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creating learning opportunity through credit

Achieving credit transfer at scale: sector reflections on potential reforms



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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning's (UALL) SEEC network hosted a discussion about [recent QAA research](#) on credit transfer and the reforms it proposed. For the purposes of the discussion, credit transfer was defined as the process by which a provider recognises the credit a student has accrued at another institution, exempting them from modules or even whole years of learning that they have already undertaken elsewhere.

The discussions were split into the three categories of potential reform detailed in the research:

1. Making the process smoother for applicants
2. Improving the policies themselves
3. Delivery at scale

Those engaged in the discussions broadly agreed that the current credit transfer process is overly complex and burdensome for applicants. There was strong support for reform, but also recognition of the nuanced challenges in implementation.



While institutional strategies may support credit transfer, implementation is inconsistent due to varying levels of buy-in from course leaders and staff

There was support for internal training through induction, practical guides and demystification of the process to confidently support applicants. The range of roles within an institution that needed to be literate in credit transfer was also raised, including but not limited to professional services and business-facing teams as well as academics. Collaboration and coherence in the approach these different functions take was key to making the process smoother. There was also a clear role for leadership teams recognised, with the importance of reinforcing the value of the process to ensure it is prioritised and not sidelined.

The language and framing of credit transfer is often inaccessible or alienating to students, particularly those who view transferring as a sign of failure

There was an agreed view that the language could be improved with attendees suggesting three key mechanisms to achieve this:

1. Simplify terminology: avoid jargon and co-create language with students to ensure clarity;
2. Address emotional barriers: recognise that many learners seeking credit transfer have faced challenges; the process must be empathetic and empowering.
3. Include student voice: involve student unions in shaping communication to ensure accessibility.

Course mapping is a major barrier, particularly at higher levels where modular prerequisites are more complex

There is strong support for a more efficient and streamlined approach to credit transfer through several key mechanisms. Attendees acknowledged that detailed course mapping was necessary to ensure a student possessed the required prior learning. There was, however, support for using this mapping process to reduce future duplication of effort and simplify the process for future applicants. Implementing a centralised system to record previous credit transfer decisions would ensure consistency in decision-making and further streamline the process. Additionally, the use of broad, generic level 4 learning outcomes could significantly reduce the need for granular, module-by-module mapping at the lower qualification levels. Attendees were already putting this into practice in some disciplines such as arts and humanities, where the requirements for Level 5 and 6 study were often broader and shared across subject areas.

There is strong appetite for a national mechanism to support credit transfer, though concerns remain about balancing standardisation with flexibility and autonomy

To support a more transparent and navigable credit transfer system, several ideas were proposed in the discussions. A centralised database shared between higher education and further education institutions, containing recognised qualifications and associated credit volumes, would significantly enhance transparency and aid in planning for both institutions and learners. In addition, the creation of a single, authoritative source of information for applicants, perhaps through UCAS, would simplify the navigation of credit transfer options and reduce barriers to accessing higher education.

There is also institutional openness to adopting a best practice charter. Such a charter could include shared standards and indicators for credit acceptance, encouraging consistency and broader participation across the sector.

There is recognition that England is currently lagging behind other devolved nations in implementing effective credit transfer systems. As a result, there is growing interest in learning from successful models developed elsewhere in the UK, such as the Scottish Government's plans for a national RPL system.

Credit transfer intersects with widening participation, but has broader additional value

Credit transfer must be fully integrated into the planning and implementation of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE). This includes aligning funding mechanisms and ensuring that prior learning is appropriately recognised within the system.

There are significant equity concerns, as students with non-traditional learning backgrounds are disproportionately represented among those who use credit transfer routes. It is therefore essential that the system does not marginalise these learners or create additional barriers for them.

Furthermore, there is concern that framing credit transfer solely within Access and Participation Plans (APPs) risks diminishing its strategic importance. Rather than being treated as a niche or supplementary activity, credit transfer should be recognised as a central component of inclusive and flexible higher education policy. This approach differs somewhat to the approach taken in the devolved nations, where RPL and credit transfer is viewed much more as a widening participation measure.



Conclusion

Those involved in the discussions were clear that as universities are increasingly making lifelong learning central to their strategies, there is a need for reform and that they saw credit transfer as a key enabler of flexible, inclusive lifelong learning. However, successful implementation will require cultural change across the sector as well as within institutions, student-led communication strategies, national infrastructure and guidance, policy coherence, and equitable funding.

There is momentum for policy change. The Department for Education recently announced that they will this year update on proposed changes to embed learner mobility across LLE funded provision and work with the sector in delivering this, and the Scottish Programme for Government sets out their ambition for an RPL framework. Both present a clear opportunity to instigate policy change and for the sector to influence any measures at a sector-level while demonstrating their on the ground expertise.