

CQSD

CENTRE | QUALITY SUPPORT
FOR | & DEVELOPMENT



FOCUS ON: LEARNING DESIGN

COHERENT & SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMME STRUCTURES



PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

The University's taught programmes operate on a modular system. Programme structure refers to the organisation of modules across a programme. Sequencing modules logically and making explicit connections between knowledge and skills facilitates curriculum coherence and a clear learning pathway for students. In the context of programme structure, sustainability refers to the viability and relevance of the modules that make up a programme.

A coherent and sustainable programme structure necessitates co-ordination in design and delivery across the programme team. This guidance is to be used by programme teams in the design, delivery and enhancement of new and existing programmes and modules, as well as individuals reflecting on how their module is situated within the programme.

CONTEXT & PARAMETERS

Understanding credit and levels helps in creating a programme that progressively develops students' skills and knowledge while maintaining a manageable workload.

Modules are credit-weighted

Credits represent the student workload required to achieve the learning outcomes of a module. **One credit represents 10 hours of notional learning** i.e. the number of hours a student is expected to spend, on average, attending scheduled sessions and undertaking self-study and assessment.

The **minimum module size is 20 credits**. This reduces the impact of multiple modules running concurrently competing for students' time and attention.

Modules larger than 20 credits should be restricted to **multiples of 20** and will **not normally exceed 60 credits**. This 'common currency' for modules enables sharing of modules across programmes and simplifies progression rules (by minimising the complications of combining modules of different sizes). It also enables greater transparency, and thereby parity, of workload between modules that have the same credit weighting. Schools should also have local parameters for scheduled study hours across modules, which differ depending upon module type, discipline and level of study.

Credits should be allocated based on the learning outcomes, complexity of the module and anticipated workload.

Programmes require a specific number of credits

Undergraduate (UG) programmes are structured into Parts. Each 'Part' normally represents an academic year of study comprising 120 credits, and each programme has 360 credits in total for a three-year degree (or 480 for a four-year degree).

Taught postgraduate (PGT) programmes normally have a total of 180 credits delivered over 12 months.

"An internally coherent curriculum benefits student wellbeing by supporting the development of mastery, self-efficacy, self-narrative within discipline, deep learning and meaning." - Hughes, G., et al. (2022) [Education for Mental Health](#). Advance HE, p. 76.

Useful external reference points

The UCQF is the University's implementation of the QAA (2014) Frameworks for HE Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies ([FHEQ](#)). This outlines the expectations for the various levels of qualifications (Levels 4-8).

SEEC (2021) [Credit Level Descriptors for HE](#) are more detailed than the FHEQ and focus on the characteristics and context of learning expected at Levels 3-8.

QAA (2021) [Credit Framework for England](#) introduces guiding principles for the use of credit, and contains the 2021 Credit Framework Table. There are also accompanying student resources.

QAA [Subject Benchmark Statements](#) describe the knowledge and skills expected of graduates in specific subject areas (all UG except for PGT Business & Management).

Modules are assigned levels

Levels denote the complexity and progression across a programme. A module is placed at a Level appropriate to its intended learning outcomes, which for UG programmes corresponds to the relevant Part. Each Part relates to a Level of the University's Credit and Qualifications Framework ([UCQF](#)). A placement year/year abroad is normally placed at Level 5. In each Part modules amounting to at least 100 credits must be at the level of the Part.

PGT programmes consist of a minimum of 180 credits, with a minimum of 150 credits at Level 7, and normally include a significant research component in the form of a dissertation or research project.

Workload is balanced across semesters

To balance workload, programmes should normally be designed with credit distributed equally over the two semesters, or, in the case of PGT programmes, evenly over the two semesters and the post-semester summer period.

Modules are to be taught and assessed over one semester except in certain circumstances (e.g., modules of 40 credits or more, placement modules, dissertation or research projects).

The first semester is compulsory

The first semester (i.e. the Semester 1 of Foundation Year, UG Part 1 and most PGT) should comprise compulsory modules. This is important for academic orientation and fostering a sense of belonging and community among incoming students. It also improves the predictability and timeliness of the timetable.

Optional modules are grouped into 'baskets'

Striking the right balance between compulsory and optional modules ensures that programmes are **flexible** enough to meet the diverse needs and interests of students, while ensuring the programme learning outcomes (PLOs) are met.

A basket is a group of modules that are optional on a specific programme. Each module appears only in one basket per programme (unless it is intended to be taught in multiple iterations). Baskets of optional modules facilitates coherent pathways through programmes and provides a more realistic (and not overwhelming) choice to students by limiting timetable clashes.

There are 3 approved **basketing models**. For more details see the [UoR Guidelines on the structure of undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes](#).

Optional modules are not normally capped, ensuring that all students have an equal chance of following their chosen pathway through a programme.

| UG PART | UCQF LEVEL |
|---------|------------------|
| 1 | Level 4 (CertHE) |
| 2 | Level 5 (DipHE) |
| 3 | Level 6 (Hons) |

Example Programme Structure for Part 1 BA Board Games

| Semester 1 | Semester 2 |
|--|---|
| (C) Rolling Through the Ages: A History of Games and Gaming (20) | (C) Playing Together: Exploring the Societal Dimensions of Games (20) |
| (C) Roll for Initiative: Exploring Board Game Mechanics (20) | (C) What's your Game Plan? Introduction to Game Marketing (20) |
| (C) Board Game Design Lab 1 (40) | |

Relevant Policies & Procedures

For more details and guidance on module capping, 'basketing' models, balancing credits across semesters, and agreed policies for other awards (e.g. Foundation Year, Combined Programmes, Integrated Masters) see the [UoR Guidelines on the structure of undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes](#).

For University **Guidelines and templates** for [Programme Specifications](#) and [Module Descriptions](#) see Section 5: *Programme Design and Development* of the [Quality Assurance and Policy website](#)

"Does the design of the programme make sense? Do modules have a sense of how they follow on from one another?" – Professor Paul Ashwin, Lancaster University.

GUIDANCE FOR PROGRAMME TEAMS

Whether you are starting from a blank piece of paper or reviewing an existing programme structure, the following prompts (aligned to the Curriculum Framework Programmes Principles) can be used to support local conversations and action within the context and parameters above.

Q1. How will you ensure that programmes:

a) comprise a coherent set of modules that collectively address programme learning outcomes (PLOs)?

b) are sequenced to progressively develop knowledge and skills as students' progress?

- What are the key ideas and concepts that run throughout the programme? Where is the most appropriate time to introduce and develop them in ways that build on what students have already learned?
- What criteria will you use to determine whether a module is compulsory? How will you balance depth and breadth?
- Is there a clear rationale for the structure in terms of increasing levels of challenge?
- Where will students have opportunities to bring together information and ideas from different topics? e.g. capstone modules and cornerstone projects.
- What are the key skills that run throughout the programme? Have these been mapped across the programme? When is the most appropriate time to introduce and develop these?
- How will you encourage students to demonstrate and articulate their engagement with UoR Graduate Attributes?
- How will placement learning be integrated into the programme?
- How can you integrate induction and scaffold students' transition as they progress through the programme? What are the opportunities afforded by a compulsory first semester?
- How can you ensure PLOs are achievable by all students, regardless of options?



UoR Curriculum Framework Relevant Programme Principles

Coherent

1. Programmes are purposefully designed to ensure that modules form a coherent integrated and blended whole.
2. Teaching, learning and assessment is aligned to the learning outcomes of programmes and of associated modules.
3. The development of skills is mapped across programmes. The learning pathway through the programme is articulated and shared with students.
4. Teaching, learning and assessment are appropriately and progressively challenging from the outset, building on prior knowledge/skills.

Sustainable

1. Programmes are distinctive, reflective of student and market demand and deliver on financial and/or strategic requirements.
2. The structure of programmes is simple, clear and easy to follow.
3. There is parity of student workload between modules that have the same credit weighting.
4. Programmes enable a realistic choice of optional modules where appropriate, balanced with the need for coherence.
5. Programmes are resilient to changes in resources and circumstances.

Q2. How will you ensure that there is a realistic choice of optional modules, where appropriate, balanced with the need for coherence?

Take an evidence-based approach:

Check out scores in the NSS [optional] questions on Course Content and Structure:

1. All of the compulsory modules are relevant to my course.
2. There is an appropriate range of options to choose from on my course.
3. The modules of my course form a coherent integrated whole.

- How many, and what kinds of optional modules should be offered for the discipline and your context? Have you considered staff expertise and resources? How will optional modules cater for students' diverse interests/ future aspirations without overwhelming them with too many choices?
- How will you organise baskets? How will you balance depth and breadth? Have you considered module popularity and the impact this has on module viability? How will baskets facilitate coherence? e.g., Will some baskets develop a similar set of skills and attributes (albeit in a different context) and teach and assess these in similar ways?
- Is there a set of specified pathways (in which specified combinations of optional modules are allocated according to the pathway chosen) which may be useful in simplifying options for students?
- Is there enough flexibility to allow opportunities for Study Abroad? Language learning (i.e. IWLP modules)? Cross-disciplinary choices (e.g., University-wide modules)?

Q3. How will you ensure the range of modules is distinctive, reflective of student and market demand and delivers on financial and/or strategic requirements?

Take an evidence-based approach:

Sources of evidence include:

1. Student voice (alumni, current and prospective students), enrolment data and pass rates
2. Employer engagement
3. Subject benchmark statements and PSRB guidance (where appropriate)
4. Range of modules offered at competitor institutions.

- Are all the modules relevant to the programme aims and PLOs?
- How will you monitor the viability of modules? [UPB will undertake a high-level monitoring of the University's portfolio of modules. Schools are expected to routinely consider and review modules that have fewer than 10 students enrolled and/or a pass rate below 80%].
- Is the programme structure simple, clear and easy to follow? Can students predict the impact of their option choices on future options or pathways?
- Is the module diet resilient to changes in resources and circumstances? You should strive to keep the options choices

relatively consistent across successive years (understanding that complete stability may be impacted by unforeseen circumstances such as staff changes and research leave).



A note about collaboration

Leveraging academic, professional and student partnerships ensures a diversity of perspectives and collective expertise can be brought to the process.

Do not underestimate the value of early engagement with timetabling, and if you are planning to share modules with other programmes, relevant programme leads, to ensure programme structures are coherent, workable and sustainable.

For help in structuring your programme, please contact the ADE (Academic Development and Enhancement) team.

To contact us and explore other guides in our Focus On: series, please visit

<https://www.reading.ac.uk/cqsd/teaching-resources>

