

# **Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training**

## **November 2004**

### **1. Background**

The National Framework of Qualifications forms the basis of a new, more flexible and integrated system of qualifications. The need for such a system arises in the main from the national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society', in which learners will be enabled to take up learning opportunities at chosen stages throughout their lives. The concept of 'lifelong learning' also implies that learners should be able to undertake units of learning at varying rates of progress, and perhaps not all in a continuous process; and that it should be possible to receive recognition for learning achievements in units that are smaller than many existing awards.

Credit systems have been in operation in higher education in Ireland for some time. Many of these are modelled on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) which was initially introduced to facilitate the transfer of students between higher education institutions in different European states. Other credit systems are designed to facilitate accumulation and transfer within institutions. Recently, the need to develop the accumulation aspect of credit systems has achieved greater prominence, and work is ongoing at the European level to develop ECTS further in this regard. This is taking place in the context of the elaboration of an approach to learning outcomes both for national frameworks of qualifications and an overarching European framework of qualifications in the Bologna process. In addition, developmental work is also being undertaken at the European level to create a credit transfer and accumulation system for vocational education and training.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has determined that the design of the National Framework of Qualifications will facilitate the development of a national approach to credit accumulation and transfer, based on units of learning. This approach will open up the Framework to learners as it will enable them to accumulate credit - including credit for prior and experiential learning - towards the achievement of awards.

In March 2003, the Authority, as part of its policies and procedures for access, transfer and progression, determined principles and objectives for a national approach to credit.<sup>1</sup> The general purpose of credit is to recognise learning achievements which have value in themselves and which may be used to gain an award. As a further step in its implementation, the main benefits of a national approach to credit in higher education and training are set out in this document, as well as additional principles and guidelines for the operation of credit. The principles and guidelines are intended to guide institutions and awarding bodies in developing their credit systems to complement the National Framework of Qualifications.

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<sup>1</sup> These principles and objectives are set out in Appendix 1.

It is recognised that the overall aim is to establish a common currency of credit in higher education and training that can also provide a basis for the development of credit in further education and training. The approach is also based on the need to establish zones of mutual trust for credit to operate within and between institutions at all levels. This takes time to establish and the Framework is expected to play a significant role in building this trust.

## **2. Benefits of a national approach to credit**

One of the main benefits to be derived from the adoption and implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training is that it will complement and support the National Framework of Qualifications. Specifically, it will meet the needs of learners in a lifelong learning context by facilitating credit accumulation and credit transfer across all sectors of Irish education. A national approach to credit will also facilitate and enhance processes for the recognition of prior learning, new modes of learning and learning achieved in many non-formal and informal contexts. It will support the attainment of awards, and indicate the achievement of outcomes in smaller units of learning, i.e. the achievement of credit will indicate progress towards an award.

There are clear benefits to learners in having arrangements for accumulation of credit towards an award in operation throughout the system. The more diverse learning community that is anticipated in the future will include many learners who participate in programmes on a part-time basis, or at intervals. The concept of the Framework itself, and the integration of the various classes of award-type (major, minor and supplemental and special purpose), depends on having in place ways of measuring and comparing packages of learning outcomes less than those associated with whole major awards.

The adoption of a system of credits is also a key component of the development of the European Higher Education Area under the Bologna process. ECTS is becoming a generalised basis for credit systems in higher education, and it has a proven track record in facilitating student mobility and international curriculum development, and is developing into a credit accumulation, as well as a credit transfer system. Thus, in line with Ireland's commitment to and participation in the European Higher Education Area, the national approach to credit will be compatible with ECTS.

This approach will encourage higher education institutions to adopt a unitised structure in the design of their education programmes which, in turn, will give them flexibility to be innovative and responsive to the needs of learners and employers both in terms of the design of curricula and delivery.

The national approach to credit – which spans both the higher education and training and further education and training sectors – is intended to establish a stable and clearly understood national currency in learning that will benefit both learners and recruiters in education and employment. Specifically, it will help foster mobility amongst Irish learners both nationally and internationally, and enable education providers to attract international students more readily. It

will also enhance the readability, the comparability and the recognition of Irish higher education and training awards both nationally and internationally. This will be reflected in instruments such as the Diploma Supplement.

### **3. Principles and Guidelines: some key issues**

#### **3.1 The National Framework of Qualifications and credit: outcomes and inputs**

The development of a national approach to credit in higher education and training is intended to complement the National Framework of Qualifications. Given that the Framework is an outcomes-based awards system, and that the national approach to credit will be compatible with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation system (ECTS) – a system that is based on inputs (i.e., student workload) – the question naturally arises as to how such complementarity will be achieved.

Learning outcomes can be described and even defined in great detail, but tools do not exist by which learning outcomes can be measured, apart from the crude device of counting specific skills. All workable approaches to assigning credit to learning achievements require the use of a notional device that can associate either learning outcomes or programme targets with something else that *can* be measured: the most commonly-used of these devices in Europe is learner workload, and this is the measurement basis of ECTS. While the workload/programme relationship is itself notional, the association between these constructs in ECTS is very strong, as the key quantity involved in defining learner workload is that of a notional average programme-year's participation in learning. The workable nature of this arrangement is strengthened by the fact that most credit for learning achievement in higher education is gained through participation in programmes.

Working from this logic, it can be seen that a comparatively reliable association can be drawn between programme size and credit assignment – in effect, programmes can be credit-weighted, and it is now common practice to define higher education programmes as, for example, '120-credit' or '180-credit' programmes.

The association of credit quantities with learning outcomes or award standards requires a second notional device, that of a notional 'typical programme'. Consequently, when one talks about a '180-credit award', the reference is in reality to a typical programme leading to this type of award, and the concept should really be described as 'an award with which we associate a 180-credit programme'. If the programmes typically associated with an award-type vary in their credit weightings, it is then logical to describe such an award-type in terms of a range of credit values (see below).

### 3.2 Credit and levels

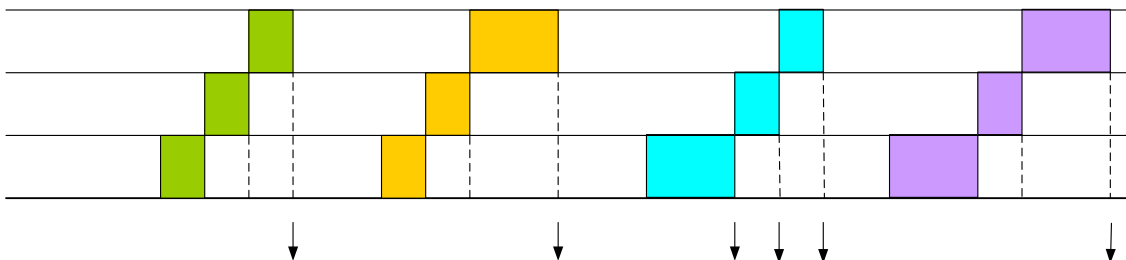
As credit weighting is not a defining factor in any award-type descriptor in the Framework, it is not necessary to associate any particular level in the Framework with any particular amount of credit. Equally, the policies and criteria for the Framework do not indicate any reason why it is not possible to have different credit-weightings associated (via typical programmes, as discussed above) with various named awards at the same level, even named awards of the same award-type.

#### *Credit profiles and credit attribution*

The National Framework of Qualifications provides a levels referent for awards in Ireland. The same levels can be used to clarify the meaning of credit packages attributed to multi-year programmes, i.e. as the basis of ‘credit profiles’ which can illustrate the (real or notional) ‘attribution’ of credit at stages within programmes.

A particular issue has been identified in the interpretation of the credit associated with certain award-types such as the Honours Bachelors Degree at Level 8. The question arises: if the award is made at Level 8, and a typical programme leading to this award is 3 or 4 years in duration, does this imply that the learning involved is all at level 8? This is clearly not the case, and yet the typical weighting of such a programme as ‘180 credit’ or ‘240 credit’ appears to suggest it.

This apparent paradox can be interpreted with the assistance of the diagrams set out below which illustrate the ‘real’ meaning (in terms of current practice) of the attribution of credit to various awards of the same type. The key concepts are those of credit profile and credit attribution.



- Figure A profiles the credit associated with a typical 3-year programme. The total credit package for the programme in ECTS terms is 180, and an award is made only when a learner has accumulated this amount of credits. Depending on the practice in the awarding body concerned, the credit may be allocated to a learner at intervals (e.g., for completion of programme modules, or on the basis of yearly assessment) or it may all be allocated at the end of the 3-year programme (e.g., following a final examination). In any of these situations, it is still valid to ‘attribute’ the credits available, on a real or notional basis, to stages in the programme that correspond to Framework levels: thus, the programme illustrated leads to a Level 8 award, but the total credit package is notionally attributed as 60 for learning with Level 6 outcomes, 60 for learning with Level 7 outcomes and 60 for learning with Level 8 outcomes.
  
- Figure B profiles the credit associated with a typical 4-year programme in many disciplines in both the Irish universities and Institutes of Technology, leading to an Honours Bachelors Degree award at Level 8 in the Framework. The total credit package in this instance is 240, which can be attributed as 60 at Level 6, 60 at Level 7 and 120 at Level 8. As with the example in Figure A above, this profile illustrates a programme in which no award is made until the total credit package has been accumulated.
  
- Figure C profiles another typical 4-year programme, which may be provided in many disciplines in Irish Institutes of Technology, again leading to an Honours Bachelors Degree award at Level 8 in the Framework. The total credit package, as with the example in Figure B above, is 240. In this instance, the package can be attributed as 120 at Level 6, 60 at Level 7 and 60 at Level 8. By contrast with the examples in Figures A and B, this profile illustrates a programme in which awards are made at the three relevant Framework Levels (6,7 and 8).
  
- Figure D profiles the credit that could be associated with the kind of longer programme that typically leads to the award of an Honours Bachelors Degree in certain disciplines in many Irish higher education institutions, e.g. Architecture. This is a speculative profile, and it would be necessary to examine any particular programme structure to confirm its validity. The example is that of a 5-year programme, with 120 credits attributed at Level 6, 60 at Level 7 and 120 at Level 8, making a total credit package of 300.

It is noteworthy, in Framework terms, that the illustration points up the variation and diversity that can be accommodated in the profiles of named awards that all conform to the same award-type.

The interpretation of the credit profile for the ‘longer’ programme (Figure D) is challenging in the context of ECTS and the Bologna process, as it removes the effective upper limit of credit that can be associated with a First Cycle award. However, the ‘explanation’ of the credit package in relation to the longer programmes has been one of the conundrums arising out of the development of ECTS, and the credit profile concept does provide a solution to this difficulty. It also offers an explanation of the attribution of credit to stages within the First Cycle.

## **4. Principles**

Credit systems or arrangements in higher education will:

- *be simple, clear and comprehensive*
- *be compatible with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)*
- *encourage learner participation and mobility by facilitating access, transfer and progression*
- *support the attainment of awards as well as indicating achievement of outcomes in smaller units of learning (i.e. the achievement of credit will indicate progress towards an award)*
- *maintain the quality of standards of awards in the national framework of qualifications*
- *support the comparability and recognition of higher education and training awards*
- *facilitate, as appropriate, the development of the education and training systems including the design and/or redesign of learning units and awards*
- *accommodate and facilitate change in curricula and in delivery systems*
- *enable stakeholders (including funding bodies, awarding bodies and providers) to exercise their rightful responsibilities*
- *be cost-effective, and involve as little bureaucracy as possible*
- *respect the autonomy of providers and/or awarding bodies in the design of their programmes and awards systems and awards regulations*

## **5. Guidelines for the operation of credit**

The responsibility for assigning credit value to units of learning and whole awards will reside with the appropriate education providers and/or awarding bodies, and will take place within the context of the National Framework of Qualifications. The achievement of credit does not mean that this credit can be automatically transferred to contribute to the outcomes required for another

award. At the same time, it is recognised that the overall objective is to establish a wide currency of credit in higher education and training.

The national approach to credit is intended to be compatible with, and support the specific awards regulations that individual institutions and awarding bodies determine or maintain for their programmes and awards. These regulations will be consistent with the Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression. They will also comprehend such matters as entry requirements, compulsory courses/units, optional courses/units, pre-requisites and/or co-requisites for courses/units, recommended courses/units and the protocols and processes used for the recognition of previously achieved credit, including the principle that credit will not be given more than once for the same learning achievement.

The following guidelines have been drafted in line with the existing European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).<sup>2</sup> It is recognised that this system is evolving within the context of the Bologna process and the development of the European Higher Education Area. Thus, for example, in the Berlin Communiqué of September 2003 Ministers called for the further development of ECTS as a credit accumulation system. Exploratory work is also ongoing on the possibility of linking credit to levels and to learning outcomes.

The approach taken below is to develop operational guidelines for credit in Ireland that reflect the current state of play in ECTS. For this reason, and also given existing practice in institutions of education in Ireland, the focus is placed on the first two cycles of higher education (in terms of the National Framework of Qualifications, this concerns Levels 6 to 9) and the assignment of credit to major award-types. Further consideration needs to be given to the question of credit assignment to major award-types at Level 10, and certain research-based awards at Level 9. Such consideration will take account of existing practice and developments in ECTS in the context of the ongoing Bologna process.

Under ECTS, one credit is assigned to learning outcomes achievable in 25-30 hours of workload. The ECTS convention is that 60 credits measures the workload of an average full-time student during one academic year. Workload refers to the notional time within which the average learner might expect to complete the required learning outcomes.

In order to achieve coherence, clarity and complementarity between credit systems and the National Framework of Qualifications, the following guidelines are proposed:

- *Credit will only be earned by the learner after appropriate assessment and the successful achievement of the specified learning outcomes*
- *It is recommended that the credit systems of providers should operate on the basis that one credit equals 20 - 30 hours of notional time (or equivalent)*
- *Credit shall not be earned twice for the same learning achievement (in the sense that this should not lead to two awards at the same level for essentially the same learning)*

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<sup>2</sup> For the new ECTS User Guide (17 August 2004) see [http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/ects/guide\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/ects/guide_en.pdf)

- *It is recommended that there should be a minimum volume of credit attributed at the level at which an award is to be made e.g., at Level 7 in the case of the Ordinary Bachelor Degree. No programme, therefore, should have less than 60 credits at the award level.*
- *It is recommended that a range of credit values can be associated with an award-type, e.g. the range for the Honours Bachelor Degree can be 180-240 or, in more unusual instances, 240+.*
- *It is recommended that a typical credit volume or credit range be established for each award-type from levels 6-9 in the Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education system:*

Level 6 Higher Certificate	=	120 credits
Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree	=	180 credits
Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree	=	180-240 credits
Level 8 Higher Diploma	=	60 credits
Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught)	=	60-120 credits
Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma	=	60 credits

- *In order to facilitate progression, it should be possible for a learner to use some credit earned for an award at one level in the Framework towards an award at a higher level in the Framework – the processes and protocols for recognising previously achieved credit in order to give exemptions or to transfer will be determined by the receiving providers and/or awarding bodies.*
- *In line with the Authority’s policies and procedures for access, transfer and progression, it is recommended that awarding bodies and education and training providers will provide clear, transparent information to learners about their credit systems and arrangements for accumulation and transfer within and across institutions (including their own processes and protocols for recognising previously achieved credit in order to give exemptions or to facilitate transfer). This will include statements about the recognition of prior learning. It is also recommended that credits achieved will be recorded in student transcripts and in the Diploma Supplement.*

## **Appendix: Principles and Objectives for the development of a national approach to credit as determined by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, March 2003**

### **Principles for the development of a National Approach to Credit**

The development of a national approach to credit will be undertaken based on the following general principles. The approach will

- complement the national framework of qualifications
- be simple
- be clear and transparent
- be cost-effective, and involve as little bureaucracy as possible
- be comprehensive.

Operating principles set out that the approach to credit will:

- support the attainment of awards, as well as indicating achievement of outcomes in smaller units of learning (i.e. the achievement of credit will indicate progress towards an award)
- maintain the quality of standards of awards in the national framework of qualifications
- facilitate, as appropriate, the development of the education and training systems
- enable stakeholders (including funding bodies, awarding bodies and providers) to exercise their rightful responsibilities
- facilitate the design and/or redesign of learning units and awards.

Further principles may be identified following consultation with stakeholders and as the implementation of the national approach to credit proceeds.

### **Objectives for a National Approach to Credit**

The implementation of a national approach to credit will be in accordance with the following key objectives. It will:

- support and complement the National Framework of Qualifications by promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression
- accommodate and facilitate change in curricula and in delivery systems
- facilitate lifelong learning by
  - enhancing the range of learning opportunities with associated recognition
  - enabling the recognition of learning in many non-formal and informal contexts and in new formats, e.g. e-learning
  - encouraging participation in learning by recognising small steps of achievement
  - supporting processes for the recognition of prior learning
- provide a basis for comparison with other credit systems
- support Irish participation in European and international initiatives on credit.