Common Award Scheme
Programme Structures

Introduction

1. The Common Awards Scheme was adopted by the College from the start of the 2008/9 academic year. The Scheme consists of a common set of regulations and academic policies that apply to all taught programmes of the College, unless exemption is approved by the Academic Board. It does not apply to University of London International Programmes taught by the College, or to research degrees.

2. This paper identifies the programme structures that are anticipated for programmes under the Scheme, at undergraduate and postgraduate level. It identifies the rationale for and principles behind the proposed structures.

3. This paper is intended to inform academic staff when developing taught programmes at the College and is for guidance only.

Normal Programme Structures

4. The original briefing paper on undergraduate degree structures prepared for the Common Awards Scheme states:

“Broadly speaking, it is expected that most twelve module Honours degrees will be comprised of 12 x 30 credit modules, although minor variations through the use of half [15 credit] and double [60 credit] modules will be permitted.”. The original paper on postgraduate degree structures states:

“it is expected that most taught Postgraduate degrees will be comprised of 4 x 30 credit modules and a single 60 credit dissertation module. Minor variations through the use of half [15 credit] and double [60 credit] modules, and also 30 credit dissertation modules, will be permitted. In addition, though the inclusion of a dissertation is recommended, it is not compulsory.”

5. The credit value of modules is notionally linked to student effort at the ratio of 1 credit for every 10 hours of total effort, although it is recognised that contact hours may vary considerably between modules and programmes.

6. One of the main purposes of the Scheme was to ensure that Birkbeck awards are “portable” and recognised by other institutions in line with national expectations of credit frameworks. Complicated programme structures prevent students from moving from one programme to another, or using previous learning as accredited prior learning. It also militates against the development of joint honours programmes within the College.

7. The expectation is therefore that all modules on taught programmes will be either 15 or 30 credit modules, apart from dissertation modules which will normally be 60 credits or MRes dissertation modules which will normally be 120 credits. Dissertation modules may also be supported by 15 or 30 credit research methods modules designed to support the development of the dissertation. All programme structures should be specifically noted and approved as part of the programme approval process.

8. The permitted frameworks for taught degrees at Birkbeck is attached as Appendix One.

Module Categories

9. Modules are categorised as follows:
core they must be taken and passed to allow the student to complete the degree

compulsory they must be taken, and Programme Regulations must stipulate the minimum assessment that must be attempted

option students may choose a stipulated number of modules from a range made available to them. Option modules will be clearly identified in Programme Regulations.

elective students may replace an option module with modules from another programme, subject to approval of Programme Directors, availability of places and timetable requirements.

10. Modules may also be designated as pre-requisite modules, meaning they must be taken and passed to allow for progression to a subsequent, higher-level module that assumes a specific knowledge base. Any module requiring specific pre-requisite study must be annotated accordingly in literature given to students when selecting their programmes.

11. Each module on a programme must have its category defined on its programme specification. A maximum of 60 credit points from outside the degree programme may be permitted, at the discretion of the Programme Director, and providing all core and compulsory modules are completed satisfactorily.

Level of Study

12. In the documentation published at the time of the adoption of CAS, it was stated that the normal expectation would be for each degree programme to consist of 120 credits at level 4, 120 credits at level 5 and 120 credits at level 6, in order to ensure progression across the degree programme (so later modules are more demanding than earlier ones), ensure comparability across Birkbeck programmes; and facilitate combined and joint honours degrees.

13. Variation from this model is permitted, where justified on academic grounds, and must be approved through the programme approval mechanism. Permitted variations are as follows:

   A minimum of four and a maximum of six modules at Level 6.
   A minimum of two and a maximum of four modules at both Level 5 and Level 4.

14. Joint honours programmes normally consist of 180 credits in either subject, although occasionally will consist of 210 credits in one and 150 credits in the other. Major / Minor degrees will normally consist of at least 240 credits in one subject and at most 120 credits in the other.

Credit Level Descriptors

15. Guidance on the use of credit is available from QAA publications, including subject area benchmark statements. The broad descriptors are published in the QAA publication “Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Guidance on Academic Credit Arrangements in Higher Education in England, and are reproduced below.

Summary of the England Wales, and Northern Ireland Generic Credit Level Descriptors

16. Level 4: develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base; employ a range of specialised skills; evaluate information using it to plan and develop investigate strategies and to determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable
problems; and operate in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.

17. **Level 5:** generate ideas through the analysis of concepts at an abstract level with a command of specialised skills and the formulation of responses to well defined and abstract problems; analyse and evaluate information; exercise significant judgement across a broad range of functions; and accept responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.

18. Level 6: critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, utilising specialised skills across an area of study; critically evaluate concepts and evidence from a range of sources; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills and exercise significant judgement in a range of situations; and accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.

19. Level 7: display mastery of a complex and specialised area of knowledge and skills, employing advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for related decision making including use of supervision.

Common Awards Scheme Steering Group
April 2013
### Birkbeck common awards scheme framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NQF</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Credits needed</th>
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<th>Max at lower level</th>
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<td>Masters Degree</td>
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<td>150 level 7</td>
<td>30 level 6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Postgraduate Diploma</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>90 level 7</td>
<td>30 level 6</td>
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<td>Postgraduate Certificate</td>
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<td>60 level 7</td>
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<td>Graduate Diploma*</td>
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<td>Certificate of Higher Education</td>
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<td>90 level 4</td>
<td>30 at A Level or NVQ level 3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* = The Graduate Certificate and Diploma are typically used as qualifying or refresher courses before a student embarks on a postgraduate degree. QAA states that “A programme leading to a Graduate Certificate or Graduate Diploma might have some level 7 outcomes, but use of the Postgraduate title for the award would be justified only if most or all of the outcomes were assessed at level 7.

** = Some earlier Foundation Degree programmes permit 150 credits at the lower level