
- learning outcomes
- assessment criteria.

Units specify what needs to be achieved and will not include any requirement about how, where or when the learning is delivered. A unit describes the learning outcomes of part or all of the learning that has been gained through a particular programme, module or other learning activity/experience. The unit specification will not refer to delivery methods.

Credit applied to the NQF

All qualifications accredited to the NQF will be expected to have credit value assigned to their units according to an agreed timetable.

All units and qualifications within the NQF will continue to be based on learning outcomes together with assessment requirements.

Credit value is derived from the learning outcomes and the assessment criteria within a unit. Credit may be awarded for the achievement of either units or qualifications.

Learning time

Learning time is the basis on which credit value is determined and relates to the amount of time it is expected an average learner will spend to achieve specified learning outcomes. The tariff used to determine the relationship between learning time and credit will be 10 hours. Therefore, where the learning time of a unit has been established as 30 hours, this unit will be worth three credits, a unit whose learning time has been established as 60 hours will be worth six credits and so on.

Terms and definitions

The following terms and definitions are from the CCA for Wales, published in July 2003. The CCA notes that ‘The Credit Common Accord uses terminology and specifications which are fully compatible with those established in higher education credit guidelines.’ The definitions of some of these terms are still to be finalised in England. These terms may be subject to modification depending on the outcomes of the review of the regulatory arrangements by QCA, ACCAC and CCEA.

Assessment criteria	A description of what the learner is expected to achieve, in order to demonstrate that a learning outcome has been met.
Assigning credit value	The process of attaching a number of credits and a credit level to a unit and or qualification.
Credit	<p>An award made to a learner in recognition of the achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified credit level. Credit is only awarded following quality assured assessment of achievement.</p> <p>No additional credit can be awarded for achievement over the threshold level (established by the learning outcomes and assessment criteria) although such achievement can be recognised through the award of marks or grades.</p> <p>No credit should be awarded for units where the learning outcomes have not been achieved.</p>
Credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS)	A system based on a set of agreed specifications and procedures, which facilitates learners to accumulate and transfer the credit they have gained within and beyond the providing institution, awarding body or qualification scheme.
Credit equivalence	Estimated values for qualifications and their component units. Credit equivalence is also applied to those qualifications which do not fit the design specification and against which credit may not be formally assigned or awarded.
Credit framework	A set of minimum specifications for valuing, measuring, describing and comparing achievement.
Credit level	An indicator of the relative demand, complexity, and depth of learning and of learner autonomy derived from agreed generic credit level descriptors.
Credit transcript	A summary of individual learner achievements expressed in terms of credit equivalence or credit award and level.

Credit value	<p>The value of a unit, based on the learning time attached to the learning outcomes and credit level. One credit is assigned to learning outcomes achievable in 10 hours of learning time.</p> <p>Within the CQFW, the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS), the SCQF and across higher education in the UK, 10 notional learning hours equals one credit.</p>
Learning outcomes	<p>Statements of what a learner can be expected to know, understand and/or do as a result of a learning experience.</p>
Learning time	<p>A notional measure of the learning time of a unit or whole qualification. It is related to the amount of time a typical learner might be expected to take to complete all of the learning relevant to achievement of the learning outcomes.</p> <p>Taught or contact time will vary according to the mode of delivery, but learning time will not. All learning relevant to the learning outcomes should be considered when learning time is being estimated. Consideration should also be given to the level at which the learning is being offered when reaching this judgement.</p> <p>Learning time should include all of the learning activities which it is expected that the learner will undertake in order to achieve the learning outcomes including, for example, as appropriate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • formal learning (including classes, training sessions, coaching, seminars and tutorials) • practical work in laboratories or other locations • relevant IT activities • information retrieval in libraries • expected private study and revision • work-based activities which lead to assessment • practice, gaining, applying and refining skills to achieve threshold level of competence • all forms of assessment • programme planning • educational counselling and mentoring. <p>Excludes learner initiated private study over and above that expected within the defined terms. Any prior skill or knowledge required of the learner should not be included in an estimate of learning time.</p>
NQF qualification level	<p>A broad measure of the overall demand of a qualification.</p>

Qualification

A certificate of achievement or competence specifying awarding body, qualification type and title. It would normally be that which makes a learner eligible for consideration for entry, advancement or progression in an academic, vocational or professional context.

Unit

The smallest part of a qualification in the NQF that can be separately certificated. It is an explicit and coherent set of learning outcomes and may be of any size.

A unit must include:

- learning outcomes
- assessment criteria
- credit value (number of credits at a credit level)
- unit title and code.

Units may be incorporated into modules, which provide the teaching and learning requirements associated with the unit or qualification.

Appendix 1: Policy context

Policy background

The government made a commitment to a national credit framework for adults in England in its strategy *21st century skills: realising our potential*, published in July 2003. The undersecretary of state for skills and vocational education, Ivan Lewis, wrote to QCA and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in September 2003 asking them to take forward further work on credit.

QCA was asked to develop credit principles as the basis for taking forward work to assign credit to the full range of units in the NQF and to deliver the reform programme for adult qualifications set out in the skills strategy. QCA was also asked to work closely with key partners and to undertake initial work with major awarding bodies to develop a shared approach to credit, including mutual recognition of units.

The credit principles have been developed in the context of government policy to achieve the unitisation of the NQF. That programme of work will ensure that all units in the NQF can be assigned level and credit value as a basis for the establishment of a fully flexible and responsive unit-based qualifications framework.

The LSC was asked to work closely with QCA in developing their credit principles so as to ensure coherence between their work and that of QCA. The LSC has been asked to review the credit systems operating for learning and qualifications outside of the NQF, to identify how the application of credit to this other provision might drive quality and improve flexibility in further education, and how such credit might be developed to provide progression into the NQF. The LSC has been asked to identify what common principles apply across these credit systems, what needs to be done to make them consistent with the QCA's principles for credit, and how their application might then bring incremental award for learning achievement to other provision and offer progression into the NQF.

Wider context

QCA and the LSC are working closely with key partners including the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and partners in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The key features of the national credit framework draw on important work carried out by the Further Education Unit, the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and the recent CCA for Wales. The development of the CCA involved leading awarding bodies as well as Education and Learning Wales (ELWa), ACCAC, NICATS, QCA and the LSDA.

QCA and the LSC were asked to focus their work on the needs of adults in the context of the Skills Strategy. The Working Group on 14-19 Reform is leading developments in qualifications for young people and QCA and the LSC are keeping the group informed of progress on the national credit framework.

Appendix 2: Level descriptors

Introduction

The level descriptors set out the characteristic generic outcomes of each level. They are intended to provide a general, shared understanding of each level and to allow broad comparisons to be made between units at different levels. They are not intended to be prescriptive or comprehensive statements, and there is no expectation that every unit should have all of the characteristics.

As the term ‘generic’ implies, the descriptors are intended to integrate vocational, academic and professional aspects of learning and apply to all learning contexts; classwork, practical work, work-based learning and so on. They have been developed with the intention that unit developers will use their professional expertise to translate them into their own subject areas.

The level descriptors can be used as a guide to writing learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria for units, to assign level to units and to assign credit level to units.

The descriptors should be seen as a developmental continuum, that is, each level subsumes the characteristics of lower levels. Guidance on the NICATS descriptors states that they are to be used primarily with assessment criteria, and to a lesser extent with learning outcomes.

The descriptors have been developed for use by organisations that may be assigning levels to units, as a first working document, and will be revised in light of feedback on their use¹.

Definition and scope of categories²

Intellectual skills and attributes

This category is about the learner’s knowledge and comprehension, and how the learner uses skills, solves problems and evaluates, analyses and presents information.

Processes

This category is about how the learner operates in different contexts and the processes, tasks and roles the learner performs. It is about the how the learner makes judgements, applies skills, communicates and works with others.

Accountability

This category is about the learner’s level of autonomy, responsibility, accountability and leadership.

¹ These descriptors consist of the NICATS descriptors, also used in Wales, with additional material commissioned by QCA that has been included as a result of consultation.

² The categories used are NICATS categories, and thus these definitions are those used by NICATS.

Level	Intellectual skills and attributes	Processes	Accountability
Entry	<p>Employ recall and demonstrate elementary comprehension in a narrow range of areas with dependency on ideas of others</p> <p>Exercise basic skills</p> <p>Receive and pass on information</p>	<p>Operate mainly in closely defined and highly structured contexts</p> <p>Carry out processes that are repetitive and predictable</p> <p>Undertake the performance of clearly defined tasks</p> <p>Assume a limited range of roles</p>	<p>Carry out directed activity under close supervision</p> <p>Rely entirely on external monitoring of output and quality</p>
1	<p>Employ a narrow range of applied knowledge and basic comprehension</p> <p>Demonstrate a narrow range of skills</p> <p>Apply known solutions to familiar problems</p> <p>Present and record information from readily available sources</p>	<p>Show basic competence in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts</p> <p>Utilise a clear choice of routine responses</p> <p>Co-operate with others</p>	<p>Exercise a very limited degree of discretion and judgement about possible actions</p> <p>Carry restricted responsibility for quantity and quality of output</p> <p>Operate under direct supervision and quality control</p>
2	<p>Apply knowledge with underpinning comprehension in a number of areas</p> <p>Make comparisons</p> <p>Interpret available information</p> <p>Demonstrate a range of skills</p>	<p>Choose from a range of procedures performed in a number of contexts, some of which may be non-routine</p> <p>Co-ordinate with others</p>	<p>Undertake directed activity with a degree of autonomy</p> <p>Achieve outcomes within time constraints</p> <p>Accept increased responsibility for quantity and quality of output subject to external quality checking</p>

3	<p>Apply knowledge and skills in a range of complex activities, demonstrating comprehension of relevant theories</p> <p>Access and evaluate information independently</p> <p>Analyse information and make reasoned judgements</p> <p>Employ a range of responses to well defined but often unfamiliar or unpredictable problems</p>	<p>Operate in a variety of familiar and unfamiliar contexts using a range of technical or learning skills</p> <p>Select from a considerable choice of procedures</p> <p>Give presentations to an audience</p>	<p>Engage in self directed activity with guidance/evaluation</p> <p>Accept responsibility for quantity and quality of output</p> <p>Accept limited responsibility for the quantity and quality of the output of others</p>
4	<p>Develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base</p> <p>Employ a range of specialised skills</p> <p>Determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable problems</p> <p>Generate a range of responses, a limited number of which are innovative, to well defined but often unfamiliar problems</p> <p>Evaluate information, using it to plan and develop investigative strategies</p>	<p>Operate in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities</p> <p>Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, selecting or presenting information, methods or resources</p>	<p>Undertake self directed and a limited amount of directive activity</p> <p>Operate within broad general guidelines or functions</p> <p>Take responsibility for the nature and quantity of outputs</p> <p>Meet specified quality standards</p>
5	<p>Generate ideas through the analysis of information and concepts at an abstract level</p> <p>Command wide ranging, specialised technical, creative and/or conceptual skills.</p> <p>Formulate appropriate responses to resolve well-defined and abstract problems</p> <p>Analyse, reformat and evaluate a wide range of information</p>	<p>Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of technical, professional or management functions</p> <p>Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions related to products, services, operations or processes</p>	<p>Accept responsibility and accountability within broad parameters for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes</p>

6	<p>Critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge</p> <p>Utilise highly specialised technical or scholastic skills across an area of study</p> <p>Utilise research skills</p> <p>Critically evaluate new information, concepts and evidence from a range of sources</p>	<p>Transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of situations</p> <p>Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes including resourcing</p>	<p>Accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes</p> <p><i>Begin to lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups</i></p>
7	<p>Display mastery of a complex and specialised area of knowledge and skills</p> <p>Demonstrate expertise in highly specialised and advanced technical, professional and/or research skills</p>	<p>Conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, <i>using and modifying advanced skills and tools</i></p> <p>Design and apply appropriate research methodologies</p> <p>Communicate results of research to peers</p> <p><i>Develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques</i></p> <p><i>Act in a wide variety of unpredictable and advanced professional contexts.</i></p>	<p>Accept accountability in related decision making including use of supervision</p> <p><i>Take significant responsibility for the work of other professional staff; Lead and initiate activity.</i></p>
8	<p>Make a significant and original contribution to a specialised field of enquiry</p> <p><i>Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge</i></p>	<p>Demonstrate command of methodological issues</p> <p>Communicate results of research to peers and engage in critical dialogue</p> <p><i>Develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials</i></p>	<p>Accept accountability in related decision making including use of supervision</p> <p><i>Lead and originate complex social processes.</i></p>

Appendix 3: Related publications and reports

A basis for credit? Developing a post-16 credit accumulation and transfer framework: a paper for discussion (FEU, 1992)

A framework for credit: a common framework for post-14 education and training for the 21st century (FEU, 1995)

Credit and higher education qualifications: credit guidelines for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (CQFW/NICATS/NUCCAT/SEEC, 2001)

Credit Common Accord: credit and qualifications framework for Wales (ELWa, June 2003)

ELWa: Introducing the credit and qualification framework for Wales (CQFW, 2002)

Framework guidelines 1: a framework for credit: levels, credit value and the award of credits (Further Education Unit, 1995)

Framework guidelines 2: a framework for credit: learning outcomes, units and modules (Further Education Development Agency, 1995)

LSDA reports: credit systems for learning and skills: current developments (LSDA, May 2003)

NICATS implementation report 1999-2002 (NICATS, 2002)

NICATS: report of the Northern Ireland credit accumulation and transfer (NICATS) project (NICATS, April 1996 – March 1999)

SCQF: national plan for implementation of the framework (Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework, 2002)

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