



Making Use of Credit: A Companion to the Higher Education Credit Framework for England

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Contents

Definition of terms	1
Introduction	4
Micro-credentials	5
Short courses and executive education	7
Placements	7
Partnership arrangements	8
Accelerated degrees	8
Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)	9
Continuing professional development (CPD)	9
Integrated foundation years and Access to HE	10
Recognition of prior learning (RPL)	11
Articulations and ‘topping up’	12
Collaborative approaches with employers	14
Higher and degree apprenticeships	15
Postgraduate qualifications	17
Professional doctorates	19
Membership of the 2021 Credit Framework for England Advisory Group	20

Definition of terms

Apprenticeship

A job with training to industry and/or professional standards, which may or may not include a mandatory qualification. See also 'Higher and degree apprenticeships'.

Articulation

An arrangement where learners enrolled on a designated course at a partner provider are automatically entitled (subject to academic criteria) to be admitted with advanced standing to a subsequent part or year of a degree-awarding body's course. 'Advanced standing' is the recognition of previous successful study, reducing the number of modules needed to complete the course

Credit

A means of quantifying and recognising learning whenever and wherever it is achieved. Credit is awarded in recognition of achievement of learning outcomes at a specified level.

Credit accumulation

A process of achieving credits over time in relation to a course or courses of study, or formally-recognised experiential learning. Each higher education awarding body determines what credit it will accept for purposes of accumulation or transfer in relation to its individual courses.

Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS)

A system which enables learners to accumulate credit, and which facilitates the transfer of that credit within and between education providers.

Credit level

An indicator of the relative complexity, demand and/or depth of learning.

Credit level descriptors

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

Credit transfer

A mechanism which enables credit awarded by a higher education (HE) awarding body to be recognised, quantified and included towards the credit requirements for a course delivered by another HE provider and/or between courses offered by an HE provider.

Credit value

The number of credits, at a particular level, assigned to a body of learning. The number of credits is based on the estimated learning hours (where one credit typically represents 10 notional hours of learning).

ECTS

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, intended to make studies and courses more transparent. It helps students to move between countries and to have their academic qualifications and study periods abroad recognised.

FHEQ

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – the principal national reference point for academic standards.

Franchised or validation partnership

Franchised and validated provision is a process by which a degree-awarding body agrees to authorise another organisation to deliver (and sometimes assess) part or all of one (or more) of its own approved courses. In a franchise model, the degree-awarding body retains responsibility for the course content, the teaching and assessment strategy, and quality assurance. A validation arrangement is where courses are designed and quality assured by the partner and approved by the validating degree awarding body.

Higher and degree apprenticeships

Higher apprenticeships are apprenticeships at FHEQ Levels 4-7 that do not include a mandatory degree qualification but may or may not include another qualification. Degree apprenticeships are apprenticeships at Levels 6 or 7 that must include a bachelor's with honours or master's degree as a mandatory qualification.

Higher education awarding body

An institution with the power to award degrees conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, or under Section 48 of the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992*, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA, or, in England, granted by the Office for Students on advice from QAA under section 42 of the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*.

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.

Micro-credentials

Credit-bearing courses or modules designed to be self-standing or could be studied as a component part of a larger award. Micro-credentials are awarded by a body with the powers to award academic credit, are subject to proportionate quality assurance mechanisms, and are mapped against the FHEQ levels.

Module/unit

A self-contained, formally-structured, credit bearing learning experience with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

MOOC

Massive Open Online Course, an open, online course designed in part to introduce higher education to learners. They are usually free, but some may have paid-for features like assessment and certification.

Notional learning hours

The number of hours which it is expected that a learner (at a particular level) will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes at that level. This may include time spent in class, directed learning, independent study and assessment. One credit is typically described as being equal to 10 hours of notional learning.

Professional doctorate programmes

Programmes leading to a doctorate in a particular professional context, which typically include some taught elements in addition to the research dissertation. Credit practice varies but typically professional doctorates include a minimum of three calendar years' full-time postgraduate study with Level 7 study representing less than one-third of this. Part-time options are available over longer periods.

Progression

The formal journey that students take through a course, or from one course to another, requiring study at a particular level, typically enabled by achieving a minimum number of credits in order to move to the next stage. of credits in order to move to the next stage.

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.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) /Accreditation of prior learning (APL)

The identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement. While accreditation of prior learning (APL) focuses on awarding credit for prior learning, recognition of prior learning (RPL), in addition, recognises prior learning that has occurred in a range of educational and training contexts and/or where learning is achieved outside education or training systems and is recognised for academic purposes. These terms may be used differently in specific regulated disciplines, such as nursing and other healthcare professions.

Shell module/qualification

Pre-validated template modules that enable workplace learning to be built into a learner's studies.

Transcripts

An academic record of a learner's name, the institution they studied at, and a list of all courses taken, grades received in each unit or module and the degree conferred, as well as the classification, provided by the awarding body. The diploma supplement is similar to a transcript but carries more information to make it compliant with the European Higher Education Area. The Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) is a formal degree transcript that provides a full record of achievements, including both academic and extra-curricular learning and experience.

Introduction

Making Use of Credit: A Companion to the Higher Education Credit Framework for England offers a variety of practices in which credit can be used in higher education to support flexible learning routes. It also explores how different forms of delivery and qualifications can be used in the context of credit, for example, micro-credentials and apprenticeships, among others.

It features reflective questions that may prove helpful when considering the use of credit. These questions often apply across multiple contexts, so while each section and its questions can be used on their own, it may also be useful to read this document as a whole. As it explores the use of credit in specific contexts, this advice can be used as a reference guide to support providers in developing new courses and qualifications.

We use 'learner' in this advice as a generic term to include those studying in a variety of modes and contexts such as full-time students and apprentices. When referring specifically to particular types of learner, we use terms like 'student' and 'apprentice'.

This advice complements the *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements*, which contains the 2021 Credit Framework Table for England, which may be helpful to refer to when reading this document.



Micro-credentials

In the UK, qualifications have credit values generally ranging from 120 to 360 credits (although there are examples as small as 60 and as large as 540 credits), with considerable variation in the credit weighting of their constituent modules. However, many providers are exploring ways in which the flexibility of the credit framework can be used to create smaller ‘bite-sized’ qualifications that can be studied more flexibly, often on a part-time basis.

Such qualifications have a range of names, including ‘micro-credits’ or ‘micro-credentials’, ‘modular qualifications’, ‘micro-qualifications’, ‘nano-credits’ and ‘nano-credentials’. There is no specified credit value, but examples can range from 1 to 10 credits. Unlike larger awards, at the time of writing they are not eligible for student loans. Micro-credentials may not be appropriate for all subjects, nor will they answer the needs of all learners, but they can be useful where learners need to address a short-term skills or knowledge gap in a way that can be part of the lifelong learning journey.

A micro-credential can also be a qualification in its own right and does not need to be part of a larger award to have credibility. At the same time, small units of credit also have the potential to be used to offer access to more traditional higher education certification, like degrees, by being produced from within a well-designed, ‘stackable framework’ where qualifications articulate and accumulate, either following traditional progression through FHEQ levels or in a non-linear approach. Providing such ‘stacking’ is quality assured and subject to robust governance, with careful course design and limitations on the length of time that elements may be stacked, it can provide the flexibility for both access and lifelong learning to address real skills shortages and disrupted environments, and to address emerging skills gaps. That said, it may not always be that simple: the practical design constraints involved in stacking small units into coherent larger ones may restrict the use of micro-credentials largely to the context of continuing professional development (CPD) or as part of recognition of prior learning (RPL) for entry to a higher qualification. Many of the successes in micro-credentials so far have been market-driven offerings, accredited by employers or professional bodies, where CPD certification is rigorous. Micro-credentials may also be used for conversion courses for employees or learners switching careers, or finding themselves having to meet new professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements.

Degree-awarding providers retain autonomy on whether micro-credentials can or should bear credit. Credit rating micro-credentials can provide greater clarity for learners on the level of the learning they are undertaking, and how this might be utilised subsequently in a credit-transfer context. It also adds value to the micro-credentials for learners and employers by ensuring alignment with sector-level expectations about the nature of learning at specific levels, thereby ensuring greater portability and career progression opportunities.

Quality assurance – approval, ongoing monitoring and review – might well follow the same principles as that for other provision but will also be proportionate to the scale and intention of the micro-credential. The FHEQ is already flexible enough to accommodate smaller packages of credit as qualifications in their own right, such as the Certificate of Higher Education – a Level 4 qualification for 120 credits.

The currency of micro-credentials achieved over time poses a challenge, given that academic credit is typically recognised for about five years in terms of returning to study. A further challenge is potentially making a larger award based on a piece-by-piece achievement of credit. This can be a complex task, requiring academic judgement by the institution involved, which needs to consider the record of credit achieved by the learner on an individual basis.

Reflective questions

- What opportunities are there to offer micro-credentials in the context of your existing provision and learner cohorts?
- If you offer micro-credentials, at what level(s) are they positioned on the FHEQ, and can they be used as credit towards a larger award?
- What is the gain for learners and employers for a micro-credential to be credit rated to the FHEQ?



Short courses and executive education

Short courses and executive education can either be non-credit bearing or credit bearing (effectively making them micro-credentials). When these courses are non-credit bearing, participants might receive a certificate showing that they have completed the course. To be credit bearing, the course should map to the relevant framework level of the FHEQ, have learning outcomes appropriate to the level, and be formally assessed. Providers may have a designated short course framework to approve such courses. Alternatively, the provider might approve the courses through their quality assurance framework.

The structure of short courses and executive education, and the credit associated with it, takes several forms. These include a standalone qualification or a micro-credential, either of which can be portable and could, through RPL, contribute at a future point to a higher education qualification, and be one of the building blocks of a flexible degree structure.

Reflective questions

- What are your provider's processes for approving short courses?
- What are the challenges associated with awarding credit for short courses and executive education?

Placements

A wide breadth of placements currently exists in higher education. For instance, for a professional qualification the placement is often integral to the course. Placements are often modules within degree courses and can lead to the award of credit, providing that the learner passes the required assessment and meets the approved learning outcomes. The discipline studied will determine the style and importance of the placement element, as well as its duration and use of credit. Placements which include study abroad may involve the import of credit into the awarding body's degree course or they might involve the import of both credit and marks. Where the latter is the case, the degree-awarding body will develop a detailed marks conversion scheme in order to reliably translate the marks obtained at the other provider.

Reflective questions

- What approach(es) does your provider take towards awarding credit for placements?
- Are there multiple approaches, at the discretion of local departments? Or is there a consistent, institution-wide strategy covering where credit should be awarded for placement learning?
- If you only import credits, not marks, for study abroad placements, what is the rationale for this?

Partnership arrangements

For providers in partnership with a degree-awarding body (DAB), their role in the design of the course may differ depending on whether it is a franchised or validation relationship. Validation arrangements may afford more control over course design and quality, albeit within the terms of the partnership agreement, with the DAB having overall responsibility for the award. In a franchise arrangement the partner provider delivers a course designed by the DAB; the responsibility for quality, and the eventual award, rests with the DAB.

In both cases consideration of the use of academic credit in the design and approval of the award is a matter for the DAB. Providers who are delivering an award validated through a partner DAB can use the Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements to facilitate effective discussions and understanding of their role in the delivery of the approved award.

Reflective questions

- If you are a provider working with one or more DABs on a franchised or validated basis, how does credit operate under your agreement?
- Do you have multiple approaches to awarding credit (if working with more than one DAB)?
- If you are about to enter into a validation/franchise agreement, what discussions do you need to have about awarding, recognising and recording credit?

Accelerated degrees

Accelerated degrees are specifically designed to be delivered in a condensed time period, usually over two-years. Module delivery and assessment are designed and written to accommodate this condensed delivery scheme. The structure of accelerated degrees will vary between providers. Award of credit will follow the same pattern as more traditional models, with a typical two-year undergraduate degree consisting of 360 credits. However, it is not unusual for learners on accelerated degrees to start the next level of study prior to final confirmation of their results from the previous semester or term. Given the compressed timescales, swift decision-making and advanced planning is required to ensure that outcomes can be communicated to learners as quickly as possible.

Reflective questions

- If you are a provider planning on delivering accelerated degrees, what quality considerations do you need to make with regard to how students can progress with credit in condensed timescales?
- If delivering an accelerated degree, do you quantify learner workload with regard to credit weighting and notional hours of study differently to that of more traditional degree delivery patterns?

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)

Where courses are integrated with PSRB requirements, there are further considerations that inform course design and delivery. Different models of 'accreditation' are operated by different PSRBs, reflecting a variety of statutory roles and the need to demonstrate a wide range of professional and practice competencies. Providers will need to be conscious of the extent to which demonstration of these competencies are integrated (or not) into the credit structure of the award. For example, they may be factored-in and credit rated, or they may be additional to the formal credit requirements for the academic qualification.

Providers will need to consider learner workloads when aligning curricula with professional competences to avoid overburdening the learner, particularly where accreditation is in addition to learning hours for approved courses of study. Additionally, where accreditation is embedded within learning outcomes, they will need to pay attention to course progression rules and regulations, at approval and review. This should help ensure that academic and professional achievements, including placements, complement one another, and reduce the risk of course failure or delays to course progression, wherever possible.

Reflective questions

- Do the requirements of the course set by the PSRB comply with your institution's approach to credit?
- If not, are appropriate adjustments catered for within your institution's regulations/credit frameworks?



Continuing professional development (CPD)

Continuing professional development (CPD) can be delivered by employers, awarding bodies and other organisations, and can include accredited or non-accredited learning. Where a learner has undertaken learning activities associated with CPD, this can be recognised for credit by awarding bodies through the submission of evidence (for example, a portfolio) of this learning. Once this evidence is assessed, credit may be awarded through an awarding body's recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes, either by satisfying initial entry requirements or enabling entry with advanced standing.

Reflective question

- What are the advantages to both the provider and the learner of offering credit for CPD learning?

Integrated foundation years and Access to HE

Extended duration degrees which include the option of an integrated foundation year are studied by learners who are registered on a course leading to Level 6 outcomes. This study is routinely referred to as 'Level Zero' and is primarily at Level 3 although there may sometimes be Level 4 modules included as a core part of the foundation year.

These courses, which are designed to support learners towards full honours degree outcomes, are considered within higher education quality assurance processes and qualify learners for higher education funding. Teaching at this level is also recognised by Advance HE as part of the professional standards framework. It is common practice to consider the foundation year as an integral aspect of a learner's progression through higher education.

The QAA [Access to Higher Education Diploma](#) is a credit-based Level 3 qualification developed, promoted and regulated by QAA since 1997. The Diploma comprises units of assessment expressed as learning outcomes and assessment criteria. The credit requirement for the achievement of all Access to HE Diplomas is 60 credits, with 45 of these credits coming from units concerned with academic subject content at Level 3 and graded; the remaining 15 credits come from ungraded Level 2 or Level 3 units.

Access to HE Diplomas are awarded by Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), who are licensed by QAA.

Reflective questions

- If you are a provider offering a foundation year, what processes do you need to consider for credit progression from Level 3/Zero to Level 4 or, if integrated, restudy at Level 4 and subsequent progression?
- What factors relating to credit, curriculum or learning design and student experience, do you need to consider when devising a foundation year model?

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) often places a credit value on prior learning that can be counted towards the completion of a course of study and the associated award or qualification. A learner's skills and knowledge, achieved through work, community or voluntary experience, and/or prior study, is considered through a formal process against descriptors to assess the level achieved across the relevant learning outcomes. This assures the provider of the relevance and currency of the experience.

These RPL mechanisms are well established and set out within the academic regulations of the receiving provider, but are not universally integrated into course design. Applicants can provide a narrative account of their learning with supporting evidence which is mapped to the course learning outcomes, or submit a portfolio with a number of pre-determined requirements, such as a CV and employer reference along with other contextual portfolio documentation.

As there is sometimes a charge for RPL, this can be a disincentive for applicants, especially if the application fee is not significantly lower than the cost of sitting a module or specific parts of a course in full. At the same time, cost may not be a learner's primary motivation for seeking RPL - many are seeking to reduce the amount of time they study overall and avoid repeating a portion of formal learning. For these learners, it is possible that a more complex RPL process may be a disincentive.

RPL could disadvantage those with no prior higher education experience or whose experience is dated when it comes to assessment. Support for these learners could include study skills packages and other mechanisms to aid their transition into higher-level learning. Clear information for learners on cost, timescales and what happens if module assessments are failed is also important.

Reflective questions

- How can you more fully integrate RPL into the design of higher education courses, and how can this be supported through the process of course approval?
- While level descriptors support the consistent assessment of credit level, how can approaches to the assessment of prior learning consistently recognise the volume of credit in relation to the evidence of learning provided - within your provider and across providers?

Articulations and ‘topping up’

An articulation arrangement is typically a form of partnership where all learners who are enrolled on a designated course of study at a partner provider are automatically entitled, subject to successfully completing that course, to be admitted with advanced standing to a subsequent part or year of a course of a degree-awarding body (DAB). This model is by far the most common, but articulations can also take place from one course to another within the same DAB.

Articulations are governed by formal agreements between the two providers. Prior to entering into the agreement, the DAB will carry out appropriate due diligence checks including a check on the quality of provision at the partner, a detailed curriculum mapping to ensure that learners who transfer will have covered the required subject content, and that the credit volume of the studies already completed at the partner is sufficient to grant exemption from corresponding modules at the DAB.

Credit accumulation and transfer is a feature of articulation arrangements as the credit achieved at the partner contributes to the award completed at the DAB. Typical articulation arrangements are: 1+3 (one year at the partner followed by three years at the DAB); 2+2 (two years at the partner followed by two years at the DAB); or 2+1 (a Level 4/5 qualification such as an HND, foundation degree or diploma of higher education followed by top-up study at a DAB).

The credit accumulated across both parties should meet the credit requirements for the award at the DAB. These arrangements are written and approved, drawing on quality processes within the awarding body, and referencing appropriate documents such as the [Foundation Degree Characteristics Statement](#).

‘Top-up’ courses enable the conversion of an existing qualification, commonly a foundation degree or higher national diploma, to an honours degree. Foundation degrees are often designed with such top-up routes in mind to facilitate progression. This flexible approach provides the opportunity for a learner to study at a local college, transferring to a university to complete the honours degree. They can also be delivered in local colleges under validation arrangements, and need not include different locations of study, thereby giving learners access to Level 6 qualifications without having to move or travel to a DAB. Designed and mapped effectively, formalised top-up arrangements offer a level of cohesion within the award even if there are different locations of study.

Reflective questions

- What are your provider's processes for considering credit as part of an articulation arrangement?
- Do your processes cover articulation across the UK, for example, from a Scottish to an English provider?
- What are the challenges associated with incorporating credit from a partner provider into an award at your own provider?
- When considering progression for an applicant from Level 5 to Level 6 (2+1 model), how should you consider the relevance of Level 5 learning outcomes, that may be different in character from those studied at stage 2 (Level 5) of an honours degree? For example, have you familiarised yourself with the [Foundation Degree Characteristics Statement](#)?
- Has the foundation degree provided learners with the right level of skills to succeed on the top-up degree?



Collaborative approaches with employers

Higher education providers can formally recognise external learning opportunities provided by organisations or employers who are collaborating with them, to provide flexible access to higher education for underrepresented groups and/or non-traditional entrants. For example, where employers have developed in-company staff development and training programmes, higher education providers work with the organisation to formally accredit and develop the higher-level learning.

The accreditation process includes equivalent arrangements to those established for the award of higher education credit by awarding providers, including:

- appropriate learning outcomes
- summative assessment requirements
- associated credit level and volume
- appropriate qualifications and expertise of staff assessing learning
- approved arrangements for external scrutiny of standards and quality assurance, monitoring and reporting.

The higher education provider underpins these collaborative arrangements with a formal written agreement between them and the collaborating organisation/employer.

Such arrangements afford opportunities to provide routes into higher education courses with appropriate recognition of accredited learning, enabling learners to access courses at a later stage through advanced standing. Similarly, higher education providers can also develop bespoke employer-sponsored courses, designed using a combination of accredited in-company learning and the provider's modules, that lead to the award of higher education qualifications. Some providers have developed work-based or work-integrated frameworks comprising modules designed specifically for this purpose.

Reflective questions

- What systems and procedures do you need to put in place to ensure that credit awarded for external collaborative provision is established through equivalent expectations of standards and quality of learning opportunities?
- What opportunities for higher education innovation are provided by the combination of accredited external learning and specialist and/or work-integrated higher education provider modules?

Higher and degree apprenticeships

The provision of higher and degree apprenticeships requires that all learning (training) hours are undertaken within an apprentice's employed hours. The learning hours required to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours (learning outcomes) for apprenticeships comprise a combination of on and off-the-job hours. A minimum of 20% of an apprentice's employed hours must be allocated for off-the-job learning. Off-the-job learning can take place in the workplace, online, at another location or any combination of these.

Apprenticeships that include a higher education qualification, or higher levels of learning, have been developed to meet the need for higher-level skills, technical, graduate and professional occupations across the UK. To ensure that increases in skill levels can be measured consistently, apprenticeships are aligned to established qualification levels and credit level descriptors. An apprenticeship also provides progression opportunities for further (lifelong) study which could include, for example, another apprenticeship at a higher level, professional qualifications or other higher education study.

Both apprentices/learners and employers are legally entitled to recognise prior learning before the start of higher education apprenticeship courses.

To do this, higher education providers in England require an initial assessment of prior learning in advance of starting an apprenticeship course. This is to ensure that public money is not used to develop knowledge, skills or behaviours that an individual has previously acquired. It also ensures that an assessment of prior learning informs an individual's personal learning to maximise learning potential.

Where initial assessment identifies prior learning, higher education providers, with the agreement of employers, can deliver a full course of planned learning but may not charge for the knowledge, skills or behaviours that have already been achieved. Alternatively, higher education providers may agree to implement RPL procedures. This can recognise prior learning through the award of credit and/or permit apprentices to progress to later stages of apprenticeship courses with advanced standing and/or exception. The remaining learning must have a duration of at least 12 months.

For example, the Police Constable degree apprenticeship (PCDA) requires that all providers make an initial assessment of prior learning, not just of any prior qualifications but also in relation to the evidence of prior knowledge, skills and behaviours required to undertake the role as a professionally competent officer. Where prior learning is identified, this will be reflected in an individual personal learning plan and will inform the tripartite discussions between the workplace coach, the apprentice and their higher education tutor that monitors learning progress. Providers delivering the PCDA often also deliver a degree holders entry programme (DHEP) to enable graduates to achieve a Level 6 graduate diploma and become police constables as an alternative route to the PCDA, accredited by the College of Policing. Even though the DHEP is not an apprenticeship and there is no formal requirement to initially assess prior learning, the good practice exemplified through the PCDA is being taken up by providers and employers to enhance the learning experience.

Apprenticeship standards in England require an independent End Point Assessment (EPA) once the apprentice has completed all relevant elements of the course. At Levels 6, 7 and 8 the EPA may be integrated in, or separate from, the degree course. For integrated EPAs, the higher education provider delivers the EPA as part of the credit-bearing award. Non-integrated EPAs are delivered by an independent third-party organisation.

Reflective questions

- Can you learn any lessons from the required processes for the recognition of prior learning for higher and degree apprenticeships for the provision of other forms of higher education?
- How can the regulated entitlements that higher and degree apprentices have to the initial assessment of their prior learning be equivalently reflected in the experience of other higher education learners?



Postgraduate qualifications

The term 'postgraduate' covers a wide range of courses – research and taught master's, interim awards, doctorates, professional doctorates and higher doctorates – and can run over a calendar rather than an academic year. A fuller discussion of the distinctive features of postgraduate courses can be found in the QAA [Master's Degree Characteristics Statement](#) and the [Doctoral Degree Characteristics Statement](#). For all types, providers can make use of credit to build in flexibility.

Postgraduate research (PGR) master's may focus on individual study, leading to a substantial, final major project or thesis (the MPhil, for example). Postgraduate taught (PGT) master's feature modules with a range of linked assessments and a shorter major project or dissertation. Both can include practice or work-based elements, are placed at Level 7 of the FHEQ and at second-cycle master's level in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and can lead to doctoral-level study (Level 8 of the FHEQ and third cycle in the EQF).

PGT awards closely identify with a wide range of established and emerging subjects, employer/market needs, professional training courses, 'conversion' courses, and include qualifications such as the popular Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCertEd or PGCE). In some subjects they can be combined with undergraduate degree courses to form a four-year integrated or undergraduate master's award, such as the Master of Engineering (MEng).

Awards which the sector would otherwise consider as 'interim' – like the PgDip Legal Practice for solicitors' qualification – can hold professional standing in their own right.

Some doctoral courses integrate a PGT master's which is taken prior to starting work on the thesis. This is sometimes referred to as a '1+3' course. Some professional doctorate awards, which we explore further in the next section, may be research-led but also have taught elements at Level 8.

Higher doctorates (for example, Doctor of Science/DSc/ScD and Doctor of Letters/DLitt) are normally awarded by research degree-awarding bodies to staff who have earned a high reputation for research in their field through their professional practice, and do not use credit.

PGT courses can use credit to define the relative weighting of their constituent elements, to facilitate progression from previous undergraduate courses, and from them on to doctoral programmes. Credit can also support interim awards within some PGT courses which enable learners to leave with a master's award (all taught elements passed plus the major project – 180 credits), a postgraduate diploma (all taught elements passed – 120 credits), a postgraduate certificate (where the student might have exited the award without sitting further elements – 60 credits) or a certificate of credit (one taught element passed – 30 credits). PGT awards are often studied part-time by students who are also in full-time employment and therefore credit is used to support students undertaking the award over a longer time frame or to swap modes of study over time.

There are a number of award structures which can be used to consider how credit can be utilised. For example, PGT courses in a single discipline may opt for a standard credit-rating of 30 credits per taught module, with an allocation of 60 credits for the major project or dissertation module. This provides a simple, five-module award which achieves academic depth through a total study time of 300 hours per taught module and 600 hours for the major project/dissertation. Courses whose originality lies in bringing together cognate disciplines, or sub-disciplines within the same broad discipline, may opt for a seven-module award. Here, a standard credit-rating could be 20 credits per taught module, plus 60 credits for the major project or dissertation module. Individual elements may be studied in less depth, but the originality of this model enables the completion of a major project/dissertation whose depth comes from the creative synthesis of traditionally unconnected subjects.

Reflective questions

- How effectively can existing elements of PGT courses serve as micro-credentials?
- From the designer and learner perspectives, what are the relative merits of 'large' and 'small' modules in PGT courses?
- For part-time students undertaking PGT courses, how can you use credit to support their flexible learning requirements?



Professional doctorates

The number of professional doctorates in the UK has grown in recent years and there are some similarities between professional doctorates and traditional PhD study. They are both primarily research degrees that require candidates to contribute significant subject knowledge in their field of research. They show originality and independent critical judgement - which is practice-related in the case of the professional doctorate. They are also of equal value in the relevant qualifications framework. Both involve the writing of a thesis - or sometimes, at least in part, a portfolio - and a viva voce examination. However, there are also some significant differences.

Firstly, professional doctorates have a practical orientation that is closely related to professional practice. They enable practitioners to research and specialise in their area of practice, and to use the outcomes of that research both to enhance their own performance and to contribute to the wider development of the field. In this way, practice informs theory which, in turn, informs practice. Professional doctorates are generally designed to be studied part-time, over four to six years, and involve a substantial volume of placement/professional activity - a pattern which recognises that many applicants are currently working, allowing them to study and work simultaneously.

Secondly, professional doctorates comprise a taught stage and a research stage, which are credit-rated in most cases. Credit allocation for different elements within the overall 540 credit total varies between courses and providers, with 120-180 Level 7 credits for the taught stage, and 360-420 Level 8 credits for the research stage.

Thirdly, some professional doctorates carry PSRB accreditation or a licence to practice (in the case, for example, of the NHS-funded DClInPsy). The Careers and Research Advisory Centre (CRAC) found that the main subject areas for professional doctorates were education (EdD), business (DBA), psychology (DClInPsy), and subjects allied to medicine (MD, DDent), but the range of subjects has expanded and professional doctorates are now available in areas ranging from theology through fine art to policing. Some professional doctorates (DProf) are transdisciplinary and are designed to recognise doctoral-level learning in any area of professional practice.

Reflective question

- How would you use academic credit to differentiate between the relative weighting of the taught, practice-based and research elements of the course?

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