Review of credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education

Manuel Souto-Otero, University of Bath
Opening endorsements

South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC)¹

This report is a timely reminder of the potential importance of credit transfer at a time of increasing flexibility in learners’ study patterns and the globalisation of the market for HE provision. It also serves to remind us of the work that remains to be undertaken to establish effective routes for progression for non-traditional entrants into higher education and for greater clarity about the associated processes and procedures. The sector has made significant progress over the past 20 years in defining curricula in credit terms but this has been largely for the benefit of institutions themselves and for intra-institutional transfer arrangements (joint honours programmes, module sharing across departments and articulated progression from recognised partners for example) rather than for the benefit of learners. Credit aids work-based learning, part-time study, recognition of prior learning, and European and international student mobility but such activities remain outside the mainstream of much institutional thinking and practice.

Dr Mark Atlay (Chair)

Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (NUCCAT)²

This report, Review of credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education, could not have been published at a better time. The introduction by the QAA of the revised Quality Code places squarely before us a clear National Qualification Framework and reminds us of the fact that credit level is a primary way in which we conceive of our awards. The 1990s dream of the mobile, transient, learner that sat the heart of credit accumulation and transfer may now finally be coming true but on an international scale. Erasmus has seen comparatively small numbers of students undertaking study on the continent, but the increasing challenge of fees in the UK may see this develop. As the European Higher Education Area widens its reach, UK nations (following the Scottish lead) might need to brush the dust from those old European Credit Transfer System conversion tables. Finally as more and more HEIs look to ‘transnational education’ as a strategic way forward, the phrase “framework to framework” is heard in ever more meetings between business developers and quality assurance/registry staff. This is a very timely and useful report that deserves a wide circulation.

Dr Leopold Green (Chair)

UK Credit Forum³

While short surveys are limited in their ambition by the brevity of their research this report provides a comprehensive overview of institutional, regional, national and international policy and practice. The themes and discussions in this area have shifted little in 20 years, save for a gradual and pervasive embedding of Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) within the UK higher education system. CATS enables mobility and articulation, facilitating a rich and rewarding engagement between students and their learning. Mobility and articulation are twin themes underpinning both the Higher Education Achievement Report and the increasingly flexible and interactive media through which students and graduates access and share material. The principles underpinning CATS have never been more relevant and this report provides a useful map of CATS policy and practice in this diverse and challenging landscape.

Dr Wayne Turnbull (Chair)

¹ SEEC aims to advance education for the public benefit by developing credit accumulation and transfer and promoting lifelong learning at the higher education level. See www.seec.org.uk.

² The Northern Universities Consortium (NUCCAT) is drawn from higher education institutions across northern and central England and Northern Ireland and provides a forum for higher education practitioners with an interest in the design, implementation and regulation of credit-based curriculum and its implications for the student experience and progression, reflecting the changing dynamics of the sector. See http://www.nuc.ac.uk/.

³ The UK Credit Forum aims to share information about contemporary and immediate developments in credit and qualification frameworks and related matters for the whole of the country, and how it relates to European and international perspectives. It also offers comments and advice on UK and European proposals that are put out to consultation by governments, departments, funding bodies, and other significant players in the academic credit field. The credit forum offers an opportunity to its members to hold in-depth discussions of credit issues, which enables participants to take information about developments back to the organisations that they represent. See: http://www.seec.org.uk/academic-credit/uk-credit-forum
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Acknowledgements

Elsa Lee provided excellent research assistance for this project. Alison Le Cornu, from the Higher Education Academy, provided direction to the project; the research team is grateful for the very valuable inputs provided to this report. The author would also like to thank individual experts and case study institutions for their extremely useful inputs to this project. All remaining errors are the authors'. 
Executive summary

Introduction

In September 2012 the University of Bath was commissioned by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to undertake a project to ‘Review credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education’. The project set out to review the current situation in relation to credit transfer in the UK countries, within its European context, providing an overview of policy and practice. The research questions addressed by the study were:

- What is the current situation regarding the implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in the UK?
- Have commitments to the implementation of the Bologna Process been made and realised?
- What differences exist between the UK nations in policy and practice in credit accumulation and transfer?

The report is linked to the on-going work of the HEA on ‘flexible learning’ (regarding the pace, place and mode of delivery). This is a developing theme in the context of discussions around lifelong learning, as well as increasing and widening participation in post-secondary education. Flexible learning is seen as particularly relevant in the context of the recent increases in higher education tuition fees, as it can allow students to combine work and study to fund the cost of their studies. It also facilitates mobility.

Moreover, stakeholders other than individuals are expected to benefit from credits. Employers often report a lack of interest in sponsoring full qualifications for their employees. Through the use of credits, they may obtain clearer information on the learning already achieved by potential employees. Such arguments must of course be balanced against the challenges faced by the use of credits, such as those related to atomisation and incoherence.

The project was based on the analysis of data from scoping interviews with key informants (government officials in different UK administrations and experts) and a set of case studies. The review of secondary data included an analysis of selected UK higher education institutions’ websites on Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT), a review of extant literature in this area and a review of available surveys on CAT take-up and usage.

Findings

The European context

The European context, such as the Bologna process, and the establishment of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which currently has at least 30 million students and more than 6,000 higher education institutions, increasingly affects higher education institutions in the UK.

At European level, an overarching EHEA framework has been established, which is linked to the Bologna objective of standardising a three-cycle structure (BA/MA/doctoral cycle) for European higher education systems. This recognises that credits on their own say nothing about the content, its relevance to other courses, or the standard the student has achieved. Thus, attention has been given to the development of associated instruments, such as a framework of levels, which describe the level of the credits achieved. The UK countries all have national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) which are at an advanced stage of implementation regarding Bologna requirements: qualifications have been included in the NQFs, and UK countries have self-certified the NQF compatibility with the Qualifications Framework for the Higher Education Area. Only ten out of 47 European countries included in the report were in this situation in 2011.

The UK nations have also achieved a high degree of implementation of the European Credit Transfer System. Credits are allocated to all components of all HE programmes, enabling credit transfer and accumulation, and are linked with learning outcomes. However, the use of ECTS for credit transfer and accumulation varies by country, being higher in Scotland than in other UK nations. Moreover, the alignment of programmes to the expected ECTS value for the relevant cycle also reveals significant variation across UK countries. England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNi) are among the worst performing European countries in terms of matching their programmes to ECTS credit ranges per cycle. Whereas less than 5% of first-cycle programmes are outside the 180-240 ECTS credit range for first-cycle programmes in Scotland, the equivalent figure is 40% in EWNi – the worst performance in Europe. More generally, ECTS does not benefit from the fact that countries calculate credits following very different approaches (through contact hours, workload excluding learning outcomes, learning outcomes excluding workload or both learning outcomes and workload). This makes their meaning vary substantially by country, and reduces ECTS’s value as a potential instrument to be used in the context of the recognition of professional qualifications.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is facilitated by the use of credits. RPL can be used to provide access to higher education for students who do not hold the required formal qualifications, reduce the length of higher education studies, or award a full qualification. Credit systems facilitate in particular the second and third tasks. In the UK, however, and in contrast to the situation in
other European countries (France, Denmark, Iceland and part of Belgium) it is not generally possible to obtain full higher education qualifications on the basis of the recognition of prior learning. Moreover, while national guidelines are provided by the QAA, higher education institutions are free to regulate their prior learning recognition systems. There is no individual right to recognition of prior learning, like that in France, Finland and the Netherlands, among other countries, also have more developed systems for the recognition of prior learning than UK countries.

**UK policy and practice**

The report shows that credit frameworks in the different UK countries are aligned, as they are based on the achievement of learning outcomes and a notional ten hours of learning per credit. They are also aligned with national qualifications frameworks and the European framework for higher education. However, while policy frameworks and systems are in place, this does not mean that policy commitment is always guaranteed. While ‘credits’ are often mentioned in policy documents there is little evidence that credit concepts have visibly trickled down operational levels of government practice.

Over 90% of UK higher education institutions recognise and award credits, most in line with the credit and qualification frameworks in their countries. Around 5% do not operate credit arrangements. However, information and guidance, the first step towards an effective credit accumulation and transfer system, requires improvement. Information is often presented in a technical non-user-friendly way, not sufficiently informative and/or difficult to find. In addition, little evidence was found of active marketing of APEL by the institutions.

While national guidance on the recognition of prior learning exists in the UK on the ground, the application of APL varies and it can be said there is little practice on which to base generalised patterns of activity in the UK. Variation refers to aspects such as the volume of credit that can be claimed on admission to a programme, time limitations for credit claiming, methods of assessment and costs. Regarding the recognition of work-based learning, a large majority of institutions award credits for work-based learning and placements, but only around half for sandwich years and in-service courses in organisations.

There is also much sectoral diversity in terms of condonement, compensation, and discounting of module performances, which has implications for possible variations in the application of academic standards across the sector in the UK. The most common total amount of condonement or compensation permitted is 60 credits (just under 20% of the honours programme), but figures vary significantly.

A final issue explored in the report is articulation, which refers to the existence of linkages between qualifications in different sectors, often with a guarantee of credit transfer. In the case of the UK, this most readily occurs between further education and higher education. However, while in some European countries students can gain full credit for their previous short-cycle studies if they embark on a bachelor programme in the same field, in the UK the situation is more complex as there are several options. Recently Scotland has started to look in detail at the issue of advanced entry from school. Given schools, colleges and universities offer provision at Level 7, enhancing synergies between these providers can result in efficiency savings but developments in this area are still limited.

**The challenges ahead**

The report explored in detail European and UK policy and practice regarding credit transfer and accumulation systems. Great expectations have been placed on CATS (Credit Accumulation and Transfer Schemes) at the policy level. Yet, these have tended to produce lower impact than policy makers expected. Approaches to qualifications and credit frameworks and practice in the UK have, moreover, remained on the whole fragmented compared with the best examples from other countries, in spite of the UK being one of the pioneers of such instruments. This raises fundamental questions for the future regarding the extent to which expectations need to be recalibrated or further action is required that can lead to better and more widely functioning systems – or a combination of both. There is certainly a need to be more critical about the potential benefits of CATS and move from long to short lists to prioritise those areas where an impact can occur.

In practice, the links between CATS, widening participation and increased flexibility of learning are not obvious. Learners themselves have not yet practiced significant demand. Indeed, in most courses the number of applications for credit transfer is low. Institutional strategies for widening participation are not often explicitly tied to CATS regulations. CATS systems do not automatically promote transfer and progression, because they do not stimulate the demand for these nor make institutions more open to non-traditional learners per se. More generally, it has been argued that there is a tension in the policy expectation that all institutions should embrace credit transfer equally when there is also a growing expectation for institutional diversity. In this context some institutions simply do not see the added value of credit schemes. Financial savings for the public purse are also more limited than often assumed, which may partly explain the lack of actual political commitment to credit system beyond exhortation.

Those involved in the credit schemes and frameworks continue to face challenges assigning credit and guided learning hours. Differences in curriculum and qualification design are among the obstacles for credit transfer. If the differences are too important, identifying equivalence becomes time-consuming and hence costly for higher education institutions. Economies of scale are not
achieved, given low numbers of applications. There is also a high level of bureaucracy involved and a lack of motivation for cooperation among providers and/or awarding bodies. Data on key CATS aspects can be scarce at institutional and national level, which hampers decision making.

Finally, cultural and structural issues and trust play their role. Compared with other countries such as the US, the UK has a weak, albeit growing tradition of FE colleges providing the first part of degree courses and universities expecting to admit significant proportions of their students from these colleges, and there are concerns that this would provide a less rigorous process than other forms of learning. Greater incentives would also be required in relation to higher education institutions making use of credit systems and associated mechanisms to enhance flexibility, which are often costly and highly customised. The potential benefits at the institutional level are not sufficient to move credit forward widely without external changes and pressure.

Cultural and social issues at the individual level are also relevant. Most school leavers would rather progress to higher education with their peer group than follow a non-traditional route. Yet, it is also true that widespread transfer takes place even without formal CAT schemes in the UK. Thousands of students who enter higher education institutions do so having been at a different institution in one of the preceding two years. It is believed that most of these students received no credit for their previous studies though many of them would have benefited from the existence of CATS. Clearly the aspiration that CATS may provide a guarantee that students can automatically transfer between participating institutions has not materialised. In fact, it is still also a mirage even where CATS are currently well established, like in the US but opportunities are there to enhance CATS usage. Demand for CATS is also high when there is a need for qualified staff by employers – for instance in sectors such as education and health.

In areas other than transfer, such as the recognition of prior learning, the contribution of CATS has been strong in some countries – also noting potential for future improvement in the UK. Similarly, the North American experience suggests that CATS can help widen participation at least for some groups. It should also be noted that CATS can’t make it on their own. While flexible credit arrangements may be useful to widen participation to non-traditional groups, complementary measures to flexibility, linked to financial aspects, learner support or motivation are likely to be required too.

The establishment of more ambitious and uniform systems, such as the French VAE, including the notion of individual entitlements, could also be beneficial given the diversity in practice in the sector is challenging for users and leads to lack of transparency. Reducing barriers for credit transfer for individuals may also entail: issuing institutional policy statements on recognising diverse learning pathways, setting out clearly and in a user-friendly way where information can be found (on the acceptance of vocational and access qualifications and availability of accreditation of prior learning, the subject areas that accept these, note of foundation year and bridging course availability, clarification of credit transfer arrangements, etc), explanation of availability of financial help for assessment costs and availability of advice and assistance for applicants and in particular for applicants with disabilities.

Finally, the report suggests it is increasingly necessary for higher education institutions to work internationally in these areas. Different approaches to implementation, in areas such as the application of the ECTS, detract from the currency and value of the instruments being used.
1. Introduction

This report presents the results of the small-scale research project ‘Review of credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education’, undertaken between September 2012 and January 2013 by the University of Bath (UoB) for the HEA. In this project credit is understood as a means to attach relative values to different components of a course. Degrees are normally acquired after the completion of a certain number of credits. As Bekhradnia (2004:6) argues:

“Whether or not a formal credit system is in operation, if one part of a course takes up more of a term than another, and has more importance attached to it in the examination, then effectively it has more credit assigned to it. A formal credit system which assigns credits to course components systematises this process and makes it transparent.”

Bekhradnia thus notes that whereas modularisation offers a curricular device – based on the division of the curriculum into logical and distinct components - credits are a means of attaching relative values to a course’s different components. Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) rely on prior learning experiences, formal or experiential.

The report is linked to the ongoing work of the HEA on ‘Flexible Learning’, which is an increasingly important theme. This is because flexibility is expected to help develop lifelong learning, improve and widen post-secondary participation rates, eliminate unnecessary student tuition and educational costs and reduce post-secondary non-completion rates (Junor and Asher, 2008). Flexible learning is particularly relevant in the context of the recent increases in higher education tuition fees, as it can allow students to combine work and study to fund the cost of their studies. Collis and Moonen (2001; 2002) define flexible learning as a movement away from a situation in which key decisions about learning are made in advance by instructors and institutions, towards a situation where the learner has a range of options from which to choose in relation to his/her own learning. Flexibility can relate to a wide range of elements, including time (completion and assessment), content, entry requirements, instructional approaches, delivery and logistics of a course (Collis, 1998).

For the HEA flexible learning relates to enabling choice and responsiveness in the pace, place and mode of learning. The use of credit frameworks is often related to choice in the pace of learning (Tallantyre, 2012). Indeed, credit accumulation systems enable students to have their learning recognised after the completion of a module or through the recognition of prior learning, take a break, and return subsequently to achieve more credits that can be linked to a qualification. Credit transfer can additionally enable students to move from one course to another without having to repeat or ‘duplicate’ previous learning (they provide flexible routes between qualifications); credit systems can also facilitate the recognition of prior learning to accelerate the completion of a course (thus widening participation and promoting lifelong learning). At a formal level, and related to pace of learning aspects, ‘credits’ taken per year may be one of the elements used in the definition of ‘part-time’ students – for instance in Scotland.

However, credit transfer systems can also be considered fundamental to other elements of flexibility. For example, the transfer of credits is closely related to flexibility of place of learning, enabling learners to move between institutions within and across countries. Regarding mode of learning, credit transfer enables students to make use of different modes of learning, for instance enabling transfer to and from the Open University – one of the pioneer institutions regarding the use of credit accumulation and transfer in the UK (Bridges, 2010a) - or other distance learning institutions in the UK or abroad, as required by students’ individual circumstances. Figure 1.1 summarises the main relationships between flexibility and credit systems.

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It should be noted that credits can benefit individuals beyond their participation in the education system. They can also be important for employment abroad (GHK, 2011a). In 2005 the European Directive 2005/36/EC on professional qualifications for some professions, classified professional qualifications according to five levels. The directive confers rights and obligations on both the
relevant national authority and the migrant. However, many national authorities responsible for the recognition of professions in Europe are still unsure/do not know whether the notions of credits and student workload provide useful evidence for the recognition of professional qualifications (GHK, 2011a).

Finally, it should be noted that not only are individuals expected to benefit, but also other stakeholders. Employers, notably, have demanded flexibility in the organisation and delivery of education and training and better credit systems in order to better link with educational institutions - as suggested in the evaluation of the credit and qualifications framework for Wales (Miller Research, 2008) - and often observe that funding arrangements and qualification systems are the main external barriers for educational institutions to achieve greater responsiveness. Employers’ complaints in this last respect often refer to institutions’ lack of interest in full qualifications for workforce development (McCoshan and Souto-Otero, 2003). Moreover, through the use of credits, employers may obtain clearer information regarding the learning already achieved by potential employees, especially those without standard full qualifications, and compare the achievements and plan future training for potential and existing employees (QAA and LSC, 2004).

For higher education institutions, an impetus for credit transfer may relate to marketing strategies and approaches to attract learners. This is achieved through the offering of exemption from programmes, the facilitation of the design of bridging programmes that are short and enable enrolment in a later phase of the programme, and the articulation of qualifications and curricula between vocational education and training (VET) and HE (GHK, 2010). They can also provide points of reference for quality assurance and funding distribution and transparency for stakeholders.

Critics of credit systems, on the other hand, have argued that qualifications cannot be seen to be made of blocks of knowledge that can be interchangeable because curricula are designed to be integrated programmes: credits are parts of an integrated whole. Moreover, the requirement that each unit must be able to be assessed in its own right can introduce unnecessary cost and assessment burden and, if learners have to demonstrate that they have achieved every learning outcome to be awarded in a unit and in a qualification, it can be difficult to devise suitable grading methodologies (Ofqual, 2011). The challenges highlighted also relate to atomisation and incoherence (see for instance Lester, 2011). This is particularly the case when credit systems do not incorporate direct appraisals of the overall level of a qualification and the level is assumed from the rules for combining units and when units are relatively small.4 For Andreshak-Behrman and Storan (2004) credits (or unitisation or modularisation, for that matter) cannot be expected to guide and advise students towards a sensible accumulation that results in a coherent course and leads to a qualification (credit encourages ‘pick and mix’ programmes, which have little academic coherence). Credit schemes have also been criticised on the basis that they are not necessary in institutions where most students are full-time as they are aimed primarily at part-time students needing ladders and bridges; there is inconsistency in understanding and practice; compensation and condonement are often treated differently (see below in this report); a mismatch of the credit size of modules can cause problems; problems of articulation between credit systems can descend into vacuous debates about numbers; and the use of credit in programmes allows students to choose easy/easier options (Burgess, 2004). Thus, some have formulated questions around what good ‘a few credits here and there’ could be to a learner. The Scottish Funding Council (2011) has argued, based on the US experience, that first those credits may provide an understanding of what does or does not interest learners; the ability to see what they can achieve and what they have achieved; skills and knowledge based on achieving learning outcomes (which may be used in future studies if duly accredited); and a foundation to build on.

On the whole, credit transfer and accumulation systems are seen as central aspects of flexible learning. However, they are also often perceived as technical and opaque systems. The purpose of this report is to help address this situation through a review of the current situation in relation to credit transfer in the UK countries, within its European context, providing an overview of policy and practice.

The remainder of the report is organised as follows: section two outlines the study objectives, research questions and methodology; sections three and four present the study findings, in the European context and the UK situation respectively. Finally, section five presents conclusions and recommendations.

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4 The most common standard size of modules in EWNI is 20 credits.
2. Study objectives, research questions and methodology

This study aimed to produce a review of current policy and practice in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the four nations of the UK in relation to credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), providing also information on accreditation of prior certified learning (APCL) and accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL) systems. The research questions addressed by the study were:

- what is the current situation regarding the implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in the UK?
- have commitments to the implementation of the Bologna Process been made and realised?
- what differences exist between the UK nations in policy and practice in credit accumulation and transfer?

The project focused on undergraduate level courses. It does not attempt to describe in detail credit accumulation and transfer systems in the UK (for recent comprehensive reviews see QAA 2008a; Atlay et al., 2012; Bridges and Flinn, 2010; Johnson, 2004), but focuses on their context and degree of progress compared with other European countries, interaction with European credit systems, usage and relationship with flexible learning. The data collection approach employed for this study is outlined in Figure 2.1. The project is based on the analysis of both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through a series of scoping interviews with key informants (government officials in different UK administrations and experts) and a set of case studies, selected to reflect the diversity of the HE sector in the UK and identified through the literature review or through referrals as examples of good practice in some aspect related to the implementation of CAT. The case studies undertaken for this piece of research typically comprised desk research and one/two interviews with staff and students in the relevant institution. The review of secondary data included an analysis of a selection of selected UK HEI websites on CAT, a review of extant literature in this area and a review of available surveys on CAT take-up and usage.

Figure 2.1: Data collection approaches’

Primary data
- Scoping interviews
- Case studies

Secondary data
- Literature review
- Review of HEI websites
- Review of HEI surveys

Source: Author.
3. The European context

This section addresses questions one and two of this research project on the degree to which the UK has met the commitments made regarding the Bologna process – which currently includes 47 European countries - and use of credits, and mapping the current situation on the implementation of the ECTS in the UK. The Bologna process is linked to the development of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which currently has at least 30 million students and more than 6,000 higher education institutions. Although the Bologna process has affected the UK less than some countries, given the starting situation of the UK HE system in 1999 (Westerheijden et al., 2010) UK higher education institutions are highly supportive of the process. When asked if the Bologna Process reforms and EU initiatives had improved the situation regarding the recognition of UK degrees in Europe, in a recent survey for the UK International Unit 100% of UK institutions reported that the situation had improved (55%) or been maintained (45%); a growing number of institutions now have European strategies: 53% compared with 40% in 2009 and 41% in 2007 (International Unit, 2012a). One of the key EU goals in education and training is to facilitate the access of all (Souto-Otero, 2007). The Bologna Declaration of 1999 launched a series of reforms in European higher education systems with the aim of making these more comparable, competitive and attractive to researchers and students. Its overarching objectives were initially linked to the introduction of a three-cycle structure (Bachelor/Masters/doctorate), quality assurance, and recognition of qualifications and periods of study. Every second year the Ministers responsible for higher education in Bologna countries meet to measure progress and review priorities for action (Westerheijden et al., 2010). This section focuses on three of the main Bologna tools identified in the 2012 progress report on the Bologna process (Eurydice, 2012:31): national qualifications frameworks, ECTS and the recognition of prior learning. It should be noted that the European Union in this context has recently begun to study the use of credit systems in higher education co-operation beyond European countries, most notably between the EU and US (GHK, 2011b).

3.1. National qualifications frameworks

National qualifications frameworks facilitate the use of credit transfer and accumulation systems. Berkhradnia (2004) notes that credits, on their own, say nothing about the content, its relevance to other courses a student may wish to pursue, or the standard the student has achieved. By itself, the adoption of a common credit scheme will do nothing much to increase the likelihood of student transfer. For this reason, attention has been given to the development of other associated instruments, such as a framework of levels and level descriptors, which describe the level of the credits achieved. Higher education institutions that operate CATS specify the percentage of credit at each level that is required for each qualification – and often degrees combine credits at a number of different levels. Credit transfer systems also benefit from a description of learning outcomes, which pre-specify what students learn in each module, although this is a challenging area as learning outcome descriptions are often insufficient to assess a student’s suitability for entry. Finally, associated with learning outcomes is the idea of a recognised transcript, which enables students to describe in detail what they have achieved (which within the Bologna process is associated to the so-called Diploma Supplement).

At European level, the development of such a credit system has taken place progressively since the early 2000s. Following the 2003 Berlin Communiqué, which encouraged Member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, the Bergen Ministerial meeting of May 2005 (Bergen Communiqué, 2005) adopted the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA. It stated:

We adopt the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. We commit ourselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010, and to having started work on this by 2007. (Bergen Communiqué, 2005:2).

The London Communiqué of 2007 (London Communiqué, 2007:3) qualifications frameworks were explicitly defined as instruments in achieving comparability and transparency, and as facilitators of the development of ‘modules and study programmes based on learning outcomes and credits as well as all forms of prior learning’.

An overarching EHEA framework has thus been developed, which is linked to the Bologna objective of standardising a three-cycle structure (BA/MA/doctoral cycle) for European Higher Education systems. The EHEA framework is open to ‘including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications’ (Bergen Communiqué, 2005), which in the first cycle are especially seen as means for widening access (Westerheijden et al., 2010; Rauhvargers et al., 2009). The EHEA overarching framework uses the Dublin descriptors, which offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with higher education short-cycle (within the first cycle); first cycle, second cycle and third cycle qualifications. As reviewed in more detail in section four, frameworks for higher education qualifications and a framework in the UK countries have been developed (cf. also Universities UK, 2011; QAA, 2008a; QAA, 2006; QAA, 2001).
Their comparability with the framework for qualifications of the EHEA has been studied by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2006; QAA, 2008b). The result of these exercises is provided in Table 3.1. Scotland successfully self-certified the national Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland as compatible with the FQ-EHEA in October 2006. A revised version of the national Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ-EWNI) was published in August 2008. The revised version includes the qualification descriptors of the FQ-EHEA, known as the Dublin Descriptors, as an additional reference point and indicates the relationship between the levels of the FHEQ and the cycles of the FQ-EHEA. The FHEQ-EWNI was self-certified as compatible with the FQ-EHEA in February 2009 (Europe Unit 2009). As shown in the table, frameworks in EWNI and Scotland are based on different numbers of levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical higher education qualifications within each level</th>
<th>FHEQ EWNI level</th>
<th>FQHEIS/SCQF level</th>
<th>Corresponding FQ-EHEA cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral degrees</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Third cycle (end of cycle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters degrees (including integrated Masters degrees)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Second cycle (end of cycle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate diplomas</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Intermediate qualifications within the second cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate certificates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degrees with honour</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>First cycle (end of cycle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degrees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate qualifications within the first cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate diplomas</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate certificates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation degrees</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma of higher education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate diplomas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher National Diplomas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher National Certificates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificates of Higher Education</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Intermediate qualifications within the short cycle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: QAA et al., (2011)

The UK countries thus all have national qualifications frameworks that the Bologna implementation report ranks as being in the most advanced stage of implementation. This means that qualifications have been included in the national qualifications framework, and that the framework has self-certified its compatibility with the Qualifications Framework for the Higher Education Area (Eurydice, 2012). Only ten out of the 47 countries included in the report were in this situation – most countries were either in consultation for the design of the qualifications framework, or have just adopted the national qualifications framework in legislation or other high level policy fora.

It should be noted that, by contrast, while 26 out of the 47 Bologna countries obtained a ‘dark green’ rating (maximum score) for the implementation of the first and second cycle structure in 2010-11 (meaning that at least 90% of students are enrolled), the UK (for which Eurostat only offers aggregate data) obtains only a ‘light green’ rating (second score) alongside another 12 countries. This shows that only 70-89% of students are enrolled in a two-cycle degree system that is in accordance with the Bologna principles. The UK thus ranked 22nd out of the 34 countries for which data is available in terms of compliance with the Bologna requirements for two-cycle structures (Eurydice, 2012:33) – see also section 3.2 on credit transfer. This is a lagging behind, compared to other countries, in relation to this aspect.
The EHEA has been complemented by the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), launched in 2008. The EQF is based on eight levels defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. This aims to act as a translation mechanism to make national qualifications more readable across Europe (as shown in Figure 3.1), thus promoting educational and labour market mobility, which are key themes for the EU (Souto-Otero, 2011). It was expected that all new qualifications issued from 2012 would carry a reference to an appropriate EQF level, although delays have occurred in a number of countries.

Figure 3.1: The EQF model of linking national qualifications frameworks

Source: Author.

The links between credit systems and qualifications frameworks and their different levels of integration have been recently studied in detail (GHK, 2010). Such links appear strong in the UK countries, as qualification frameworks and credit systems are integrated to create a common approach to design and award of qualifications (cf. GHK, 2010:156). The EQF is currently being evaluated. Results will be available in early 2013, and will shed further light on the links between the EQF and credit transfer systems in practice.

3.2. European credit transfer system

The European credit transfer system (ECTS), established in 1989 as a pilot scheme within the Erasmus programme to facilitate the recognition of study periods undertaken abroad by mobile students (European Commission, 2009), has become a central tool in the Bologna process. ECTS was initially conceived as an instrument for credit transfer but as an increasing number of countries have adopted it, it has evolved as a European-wide credit accumulation and transfer system. The recent Bucharest Communiqué (EHEA, 2012) stressed the need to strive for coherence across countries in the use of ECTS. Their process of implementation has been complicated because of the lack of levels in ECTS and their imprecise nature – as discussed below. Nevertheless, as Junor and Usher (2008) point out, one benefit of the ECTS has been to encourage individual countries to consider their own internal transfer arrangements. In some cases, Erasmus and the use of ECTS made transferring between institutions in two different countries easier than transferring between two institutions within the same country.

ECTS does not benefit from the fact that countries calculate credits following very different approaches. For example, some countries calculate credits on the basis of contact hours, others include workload but exclude learning outcomes, others include

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5 The project ‘Tuning Education Structures in Europe’, as part of its approach to understanding curricula and making them comparable and compatible, reviewed the role of ECTS as an accumulation system and focused in particular on understanding the comparative student workload required to achieve the intended learning outcomes (Europe Unit, 2009).
learning outcomes but exclude workload and yet others include both, workload and learning outcomes (Westerheijden et al., 2010). This is a problem, as it makes the actual meaning of ECTS vary substantially by country, and reduces its value, for instance, as a potential instrument to be used in the context of the recognition of professional qualifications in Europe.

The typical ECTS range specified for short-cycle qualifications in HE in Europe is 120 credits, for first cycle qualifications 180-240 and for second cycle qualifications 90-120 credits. There is no typical range for doctoral studies. The ECTS system permits the allocation of credits for each component of the qualification. Credits can be accumulated and transferred across institutions; programmes and learning outcomes obtained outside formal education can result in credit recognition through validation (European Commission, 2009).

ECTS credit is always attributed a level at which it is awarded. Only credits awarded at the appropriate level can be accumulated towards a qualification, as stipulated in the national or institutional progression rules (ECTS users’ guide, European Commission, 2009:16). This does not exclude the possibility that a specific credit from the first cycle can sometimes be accumulated towards a second cycle qualification (eg students can have the option to choose an additional foreign language as part of their Masters degree studies and this could be a beginners course normally part of a first cycle degree) (GHK, 2010). Some limits in this respect are in place. A minimum of 60 credits at the level of the second cycle are stipulated for a qualification to be classed as second-cycle.

Some higher education institutions within the Bologna area have developed ‘ECTS information packages’, which are similar to US universities’ catalogues, providing information on the institution, the organisation and structure of programmes and courses, the content, prerequisites, mode of assessment, time unit, type of course, teaching and learning methods employed and ECTS credits allocated by the department offering the course programme.

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Figure 3.2: University of Agder ECTS catalogue

Source: University of Agder, Norway.

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According to the Bologna implementation report, the UK nations have achieved a high degree of implementation of the ECTS, with credits being allocated to all components of all HE programmes, enabling credit transfer and accumulation and being linked with learning outcomes (Souto-Otero, 2012). Just under half of Bologna countries are in an equivalent situation, as shown in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3: Stage of implementation of ECTS system, 2010-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scorecard categories</th>
<th>2012 Report</th>
<th>2009 Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECTS credits are allocated to all components of all HE programmes, enabling credit transfer and accumulation</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECTS credits are allocated to all components of more than 75% of HE programmes, enabling credit transfer and accumulation AND ECTS credits are demonstrably linked with learning outcomes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECTS credits are allocated to all components of at least 40% of HE programmes OR a national credit system is used which is not fully compatible with ECTS</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECTS credits are allocated in less than 40% of HE programmes OR ECTS is used in all programmes but only for credit transfer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


National surveys provide a more finely-grained picture. A survey of 70 UK higher education institutions, by the UK International Unit (International Unit, 2012a), suggests increased engagement with the European higher education agenda, and confidence that the UK credit systems and qualifications frameworks are compatible with overarching European systems; in those institutions where the ECTS is not used the main reason is that the credit systems they use are compatible with ECTS. As one institution in the QAA et al (2009:4) survey put it: “We use ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) based on 25 hours per unit credit. We have made this choice because we have collaborations with other European higher education institutions and our partners value the fact that we use the same credit system.” Thus, 61% of respondents to the International Unit survey reported they use the ECTS for the purposes of credit transfer, 26% use it for accumulation, 34% use ECTS for neither transfer nor accumulation; of those that do not use ECTS, 75% record the equivalent number of ECTS credits in their degree transcripts or provide official translation between credits used and ECTS.

The International Unit survey suggests that use of ECTS for credit transfer and accumulation is higher in Scotland than in other UK countries, especially as tools for credit transfer; the situation is more even regarding credit accumulation. The difference between

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7 76% the institutions that responded were in England or Northern Ireland. 10% of institutions were in Wales and 14% were in Scotland.
Scotland, England and Northern Ireland is particularly marked. Whereas over 80% of Scottish institutions reported using ECTS for credit transfer, less than 60% of ENI institutions do. Nevertheless, it should be noted that of the 38% of ENI institutions that do not use ECTS, three quarters record the equivalent number of ECTS credits in their degree transcripts or provide official translations between credits used and ECTS, and over half do not use ECTS because a credit scheme which is compatible with ECTS is already in use. A fifth of those institutions that do not use ECTS, however, quoted a lack of demand from students and other stakeholders as an explanatory factor. In Wales 29% of institutions do not use ECTS for credit transfer or accumulation, and of those half record the equivalent number of ECTS credits in their degree transcripts or provide official translation between credits used and ECTS. The University of Aberystwyth, interviewed for this piece of research, on the other hand, reported that the use of ECTS is a central policy of the university and has helped in the development of a number of articulation agreements with overseas universities. Moreover, all of the Welsh HEIs that do not use the ECTS quote the existence of a credit scheme, which is compatible with ECTS as an explanatory factor. In Scotland only 20% of respondents do not use ECTS for either credit transfer or accumulation, and 100% of those record the equivalent number of ECTS credits in their degree transcripts or provide official translation between credits used and ECTS, and quote the existence of a credit scheme compatible with ECTS as an explanatory factor. This suggests a greater confidence among institutions about the compatibility of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) with overarching European systems.

A second, important, area where significant variations between UK countries exist, is the alignment of programmes to the expected ECTS value for the relevant cycle. This aspect facilitates transparency, accumulation of credits and their transfer — in particular across countries — in practice. Figures 3.5 and 3.6 show the associated ECTS values for first and second cycle programmes in Bologna countries. The figures show, first, wide variation across countries, even though Europe has gone a long way since the 1980s in terms of standardising the number of credits in higher education courses (Junor and Usher, 2008). Second, they reveal wide variation between the situations in Scotland and England, Wales, Northern Ireland (EWNI). Third, they show that England, Wales and Northern Ireland are among the worst performing countries in terms of matching their programmes to ECTS credit ranges per cycle.

The situation for first cycle programmes, presented in Figure 3.5, reveals most programmes in EWNI are 180 ECTS, whereas those in Scotland are most often 240 ECTS. The most important difference, however, is that whereas less than 5% of programmes are outside the 180-240 ECTS credit range in Scotland, the equivalent figure is 40% in EWNI — the highest percentage of the 47 cases presented.

Source: International Unit (2012b; 2012c; 2012d).
Figure 3.5: Share of first cycle programmes having workload 180, 240 or another number of ECTS credits 2010-11


Figure 3.6 presents an overview of the situation for second cycle programmes. At this level, most programmes (80%) in Scotland are 90 credits, the remainder being 60-75 ECTS. In EWNi, on the other hand, only around a quarter of programmes are within the 90-120 credit range. Almost 50% of the programmes are 60-75 credits, and almost 30% have another associated credit range, making these countries, again among the top five least compliant.

Figure 3.6: Share of second cycle programmes having workload 60-75, 90, 120 or another number of ECTS credits 2010-11


The ESBI (2003) survey on ECTS use revealed much lack of awareness among students regarding how ECTS operates and their rights concerning the accumulation process (eg where to appeal if a student disagrees, etc), which is an important factor when reflecting on the degree of flexibility the system actually can develop. Moreover, the survey pointed out that since there are no common credit systems in some countries, the methods of accumulation cannot be understood.

The House of Lords (2012:16) has recently lamented the lack of actual exploitation of the ECTS system and urged: “Government and universities more actively to promote and exploit the actual and potential benefits of the Bologna Process to their students and staff, including the utility of the ECTS and the Diploma Supplement. Both of these instruments have obvious benefits but we regret that while they have been fully adopted in Scotland, this is not the case in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, despite their adoption by the majority of the 47 Bologna countries.”
3.3. Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning can be used, first, to provide access to higher education to students that do not hold the required formal qualifications (i.e., a recognised upper secondary education qualification that provides access to higher education courses), second, to reduce the length of higher education courses or, third, to award a full qualification. Credit systems facilitate, in particular, the second and third tasks.

The UK performs well in terms of the proportion of students who access higher education through a non-regular route. Around 25% of students use such routes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (data for Scotland is not available): a rate only second to that of Sweden out of the 23 countries analysed by Eurydice (2012). A proportion of this access comes from recognition of prior learning. Recognition of prior learning can also be used in the UK to reduce the number of credits needed to be taken, often up to a set limit.

In the UK countries, however, and in contrast to the situation in other European countries (such as France, Denmark, Iceland and Belgium (Flanders)) where credits up to the required level to be awarded a whole degree can be obtained through validation of prior experiential learning (Souto-Otero et al, 2005), it is not generally possible to obtain full higher education qualifications on the bases of the recognition of prior learning (Souto-Otero et al, 2008; Hawley et al, 2010).

**Figure 3.7: Recognition of prior learning in Europe**

![Recognition of prior learning in Europe map](image)

**Scorecard categories**

- Green: There are nationally established procedures, guidelines or policy for assessment and recognition of prior learning as a basis for 1) access to higher education programmes, and 2) allocation of credits towards a qualification and/or exemption from some programme requirements, AND these procedures are demonstrably applied in practice.
- Yellow: There are nationally established procedures, guidelines or policy for assessment and recognition of prior learning as a basis for 1) access to higher education programmes, and 2) allocation of credits towards a qualification and/or exemption from some programme requirements, BUT these procedures are not demonstrably applied in practice.
- Orange: There are nationally established procedures, guidelines or policy EITHER for 1) OR for 2) (see above), AND these procedures are demonstrably applied in practice.
- Red: There are no specific procedures/national guidelines or policy for assessment of prior learning, but procedures for recognition of prior learning are in operation at some higher education institutions or study programmes.
- Red: Implementation of recognition of prior learning is in a pilot phase at some higher education institutions.
- Red: Work at drawing up procedures/national guidelines or policy for recognition of prior learning has started.
- Red: No procedures for recognition of prior learning are in place EITHER at the national OR at the institutional/programme level.

As a comment to the UK high rating it should be noted that while national guidelines are provided by the QAA, higher education institutions are free to regulate their prior learning recognition systems. There is no individual right to recognition of prior learning like that in France.

Based on criteria that also take into consideration take-up levels of recognition of prior learning, Hawley et al (2010) assessed levels of development in systems for the recognition of prior learning in European countries (extending the assessment beyond higher education,) and identified four clusters as shown in Figure 3.8. The UK is in the second group; Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal have developed more comprehensive and widely used systems for the recognition of prior learning.

![Figure 3.8: Level of development of systems for the recognition of prior learning](image)


Countries with a high level of development have established practices for recognition of prior learning encompassing all or most sectors of learning and significant levels of take up. Countries with a medium-high level of development have established systems but relatively low take up, or well-established systems but only in certain sectors without a national framework for recognition. Countries with a medium-low level of development are similar to the medium-high group but with greater sectoral fragmentation and lower take-up levels. Countries with a low level of development are in the process of developing or approving legislation or policy relating to recognition of prior learning, or tools which might support the introduction of a process of recognition such as occupational profiles, as well as countries where very little activity, if any at all, is taking place.

**Case study: the VAE system in France**

In France, and since the approval of the VAE (validation des acquis de l’expérience) in 2002, all State recognised qualifications can be awarded on the basis of recognition of prior learning. The system is highly structured and typically encompasses a six-step procedure based on:

- guidance;
- application validity check;
- portfolio preparation;
- interview;
- deliberation;
- decision.

Costs are charged for support preparing the portfolio and its assessment. Take-up in higher education has been high compared with other European systems.


A special case of recognition of prior learning is the international recognition. In most Bologna countries (30 out of 47 Bologna countries in 2010-11) individual higher education institutions make the final decision based on their own criteria. In 12 countries, mostly Eastern such as Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria or Ukraine, central government has the responsibility for academic recognition of foreign qualifications (Eurydice, 2012). In Cyprus and Greece, decisions on academic recognition are made by the national ENIC/NARIC centre. Portugal and the Czech Republic have other institutional arrangements for the academic recognition of foreign qualifications.

Having reviewed the situation regarding the qualifications frameworks, the use of ECTS and recognition of prior learning from a European perspective, the next section turns to the situation regarding question three for this research study, related to UK policy and practice on credit transfer and accumulation.
4. UK policy and practice

This section reviews UK policy and practice on credit accumulation and transfer. It starts with a review of the credit and qualifications frameworks developed over the last decade or so, before moving on to the credit practice in UK higher education institutions. The section on practice focuses on the aspects of provision of information, recognition of prior learning, articulation and advanced entry, recognition of work-based learning, condonement and compensation, and the main challenges regarding the use of credit systems.

4.1. Credit and qualification frameworks

There is a long history of credit accumulation and transfer in the UK, going back to the CNAA, the establishment of the Open University, and before that to the Robbins Committee (Bekhradnia, 2004). Credit was first used in the UK when the Open University was created in 1969 (Bridges, 2010a). But it was not until the 1990s, following the recognition that the lack of national frameworks presents potential barriers for students to obtain credit recognition across institutions, that a Common Framework for Learning was published (Reynolds et al, 1998).

A credit framework includes a standard nomenclature of awards, agreed and common credit points at relevant levels, and the inclusion of additional and recognised ‘stopping-off’ points. A review of the credit use in England and Wales in the late 1990s suggested the essential problem was the lack of a credit framework that enabled courses to be deemed equivalent for the purposes of satisfying credential requirements (Faris, 1999). In 2004 the Schwartz Report on Fair Admissions (DfES, 2004) concluded that the lack of a national credit transfer system in England was a problem causing major barriers to students wishing to transfer between institutions and sometimes even between courses within the same institution. Johnson (2004), drawing on the results of a survey of 100 institutions in EUWNI, noted significant variations in credit practice in HEIs in EUWNI particularly regarding the use and re-use of credits, and condonement and compensation (see below): inconsistencies that he argued were to the detriment of students (see also Stowell (2004), who explicates how variations regarding policies in this area may have a direct impact on the degree classification of individual students). Thus, Johnson referred to the need to reach a formal agreement on a national HE credit system.

According to QAA and LSC (2004) a credit framework can:

- provide clarity in an increasingly diverse landscape of qualifications;
- acknowledge and codify the diversity of higher education and professional development qualifications;
- provide a ‘route map’ showing progression pathways to enable students to more easily navigate the maze of qualifications;
- enable ‘bite-size chunks’ of meaningful accredited learning which can build confidence and encourage students into further learning;
- enable students to transfer more easily between and within institutions;
- provide a basis upon which the sector can assure itself about standards;
- enable institutional management to codify and ‘tidy up’ existing practice which, in turn, can bring other benefits;
- provide a common language supporting curriculum development within and between HEIs;
- encourage and facilitate partnerships between institutions.

Thus, it is not surprising that when credit frameworks were under preparation the hope was that when they were fully established, they would provide flexibility and choice for learners and employers, making it easier for people to plan their learning (QAA and LSC, 2004).

Eventually, a Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework was launched in 2001 and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales in 2003 (Atlay et al., 2012), following work by the Credit Common Accord Working Group to agree terminology, principles and quality assurance procedures. The ‘Common Framework’ report also provided the bases, together with the work of the Credit Issues Development Group (QAA, 2008c), the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group, so-called ‘Burgess Group’ (Burgess, 2006), and work by regional credit consortia such as SEEQ and NUCCAT for the 2008 Higher Education Credit Framework for England (see QAA, 2008d). The vocational education and training sector in England also developed a credit framework, the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), implemented from 2008. Its key feature, according to Ofqual (2011) is that it supports the accumulation and transfer of credits between qualifications and awarding organisations. While the scope of the framework is currently focused on vocational qualifications, it was introduced with a view to its wider application.

The Joint Forum for Higher Education was charged with the promotion of a better understanding of the relationship between the QCF and the English HE credit framework – see also QAA (2008e). It developed ‘overarching principles and operational criteria for

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8 Condensation is the process by which an assessment board in consideration of a student’s performance recommends that failure in part of the programme does not need to be redeemed in order for the student to progress or to gain the award for which (s)he is registered. Credit is not awarded in respect of the failed area (Bridges and Flinn, 2010:143).
a common approach to credit across the vocational and higher education sector to support progression from further to higher education. Northern Ireland played a significant part in the development of credit frameworks. In particular, the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) project developed a system of level descriptors, which has been incorporated into a number of frameworks operating in the UK. Bridges (2010b), Cameron (2010), and Ashelby and Mooney (2010) provide detailed overviews of credit and qualifications frameworks in the UK (in England, Scotland and Wales respectively). QAA (2009) provides a general explanation of how credit is used in higher education.

The credit frameworks in the different UK countries are aligned, as they are based on the achievement of learning outcomes and a notional ten hours of learning per credit. They are also aligned with national qualifications frameworks (eg FHEQ; QAA, 2008a) and the European framework for higher education (FQ- EHEA) referred to in section three (QAA, 2008b; 2008c).

While policy frameworks and systems are in place, this does not mean that policy commitment is always guaranteed. The evaluation of the Wales CQFW suggested the CQFW is portrayed in many Welsh Assembly Government policy document as an important ‘tool’ for achieving a ‘learning country’. However, it also revealed a mismatch between the importance placed on the CQFW in policy and other official documents and the level of support the CQFW receives from the Welsh Assembly Government. While credit is mentioned in policy documents there is little evidence that credit concepts have visibly trickled down operational levels of Government practice (Miller Research, 2008).

While most UK institutions use the ECTS system, the use of EQF credit levels descriptor is much less widespread. National level descriptors are, on the other hand, very frequently used. However, while these credit frameworks enable transparency regarding the volume and level of learning, what is still lacking is any way of satisfying a university about the standards of the exporting university or the ability of the student concerned. Thus, even though UK countries have established different qualifications frameworks, credits awarded in one framework can be recognised by providers whose qualifications sit in a different framework as Junor and Asher (2008:29) argue, there are significant limitations to credit transfer. In England credit-transfer arrangements, they note, are not even national in scope – they tend to take the form of regional articulation agreements involving just a few institutions; Scotland and Wales, on the other hand, have greater credit transferability within their borders. In England and Northern Ireland most HEIs belong to one of several credit consortia and some have established local functioning credit accumulation and transfer systems for students moving between programmes and institutions (Universities UK, 2011). Issues of practice at higher education institutions are reviewed in more detail below.

4.2. Credit practice in UK higher education

Two recent surveys, one by SEEC covering 65 higher education providers in the four UK countries9 (Atlay et al, 2012) and one by QAA and partners covering 108 institutions in England (QAA et al, 2009) suggest that over 90% of higher education institutions recognise and award credits, most in line with the credit and qualification frameworks in their nations – see also section three. But around 5% do not operate credit arrangements. This section reviews in more detail six key aspects regarding credit practice in the UK: provision of information, recognition of prior learning, articulation and advanced entry, recognition of work-based learning, condonation and compensation, and the main challenges in the use of credit systems.

4.2.1. Information and guidance

Information and guidance is the first step towards an effective credit accumulation and transfer system. Indeed, the QAA asks that clear guidance be given to applicants about when a claim for the accreditation of prior learning may be submitted, the timescale for considering the claim and the outcome, and that appropriate arrangements should be in place to support applicants submitting claims for the accreditation of prior learning and to provide feedback on decisions. If students (and staff) are not aware of the system, appropriate use cannot be made of it. Of those institutions operating credit arrangements, 90% have a published document detailing the credits associated with each programme, which is an important stage to inform learners (QAA, 2009). Information on credit-related schemes, such as those associated with the recognition of prior learning, however, should be comprehensive throughout the process and easily accessible to potential applicants. In this aspect there are notable shortcomings in the sector. Information on credit accumulation, transfer and related mechanisms is often presented in a technical non-user friendly way, not sufficiently informative and/or difficult to find. A review of 166 HEI websites from across EWNI (McDermott et al, 2010) suggests only a small minority of university websites contain information that is easy to find as well as well presented, useful and clear.

9 England and Northern Ireland (53 institutions), Wales (five institutions) and Scotland (seven institutions).
Although McDermott et al recognise the review was an informal exercise, which served only to provide a ‘snapshot’ of APEL information for students, it did seem to show that there is substantial room for improvement in the provision of APEL information. Consistent with this finding, a study conducted by the Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium found that all of the institutions studied had APEL policies, but that these were mostly contained within broader institutional documentation and were not, therefore, obvious to students. In addition, little evidence was found of active marketing of APEL by the institutions (HEFCW, 2010). Thus, perhaps because of the difficulties in the recognition of prior experiential learning in particular, APEL procedures in the UK are not always widely available or clearly written (cf. also Wilcox and Brown, 2009; Betts and Crichton, 2009). An example of good practice in relation to credit transfer is the interactive website of the Open University, which has been developed as a simple, informative and interactive platform for potential applicants to find out easily the information they require. Similar tools could be developed for other credit-related aspects and claims.

Managing information to stimulate and facilitate credit transfer

The majority of the higher education institutions and their partner colleges delivering higher education courses in the East of England operate modular schemes and recognise, under the CATS system, appropriate and relevant learning previously achieved elsewhere (Cambridge University may accept the transfer of an appropriate partially completed award into a Cambridge University course of study by exception but does not use the CATS system within its own programmes).

Yet each course within a higher education institution has been designed to meet certain learning needs and subject specific outcomes. Therefore, because course content can be so different, the amount of the transfer of the same qualification may vary from institution to institution and even from course to course within an institution. To help learners gain a better estimate about how much credit they have achieved and if they can use their qualification within a new award, many higher education institutions have developed a database which gives details of decisions made in the past, the general credit level awarded to some qualifications and the specific credit approved against an award.


4.2.2. Recognition of prior certified learning and recognition of prior experiential learning

QCDA (2010) has issued guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework, adapted to the European guidelines on validation on non-formal and informal learning. The guidance provides information on six steps, based on the information contained on the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, on the RPL process: raising awareness of claiming credit through information, advice and guidance; pre-assessment to gather evidence and give information; assessment/documentation of evidence; feedback; awarding credit and appeal. On the ground, however, the UK higher education
sector’s application of AP(E)L varies and it can be said that there is little practice on which to base generalised patterns of activity.\textsuperscript{11} Below, we review the situation, in particular regarding the volume of credit that can be claimed through recognition of prior learning, the range of assessment methods used in the recognition of prior learning, shelf-life of credits and costs for users.

There are significant variations regarding the volume of credit that can be claimed on admission to a programme in the UK. Houston et al (2011) report that the range is typically between one half and two thirds of the total award. This is in line with the results by Atlay et al (2012), that show that some institutions allow recognition of credits making up to over three quarters of the award. Some institutions, such as Cranfield, traditionally adopted the view that the learning experience derived from undertaking a postgraduate degree (in which Cranfield specialises) is a holistic experience and that reducing the experience by accrediting prior learning should be kept to a minimum. Thus, APEL was traditionally considered for admissions but not for exemption from modules (Betts and Crichton, 2009). The European Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning (Hawley et al, 2010) reports anecdotal evidence suggests it is far more common for institutions to use APL, especially APEL, procedures as part of the process of admitting students to their courses than for awarding specific credit. Moreover, at a range of institutions there are limits to the use of APL in the final stages of the degree programme. Atlay et al (2012:32) observe the proportion of credits that can be gained through APL seems to have decreased in the last decade.

\textbf{Figure 4. 2: Maximum amount of credit that may be contributed by APL/APEL to the credit requirements of an honours degree (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) – number of higher education institutions (*)}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Institutions</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>35</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Atlay et al, 2012 (*) The number of institutions for which data was collected is 57.

In terms of advice on preparing an application for AP(E)L in the HE sector, some institutions provide short courses or modules for candidates. Often documentation is also provided such as a handbook and other relevant literature and forms. More direct contact is also offered in some cases, ie telephone/email or face-to-face advice from an AP(E)L co-ordinator or academic staff.

A combination of portfolios and interviews is often used for assessment and some institutions use detailed application forms to compare the applicant’s experience to entry criteria. However, assessment for smaller units of learning, eg one module, can sometimes be carried out on the basis of a report for example. Other possible assessment methods include, for example, projects, essays on ‘applied’ topics, interviews, practice-based documents, reports on observations of practice, or analytic and evaluative descriptions of practice (Souto-Otero, 2010). Whittaker (2011) shows a range of assessment mechanism used for gathering evidence in the RPL process. The survey suggests that portfolio, reflective accounts, mapping of learning outcomes and references from employers/managers are the most frequent ways to gather evidence in the recognition of prior learning process.

\textsuperscript{11} As a recent example, the Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium found that APEL was used by all but one of the institutions it studied, but there was no standardisation between – and sometimes within – institutions (HEFCEW, 2010).
Regarding recognition of prior certified learning, it should be noted that higher education institutions do not normally transfer marks from previous institutions into new awards, as marking systems differ across institutions and this makes it difficult to aggregate the marks to produce a consistent outcome (Betts and Crichton, 2009). Atlay et al (2012) report general consistency in the credit requirements of major awards, with the exception of Higher National Certificates (HNCs). There is also some inconsistency in the credit requirements and nomenclature applied to various minor HE awards (120 credits or less) offered by institutions. Credit re-use, on the other hand, is on the increase. In 2003 only 20% of institutions permitted relevant credit achieved in completion of an Honours degree to count towards a second Honours degree. In 2012 the proportion increased to 35%. In 2003 13% also permitted credits from an Honours degree to contribute to a Masters degree, whereas the figure was 20% in 2012 (Atlay et al, 2012).

**Westminster Exchange**

The University of Westminster was Britain’s first polytechnic, founded in 1838. The credit transfer system at the University aims to provide flexibility to learners. Westminster Exchange, an academic department of the University, focuses on innovation in learning, teaching and pedagogic research. Flexibility is particularly important for those degrees in which professionals are involved, as is the case for those degrees offered by Westminster Exchange. Westminster Exchange offers both APEL and APCL. The process for recognising credits starts with the application for admission into any of Westminster Exchange programmes: a question on the application form asks whether candidates would like to be considered for the accreditation of prior learning. The Department has nominated members to deal with these applications. Candidates have a range of support materials available to them, and can also receive tutorials on the provision of the evidence required. Recognition of prior learning occurs in all its programmes right up to doctoral level programmes.

The DProf is equivalent to 540 credits, but students who have completed the MA in HE offered by Westminster Exchange or have equivalent learning accredited through APL need obtain only a further 360 credits at doctoral level, and may complete the programme in three years or less (rather than the six years maximum stipulated for part-time students). Any of the modules which form part of its MA in HE programme can be taken as stand-alone CPD. On the other hand, all CPD and short courses can be used to achieve credit for an award through Westminster Exchange’s Advanced Professional Practice Framework.
The University of Hertfordshire (UH) has around 27,500 students and 2,500 staff. The CATS programme at the University of Hertfordshire has been in existence for over 20 years. In its lifetime the programme has consistently enabled students to build a flexible, negotiated programme of study, when one of the University’s standard programmes might not be suitable for them. Credit transfer at UH runs through a separate programme linked to the universities’ Flexible Credit Framework. By providing different pathways for gaining credit (from credit-based short courses, APEL, APCL, planned work-based and distance learning for instance) UH can encourage different types of learners to participate in higher education.

The University’s CAT system also enables UH to meet a number of other strategic drivers from its Strategic Plan at the same time. These include those related to delivering training that meets the needs of individual learners and organizations, UH’s ability to respond to the needs of employers who want to develop bespoke courses for their employees and the development of engagement with employers in the region and beyond. A local NHS Trust is already taking advantage of this by offering courses accredited by UH through its leadership academy. This has developed two accredited short courses in conjunction with UH.

On completion, a student will be awarded 60 credits at Level 7. This credit may then be used for progression towards a specific named university award through one of the schools, or towards a generic or semi-generic award through the CATS programme – this includes the option to immediately take a semi-generic award, a PGCert Studies in Healthcare Leadership and Management, without further study.

A student on the CATS programme has the advantage of being able to negotiate a pathway, with appropriate academic advice and guidance, for a degree that suits their interests and requirements. They can study modules from different courses and combine these, if appropriate, with APL. The CATS programme is co-ordinated centrally by the CATS programme tutor. Each subject also has a tutor who is identified as the subject specific CATS tutor. They hold this role in addition to their other responsibilities. Students work with both tutors. The CATS programme tutor is responsible for co-ordinating the students’ progress and ensures the choices the students make suit the timetable and are cognate in terms of content and level. Reflecting on the advantages of the recognition of prior learning and its interplay with credit and qualification systems a student interviewed for this case study argued that:

“It is better to choose a piece of work that you have already done so you can reflect on what you have achieved rather than trying to write about something that you are still trying to do.”

A maximum of 75% of credits can be awarded through APL, although this will vary according to the programme. The limit for APEL originally set at the university was 100% but has recently changed. A student interviewed for this case study emphasised the importance of completing some of the work for the degree as part of a taught programme. Reasons given pertain to the ability to gauge the level at which to pitch the evidence gathered for APEL and the stimulus provided by participating in a programme in an academic environment.

Particularly when new courses of study are designed, it is good practice for subject specialists to compare the prior learning qualifications with the new course to identify areas not covered in the previous qualifications and design specific modules or units of learning to fill in the gaps (bridging), although not all institutions adopt this practice.

The majority of respondents to the SEEC survey did not report that institution-wide policies regarding time limitation on awarded credits were in place in their institutions (Atlay et al, 2012). Of those that do, five years is by far the most common time limit, but some, such as the Open University (OU), consider study completed within a much longer period of time (16 years in the case of the OU). Admissions tutors tend to have a great degree of freedom on this issue. Houston et al (2011) note differences between subjects (with credits awarded in the Humanities tending to have longer shelf life than technical subjects where the rate of change is rapid). Moreover, when the student can show that they have kept their knowledge up to date through life or work experience this rule may be relaxed.

An interesting finding of the Higher Education Academy ‘Demonstrator APEL’ project (Walsh, 2009) is while assessment has until recently focused on the individual, an important development within the context of work-based learning is the ability to recognise group learning experiences. Where an organisation has delivered the same continuing professional development to a group of employees, a common assessment process – or ‘group APEL’ - can be used for the whole group.

On the issue of costs, there is no standardised fee for recognition of prior learning applications. The element of the validation process which is charged for can vary as well as the amount charged. Some HEIs might set charges according to the number of credits applied for/awarded, while others charge per hours of advice and guidance received. Specific examples of costs reported in the European Inventory on validation were GBP 75 (EUR 90) for the assessment of an APEL portfolio at one HEI, although this institution did not charge for the initial consultation (or for direct credit transfer), while another charged EUR 115 (GBP 95) for an APL module which forms part of a work-based learning route. In some institutions costs are substantially lower than this. Norwich University College of the Arts applied in 2009 a non-refundable £25 fee for applicants wishing to make an application for entry through the APEL process, to contribute towards any guidance and advice needed in the preparation of the application and its subsequent assessment; there are no reductions in the amount of tuition fees paid at undergraduate level as the School does not...
operate a fee-per-unit structure (Betts and Crichton, 2009). In Scotland, generally, there is no charge for the recognition of prior learning that takes place as part of the admissions process in higher education institutions but RPL claims for credit tend to be subject to a fee, which varies across institutions (Leney and Ponton, 2007). The costs of AP(E)L are in general lower than taking a course in full, plus the individual savings on time by not having to repeat learning already achieved, which is an indirect cost saving (Hawley et al, 2010). At the University of Hertfordshire a student applying for credit via APEL usually pays 50% of the normal costs of the module. No charge is made for the Accreditation of Certified Learning.

In 2010 QAA commissioned a large number of case studies (27) on recognition of prior learning in Scotland and Europe, and a study on streamlining RPL processes and facilitating the award of credit for prior informal learning (Whittaker, 2011). The report underlined the importance of policy and processes that mainstream and integrate RPL within admissions, learning, teaching and assessment strategies and quality assurance mechanisms; curriculum design that explicitly addresses flexible modes of entry, progression and delivery; clear points of contact for RPL for potential applicants, existing students and staff; and integration of RPL processes within related developments such as personal development plans and work-based learning; it highlighted staff CPD in this area, monitoring and evaluation, and better use of technology as key areas for improvement.

### 4.2.3. Articulation and advanced entry

Articulation refers specifically to the existence of linkages between qualifications in different sectors, often with a guarantee of credit transfer (on the issue of the relationship between the two sectors see Parry et al, 2008). In the case of the UK, this most readily occurs between further education and higher education, typically from Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas (HNC and HND) in Scotland or from foundation degrees (FDs) in the rest of the UK to the second or third year of first degrees (Houston et al, 2011). This process of credit transfer is linked in many cases to tariffs defined in qualification and credit frameworks: in Scotland the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), and in the rest of the UK the Qualifications and Credit Framework. An active university in articulation is the University of Middlesex, which offers a number of top-up courses that cover the third year of a Bachelor’s course and are specifically designed for applicants wishing to progress from HND, FD or following the second year of a standard Bachelors degree course. The University of Plymouth is another example of an active university in this area, particularly its structured partnership with local colleges to increase access from foundation degrees.

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**University of Edinburgh**

The University of Edinburgh is a large institution that runs a devolved system of colleges and schools that oversee individual programmes and courses. The way that credit is allocated has been standardised across the University following a major review and restructuring process that took place in 2003-04. This allowed the University of Edinburgh to comply both with the Scottish Curriculum and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Bologna Process. Prior to this credit was awarded by some courses and programmes but this was not universally applicable and the understanding of the implications of this varied between colleges, schools, and courses. Further work took place following the publication of the revised Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) handbook in 2009. The Senate Curriculum and Student Progression Committee undertook a review of the match between the University’s courses and programmes and the levels and programme descriptors in the SCQF.

Under normal circumstances a student must complete at least two years of study at the institution to gain a degree from the University of Edinburgh. In all cases, the colleges retain discretion for making decisions on a case-by-case basis. Factors taken into account include the nature of the courses at the HEI that the transferring student comes from, in terms of articulation with the intended programme at the University of Edinburgh and, in the case of transfer from Further Education (FE) Institutions, articulation agreements. Through the recognition of prior learning students are able to take a variety of courses in the same year, sometimes drawn from different SCQF levels. The University expects that this will become more important as students enter the University with a wider spectrum of qualifications than in the past.

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12 [http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/DevelopmentAndEnhancement/Pages/RPL-Network-project.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/DevelopmentAndEnhancement/Pages/RPL-Network-project.aspx) [Accessed 12 December 2012]
University of Plymouth Colleges (UPC)

University of Plymouth Colleges is a partnership between the University of Plymouth (the largest university in the south-west of England) and currently 18 partner institutions (local colleges) to increase access to undergraduate level courses in a scattered rural environment, and a full faculty of the university. The main activity is the provision of two-year foundation degrees at participating feeder colleges, which are both an end in themselves and a progression route to the final year of a full Honours degree at the University of Plymouth. UPC Faculty partnership delivers, on the whole, over 300 courses.

In Cornwall, UPC is one of the main contributions to the Combined Universities of Cornwall (CUC) work via the FE sector, who do not independently provide their own HE level work. UPC Faculty supported over 9,000 students in 2011. Many students study on a part-time basis and most are in work, some co-funded by employers. UPC also underlines that their courses are particularly suitable for people with family commitments (being part-time and locally delivered). The quality of the provision has been consistently commended by the Quality Assurance Agency.


Figure 4.4 shows that in some countries students can gain full credit for their previous short-cycle studies if they embark on a Bachelors degree programme in the same field. In the UK the situation is more complex, as there are several options. Atlay et al (2012:32) report that around 80% of higher education institutions permit the relevant credit awarded for learning achieved on a foundation degree to contribute towards an Honours degree, whereas for HNDs the figure is just below 70%.

In Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council (Scottish Funding Council 2011) has had a policy on articulation since 2004. It has funded both universities and colleges to ensure full credit progression routes to widen participation in HE, has more recently created a number of regional articulation hubs and has made articulation levels a key indicator of outcome agreements with a number of post-1992 universities. Articulation in Scotland benefitted 2,500 students in 2009-10 (Scottish Funding Council 2011). Students in Mathematical and Computer Sciences, Business and Administrative Studies, Creative Arts and Design and Engineering made use of articulation to a higher extent than those studying other subjects.

Source: Eurydice 2012
The Scottish Funding Council (2012) noted challenges with ‘hub universities’ guaranteeing progression for further education colleges’ students and raised questions over the impact delivered by hub funding. The 2005 evaluation of the SCQF concluded that with respect to the development of articulation and credit transfer arrangements between further and higher education institutions there was little evidence that SCQF had contributed much beyond providing a language and tools to underpin arrangements that would have usually been introduced in the absence of the SCQF (Gallacher et al., 2005:8).

Recently Scotland also looked in detail at the issue of advanced entry from school whereby students fulfilling certain requirements (often two or three passes) on their Advanced Higher or equivalent studies enter higher education with advanced standing (Scottish Funding Council, 2011). The example of Scotland shows that given schools, colleges and universities offer provision at Level 7, enhancing synergies between these providers can result in efficiency savings. The number of Advanced Higher entrants direct from school to second year was 125 students in 2012-13 (out of 1,400 students achieving 3+ passes in their Advanced Higher). The Scottish Funding Council expects to increase this number to 800 in 2015-16 by encouraging schools to deliver Advanced Highers as a route to advanced entry and by stimulating universities, schools and colleges to work together to provide advanced entry to all qualified candidates.

University of Dundee College of Life Sciences

The College’s aspiration is that from 2013-14, a significant number of students on its Life Sciences degree programme will enter the programme at level (or year) two, allowing full-time students to graduate with an Honours degree after just three years of study at the university or with an MSci after four years. Key to this is the notion of a core curriculum at SCQF level 7 – developed in partnership with local schools and colleges – which will enable students to access level two of the degree programme with appropriate level seven qualifications. To enable the notion of the core curriculum to work, the revised degree programme will demonstrate a greater focus on the skills-based elements at levels one and two, with more of the subject specialist elements coming into play at levels three and four. The university has given one of its lecturing staff a part-time remit to work with the school sector to raise awareness of the option for entry into level two of the Life Sciences degree.

The university also recognises that students coming from a variety of routes will have varying needs for transitional support. Since 2011-12, new entrants to the Life Sciences programme are invited to complete an online skills audit prior to the start of the session. This enables the university’s advisors of studies, in discussion with each student, to identify gaps in the student’s skills or knowledge and to build appropriate support into the student’s programme of study.

Source: Scottish Funding Council (2011).

4.2.4. Recognition of work-based learning

Regarding the specific area of recognition of work-based learning, a large majority of institutions award credits for work-based learning and placements, but only around half for sandwich years and in-service courses in organisations. Credit award is based on evidence of learning through portfolios, reflective reports, reflective logs and presentations, rather than time spent in placement.
Recognition of work-based learning is common in some subject areas, such as education and health.

4.2.5. Condonement and compensation

Atlay et al., (2012) suggest there is still much sectoral variation in terms of condonement, compensation, and discounting of module performances, which has implications for possible variations in the application of academic standards across the sector. Institutional positions regarding condonement and compensation are provided in Table 4.1 below, which shows great variation in institutional practices. Few respondents to the SEEC survey on credit practice had a scheme of both condonement and compensation, but most institutions offer at least one of those.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condonement is permitted</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit is awarded for condoned modules</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation is permitted</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit is awarded for compensated modules</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both condonement and compensation are permitted</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither condonement nor compensation is permitted</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common total amount of condonement or compensation permitted is 60 credits (just under 20% of the Honours degree programme), but some institutions permit modules to the value of 80 or 90 credits to be condoned or compensated (a quarter of the Honours degree programmes). Some institutions discount the weakest module grades before calculating the Honours degree classification, which is known as ‘discounted credits’. Most commonly, one module is discounted at Level 5 and another from Level 6 (Atlay et al., 2012).

Source: Atlay, 2010.

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13 Compensation is the process by which an assessment board in consideration of a student’s performance recommends that credit be awarded for part of the programme in which the student has failed to satisfy the assessment criteria, on the grounds that the positive aspects of the overall performance outweigh the area of failure (Bridges and Flinn, 2010:143).
4.2.6. Challenges

Osborne (2006) notes CATS have rarely fulfilled their promise of flexibility, and the unintended consequences of their introduction. For instance, although the use of CATS aimed to increase access to higher education from a variety of routes and for a variety of learners on equal footing to traditional entry routes, he notes that in Scotland – where the situation is, as we have seen, more advanced than in England - post 1992 universities are much more engaged in credit transfer from FE than other universities. He suggests that while this creates new opportunities for learners, in particular those from traditionally non-participant backgrounds, there are also dangers that transfer arrangements in practice result in the funneling of certain types of students into restricted types of institutions. Frequently, the links between CATs and widening participation and flexibilisation of learning are not obvious in practice. Institutions often have strategies for widening participation, but these are not explicitly tied to CATs regulations.

More generally, it has been argued that there is a tension in the policy expectation for all institutions to embrace credit transfer equally when there is also a growing expectation for institutional diversity (Bateman and Knight, 2003). Consistent with the remark by Osborne (2006), issues of parity of esteem between vocational qualifications and traditional academic qualifications have been shown to represent a continuing barrier to flexible entry based on credit transfer in some institutions. Credit frameworks have not necessarily solved such difficulties (Houston et al, 2011).

Some institutions simply do not see the added value of credit schemes. In the QAA et al (2009) survey where HEIs reported they did not offer credit arrangements, and had no intention of introducing them, reasons given related to the non-modular nature of provision, and other reasons specific to the HEI. One mentioned ‘we are satisfied that our processes for approving, recording and articulating courses and programmes provide adequate information without being expressed in the form of academic credit’.

Those involved in the credit schemes and frameworks, on the other hand, continue to face challenges assigning credit and guided learning hours, and lack of compliance with credit framework requirements does not necessarily result in lower quality units (Ofqual et al, 2011). Furthermore co-ordination and alignment are important outstanding issues. Differences in curriculum and qualification design are among the obstacles for credit transfer (GHK, 2010). If the differences are too important, identifying equivalence becomes time consuming and hence costly for higher education institutions. However, it should be kept in mind that while qualification design principles and joint practices can be important to enable the identification of equivalence, if the bases for comparison are too diverse the process will be cumbersome.

Additionally, a common approach to qualification design only facilitates the tasks of those who have already decided to use this pathway in establishing particular rules for transfer, accumulation and progression. It does not automatically promote transfer and progression, because it does not promote the demand for it nor makes institutions more open to non-traditional learners per se – two other challenging areas for CATS. Evaluations of the UK (EWNI) Qualifications and Credit Framework (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2007; Ofqual et al, 2011) reported that learners themselves have not yet expressed significant demand (see also Whittaker, 2011). Indeed, in most courses the number of applications for credit transfer is low.

The issue of low demand is associated to another challenge for institutions: high costs (eg economies of scale are not achieved, credit transfer or recognition of prior learning are not ‘core business’ for staff) compared to standard delivery and assessment. Thus there are hidden costs of transferring learning outcomes for providers (in order to ensure the commitment of staff, their time and set-up appropriate systems). There is also a high level of bureaucracy involved (including methods of calculating student load, for instance), and a lack of motivation for co-operation among providers and/or awarding bodies (GHK 2010) linked to funding and accountability regimes as well as reputational competitions.

Bekhradnia (2004) takes a somewhat different view on the issue of demand when he notes that widespread transfer takes place even without formal CAT systems (he reports that more than 11,000 of the 300,000 plus students who entered higher education institutions in 2002-03 in the UK did so having been at a different institution in one of the preceding two years, but that it is believed that most of these students received no credit for their previous studies), though it is also clear that transferring students would have benefited from the existence of CAT frameworks (which would have allowed their previous higher education experience to be taken into account more easily).

In some areas, moreover, there are challenges in knowing actual demand and usage, let alone potential or untapped demand. The European Inventory (Hawley et al, 2010) notes that APEL is not recorded via higher education institutions’ data submissions to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), and figures on actual usage for the sector have not been available.

Financial savings for the public purse may also be more limited than often assumed, which may partly explain the lack of actual political commitment to credit system beyond exhortation. The Scottish Funding Council (2011) has estimated that the scope of savings from flexible entry into higher education – making better use of credit transfer systems through articulation, advanced entry and accelerated degrees - will be small in the short term (they estimate c. £5 million over the next two years), showing greater though still modest savings in future years (up to £12 million by 2015-16). The majority of these savings would come from articulation, but a significant proportion would come from advanced entry from school. This is against a FE/HE teaching budget in the region of £1.4 billion. Following the HNC/D route does not reduce the amount of time to obtain a degree (four years in Scotland). In fact, the Funding Council noted that a number of students who enter university following these routes are actually
taking five or six years to achieve a degree as a result of only partial credit being given for their HN qualification—denoting progression rather than articulation. Just over 5,500 students complete an HN qualification per year and progress to university. Only 2,000 of these are progressing on full credit (articulation). The remaining students (3,500) are entering HE but are repeating at least one year/credit level of study adding not only time but cost to the achievement of a degree. Lack of articulation can be due to students not wishing to enter at a year other than year one, institutions not offering a higher year of entry even where there is a matched curriculum, or an HN qualification not matching due to a change of study path for the student.

Finally, cultural and structural issues and trust have been identified as playing a role in the current levels of usage of the CAT system. Bekhradnia (2004) argues that CATS have not taken hold in the UK perhaps because there is no tradition and network of colleges providing the first part of degree courses and universities that expect to admit significant proportions of their students from these colleges, in part because the three year degree does not lend itself to a model of an intermediate award (like the foundation degree) plus top up as easily as does the US two plus two arrangement. There are also concerns among part of the higher education community that this provides a less rigorous process than other forms of learning (HEFCEW, 2010). Cultural and social issues can also play a role at the individual level. While the Scottish Funding Council expected this option to attract students to take more Advanced Highers to reduce HE related debt, this has not been the case. Most school leavers would rather progress with their peer group than follow a non-traditional route. And there is some logic behind this: anecdotal evidence from several institutions suggests that students opting for year two entry often fall back to year one within a few weeks of starting their course, possibly because they find it difficult to assimilate into an already established peer group and possibly because there is not enough synergy in terms of the syllabus (Scottish Funding Council, 2011).
5. Conclusions and implications

There are a number of messages emerging from the current situation regarding credit transfer and accumulation systems in the UK. First, systems are in place, but they are producing lower levels of impact than policy makers expect. This raises fundamental questions for the future regarding the extent to which expectations need to be recalibrated or further action needed that can lead to better and more widely functioning systems, or a combination of both. Berkhradnia (2004), for example, argues that the first lesson that can be drawn from this review of CATS is that we should be modest in our aspirations. The requirement systematically to break down the components of a university course and to describe the learning that each is intended to provide, and the weight to be given to each component, is simply a requirement to be rigorous and transparent. Notably, a key aspiration that some have – that CATS may provide a guarantee that students can automatically transfer between participating institutions – is still a mirage even where CATS are currently well established (Berkhradnia, 2004). Even in the US where credit transfer is well established, the government accountability office has noted that many institutions’ transfer policies specify they only accept credits from a regionally – rather than nationally - accredited institution (USA GAO, 2005).

This may not be the case in all areas upon which CATS may have an influence. In other areas, such as recognition of prior learning, the contribution of CATS has been stronger in some countries. Bateman and Knight (2003) conclude that the North American experience demonstrates CATS can also help widen participation. However, that experience, they argue, also shows that some of the other benefits claimed for CATS may not be available - most particularly the widespread movement of students between universities and the accumulation of credits for lifelong learning. There is a need, thus, to be more critical about the potential benefits of CATS and move from long lists to shortlists to prioritise those areas where an impact can be produced.

Quantitative evidence on the untapped demand for credit transfer and accumulation arrangements is largely missing and there are also limitations regarding actual demand and use, aspects that would require improvement. While it is reasonable to assume certain groups, such as adults, would benefit from these flexible arrangements, complementary measures to flexibility, linked to financial aspects, learner support or student motivation for instance, are likely to be required to make these groups reach out to higher education (GHK, 2010).

Regarding the need for action, there are questions about whether greater incentives need to be provided to higher education institutions to make use of credit systems and associated mechanisms to enhance flexibility, or whether more ambitious systems, such as the French VAE need to be put in place.

Reducing barriers for credit transfer may entail issuing institutional policy statements on recognising diverse learning pathways, setting out clearly and in a user-friendly way where information can be found (on the acceptance of vocational and access qualifications and availability of accreditation of prior learning, the subject areas that accept these, note of foundation year and bridging course availability, clarification of credit transfer arrangements, etc); explanation of availability of financial help for assessment costs and availability of advice and assistance for applicants and, in particular, for applicants with disabilities.

CATS systems tend to be used more when there is high competition for non-traditional students (Atlay et al, 2012), as institutions aim to make the ‘highest bid’ to facilitate their achievement of a qualification. In countries where it is possible to transfer credit from post-secondary VET to HE, universities often make the choice concerning the part of credit that can be transferred. In cases where universities see this as an opportunity to recruit additional students they may be in favour of entering into agreement with post-secondary VET providers and both can use this argument as a selling point to attract more students. Where institutions are in competition and target the same audience, the contrary may be the case (GHK, 2010). Demand is also higher when there is a need for qualified staff by employers – for instance in sectors such as education and health.

Yet more generally, Andreshak-Behrman and Storan (2004) note looking at the situation of providers in East London; the potential benefits at the institutional level (combined with barriers such as time, funding and credit expertise) are not sufficient to move credit transfer forward without external changes and pressure. There is a need, thus, for greater pressure or the provision of greater incentives to higher education institutions to reward the use of credit transfer and accumulation systems.

In the specific case of recognition of prior learning, for instance, and following GHK (2010) it can be argued that while the underpinning rationale for the use of credits is that such shortening of programmes (or exemption) is cost-efficient for both the individual, who spends less time in training, and for the system, since fewer (often public) resources are used to train the person, the environment in which education and training providers operate may actually sometimes be quite the opposite. In systems where providers are funded per capita or where they are directly paid by student fees, the providers may have little incentive to shorten programmes as this will result in fewer resources for them, and possibly create additional costs because they may have to examine how much credit is suitable to be transferred, design an individualised training plan, and provide more flexible forms of teaching. It is important that countries which wish to promote credit transfer also take into account this aspect of provider motivation and incentives.
Systems, moreover, are currently complex and overlapping, which calls for rationalization. The UK has too many national frameworks operational in all or part of the UK, which creates confusions for learners and tutors, and some reduction/integration would be advantageous (Flinn and Bridges, 2010).

More generally, the diversity in practice in the sector is challenging for users and leads to lack of transparency. The Burgess (2006) report made it clear that the application of any national guidelines on credit would remain a matter for individual institutions to decide at their discretion. While flexibility is important, greater uniformity in implementation within UK countries (and, indeed, between institutions in these countries, and often between departments within institutions) and in the provision of rights to individuals regarding credit transfer, accumulation and recognition of prior learning would make the system more transparent. While pockets of good practice exist, there is a marked lack of clarity in the system, which can deter usage. Approaches to qualifications and credit frameworks in the UK have, on the whole, remained fragmented compared with the best examples from other countries, in spite of the UK being one of the pioneers of such instruments (GHK, 2010). Where institutions are left to devise and implement their own procedures in areas such as recognition of prior learning this can lead to a number of problems and barriers, together with an overall lack of cohesion. It thus seems that co-operation between institutions and other stakeholders should be increased in the future (Souto-Otero et al, 2008). In the US it is clear that state-wide policies focusing on enhancing access and constraining costs have expanded articulation agreements considerably (Dougherty, 2009; Anderson et al, 2006).

Finally, this report has suggested that it is increasingly necessary for higher education institutions to work internationally in these areas. Different approaches to implementation, in areas such as the application of the ECTS, detract from the currency and value of the instruments being used.
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**Accreditation of prior learning (APL)** The identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement.

**Accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL)** Refers to the process that results in the assessment and accreditation of learning that has been formally and positively assessed by a recognized or accredited educational institution.

**Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)** Refers to the process by which a learner is considered for the award of credit in respect of previously *uncertified* learning which has been achieved through prior experience at home, at an outreach centre or in the workplace.

**Assessment regulations** The rules governing assessment of a programme of study including marking scheme, pass mark, requirements for progression to subsequent levels or stages of a programme, and award and classification requirements (for instance, in terms of credits to be achieved and specific marks to be attained).

**Credit** Credit is awarded to a learner in recognition of the achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level.

**Credit accumulation and transfer** A mechanism which allows credit awarded by a higher education awarding body to be recognised, quantified and included towards the credit requirements for a programme delivered by another higher education provider and/or between programmes offered by a higher education provider.

**Credit level** An indicator of the relative complexity and/or depth of learning.

**Credit level descriptors** The generic characteristics of learning at a specific level, used as reference points.

**Credit transcript** The formal record of a student's achievements issued by a higher education provider or awarding body.

**Credit value** The number of credits, at a particular level, assigned to a body of learning. In other words, it indicates both the amount of learning expected (often in terms of notional hours of learning) and the relative level of difficulty (often expressed as level descriptors, which are generic characteristics of learning at a specific level).

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

**Notional hours of learning** The number of hours it is expected a learner (at a particular level) will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes at that level. Thus a professional judgment is made on how many hours it would take the typical learner (not those who complete the learning outcomes quickly nor those that require additional time) to achieve the learning outcomes at a given level.

**Qualification descriptors** Generic statements of the outcomes of study for the main qualification at each level which exemplify the nature and characteristics of that qualification.

**Unit/module** A self-contained, formally structured learning experience with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes.

(*) Adapted from QAA 2009, Learning from Experience Trust 2000 and Bridges, P. and Flinn, M. (2010).
List of acronyms

APCL – Accredited Prior Certified Learning
APEL - Accredited Prior Experiential Learning
APL – Accreditation of Prior Learning
BA - Bachelor of Arts
CAT – Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CATS – Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
CNAA - Council for National Academic Awards
CQFW – Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
DfES – Department for Education and Skills
DG – Directorate General
ECTS – European Credit Transfer Systems
EHEA - European Higher Education Area
ENI – England and Northern Ireland
ENIC - European Network of Information Centres
EQF – European Qualifications Framework
ESBI - Educational Subject Block Index
EU – European Union
EWNI – England, Wales and Northern Ireland
FQ-EHEA - Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
FQHEIS/SCQF - Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions/
Scottish Curriculum and Qualifications Framework
HE – Higher Education
HEA – Higher Education Academy
HEFCW – Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEI – Higher Education Institution
HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency
HN – Higher National
HNC – Higher National Certificates
HNC/D – Higher National Certificate/Diploma
LSC – Learning and Skills Council
MA – Masters of Art
NARIC - National Academic Recognition Information Centre
NI – Northern Ireland
NICAT – Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
NQF – National Qualifications Framework
NUCCAT - Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer
QAA – Quality Assurance Agency
QCDA – Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency
QCF – Qualifications and Credit Framework
RPL – Recognition of Prior Learning
SCQF – Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SEEC – South East England Consortium
USA – United States of America
USA GAO – United States of America Government Office
UK – United Kingdom
VAE – Validacion de l’Acquis de Experience

VET – Vocational Education and Training
Introduction

This document presents information collected during a case study of the University of Hertfordshire (UH). The information for the study was gathered from carrying out a website review, document analysis and a number of telephone interviews including one with a student on the CATS programme. The case study presents a wider range of material than will be presented in the report, in which case studies will appear as 0.5-1 page text boxes.

The University of Hertfordshire

The University of Hertfordshire is a British post-1992 university with around 27,500 students and 2,500 staff.

Credit transfer at UH runs most flexibly through a separate programme linked to the UH Flexible Credit Framework. This case study will describe the Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CATS) programme at UH, how APEL can be used to gain a degree through the CATS programme and how CATS and the Flexible Credit Framework are linked.

Aims of the CATS programme

The CATS programme at the University of Hertfordshire has been around for 22 years. In its lifetime the programme has consistently enabled students to build a flexible, negotiated programme of study. It has provided a route for the University’s students, full- and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate, to negotiate a bespoke learning programme where one of the University’s standard programmes might not be suitable for them.

Learners could start with one or two modules from different University Schools and then decide if they wanted to progress to a full degree or take a diploma or certificate. Hence, the aim of the programme was to develop a pathway that was flexible and enabled wider participation.

The aims of the programme are still the same although the balance of uptake for part-time and full-time students has changed over the years. The trend has been towards a rise in full-time students and a fall in part-time students. Reasons for this are not definitive although increases in transfer of full-time students wishing to re-orientate their studies from a standard programme to the more flexible CATS programme and increases in international exchange students have contributed.

UH has a thriving international Exchange and Study Abroad programme and all students participating in it use the CATS programme route for the time they are at UH. The CATS programme has helped to ensure the success of this institutional drive.

‘We have partnerships with universities in the USA, Canada, Latin America, South Africa, China, Korea and Japan, South East Asia, and Australia.’

Another aim of this programme is to engage with local employers. This can be achieved through combining the CATS programme with the Flexible Credit Framework. A local NHS Trust is already taking advantage of this by offering courses accredited by UH through its leadership academy.

Increased flexibility of learning at UH is broadly achieved through the Flexible Credit Framework, which aims to improve access for learners and hence widen participation. The model below illustrates this by showing the different ways in which a learner can participate in learning that is accredited by UH. By providing different pathways for gaining credit UH can encourage different types of learners to participate in higher education.

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By increasing the flexibility of learning in this way, the range of opportunities for learners is increased. This encourages wider participation at all levels as someone who takes a credit bearing short course has the option to continue to a full degree at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

It also enables UH to meet a number of other strategic drivers of its Strategic Plan. These include those related to delivering training that meets the needs of individual learners and organisations, UH’s ability to respond to the needs of employers who want to develop bespoke courses for their employees, and the development of engagement with employers in the region and beyond.

For example, an NHS Trust local to the institution has a leadership academy that has developed two accredited short courses in conjunction with UH. On completion, a student will be awarded 60 credits at Level 7. This credit may then be used for progression towards a specific named University award through one of the Schools, or towards a generic or semi-generic award through the CATS programme – this includes the option to immediately take a semi-generic award, a PG Cert Studies in Healthcare Leadership and Management, without further study.

**Description of the CATS programme**

Almost all UH modules are credit rated in common with the vast majority of UK HEI’s, however the CATS programme does not have its own modules – awards available through CATS are made up from credit rated modules drawn from other programmes.

The CATS programme at the University of Hertfordshire is available for students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The majority of modules on offer at UH are open to CATS programme students. Students on the CATS programme can also use credit from prior learning that is certificated (APCL) or experiential (APEL), which is work based or non-certificated training or the result of life experience. Collectively the process for accrediting prior learning is referred to as APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning).

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15 Reproduced from the University of Hertfordshire’s Introduction to the Flexible Credit Framework
The system of credits required for undergraduate study is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number of credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certificate of HE</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma of HE</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honours Degree</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Credits are also awarded at postgraduate level.

A maximum of 75% of credits can be awarded through APL, although this will vary according to programme. The limit for APEL was originally set at 100% but this has recently changed. A student interviewed for this case study emphasised the importance of completing some of the work for the degree as part of a taught programme. Reasons given pertain to the ability to gauge the level at which to pitch the evidence gathered for APEL and the stimulus provided by participating in a programme in an academic environment.

The CATS programme is co-ordinated centrally by the CATS programme tutor. Each subject also has a tutor who is identified as the subject specific CATS tutor. They hold this role in addition to their other responsibilities.

A student on the CATS programme has the advantage of being able to negotiate a pathway, with appropriate academic advice and guidance, for a degree that suits their interests and requirements. They can study modules from different courses and combine these, if appropriate, with APL. They do this by working with the CATS programme tutor and the relevant subject CATS tutor. The CATS programme tutor is responsible for co-ordinating the students’ progress and ensures the choices the students make suit the timetable and are cognate in terms of content and level.

“My personal tutor was really good at keeping in contact [with me] and reminding me about deadlines. This was very helpful in getting me through the process.”

As with all programmes of study at UH, APL can be used to gain entry to the CATS programme or to advance through it more quickly by enabling the recognition of learning that the student has already achieved. Hence, APL ensures that students do not repeat learning already attained elsewhere.

Learning accredited through APL should have been completed within five years of the start of the CATS programme unless the student can demonstrate that they have kept up to date through CPD or through relevant work and/or life experience. APL is offered for learning for overseas HEIs. This is monitored via resources such as NARIC. APL is also awarded for courses completed at an appropriate academic level at FE colleges.

UH also has a number of articulation agreements with a range of institutions that enable participating students to move more freely between HEIs in different countries around the world.

In moving through the process of APEL for the CATS programme, a part-time Masters student might start with one or two taught modules where s/he would have the opportunity to engage in academic debate and be exposed to the literature and meet experts in the field of research. On completion of these modules s/he would have 60 credits. S/he might then complete the rest of the Masters (120 credits) through APEL. This can be achieved in one year; depending on the effort and time the learner can commit to the work. The learner will negotiate with her/his personal tutor about what work would be relevant for an APEL product\(^{16}\) and would then carry out a process of mapping the work done onto a template provided by UH. S/he would be supported in this by her/his personal subject tutor.

“It is better to choose a piece of work that you have already done so you can reflect on what you have achieved rather than trying to write about something that you are still trying to do.”

Alternatively, a student can complete the APEL claim and then undertake further study that builds on their APEL learning and credit to complete their award.

An individual student on the CATS programme leaves UH with a degree that is bespoke and reflects their requirements and interests. In the past award titles for students graduating from the CATS programme were defined on an individual, negotiated basis, however, since the introduction of the Flexible Credit Framework a number of generic and semi-generic

\(^{16}\) A product in this sense is the whole piece of work expressing learning at the appropriate academic level, submitted to gain credits for APEL as part of the CATS programme.
award titles have been defined for students. The titles reflect the main Schools in which the student has studied. The awards are also available for joint and major-minor combinations of designated titles. A transcript is also provided detailing the student’s individual programme.

Take-up and implementation

The CATS programme has about 300 students across the majority of Schools and modes of study and it is likely that this number will not increase much above this level, although the balance of students studying full-time and part-time may change as the economic climate takes effect and the impacts of fee changes become apparent. Currently around 40 students have had prior learning accredited enabling them to complete modules and programmes more rapidly than otherwise would have been possible. These are not confined to the CATS programme.

Costs

A student on the CATS programme pays the same rate as a student on any other programme in the university. Part-time students pay the cost of the module and full-time students pay the normal university fees. A student applying for credit for APEL usually pays 50% of the normal costs of the module. No charge is made for Accreditation of Certificated Learning. Although APEL can save time because it is based on work that has already been completed it is time consuming because the learner has to understand how to analyse and express the learning they have achieved from an academic standpoint, so the first product can take longer while later products, where more than one APEL component is planned, can be more easily and quickly achieved.

Success factors and challenges

The benefits for students of using the Flexible Credit Framework and the CATS programme have already been alluded to above. A student can gain a bespoke degree which may help them to not only remain engaged with their studies but also to get employment in a field strongly associated to their degree. The UH website provides a number of case studies of students that are still on the programme or have already completed it describing the benefits of the CATS programme for them.17

The benefit of the Flexible Credit Framework and APEL in particular, is that it is student focused and allows the learner and the institution to celebrate existing learning and achievement. Students can express this by a great sense of commitment to their work which is often expressed in the sheer volume of what they produce for an APEL claim. As one interviewee describes: ‘the joy of being able to express their learning is sometimes quite stunning’.

For part-time students in full-time employment APEL is particularly beneficial. Learners are able to use learning gained from work they have already done to gain credits. Not only does this enable the learner to fast track through the degree but it also provides an opportunity to reflect on the learning they have achieved in the workplace. Learners who have finished their degree may continue to use these skills in the workplace.

“I learnt about the significance of preparation and thinking time to the success of my project and this is something that I will take forward into the workplace.”

The institution benefits by being able to provide access to students from a wider range of backgrounds and with different interests. It also enables the institution to meet its strategic goals pertaining to:

- engagement with employers (both public and private) through accrediting the training they offer or developing bespoke courses for their employees;
- variety of provision beyond traditional full-time programmes of study through the broadening of study patterns and delivery modes, including remote and distance learning.18

The accreditation of short courses offered by other institutions can be a good recruitment tool as it might result in a student deciding to take up a full degree but it also raises awareness among local employers about the work the institution does and can do.

The challenges identified by the interviewees for this case study appertain to the need to maintain numbers of students on the programmes in the face of rising fees and a difficult economic climate. In this context, it will be useful to develop the CATS programme alongside the APL programme to engage with employers and offer the most flexible use of modules that meet employer needs. This will also satisfy the increased need for employability skills from HE programmes to enable the successful transition of students from HE to employment.

18 See footnote 2.
For APL a further challenge is likely to emerge. As universities become subject to more control from external forces, approaches to learning may become more standardised and so more creative approaches that take account of experiential learning may end up garnering less support and so may disappear from the menu of HEIs.

Difficulties for students using APEL on the CATS programme include balancing the needs of their professional lives with their academic work and keeping to an agreed timeline. A supportive and engaged personal tutor can help to ensure this is successful. Supportive peer networks also have a positive impact on progress and completion.
Introduction

This document presents information collected during a case study of the University of Westminster. The case study focuses on the experience of the ‘Westminster Exchange’ and, in particular, on the experience of its postgraduate courses in the area of higher education (HE). The case study presents a wider range of material than will be presented in the report, in which case studies will be presented as 0.5-1 page text boxes.

The University of Westminster and ‘Westminster Exchange’

The University of Westminster was Britain’s first polytechnic, founded in 1838. The University has a student population of more than 20,000, taking undergraduate, Masters and research degrees as well as professional programmes and short courses. Today, it places at the core of its mission the provision of a diverse and inspirational learning environment, with a focus on practice-informed teaching. The University also places high importance on serving diverse communities and on its close involvement with businesses and professionals.

Westminster Exchange, an academic department of the University, focuses on innovation in learning, teaching and pedagogic research. It provides a wide range of qualifications and continuing professional development opportunities and also acts as a hub for the University’s teaching quality enhancement activities.

Aims of the credit transfer and accumulation system

The credit transfer system at the University aims to provide flexibility to learners. This is particularly important for those degrees in which professionals are involved, as is the case of those degrees offered by Westminster Exchange. The credit transfer system provides opportunities for people at different stages of their careers. It is also of benefit to the University as it increases the number of students who can benefit from the courses offered.

The University’s Academic Handbook states that as the University’s Modular Frameworks have been designed on a credit accumulation system it is implicitly recognised that this enables the award of credit for prior learning. Therefore the link between credit accumulation systems and accreditation of prior learning (APL) is seen as strong. The case study often refers to APL, as this is one of the main ways in which a credit accumulation system increases flexibility in learning.

Description of the system

Systems for credit accumulation and transfer have been in place for a long time at the University of Westminster. The University offers APL both through ‘accreditation of prior certified learning’ (APCL) – when appropriate certified learning from another recognised academic institution that has taken place prior to entry into the Westminster course of study is accredited towards a University of Westminster award – and ‘accreditation of prior experiential learning’ (APEL) – obtained through life experience, work experience and study which are not normally attested through any educational or professional certification.

APCL can be gained from courses that students have completed which have given the student an intermediate award (eg Dip HE), an award, or any part of a course they successfully passed if they did not complete the award for which they were registered. At the time of awarding the APCL credit, marks, in their original or an amended form, can be included on a students’ record and so count towards the final award, if the student has studied in a system where a similar process of marking is used, with a rigorous quality assurance process. Credits that have already been counted towards the award of an Honours degree cannot provide credit towards another Honours degree – this is deemed ‘double counting’. The same principle applies regarding credits that have already contributed towards the award of a Masters degree in relation to the award of another Masters degree. The learning accredited through APCL must have been completed within a maximum of five years prior to the enrolment on the course, otherwise the applicant needs to demonstrate they have been working professionally and building on that learning in the interim period.
In order to apply for APCL students have to fill in a form where they identify the parts of the University of Westminster award (in terms of learning outcomes) they believe they have already achieved, and cross-reference them to their previous learning. In order to do this they need to meet with the course leader to clarify the learning outcomes of the level or module from which they wish to seek exemption. Additional, general credit may be given for learning not equivalent to specific modules. These can be substituted for elective modules. The documentary evidence to be provided by students includes official transcripts or certificates of results, outlining the content of the course or modules, confirmation of the components passed, the marks obtained for each component and any other relevant information. The application, once submitted to the Admissions office, is forwarded to the admissions tutor/course leader for consideration; they will issue a recommendation for the award of credits, when applicable, to the relevant school APL Board.

To apply for APEL students need to complete a ‘module learning outcomes’ form for the modules they consider relevant and explain how their experiential learning matches each of the learning outcomes. To be awarded credit for the module they must demonstrate they have met all the learning outcomes. Students also need to attach all relevant evidence to support their claim (common examples include CVs, letters from employers written on company-headed paper, documentation generated in their employment or evidence of attendance at training or staff development events. APEL claims may be considered for learning that has taken place since the student commenced the course at the University of Westminster, but claims should be made prior to the start of the module for which the claim is made. In contrast with the APCL system, APEL credits awarded are not given a mark and are not included in the calculation of the classification of the final award. Students are supported by a mentor – normally a member of the academic staff who teaches on the course on which the student is registered - in their APEL claim. The mentor will support the student in the preparation of the submission and advise the student regarding alternative methods of presentation and the nature of the appropriate corroborating evidence but cannot offer guarantees regarding the outcome of the submission. An additional member of academic staff may share the role of mentor in the case of a specialised academic field, which requires subject specific expertise. In their application they are required to describe the learning they have achieved by matching it against the learning outcomes for the module(s) for which they are making a claim. The claim is assessed by a member of academic staff with subject expertise in the area of the submission. Besides reviewing the submitted material the assessor may interview the student and must ensure that the learning reported is current, ie the learning has not been forgotten. After the assessment is completed the assessor must forward a statement to the APEL Assessment Board detailing the number of credits at each level the Academic Assessor is recommending for award purposes. This statement should indicate which module(s) the credits are being awarded for. The University APEL Board (whose composition is determined by the Head of Admissions and Student Funding) meets at least three times a year and among its responsibilities are awarding APEL credit, monitoring the processes and outcomes of the award of APEL credit and notifying Academic Services of any decisions and recommendations (which may include requests for presentation of additional evidence or re-submission). APEL is subject to inspection by external examiners.

Under both systems credits are awarded for learning which match the learning outcomes of particular module(s). Then the student is exempt from that module. The University stipulates that all students must be informed of the timescale for making an application prior to their registration. In the APCL system the award of the credit is assessed by the relevant Academic Assessor and approved by the relevant School or University Board. All Schools must designate a named staff member with responsibility for APCL and a staff member with responsibility for APEL. Students have the right to appeal within ten working days from the notification of the decision if (s)he believes that there have been material irregularities in the PAL process.

APEL can be employed for the waiving of credits, but not to obtain a full qualification. It can be used to recognise learning at levels three to seven and only applies to whole (not part) modules. The University sets limits on the proportion of credits that can be awarded through APEL. These limits are two thirds of the total programme credits for undergraduate degrees and half of the credits for postgraduate programmes, provided that professional or accrediting bodies’ regulations do not set a maximum proportion of APL credit less than that allowed under the University’s regulations.

In Westminster Exchange recognition of prior learning occurs in all its programmes right up to doctoral level, including its Doctorate in professional studies. Its advanced professional practice degrees in education thus use a flexible format with a core module at each stage (Certificate, Diploma, Masters), which can be combined with modules from the MA in HE degree, work-based learning module frameworks and modules with negotiated content. In fact, one of the core modules for the advance professional practice programme (CPD reflective review and planning for academic study), which the department requires students to take as their first module, allows students to reflect on past achievements and prepare an APEL claim if appropriate. It could thus be said that embedded within the 180 credit MA in HE is the 60 credit postgraduate certificate in HE, and the MA HE is the first stage of the Professional Doctorate programme – see below.

The DProf is equivalent to 540 credits but students who have completed the MA in HE offered by Westminster Exchange or have equivalent learning accredited through APEL need obtain only a further 360 credits at doctoral level, and may complete the programme in three years or less (rather than the six years maximum stipulated for part-time students). During that time students take additional DProf Modules (including a research and development project).

The flexibility of Westminster Exchange’s offer is also visible in the fact that any of the modules which form part of its MA in HE programme can be taken as stand-alone CPD. On the other hand, all CPD and short courses can be used to achieve credit for an award through Westminster Exchange’s Advanced Professional Practice Framework.
The process for recognising credits starts with the application for admission into any of Westminster Exchange programmes: a question on the application form asks whether candidates would like to be considered for the accreditation of prior learning. The department has nominated members to deal with these applications. Candidates have a range of support materials available to them and can also receive tutorials on the provision of evidence required. Evidence is normally presented in the form of a portfolio; this is double checked by members of the department and then a sample is reviewed by the external examiner for the relevant programme. Accreditations are formally approved by the programme boards. Recognition of prior learning includes credits taken at other institutions nationally as well as recognised international institutions, an area in which Westminster Exchange works closely with NARIC UK.

Recognition can also be granted for credits taken in Further Education institutions, in relation to foundation degrees. Westminster Exchange also offers collaborative provision in relation to its PGCE/Cert Ed with a range of FE colleges in the Greater London area. This means that as a student registered with one of Westminster’s partners an individual can undertake his/her learning at an institution that is convenient for him/her, but still obtain a Westminster qualification.

Recognition of prior learning can be granted for credits taken at the same or higher level the applicant aims to study.

**Take-up and implementation**

While other departments, like Public Health, Business Studies or Computer Science, are also active in terms of the credit transfer and accumulation, take-up of this system is not high in the University as a whole. In Westminster Exchange, around a third of postgraduate taught students will have had some prior learning recognised; at doctoral level this extends to the majority of students.

**Costs and benefits**

Costs for individuals are low, there is no additional charge for the process of accreditation of prior learning APCL: there is a fee for the process of AP(E)L guidance and assessment according to the Academic Handbook. The student may however have to pay the full fee for the course after the recognition of prior learning. This is not always the case. In the professional doctorate programme offered by Westminster Exchange students obtain a discount on the programme fee if they have prior learning accredited. Credits cannot be awarded until the appropriate course fee has been paid.

**Success factors and challenges**

Professional bodies actually had an input on the design of many Westminster Exchange programmes, which makes those programmes more aligned to market demands and also to the recognition of learning outside the formal education sector. On the whole, the system is considered very successful in achieving its aims.

An important challenge is that we are currently in a system of mass higher education and credit transfer systems are linked to the individualisation of pathways. It is equally necessary to have set procedures for the system to work effectively. It is also necessary to develop people who understand those systems and implement them. Westminster Exchange does this because they are a professional development department. Some Education, Business of Health departments do it because they have strong links with professional practice. Other departments may not have similar systems because there is no demand for them, but at the same time the lack of a procedure makes it more difficult to attract learners with a wider set of backgrounds.

A further challenge revolves around the identification of the drivers to take credit transfer and accumulation forward, as a critical mass of potential applicants is needed if systems are to be developed that will help students and ensure an appropriate mapping of learning outcomes. The challenge is to move the system across its successful silos.
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