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# **Mapping the capacity for reform: credit-based provision in London East**

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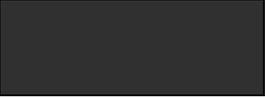
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### **Project Partners**

Barking College

Community College Hackney

Greenwich College of Further Education

Havering College of Further and Higher Education

Lewisham College of Further Education

Leyton Sixth Form College

London Open College Network

Newham College of Further Education

Newham Sixth Form College

Redbridge College

SEEC



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

In autumn of 2003, Continuum, the Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies at the University of East London, was commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council of London East (LSCLE) to conduct a scoping study into the capacity to develop credit-based learning for young people at further education colleges. The purposes of the study and the resulting report are to:

- Understand developments outside of London East further education college context in relation to any future efforts to develop credit-based learning
- Understand the particular context of London East in relation to credit-based learning
- Highlight examples of credit-based learning or structures sympathetic to the application of credit at partner colleges in the region
- Gather perspectives on credit-based learning from partner colleges

Working with nine partner colleges and two credit organisations – Newham College of Further Education, Newham Sixth Form College, Redbridge College, Community College Hackney, Lewisham College of Further Education, Barking College, Greenwich College of Further Education, Havering College of Further and Higher Education, Leyton Sixth Form College, SEEC and London Open College Network – a series of open-ended interviews were conducted to gather perspectives on past experience and the possible need for reform towards credit-based learning. Subsequently, further interviews and a student survey were conducted; we also gathered documentary materials on credit-based learning and the colleges of London East. This evidentiary base was analysed (see Methodology), and the results of these efforts has been organised into this report.

This report breaks down the findings and issues unearthed in the scoping study into a number of chapters. In *Chapter 2*, the case for credit is examined and this includes an

account of the context in which the scoping study took place. The chapter also provides a summary review of the literature relating to credit, the research undertaken and an account of the American model. In addition to the review of past work the chapter also introduces and describes current developments involving credit.

*Chapter 3* sets out a range of different perspectives on understanding aspects of credit. In doing this it focuses on credit as a construct or to be more accurate a series of constructs. The underlying assumptions most often associated with credit are critically explored. The chapter introduces the concept of Mass Customization as a way of understanding the operational features of credit arrangements.

*Chapter 4* outlines and discusses the methodology used in the scoping study. Particular attention here is given to the use of a stakeholder analysis. The importance of seeing and placing learner needs as central to credit developments is considered and also how such needs might be revealed. This chapter also provides information on the choice of research questions, methods of data collection and analytic techniques.

The findings and the interpretation of these findings from the study is the main focus for *Chapter 5*. The underlying assumptions and realities of credit are considered here and through this the gaps and inconsistencies in relation to information about credit are examined. Case study examples of credit and quasi-credit structures already operating in London East are highlighted to illustrate the extent of existing developments.

*Chapter 6* presents the working comments and proposals. Where appropriate these are addressed to particular audiences for further consideration.

## 2 THE CASE FOR CREDIT

### 2.1 FE and the London East Context

The further education (FE) sector plays an important and vital role in the education of both adults and young people and that importance is evident in the numbers of learners participating in FE. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) reports that there has been a 28% increase in enrolments for 16-19 year olds from the 1994/95 academic year through until 2002/03. Three out of every four young people are in education or training, and in 2002/3 the further education sector was responsible for educating nearly four million young people across the UK (DfES, 2004). However, enrolling 16-19 year olds is not enough; the achievement of young people and their progression to the labour market or to continued education is of the utmost importance. Of course, the FE sector also plays an important role in the widening participation agenda. Increasingly, higher education (HE) courses are being delivered in FE colleges with 11% of HE participants undertaking their studies in the FE sector and “43% of all those currently progressing into HE do so from the FE sector as opposed to the post-16 school sector” (Smith, 2002, p. 73).

FE colleges have a broad brief. They must prepare young people and adults in a very wide range of fields, both academic and vocational, involving a mind-boggling array of courses and qualifications. Hence, the expertise of FE colleges is that of providing and managing educational services to diverse populations in local areas. When compared to most higher education institutions (HEIs), FE colleges are experienced in:

- Managing diversity in terms of offerings and student choice
- Working with students with different ability levels
- Supporting students with “educational guidance”
- Engaging in progressive ways of teaching, learning, and assessment
- Maintaining close links with local employers and the community (Robertson, 1994, p. 75).

This mandate is no less true in the region of London East where this study is focused. For the purposes of this study, “London East” will refer to the following London boroughs: Barking and Dagenham, Hackney, Newham, Havering, Redbridge, Greenwich, and Lewisham. This is an operational definition of the area included in the study, not a definitive statement about what is considered to be London East. Butler (2000) summarises the difficulty in drawing the boundaries in this region of London:

*East London is a notoriously hard place to define. This is partly because it is a sub region of a major city and does not exist independently from it but more problematically because East London (or the East End or even London East) is as much an artefact of cultural as of physical geography (p. 10).*

The “artefacts of cultural geography” of London East are those of racial and ethnic diversity, poverty, and innovation and regeneration. Jerran (2002) describes the degrees of spatial (manmade physical barriers) and economic exclusion experienced by inhabitants of London East and how past injections of money into the area have not impacted many of its residents (p. 35). However, the development of the University of East London and the focus of regeneration policy on education, training, and community are reasons to be hopeful that change is moving in a positive direction. Stevenson (2000) remarks on the “huge potential competitive edge in a globalised world given by the location of such a broad mix of ethnic minority communities in East London – who have increasingly better attainment levels in education” (p. 51).

If, in fact, education is a core element of London East’s regeneration, then the availability of a wide range of opportunities to meet the needs of its communities is essential. London East further education colleges play a continuing role in extending appropriate and diverse educational provision to the local communities which they serve. Across what has been defined as London East for the purposes of this report, there is, of course, variation in income levels, standards of living, locale (urban vs. suburban, ethnic backgrounds, etc). Nonetheless, most of the project partners reported that the nature of their student population was one of lower-than-average achievement, a high deprivation element and a large ethnic mix.

Data from the Learning and Skills Council of London East in 2004 show that there are around 110,000 16-19 year olds in the region and this population is on the increase (LSCLE, 2003, p. 13). However, nearly half of young people in the LSCLE area do not leave school with a qualification, and a total of 15% simply fall through the cracks and do not continue on with their education after leaving school or find employment (LSCLE, 2003, p. 13).

In order for FE colleges, both in London East and nationally, to raise achievement levels and progression rates where needed, colleges are required to act and react in innovative ways in order to provide the best and most appropriate education for the communities they serve. This means providing high quality education that is flexible, student-centred, and fit-for-purpose. This study and report engage with the potential for credit accumulation and transfer (CATS) to further extend and optimise the capacity of FE colleges to fulfil this mission. Hence, one must ask the question, what potential does credit have as a tool in the education of young people, particularly with a view to increasing student success? Why is it important to grant credit for learning achieved?

To begin to shed light on these questions, the following sections examine the role of policy in developing a rationale for a CAT system and its theoretical benefits. We also question the US model and reviews the previous research that has examined CAT systems in higher education (HE) and further education (FE).

## **2.2 The Development of Credit**

The concept of ‘credit’ is not new, although its definitions and manifestations have emerged differently in various contexts. This chapter sets out to sketch out credit developments since the late 1980s with reference to the policy frameworks that have tentatively advocated its use.

One initial thrust for credit came in 1986 with the development of a credit structure introduced by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). According to Walsh and Johnson (2001), the purpose of this effort within higher education was based on a desire for “a tailored response to the needs of the broader range of students who were beginning to enter higher education” and as a way of avoiding multiple

delivery of the same modules on different courses (p. 2). This early beginning of a credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS) was gradually devolved to the universities and most universities have modular courses and use some aspects of CATS. Some universities also have membership in a consortium that encourages the further development of CATS to enable the movement of students from one HE institution to the other without a loss of achievement. The Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC), the Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales (HECIW) and the Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (NUCCAT) are examples of major consortia that operate in the UK. According to a comprehensive survey of UK universities conducted by Johnson and Walsh (2000), over two-thirds of universities employ undergraduate credit using ten notional learning hours to represent one credit and nearly ninety percent of institutions have their courses delivered in modules, with two-thirds dividing the academic year into semesters (p. 26). In theory, this should allow not only the accumulation of credits but the transfer of credits between institutions if students elect to move from one institution to another. Nonetheless, a recent paper Bekhradnia (2004) indicates that, in 2002-03, it is likely that most of the 11,000 students who “transferred” to another HE institution *did not* receive credit for previous work due to incompatibility between accounting methods, course content, and standards (p. 7).

Another strand in the credit accumulation story has been the development of the national Open College Network (NOCN) and open College Networks (OCNs). The first OCNs were established in the 1970s and 80s, and the Networks remain a very important awarding body for credit. The Networks support credit-based learning, created and adapted for local markets. OCNs have “off the shelf” courses as well as working with further education colleges and training providers to develop credit-bearing courses, primarily for adults. Davies cites three uses for OCN credit: to certify previously unrecognised learning, sometimes work-based; to bolster other learning programmes; and, to provide a “bridge” between courses or programmes of learning. In general, OCNs fill the needs of colleges and students by offering courses that fall outside of the national qualifications and one study reports that, although variable, adults are more heavily represented on OCN courses (Davies, 1999).

Of course, as education and employment now operate in a global marketplace, the mobility of students and portability of their achievements is an issue that goes beyond UK borders. Hence, the European Union's Bologna Declaration supports the development of the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS) among other reforms that can support the mobility of learners. ECTS cannot, by itself, bring about a true European educational market. Allan (2002) argues that "comparability/compatibility" within Europe is far from a reality, particularly when national systems (including the UK) suffer from a lack of such arrangements internally (p. 285). Societal and cultural norms with respect to assessment and grading represent another barrier to the creating comparability and compatibility (Sullivan, 2002).

Although considerable focus is put on HE in relation to ECTS and general European integration in education, there are calls for recognising all forms and levels of learning within a pan-European system. Despite the obstacles in doing so, Adam (2001) suggests that: "higher education can no longer exist as an island isolated from secondary, vocational and adult education. It must integrate more with these sectors by building appropriate bridges that help create a workable system for lifelong learning" (p. 303).

If the use of credit is widespread in higher education and adult education, and efforts are being made to develop a pan-European system to its fullest potential, why has credit not found its way to further education for the 16-19 group? In fact, in Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, there have indeed been developments in credit-bearing learning for young people. Wales is rapidly moving toward an all-encompassing framework for 16 plus education. ELWa (Education and Learning in Wales), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and ACCAC (Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales) are working together within a clearly laid out implementation plan. Along with the plan, a *Common Credit Accord* serves "to formalise agreement on terminology, design specifications, principles and systems required to ensure that the currency of assigned and awarded credit is fully quality assured" (ELWa, 2003, p. 4). Northern Ireland and Scotland have taken similar paths, developing Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) and Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer system (SCOTCAT), respectively. Beyond developing a system of credits, the

Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is Scotland's qualification framework, grouping all qualifications into a single framework and one that is credit-based. Beyond an approach that will allow credit accumulation and transfer within these provincial borders, the UK Credit Equivalence Project has made strides to link credit frameworks in Northern Ireland (NICATS), Wales (the Credit and Qualifications Framework, Wales), and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA). Among the FE qualifications encompassed by the project are: GCE AS/A Level, GCSE, GNVQ, and NVQs.

### **2.3 Related Reform**

Credit is but one tool to enable learners to participate and succeed in education. This report argues that credit must be connected to other reforms that can lead to a comprehensively accessible education system and one that offers choice and opportunities for the mobility of the learner. There are several current and proposed reforms worth noting.

The current work of the Tomlinson Group as well as Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is indicative of the moves toward reform in order to make education more accessible. The Tomlinson Group formulates a fundamentally different approach to education in terms of adopting a new model (in the case of 14 -19 education) and there is a substantial push towards a national credit framework for adults by the QCA.

For young people, the possibility of a credit framework has been put somewhat on hold until it is clear how credit will feature in a diploma system, such as that proposed by the Tomlinson Working Group. Tomlinson (2003) calls for "enabling those young people who leave learning before 18/19 to retain credits for their achievements" (p. 7). Hodgson and Spours (2003) describe two models of a reformed 14-19 curriculum in which credit accumulation would play a role. First, a "flexible and open approach" is the most "radical" new system. In this approach, the "14-19 awarding structure focuses on progression, learner choice, modular design, credit accumulation, key skills and overarching certification of current qualifications" (p. 167). Less radical is the "combined approach" which is characterized by a prescribed core but at the same time allowing for choice in specialization areas and some use of modules and credit.

Based on a diploma or baccalaureate system, the authors advocate a design where a “common core” is required of all learners, while also employing “a limited use of modularization and credit, and opportunities for learners to exercise choice” (Hodgson & Spours, 2003, p. 167).

Both the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and Learning and Skills Council (LSC) are involved in working toward the goal of credit for adults. The QCA promises:

*By 2007 modern qualifications will be tailored and quality-assured to meet sector needs, and placed in unit-based credit frameworks. Adaptable assessment and funding arrangements will extend access and take-up, improve equality of opportunity and promote lifelong learning. This revitalised system will support employers, young people and adults by developing the skills of the workforce and improving international competitiveness (2003b, p. 1).*

A yet more recent policy development is around Lifelong Learning Networks, as proposed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). These Networks, made up of partnerships of further and higher education institutions, aim to facilitate the progression of vocational learners beyond Level 3 qualifications, similar to those studying A-levels and progressing to university. HEFCE’s (2004) briefing on Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs), states: “About 90 per cent of those on conventional A-level programmes enter higher education, but only 40-50 per cent of those qualifying at Level 3 in vocational subjects do so” (p. 4). A key element in guiding students through a network of colleges and universities in such a way to overcome barriers to progression is that of credit accumulation and transfer.

## **2.4 Policy Context of CATS**

Credit-based learning is advocated as an essential part of an inclusive education system and support for credit systems is found throughout the widening participation discourse. The debate over credit is not new, and policy papers have reflected the potential for credit systems to facilitate learning which is student-centred and contributory to lifelong learning. Credit can be seen as a vehicle to more accessible education in post-compulsory institutions that can, in turn, increase the numbers of

post-16 learners in order to fulfil the needs of the economy and improve the personal and financial prospects of individuals.

In July of 2003, with the Government's White Paper on skills, *21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential*, the desirability to moving towards a credit-based system within the national qualifications framework was made apparent, particularly, for adults (DfES, 2003a).

The 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, maintains the importance of credit transfer and accumulation systems in providing flexibility and facilitating participation both in further and higher education, among institutions in terms of consortia as well as within institutions themselves (DfES, para 1.19 and 5.25). The White Paper also advocates the use of credit as a means of responding to increasing student diversity (DfES, 2003b). With respect to the FE community, *Learning Works* states that credit transfer can provide students with a degree of control over their own learning as well as "accreditation for interim achievement . . . recognition for their work" and the opportunity to "build up credit throughout their lives" (Kennedy, 1997, p. 86). In addition, the DfES report *Success for All* (2002) calls for ensuring:

- Greater choice
- Higher standards
- Clear progression routes to HE and employment
- Engagement between employers and "a transformed and responsive network of further education colleges and other providers committed to meeting regional and sub-regional skill needs" (DfES, 2002).

The initiatives to make education more accessible are many and diverse. "Aspiration raising" among young learners to increase their awareness of future educational opportunities; access courses for adults; modular course structures; and distance learning are examples of ways in which access can be improved and lifelong learning promoted. Credit accumulation and transfer is central to these initiatives.

The rationale surrounding the development of CAT systems has been based on advantages of credit frameworks for learners in terms of accessibility and mobility.

Ashworth (1995) defines “a good credit system” as “one that also increases motivation by providing shorter-term targets for learners, and provides a reliable and credible measure of learning gain that can be used in the allocation of resources” (p. 2). *A Basis for Credit?* (FEU, 1992) outlined some of the ways in which credit can impact stakeholders:

### **Learners**

- Greater opportunity to negotiate and plan learning programmes appropriate to their needs, interests and preferred mode of learning;
- Increased choice and opportunities to enter and exit education and training according to needs and circumstances and retain credit earned to date;
- Opportunities for changes in direction without loss of credit and with interim certification.

### **Institutions**

- A means to map, review, and plan curriculum offers both internally and in collaboration with other providers
- A standard definition of credit and a means of determining it in relation to a range of curricula and qualifications for 16-19 year olds and adults
- A basis for establishing modular delivery structures which would enable institutions to provide flexibility, choice and breadth cost effectively
- A basis for high quality progression routes into education and training of all kinds (FEU, 1992, p. 5).

Similarly, Tait (2003) asserts that “credit-based approaches can play a crucial role in adding value, not only for learners, but for a range of stakeholders including providers, employers, community, policy-makers, planners, funders, regulators and awarding bodies” (p. 15). Credit is thought to be valuable in terms of facilitating:

- Progression
- Customised provision with employers
- Learning in small chunks instead of only whole qualifications
- Recognising small chunks of learning to motivate the learner
- The elimination of distinctions between full- and part-time learners

- Student mobility locally, nationally, and internationally
- Lifelong learning through the creation of a system in which individuals can continually build on and build up credit
- Equivalence between academic and vocational qualifications

Taking these perceived benefits in total, at least three themes resonate: **choice**, **flexibility**, and **portability/mobility**. These themes are learner-centred and will be taken forward in this report.

While there seem to be clear and numerous potential benefits for learners, there are also benefits from the adoption of CATS for institutions. However, this report argues that, as yet, institutions perceive the adoption of credit frameworks to be resource intensive. The benefits to institutions do not yet appear substantial enough to move things forward for the sake of the learner. Barriers external to the institution and hence out of their control tend to compound the problem. An example of how external pressure and systemic necessity colluded to make credit a reality is in the case of the US. Although learners may well benefit from a credit-based system, the catalysts for credit-based learning lie elsewhere. Despite the contextual differences between the US and the UK, the longevity of credit and perceived benefits of credit in the US prompt comparison and borrowing. However, with respect to further education as opposed to higher education, it is helpful to look again at the US model, and further, and to look at it critically.

## 2.5 The US Model Revisited

In the United States, credit accumulation and transfer has been a part of the educational landscape for about a century, and the structure and implications of the system has been described (Altbach, 2001; FEU, 1993) and taken into account in discussions of credit the UK (Robertson, 1994). In higher education, the development of CATS has been influenced by international models of credit transfer. In FE, however, is it possible to learn anything from the American model? More importantly, it is essential to view the US model *critically*. Although those in the US who question the notion of “the credit hour” are in the minority, there is recent thought on how credit can be a negative.

What, if anything, is driving credit-based learning in London East or nationally? If the drivers or incentives are not sufficient, will institutions be bothered? In the case of the US, credit was not adopted in secondary and higher education solely for the reason that it might improve student success or mobility, or that flexibility or choice would benefit students. Instead, external drivers played a significant role.

The historical development of the credit hour has its basis in the expansion of secondary (high school) education. Between 1910 and 1920, the percentage of US high school students more than doubled to 32% of 14-17 year-olds (Shedd, 2003, p. 6). In order to standardise the time spent on the curriculum, and for colleges and universities to be able to have a common basis from which to admit high school graduates, the credit-driven system developed. Another force behind the development of a credit system was the Carnegie Foundation. When Andrew Carnegie provided a large sum of money to be used for pensions for retired professors, the Foundation linked the eligibility for the scheme to a college or university's use of the credit hour (Shedd, 2003, p. 8). Unsurprisingly, the credit hour quickly gained acceptance.

Another key development in higher education in the US was that of a system of “electives”. The interpretation of “liberal education” in the US has been one that has the goal of creating a well-rounded person. To achieve this goal, “general education requirements” forms much of the first two years of university education. These requirements are distributed over a wide range of disciplines and fall under headings such as social science, science, humanities, and more recently, non-Western cultures or a diversity requirement. By way of example, the University of Wisconsin-Madison states their purpose behind these requirements:

*The purpose of the General Education requirements is to ensure that every graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison acquires the essential core of an undergraduate education that establishes the foundations for living a productive life, being a citizen of the world, appreciating aesthetic values, and engaging in life-long learning in a continually changing world. For this reason, these core requirements provide for breadth across the humanities and arts, social studies, biological sciences and physical sciences; competence in communication, critical thinking and analytical skills appropriate for a university-educated person; and investigation of the issues raised by living in a culturally diverse society (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004).*

Students must take a certain number of credits in each designated area, and there is a great deal of choice of what can “count” toward each requirement; however, this choice is not limitless. Similarly, within the area of student’s specialisation (major), there is also usually a choice of electives, and these are linked to a set of core requirements where students have some choice but within limits that retain programmatic coherence. The popular idea that the US undergraduate degree is formed from a “pick-a-mix” of classes and credits is quite simply a fallacy.

Along with the interpretation of a liberal education, the elective system began as a way of attracting students. It allowed universities to differentiate among themselves and appeal to a range of student interests. According to Shedd (2003):

*Demand to make institutions more attractive to the broader public led to a huge increase in course titles and a corresponding need for some way to document students’ progress. With a greater number entering higher education, student mobility also increased and quantitative, transferable learning units became critically important (p. 9).*

In sum, the need for a transparent means of comparing university applicants, the influence of the Carnegie Foundation, an underlying belief in developing the “well-rounded individual”, and a need to attract students led to the development and use of a credit system. Additional important drivers include the federal government’s use of the credit hour in regulation and collection and reporting of data as well as the state government’s use of credit in funding public universities (Shedd, 2003, p. 11).

This history, however, is one of post-18/19 education. This important difference should be considered when borrowing from the US system. The further education sector in this country is often thought to be equivalent to “community colleges<sup>1</sup>” in the US. This is not entirely accurate. First, the community colleges do not cater for the under-18 group. Instead, American high schools are organised to educate the 14-18 age group, and community colleges and universities take up where high schools leave off. Like further education in the UK, community colleges do provide education for adults, as well. Educational programmes offered to those just out of

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<sup>1</sup> Community colleges are teaching institutions normally offering qualifications of less than 2 years in duration. They may offer technical and vocational courses as well as the equivalent of the first two years of a bachelor’s degree.

high school are, in general, no different than those offered to an adult of any age. Community colleges and technical/vocational colleges offer a range of programmes, including a two year “Associate Degree” which can be the culmination of the *right* classes and credits to allow the individual to apply to study for a bachelor’s degree. In the US, the term “higher education” serves to include all these institutions. Articulation and transfer agreements between institutions (particularly in the same state) allow students to “transfer” to a 4-year institution to complete their studies and earn a bachelor’s degree. A key factor in the success of this practice lies in part in modularisation, credit, and transfer arrangements.

Why is this relevant to our understanding of credit? There are two important points to be emphasised. First, although students have the ability to “dabble” by taking classes and earning credit in whatever disciplines they wish, students are well aware that there are rules as to “what counts” toward their degree, whether they are at the community college or the university level. Degree programmes are structured and not haphazard. Second, the *further education college is not equivalent to the community college in that the latter is not responsible for the education of under 18s*. This is a very relevant point in that there may well be important differences between what credit can offer young people and what it can offer adults. In the case of the US, then, are credit systems used for young people? In discussing the development of credit in the US, high schools (for 14-18 year olds) helped set into motion credit in the higher education sector.

What, then, is the situation with high school education, that which is most relevant to 16-19 education in the UK? In the US, the high school curriculum is modular and is credit-based. However, most high school students would not readily identify with credits. (No research base exists to evidence this claim; it is based on the experience of one of the authors). The reason that they would not think in terms of credits is simply because choices in the high school curriculum are rather limited. Credits serve as an organisational accounting system to allow accurate record keeping and manage the options that students do have. However, the majority of classes are dictated in terms of what it is thought that students “should know” as well as by what is required to progress students into higher education. The approach is very much still “school” as opposed to “college”. This is a significant difference and therefore the

comparisons between the US and the UK concerning the education of young people need to be taken forward carefully.

This report has already stated that there is little or no controversy over credits in the US. In terms of high school education, it would be safe to say that there is no controversy at all. In higher education, there are those that have approached credit with a critical eye. One of the issues raised is over coherence. Most university graduates earn their degrees at more than one institution. This being the case, Shoenberg (2000) is concerned that although individual colleges and universities strive for curricular coherence, “it now must be the entire system that provides this curricular integrity” (p. 8). This is quite a challenge considering that the credit can have the opposite effect: “unique courses of study only serve to make transfer difficult . . . [institutions] have an incentive not to make their own general education offerings too adventurous or challenging” (Shoenberg, 2000, p. 53). Hence, there is the potential for a “dumbing down”, particularly of general education credits, those which are most commonly transferable.

The potential for credit to drive a system which results in an incoherent curriculum is being addressed by two means: firstly, by relying on academic staff contributions to develop overall competencies and a standards-based curriculum (Henry, 2000; Leffler, 2000); secondly, by looking towards adult learning in terms of focusing on individualisation, reflection, and a summative experience (Maehl, 2000). That does not mean, however, that credit will be replaced by another system; it is perhaps time to re-consider its negative impacts and how they can be addressed. In one study, eleven US higher education institutions that were “believed to be national leaders in instructional innovation” were examined with respect to the credit hour as a potential inhibitor of innovation (Ehrlich, 2003). The study found that the use of the credit hour was *not* a significant barrier for these institutions in that the mission and vision of innovative institutions was strong enough to work around any difficulties created by the necessity (for external purposes) to identify learning based on credit hours (Ehrlich, 2003).

The questioning of the utility of the credit hour is a positive thing; there is nothing worse than a foolish consistency. However, in sum, the benefits of a flexible system in which students can be mobile, exercise a degree of choice, and to gain credit for their learning in many different contexts outweigh the negatives. It is difficult to see how HE in the US could be otherwise structured as no viable alternative has presented itself. Nonetheless, any borrowing from the US must be done with consideration for the systemic and contextual differences.

## **2.6 Research**

As evidenced in the first part of this chapter, a great deal of work that has been done developing the rationale for credit and credit frameworks and systems already in place provide a significant technical resource. An understanding of credit and where it is already being used is also of benefit. However, work focusing on credit-based learning from a *research* perspective is rather limited. This is perhaps not surprising for several reasons: firstly, it is difficult to design research that focuses on what does *not* exist, i.e. credit; secondly, it is difficult to ascertain from within (and without) an organisational context what myriad of factors are impacting student achievement and progression. Nonetheless, the research perspective is needed in that it is essential that what are thought to be the impacts of credit are actually assessed in practice. Research also has an important contribution to make to evidence based policy developments.

One study, conducted by Davies and Bynner (1999), does begin to answer the questions around whether credit can do what is often claimed. The research documents several case studies of institutions where OCN credit was being used. The study reports that staff were misinformed about credit (Capizzi, Carter, & Davies, 1998). The authors found that employers and learners were not conversant in the language of credit, and that learners often did not even realise they were on a credit-bearing course. However, they concluded that students “did not need to ‘know about credit’ to benefit” and:

*[They] found no evidence that credit per se was a motivating factor in initiating learners' participation, but . . . several features of the programme that had been promoted by credit – continuous assessment, small steps, a culture of achievement, regular feedback – played a part in motivating them to continue (Davies & Thompson, 1999, p. 42).*

Related research, such as Munn (1988) investigated the use of a modular structure in FE in Scotland. Although the modular frameworks studied did not employ credit, the present report will later argue that it is the use of *modularity* and not credit alone that is responsible for the benefits associated with credit. Munn (1988) focused on the concepts of “choice” and “guidance” and found that choice was constrained by:

- External factors such as the fact that choice was not given “the same national prominence as other features” of the modular structure.
- New forms of teaching and assessment put heavy demands on staff and organisationally, timetabling and record-keeping were seen as complex.
- Staff felt that they, not students, were in a better position to make choices, choice is not necessarily a motivating factor for students, and employers and professional organisations limit choice (p. 4).

On the other hand, choice was promoted by:

- Support and leadership both within the institution and the region.
- The use of computer systems to timetable and to track students.
- Sufficient numbers of students to allow an efficient distribution of students among the modules (p. 5).

In terms of data collected from students, the author found: “they like the idea of choice but are less enamoured of the kinds of choices that are currently available to them” (Munn, 1988, p. 5).

As choice promoted by a modular system requires not only additional record-keeping, but additional guidance for students. In terms of guidance, the author found:

- Students displayed a lack of knowledge about the guidance available.
- Guidance was rather more “reactive” than “proactive”.

Munn (1988) concludes that the opportunities for choice are rather limited in practice due to flexibility being constrained by internal and external factors cited as well as guidance strategies that are less than optimal.

Cook (2001) explores the opinions of practitioners toward CATS in Northern Ireland (NICATS), attempting to elicit the “practical difficulties” in the development and use of CATS. Cook (2001) finds “many staff are ignorant of both the intentions of the scheme and its implications” (p. 252). Further, practitioners expressed concerns about the ability for a credit scheme to describe vocational and academic units in the same framework. He concludes that the important factors in the success of CATS are: “regional and institutional commitment” and the “support of individual practitioners” and that the “real benefits” of CATS cannot be truly known until learners are actually earning credits *and* actually transferring them between institutions (p. 252).

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In summary, credit is not a new idea, and, hence, much is already known about it. It is used as a tool nationally and internationally, for adults, and, in some places, for young people. Nonetheless, in England, and particular to this report, London East, the use of credit for young people is not widespread. Given the perceived benefits of credit, and those that have been evidenced through the limited research on the topic, why is it not commonly used? Where it *is* used, what forms does it take and what benefits are thought to be obtained by its use?

Before these questions are approached through the data, Chapter 2 presents a framework that will allow the reader to understand *how* credit works, and how it might provide benefit, particularly to the learner.

## 3 THE CONSTRUCT OF CREDIT

### 3.1 Understanding Credit

What is meant by credit and what purposes does it purport to serve? The data in the present study will reveal a lack of knowledge and, more importantly, misconceptions and negative expectations about credit and how it might function. If FE staff have not engaged with credit, it is understandably difficult for them to have a clear picture of it. The second half of this chapter serves to illuminate *how* the benefits, particularly with respect to the learner, might be realised.

Considerable effort has been made to create common definitions and precise language in order to understand credit and operationalise a national system of credit accumulation and transfer (FEU, 1992, 1993, 1995; QCA, 2003a; Robertson, 1994; Tait, 2003). What is credit, exactly, and how is it seen to benefit stakeholders? Credit can be seen as a unit of measure to describe what learning has taken place, or, perhaps more accurately, what the “owner” of the credit “knows” or can “do” and to what “degree”. Credit is often seen as an “accountancy” tool, used to recognise learning achievements by attaching a numerical value (based on what is known as *notional learning time*) to units of learning. *Notional learning time* is the number of hours the average student would take to achieve the learning outcomes prescribed. This approach to credit assumes more than just “seat time” has taken place must ascribe *learning outcomes* to the credit or credits achieved as well as to a *level* that is commonly understood. Credit, in and of itself, does not imply a level of *quality*. However, credit can be used to this end. Robertson (1994) advocates CAT systems as more than “accounting tools” but instead “as instruments for the modernisation of the curriculum and for improved quality assurance” (p. 82).

The “units” are often delivered in “modules” and are of varying “sizes”. The units encompass one or more learning outcomes. Appropriate assessment determines if a learner has achieved the outcomes and, if successful, will be awarded credit. The credit earned may be “traded in” for a qualification given that units or modules have

been taken in accordance with the appropriate *rules of combination* and programme regulations. Nonetheless, the credits achieved via the units/modules of learning “stand-alone” and are demonstrated on a *credit transcript* that (minimally) lists the unit/module titles and levels as well as credits achieved. The transcript is a “passport” which represents the entire volume of a learner’s achievements and can testify these achievements to for example employers or other educational institutions.

In order to measure learning in this way, it can be broken down into segments, referred to as *units* and *modules*<sup>2</sup>. Units are discrete and correspond with assessment and, hence, learning outcomes. These “units of assessment” are combined into “modules of teaching/learning”. The ways in which the units are combined into modules is not limited by the unit/module/credit architecture. According to one FEU paper:

*The relationship between units and modules is flexible. The outcomes of a unit may be reached through a single module. Alternatively, they can be reached through two or more modules, or one module can contribute to achievement of a number of units (FEU, 1995).*

Through achieving the learning outcomes associated with given units of assessment, a learner earns and *accumulates* the numerical credits attached to the units. In this way, credit accumulation is an *internal* process, occurring at a given institution. *Transfer*, on the other hand, can be seen as the process of a learner and his or her credits (as listed on a credit transcript) taking these credits with him or her to another institution. In theory, at this institution, the credits will represent learning achieved and could be used toward a qualification at the second institution. Toyne (1979) provides a definition of *credit transfer*:

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<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to emphasize that adopting credit alone is not a very powerful tool. It is in the use of modules and units that flexibility, mobility, and choice are potential results. While it is possible to attach a given number of credits to a traditional year or two year long course, the point is ultimately missed.

*An essential process whereby qualifications, part-qualifications and learning experiences are given appropriate recognition (or credit) to enable student to progress in their studies without unnecessarily having to repeat material or levels of study, to transfer from one course to another, and to gain further educational experience and qualifications without undue loss of time, thereby contributing to the maximisation of accumulated educational capital (as cited in Robertson, 1994, p. 53).*

Hence, the concepts of accumulation and transfer are different in an important way. Credit accumulated at one institution, if earned in a modular structure that allows different combinations of elective units, can promote *choice* and *flexibility*. *Portability*, however, is dependent upon mechanisms built among institutions that allow for credit transfer.

### **3.2 The Value of Credit**

Credit, unitisation, and modularisation are means of introducing *systemic flexibility* in terms of *pathways* and *curricula* (Morgan-Klein, 2003, p. 43). Credit can (theoretically) increase the flexibility for learners in terms of the transforming and varying the “sizes” of the commitment to a learning programme, allowing individuals or employers choice in deciding what units/modules are appropriate, and allowing students to alter their educational route with less time “lost”.

In short, attaching meaningful credit to completed units of learning has the potential to increase learner motivation, allow multiple entry and exit routes, and increase student choice. It is perceived to be a more transparent way of communicating to others what a student should know or can do. For colleges, students may be retained at higher levels and more easily return after an absence if they are able to move in and out of education more smoothly. Motivation may be increased by acknowledging smaller units of achievement (Davies & Thompson, 1999). Curriculum can be streamlined and duplication reduced given that certain units would have applicability across subject areas. The question remains, are these the benefits that are seen as desirable and which are expected by stakeholders in London East?

### 3.3 Dimensions of Credit Accumulation and Transfer

According to Sutherland (1993), there exist principles that should apply “to any development in the education system”. They are: transferability, flexibility, transparency, and compatibility (p. 7). Given the purposes of credit and the policy context already discussed, these are clearly desirable features of reform towards a credit transfer and accumulation system. Further, a series of conditions need to be met in the design of a fully developed credit-based system. According to systems theory, system is only a system if it has: an objective, a measure of performance, sub-systems, a degree of connectivity, inputs and outputs from the wider system or environment, both human resources and physical resources, decision makers and processes, and continuity (Checkland, 1981, p. 306). Taken together with the accumulation of technical information and rationale development around credit, the following dimensions begin to frame and understand the nature of CATS and the construct of credit:

#### **DIMENSIONS OF CREDIT**

**Appropriateness:** degree to which credit transfer meets the needs of the institutions, students, employers, and other stakeholders

**Choice:** degree to which a credit framework and system allows learners to pursue and combine interests

**Compatibility:** degree to which institutional and local systems fit into national or supranational schemes

**Comprehensiveness:** degree to which the entire complement of courses and qualifications at all levels and types of educational institutions are within a credit framework

**Consistency:** degree to which credits are a constant measure across time and among users

**Credibility:** degree to which the credits and the achievements that they represent are respected from one educational institution to the next

**Flexibility:** degree to which credit system allows room for student choice in the curriculum, multiple entry and exit opportunities, and opportunities for different modes of learning (part-time, distance, evening, etc)

**Portability:** degree to which credits can be used as a means of progression and mobility among institutions

**Quality:** degree to which the credit system supports and informs quality assurance systems

**Transparency:** degree to which credit allocation and transfer mechanisms are clearly defined and understood by students and staff and the wider public

There is admittedly overlap between the dimensions as well as gaps between them. Nonetheless, they represent the issues of concern as well as the potential for credit as a viable reform for 16-19 education. The limitations of the study do not allow for the exploration of all these dimensions. However, those dimensions that are of perhaps of most immediate interest to learners in FE and the most basic in what is expected of credit are *flexibility, choice, and portability*.

### **3.4 Flexibility, Portability and Choice**

With respect the US system of higher education, the Robertson (1993) writes: “Flexibility, mobility, diversity and choice in post-secondary education are the key organising features around which popular consent is mobilised and democratic participation is maintained” (p. 73). The authors ask the critical question of whether or not Britain is prepared for change that would allow for this type of democratic participation. We note, however, that the HEFCE/LSC proposals for LLNs are in part predicated on the need to equalise progression opportunities to HE from vocational pathways with those from ‘A’ programmes.

Flexibility, portability, and choice are themes that resonate with credit and with the intentions of government policy papers, as addressed in Chapter 1. For the purposes of this paper, these terms are defined as in Figure on the previous page. These concepts may be thought of as critical to of any mass system of education. If educational provision is flexible, it is not limited unduly by time or space. It is capable of offering a large number of potential learners a variety of different educational opportunities based on their needs and interests. It allows multiple pathways, opportunities to change paths, and ease of entry and exit across time. The achievements of the learner, however large or small, are owned by that learner, not the institution. The learner is permitted if not encouraged to make choices of when, where, and how he or she learns. There is a learning marketplace, and the learner the consumer. If education is a product or service (no matter how different then other products or services), how well does it provide for its customers and can credit, unitisation, and modularisation make for a better marketplace?

### **3.5 Customizing the Product for a Mass Market**

This analogy has been developed to understand and explain the potential workings of a credit-based system. Application of business principles to education is nothing new, although the compatibility of one to the other remains contested, at least by the authors of this report. The “accounting” analogy for credit goes a long way to explain how credit works in the abstract. Nonetheless, the accounting analogy is limited in its ability to explain how credits become attached to units and modules<sup>3</sup>, and furthermore become a system in which the learner is central and the dimensions of flexibility, choice, and portability operate in the interest of learners.

The mass customization analogy is one that is multi-dimensional and can frame product and process as well as producer and consumer. Mass customization in industry has been the framing feature in both the literature and in practice for a number of years. The concepts of Fordism and the mass market have passed into antiquity. Producers of goods and services must take their cue from the individual consumer instead of providing a single one-size-fits-all product or service. The consumer must be at the centre. At the same time, predicting the desirability of a range of products through market surveys and the like has proved less and less reliable, but “co-development” of the product between consumer and producer is thought to be essential (Tseng & Piller, 2003, p. 8). Moreover, cost is, as always, a factor. Creating products and services that are bespoke, customized in the traditional sense, cannot be produced a large scale and cost is prohibitive for most consumers.

Just as the mass production, Fordist mentality is long gone from private sector production of goods and services, so, too, does education find itself in an era where efficiency in educational products and services is not sufficient. Mass customization offers an opportunity to provide an educational experience that is what students want and is delivered in way that maximizes efficiency. Mass customization can be seen within the context of credit-based learning in FE in terms of its potential to customise

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<sup>3</sup> This report asserts that unitisation and modularisation are necessary to create a credit-based system that is functional and supports flexibility, portability, and choice. Unit-based courses and qualifications are discussed in the following Chapter with reference to mass customization. As indicated in early in Chapter 2 of this report, modules are of varying sizes as they encompass units of assessment, with which credit is allotted and “attached”. The following discussion uses the term “module” to correspond with the mass customization literature.

learning and courses to meet the needs of individual students while at the same time delivering education at “near mass production efficiency” (Tseng & Piller, 2003). Therefore, mass customization is *not* truly individualisation, which implies a re-creation of processes and modules for every learner. It is customization on a mass scale.

In the arena of credit and unitisation, responsiveness to consumer choice can be regarded as a major benefit, particularly for adults and employers. For young people, however, it may be more difficult to argue that they are self-aware, rational choosers. However, choice and flexibility cannot be limitless in education anymore than choice is limited in other areas of consumption. Individuals have constraints (where they live, amount of time they have to dedicate to a course, educational background and ability, interests, etc). Second, courses are also constrained by time and the amount of material that can be covered. Moreover, the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge (what fits where; what curricula make sense) as well as requirements of accrediting bodies, exam boards, and the needs of employers all limit the amount of variation that a given course can have. According to Pine, Peppers, & Rogers (2000), people don't want more choice; they just want what they want: “Customers . . . do not want more choices. They want exactly what they want – when, where, and how they want it” (p. 53). This could be the reason that, of the 794 NVQs in place in 1995, “at least half” of NVQs “were effectively unwanted and unused” (Wolf, 2002). Too much variety, particularly if it is not meaningful, is unhelpful and the development of this variety a waste of resources. “The number of different qualifications, in the government's view, confused students and employers. It meant that people didn't know what a qualification was worth, and this in turn reduced the incentive to acquire vocational skills” (Wolf, 2002, p. 81).

### **3.6 Mass Customization and Credit-based Learning**

Mass customization is about working with core elements that cannot be changed. They give the product integrity and are needed to make the product or service function. However, other aspects of the product are modular, and consumers can make choices to suit their needs and interests.

Modularity in use *allows consumers to **mix and match elements** to come up with a final product that suits their **tastes and needs**. For example, to make a bed, consumers often buy bed frames, mattresses, and pillows, linens, and covers from **different manufacturers and even different retailers**. They all fit together because the different manufacturers put pit the goods according to **standard sizes**. Modularity in use can spur innovation in design: the manufacturers can independently experiment with new products and concepts, such as futon mattresses or fabric blends, and find ready consumer acceptance as long as their **modules fit he standard dimensions** (non-italics in the original; bold not in the original) (Baldwin & Clark, 2000, p. 39).*

At the same time, one would not expect curtains to be able to be used on the bed in place of a quilt or duvet cover. Curtains are not a module of the bed. Similarly, a module in nail art, for example, could not be thought to replace a module, say, of introductory Spanish. They are a separate element or module of another product: window treatments. Nonetheless, as one may wish to use curtains in a bedroom, this would be in addition to the necessary modules to make a bed. The introductory Spanish module may not be a required element of a nail design course, but there is no reason one individual could not follow both modules. They serve separate purposes, but it can be imagined that in seeking employment in a salon, other languages may be a benefit. The Spanish module can stand alone; there is no reason that the learner need to take all the modules that are required for a particular qualification in Spanish. In the bedroom, one might want to only decorate the window with curtains. Or, someone may choose, now or in the future, to purchase coordinating roller blinds or tie backs, suited to match the curtain colours and window size, thus completing the dressing.

The ability to fit elements from different producers or retailers (education and training providers) is a bonus for both producer and consumer. For the consumer or learner, choice is optimised. Depending on the opening hours of the shop, ability to shop on-line, prices, and fabrics available, the consumer may choose some modules from one retailer or manufacturer and some from another. The producer and retailer open themselves up to a larger market of potential consumers because their products and services, while retaining a certain amount of uniqueness, fit or match with those of its competitors.

### 3.7 Professional Knowledge and the Issue of Coherence

How customised is customised? The taxonomy offered up by Alford, Sackett and Nelder (2000) provides a range of how customised a vehicle can be. What is appropriate in further education? One might view these levels of customization from least to most customised as very roughly comparing to 16-19 education (“form”), undergraduate education (“optional”), and postgraduate (“core”). In this way, the amount and kind of customization can be said to be proportionate to the learner’s maturity and educational experience.

Core customization: “the customer is involved in the vehicle design process such as occurs in low volume specialist vehicles”

Optional customization: “the customer is able to choose their vehicle from a very large number of options”

Form customization: “customers are able to have limited changes or enhancements made to the actual vehicle” (Alford, Sackett, & Nelder, 2000)

Given the choice available, and the presumption that the producer knows vast amounts more than the consumer about the product, what is to prevent the consumer from making bad choices? Just as a consumer of a retail product is not expected to know and does not need to know the inner workings or the design decisions that brought the product to its current state, learners are not expected to understand all the underlying curricular decisions or choices made when educators design a course. Most readers of this report will not know precisely *how* a computer works, just that it does. In purchasing a computer, there are indeed choices to be made, most importantly to the user that the software on the computer will be able to carry out the tasks that particular user needs to be able to carry out. The purchaser relies heavily on the expertise of the manufacturer and retailer of the computer to ensure that it “works” in general as well as fulfilling the particular needs of that consumer.

Neither the consumer nor the student has the expertise to make the majority of decisions required to develop a coherent course or functioning product. *However*, it is possible to allow the consumer to make choices, based on preferences and needs, on certain elements of the product or service – that is, to customise it. The learner/consumer may very well need support and advice in making these choices.

For example, Swatch brand watches offer a watch that the customer can help design with the assistance of the shop assistant. Some choice is offered, but “the constraints of the product system stop ‘bad design’” (Piller, 2003, p. 6). In the educational arena, unitisation and modularisation (and credit) are designed by the experts – educationalists – not the learner. Choice is available, but advice, guidance and expert design allow for the control over the curriculum and controlled choice on the part of the learner. In MC, when a product is divided up into subsystems (or modules), which, in order to work together, must follow certain “design rules”. These rules are divided into “visible” and “hidden” categories.

*The designers of modular systems must know a great deal about the inner workings of the overall product or process in order to develop the visible design rules necessary to make the modules function as a whole. They have to specify those rules in advance. And while designs at the modular level are proceeding independently, it may seem that all is going well; problems with incomplete or imperfect modularization tend to appear only when the modules come together and work poorly as an integrated whole (Baldwin & Clark, 2000, p. 39).*

The locus of control over the content of the curriculum is not changed by the development and use of credits, nor more than allowing for choice and flexibility in MC gives over too much control to the consumer.

*The accusations of managerialist control over academic matters ultimately miss the point. A credit framework does not impose content on academics or reduce their freedom to design courses. It is merely a structure within which learning can be recorded and given credit. Rationalisation is a funding issue, not the result of credit frameworks (Gosling, 2001, p. 277).*

Further, as Gosling (2001) suggests, with an insistence on “prerequisites<sup>4</sup>” control over the curriculum is maintained (p. 277). The idea is that there is *connectivity* and *dependency* among modules. There is *technical linkage*, or in credit speak, rules of combination. Modules must be distinct but also work together and “communicate” with one another.

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<sup>4</sup> Prerequisites are modules (or units) that must be precede other modules/units and progression is dependent upon successfully completing the prerequisites.

**Connectivity**—defining all the modules that *can* precede, follow, or operate in parallel with each module

**Dependency**—defining all the modules that *must* precede, follow, or operate in parallel with each module

**Technical linkage**—defining how each module can be linked to preceding, following, and parallel modules (Gilmore & Pine, 2000, p. xvi).

### 3.8 Creating the “Learning Relationship”

If further education providers use modules that can be combined with modules from other educational institutions, how could this be of benefit as it could encourage learners to shop elsewhere? It is not in the best interests of an institution to promote learner mobility (Walsh & Johnson, 2001, p. 2). Mass customization suggests that the provider must strive towards an individual relationship with the learner, a “learning relationship” defined as “an ongoing connections what becomes smarter as the two interact with each other, collaborating to meet the consumer’s needs over time” (Pine et al., 2000, p. 53). That way, the authors conclude that you will make “customers for life” (Pine et al., 2000). MC can be seen as an internal mechanism to improve retention and encourage students who drop out to return to the same institution. A comprehensive support, advice, and guidance system for the learner is essential. Lifelong Learning Networks can enhance the “learning relationship” between learner and educational provider. HEFCE (2004) suggests that “individualised learning plans” be used as a way of taking “full account of learner needs” and so that learners are able to “take advantage of opportunities” at all levels of education.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Educational Reform

Given the current work on credit at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and LSC as well as the work on LLNs, it seems appropriate to begin to frame the discourse of credit in terms of educational change or reform. The study to which this paper was linked is focused on understanding the *capacity* to move towards the further development of credit-based reform in London East. Capacity can be regarded in terms of such concepts *desirability* and *feasibility* of a given reform. Is reform a “good thing”? Is it possible given the context and constraints? Fullan’s (1991) work is useful in operationalising these concepts.

Fullan (1991) cites three areas that interact to determine the feasibility of initiation of a particular reform. Relevance, readiness, and resources are the three “R’s” of any reform. Fullan describes *relevance* as the “the interaction of need, clarity of the innovation (and practitioner’s understandings of it), and utility, or what it really has to offer teachers and students” (p. 63). Second, the question of an organisation’s “practical and conceptual capacity to initiate, develop, or adopt a given innovation” can be regarded as *readiness* (p. 63). Fullan adopts a questioning strategy to determine the relevance of the change and the readiness of individuals and the educational institution itself:

***Ready or not for reform?***

1. Is there a NEED for the reform?
2. Is it a REASONABLE and APPROPRIATE CHANGE?
3. Do staff possess the requisite KNOWLEDGE and SKILLS?
4. Do staff have the TIME to engage with the reform?
5. Is the change COMPATIBLE with the organisational CULTURE?
6. Are there other situations or OTHER ONGOING CHANGES to be considered?

(adapted from: Fullan, 1991, p. 64).

Resource concerns form the third strand:

*Resources concern the accumulation of and provision of support as a part of the change process. Just because it is a good and pressing idea doesn't mean that the resources needed to go forward with a change. While resources are obviously critical during implementation, it is at the initiation stage that this issue must first be considered and provided for (Fullan, 1991, p. 64).*

In order to begin to address these questions, they must be directed toward the individuals and groups considered to be stakeholders.

## 4.2 Stakeholders

In the areas of health policy, international development, and environmental conservation the importance of the stakeholder has been highlighted. However, the literature on stakeholders in the development of educational policy and reform initiatives is much less prevalent. Stakeholders can play vital roles at every stage of educational change, although the focus on stakeholders is often limited to working with stakeholders to build consensus or as an evaluative technique for a reform already in place.

The importance of stakeholders has been brought into sharp focus with the development and implementation of *Curriculum 2000*. Hodgson and Spours (2003) examine its progress and pitfalls and determine that one of the major issues was the lack of consultation and stakeholder input. They write: “the first and clearest message to emerge from the *Curriculum 2000* experience is that any future reform process needs to be long-term, open and transparent, and to involve stakeholders from its inception to its implementation” (Hodgson & Spours, 2003, p. 161). Further issues raised include the development as “an ‘island of reform’”, unconnected to the education as a whole instead of as part of a “joined up” programme.

The objective in using stakeholder analysis is to “evaluate and understand stakeholders from the perspective of an organization, or to determine their relevance to a project or policy” (Brugha & Varvasovszky, 2000, p. 239). In this case, the focus of the analysis is the further development and implementation of a CAT system. The rationale for the use of this approach stems from the idea that many groups affect and are affected by the implementation of policy and practice and that these groups should

be able to have a “voice” in the process of policy development and the expression of this voice will help determine the feasibility of a policy, contribute to its shape and ultimately increase the possibility of its success.

Identifying stakeholders is still a key activity. The list of key players include: college managers, college tutors, advice and guidance personnel, QCA, LSC, awarding bodies, parents, students, academics, universities, and employers.

### **4.3 Limitations of the Scoping Study**

As in any study, time, budget, and access were limiting factors. As such, rather than casting a wide net to include all stakeholder groups identified, this study focused mainly on those in FE institutions, managers, lecturers, and students. Further, access to and participation of individuals in this study proved challenging given their own busy schedules. The study was also limited by definition as a “scoping study”. As reflected in its aims, this study serves as a starting point, furthering the knowledge of stakeholder perspectives and the use of credit-based learning in London East, and the links to ongoing reforms.

### **4.4 Data Collection**

A number of data sources were used in this scoping study which is reported here. Institutional profiles were requested from the nine partner colleges. Four of the nine returned these profiles, which provided information on college and student characteristics, incidence of credit accumulation and transfer (or similar) usage, and a list of available documents and potential interviewees. College prospectuses and other public available reports and published material on the colleges were also collected. Two partner meetings were held as well as a seminar on credit. These provided important opportunities to engage in a dialogue with a variety of stakeholders and discuss interim findings.

Primary data was collected through the techniques of survey and interview. Following a small pilot of the survey and subsequent revision, a student survey (Appendix A) was distributed to the partner colleges, and four colleges participated in distributing the surveys. Of the 400 surveys distributed to those colleges, 247 were returned. The surveys were voluntary and anonymous and distributed by FE lecturers

during a class session. Additionally, key informants were interviewed. Eight FE managers participated in open-ended interviews in the autumn of 2003. Eight individuals also met with the researchers; these individuals were asked to participate based on their knowledge and experience with credit issues in both HE and FE. A further six (semi-structured) interviews with FE lecturers were held in the summer of 2004 (see Appendix B for interview protocol).

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

As the majority of the data was text-based and the aims of the study included gathering stakeholder perceptions, a general qualitative approach was used. Qualitative approaches can be thought to include: focus on the insider's perspective, the researcher as the main instrument of data collection and analysis, a fieldwork component, and, fourth, an inductive strategy, i.e. theory is not being tested (Merriam, 1998, p. 7). Further, this study can be seen as policy, not theoretical, research. Hakim (1987) states that policy research differs from the theoretical in the following way:

*An emphasis on the substantive or practical importance of research results rather than on merely 'statistically significant' findings, and second, a multidisciplinary approach which in turn leads to the eclectic and catholic use of any and all research design which might prove helpful in answering the questions posed (p. 172).*

The interview data was coded, using initially the structure provided by Fullan (1991) with respect to the major questions associated with the initiation and implementation of any educational reform. Within those broad questions, the data was coded according to the themes that emerged and were relatively consistent across interviewees. The student surveys were predominantly using descriptive statistics. These two sources, along with the documents referred to above, were used to create a series of snap-shots of stakeholders and perceptions towards credit in London East.

## 4.6 Research Questions

The following questions were broadly used to frame this scoping study:

1. What are the *advantages and limits* to credit schemes currently being used?
2. What, if any, are the *sources of resistance* towards the use of credit?
3. What *benefits* of a CAT system do stakeholders consider important, and which *benefits are currently being realised* and which are not?
4. What are the *expectations* of stakeholders with respect to credit-based learning?

## 5 FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

### 5.1 Stakeholder Perspectives

Several stakeholder groups were the sources for data for this report, students, FE staff, both managers and teachers. Academics and other professionals with a stake in credit were also interviewed. The student survey conducted and documents reviewed also inform this chapter. The findings of the data are outlined in this chapter, accompanied by an interpretation of that data. The structure that flowed from the coding of the data was one that fell within the parameters of Fullan's (1991) questioning strategy for reform. Further, credit or credit-sympathetic structures in London East are used as examples to illustrate current capacity.

### 5.2 Is There a Need for Reform?

In determining overall capacity, does the data show that there is a *need* for reform to credit-based learning? Whereas it is difficult to say “yes” or “no” to credit, the interview data indicates that “something” is needed given the overall low staying on rates, achievement and progression in London East. Two contrasting quotes give voice to the debate on credit:

“If it's such a good idea, why haven't we done it so far?”

(FE management staff member).

“If not *this* [credit], then what? (italics added)”

(FE management staff member).

Those “pro-credit” still often demonstrated a lack of knowledge of credit or had misconceptions about how a credit system might work. It is perhaps not surprising that *the interviewees that tended to be most sceptical were often those who knew the least about credit and how it might work, or held misconceptions about it*

In so far as students are concerned, most expressed the opinion that increasing flexibility, portability, and choice is a positive thing. When asked if learners should be able to drop in and out, have more choice, and take achievements to another

institution, those that thought it was “important” or “very important” were in the majority:

Table 4.1: The **theoretical** importance of choice, portability, and flexibility for learners

Q1: PORTABILITY	a bit important	9%
	important/very important	79%
Q2: CHOICE	not at all/a bit important	10%
	important/very important	78%
Q3: FLEXIBILITY	not at all/a bit important	17%
	important/very important	49%

Note: Percentages do not equal 100% as the remaining respondents answered “don’t know”

**Progression** issues as well as **gaps in the level structure** are the main reasons that interviewees saw fit to endorse a change of some kind in the education of young people. The difficulty that many students have in moving from level 2 to level 3, as well as moving from entry or level 1 onwards was highlighted in the interview data, as well as in the reality of the progression statistics at certain colleges. The interview data is clear in that, particularly in vocational areas, for students entering FE with a low level of basic skills, or students without 5 C’s at GCSE level, getting them onto the right course and/or bridging gaps between levels is difficult. Further, students’ progression was seen to be hindered by a “winner takes all” system, although there are some examples of partial achievement being allotted.

*Talking about average and below average students/how do you help progression from level 2 to level 3? Students manage to achieve entry requirements for level 3, but then struggle. It’s not a graduated enough system of qualifications. Reforms to A-levels tried to do this, but given that AS has to be assessed at the same level as A2, it doesn’t really help very much. It does give the opportunity for students to register some achievement, which is positive (FE staff).*

Some interviewees expected that credit could fill these gaps by allowing students to take courses on more than one level simultaneously and take the units that they need as opposed to an entire course that might include learning that they have already done. (This is, in fact, the case at Newham College).

### 5.3 Are There Other Situations or Other Changes to be Considered?

It is impossible and unwise to ignore other ongoing reforms or proposed reforms that may impact on how a credit system is implemented. Two reforms surfaced in interviews, one being the 16-19 reforms proposed by the Tomlinson Working Group and the other being the QCA credit frameworks for adults. A third proposed reform, LLNs (HEFCE), did not form a focus for the interviews as this reform only emerged publicly subsequent to the data collection. Moreover, even at the time of writing, the discussion of the LLNs is still being developed through a process of regional partnership planning. Nonetheless, as mentioned in chapter 2, the connection with credit is too important to be ignored and it is hoped that this report can contribute to the emergent implementation of LLNs.

In February 2004, the Tomlinson Working Group produced its interim report on radical changes proposed for education of young people, including a system or series of diplomas to replace the current system of qualifications. Most interviewees were supportive of the Tomlinson reforms, citing the potential to bridge the gaps between levels more successfully and to provide students for with partial achievement and choice. Most interviewees support the Tomlinson reforms but are hesitant to fully endorse the reforms prior to the final report. The awareness and interest in Tomlinson may well be due to the wide dissemination of interim reports as well as the engagement of FE stakeholders in conferences and open meetings.

Insofar as credit is concerned, interviewees did not readily see the connection between credit and these reforms, although it is now clear that credit will indeed play a role:

*Each available diploma component should be assigned a credit value according to the volume of learning it contains, and each diploma should require successful achievement of a minimum number of credits. The way credit is established for 14-19 diplomas should be the same as that for qualifications within the adult framework (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 48)*

The QCA has forged ahead with reforming the adult curriculum in order to bring qualifications into a credit and unit framework into place by 2010. The reasons given for implementing the framework are those of ensuring “flexibility and responsiveness” to learners and employers, allowing qualifications to be customised

and for *units* to be changed when necessary instead of developing entirely new qualifications (QCA, 2004). The report is keen to link the Tomlinson reforms with the adult credit framework. Interestingly, however, the reforms steer clear of talking about delivery in modules. This is perhaps not surprising as this allows for the locus of control to remain largely with the colleges with respect to modes of delivery. Reflecting on the data collected for this study, overwhelmingly, interviewees who did not support moves toward credit were not objecting to credit per se, but to the perceived lack of coherence that unitisation and modularisation would create. The development of QCA adult credit reform over the course of the present report raised the question of if a credit framework might be appropriate for the needs of adult learners, is it also appropriate for young people?

#### 5.4 Is the Change Compatible with the Organisational Culture?

Robertson (1994) puts forth the idea that the move toward credit-based learning requires a cultural shift in the organisation. In the case of higher education, he suggests that the values of a credit culture can appear in conflict with those of the traditional university, the dominant organisational form in HE. Along with establishing a technical framework for credit, the less tangible side of organisational culture is also presumed to be a factor in successful reform. So, are the principles of a “credit culture” a good match with the organisational culture of FE colleges in London East?

Principles of a credit culture (Robertson, 1994, p. 315)

From:	To:
Exclusion	Inclusion
Teacher	Learner
Process	Outcome
Direction	Guidance
Failure	Achievement
Margins	Mainstream
Profession control	Individual choice
Structures	Cultures

Given the nature of FE and the diverse populations of London East, one might presume that organisational culture is built on the principles in the right-hand column. Certainly, there are examples of this. For instance, the following case exemplifies many of these principles:

First Class Leisure Level 1  
(London Leisure College)

**Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) in partnership with Greenwich Community College (GCC)**

A unique partnership between an FE College and a public sector Leisure provider has grown steadily to provide LSC-funded courses for 700 learners. During this period of growth, staff reacted to the difficult issue of retaining 16+ students on two-year courses. While this is an appropriate format for some students, others, it was thought, would benefit from a one-year intensive course in which they could earn 7 smaller qualifications linked directly into the skills that employers in the industry are looking for, as well as providing work experience and access into the labour market after Level 1.

Included in this course are qualifications in First Aid, Customer Care, Health & Safety, Life guarding, Community Sports Leadership and a City & Guilds Sport Progression Awards.

The success of this course has been proven with the addition of a second group of learners in 2004/5, as well in the fact that the vast majority of students complete all qualifications, guaranteeing them sessional employment with GLL.

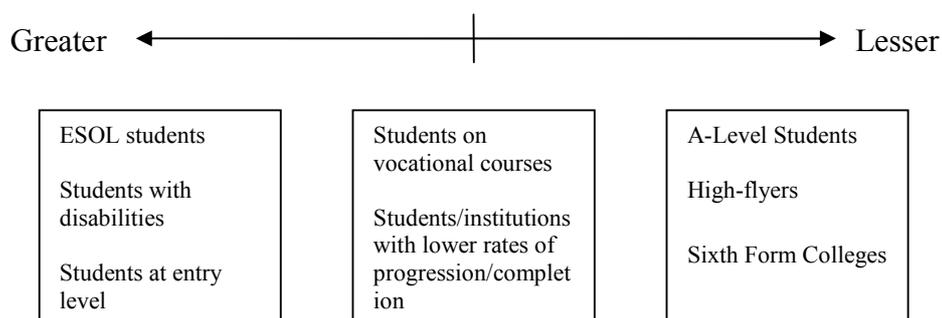
Nonetheless, given the portfolio of 7 awards, if a student does not complete all qualifications, he or she will still have earned some of the qualifications and walks away with tangible achievement.

**"The key for students who don't have the motivation of more successful candidates, and where family backing isn't as common, is that offering bite-sized learning keeps them motivated and helps them to experience achievement" (FE Staff member).**

Despite some moves toward structures that mimic credit, there is a status issue that credit confronts. Why? Credit is/has been associated with a groups of learners that are on the margins or embarking on vocational studies. Somehow, credit is deemed as "lowering the tone" of education, of negatively impacting quality or driving the curriculum or teaching.

The varying levels of interest among the project partners and within colleges has resonance with the degree to which those individuals or institutions saw themselves as engaged in “academic” education (often in the preparation of students for university) as opposed to those involved in vocational programmes and/or in the education of less advanced learners. The extent to which FE staff regard credit as a useful tool seems to be dependent on the type of student, course, or qualification in question. It was suggested that academic courses require more continuity of skills and knowledge and would not be suited to further unitisation. Further, a distinction has surfaced that reinforces the view that certain types of institutions see credit as an appropriate vehicle more than others. That is, the more “marginal” the student, course, or qualification, the more people appeared to regard credit in a positive manner. The following diagram demonstrate that, reading from right to left, the emphasis put on credit:

Need for a credit system



Further, the university sector, another critical stakeholder in any reforms in FE, remains biased toward A-levels, interviewees reported. As long as A-levels continue to be the “gold standard” anything different is definitely going to be viewed as sub-standard. One interviewee sees this as the major problem in reforming 16-19 education, stating that the “inertia and tradition” of A-levels blind people to the much needed culture change away from the elitism that A-levels perpetuate. Still others believed that following Curriculum 2000, A-levels are already sufficiently modularised and that students *do* walk away with “something” if they are only able to complete the AS level or only certain subjects. Overall, for most interviewees, A-levels were not on the agenda in discussing credit and unitisation.

Further, according to staff, students are well aware of a hierarchy with A-levels on the top. Students “understand” that Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCE’s) are the poor cousin of A-levels and vocational qualifications in general are for those who are not as motivated or successful.

Another area in which stigma comes into play is with regard to whether or not students had enrolled on but not completed courses elsewhere. There was a varied response in terms of staff, some (anecdotally) expressed the need for students to be able to bring credit from one institution to the next (portability). The data showed that about half of interviewees perceived that students did not have relevant achievements at other colleges that could represent “credit”. The students may have left a previous college for a reason such as behaviour or poor performance, not necessarily due to moving residence, illness, etc. However, for those who felt that there are a good number of students that could benefit from the portability of credit in this way, there currently does not exist a transparent way in which to allow students exemptions from parts of courses. This appeared to be done on mostly an ad hoc basis. The fact that students may have been following courses where the end qualification is associated with one examining board as opposed to another, and/or the curriculum is different makes it difficult to allow students to opt out of learning that they may already have done.

*One tries to fit them [students who come to the college with bits of other qualifications] to our own structure in such a way that means that they don’t need to repeat things, but the idea of trying to give students an exemption from things, quite often students don’t even want exemption from things, anyway. They prefer not to be singled out in that way (FE staff member).*

Moreover, it was expressed that students *do not want* to be left out of certain parts of courses as it would make them stand out or be stigmatised. Linking back to whether or not students actually are moving from one college to the next and thus losing any achievement gained, some interviewees believed that students are reticent to admit they have been at another college and not completed something. *Staff believe that students do not want to admit that they have not completed a course elsewhere, as it is viewed as failure, although, in fact, they may have gained some achievement.*

Without credit or another mechanism to record this achievement, it is only the end game, the qualification, that counts.

In the student survey conducted for this report, only a very small percentage of students, 10%, admitted to having started a course and not completed it. Unfortunately, there is no way to know if this reflects reality of its stigma, even on an anonymous survey, preventing students from admitting past work.

While a majority of students found the principles of flexibility, portability, and choice *theoretically* desirable, only a minority of students felt that they themselves would drop in or out, make different choices, or finish a qualification at another college.

Table 4.2: The **likelihood** of learners exercising choice, portability, or flexibility

Q4: PORTABILITY	not at all likely/possible	63%
	likely/very likely	17%
Q5: CHOICE	not at all likely/possible	43%
	likely/very likely	26%
Q6: FLEXIBILITY	not at all likely/possible	61%
	likely/very likely	13%

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Note: Percentages do not equal 100% as the remaining respondents answered “don’t know”

At the same time, even if only a minority of students were to exercise the ability to drop out and return with credit at a later time, finish their course at another college, or increase the variety in their programme of study, it may well be worthwhile in progressing students forward within FE and to HE.

Another example of credit-sympathetic structures in use in East London is that of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), which allows students to drop in and out without stigma. In fact, the entire purpose of the modular structure and log book (similar to a credit transcript) is to allow **flexibility** in terms of where and when learners achievement modules and, ultimately, the qualification.

**ECDL**  
**The European Computer Driving Licence**

Used in 137 countries, the ECDL is an internationally recognised qualification. A portfolio of seven modules, the ECDL allows learners to achieve the separate parts of the qualification by sitting exams focusing on an individual module. FE colleges and other training providers can offer instruction, either face-to-face or in an independent learning setting. Individuals who already have the knowledge and skills to pass a module need not enrol on any course; they can simply sign up at a testing centre to sit the examination. Learners can also use self-study materials.

A “passport” (called a log-book) is given to each learner, and the learner gets a “stamp” in the passport acknowledging the achievement of a unit after they have successfully passed it. Where the learner gained the knowledge is not important, and they can test at any testing centre.

In the UK, the qualification is accredited by the British Computer Society.

**5.5 Is it Reasonable and Appropriate Change?**

Is credit an appropriate tool for use in 16-19 education? The answer to this is clouded to a degree by the lack of general understanding about credit. Units, modules, and credit seemed to get jumbled and discussed interchangeably as if the benefits and limitations of each are one and the same. Credit, without unitisation or modularisation, can easily (if inefficiently) be used in the current system by determining the total number of notional learning hours of a one or two year course and attaching this number of credits to the course. However, this would do little if anything to increase portability and flexibility, student choice in combination of skills and subject matter, nor contribute to any of the other benefits associated with credit. The issue here is the extent to which these perceived benefits are translated into realisable benefits from a learners’ perspective. It is, in fact, the question of units and modules that causes stakeholders to feel uneasy about credit. It is in the context of credit as a part of a system that works in conjunction with units and learning outcomes and modules of delivery for which interviewees voiced concern.

This is where the relevance of the question of adults vs. young people is relevant. Interviewees largely expressed the sentiment that there are important differences that may make units and modules appropriate for adults (or, at least *more* appropriate) than for young people. For adults, their lifestyles, family and work commitments, and need for more specific skills appear to make a unitised system of qualifications more sensible. However, for young people, the issue of **commitment** arose. For young people, particularly given the characteristics of many of the young people in London East, some interviewees expressed the view that some learners have a problem with committing to a course, hence a one or two-year course forces students to make a commitment.

*The particular social and economic circumstances of this part of London are such that many of our students are disadvantaged, and that will, obviously, have a big impact on their ability to stick a 2-year course. There may not be the support at home, perhaps, that students in leafier parts of the county might have. They don't come from a particularly rigorous academic background, anyway (FE staff member).*

However, interviewees did not largely express how to reconcile the paradox that the commitment they must (seemingly) make to a course of that length could potentially impact on retention if, indeed, commitment is a problem. The other side of the coin is committing for shorter periods of time (for example, Newham College's six-week terms) that could actually drive up retention.

Further, the coherence of the college day was perceived as being under threat if a system of units were to be introduced. Some interviewees felt that units would have the impact of requiring students to be at college only part of the day, or in such a way to erode the time management and study skills that already an issue for some young people.

Additionally, young people, more so than adults, may have a need to identify with a course tutor, and a lack of continuity in the **personal relationship** between teacher and student could outweigh the advantages of unitised systems. On the other hand, it was suggested that intermediate level learners might find it more stimulating to change contexts and tutors more frequently. Not only is the personal relationship

between teacher and student of issue, but interviewees often focused on the possibility that credit would interfere with learning as a **social experience**. (Again, it need be mentioned that *credit*, in and of itself, does not impede nor change any aspect of the learning experience.) While interviewees largely thought that adults, too, benefit from the social aspects of learning, the effect of the social environment is even more important for young people. This, however, throws up another misconception: if one assumes that most students will be (eventually, if not from the start) on a pathway to a qualification, then, in fact students will be part of a coherent group of learners as they move through the course. As the modules that will lead them towards a certain qualification will be largely the same (core elements, for example) it will be only in cases where there are some optional or elective units/modules that students will perhaps be in classes where mixed cohorts learn together.

Some staff, particularly those involved with teaching or overseeing A-levels, regarded A-levels as “already unitised” and that, given the reforms under Curriculum 2000, already granting partial credit for achieving success in its component parts. Similarly, AVCEs and BTECs (Business and Technology Education Council) are also viewed as sufficiently unitised and accessible.

Clearly, **coherence** is an important consideration in any move toward a unitised, credit-based system. While units can stand alone, they are also to be structured in such a way to link to each other to build courses as well as linking to other levels and courses. Some problems in the use of unitisation have been noted where key skills are removed from content that can prevent the learner from making the necessary connections between knowledge and skills, causing incoherence. Furthermore, this limitation may also impair a teacher’s ability to identify and fill knowledge and skill gaps as one might over the course of a year. However, it has been suggested in the data that the core units, followed by all learners, mean that both curricular coherence and the social connections students make between themselves would be maintained.

A further insight into flexibility and coherence stems from the option to combine vocational and academic components through a unitised, credit-based system. Several discussants saw benefits, in certain cases, of combining units from these broad areas. Most (if not all) types of employment require tasks that involve elements of both an

academic field and more practical, vocational one. Thus as long as this combination is not haphazard, it may benefit students and directly contribute to overall employability.

The view also emerged that credit *is necessary but not sufficient* to establish flexibility. The qualification framework must also be able to accommodate flexibility, choice, and mobility. Further, timetabling a unitised curriculum has been raised as a difficulty due to the need to assure most (if not all) learners can be taking the right units at the right times. One individual commented that credit is “something flexible but you have to deliver it in a rigid way”.

Perhaps the three arms of flexibility need to work together to allow for credits to benefit stakeholders in the ways imagined. Ideally, flexibility might be maximized if three types of flexibility work together:

- Temporal flexibility: given units are taught at varied times of the day and year
- Content flexibility: units are combined to create qualifications using rules of combination, but a degree of *choice* is afforded
- Route flexibility: there is overlap of units required among courses as much as possible to allow for lane-changes into other areas of study.

An example from London East that illustrates the use of temporal **flexibility** in a unique way is the GPlus framework:

**GPlus Network  
Greenwich**

Schools and colleges have joined up across the borough to increase the range of opportunities for 16-19 students. A huge range of subjects, courses, and qualifications are on offer, both in academic and vocational areas. The Network allows students to study at more than one location in order to access the exact study options that they are looking for. Timetabling is done borough-wide in order to achieve a network where students can in practice, not just in theory, enjoy this opportunity.

Some of the views of interviewees reflected the opinion that home-grown (some of which bear credit) and OCN courses are needed to fill important gaps in the national qualifications framework (NQF), and that credit is and would be most usefully deployed in this way. For instance, students who are underprepared for A-levels (but wish to go down that route) can benefit from an A-level access-type course and maybe further motivated and engaged were they to earn credit for it. For learners wishing to achieve vocational qualifications, it is sometimes difficult for students to know what they might like to pursue. Small units of learning in a variety of vocational fields are sometimes used to fill this need, and it has been suggested that accrediting such learning and allowing it to “count” for a unit in a qualification and would be a valuable use of credit. In this way, credit begins to address the issue of parity between **academic and vocational qualifications** as well as allowing for a certain amount of delayed choice and flexibility in this binary division. The issue has been a particular part of the reason for the LLNs proposals.

If the benefits of credit accumulation and transfer are valuable for some learners and some types of learning, would these benefits extend to the other students and programmes? Some of those consulted were of the opinion that if reforming for credit, we must “do it wholesale or not at all”, indicating that a CAT system should apply across all levels and qualifications and not be used in a specific or limited way. A more middle-ground view is that certain qualifications such as GNVQs are easily divided into units for which credit can be attached while others not.

If one of the goals of credit is creating parity between the vocational and the academic, then perhaps this can only be realised if credit has an impact in all aspects of the curriculum, including traditional A-levels. This comprehensive approach is described by Robertson (1993): “Credit systems become basic elements in the organisation of individual learning opportunities, central to institutional life, shaping the character of the student learning experience” p. 75).

A CAT system must be structured so that it is a good fit with a national qualifications framework, but still have the ability to work in a flexible way to meet **local needs**.

The new developments both at the QCA and with respect to the Tomlinson Report, are integral to the credit discussion as they indicate educational reform and credit have

taken on national importance. However, issues have been raised to how a national credit framework could be at the same time responsive to the needs of London East learners. Some interlocutors have suggested that a regional or a pan-London framework be established in order to assure that local control and needs are taken into account. This has been advocated in the past by, for example, *London Together (A Credit Framework for London, 1993)*. Establishing this balance will be critical in allowing not only credit accumulation *within* a given institution, but, more importantly, *credit transfer* among institutions.

Whilst *accumulation* of credits may be seen as an internal college issue, the transfer of credits requires a system-wide use and understanding of credit. As colleges are often seen as local or regional institutions, is it necessary or appropriate to facilitate national (or even international) credit acceptance?

It emerged that for some interviewees that relationships that build **trust** among colleges are key elements in terms of the recognition of credits. Given the many formal and informal links that already exist among colleges in London East, one approach could involve a consortium of local colleges. The colleges could then establish a local credit framework, deciding mutually on descriptors and outcomes.

Others commented that the most important element to underpinning **quality** must come from external accrediting bodies and the QCA. As discussed in the previous chapter, shifts in the locus of control on credit issues between the local and the national could have important implications for systems of quality control as well as for assuring the needs of learners and colleges are met in terms of provision.

## **5.6 Do Staff Possess the Requisite Knowledge and Skills?**

Clearly, one of the main findings of this report is the uneven distribution of knowledge about credit overall. This lack of knowledge about what credit is about or what it might do leads to its rejection based on a perception of *complexity* and confusion between the impacts and expectations of unitisation and modularisation and those of credit. As mentioned in Chapter 2, credit and the way in which courses *can* be delivered (units and modules) are linked but are not synonymous. Hence, the real doubts on the part of interviewees show a greater association with *delivery* than the

granting of credit. The “flexibility vs. coherence” debate impacts on delivery, not whether a student has earned something called “credit”.

Other doubts arose around what good “a few credits here and there” could be to a learner. As in the discussion of the US approach to credit, it is very possible that the answer to this is: 1. an understanding of what does or does not interest them; 2. the ability to see that they can achieve and what they have achieved; 3. skills and knowledge based on achieving learning outcomes; and, 4. a foundation to build on. Students may, in fact, desire to go down a particular path in order to understand what that field of study is about, but they may choose to abandon it and begin on another path. The granting of credit for what they have achieved, and the ability to change tack (allowable by delivery by modules) while retaining credit. In many cases, if the credit is gained by achieving learning outcomes on units very specific to a particular field, they may not be able to be used towards another qualification. On the other hand, interviewees suggested that core modules, such as those pertaining to health and safety, for example, could be taught centrally (making the allocation of teaching resources more efficient) and allowing students to walk away with so many health and safety credits, irrespective of what course or qualification they may be attempting.

What credit (or unitisation or modularisation, for that matter) *cannot* be expected to do is to guide and advise students toward a sensible accumulation of credits that results in a coherent course and leads to a qualification. Whether credit is under discussion or not, the factor of support and guidance is one that is seen as common to achievement:

*We have had for the last three years a quantified increase of achievement and clearly it's to do with the good teaching at the college. But, they [the students] need a lot of support. So, lots of stuff outside the classroom has to contribute to that success (FE staff member).*

Well-informed advising and teaching staff would be critical to assuring that students are taking the “right” units, both in terms of what is right for them, but also (where appropriate) those which will lead to a qualification and not just a jumble of ad hoc credits.

Finally, how might the issues raised by stakeholders play out in a real-life scenario? The development of NewCAD at Newham College of Further Education allows for a perspective that comes from actual experience of credit in London East. NewCAD seems to tick all the correct boxes in terms of being responsive to the issues that arise around credit. This is far cry from the 'winner take all' system in which students are unable to change tack without a significant loss of time and achievement. Credit can be tacked on the end of a one or two year course, but this does not provide any flexibility in any real sense.

At Newham College, the six-week terms provide a true sense of flexibility where students can register some achievement in a short amount of time and staff and students have the opportunity to assess that achievement and to reflect on whether or not a particular learner is on the right track. NewCAD operates in such a way to promote **flexibility** and **choice** for learners. However, without the adoption of a complementary system by other colleges, **portability** of achievement will not be a reality.

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## **NewCAD**

### **Newham College**

This is a hypothetical Q&A based on interviews with people key to the development of NewCAD and a review of documents.

#### **What is it and how does it work?**

*“NewCAD stands for ‘Newham College Access Diploma’. It is the main qualification that we offer at Newham College. It exists across six levels of achievement, beginning at Entry level and on to Level 3.”*

#### **Why was it developed?**

*“Basically we saw that students weren’t progressing beyond entry level and level 1. This was a great barrier in some students’ abilities to achieve qualifications in the NQF.”*

**How did staff react?**

*“At first, people were not completely on board with it. There were concerns around standards, for on thing. But, as it was the staff who were writing the units and assessments, they soon saw how they had control over the criteria.”*

**What are the key ingredients in making a change to credit work?**

*“One is leadership from the top. We had that and wouldn’t been successful without it. Also, engaging staff at every stage of the process gave them ownership.”*

**What about the coherence argument?**

*“Unitisation doesn’t necessarily mean incoherence. I mean, you can have an incoherent course that isn’t unitised. The units are linked together in a sensible way, both vertically and horizontally.”*

**What about having a cohort of students working and moving along together?**

*“The focus on the core elements does mean that students are moving through together to a certain degree. They have tutorials.”*

**Has it been difficult administratively?**

*“It was a lot of work on the front end. Units had to be developed as well as assessment. Technology has been key in allowing us to develop our database of units and tracking what students have achieved. It’s a massive task; nonetheless, it’s altogether possible as we’ve done it!”*

**How does NewCAD contribute to the flexibility of provision?**

*“One aspect of what we’ve done at Newham is to break up the academic year into 6 blocks of 6 weeks each. This allows students to build up a few credits in just 6 weeks. It really gives them a sense of ‘wow’, look what I’ve done in such a short space of time.”*

**How do we know that NewCAD is actually promoting achievement and progression?**

*“In it’s first year of implementation NewCAD:*

- *retention increased by 15%*
- *achievement increased by 30%*
- *progression increased by 50%*

### **What about quality issues?**

*“The units are accredited by the Open College Network. It was thought, if it works for Access programmes . . . ”*

*“Access [to HE] programmes, based on a modularised framework, used units of assessment that were internally moderated and externally validated . . . Why not extend the model to other students at the College?” (Newham College of Further Education, 2004, p. 9).*

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### **5.7 Are There Resources Available to Engage with the Reform?**

Resources, human and financial, are a prerequisite for any reform. Do stakeholders see reforming the system toward a credit-based one as reasonable given resources?

A fear that accompanies a move toward CATS is that of increasing bureaucracy and introducing more work to already busy FE staff. The entire shift was described as important and necessary by one individual, but, at the same time, “a hell of a lot of work” (FE staff member). Technical knowledge, time to understand and implement a reform, and the technological support required to timetable and track students emerged as areas in which resources would need to be allocated in order to get a credit system up and running. Here again this experience may be important considerations for the resourcing of the LLNs.

Further, it emerged that the difficulty in getting departments to work together (particularly, but not exclusively, across the academic/vocational divide) in colleges may hinder gains to efficiency. For instance, it was suggested that areas like customer service and health and safety can be extracted from courses and could be taught in a global way to students from many courses. However, such streamlining would require commitment on the part of staff from various areas of the institution.

Additionally, credit could be a tool to provide more offerings to learners *among* institutions and could do this to the financial benefit of institutions. For example, resources could be pooled in subjects where there is low take-up (foreign languages was suggested) so that units in that subject area could be taught to students across London East that would elect this area of study.

CATS courses must be fundable to allow benefits to be realised. CATS is resource-intensive in that it may require a consortium approach and a robust and accessible database of unit descriptors for all courses across colleges. Whereas an understanding and general agreement of “levels” has been reached, prose descriptions of units and their learning outcomes need to be further developed in many cases. An obvious barrier to the adoption of CATS is that the current FE funding regimes do not reward small achievements but instead the award of whole qualifications. This has often prevented colleges from attempting to create their own credit-based provision even if such provision may be fit for purpose. However, commitments by the QCA and LSC to create a CAT system in FE in England will undoubtedly require a shift in thinking in terms of how college funding is allocated. The funding regime needs to develop alongside any reforms involving unitisation and credit.

## 6 COMMENTS AND PROPOSALS

The main purpose of this report has been to describe and discuss the scoping study commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council of London East. The study has considered the capacity to develop credit-based learning for young people within further education colleges in East London. Inevitably, given the size of the study and the resources available it was only possible to undertake the initial part of a much longer study that is required in order to develop a fuller understanding. So, this report and therefore the comments and proposals that flow from it provide a preliminary yet important set of points and issues and also offer a platform for a more in-depth follow-on study.

On the basis of this study and from a reading of the literature on credit based learning we would suggest that there is a strong link between widening participation, lifelong learning and the benefits of credit. However, as the study shows, this link is as yet incomplete and there are gaps and inconsistencies which prevent many of the benefits being delivered to learners. This point echoes a comment made by Sir Howard Newby, Chief Executive of HEFCE:

*“I do not need to remind this audience that higher education sits within the context of lifelong learning and yet we still do not have the progression routes, the pathways or even the credit transfer system lifelong learning to be developed and marketed to those who might need it most.” (HEFCE, 2004, p.14)*

There is then a sense in which the development of credit based learning can be seen as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for further progress to be made in relation to widening participation and lifelong learning. However, this study highlights how many of the supposed and anticipated benefits of credit are as yet untested and require a greater understanding for example of the roles and views of stakeholders in order that such benefits can be both recognised and communicated. Indeed, the issue of communication and as central to this the facilitation of a purposeful dialogue with learners about how credit might contribute to greater and more learner-led opportunities are identified as important factors in moving forward the discussion of credit within East London. This is not to suggest that that no progress has been made,

quite the opposite the study refers to a number of examples where despite a far from favourable national policy climate colleges have developed robust credit based learning opportunities in dialogue with learners. There is, we suggest, much to be learned from such initiatives which might both inform practice in other East London colleges and also inform national policy developments such as the proposals put forward by HEFCE and LSC in relation to Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). We would argue, given that lifelong learning in its broadest sense is informing the LLNs programme that CATS has a significant contribution to make to furthering this policy.

The comments and proposals offered in this concluding chapter relate directly to the research questions which framed the scoping study. We thought it would be useful where possible to direct these comments to the relevant stakeholders not least because this is consistent with the stakeholder perspective we drew on in the study. Because of the preliminary character of the study we recognise that in the case of some of the comments and proposals made further research is needed in order to fully substantiate the position. Nevertheless, we decided to include these suggestions on the grounds that they were identified as being important by respondents and also because we believe they may help to stimulate a debate about the further development of credit, widening participation and LLNs.

The broad questions used to frame the scoping study were as follows and they will be responded to in the comments and proposals:

1. What are the advantages and limits to credit schemes currently being used?
2. What, if any, are the sources of resistance towards the use of credit?
3. What benefits of credit system do stakeholders consider important and which benefits are currently (at the time of the study) being realised and which are not?
4. What are the expectations of stakeholders to credit based learning?

Though our work with the various stakeholders involved in the study we have attempted to identify some of both the advantages and limitations associated with credit schemes currently in use.

*Comment*

A great deal of work has already been done on the technical side of credit. For example, credit principles, level descriptors, articulation agreements and accords have already been developed and are being used in different parts of the UK in both FE and HE. QCA's work on credit for adults, and the work and experience of credit consortia in Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland is considerable. The OCNs have a wealth of experience in operating credit. In London East, from our study, the NewCAD development established a highly effective credit system which enables credit accumulation and internal transfer for learners.

***Proposal to funders and FECs:***

Build on existing examples of established credit practice such as the NewCAD scheme.

*Comment*

No statistical information appears available on the movement of students and numbers and nature of students that are not completing courses, and then perhaps repeating parts of courses.

***Proposal to funders, FECs and HEIs:***

Better tracking of students on a local or national level would provide information on this, and such data would clearly be vital to keeping overall records of student achievement (i.e. credit transcripts) and assist in promoting the possibility of credit transfer.

*Comment*

The resources required from institutions in relation to adopting a credit framework are great and the benefits to institutions do not yet appear substantial enough to move things forward for the sake of the learner. Barriers external to the institution and hence out of their control tend to compound the problem. The pilot and demonstration work from the LLNs may provide important information to FECs and HEIs.

Within the boroughs of London East, there are few examples of *credit* being used, but structures sympathetic to credit, in that they promote flexibility, portability, and choice, are evident, as in the examples described in this report.

***Proposal to funders, FECs and LEAs in London East:***

Develop these structures as pilots for credit and investigate how and if they actually achieve their goals of flexibility, portability, and choice, and if those goals actually contribute to take up and retention.

*Comment*

Stakeholders cannot begin to engage with a proposed reform if they are not provided information about how the reform will work on a practical level. FE staff will not be convinced by what credit might do if they are not aware of precisely how it will impact their working lives, teaching, advising students, etc.

***Proposal to funders, FECs, staff and learners:***

There needs to be transparency in what policy makers intend to do with respect to credit, and an open dialogue involving all stakeholders and in particular learners. This dialogue needs to be informed with clear information on credit and how it might add value to access and progression arrangements for learners.

*Comment*

The three reforms referred to in this report (a credit framework for adults, LLNs, and the Tomlinson proposals) involve considerable structural and organisational changes and all link to credit in some way, but do not currently set out how they will work with credit and together. Credit has a potentially critical role to play in the LLNs but we suggest that credit transfer will be based on bilateral and multilateral progression arrangements.

***Proposal to funders, FECs:***

Credit should not be overshadowed with respect to these reforms, as it may well be an important vehicle to reach the overall reform goals. Credit, if part of a national framework, can optimise flexibility and portability. If credit

frameworks are developed in isolation to one another, there will be continued re-invention and incompatibility.

*Comment*

Is it possible to have a credit system in a funding regime that is not compatible with it? It is difficult for staff to see how a credit system could work, as the current system does not fund on this basis. Moreover, understandably, some staff view credit as another time-consuming administrative matter to get in the way of learning.

***Proposal to funders, FECs, staff and learners:***

A funding regime suitable to support a credit and unitisation is critical. Only then will colleges see credit as a viable option. Staff also must be given the time to engage with credit, to understand it, and to contribute to its development in such a way to take ownership of it.

*Comment*

The scoping study drew attention to the value of seeing credit arrangements as, in effect, communications systems. Not just in the obvious sense of promoting educational mobility, which as noted is very limited in practice but rather in conveying information about learning and learners. There are at least three main strands of information involved which credit systems communicate – information about level, standard and volume of learning.

***Proposal to FECs, HEIs, funders, staff, learners:***

That credit is to be understood as communication systems which effectively act to move information between different credit stakeholders. The mutual sharing and recognition of information regarding scope of learning, volume of credit and level are critical aspects of a credit system. These should be as transparent as possible to learners.

This report concludes, having rehearsed some of the headline comments and proposals which emerged from the scoping study that CATS can be an effective way of:

- Furthering lifelong learning
- Facilitating and widening participation
- Encouraging student success

As all three of these objectives are central to the HEFCE/LSC lifelong learning networks proposals we would suggest that serious consideration be given to the perspectives, experiences and structures that this report has identified.

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## APPENDIX A

**STUDENT SURVEY**  
**LSCLE CATS 16-19 PROJECT**  
**University of East London**

*This survey is part of a research project based at the University of East London and is aimed at understanding your views on flexibility and choice in your college studies.*

*This is a VOLUNTARY and ANONYMOUS survey. You will not be penalised in any way if you do not fill it in, but your input is very important. We do not ask your name, and all of the information on this survey will be used for research purposes only.*

*Please fill in each section on both sides of this page completely and carefully.*

Section A:

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Are you male or female? (circle one)
3. Do you study part-time or full-time? (circle one)
4. What do you intend to do after completing this course? (please tick the appropriate boxes)  
 Work  
 Enrol on another course  

*If you are enrolling on another course,  
which course will it be? \_\_\_\_\_*

*Where will it be?*

 At this college  
 At another college  
 At university  
 Training provider  
 Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
5. Have you ever started a college course but not finished it? YES/NO
6. If yes, can you tell us why you didn't finish? \_\_\_\_\_

Section B:

Please circle one response for each question.

1. *Sometimes people move house and away from the college that they have been attending. In that case, do you think it would be important to be able to continue the same course at a nearby college without having to start the course over?*

*Not at all important      A bit important      Don't know      Important      Very important*

2. *People sometimes want to combine several of their interests in their studies. For example, someone may like to study hairdressing but also study a foreign language in order to communicate with more clients. Do you think is it important for students to be able to combine their interests in this way?*

*Not at all important      A bit important      Don't know      Important      Very important*

3. *Sometimes people may have to drop out of a course in the middle because they need to earn money or perhaps have to stay home to take care of a family member. Do you think it is important to be able to drop out of a course for a term or more and then rejoin the same course without having to start over?*

*Not at all important      A bit important      Don't know      Important      Very important*

Section C:

Please circle one response for each question.

4. *At some point in your studies, do you think you might be in a situation where you would need or want to continue your course at a different college?*

*Not at all likely      Possible      Don't know      Likely      Very likely*

5. *If given the opportunity, would you choose to take classes from several different subject areas and combine them?*

*Not at all likely      Possible      Don't know      Likely      Very likely*

6. *At some point in your studies, do you think you might be in a situation where you would need or want to drop out for a term or more and then rejoin your course?*

*Not at all likely      Possible      Don't know      Likely      Very likely*

**T H A N K   Y O U   V E R Y   M U C H ! !**

## APPENDIX B

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### CATS Project

#### Lecturer/Manager Interviews

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Strategy: to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with FE tutors across the spectrum of provision for 16-19 learners

Purpose: consistent with a stakeholder analysis, tutors are a recognised group of stakeholders that can impact and will be impacted by moves to adopt a CAT (credit accumulation and transfer) system

#### What is 'credit'?

Credit is often seen as an “accountancy” tool, used to recognise learning achievements by attaching a numerical value (based on what is known as *notional learning time*) to units of learning. The “units” (or modules) are of varying “sizes”. The units encompass one or more *learning outcomes*. Appropriate assessment determines if a learner has achieved the outcomes and, if successful, will be awarded credit. The credit earned may be “traded in” for a qualification given that units or modules have been taken in accordance with the appropriate *rules of combination*. Nonetheless, the credits achieved via the units/modules of learning “stand-alone” and are demonstrated on a *credit transcript* that (minimally) lists the unit/module titles and levels as well as credits achieved. The transcript is a “passport” which represents the entire volume of a learner’s achievements and can demonstrate these achievements to employers or other educational institutions.

#### Topical Interview Protocol:

1. General info (on project and review of paragraph on credit)/introductions
2. Educational reform
  - a. From your point of view, what are the strengths in the “architecture” (i.e. qualifications and arrangement of provision) of FE as it currently exists?
  - b. From your point of view, what are the weaknesses in the “architecture” (i.e. qualifications and arrangement of provision) of FE as it currently exists?
3. Appropriateness
  - a. Given your curricular area, does CATS seem an appropriate vehicle? Why or why not?
  - b. Are there other areas of provision at the college, does CATS seem an appropriate vehicle? Why or why not?
4. Flexibility

- a. Is the curriculum you use unitised? Can you explain specifically to me how the course you teach on is organised?
  - b. Does this work well? For students? For tutors?
  - c. Are there any ways in which you would wish to change this? Why? Are there constraints that prevent it?
  - d. What are the advantages or disadvantages you perceive with a unitised curriculum?
  - e. Are there specific teaching issues associated with unitisation?
  - f. Are there specific administrative or bureaucratic issues associated with unitisation?
  - g. What (if any) are the implications for assessment with a unitised curriculum?
  - h. Do you think there is a need for students to be able to combine parts (units) of other courses with your curricular area? Is there a desire on the part of students to do so?
  - i. Should the students on your course have more choice in what units/classes they take? Why or why not? Can you give an example?
5. Quality & Portability
- a. If students are allowed to combine units taken at various colleges to gain a qualification, do you think this would be a good idea? Why or why not?
  - b. Would you question the quality of what they had learned at another institution?
6. Given a credit system as it has been briefly outlined to you, do you perceive any problems with it?
7. Given a credit system as it been briefly outline to you, do you see any advantages to it?
8. How, in your opinion, should a credit system “work”? What should it be able to do?
9. If this type of reform were to be adopted, what would you expect from the system in terms of:
- a. Impact on tutors
  - b. Impact on students
  - c. Impact on your college
  - d. Impact on the FE sector overall

## APPENDIX C

### Abbreviations

ACCAC	Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales
AVCE	Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CATS	Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
ECTS	European Credit Transfer Scheme
ELWa	Education and Learning in Wales
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HECIW	Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEI	Higher Education Institution
LLN	Lifelong Learning Network
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
NICATS	Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
NOCN	National Open College Network
NUCCAT	Northern Universities Consortia for Credit Accumulation and Transfer
OCN	Open College Network
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SCOTCAT	Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SEEC	Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer



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