UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

**QUALIFICATIONS AND CREDIT FRAMEWORK; MODULAR STRUCTURE**

1 FRAMEWORK

The University has adopted a modular structure and a credit framework for the delivery of its courses and undergraduate Honours subject strands.

The University’s current Qualifications and Credit Framework (Annex) replaces the frameworks in use from 1992 to 2001 and from 2002 to 2008. For each University award, the Framework identifies the minimum credit volume, the range of credit levels for modules contributing to the award, the minimum credit points required at the highest level and the maximum permitted at the lowest level within the range, and the pass mark used. The place of the award in the national Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) is also identified. Other expectations (entry qualifications; duration; progress, consequences of failure and classification) are specified in award and course regulations. University award regulations are found on the website of the Office of the University Secretary at [ulster.ac.uk/about/governance/ordinance-and-regulations](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/about/governance/ordinance-and-regulations). Templates for regulations may be found on the Academic Office website: ulster.ac.uk/academicoffice/regulations-templates.

2 QUALIFICATIONS AND GENERIC QUALIFICATION DESCRIPTORS

The University expects its awards to meet the generic outcomes for the relevant qualification described in the FHEQ (Appendix 5). Further information on the FHEQ is available at QAA’s website. Each particular course has its own aims and learning outcomes set out in a programme specification.

3 CREDIT LEVELS AND GENERIC CREDIT LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

Modules are assigned a particular level. The level is an expression of relative demand, complexity, depth of learning and student autonomy.

The University’s levels reflect those commonly in use in the rest of the university sector it formally adopted, in 2002, the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) level descriptors to describe the levels. These are now known as EWNI (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) levels and they have been recommended in the higher education credit framework for England published by QAA in August 2008. (Scotland has a different framework.) The generic credit levels are set out at appendix 6.

The following equivalences apply:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| University Credit Levels (2009) | University Credit Levels (to 2008) | FHEQ (2008) | FHEQ (to 2008) |
| 1 | A | - | - |
| 2 | A | - | - |
| 3 | A | 3 | - |
| 4 | 1 | 4 | Certificate |
| 5 | 2 | 5 | Intermediate |
| 6 | 3 | 6 | Honours |
| 7 | M | 7 | Master’s |
| 8 | Doctoral | 8 | Doctoral |

The EWNI levels encompass the post-16 education systems across both the further and higher education sectors and start at ‘Entry’ Level. Entry level and Level 1 are not used in University courses (with the exception of a particular introductory Level 1 Mathematics module in Access to Higher Education courses). Level 2 is only used in Access Diplomas, but at least 60 credit points in the final year of such courses must be at Level 3.

4 MODULES AND CREDIT POINTS

A module is a component of a programme with its own approved aims, learning outcomes and assessment methods. Each module is usually taught and assessed within a semester but modules may be delivered across the academic year and assessed in semesters 2 or 3 (‘long-thin’ modules). Credit points and a credit level, appropriate to the module's content and learning outcomes, are allocated in accordance with the overall requirements of the award. Credit points are a notional expression of student effort hours (inclusive of class contact, practicals, fieldwork, private study, assessment). Notionally 10 hours of student effort equate to one credit point.

Modules are either compulsory or optional within the programme structure. Some modules may in addition be described as ‘core’, requiring students to meet the threshold standard in both coursework and examination assessment elements in order to pass the module. (This may also be required in specific coursework components).

Student performance in modules and the course overall is generally measured as percentage marks, although achievement may be recorded on a pass/fail basis. The University confers its qualifications on students who complete modules amounting to the specified number of credits at the appropriate levels for the award, in accordance with course regulations, and achieve the specified standard of performance to fulfil the learning outcomes of the course.

Module Size

Taught modules may have any value in multiples of 5 credit points. There is currently a minimum size of 10 credit points in award-bearing courses but 20 is encouraged as the normal minimum size. A strong rationale is expected for smaller modules (10 or 15 credit points). If course teams intend to use different sizes they should take account of the overall study load on students. Stand-alone short courses (including modules contributing to the Certificate of Personal and Professional Development (CPPD) or Postgraduate Certificate of Professional Development frameworks) may be offered as 5 point modules.

Periods of placement which are assessed in relation to the learning objectives of the course may carry credit points. The placement may be integrated with an existing module or considered equivalent to taught modules. The allocation of credit points should not be made mechanistically in relation to the time spent on placement but should be related to the learning objectives of the module; there may be periods during placement when the student is gaining experience which does not contribute to the fulfilment of intended learning outcomes.

Study Load

One hundred and twenty credit points represent the normal workload for a full-time programme of study in the standard academic year and 180 credits for study across a full calendar year. Normally 60 credit points of study are undertaken in each of the autumn and spring semesters. This amounts to some 36-42 hours of study per week. Programmes of significantly longer duration comprise additional modules, taken during the summer semester.

In part-time programmes, a maximum of 90 credit points may be studied in the two-semester academic year and 135 in the calendar year (notionally 30 hours per week), with no more than 45 credit points in any semester.

The special intensive, eight-week summer semester allows study of modules amounting to 40 credit points (50 hours per week) (full-time) or a maximum of 20 points for part-time studies (25 hours).

The guidance is summarised below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Study load in credit points | Normal full-time (notional hours per week) | Part-time maximum |
| Academic year (30 weeks) (2 semesters) | 120 (40) | 90 (30) |
| Calendar year (45 weeks+) (3 semesters) | 180 (40) | 135 (30) |
| Intensive summer semester (8 weeks) | 40 (50) | 20 (25) |

Unequal study load between semesters should not be a feature of course design for full-time courses (and should preferably be avoided in part-time courses, but may occur because of module sizes). Exceptionally, individual students may seek, taking account of the optional modules available within their programme, to take a heavier load in one semester than in the other. Subject to fulfilment of the requirements for the year as expressed in course regulations, and in the case of full-time students the completion of at least 40 credit points in the other semester, this is permissible. In some other circumstances, students may seek to take additional modules, for example a part-time student transferring to full-time mode, or a student transferring from another course. Course/subject committees have discretion to permit such additional study.

The study loads above represent normal maxima. Proposals for courses with a heavier load as part of their structure, for example additional credits within the standard academic year, or completion of 120 credit points in 20 weeks of study for an intensive degree of two years or 60 weeks, require special consideration by the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee.

One-year full-time Master’s degrees should be completed within 50 weeks, ie before the start of the next academic year for courses commencing in September.

Module Teaching Patterns

The balance between lectures, seminars, tutorials, projects, laboratory and fieldwork etc is not prescribed. There are conventions within subjects and common patterns are often followed on a weekly basis. Course/subject teams should take account of the needs of student groups in considering the disposition of various learning and teaching methods. The Senate has noted the merits of front-loading contact time in first year undergraduate teaching to ease the transition from school. A first year undergraduate teaching policy was approved in 2008 (see Academic Office website). Courses which do not have written examinations may use the designated period in the semesters for other activities.

5 USE OF MODULES AT PRE-HE LEVEL IN UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMMES, AND UNDERGRADUATE MODULES IN POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMMES

The 2002 Framework introduced some latitude in the specifications for awards. This is mainly because ab initio study may not be easily accommodated within the expectations of the usual level. Consequently, some modules are permitted at a lower level than would normally be expected in an HE qualification. The following restrictions apply:

Lowest Level

Other than Access Diplomas, the lowest level permissible in undergraduate programmes is Level 3. Except for integrated Master’s degrees, the lowest level permissible in postgraduate programmes is Level 6.

Maximum at Lowest Level

With the exception of courses identified below, the maximum volume at the lowest level is:

in programmes with 120 or more credit points: 30 credit points

in programmes with fewer than 120 credit points: 20 credit points

In Foundation and Associate Bachelor’s degrees it is - 40 credit points.

Access to Higher Education courses are usually made up entirely of modules at Levels 2 and 3, with at least 60 credit points at Level 3. An introductory Mathematics module at Level 1 may be used.In Honours degrees, particularly in Art and Design or for international students from countries where the school-leaving qualification does not equate to A Level standard, an integrated foundation year (Year ‘0’) at Level 3 may be included. From 2016, the concept of ‘extended’ Master’s degrees has been approved which allows additional study of at least 60 credits at Level 6 to be integrated at the start of the course.

Exemptions on the basis of study at Level 3 or 6

Exemption should not be granted from Level 3 modules in undergraduate programmes and Level 6 modules in postgraduate programmes except where relevant study has been successfully completed as part of another programme at the same qualification level. For example, a student should not be exempted from a first year degree module at Level 3 on the basis of a GCE A level in the subject, as the latter qualification serves to meet the admission requirements. Course design should ensure that alternative modules are available for students who do not need to take such foundation modules.

6 USE OF MODULES OF A LEVEL HIGHER THAN THAT TYPICALLY ASSOCIATED WITH A QUALIFICATION

With the exception of a small number of degrees, the classification of undergraduate awards is determined exclusively by students’ average performance in the modules studied at the highest level. The inclusion is a programme structure of a module(s) from a higher level than that which would be typical of the qualification level for that programme would not normally be accepted given that, in longer programmes, this would lead to a classification based on a very low number of credits, and in all cases would result in a classification based on study at a level higher than that associated with the qualification. In such circumstances a carefully articulated rationale for the inclusion of higher level module(s) will be required for consideration at validation and subsequently by the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee.

7 POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMMES

From 2003 intake, in accordance with the national framework, all courses using Postgraduate Certificate, Postgraduate Diploma or Master’s award titles must be postgraduate in level. These awards have a minimum of 60, 120, 180 credit points respectively. Except for Integrated Master’s degrees, the lowest undergraduate level which may be included is Level 6. The restriction on volume at this level is indicated in 5 above and in the summary annex.

Programmes which are postgraduate in time and intended as conversion programmes should be presented as Graduate Certificates or Graduate Diplomas, with a minimum 60 or 120 credit volume respectively. A Level 7 dissertation does not form part of such programmes. (See 8 below – Level 6.) The ‘extended’ Master’s degree (5 above) fully integrates such a preparatory period.

Entry Standard

The entry standard for Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma programmes and ‘extended’ Master’s degrees is a minimum of a non-honours degree (with 360 credits). For Master’s degrees it is a second-class honours degree, or the equivalent standard in a Graduate Certificate or Diploma. This standard is a pass for Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma entry and 50% for Master’s entry.

Pass Mark

In Level 4 – 6 modules in Integrated Master’s degree courses and in Level 6 modules in extended Master’s degrees, and from 2016/17 in Level 6 modules in other postgraduate courses, the pass mark is 40%. The pass mark in Level 7 modules is 50%. The standard of achievement required to progress to Level 7 in extended Master’s degrees is 50%. An overall 50% standard must be met by candidates to be eligible for a postgraduate award.

Postgraduate Certificates

Except where presented as stand-alone qualifications, postgraduate certificates are generally not entry points. Instead, they may be awarded to students who successfully fulfil the objectives of the award, but do not complete or proceed to the postgraduate diploma/ Master’s stage.

Master’s dissertations

A 60-point dissertation is a common feature of Master’s degrees. It is not a requirement. Only those dissertations which achieve a mark of 70% or above are deposited electronically in the University’s Library in accordance with the Guidelines for the Presentation of Dissertations.

Integrated Master’s Courses

The University currently offers the MBiomedSci, MChiro, MEng, MOptom, MPharm and MSci as Master’s degrees with Honours in this category. These are first degree courses with postgraduate outcomes at the final level. Hence they are categorised as Master’s level qualifications. The pass mark is set at 40% in the undergraduate level modules and 50% in the Level 7 modules. The minimum number of Level 7 credit points is 120, not 150, as in other Master’s programmes. A project/dissertation and a period of work-based learning are compulsory, integral components of such courses.

8 UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMMES

Within the three main qualification levels, the following awards are available. The pass mark in all is 40%.

Level 4

Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE)

Normally comprising 120 credits at Level 4, with a maximum of 30 credit points at Level 3, this award replaced (from 2002) the former Diploma comprising 120 credit points at Level 4.

Level 5

Foundation degree (FdA, FdEng, FdSc)

Associate Bachelor’s degree (AB)

Advanced Diploma (AdvDip)

Advanced Certificate (AdvCert)

The Foundation degree and Associate Bachelor’s degree comprise a minimum of 240 credit points, usually at Levels 4 and 5, but with a maximum of 40 credit points at Level 3. The Foundation degree is intended for vocational areas of study. It must include at least 40 credit points of work-based learning. Following a Foundation degree, the associated Honours degree is completed in up to two further years of full-time study, or the equivalent part-time, in a ‘2 + bridging + 1’ model. The bridging element ranges from 0 – 120 credit points depending on the curriculum match. A pass standard is required for students to be eligible to progress to the related Honours degree, but initial offer and admission standards are determined by the availability of places.

The University has withdrawn the DipHE award, and no longer offers HNDs and HNCs of the Edexcel Foundation. The Foundation degree and Associate Bachelor’s degree take their place.

The Advanced Diploma and Certificate comprise 120 and 60 credit points respectively, generally at Level 5, with an entry standard of CertHE or equivalent.

The minimum general entry requirement for the CertHE, Foundation Degree and Associate Bachelor’s degree is one GCE A level and three GCSEs or acceptable alternative qualifications.

Level 6

This level comprises Honours degrees, Graduate Diplomas and Graduate Certificates and non-Honours degrees.

The Honours degree has a minimum of 360 credit points (with at least 120 at Level 6, and a maximum of 30 at Level 3 except for those course which include an integrated foundation year). It has a two A level/equivalent entry standard.

A dissertation/project, a sustained piece of work, is a normal expectation in the final level of an Honours degree. A period of work-based learning is also expected as an integral, compulsory part of the curriculum.

Graduate Diplomas and Certificates have a minimum entry requirement of a non-Honours degree. They comprise 120 and 60 credit points respectively at Level 6, but with a maximum of 30 or 20 credit points at level 3 permitted. They are based largely on undergraduate material and are usually taken by those who are already graduates in another discipline. They replace former postgraduate conversion programmes, as the ‘postgraduate’ stem in award titles is reserved for advanced courses at Level 7. A Foundation Degree or Associate Bachelor’s degree is insufficient for admission to the Graduate Diploma and Graduate Certificate.

The non-Honours degree has 360 credit points, with at least 60 at Level 6 and a maximum of 30 at Level 3. It requires two A levels or equivalent for admission. None is currently offered.

Other Undergraduate Qualifications

The award titles of Certificate and Diploma are available for programmes of 60 or 120 credit points respectively, which do not fulfil the minimum requirements for other awards. Access to HE courses, comprising 120 credit points at Levels 1 to 3, use the title ‘Access Diploma’.

Associate Awards

The Diploma in International Academic Studies and the Diploma in Professional Practice (International) are associate awards available for integrated periods of study abroad or placement respectively, lasting at least 25 weeks, in Honours and non-Honours degrees. These awards are not made independently of another qualification.

9 COMBINED HONOURS DEGREES

In addition to the provision of integrated Single Honours degrees, the University’s modular framework for Honours degrees allows the combination of certain subjects. These subjects are offered as one or more of the following:

1. as a single honours course (modules amounting to 120 credit points in the subject at each of Levels 5 and 6);
2. as a major subject strand (modules amounting to 80 credit points in the subject at each of Levels 5 and 6);
3. as a main subject strand (modules amounting to 60 credit points in the subject at each of Levels 5 and 6);
4. as a minor subject strand (modules amounting to 40 credit points in the subject at each of Levels 5 and 6).

Greater flexibility may be built into Level 4 (or 3) to facilitate delayed and informed choice by allowing students to select up to three subjects at that level.

Honours degrees are therefore available as:

Single Honours;

Major/Minor Honours (two-thirds/one-third weighting of two subjects);

Joint Honours (equal weighting of two main subjects);

Combined Honours (equal weighting of three minor subjects).

There is no integration between subjects in combined programmes, although there is internal coherence and progression within each subject strand.

10 TITLES

The award titles available are listed in the Schedule to Ordinance XXIX (Appendix 3). The range of titles has been expanded beyond the generic ‘Arts’, ‘Science’ and ‘Engineering’ to incorporate specific subjects into the award title particularly for practice-based courses, in keeping with national conventions.

Use of ‘Arts’ or ‘Science’ in Generic Degree Award Titles

The appropriate title for an award is usually self-evident. However, in some subject areas practice in the sector varies, and it is largely a matter of convention whether Arts or Science is used. The University expects that there should be consistency within subject areas, including between undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

Naming Subjects in Titles

The subject of study is named in the course title after the award. The University has adopted the QAA guidance that qualification titles should reflect their subject focus. Titles should not normally combine more than three subjects. Where subjects have approximately equal weight they are joined by ‘and’ (‘X and Y’ or ‘X, Y and Z’: two main subjects or three minor subjects.) In major/minor combinations, the minor subject is linked to the major subject by ‘with’. This applies where the minor subject represents one quarter or one third of the programme of study. This weighting should be reflected at Levels 5 and 6 in undergraduate degrees.

The UK Quality Code proposes that ‘Combined Studies’ should be reserved for courses involving study of more than three significant components. Within the University, the ‘Combined Honours’ designation may be used as a convenient summary title where three subjects are selected from a range. Awards will specify the three subjects.

11 EXIT AWARDS

Each award-bearing course requires a statement of overarching aims and objectives, representing a coherent programme of study for a course or subject strand. This also applies to interim ‘exit’ awards which are not made simply for the accumulation of credit. Students who leave without completing the requirements for a named award may receive a transcript of their studies.

In courses with staged stepping-off and on points and associated awards which are integral parts of a higher award (eg CertHE/AB/Hons degree or PgCert/Dip/Master’s degree), only one award is made to students during a continuous period of registration, that at the highest level when the student leaves. Exit awards normally carry the same subject title as the main award.

12 WEB-SUPPORTED MODULE DELIVERY

Two broad definitions are used to describe modules delivered or supported online.

* **BLENDED LEARNING** – Although online participation is required, face-to-face interactions remain. Online participation may include all or some of the following:
* accessing key course documents
* using online course material, which contains major educational content
* interactive and communication (synchronous and asynchronous) between staff and students or among students
* online assessments (formative or summative)
* **FULLY ONLINE** – There is no face-to-face on-campus component. All content, activities and interactions are integrated and delivered online. The assumption is made that the student may never attend a campus throughout the duration of the module.

No Year 1 modules may be delivered fully online in full-time undergraduate campus-based programmes. The introduction of fully online Level 5 or 6 modules in full-time undergraduate campus-based programmes may be proposed through the validation process or approved by the Faculty through the CA3 process.

13 CERTIFICATE OF PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Certificate of Personal and Professional Development award provides a framework for students who have successfully completed stand-alone credit-bearing modules in the form of short courses at Level 3 or 4 to receive a Certificate qualification. There is no requirement of integration between modules nor of a coherent programme of study. This award is formal recognition of accumulation of credit from approved modules within the framework.

A Postgraduate Certificate of Professional Development provides a similar framework at Level 7.