Academic Standards Framework

Introduction
There is considerable inconsistency across the College in the management of academic standards, the application, and award, of credit and the minimum threshold requirements for progression within a programme. This makes it difficult for the College to assure the management of academic standards as required by the Quality Assurance Agency and to evidence our Key Information Set (KIS) as required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

The Committee is invited to recommend the ‘Academic Standards Framework’ for approval by Senate. The proposed framework outlines the basic requirements for all Imperial programmes, based on the requirements of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England (FHEQ) published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA) published by the European Commission and the Higher Education Credit Framework for England, published by the QAA.

Requirements of the QAA and EU Commission
The UK Quality Code for Higher Education sets out the following expectations with regards to credit and academic standards:

**Expectation A1(c):** Where they award credit [degree awarding bodies] assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

**Expectation A2.1:** Degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.

**Expectation A3.2(i):** Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit is awarded only where the achievement of relevant module learning outcomes has been demonstrated through assessment

The QAA also states:

‘Academic frameworks are systematically and consistently applied to secure academic standards’

Further details of the expectations of the QAA are available in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

The EU Commission states that:

‘An educational component is understood to be a self-contained and formally structured learning experience (such as a course unit, module, seminar or work placement). Each component should have a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes, appropriate assessment criteria, defined workload and specified number of ECTS credits’

Further details regarding the application of ECTS is available in the ECTS User Guide.

Details of the credit requirements at each level within the Credit Framework for Higher Education can be found in the Guidance on Academic Credit Arrangements in Higher Education in England.

---


Current Situation
There is currently no consistent approach to the College’s management of academic standards within the FHEQ, the application of credit or the minimum requirements for progression within an award. This is incompatible with the QAA’s statement that academic standards should be ‘consistently’ applied and does not meet expectation A2.1 of the Quality Code.

There is a tendency within the College for credit to be awarded to assessments and not to modules\(^3\). In these cases credit is not linked to learning outcomes; this is incompatible with both the Credit Framework for Higher Education in England and the ECTS framework and does not meet expectation A3.2(i) or A1(c) of the UK Quality Code.

The current approach to credit also has implications for our KIS. The KIS calculation is based on credit and the College has a responsibility to evidence this data using relevant programme information such as the programme specification. The HEFCE audit of the College’s KIS data for the academic year 2012/13 found that of a sample of 16 modules, for eleven modules;

‘there was no documentation to support the data returned in the KIS; or the documentation was inconsistent with the KIS data; or the KIS data was erroneous.’

In action 4 of the KIS Audit, HEFCE have recommended that:

‘Documentation should clearly state the number of credits per module and give precise details about learning and teaching and assessments, to provide a clear audit trail to the KIS data. There should be evidence to back up the KIS data.’

Proposal
In order to be assured that the College is effectively managing academic standards a framework should be introduced based on the minimum threshold requirements of the FHEQ and QF-EHEA and the expectations of the UK Quality Code (in some cases the Imperial framework will exceed the national minimum requirement). This framework would ensure:

- All modules have specific learning outcomes linked to programme learning outcomes
- Module learning outcomes are assessed
- Learning outcomes are placed at the appropriate level within the FHEQ
- Credit is awarded on successful completion of a module (i.e. achievement of the specific learning objectives)
- The notional student workload required for each award is consistently defined
- Requirements for progression between levels are consistently defined

The Committee is invited to recommend the ‘Academic Standards Framework’ for approval by Senate.

It is proposed that the framework be implemented with effect from October 2014. Existing programmes, approved by senate prior to October 2014, will need to ensure they meet the requirements of the framework by October 2015. Support for this process will be provided by the Registry and the Educational Development Unit.

Appendix A Proposed Academic Standards Framework

---

\(^3\) For the purposes of this paper a module is defined a self-contained, formally structured unit of study, with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Under this definition a research project is considered a module.
Appendix A: Proposed Academic Standards Framework

The Imperial’s Academic Standards Framework is based on the accumulation of credit during a period of study. Specifically:

1. The Imperial Academic Standards Framework is based on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England (FHEQ) and the Framework Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA).

2. The College awards credits according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

3. For the purposes of KIS, the College also awards credit according to the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS). CATS will be calculated from ECTS using the ratio 1 ECTS:2 CATS.

4. As required by the EU Commission and the Quality Assurance Agency credit is applied to modules. The College defines a module as ‘a self-contained, formally structured unit of study, with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria’.

5. Credit volume for a module is based on the notional hours of student effort for successful completion of that module using the ratio 25 notional hours: 1 ECTS: 2 CATS.

6. Credit level for a module is determined by the level of the intended learning outcomes for the module in question according to the FHEQ Level Descriptors and the relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Statements.

7. Per year of study a programme should be structured to enable students to study neither more nor less than the total credit awarded for a full-time year of study; where 60 ECTS are awarded for an academic year and 90 ECTS are awarded for a calendar year. The total credit required for part-time study is calculated pro-rata.

8. The final year of an integrated Master’s degree is awarded 90 ETCS. An integrated Master’s programme must contain modules to the value of 30 ECTS during the summer between a student’s third and fourth years of full-time study. This could include formal industry placements, research opportunities or independent work towards a research project.

9. A programme must contain sufficient modules to meet the total number of required credits for the relevant award as detailed in table (i) below.

10. A programme must contain sufficient modules at the relevant FHEQ level to meet the minimum number of required credits at each FHEQ level of the relevant award as detailed in table (i) below.

11. In order to be credit-bearing a module must be assessed by at least one assessment method. Non-assessed modules are not-for credit and do not therefore count towards the required credit for an award as detailed in table (i) below.
12. The number of assessment methods and the weighting assigned to each method must be specified in the programme (or module) handbook.

13. Each assessment method must be directly linked to one of more of the module’s intended learning outcomes as stated in the programme specification.

14. To be awarded credit for a module a student must successfully complete that module (i.e. pass the assessments for that module)

15. Where a programme spans multiple levels of the FHEQ students must be awarded the required credit at each level before they may progress to the next level.

16. Credit is not awarded to clinical programmes (e.g. MB/BS) however module and programme learning outcomes must still be at the appropriate level for the relevant year of study.

17. Programmes which exceed the limits of this framework will require approval from Senate. Programmes must still comply with the National Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.

Table (i)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award</th>
<th>FQ-EHEA Cycle</th>
<th>Total ECTS required for Award</th>
<th>Total ECTS required per full-time year of study (ECTS required at relevant FHEQ level)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1 (Level 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Degrees (MPhil, PhD, EngD, MD(Res))</td>
<td>3rd Cycle</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand Alone Master’s Degree (MSc, MBA, MRes, MPH, MEd)</td>
<td>2nd Cycle</td>
<td>90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated Master’s Degree (MSci, MEng)</td>
<td>2nd Cycle</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>60 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip)</td>
<td>2nd Cycle</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert)</td>
<td>2nd Cycle</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree (BSc, BEng)</td>
<td>1st Cycle</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>60 (60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^1$ Credit is not applied to research degrees however the programme learning outcomes should be at level 8 of the FHEQ.