

# CREDIT AND HE QUALIFICATIONS

## Credit Guidelines for HE Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

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## INTRODUCTION

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published the Qualifications Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland in January 2001. The framework is designed to ensure a consistent use of qualification titles and to provide a national set of reference points for HE qualifications. It is explicitly concerned with *qualifications and qualification levels*. It incorporates five qualification levels (three undergraduate and two postgraduate).

The QAA qualifications framework does not incorporate a credit framework and does not concern itself with *credit levels* and the associated demands on learners. Nor, therefore, does it provide the means to differentiate between the qualifications within each of the five qualification levels in terms of the nature and extent, or volume, of learning and achievement at different credit levels. The majority of qualifications/awards comprise a programme of learning at a number of credit levels, whereas the qualification levels within the Qualifications Framework are output or exit levels, which represent the endpoint of an individual learning journey.

At the invitation of QAA, therefore, the key national credit bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have developed this set of credit guidelines - the basis for a national credit framework - to complement the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF). The guidelines are designed to provide guidance to institutions on the operation of credit systems and to assist them in mapping their qualifications against the QAA framework.

Recent major national reports, including the Kennedy report "*Learning Works, Widening Participation in Further Education*" (1997), the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education "*Higher Education in the Learning Society*" (1997) and the report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning, "*Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*" (1997) support the development of a credit framework on two major counts. First, to provide a framework for clarifying the relationship between awards at different levels and any pathways linking them and, second, as an important tool which can contribute to widening access to, and participation in, lifelong learning.

Within the European context, a coherent UK approach to credit will be critical in helping us to meet our obligations under the Bologna Declaration. The Declaration calls for reformed structures within HE to enable compatibility and comparability between the different systems of the member countries and to foster employability and mobility within Europe. A common framework of qualifications within the UK, supported by a consistent approach to credit levels and by ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) compatible credit systems, is essential if this is to be achieved effectively and efficiently.

In developing these guidelines, the credit bodies have built upon the work presented in 'A Common Framework for Learning' (1998), the report of the DfEE funded Inter Consortium Credit Agreement (InCCA) Project. Through this project, all the major UK credit bodies reached agreement on the principal elements of a credit framework. The principles and definitions proposed by the InCCA Project form the basis for these guidelines and have already been widely adopted by those institutions using credit systems.

The guidelines have been finalised following a consultation process undertaken during the period February – September 2001. Information about the consultation process and the key consultation findings are available in an accompanying document 'Background, consultations and the final recommendations'. A 'Summary Edition' of the guidelines is also available, which sets out the key elements of the guidance in succinct form – this may be of particular value to institutions for general circulation among staff.

## THE ROLE OF A CREDIT FRAMEWORK

### **What is a credit framework?**

A credit framework is a set of specifications for valuing, measuring, describing and comparing learning achievement. The framework is concerned with the demonstration of learning achieved, how much learning and at what academic level, and is designed to include learning from a wide range of environments, both on and off campus.

Credit and levels are merely useful tools to **represent learning for the purpose of measuring equivalence**; they do not, in themselves, affect the nature and content of what is being learned. Thus a credit framework simply provides a standardised means of **representing** learning achieved, enabling comparison of learning required in different programmes and qualifications, and facilitating the building up of credit by learners and/or the transfer of achieved learners between programmes and/or between institutions.

### **Why do we need a credit framework?**

The learning environment is increasingly becoming broader than traditional institutional, didactic or formal course based settings. This trend comes, in part, from current Government policy which encourages a culture of 'lifelong learning' with closer links to the **workplace**; in part because many educational establishments have recognised the role of off-campus learning and wish to accredit such learning. At the same time, an increasing interest in accessing higher educational qualifications is apparent throughout the workforce at a professional and sub-professional level. The increasing diversity of types of learning experience, including web-supported learning, is making demands upon educational institutions, in terms of both provision and recognition of a wide range of learning, that was, until recently, mostly unfamiliar.

It is in this context that the use of a 'common language' of credit to describe learning achievement is proving necessary. By identifying the basic parameters of volume and level of learning demand, referenced to clear statements that provide detail on content and achievement, the credit framework enhances our ability to make comparisons between programmes and greatly improves the quality of judgements about the relevance of prior and concurrent learning.

### **The role of credit in supporting learners**

A credit framework places learners at its centre, enabling them to earn credit for their academic achievement, irrespective of its level and the duration, overall volume and location of their learning. Learners will be motivated by the cumulative recognition of their learning as they progress. In addition, their learning goals will be achieved more efficiently without unnecessary repetition of learning.

Learners who wish to transfer from one programme to another, or from one institution to another, require a mechanism whereby their relevant prior learning achievements can be recognised. A credit framework provides this mechanism.

### **Linking credit and academic standards**

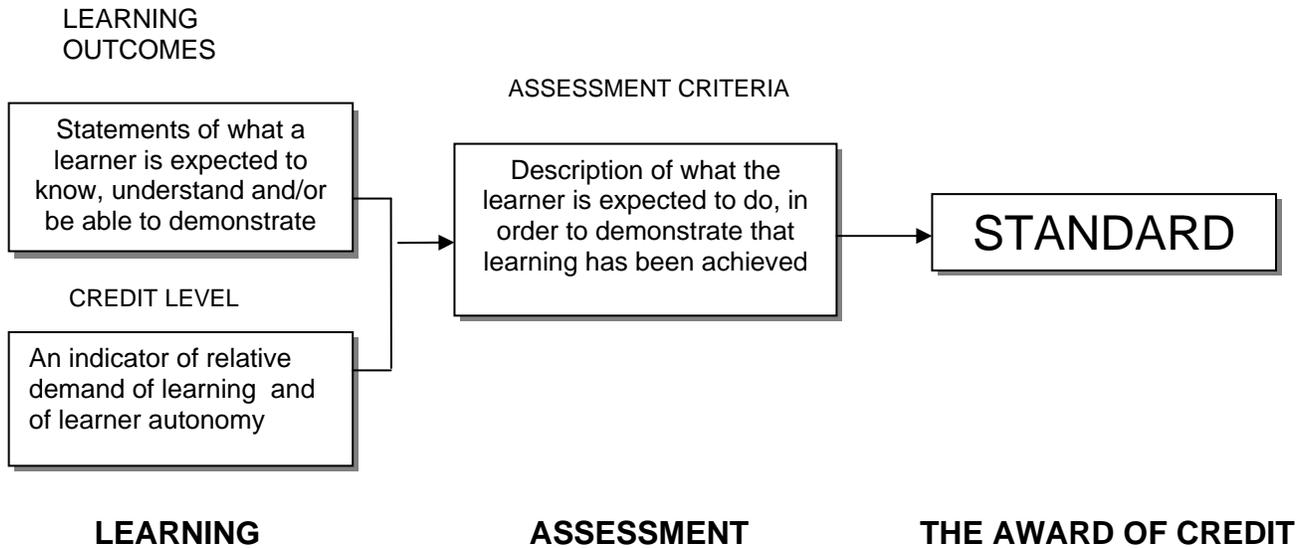
In recent years there has been increasing interest in the role of credit in defining the relative academic standards of programmes in terms of intellectual demand (level) and the notional learning effort (quantified, via notional learning time), in credit.

Levels and credit values alone, however, cannot be regarded as yardsticks of academic standards, which must be defined by bringing the academic level into a curricular context. To achieve this objective it is necessary to identify a series of formal *learning outcomes* and associated *assessment criteria* for each module. These become the elements that define the *standard*; the standard itself being met when all the relevant assessment criteria have been satisfied.

Credit frameworks, defined by credit and levels, provide an appropriate structure for relating qualifications to one another and defining them in terms of the *minimum* credit requirements. Since the award of credit is

based on the principle of learning achievements at specified levels, the credit system provides a sound basis for indicating the relative academic standards of qualifications.

### The role of credit in defining standards



## CREDIT DEFINITIONS AND PRINCIPLES

The definitions and principles given below form the basic components of a common framework within which credit systems can be developed. They explain the processes involved in designing, delivering and assessing learning within a credit-based approach.

CREDIT	
<p><b>Definition</b></p> <p><b>A quantified means of expressing equivalence of learning. Credit is awarded to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level</b></p> <p>The award of credit is a means of formally recognising learning achievement. Credit is expressed in a quantified form so that learning achievement in different contexts can be broadly compared in terms of intellectual demand (level) and relative volume (number of credits).</p>	<p><b>Principles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credit provides a means of quantifying learning achievements, achievable in notional learning hours at a given level.</li> <li>• One credit equates to 10 notional hours of successful learning activity.</li> <li>• Notwithstanding the link between credit and notional learning time, the emphasis of assessment should be upon learning achieved and not time served.</li> <li>• Credit is awarded for the achievement of specified learning outcomes. No additional credit can be awarded for achievement above the threshold level (although such achievement can be recognised through the award of marks or grades).</li> </ul>

**Note:**

**Students with credit awarded by one institution may have that credit recognised by another. The receiving institution is free to decide whether or not to recognise such credit.**

NOTIONAL LEARNING TIME	
<p><b>Definition</b></p> <p><b>The number of hours which it is expected a learner (at a particular level) will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes at that level.</b></p>	<p><b>Principles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taught or contact time will vary according to the mode of delivery, but notional learning time will not. All learning relevant to the learning outcomes should be considered when notional learning time is being estimated. Consideration should also be given to the level at which the learning is being offered when reaching this judgement</li> <li>• Notional learning time is not the actual time that any particular learner needs to spend in order to achieve the learning outcomes. The actual time will vary according to the individual's capability, degree of prior experiential or other learning and the mode of learning. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Any prior skill or knowledge required of the learner should not be included in an estimate of notional learning time.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Note:**

**The judgement concerning volume of learning and thus number of credits is an important one. The credit framework has adopted notional learning time to measure volume as the most appropriate method currently available. The most widely used credit : notional learning time ratio used in EWNI is 1 credit : 10 hours.**

## CREDIT LEVELS AND LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

### **Definitions**

#### **CREDIT LEVEL**

**An indicator of the relative demand, complexity and depth of learning and of learner autonomy**

The level identifies the relative demands of learning which will be required of a learner undertaking a module/unit of learning

#### **CREDIT LEVEL DESCRIPTOR**

**A statement which describes the characteristics of learning demand which the learner will encounter at each credit level**

Level descriptors should be seen as a developmental continuum in which preceding levels are necessarily subsumed within those which follow. The level descriptors are therefore a guide (to the curriculum designer and to learners) as to the kinds of demands it is appropriate to make of learners at each of the designated levels. As such they are **generic** in nature and can be applied across subject disciplines and modes of learning. In a higher education setting they will primarily be used by course designers developing learning outcomes and assessment criteria at modular level.

### **Principles**

- Credit levels encompass all forms of assessed learning offered across all award hierarchies, delivered by whatever means and in whatever context.
- Credit levels are different from the *specific* learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria which indicate the threshold standards required for the award of credit for any specific learning experience
- Credit levels are not intrinsically related to years of full-time study or to the previous learning achieved and/or experience of the learner: Thus:
  - i) Modules or units undertaken following the award of a first degree are not necessarily postgraduate in credit level.
  - ii) Units undertaken following work experience may be at any credit level.
- Credit levels relate to modules and units of learning rather than whole awards.
- Only one credit level can be attributed to any given module or unit of learning.
- An award or qualification may be composed of modules/units at different credit levels.
- Students with experience can gain credit for their prior or concurrent learning at any credit level.

### **Note:**

***In attributing a level to a module/unit of learning it is not necessary to demonstrate that all characteristics of the credit level descriptor are present. The relevant aspects of the descriptor are a matter for professional judgement. The credit levels descriptors are 'subject content free'. The levels are integrated with subject content in the writing of learning outcomes.***

## SUMMARY CREDIT LEVELS DESCRIPTORS

Summary Credit Levels Descriptors are provided on the next page.

These are the descriptors developed by the NICATS Project and adopted within the InCCA report. Full tables of level descriptors and guidelines for their use have been drawn up for a variety of purposes by a number of agencies including NICATS and SEEC (see references below). It is recommended that HE Institutions use those that appear best suited to their purposes, as long as they are mutually referential.

These generic Credit Levels Descriptors - together with their more detailed counterparts - are designed as guidance, to be used in the form of a template against which modules, units of learning and their defined learning outcomes can be considered. The intention is that they will serve to:

- facilitate the establishment of equivalence of expectation across disciplines;
- aid course developers in designing courses and modules against standard generic descriptors;
- articulate and make transparent the transferable skills developed by a range of higher education qualifications; and
- aid the assessment of claims of credit for prior learning.

**Note:**

***Credit levels can be mapped against, but do not equate to, the QAA Qualification levels (see footnote overleaf).***

**References:**

NICATS : [www.nicats.ac.uk/about/work.htm#ld](http://www.nicats.ac.uk/about/work.htm#ld) and are downloadable in pdf format.

SEEC: [www.seec-office.org.uk](http://www.seec-office.org.uk).

## SUMMARY CREDIT LEVELS DESCRIPTORS

Learning accredited at this level will reflect the ability to:

**ENTRY LEVEL** - employ recall and demonstrate elementary comprehension in a narrow range of areas, exercise basic skills within highly structured contexts, and carry out directed activity under close supervision.

**LEVEL 1** - employ a narrow range of applied knowledge, skills and basic comprehension within a limited range of predictable and structured contexts, including working with others under direct supervision, but with a very limited degree of discretion and judgement about possible action.

**LEVEL 2** - apply knowledge with underpinning comprehension in a number of areas and employ a range of skills within a number of contexts, some of which may be non-routine; and undertake directed activities, with a degree of autonomy, within time constraints.

**LEVEL 3** - apply knowledge and skills in a range of complex activities demonstrating comprehension of relevant theories; access and analyse information independently and make reasoned judgements, selecting from a considerable choice of procedures, in familiar and unfamiliar contexts; and direct own activities, with some responsibility for the output of others.

**LEVEL 4** - develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base; employ a range of specialised skills; evaluate information using it to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable problems; and operate in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.

**LEVEL 5** - generate ideas through the analysis of concepts at an abstract level, with a command of specialised skills and the formulation of responses to well defined and abstract problems; analyse and evaluate information; exercise significant judgement across a broad range of functions; and accept responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.

**LEVEL 6** - critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, utilizing specialised skills across an area of study; critically evaluate new concepts and evidence from a range of sources; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills and exercise significant judgement in a range of situations; and accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.

**LEVEL 7** - display mastery of a complex and specialised area of knowledge and skills, employing advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for related decision making including use of supervision.

**LEVEL 8** - make a significant and original contribution to a specialised field of inquiry demonstrating a command of methodological issues and engaging in critical dialogue with peers; accepting full accountability for outcomes.

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**Note:**

**See Table 1 later on page 10 for the correlation between these 9 credit levels (Entry – Level 8) and the QCA and QAA qualification levels.**

**Broadly:**

- **Entry – Level 3 correlates to the FE National Qualifications Framework**
- **Levels 4, 5, Level 6 correlate to the HE Qualification Levels Certificate (C), Intermediate (I) and Honours (H)**
- **Levels 7, 8 correlate to the HE Qualification Levels Masters (M) and Doctoral (D)**

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

### **Definition**

**Statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning.**

The inclusion of learning outcomes in module outlines promotes the development of coherent learning programmes and, by making the required student learning explicit, assists learner guidance. Credit accumulation and transfer is facilitated if clear learning outcomes are available to indicate with precision the achievements for which the credit will be awarded.

When used in association with their related assessment criteria, learning outcomes reflect the level at which the learning has occurred.

### **Principles**

- Learning outcomes are distinct from the aims of learning, in that they are concerned with the achievements of the learner rather than the overall intentions of the teacher.
- The learning outcomes specified for a learning experience must be assessable.
- The assessment strategy for a module/unit is designed in direct relationship to the skills and knowledge embedded in the learning outcomes.
- Learning outcomes must be accompanied by appropriate assessment criteria which can be used to judge that the specified learning outcomes have been achieved.
- Learning outcomes, together with assessment criteria, specify the minimum requirements for the award of credit. Grading is based on attainment above or below the minimum requirements for the award of credit. **The credit framework does not encompass a grading scheme.**
- Statements of competence may be used as, and equate to, learning outcomes. Learning outcomes do not, however, always define competencies.

### **Note:**

***It is the link between credit levels descriptors, learning outcomes, and assessment criteria which sets the standard for achievement in the module, and thus for the award of credit. It is important, therefore, that all three elements are expressed clearly.***

## ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

### **Definition**

**Descriptions of what the learner is expected to do, in order to demonstrate that a learning outcome has been achieved**

Assessment criteria have a direct relationship with learning outcomes. The purpose of assessment criteria is to establish clear and unambiguous standards of achievement in respect of each learning outcome. Level descriptors are used as a guide during this process.

### **Principles**

- The assessment criteria are set at a **threshold level of achievement**; performance in excess of this threshold can be further differentiated by the application of grading criteria, which serve to discriminate between the relative performances of students who have surmounted this threshold.

### **Note:**

***Assessment methods should not be confused with assessment criteria. The former could be 'one 1500 word essay', whilst the latter could be 'the learner should demonstrate understanding of the specified topic, presenting well-structured arguments with reference to appropriate sources.'***

## MODULE

### **Definition**

**A self contained, formally structured learning experience with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria**

### **Principles**

- A module refers to the *planned curriculum* experienced by the learner. In addition to title, learning outcomes, level, credit value and assessment criteria, the module normally includes the syllabus, the modes of learning, the assessment strategy and the modes of assessment. The credit value of the module is defined by the institution responsible for the design of the module.

### **Note:**

***The concept of unit of assessment is distinct from the term module. A unit of assessment comprises the title, the set of learning outcomes, credit value, credit level and the assessment criteria of a component of curriculum. It does not include the syllabus or any aspect of the delivery. The module comprises all the aspects that make up the unit of assessment together with the syllabus, the mode of learning and the methods of assessment. The module therefore subsumes the unit of assessment.***

***Further Education (FE) makes widespread use of the unit of assessment because it is possible for an authorised agency to validate units of assessment and then allow teaching institutions the necessary flexibility with regard to the detailed syllabus and the mode of delivery. In Higher Education (HE) there is no need for units of assessment as separate entities because the concept of unit of assessment is already embedded in the module. The fact that both FE and HE use the same principles of awarding credit for the achievement of learning outcomes is the reason why it should be possible for FE and HE to use the same credit framework.***

# A GUIDE TO THE CREDIT VALUES OF HE QUALIFICATIONS IN ENGLAND, WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND

## Introduction: credit and qualification levels

The following guidance on credit values is designed to complement the Higher Education Qualification Framework [HEQF] for England, Wales and Northern Ireland [EWNI] (QAA 2001). The HEQF has five qualification levels and five corresponding sets of qualification descriptors. However, the QAA framework does not include any mechanism or criteria that can be used to differentiate between the qualifications at each qualification level. As a consequence, the qualifications that are clustered at each level share the same qualification descriptor. The careful application of credit, based upon the principles set out earlier in this guidance document, can be used to differentiate between a number of these qualifications.

The following table (Table 1) lists the HEQF qualification levels [left-hand block] and shows their correlation with the commonly cited credit levels [right-hand block]. Qualification levels [learner outcomes] and credit levels [demands on the learner] are not the same but they are related and for the purposes of the table, they may be correlated.

**TABLE 1: Credit levels and the related QAA and QCA qualification levels**

QUALIFICATION LEVELS		CREDIT LEVELS		
	1. HEQF/NQF QL	2. EWNI framework	3. FE/HE	4. Former CNAA
<b>HEQF</b>	Doctoral D Level	Level 8		
	Master's M Level	Level 7	Level M	Level M
	Honours H Level	Level 6	Level HE3	Level 3
	Intermediate I Level	Level 5	Level HE2	Level 2
	Certificate C Level	Level 4	Level HE1	Level 1
<b>NQF</b>	Level 3 Advanced	Level 3	Level FE3	Level 0
	Level 2 Intermediate	Level 2	Level FE2	
	Level 1 Foundation	Level 1	Level FE1	
	Entry	Entry	Entry	

**Column 1:** The five qualification levels which make up the Higher Education Qualifications Framework [HEQF] and the four qualification levels that make up the lower part of the National Qualifications Framework [NQF]. The higher levels of the NQF (FE4 and FE5) have been omitted because their correlation with the other levels shown here has not been established.

**Column 2:** The unified series of credit levels recommended for use in England, Wales and Northern Ireland [EWNI].

**Column 3:** The frequently used notations for the FE and HE credit levels

**Column 4:** The levels originally used by the former Council for National Academic Awards [CNAA].

The EWNI credit bodies recommend that institutions use the credit levels shown in column 2.

## The general approach in devising these guidelines

### Using credit to help define the standard of qualifications

The EWNI credit bodies have adopted a similar approach to that used by the QAA HE Qualification Framework for Scotland. For programmes that span two or more credit levels, a precise designation of the credits required at each level would be unnecessarily restrictive. In the tables that follow (Tables 2 and 3), just four criteria are used to define the standard of each qualification in credit terms.

- (i) The recommended **minimum overall credits** for the qualification.
- (ii) The **range of levels** encompassed by the qualification.
- (iii) The recommended number of credits at the **highest credit level**.
- (iv) The recommended **maximum number** of credits at the lowest level.

The four criteria reflect the key aspects of each qualification: the amount of learning [overall credits], the range of intellectual demand [levels], the attainment at the most demanding level [credits at the highest level] and a limit on the learning included from the lowest level.

The full definition of the standard of each qualification is provided by the institutionally validated **programme specifications** which, when credit is used, incorporate the credit requirements. The formulation of the programme specifications is influenced by the application of the relevant QAA subject benchmarks. The credit values set out in these guidelines are explicit with regard to the achievement expected at the highest level but do not impose unnecessary constraints on the curriculum structure as designed by each institution. The fourth criterion helps to ensure that the standard is not compromised by including excessive numbers of credits at the lowest level encompassed by the qualification.

**The credit value of the programme studied versus the credits attempted**

The tables set out the recommended **minimum** credit values of HE qualifications. It remains for institutions to decide the credit values that they believe are appropriate for the qualifications that they offer. They may decide to require students to gain more credits than the minimum recommended in these guidelines. A further distinction should be made between the credit value of the qualification as validated by an institution and the number of credits that the institution allows students to attempt on the approved programme of studies. In summary, the institution may design programmes with higher requirements than the recommended minimum and it may permit, encourage or advise students to attempt a larger number of credits than are needed to gain the qualification.

HE qualifications are presented in two broad groups:

- postgraduate & graduate qualifications
- undergraduate & associated qualifications

For each qualification a short explanation is provided for the recommended credit value. All credit values are offered as **guidance** to institutions using the HE credit framework in EWNI. In all the tables of qualifications that follow, any reference to a minimum credit attainment at a specific level indicates that the criterion can be satisfied by the attainment of the credits at the stated level or at a higher level.

**Recommended credit values of HE qualifications**

**TABLE 2: The recommended minimum credit values of Postgraduate and Graduate Qualifications**

Qualification	HEQF Qualification Level	Min overall credits	The range of levels No of credits at highest level	Max at lowest level
<b>POSTGRADUATE</b>				
Professional Doctorate	D	540 credits	Levels (6), 7, 8 min 360 credits at Level 8	max 30 credits at Level 6
Master's Degree	M	180 credits	Levels (6), 7 min 150 credits at Level 7	max 30 credits at Level 6
PG Diploma	M	120 credits	Levels (6), 7 min 90 credits at Level 7	max 30 credits at Level 6
PG Certificate	M	60 credits	Levels (6), 7 min 40 credits at Level 7	max 20 credits at Level 6

<b>GRADUATE</b>				
Graduate Diploma	H	120 credits	Levels (3, 4, 5) 6 min 90 credits at Level 6	max 30 credits at Level 3
Graduate Certificate	H	60 credits	Levels (3, 4, 5) 6 min 40 credits at Level 6	max 20 credits at Level 3

## **The professional doctorate**

The professional doctorate is achieved through a major programme of studies based upon a validated curriculum. It is sometimes known as the 'taught' doctorate or the 'practitioner' doctorate because the emphasis is placed upon the student's in-depth reflection on her/his professional practice. There has been much discussion of the credit requirements for the professional doctorate during the consultation stages of the QAA development of the qualifications frameworks. Initially, it was proposed that all the credits [540] must be achieved at D Level [Level 8](QAA 1999). Subsequently, the QAA proposed that only 450 credits of the 540 credits need be achieved at D Level (QAA 2000). Finally, in publishing the Scottish framework, the QAA decided that 420 credits of the 540 credits should be achieved at D Level (QAA 2001). The changes reflected progressive recognition that M Level work has a significant part to play in the design of curriculum-based programmes leading to a professional doctorate.

The demands of the professional doctorate should be compared to the doctorate undertaken by research thesis. The latter is traditionally regarded as a training in research undertaken by an appropriately equipped student in the equivalent of three years of full time study. The first year is commonly devoted to the mastery of methodological techniques and data collection that acts as the foundation for the deeper interpretative and evaluative studies in the final two years. While the experience of some research students may be quite different from this, it is considered a reasonable general characterisation of the doctorate by research thesis.

In terms of comparability with the Doctor of Philosophy, it would be realistic to regard the first third of the professional doctorate as at master's level and the subsequent reflective and evaluative studies to be at doctoral level. This is the rationale behind the guidance that up to 180 credits [one-third] may be achieved at Level 7 [with a small allowance at Level 6] and the remaining 360 credits [two-thirds] should be achieved at Level 8.

This structure allows universities to design a master's programme to lead into a directly related doctoral programme [for example, a 1-year FT study leads to the MEd degree and a further 2 years FT study leads to the EdD degree]. Students lacking the discipline specific background at master's level would require a full 3-year [FT equivalent] programme. A further advantage of the structure is that it recognises that individual taught modules in research methods training are not easily designed at Level 8, which implies that the candidate is making an original contribution to knowledge. Level 8 is more easily achieved in large modules based on dissertations and other forms of evaluative studies.

The credit structure is totally consistent with the QAA qualification descriptors. Some research councils expect recipients of their studentships to have undertaken a four-year integrated Master's degree or a research-based Master's degree but this should not be used as a basis for making a substantial increase in the credits needed to gain a professional doctorate.

## **The Master's Degree, PG Diploma and PG Certificate**

The recommended credit values of these qualifications are already very widely applied in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is suggested that 30 credits of Level 6 studies may be included in programmes leading to the PG Diploma and the Master's Degree; and up to 20 credits of Level 6 studies included in programmes leading to the PG Certificate. This will maintain the flexibility in programme design.

## **The Graduate Diploma and Certificate**

Graduate qualifications are usually taken by those who have graduated but want to pursue studies that are not necessarily at a higher level (QAA 2001). An example is the traditional PGCE qualification for entry into teaching. These qualifications were designated as H Level by the QAA. It is recommended that, in common with other qualifications culminating at Level 6 [see below], a small amount of the credit may be devoted to *ab initio* studies at Level 3 or higher.

**TABLE 3: The recommended minimum credit values of Undergraduate and associated Qualifications**

Qualification	HEQF Qualification Level	Min overall credits	The range of Levels No of credits at highest level	Max credits at lowest level
Integrated Master's Degree	M	480 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5, 6, 7 min 120 credits at Level 7	max 30 credits at Level 3
Honours Degree	H	360 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5, 6 min 90 credits at Level 6	max 30 credits at Level 3
Ordinary Degree	I	300 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5, 6 min 60 credits at Level 6	max 30 credits at Level 3
Foundation Degree	I	240 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5 min 90 credits at Level 5	max 30 credits at Level 3
Diploma HE	I	240 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5 min 90 credits at Level 5	max 30 credits at Level 3
HND	I	240 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5 min 90 credits at Level 5	max 30 credits at Level 3
HNC	C	150 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5 min 30 credits at Level 5	max 30 credits at Level 3
Certificate HE	C	120 credits	Levels (3), 4 min 90 credits at Level 4	max 30 credits at Level 3

**Note:** The EWNI credit bodies recommend that the programmes leading to the Integrated Master's Degree, the Honours Degree and the Ordinary Degree reflect planned progression and credit attainment through the levels spanned by the qualification.

**The recognition of the role of ancillary studies in programme design**

The EWNI credit bodies recommend that in the design of all Undergraduate and associated programmes, a small number of credits [up to 30 credits] at Level 3 may be included. This facility is intended to enable the designers of programmes to accommodate ancillary studies, which complement the main programme. This feature is shown in the right-hand column in Table 3.

**The Integrated Master's Degree [the extended Master's or Undergraduate Master's]**

This is the highest of the undergraduate qualifications and is usually designated as an MSci, MEng or MTP degree. The MPhys, MChem, MBiol and MGeol are other examples of MSci awards. The QAA HE frameworks stipulate that the award of a Master's Degree reflects a substantial achievement at master's level. The Scottish framework requires that at least 120 credits must be achieved at M Level [Level 7] with the consequence that the entire final year of the undergraduate programme is pitched at M Level. It is recommended that EWNI should adopt the same position as Scotland. Some have argued that the Integrated Master's Degree should be given the same credit value [minimum 150 credits at Level 7] as the other Master's Degrees, while others have pressed for a lower credit value [just 90 credits needed at Level 7]. Increasing the credits needed at Level 7 would have serious implications for the programme designers. Reducing the credits needed at Level 7 to 90 would raise doubt that the award satisfies the QAA criterion of substantial achievement at M Level.

It is recognised that a number of Professional Bodies and national subject groups have a particular interest in extended degree programmes and that this guidance and related issues will need to be explored with them.

**The Honours Degree**

The credit value recommended for the Honours Degree is already widely applied in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Table 3).

**The Ordinary Degree [equates to the HEQF Degree]**

The current nomenclature [Foundation Degree, Degree and Honours Degree] is a potential source of confusion for students. Two of the awards have a descriptor in front of the term degree but the third award lacks a descriptor. A logical solution is to introduce an appropriate descriptor that would be consistent with sector

expectations. In order to distinguish clearly the unclassified degree from the other two possible awards using the 'degree' nomenclature (i.e. the 'Honours' degree and the 'Foundation' degree), it is recommended that the descriptor 'Ordinary' be attached. This will result in three clearly identified awards: the Foundation Degree, the Ordinary Degree, and the Honours Degree. It should be noted, however, that a significant number of institutions currently use the term Degree without a descriptor to mean 'ordinary degree' and it is recognised that these and others may wish to adapt the terminology.

The QAA places the Ordinary Degree at I Level [Level 5] together with the Foundation Degree, and the Diploma HE. In terms of the nominal qualification level for the award, this is appropriate. However, it is current practice in HE to value the Ordinary Degree at an intermediate position between the Diploma HE [240 credits overall] and the Honours Degree [360 credits overall]. Most institutions currently require some achievement [normally 60 credits] at Level 6, giving 300 credits overall.

An alternative approach would be to increase the credits taken at Level 5, to attain 300 credits overall. The disadvantage with the latter approach is that a student who completes an Ordinary Degree has effectively travelled some way down an academic cul-de-sac. In order to progress from an Ordinary Degree to an Honours Degree, such a student would need to earn a further 120 credits at Level 6 [= 1year FT study]. In effect, 60 of the credits achieved at Level 5 could not contribute to the achievement of the Honours Degree. The EwNI credit bodies therefore recommend that the Ordinary Degree incorporates a significant achievement at Level 6. This position produces a clearer differentiation between the Ordinary Degree and the other lesser qualifications [Foundation Degree, Diploma HE and Higher National Diploma] positioned at the I Level (Table 3).

### **Foundation Degree, the Diploma HE and the Higher National Diploma**

The Higher National Diploma, the Diploma HE and the Foundation Degree are all regarded as Intermediate Level qualifications. Consideration has been given to making the credit value of the Foundation Degree higher than for the HND and Diploma HE. However, this would breach the FD design group's expectation that the Foundation Degree should equate to two years of FT study. Furthermore, if Foundation Degree students were expected to achieve a higher proportion of Level 5 credits; this could disadvantage those who included ancillary studies at Level 3 within their programme. There is currently not a satisfactory rationale for differentiating the Foundation Degree from the DipHE and the HND in terms of credit value. It is therefore recommended that the credit values of the Foundation Degree, the Diploma HE and the HND should be the same (Table 3).

### **The Higher National Certificate**

A recent survey of credit practice has confirmed that there is still great variation in the credit value attached to the HNC (Turnbull 2000). There is a general view that the HNC encompasses achievement at both Level 4 and Level 5. The disagreement relates to the extent to which the credit requirements should incorporate Level 5. Two possible models have been considered. The first was based on a minimum of 180 credits overall with 60 credits at Level 5; the second valued the HNC at 150 credits overall with 30 credits at Level 5. The EwNI credit bodies recommend the second model, which gives a satisfactory 90-credit difference between the overall requirements for the HNC and the HND (Table 3).

**Note:** The Edexcel qualifications [HND and HNC] are within the remit of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA]. The QCA has advised the credit bodies that it would be inappropriate for the Authority to express a view on the credit values of these qualifications at present. However, the QCA expects to give consideration to this matter in due course at which time it may decide on different credit values. The positions described in these guidelines should therefore be regarded as provisional.

### **Further matters for consideration**

The EwNI credit bodies have given consideration to a number of further matters that are relevant to these guidelines. These include the possibility of recognising smaller qualifications for promoting access and widening participation, the compatibility or non-compatibility of compensation and condonement with credit practice and the issue of the re-use of credit. All these matters need further discussion before clear guidance can be offered but the credit bodies believe that HE institutions would find it useful to have further information to assist their own discussions. Further information on these matters is set out in the appendix.

## APPENDIX

### OTHER ACCESSIBLE HE QUALIFICATIONS

In recent years a number of universities have introduced a range of smaller, highly accessible qualifications which are generally taken by those who are returning to higher education, particularly in the context of work-based learning. Employers have advised that the award of qualifications is more useful than the award of credit alone. However, they have also commented that these qualifications would be more valuable if they related to a national framework that recognises the titles and clarifies the relative standard of each qualification.

In the consultation document, the credit bodies proposed a short ascending series of smaller qualifications, considered to be a fair reflection of current practice in some institutions. At 60 credits, each equates in credit value to one-half of a FT undergraduate year although students normally take them over a longer period on a part time basis. The titles of the qualifications in the series are the University Foundation Certificate, the University Certificate, the University Diploma and the University Advanced Diploma.

A majority of respondents to the consultation indicated that these new qualifications would be useful, but a sizeable minority of respondents indicated doubt as to their value. In order to assist those institutions who may wish to continue offering these smaller qualifications, or introduce them at some point in the future, Table 4 represents the proposals included in the consultation document. Institutions could adapt the titles to make them appropriate for their own purposes, for example, a College Advanced Diploma.

*Table 4*

Qualification	Relevant HEQF Qualification Level	Minimum overall credits	The range of levels No of credits at highest level	Max credits at lowest level
University Advanced Diploma	H	60 credits	Levels (3, 4, 5), 6 min 40 credits at Level 6	max 20 credits at Level 3
University Diploma	I	60 credits	Levels (3, 4), 5 min 40 credits at Level 5	max 20 credits at Level 3
University Certificate	C	60 credits	Levels (3), 4 min 40 credits at Level 4	max 20 credits at Level 3
University Foundation Certificate		60 credits	Levels (2), 3 min 40 credits at Level 3	max 20 credits at Level 2

### ISSUES CONCERNING CURRENT CREDIT PRACTICE

During the development of the guidelines, the credit bodies identified two key issues relating to credit practice which are recognised as problematic for many institutions. The first is the practice of **compensation and condonement** and the second issue is the **re-use of credit**. The credit bodies believe that they are in a position to offer some advice on the first issue but feel that further discussion is necessary before offering firm guidance on the second issue.

#### Credit achieved and the role of compensation and condonement

The preceding guidelines on the credit values of HE qualifications set out the minimum credit achievement that is recommended for each qualification. The credits needed are the credits that should be **earned by** the student in accordance with the institution's regulations. Some institutions permit condonement or compensation of student performances that marginally fail to satisfy the requirements for awards.

**Condonement** is defined as the process by which an assessment board, in consideration of the overall performance of a student, decides that without incurring a penalty, a part of the programme that has been failed does not need to be redeemed. Since this process does not normally involve the award of credit, there is no conflict with the principles underlying the credit system.

**Compensation** is defined here as the process by which an assessment board (or equivalent) may decide that a strong performance by a student in one part of the curriculum may be used as the basis for the award of credit in respect of a failed performance elsewhere. There is no issue when compensation is applied *within* modules, but if failure in a whole module is compensated by stronger performances in other modules there is clearly a conflict with the main principle of the credit system, which is that credit is only awarded for meeting prescribed learning outcomes. It is therefore suggested that institutions which operate credit-based systems alongside regulations which permit compensation *between* modules should review and resolve this conflict.

### The use of credit towards further qualifications

A number of practitioners have requested that clear guidelines should be provided as to when it is appropriate for the credits associated with one award to be carried forward and to contribute towards a further qualification. This is not always an easy matter to resolve in practice and the consultation revealed an extreme polarity of views. A clear majority [70%] of respondents favoured the proposed guidelines but a significant minority was not in agreement. The credit consortia believe that it would be premature to offer definitive guidelines now but that a presentation of the arguments would be helpful.

There are two opposing arguments. The first is that credit may be re-used wherever the learning achievement is considered relevant. The second is that credit should not be re-used and that to do so undermines the integrity of credit. We shall explain each argument in turn.

#### 1. CREDIT MAY BE REUSED

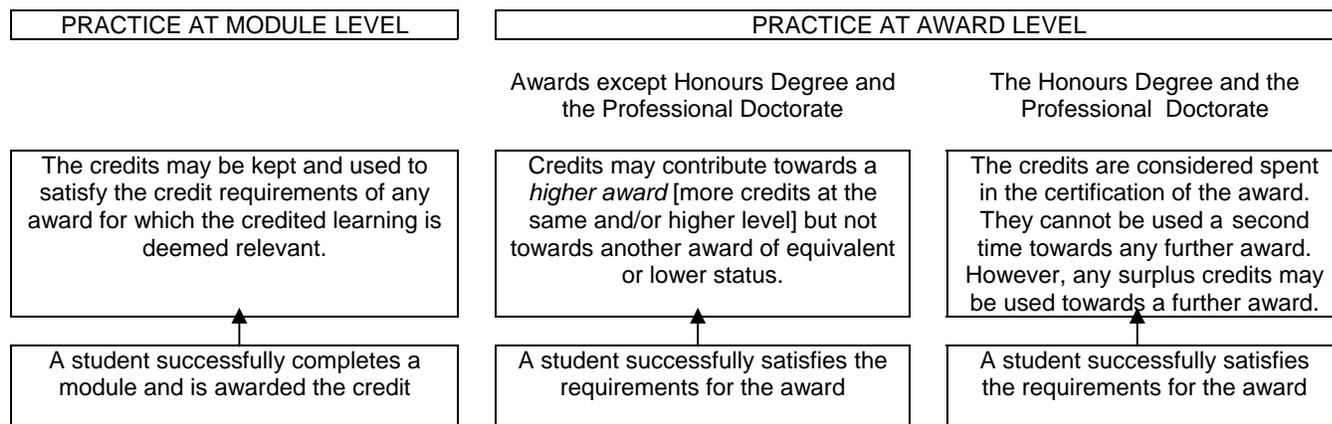
Since credit is awarded for learning achievements it is logical that this learning may be recognised and counted towards any qualification wherever the assessors deem that the learning is relevant. It follows, therefore, that a body of learning that has been credited may contribute to more than one qualification. There is no issue with regard to the credit volume for each qualification because the student has satisfied all the specified learning outcomes. Furthermore, the student's transcript is perfectly clear as to the actual volume of learning that the student has undertaken towards each qualification. This means that employers are not in danger of being misled. The problem with creating rules restricting re-use is that they would, in practice, be very difficult to police. Students could easily circumvent any rules. The re-use of credit in this way is seen as a full embodiment of the spirit of credit accumulation and transfer.

#### 2. CREDIT SHOULD NOT BE RE-USED

Credit is a currency for learning achievements and may be accumulated towards qualifications. There is a clear analogy with monetary currency. The certification of a qualification is analogous to purchasing a product. Just as one cannot spend the same money on two different products, a student should not be permitted to spend the same credit twice on two different qualifications. There are situations where one qualification subsumes another, in which case the second qualification may be considered to incorporate the earlier qualification. This is quite common and is perfectly acceptable.

However, the re-use of credit in different qualifications quite clearly creates problems of equity of achievement where two students with the same qualifications might have very different volumes of actual credit attainment. It is not safe to assume that employers and agencies will examine and understand students' transcripts, preferring to ask for the award certificates. They may therefore misunderstand the student's achievements. A convention on credit practice is necessary in order that credit should not fall into disrepute. If this convention was widely agreed and followed, instances of unacceptable practice would be minimised.

A convention might work like this:



### EXAMPLES

- A student who achieves a Foundation Degree could use the relevant credit towards an Honours Degree, but not towards an HND or a DipHE or another Foundation Degree
- A student who has gained an Honours Degree could not count any of the credit used towards a Master's Degree.

The credit organisations in EWNl will explore this issue further in consultation with their members with a view to issuing guidance. It is recommended that institutions use this opportunity to clarify their own thinking on these matters.

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Further guidance on the Credit Framework and its operation is available from the EWNI credit bodies, who can be contacted at the addresses given below.

### **CQFW**

The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) Project is funded through Education Learning Wales (ELWa; National Council and HE Funding Council) for an initial 2 years to establish agreement on a specification for the Single Post-16 Credit and Qualifications Framework in Wales. The use of a 10 notional hour credit and a continuum of nine described levels from Entry to postgraduate study has already been agreed. Implementation will be enabled through development of:

- a credit transcript for all post 16 learning
- an inclusive and accessible databasing system for units
- agreement on credit equivalencies for qualifications and units with no credit award
- quality assurance arrangements to underpin credit
- a programme of staff development and general awareness

The initial Framework agreements were launched by the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning in the National Assembly of Wales, who also laid out targets for an operational Framework. The Project is overseen by a Strategic Working Group representative of principal stakeholders with a wider Advisory Group (with representation from all sectors providing post-16 learning, regulatory and quality agencies, economic development and employment interests). In addition there is an active Forum for Awarding Bodies.

You can contact the Project team at [cqfw@newport.ac.uk](mailto:cqfw@newport.ac.uk); website: <http://cqfw.newport.ac.uk/>

### **NICATS**

The aim of the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) Scheme is to develop a single credit framework across Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE) and other providers of post-16 education and training in Northern Ireland. This framework will support the operation of a regional credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS). The reason for developing a single FE/HE credit framework is to enable learners to progress through a series of levels of learning, transferring where necessary, without encountering the barriers caused by the current lack of coherence and interconnection between existing systems of accreditation.

Funded by the Northern Ireland Government, the NICATS Project has developed the structural components of a credit framework for Northern Ireland. These specifications outline how learning achievement is to be measured, described and compared through learning outcomes, credit values and levels.

NICATS is working to:

- develop the credit framework for Northern Ireland in collaboration with the Northern Ireland further and higher education institutions and local regulatory and awarding bodies, maintaining close contacts with national credit and qualification framework developments;
- develop a unit database and establish an electronic credit transcript to underpin the Northern Ireland credit framework.

The NICATS office is situated within the University of Ulster's Belfast Campus at York St., Belfast BT15 1ED; Tel. 02890 267250; Fax. 02890 267253; email- [nicats@ulst.ac.uk](mailto:nicats@ulst.ac.uk); website- [www.nicats.ac.uk](http://www.nicats.ac.uk)

### **NUCCAT**

The Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer is a federation of some 45 higher education institutions in the UK – from the north east to the midlands in England – but also including the two Northern Ireland universities. UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is also a member.

Working through its membership NUCCAT seeks to :

- Share and promote best practice in the development of modularity, credit frameworks and academic frameworks
- Promote staff development in these areas
- Debate issues of common interest
- Undertake specific projects on credit for external sponsors

The Consortium holds quarterly meetings with invited speakers on matters of topical interest, and runs a number of regional workshops each year to promote consultation and/or staff development on academic credit and related issues, including assessment.

NUCCAT meets regularly with the representatives of the other UK credit bodies in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Southern England and Wales. NUCCAT and SEEC have also recently established collaborative arrangements for the joint undertaking of major projects on matters relating to credit and assessment in England.

Contact details for NUCCAT are: Angela Cooper (Membership Secretary and Treasurer), Deputy Registrar, University of Wolverhampton, WB Block, Gorway Road, Walsall WS1 3BD. Tel: 0190 232 3165. email: [A.Cooper@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:A.Cooper@wlv.ac.uk)

## **SEEC**

The Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer, is a consortium of 37 higher education institutions in the south of England, created in 1985 and committed to the principle that *all learning which can be judged to be at higher education levels can be credited and programmed to achieve nationally recognised awards*. SEEC is governed by a Council, meeting once each term and consisting of a representative from each member organisation.

SEEC has a full time administrator and two consultants, one of whom is the part-time Development Officer.

One of SEEC's main objectives is to promote credit practice and to keep its members abreast of current developments in credit related activities. In pursuance of this aim SEEC offers its members:

- a series of staff development workshops, seminars and conferences;
- four networks that meet each term:
  - Assessment of Prior (Experiential ) Learning;
  - Key Skills;
  - Health and Social Care Professions;
  - Work Related Learning;
- research opportunities both internally and externally funded;
- an extensive series of publications;
- an opportunity to respond to national policy and other initiatives through discussions at Governing Council, through the networks and through regular discussions at meetings with other consortia in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Further information about SEEC and membership can be obtained from, Jervine Young, Administrator, The SEEC Office, c/o The University of East London, Romford Road, London, E15 4LZ. Tel. 020 8223 4978 Fax. 020 8223 4952. E-mail [SEECoffice@uel.co.uk](mailto:SEECoffice@uel.co.uk). The web address is [www.seec-office.org.uk](http://www.seec-office.org.uk).

## GLOSSARY

**Assessment criteria:** descriptions of what the learner is expected to do, in order to demonstrate that learning outcomes have been achieved.

**Credit:** A quantified means of expressing equivalence of learning. Credit is awarded to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level.

**Credit accumulation:** a process of achieving credits over time in relation to a planned programme of study.

**Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS):** a system which enables learners to accumulate credit, and which facilitates the transfer of that credit within and beyond the providing institution.

**Credit framework:** the overall framework within which credit accumulation and transfer systems operate. The credit framework encompasses core definitions and principles, and defines the basis for the award of credit, the levels, the number of levels and the level descriptors.

**Credit Level:** an indicator of the relative demand, complexity and depth of learning and of learner autonomy.

**EWNI:** England, Wales and Northern Ireland

**EWNI Credit Bodies:** CQFW (Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales); NUCCAT (Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer); NICATS (Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System); SEEC (Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer).

**HEQF:** the QAA Higher Education Qualifications Framework

**InCCA:** the Inter-Consortium Credit Agreement, presented in the report of a DfEE funded project: 'A Common Framework for Learning' (1998).

**Learning outcomes:** statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning.

**Module:** a self contained, formally structured, learning experience with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

**Notional Learning Time:** the number of hours which it is expected a learner (at a particular level) will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes at that level.

**NQF:** the QCA National Qualifications Framework.

**QAA:** the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

**QCA:** the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.