

A guide to the credit values of HE qualifications

The guidelines which follow are designed to complement the Higher Education Qualifications Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland published by the QAA. **Table 2** below lists the five qualification levels which make up the Qualification Framework for HE [HEQF] and the four qualification levels which make up the lower part of the National Qualifications Framework [NQF]. It shows the correlation between these qualification levels and the recommended credit levels of the EWNI credit framework and the commonly used FE and HE levels [right-hand block].

HEQF	Qualification Levels	EWNI credit levels	FE/HE levels
	HEQF		
NQF	Honours H Level Intermediate I Level Certificate C Level	Level 6 Level 5 Level 4	Level HE3 Level HE2 Level HE1
	Level 3 Advanced Level 2 Intermediate Level 1 Foundation Entry	Level 3 Level 2 Level 1 Entry	Level FE3 Level FE2 Level FE1 Entry

Table 2

14. The general approach in devising these guidelines

The EWNI credit bodies are recommending a minimum number of criteria necessary to secure the standard of each award. The overspecification of qualifications could place restrictions on programme designers and students. For this reason the credit bodies have avoided recommending a credit requirement at every level engaged by a qualification. We have used four general criteria:

- The recommended **minimum overall credits** for a qualification.
- The **range of levels** encompassed by the qualification.
- The recommended number of credits at the **highest credit level**.
- The recommended **maximum number** of credits at the lowest level.

The fourth criterion helps to ensure that the standard is not compromised by the inclusion of excessive numbers of credits at the lowest level.

15. The credit value of the programme to be studied

In the two tables overleaf [Tables 3 and 4], we offer guidance on the minimum credit value of each HE qualification. Institutions are not obliged to adhere to these minimum credit values for the programmes that students undertake. They may choose to validate programmes of study that exceed the minimum credit values in terms of the number of credits needed or in terms of the levels at which the credit is attained.

16. Postgraduate and graduate qualifications

We set out in **Table 3** the recommended *minimum* credit values of postgraduate and graduate qualifications. In each case there is an allowance of a small number of credits at a level lower than that normally associated with the award. This is intended to facilitate the inclusion of relevant ancillary studies within the validated programme. It is recommended that programmes leading to the Integrated Master's Degree reflect planned progression and credit attainment through the levels spanned by the qualification. The reader is referred to the Full Edition of the guidelines for the further explanations.

Qualification	HEQF Qualification Level	Min overall credits	The range of levels No of credits at highest level	Max credits at lowest level
POSTGRADUATE				
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
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
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

Qualification	HEQF Qualification Level	Min overall credits	The range of levels No of credits at highest level	Max credits at lowest level
GRADUATE				
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

Table 3

17. Undergraduate and associated qualifications

Table 4 below sets out the recommended minimum credit values for undergraduate and associated qualifications. In each case there is a small allowance of 30 credits at Level 3 which is intended to allow the inclusion of relevant ancillary studies within the validated programme leading to the qualification.

Qualification	HEQF Qualification Level	Min overall credits	The range of levels No of credits at highest level	Max credits at lowest level
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

Table 4

It is recommended that programmes leading to the Honours Degree and the Ordinary Degree reflect planned progression and credit attainment through the levels spanned by the qualification. It is important to note that currently the credit values of the Edexcel qualifications (the **HND** and **HNC**) are highly variable. The HND and HNC qualifications are subject to review by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA].

SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

QAA (2001) *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. Readers seeking a more detailed exposition are recommended to consult the Full Edition of these guidelines. These may be obtained by contacting the SEEC Office, c/o University of East London, Romford Road, London, E15 4LZ. Email: SEECoffice@uel.ac.uk. Full tables of the NICATS level descriptors and guidelines can be obtained from www.nicats.ac.uk/about/work.htm#ld, and details of the SEEC level descriptors are available at www.seec-office.org.uk

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CREDIT AND HE QUALIFICATIONS

Credit guidelines for HE qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Credit helps to make learning flexible, adaptable, valued, accessible, tailor-made, quality driven and market led

Guidelines jointly prepared by

CQFW

Credit and Qualification Framework for Wales Project

NICATS

Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System

NUCCAT

Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer

SEEC

Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer

INTRODUCTION

1. Purpose of these guidelines

The purpose of the Summary Edition of these guidelines is to:

- provide an easily accessible and understood summary of the credit framework used in the majority of higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and to
- provide information on the relative credit values of the principal HE qualifications.

2. The status of these guidelines

The content of this document is **advisory** to institutions offering HE qualifications. Although universities and colleges are not obliged to follow the guidelines, the information has been formulated in consultation with HE institutions that use credit and it is anticipated that the substantial majority will work in harmony with the guidelines. The reader should note that a number of universities in England do not offer or recognise credit.

3. The purpose of the HE Qualifications Frameworks [HEQF]

Over the past four years there has been much interest in creating a national qualifications framework for HE. At the beginning of 2001, the Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] published two qualification frameworks: one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland [EWNI] and a separate framework for Scotland. The purpose of the frameworks is to bring consistency to the nomenclature used for HE qualifications and to clarify the relationships between different qualifications. The qualification frameworks are part of an initiative by the QAA to strengthen the definition and application of standards in HE. The qualification frameworks are to be used in conjunction with programme specifications, subject benchmarks and codes of practice.

4. The invitation to augment the new QF for England, Wales & N Ireland

The Scottish Qualifications Framework defines the qualifications in terms of qualification descriptors and credit requirements. The qualification framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland [EWNI] is based on qualification descriptors which are related to qualification levels. The QAA has identified five HE qualification levels. Each qualification is assigned to one of these qualification levels with the result that there are a number of qualifications at each level. The qualification descriptors are generic in that they apply to every qualification assigned to a particular level. The application of credit provides a tool for clarifying the relationship between qualifications. The key credit bodies in EWNI were invited to prepare a set of guidelines that might assist in this development. This document is the outcome of this work and has been informed by a consultation exercise with the universities and colleges.

5. What are credit bodies?

The credit bodies are regional associations or consortia composed of member institutions, which are mainly universities and colleges. In recent years they have worked together to develop a HE credit framework, promote good practice in the use of credit and offer advice on credit matters to the national agencies.

6. The structure of these guidelines

We start by giving a concise summary account of the HE credit framework. This is followed by a presentation of information on the recommended credit values of HE qualifications.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION CREDIT FRAMEWORK

7. What is academic credit?

Credit is fundamentally a tool for measuring and expressing **learning equivalence**. It plays an important role in rewarding the incremental progress of learners, facilitating student transfer, recognising prior learning and contributing to the definition of academic standards. This document is concerned with credit in this last role. The attribution of credit values to modules and programmes helps to define the standards of qualifications.

8. The evolutionary convergence of credit systems in HE

In the early 1990s there were a number of different credit frameworks in use at universities in the UK. However, over the last six years, through the work of the credit bodies, there has been convergence in respect of the basis upon which credit is awarded, and the credit tariff. In order that the reader should understand the recommended credit values for the HE qualifications, we are setting out a brief introduction and explanation of the HE credit system which is now used by a large majority of HE institutions in EWNI.

9. The basic parameters of the HE credit framework

The fundamental principle behind the HE credit framework is that credit is awarded only for **evidence of learning achievement**. But it is not practicable to make a *direct* quantitative measure of the amount of learning. Instead, use is made of two parameters that *indirectly* reflect the learning achievements. The first parameter is the **number of credits** which represents the amount of learning needed to achieve the learning outcomes. The number of credits is derived from an estimate of the **notional learning time**. This is defined as the total amount of time which, on average, it is expected that a learner will need in order to achieve the learning outcomes. The most widely used credit : learning time ratio in EWNI is 1 credit : 10 hours.

The second parameter is the **credit level**, which is an indicator of the relative academic demand upon the learner in undertaking the study. Successively higher levels reflect increasing demand on the learner in terms of complexity, intellectual rigour and autonomy of learning.

10. Learning outcomes as the basis for the award of credit

Credit is awarded for achieving learning outcomes. A **learning outcome** is a statement of learning achievement expressed in terms of what the student will know, understand or be able to do, on successful completion of the module. Each module has a coherent set of formally identified learning outcomes. In order to earn credit for the module, the learner must normally satisfy the assessment criteria for all [or the majority] of the designated learning outcomes for the module.



The module is the smallest entity for which credit may be awarded. A learner does not gain a proportion of the credit for satisfying a proportion of the learning outcomes. The number of credits awarded for successful completion of the module is the **credit value** of the module.

11. The credit currency and credit value

The *currency* of the credit framework is the credit. The HE credit framework in EWNI uses the **10-hour credit**, which means that each credit awarded equates to 10 notional hours of successful learning. The notional learning time encompasses all time [formal classes, supervised learning and revision] spent by the learner in pursuit of the designated learning outcomes. Emphasis is placed on the term *notional* because it is well known that the actual time which learners need to achieve designated learning outcomes varies considerably.

The credit value defines the nominal size of the module and reflects the estimated notional learning hours. In addition, the credits must be set within the context of the specified credit level. We can specify credit value and credit level of modules, programmes and qualifications.

12. The credit levels and their descriptors

Credit levels are indicators of the **relative demand** expected of a learner. They are related to, but are different from, the qualification levels introduced in the QAA qualification frameworks. The latter indicate the **principal outcomes** that the student should be able to demonstrate following the completion of awards at the designated level. The credit levels belong to a series of levels based upon progression.

The unified series of levels for post-16 learning is based on several different aspects including autonomy, breadth, complexity, depth and predictability. The level relates to what the learner actually does in terms of thinking, action and results. Each credit level has a descriptor that indicates the characteristics of the learning at that level. These are presented in an abbreviated form in **Table 1** below.

In undertaking studies at this credit level, students:

LEVEL 8	Make a significant and original contribution to a specialised field of enquiry demonstrating a command of methodological issues and engaging in critical dialogue with peers.
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.
LEVEL 6	Critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge. 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.
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.
LEVEL 4	Develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base. Employ a range of specialised skills and evaluate information using it to plan and develop investigative strategies. Determine solutions to unpredictable problems.
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 wide choice of procedures in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.
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.
LEVEL 1	Employ a narrow range of applied knowledge, skills and basic comprehension within a limited range of predictable and structured contexts.
ENTRY	Employ recall and demonstrate elementary comprehension in a narrow range of areas.

Table 1

See Table 2 for the relationship between this unified series and the commonly used FE/HE levels. The unabbreviated summary descriptors are presented in the Full Edition of these guidelines.

13. Credit, levels and defining academic standards

Since credit is a measure of learning equivalence, credits play an important role in defining academic standards. However, credits and levels need to be complemented by other information contained in the programme specifications of the qualification.