



# Operational Guidelines on Use of Credit



1 Credit  
**10** Notional Learning Hours

A circular clock face with a white border and a black arrow pointing counter-clockwise. The numbers 12, 3, 6, and 9 are visible at the top, bottom, right, and left respectively. The word 'Credit' is written vertically next to the 12 o'clock position, and 'Notional Learning Hours' is written vertically next to the 6 o'clock position.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has launched the Qualifications Framework (QF) since 2008 to provide a platform to support lifelong learning with a view to enhancing the capability and competitiveness of the workforce. Qualifications recognised under QF are characterised by three key features: level which reflects the depth and complexity of learning leading to the qualification; award title which reflects the hierarchical level of the qualification and area of study; and credit which indicates the volume or size of learning leading to the qualification.
- 1.2 The Operational Guidelines on Use of Credit (Guidelines) advise users at Chapter 2 the definition and general principles governing QF credit. This Chapter includes a step-by-step guide on the procedures of assigning credit to learning programmes and introduces commonly used ratios on contact hours and self-study hours for reference. The Guidelines provide at Chapter 3 useful advice on how credit assigned will be assessed by quality assurance (QA) bodies.
- 1.3 The Guidelines represent good practices commonly adopted by providers in the education and training sector for credit assignment. Adoption of the Guidelines by all providers is encouraged, and deviations, if any, are expected to be supported by sound justifications to the relevant quality assurance bodies.
- 1.4 The Guidelines are issued in support of the implementation of QF credit for qualifications recognised under QF.

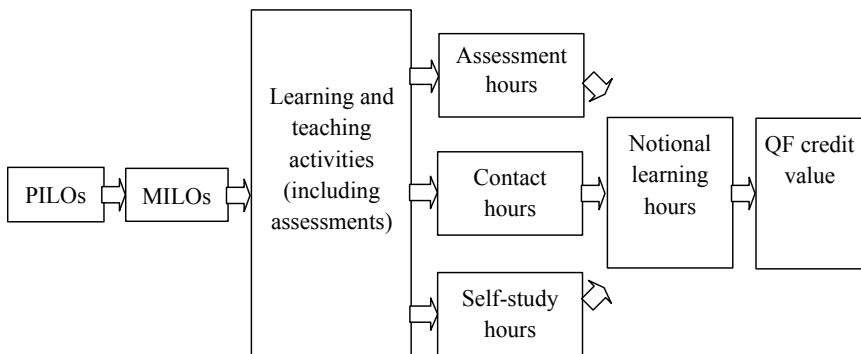
# Chapter 2 Credit Assignment

## Definition and Principles of Credit under QF

- 2.1 QF credit is a measurement of the size or volume of learning in a learning programme (also applicable to a course, module, etc). It enables learners to know the extent of effort to be spent to complete a learning programme and acquire the relevant qualification.
- 2.2 QF credit is defined in terms of notional learning time which takes into account the total time likely to be spent by an average learner in all modes of learning to achieve the learning outcomes, including the class contact hours, self-study hours and assessment hours. Under the Hong Kong QF, one credit consists of 10 notional learning hours.
- 2.3 **Annexure 1** provides a glossary of the terms used in the context of QF credit.

## General Overview of Credit Assignment Process

2.4 Assigning credit to a learning programme involves a number of steps and components. A general overview of the credit assignment process and key components is illustrated in the following diagram:



### Notes:

PILOs : Intended learning outcomes of a programme

MILOs: Intended learning outcomes of a module of a programme

Notional learning hours = contact hours + self-study hours + assessment hours

QF credit value = total notional learning hours divided by 10

## Step-by-Step Guide for Credit Assignment

2.5 Providers may follow the step-by-step guide as shown below to determine and assign a credit value to a module (and a programme).

### Step 1 – Specify the intended learning outcomes of the module

- Identify the intended learning outcomes of the module of a programme (MILOs), which specify what a learner will achieve (in terms of knowledge, competencies, attributes, etc.) after completion of the module successfully. MILOs should align with, and contribute towards, the intended learning outcomes of the programme (PILOs) which specify what a learner will achieve after completion of the programme successfully.

### Step 2 – Assign a QF level to the module

- Assign a QF level to the module with reference to the MILOs and the outcome standards specified in the Generic Level Descriptors (GLD) of QF.
- Details of GLD are available in [www.hkqf.gov.hk](http://www.hkqf.gov.hk). The intended learning outcome of the module should match the outcome standards specified for that level under one (or more) of the four domains of GLD (i.e. Knowledge and Intellectual Skills; Processes; Application, Autonomy and Accountability; and Communication, IT and Numeracy).

### Step 3 – Specify the assessment methods for the module

- Specify the method and types of assessment required of the learners to demonstrate successful completion of the module, and estimate the time required to complete the assessments. The weightings of various forms of assessment (such as tests, mid-term projects and final examinations) and the time required for completing each and every assessment activity should be included.

### Step 4 – Estimate the notional learning time of an average learner to achieve the MILOs

- Estimate the total notional learning time required of an average learner to achieve the MILOs.
- An average learner refers to a typical learner among a class of learners with varying abilities, aptitudes and experiences.
- Notional learning time refers to the time a learner is expected to spend to achieve the MILOs and includes contact hours, self-study hours and assessment hours. Providers may use the table at **Annexure 2** for listing the notional learning hours (NLHs) for all relevant activities. Providers should avoid double counting if the assessment hours are already included in contact hours or self-study hours of the programme.

- Providers may also make reference to a range of ratios between contact hours and self-study hours for various modes of teaching and learning activities listed at **Annexure 3** for estimating the notional learning time.

### **Step 5 – Assign QF credit value to the module**

- Calculate QF credit value by dividing the total NLHs by 10 (see definition of QF credit at paragraph 2.2). To ensure consistency and accuracy, the provider should compare QF level and credit value of the module with that of similar modules (or programmes) in the Qualifications Register (QR).

### **Step 6 – Calculate QF credit value of all modules of a programme**

- QF credit value of a programme will be the sum total of QF credit value of all modules of the programme (including credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing modules).
- Below is an example of a programme comprising 10 modules and one non-credit-bearing module. The table shows how QF credit values of the programme are calculated and its QF level determined.

	Module Title	QF Level	Contact Hours	Self-Study Hours	Assessment Hours	Notional Learning Hours	QF Credit Value
1	Module 1	3	30	60	(already included in contact hours & self-study hours)	90	9
2	Module 2	3	30	60		90	9
3	Module 3	3	40	80		120	12
4	Module 4	4	30	60		90	9
5	Module 5	4	30	60		90	9
6	Module 6	4	30	60		90	9
7	Module 7	4	30	60		90	9
8	Module 8	4	30	60		90	9
9	Module 9	4	30	60		90	9
10	Module 10	4	27	60	3	90	9
11	Module 11 (non-credit-bearing)						
Total		307	620	3	930	93	

Notes:

- (a) The ratio of contact hours to self-study hours is 1:2 for Modules 1 to 9.
- (b) Module 10 comprises 27 contact hours, 60 self-study hours and 3 assessment hours (for sitting the examination). The ratio of contact hours to self-study hours is slightly higher than 1:2. The learner is expected to spend on average 6 self-study hours in preparing for the examination.
- (c) The programme has a total of 930 notional learning hours and has been assigned 93 QF credits (one credit to 10 notional learning hours). Since 63 QF credits (67.7%) are at level 4 (exit level), the programme will lead to a qualification at QF level 4.

## Step 7 – Complete documentation for the programme

- Complete the programme documentation by specifying all other related information such as qualification titles, requirements for obtaining the qualification, normal duration to complete the programme (number of weeks, months or years), etc.

## Step 8 – Review/vetting by peers or external advisors

## Step 9 – Endorse and approve programme proposal

## Step 10 – Review and evaluation process

- Steps 8 to 10 are normally part of the internal procedures of programme development of an institution to ensure quality of the programme.

## Useful Advice on Credit Assignment

- 2.6 Estimation of credit value is not an exact science and credit assignment requires the professional judgment of the relevant parties, including teachers, course developers, subject experts, external reviewers, etc., for the particular programme.
- 2.7 The following are useful advice to providers in determining QF credit values of their programmes in different circumstances:

(a) Non-credit bearing modules

A module may form part of a learning programme but does not contribute towards MILOs or PILOs. The module may also require no assessment, although it may be a requirement for graduation. Modules of this type should not carry QF credit value.

(b) Extra-curricular activities

Similarly, extra-curricular activities which are not assessed or do not contribute to MILOs or PILOs should not carry QF credit value.

(c) Internship, placement and fieldwork

This refers to the supervised learning normally undertaken at the workplace. Such learning may be given different names such as internship, placement, fieldwork, industry attachment, etc. It does not normally refer to casual visits, service learning, community services or volunteering work. Some internship and workplace learning may be related to requirements for professional registration or professional membership.

Workplace learning which contributes to the MILOs or PILOs with the outcomes assessed should be assigned with credit. For this purpose, the actual number of hours (for learning) should be determined by course designers based on their experience and be used in calculating the credit value for workplace learning.

As the duration of internship, attachment, etc. may be relatively long, providers should consider showing the credit value for internship and workplace learning separately from the credit value of the core programme, to enable a better understanding of the size of the programme and a fair comparison among programmes with and without workplace learning.

(d) Online, distance and blended learning

In modules based on online or distance or blended modes of learning, contact hours are the actual hours of face-to-face contact and self-study hours are estimation of the time spent on studying paper-based module pack or materials posted online. In general, contact hours for such module will be less than that of a full-time face-to-face programme and the ratio of contact to self-study hours may be outside the range given at **Annexure 3**. Providers should review the accuracy of the estimated NLHs after they have gained more experience in the process.

(e) Variation in ratio between contact hours and self-study hours

**Annexure 3** sets out the range of ratios normally used by providers to determine the self-study hours in relation to the contact hours of a learning activity, having regard to the QF level, nature of discipline, learning and teaching modes, etc. of the programme concerned. In general, in respect of programmes at a lower QF level and with more

face-to-face delivery and teacher supervision, a lower ratio should be considered. In respect of programmes at a higher QF level, a higher ratio of contact hours and self-study hours may be used. Ratio adopted by a provider outside the range should be supported by reasons and justifications, such as empirical research or survey results.

(f) QF credit value in whole number

QF credit value should be shown in whole number. Providers should round off (i.e. round up or down) the credit value if it contains a decimal point. Providers should consider enriching the learning content correspondingly when rounding up the credit value of the programme.

For a programme with more than one module, the QF credit value should be rounded off after summing up the total QF credit values of all the modules of the programme.

(g) SCS-based Courses

SCS-based Courses are courses designed in accordance with Specification of Competency Standards (SCS) of the industries developed under the QF. SCS comprises Units of Competency (UoCs), each of which is given a credit value for reference. The credit values of the UoCs are not binding on providers and providers may suggest a different credit value for the course as they consider appropriate. Similarly, providers may make reference to

the Specification of Generic (Foundation) Competencies (SGC) developed under QF for course design and assignment of credit.

Courses labeled as SCS-based should satisfy the requirement relating to the use of UoCs in the course design. Providers may refer to the Qualifications Guidelines on SCS-based Courses issued by the Education Bureau for details ([www.hkqf.gov.hk](http://www.hkqf.gov.hk)).

(h) Common Descriptors for Associate Degree and Higher Diploma Programmes

Providers should also take into account the requirement specified in the Common Descriptors for sub-degree programmes in determining the credit values of such programmes, i.e. 60% of learning content for Associate Degree should be generic (in terms of QF credit value) and 60% of the content for Higher Diploma should be specialised or vocationally oriented. Details of the Common Descriptors are available at [www.ipass.gov.hk](http://www.ipass.gov.hk).

2.8 Providers in different sectors may adopt different approaches in assigning credit to their programmes. A “Fixed Ratio” approach is commonly used in the post-secondary education sector. The approach begins with the determination of the contact hours required to deliver the content of a module (and the learning programme as a whole). The contact hours are then used to determine the non-contact hours (including self-study hours and assessment hours) using a pre-determined

ratio. The credit of the module/programme will be the sum total of the contact hours and the non-contact hours for that module/programme.

- 2.9 Some providers may adopt a “Learning Outcomes” approach in credit assignment in line with the philosophy of the outcome-based teaching and learning approach. This approach focuses on the learning outcomes of the module (or a smaller unit or component of the programme). The effort to be put in to achieve the outcomes of the module will be identified and translated into a series of teaching/training, learning and assessment activities. The NLHs of each module is worked out individually, without relying on fixed pre-determined ratios.
- 2.10 Providers may, according to their individual circumstances and experience, adopt one of these approaches or a mixture of both approaches to suit their needs.

# Chapter 3 Credit Assessment

## General Principles on Credit Assessment

- 3.1 Assessment of the QF credit value assigned to a learning programme is necessary to ensure the credit value assigned is accurate and credible. Assessment will be carried out by the institution (or provider) internally as an integral part of its internal quality assurance process of the programme, and/or externally by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) as part of the external accreditation process of the programme.
- 3.2 Programmes of self-accrediting institutions (such as the continuing education arms of universities) and the credit assigned to these programmes may be subject to external review by the Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC) before they are registered in the QR.
- 3.3 In general, the following principles are adopted by QA bodies in assessing the credit assigned to a module or programme:
  - (a) Validity

Providers should be able to demonstrate that the methodology used to estimate the notional learning time of a programme is based on sound and valid rationales, with reference to the profile of an average learner targeted for the learning programme.

### (b) Consistency

QF credit value should be assigned by a provider to its learning programmes consistently, e.g. whether the same or similar conversion ratios of contact hours to self-study hours are applied to programmes of a similar nature offered by the same provider.

To ensure consistency, QF credit value assigned will also be assessed with reference to external benchmarks, e.g. comparison with comparable qualifications offered by different institutions or with international norms (such as 120 QF credits for a year of full-time learning), etc.

Providers are advised to use the proformas provided by the relevant QA bodies to record the credit assignment process. Any variation or deviation from established ratios and norms should be supported by justifications and documented for record and review purposes.

### (c) Transparency

Information gathered by providers, such as advice and feedback from academic peers and industry experts, comparison of NLHs of similar programmes, and other useful information which may impact on the decision of the QF credit value of a learning programme, should be properly recorded and made available to QA bodies for assessment.

## Credit Assessment by QA Bodies

### *At institutional level*

- 3.4 Institutions/providers are expected to set up an appropriate system for assignment of QF credits to learning programmes, covering the process of programme design, delivery, monitoring and review.
- 3.5 Typically, the following issues at the institutional level will be considered by QA bodies when assessing the QF credit:
- (a) whether the institution/provider has established policies and procedures governing the assignment and assessment of the QF credit of the learning programme it offers;
  - (b) whether the policies and procedures are applied systematically and reviewed periodically;
  - (c) whether discretion has been built into the policies and procedures to accommodate the diversified nature and discipline of learning programmes at different QF levels;
  - (d) whether there is a process of equipping academic/training staff with the skills and knowledge in assigning QF credits to learning programmes; and
  - (e) whether there is a process of engaging stakeholders in assigning, assessing and reviewing the appropriateness of the QF credit value and QF level of a learning programme.

*At programme level*

3.6 The following issues will be considered by QA bodies when assessing the accuracy of QF credit value assigned to a module or a learning programme. These issues are interlocking and they underpin the design, delivery and review of a learning programme:

(a) Programme objectives and PILOs

The intended learning outcomes of the programme (i.e. PILOs) should reflect the stated programme objectives and should be tested through assessment. Evidence should be produced to show that the intended learning outcomes of the programme correspond to that at the same QF level stipulated in GLD and other relevant documents/descriptors.

(b) Programme content and structure

The content and structure of the learning programme must be coherent, integrated and effective in enabling learners to achieve the stated intended learning outcomes at the required standards. The notional learning time allocated to the teaching, learning and assessment activities of a module (and to the learning programme as a whole) must be sufficient to enable learners to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

(c) Teaching/training and learning

The teaching/training and learning activities designed for the learning programmes must be effective in delivering programme content and the intended learning outcomes. Appropriate teaching methods should be employed to effectively engage learners in the learning process.

(d) Assessments and tests

Assessments and tests should be designed to enable learners to demonstrate the achievement of the intended learning outcomes at the required standards. The assessment methods and techniques used must be valid, reliable, fair and sufficient to reflect the learning outcomes at the claimed QF levels.

(e) Programme development, monitoring and review

A system must be in place to ensure that the learning programmes remain current and valid and that the intended learning outcomes and the teaching/training, learning, and assessment activities are effective.

- 3.7 **Annexure 4** is a flowchart to illustrate how credit value is assessed at the programme level. The flowchart also outlines the interrelationship of various stages of credit assessment and the assessment questions to be asked by QA bodies.

## Useful Advice on Credit Assessment

- 3.8 Credit assessment will focus on the intended learning outcomes to be attained by the learners, and how the efforts spent in attaining the intended learning outcomes would be reflected in the credit value assigned to the programme.
- 3.9 All modules of a learning programme must have a QF credit value and a QF level of their own. QF credit value without a QF level will be invalid. The overall QF level of the programme may be different from the QF level of individual modules. The majority of credits in a learning programme must be at the claimed QF level (exit level) of the programme.
- 3.10 The knowledge or skills required of a learner prior to the learning for that module should not be taken into account when determining the QF credit value for the module.
- 3.11 QF credit assigned to a programme should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure continued validity. The review could be integrated with existing process of quality assurance of the programme. Feedbacks from graduates, teachers and external advisors/examiners would be valuable for assessing the accuracy of the credit value of the programme.

## Annexure 1 Glossary

Terminology	Explanation
1. QF credit	<p>QF credit is a measurement of the size or volume of learning in a learning programme recognised under the QF. One QF credit consists of 10 notional learning hours.</p> <p>A learner of the programme will be awarded the QF credit only when the learning outcomes specified for the programme are attained and verified.</p> <p>QF credit is either awarded fully or not awarded, and is awarded independent of grading or performance.</p>
2. Notional learning time	<p>Notional learning time refers to the amount of time an average learner is expected to take to complete all learning pertaining to the module/programme and achieve the learning outcomes of the module/programme.</p> <p>It includes time spent on all learning modes and activities, such as lectures, laboratories, workshops, guided learning, self-study, projects, assignments and assessments.</p> <p>Notional learning time is expressed in notional learning hours, and includes contact hours, self-study hours and assessment hours. Notional learning time may also include time spent in the workplace.</p>

Terminology	Explanation
3. Average learner	An average learner refers to a typical learner among a class of learners targeted for a particular programme with varying abilities, aptitudes, experiences and motivation.
4. Learning outcomes	Learning outcomes refer to what a learner should know, understand, and/or be able to do upon successful completion of the learning programme.
5. Contact hours	The amount of time (in terms of hours) spent by a learner in direct contact with the teaching/training staff of a programme. It includes attendance in class, tutorials, conducting experiment in laboratory under supervision, supervised session in placement and workshop, etc.
6. Self-study hours	The amount of time (in terms of hours) spent by a learner without direct contact with teaching/training staff. This includes time spent on self-studying, preparation for tests and examinations, research, writing reports for projects and work placement, studying on-line materials, etc.
7. Assessment hours	<p>The amount of time (in terms of hours) spent by learners in examinations, tests and other related assessment activities.</p> <p>Assessment activities may include contact hours and self-study hours, which should not be double-counted in credit assignment.</p>

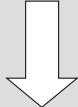
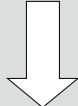
## Annexure 2 Table for Estimating Notional Learning Hours (NLHs) and QF Credit of a Module

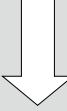
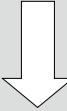
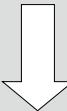
	Learning outcomes	Contact hours (a)	Self-study hours (b)	Total hours (a+b)
<b>Learning and teaching activity</b>				
1 Lecture				
2 Tutorial				
3 Practical work (laboratory, workshop, etc)				
4 Online, distance and blended learning				
5 Internship / placement / fieldwork				
6 Others				
<b>Assessment</b>				
7 Exercise				
8 Project				
9 Test / examination / assessment activities				
10 Others				
<b>Total NLHs</b>				
<b><i>QF credit = Total NLHs/10</i></b>				

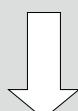
### Annexure 3 Range of Ratios Between Contact Hours and Self-study Hours

<b>Learning and teaching activity</b>	<b>Ratio of contact hours to self-study hours</b>
Lecture	Range from 1:0.5 to 1:2
Tutorial	Range from 1:0.5 to 1:2
Practical work (laboratory, workshop, etc)	Range from 1:0.5 to 1:2
Project	Range from 1:0.5 to 1:2
Online, distance and blended learning	Realistic estimation of learning time
Internship / placement/ fieldwork	Actual hours ( <i>for learning</i> )
Others	Range from 1:0.5 to 1:2

## Annexure 4 Flowchart on Credit Assessment at Programme Level by QA Bodies

	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Key questions to be addressed</b>
Programme level	<b>Programme Objectives and Programme Intended Learning Outcomes</b> 	<input type="checkbox"/> What is the purpose of the learning programme? <input type="checkbox"/> As a result of learning, what are the expected outcomes? <input type="checkbox"/> Are the intended learning outcomes of the learning programme (PILOs) commensurate with the claimed QF level that is consistent with the Generic Level Descriptors?
Programme level	<b>Programme Content and Structure</b> 	<input type="checkbox"/> Is the sequencing of the module(s) within the learning programme logical and coherent? <input type="checkbox"/> Do the intended learning outcomes of the modules (MILOs) contribute sufficiently and reasonably to PILOs?

	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Key questions to be addressed</b>
Module level	<b>Student/ Learner Assessment</b>  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Are the proposed assessment methods and their frequencies fit for measuring the achievement of MILOs?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Is there a mechanism to benchmark the assessment design against those of similar modules with comparable intended learning outcomes?</li> </ul>
Module level	<b>Learning and Teaching/ Training</b>  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Are the learning and teaching/training activities appropriate in relation to MILOs?</li> </ul>
Module level	<b>QF credit value of the individual modules</b>  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Has the number of notional learning hours of the individual module(s) taken into account all learning and assessment activities an average learner is expected to complete and achieve MILOs?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Can MILOs be achieved in the time allocated?</li> </ul>

Issue	Key questions to be addressed
<p>Programme level</p> <p><b>QF credit value of the learning programme</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Has the number of notional learning hours of the programme taken into account the total time for an average learner to complete all learning and assessment activities and achieve PILOs?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Are the majority of QF credits at the exit QF level of the learning programme?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Can PILOs be achieved in the time allocated?</li> </ul>
<p>Both programme and module levels</p> <p><b>Programme Development, Monitoring and Review</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Are there any supporting evidence of benchmarking against similar learning programmes with comparable intended learning outcomes and common descriptors?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Is there a mechanism in place to collect feedback from stakeholders of the learning programme to review whether the time allocated to the learning and assessment activities is sufficient?</li> </ul>



**Qualifications Framework Secretariat**  
Email: [hkqf@edb.gov.hk](mailto:hkqf@edb.gov.hk)

**Qualifications Framework**  
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[www.hkqr.gov.hk](http://www.hkqr.gov.hk)