

The Paradox of Scotland: limited credit transfer in a credit-based system

by Cathy Howieson and David Raffe

No. 60, December 2012

Scotland has a credit-based lifelong learning system with flexible pathways underpinned by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. Internationally it is regarded as an example of good practice in credit arrangements and credit transfer but how accurate is this perception? This Briefing reports on a study that examined the extent of credit transfer in practice and found it to be limited. It asks why this was the case in a system which has been a source of inspiration and influence on other countries seeking to develop credit arrangements.

- ▶ The extent of credit transfer from general and pre-vocational education to vocational education and training (VET) courses at college and to work-based Modern Apprenticeships is limited apart from the transfer of core skills.
- ▶ There is little credit transfer between full-time college programmes and Modern Apprenticeships or between different Modern Apprenticeships. The perceived need to develop skill sets within a specific occupational context, and the competence-based design of the main work-based training qualification, were seen by interviewees as limiting the potential for credit transfer other than in respect of core skills.
- ▶ Credit transfer is more common between VET and university, specifically between Higher National qualifications and degrees but even this is still problematic and concentrated in a small number of institutions. Credit transfer from other VET programmes into degrees is very limited and at an early stage of development.
- ▶ One explanation for the limited amount of credit transfer is the extent to which the Scottish system enables flexible entry, flexible pacing and progression through programmes without the need for formal credit transfer procedures. Scottish credit arrangements are based more on credit accumulation than on credit transfer.
- ▶ But the flexibility and integration of the Scottish system is still limited by three types of barriers: institutional factors, perceptions about different types of learning and political barriers.
- ▶ Changes currently under discussion may test the extent to which these barriers can be removed or modified by policy interventions.

Introduction

Credit arrangements, especially credit transfer, are seen internationally as key components of coherent, flexible education and training systems, in which learners can move easily between different sectors and modes of learning. Scotland has a long history of credit arrangements and has a qualifications system which, at least on paper, provides considerable scope for learners to move flexibly through the system and in doing so to accumulate and, where appropriate, to transfer credit. Scotland is regarded as an example of good practice in credit and credit transfer and other countries have sought to learn from the Scottish experience. But recent reports have suggested that the Scottish system is less integrated and flexible in practice than it appears on paper (SG 2011a; SG 2011b); and research has shown that the potential of the Scottish Qualification and Credit framework (SCQF) has not yet been fully realised.

This *Briefing* reports on the Scottish component of a four-country study of *Credit Systems for Lifelong Learning*. The study was concerned with credit transfer in 'ordinary' practice across three of the main interfaces of the system, although it also reported on initiatives to develop innovative practice. It involved interviews with 26 key informants and a review of documentary, research and statistical evidence.

The extent of credit transfer in practice

(i) Credit transfer between general & pre-vocational learning and 'mainstream' VET

This interface covers transfer from general and pre-vocational education in schools and training programmes to mainstream vocational education and training (VET) courses at college and to work-based Modern Apprenticeships (MAs).

There is little credit transfer evident across this interface. Interviewees perceived that the main benefit of pre-vocational education was to improve participants' access to initial VET and possibly help them to make faster progress. Credit transfer to MAs is seen as especially unlikely since they are based on National Occupational Standards while pre-vocational provision is not.

The main exception is in respect of the transfer of credit for core skills both to full-time courses and to MAs. These core skills will usually have been achieved in general school subjects rather than on a pre-vocational course. However, rather than shorten the VET course or MA, they often enable learners to take the core skill at a higher level or to study an additional element. Part of the reason for this is that colleges and training providers want to keep the cohort of learners moving through the course or training programme together.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is rarely used for credit transfer into VET. It is used more as a formative tool (including as a step in the process of gaining formal certification); this may change as the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) develops its policy on RPL with a greater emphasis on formal accreditation.

(ii) Credit transfer within VET

This interface concerns transitions between full-time college programmes and MAs and between different MAs. Credit transfer across this interface is limited. Indeed, most interviewees questioned the possibility of much credit transfer because of the competence-based nature of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), the main work-based training qualification, and the need to develop skill sets within a specific occupational context.

As with the first interface, the main exceptions relate to core skills. In addition, if an MA Framework specifies a college-based component, as for example in engineering and in construction, apprentices might gain credit for this component if they already have an appropriate award. This could save two or three months of the MA but many apprentices simply take the college-based component at a higher level.

Few learners move from work-based MAs to full-time college-based VET. In the few examples in this study, it seems that credit might be given if the learner has completed SVQ units that can be mapped against a National Certificate or Higher National unit.

Movement between different MAs and thus demand for credit transfer is not common. Most movement is to a different pathway within an MA, and where there are common units apprentices are exempted from any they have already completed. But the extent to which credit transfer is possible within an MA Framework varies across occupational areas.

(iii) Credit transfer between VET and degrees

This interface concerns transitions between colleges' Higher National (HN) Certificates or Diplomas and degrees; and transitions between MAs/SVQs and degrees. HN Certificates and Diplomas are placed at SCQF levels 7 and 8 and equivalent to the 1st or 2nd year of a (four-year) Honours degree; level 4 SVQs are placed at SCQF level 8 or 9 and are equivalent in principle to the second or third year of an Honours degree.

This is the most important interface for credit transfer in Scotland; it is where credit transfer is most understood and where most takes place, largely between HN programmes and university degrees (usually referred to as 'articulation'). This is strongly supported by the Scottish Funding Council as a way to achieve more 'efficient learner journeys'. But credit is discretionary, and over half of HN graduates who progress to degree courses do not receive full credit for their HNs. Some choose not to do so for social and/or academic reasons but in other cases the university does not award them full credit from their HN. Universities vary widely in their willingness to transfer credit from HNs; the large majority of HN students who gain full credit are concentrated in just four universities.

There is very little credit transfer from other VET programmes into degrees, in particular from MAs using the SVQ qualifications gained, but this is now beginning to be explored. The placing of SVQs in the SCQF and the creation of more SVQs at higher levels creates the context where credit transfer from SVQs to the second or third year of degree study has become a real possibility. Inclusion in the SCQF legitimises the concept of SVQ-to-degree articulation and was reported as important to the successful development of at least one initiative in this area. But SVQ-to-

degree articulation as part of normal practice is at a very early stage.

Explanation 1: The nature of the credit system in Scotland

We suggest two sorts of explanations for the limited extent of credit transfer in Scotland. The first relates to the nature of the Scottish credit system which gives more weight to credit accumulation than to credit transfer. Credit arrangements tend to be management tools for providers rather than means of empowering learners. Moreover, other sources of flexibility within the system reduce the need for formal credit transfer. Except for degrees and some MAs, programmes and qualifications are of relatively short duration and there are progression routes between them. Entry to programmes and movement between them is flexible; learners may be able to cover units at a higher or lower level or to take them at a faster or slower pace, and to take the assessment when they are ready rather than according to a fixed timetable. Flexible pathways are underpinned by a single awarding body (the SQA) for non-university qualifications.

Explanation 2: Continuing barriers to a unified system

While the Scottish system offers considerable flexibility and permeability through means other than formal credit transfer, there remain barriers to a more flexible and unified system.

Institutional barriers

A credit system on its own is weaker than the 'institutional logics' of the system in which it is embedded, such as institutional practices and the broader processes of educational and occupational selection which may inhibit the demand for credit transfer or the recognition of credit in practice. Credit recognition is voluntary and education providers vary in their willingness to recognise and transfer credit. Reasons for not recognising or transferring credit include the increased cost of flexible provision; a lack of trust in the learning or assessments delivered elsewhere; funding disincentives; the requirements of regulatory or

professional bodies; and time-serving norms and expectations. The design of some qualifications does not facilitate transfer of credit.

Institutional factors help to explain why credit transfer from HN to degree programmes is concentrated in just four universities, all traditionally 'recruiting' post-1992 universities.

Epistemological barriers relating to types of learning

Transfer between different types of learning may be difficult. Interviewees perceived the employability skills developed in much pre-vocational education to be qualitatively different from the vocational skills developed in mainstream VET, making credit transfer between the two inappropriate. They perceived an even stronger boundary between the mainly work-based provision which developed occupational competence and the mainly college-based provision which developed broader vocational capability. These differences in learning mean that little credit transfer is seen as possible. Similarly, some universities do not give credit for HNs because of the different methods of learning and assessment of HNs and degrees.

The strong emphasis on learning in a specific occupational context means that credit transfer is often considered inappropriate even in the case of generic skills or broader areas of learning such as health and safety.

Political barriers

Some of these perceived epistemological barriers may in fact be political barriers if the boundaries between types of learning are created, or exaggerated, in order to defend particular professional, institutional or subject interests. Some of the barriers noted as institutional ones may similarly reflect political forces.

The SCQF itself, which gives providers, especially universities, discretion in whether and how to recognise credit, is itself a product of political forces. Political barriers cannot be observed as directly as the other barriers but they may be present in the very structure of the system.

Is it possible in Scotland to remove or at least reduce the barriers we have outlined? The Scottish Government, for example, has proposed legislating to require universities to recognise credit from HNs where there is a sufficient curricular fit (SG 2011a). Or are there barriers and boundaries across which credit transfer is not possible?

References

- Howieson, C. and D. Raffe with A. Kinsella (2012) *Credit Systems for Lifelong Learning: Country Report for Scotland*. Report to BIBB, Edinburgh: CES.
- Scottish Government (2011a) *Putting Learners at the Centre*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- Scottish Government (2011b) *Review of Post-16 Education and Vocational Training in Scotland*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

About this study

*The study was funded by the German Federal Institute for Vocational Training (BIBB) as part of a four-country project: **Credit Systems for Lifelong Learning**. Contact c.howieson@ed.ac.uk for more information.*

CES Briefings

CES Briefings are edited by Dr Cathy Howieson.

All Briefings can be downloaded from our website, free of charge. If hard copy or multiple copies are required please contact Carolyn Newton at the address below.