



Achieving credit transfer at scale: An analysis of UK university policies



Rationale for the report and objectives

The discourse around credit transfer has grown exponentially in the last year or so. In England, primary legislation has been passed to enable the development of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) and the new government's election manifesto included a commitment to a post-16 strategy that would consider how students move between institutions.

But credit transfer has been referred to as the 'third rail' of LLE policy, in that it is key to achieving the fullest ambitions of the policy, but also the hardest part to realise. While it is unclear how the LLE will develop under the new Westminster government, Labour's manifesto commitment means that the issue of credit transfer is not likely to disappear from policy debate.

Often missing in the discourse is that, while universities are autonomous and there is no single credit transfer mechanism they subscribe to, credit transfer mechanisms already exist within the current system. The [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) includes a process for recognition of prior learning within its principles of recruiting, selecting and admitting students. But the system is disjointed between institutions, discretionary and cloaked in obscurity and consequently only happens in very small numbers. There has yet to be a comprehensive overview of what credit transfer practice it looks like across the sector.

As the UK's quality body, QAA plays a pivotal role supporting the sector and government to achieve a system which respects institutional autonomy, is accessible for learners, and facilitates more flexible pathways within higher education to enable lifelong learning.

This QAA resource maps credit transfer and recognition of prior learning policies across the UK and is the first of its kind to develop a clear, comprehensive picture of what's happening in practice in the current landscape. It provides an evidence base to identify learnings and recommend how to facilitate effective credit transfer at a larger scale in future, meeting the ambitions of the new government and the sector in delivering skills growth and lifelong learning.



Methodology¹

To establish an accurate sample of providers, the relevant regulatory and funding body registers were used for each UK nation.²

Desk research was conducted to identify credit transfer, recognition of prior learning (RPL) or equivalent policies for each provider. We included any policy which contained clear information about the provider's plans for RPL, whether as a standalone policy or within a broader policy such as admissions or academic regulations. Where providers cited an awarding body's policy, this is highlighted in the results. To avoid duplication, these results were not included in the further analysis of the policies' characteristics.

In some cases, provider's websites or other policy documentation referenced a policy, but it was not publicly available online. In a small number of cases, a provider indicated that the policy was available on request, or for learners undergoing the admissions process. In these cases, it has been marked as 'Yes - but not publicly available' in the results and not included in the further analysis.

If the policies were not publicly available and there was no mention of the policy found in the desk research, the provider was listed in our analysis as not having one. Providers who explicitly stated that they do not allow recognition of prior learning were also listed as not having one (although this was very rare).

When a policy was publicly available, the data collected included whether the provider allowed recognition of prior experiential learning (known as RPEL, this is learning gained outside of an educational institution, such as through work experience or volunteering), recognition of prior certified learning (known as RPCL, this refers to learning gained within an educational institution that has been awarded credit or a qualification award) and credit transfer. 'Credit transfer' was sometimes referred to explicitly, and sometimes implied under the RPCL policy. In other cases, mechanisms such as advanced standing and exemptions were cited and these were also included as credit transfer. The research also considered the maximum amount of credit a provider recognised, any standout characteristics and the time limit accepted.

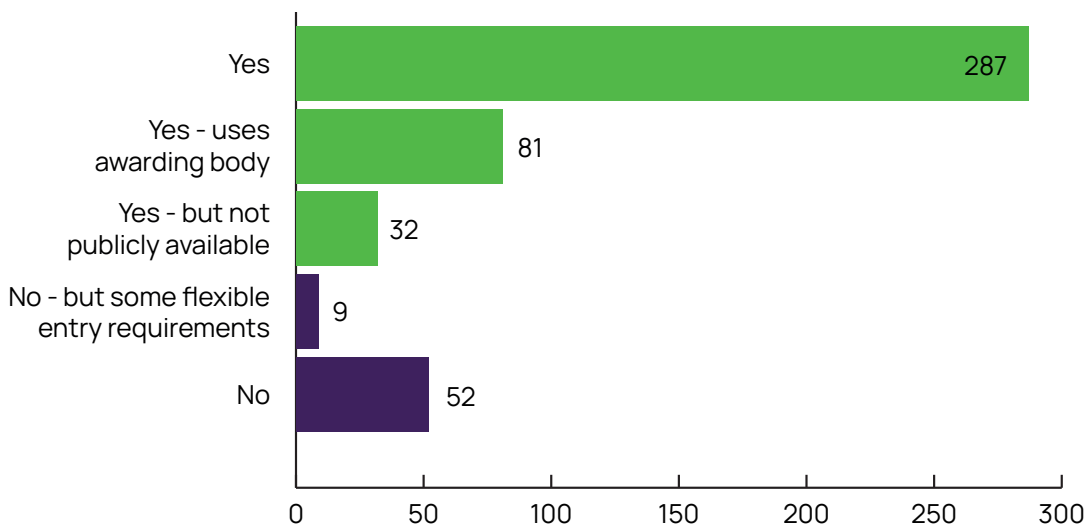
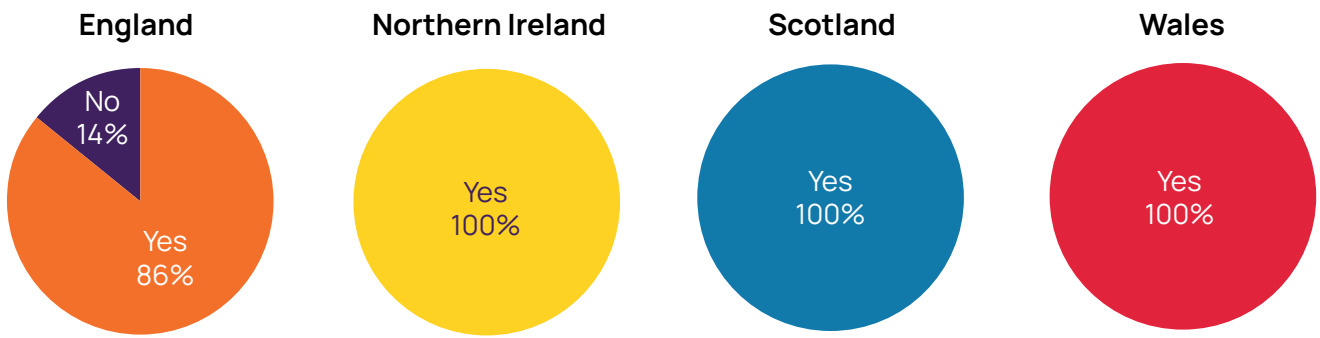
Our findings are based on the policies and publicly available information. Students are likely to be able to gain further information from a provider and have additional support, information and advice from their points of contacts when applying.

The following diagrams provide a summary of the top-level data gained from our research.

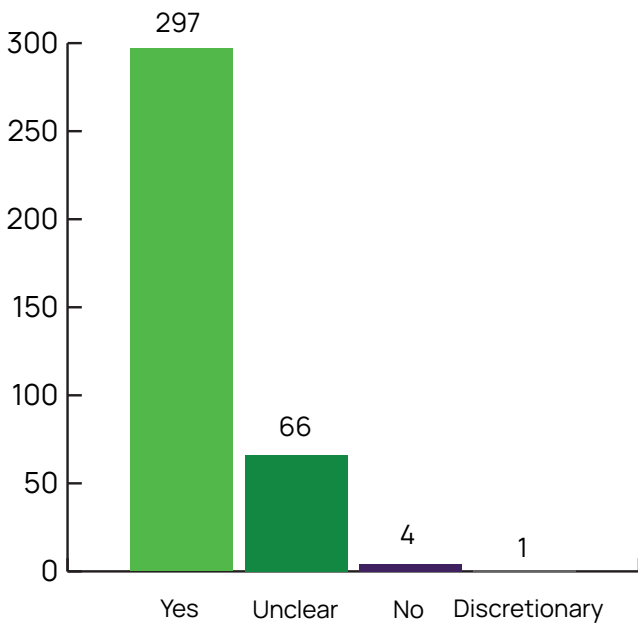
¹ This resource was compiled using desk research and therefore, while as comprehensive as possible, may contain some inaccuracies. However, we were able to access sufficient resources that we are confident that this resource presents a valid picture.

² We acknowledge that, in England, not all providers are registered on the OfS register. The research did, however, provide a large enough sample to deliver a clear picture of current practice.

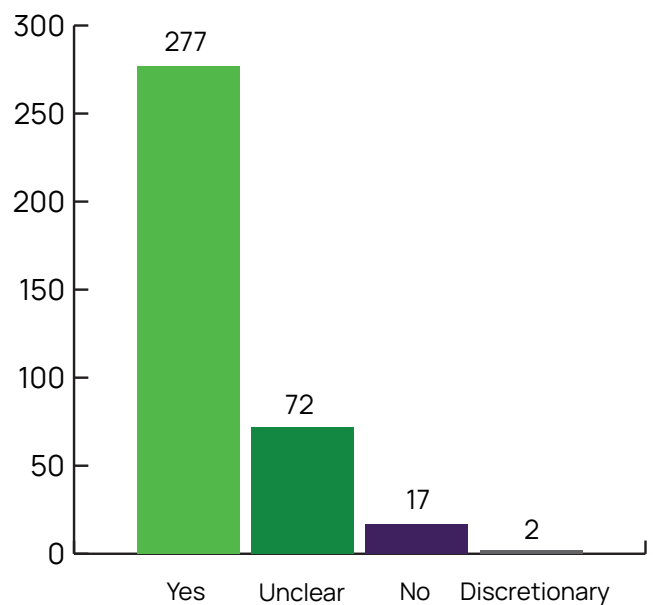
Does the provider have an RPL policy?



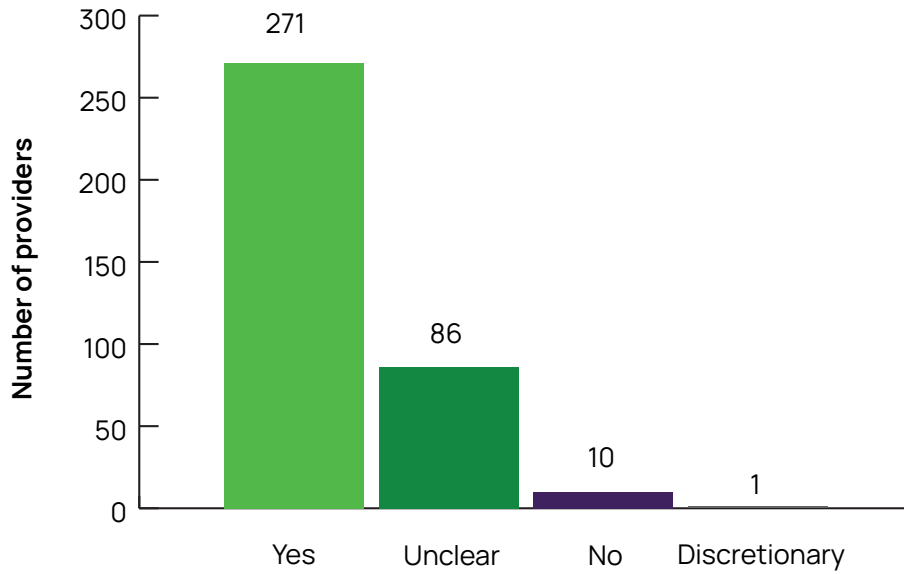
Prior certificated learning?



Prior experiential learning?

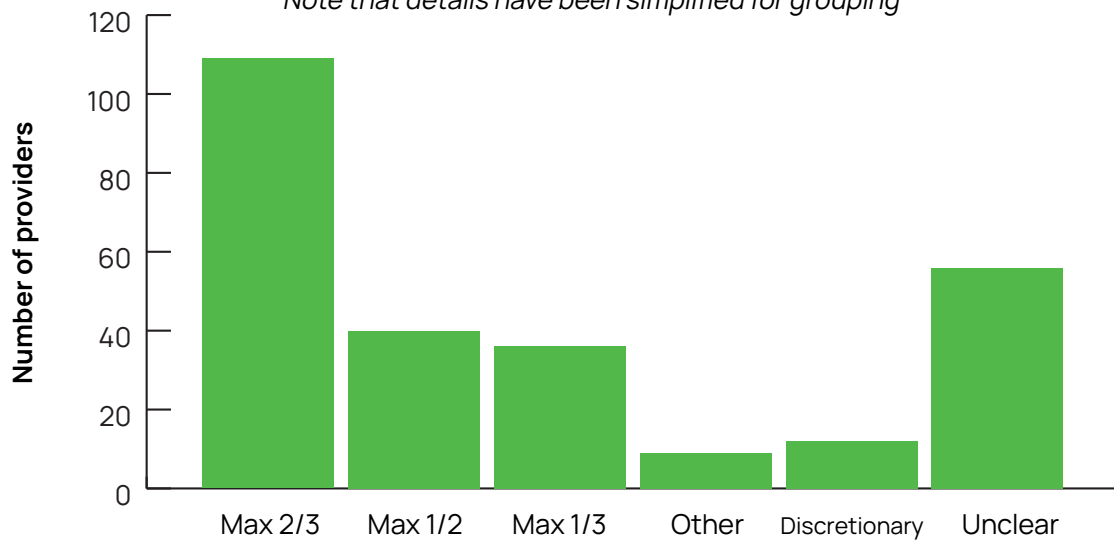


Does the provider allow credit transfer?



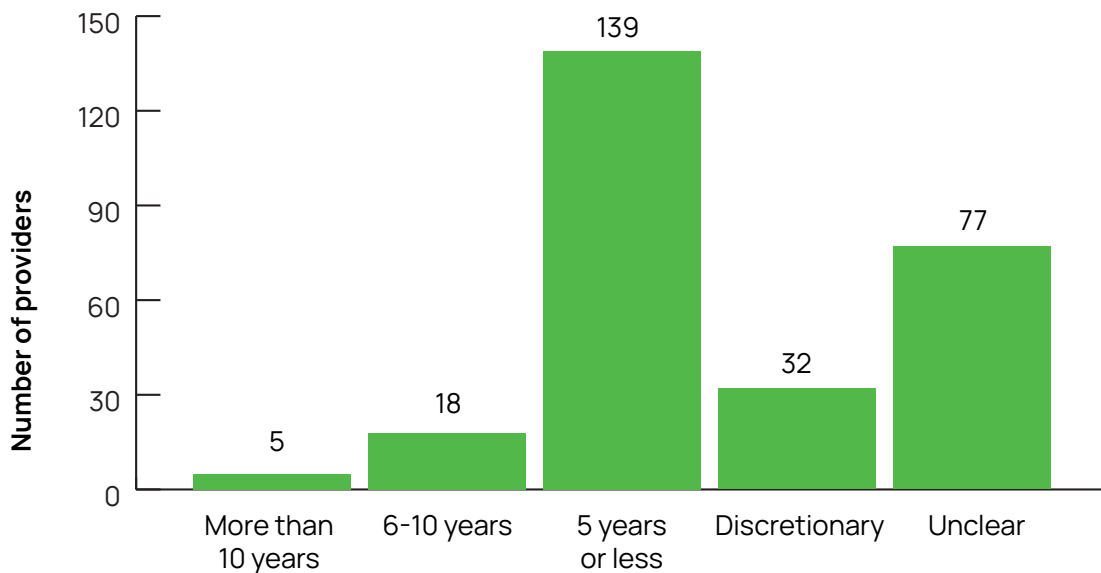
How much credit can be transferred?

Note that details have been simplified for grouping



What is the time limit on credit transferred?

Note that details have been simplified for grouping



Reflections on top-level findings

1. All providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have a policy for recognition of prior learning. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland is a slight anomaly in that they solely use auditioning as the mechanism for their admissions process and therefore have no need for a policy. It is likely this is because these nations continue to use the UK Quality Code within their regulatory framework and have been assessed against its Expectations, including having an RPL policy, much more recently.
2. Providers are more likely to accept prior certificated learning than prior experiential learning, although not to a significant degree. Policies are, however, more than four times more likely to explicitly rule out experiential learning than they are certificated learning.
3. By far the most common limit on the amount of credit transferred is two thirds of a bachelor's degree. This appears to relate to the finding that most providers prefer to directly teach the level at which they award the qualification. Given our focus on undergraduate teaching and the dominance of the three-year degree, this two-thirds limit enables that.
4. Most providers utilise a five-year limit on credit to be transferred, in line with QAA's Characteristics Statement on Micro-credentials (although QAA's credit recognition guidance advises that time limits can be arbitrary). A small number allow over 10 years, and a perhaps surprisingly small number operate a discretionary model where the limit varies based on subject and nature of the prior learning. This will have tangible consequences for lifelong learning and the process of building up credit over a longer period.



Key themes across all policies

Recognition of prior learning policies are not easily accessible

The biggest observation from this research is how difficult it is to navigate providers' websites to locate their RPL policies. In most, if not all cases, there is no clear signposting on a provider's website that would indicate the availability of this process to prospective learners unless they were explicitly looking for it.

Many policies were not publicly available, and many were referenced but then not publicly available through further searching. The use of hyperlinks and signposting to allow easy navigation through documents or websites was not used.

The policies themselves are all held in different places. Some providers included them on the policies page, some were included within admissions policies, some within academic regulations and many were only discoverable through the search function.

There appears to be little effort to publicise the policies. Therefore, information about how prospective learners can transfer credit to, or have their prior learning recognised by, a new provider is particularly difficult to find. While some providers may share information once they are in contact with a prospective learner, there is very little to highlight this process as an alternative route in higher education for those considering taking that first step.

The responsibility lies with the learner

In most if not all cases, policies make clear that the responsibility for making an RPL claim and collating and presenting the evidence required to do so lies with the student.

Many require evidence that prospective learners may not have easily available, such as learning objectives from their previous modules. As much of the success of an RPL claim relies on the provision of relevant evidence, a student would require cooperation from both their previous and new institution to deliver this and it remains unclear which is responsible for supporting the student through this process. In cases of RPEL, there may be further confusion about what is sufficient evidence, and cooperation from previous employers may be required.

Most policies are unclear about the level of equivalence they expect between a student's prior learning and the modules they wish to be exempt from. Only two providers are explicit about a specific amount, citing a minimum 80% match between learning objectives. Most operate a discretionary process but, unless further information is available to the learner, it is unclear what extent of matching they are required to demonstrate and consequently what evidence they need to do so.

In some cases, the provider actively seeks to dissuade prospective learners from engaging in the process, citing the burdensome nature of the process. We found multiple examples where the provider advises that the process may take longer than acquiring the credit through traditional means.

Given the demographics that RPL is intended to support - and the target audiences of the LLE - it feels particularly burdensome to require this level of input from a student with no clear mechanisms of support. It is unreasonable to expect a prospective learner, who may have been out of traditional education for a significant period of time, to undertake this work without expert support.

Most providers insist on awarding credit at the qualification level themselves

Most policies will not allow learners to transfer credit at the qualification level of the award they are studying towards. For example, in a bachelor's degree made up of modules covering Levels 4-6 with a final award decreed at Level 6 (as per QAA's Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications), only credit at Levels 4 and 5 can be awarded through RPL and any Level 6 credit must be taught and awarded at the receiving provider.

There is ongoing debate about who would be responsible for conferring an award achieved through multiple providers under the LLE mechanism and who is then held responsible for the student's outcomes. Current policies would require students to complete all learning at the award level within one provider.

Most providers will not exempt students from dissertation or thesis modules

Dissertation modules or equivalent are not included within most RPL policies and are often the only specific modules or learning mechanisms discounted from approval. There are a few reasons this could be:

- Dissertation modules or equivalent are often at the level of the award that is being conferred which is normally out of scope of RPL.
- The process for a dissertation module differs considerably across institutions and it is therefore difficult to demonstrate equivalence in the RPL process.
- The dissertation module acts as the culmination of learning and is an important benchmark that a provider wishes to confer itself. It is also often a crucial component of final classifications, which RPL credit tends to be excluded from.

Transferred credit does not carry marks or grades and does not count towards classification

Limits on the transfer of marks and grades is present in almost all RPL policies and, consequently, transferred or recognised credit is not included in the classification of an award. This means that credit awarded through RPL is only awarded on a pass/fail basis and shows up as such on a student's transcript. The only marks and grades present on the final transcript, and therefore used in determining the student's final classification, will be those awarded by the provider a student has transferred to. Some policies did flag that an alignment in the marking criteria may enable a transfer of marks, but in most cases providers are not willing to confer marks awarded by another institution.

This ultimately puts students who have transferred credit or had prior learning recognised through credit on a different playing field to those who have undertaken their full qualification within one institution. If they had achieved high marks in their previous institution, these marks are lost (although the learning remains), but they could also benefit from having lower marks removed from their transcript. It should be an important factor in the decision of whether to transfer for students, and it also has implications in the event of a student transfer instigated by a market exit.

Only whole units or modules are normally allowed

Most policies required the minimum amount of credit recognised to be the equivalent size of a full module, meaning that the learning objectives and credit value of a provider's smallest module must be met. In some cases, this was as low as five credits and in others as high as 30 credits.

While this makes sense from an administration and burden perspective, it does require a greater level of alignment between a learner's prior learning and their desired course. It also means that, in the case of RPEL, a significant portion of experience needs to have taken place to provide the equivalent skills and learning.

Policies often include stricter limits on prior experiential learning

Many providers' RPL policies institute lower limits on the amount of RPEL that can be transferred and stricter time limits than they do RPCL.

This indicates a distinction between the measurement of RPEL and RPCL, the former of which is not necessarily relative or commensurate with the years studied. Although much of credit transfer and the ambitions of the LLE concern moving between institutions, it does suggest a limit to the experience and learning an older learner could enter higher education with, for example.

The language used in policies is distinct from public discourse

The language used in RPL policies varies across the sector, with some using the term 'recognition' and some 'accreditation', and the language of 'credit transfer' not being used by many providers, despite being the common term in the policy debate.

This makes it more difficult for learners to navigate the policies and understand where the similarities and common areas are across providers, and adequately compare providers if RPL is a determining factor in their decision of where to apply.



Recommendations for providers

1. All providers should make their recognition of prior learning (RPL) policies publicly available and easily accessible on their admissions web pages. Where referenced elsewhere, they should be hyperlinked for easy navigation.
2. All RPL policies should include clear signposting to the support and guidance available to prospective students to help them meet the policy's requirements.
3. All providers should undertake an efficiency review to assess the impact on student engagement and determine how the RPL process could be streamlined to minimise administrative burden and student time.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. Use this credit transfer resource as an evidence base for any policy developments around credit transfer or the Lifelong Learning Entitlement.
2. Encourage use of single, sector-owned template for RPL policies to ensure consistency. As is the case with the Credit Framework, this would be created and owned by the sector and QAA would act as the custodian of the template on the sector's behalf.
3. Consult on how providers could be encouraged or incentivised to better utilise RPL policies through regulation or broader policy, for example expectations within access and participation plans, and dedicated funding via the Strategic Priorities Grant to deliver this process at a larger scale.

Next steps

QAA will publish a part two deep dive into credit transfer and RPL policies, including interviews with providers to add more detail on the findings.