

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CREDIT IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF CREDIT IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION: LAYING SIEGE TO THE IVORY TOWER

By

WAYNE TURNBULL

Liverpool John Moores University, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

“There should be no freezing of institutions into established hierarchies; on the contrary there should be recognition and encouragement of excellence wherever it exists.

If it is true that certain differences of level and function must be expected to persist among institutions, it is also true that such a structure can only be morally acceptable if there are opportunities for the transfer of a student from one institution to another when this is appropriate to his or her intellectual attainments and educational needs.

We attach great importance to this”.

Higher education: Report of the Committee appointed by
the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of
Lord Robbins 1961–63.

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FOREWORD

I first came across the concept of utilising credit to transform education in 1979. I was a lecturer in a FE college in Manchester that was introducing new programmes and I was fortunate to be at a workshop with Aubrey Black (Manchester Open College Federation).

The work of the inspiring Open College Networks and the drive of the Council of National Academic Awards meant that there was an education revolution with Adult, Further Education and the Polytechnics in the 1980s and 1990s. For the first time, we were able to discuss how we could reward learning in a mix of settings and to develop progression routes that enabled learners from outside the traditional frameworks to succeed.

Nelson Mandela said ‘Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world’. The credit movement used credit to change the educational framework so that it was more meaningful and inclusive.

Education providers came together across the UK, Europe and learned from experiences in the USA and Australia. Consortiums and partnerships were created to enable and engage in discussions around credit and how it could be used to open opportunities and to reward achievement.

This book tells the story of the journey of the development of credit. The journey is not finished and there is much still to do. This book though is excellent at showing how

we have collectively shaped and changed the educational horizon through the simple concept of linking learning and recognition.

It is the definitive study of credit.

Professor Geoff Layer

Vice-Chancellor

University of Wolverhampton, UK

17 May 2019

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The author is further indebted to the Northern Universities Consortium for sponsoring the development of this book and to both Paul Bridges and David Robertson whose research, analysis and publications have provided much of the material reviewed herein. Their (very different) approaches to advancing credit policy and practice may have met with varying degrees of success but there is no doubting their standing as giants in the credit community, from whose shoulders we are able to see further.

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CREDIT, BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

After attempting to locate a published history of credit in the USA, University of California history professor Sheldon Rothblatt reached the conclusion that a detailed account did not exist. On reflection he reasoned that such an account would have presented a ‘humdrum’ history, devoid of ‘heroic personalities combatting insurmountable odds in a climate of revolution’. Who would be tempted to write or indeed read such a ‘tiresome account of tiny details congealing into a system’?

Rothblatt (1991) should have switched his attention to investigating the history of credit in the higher education sector of the United Kingdom, as that is far from humdrum. It is a tale of ambitions realised and hopes denied, determined visionaries battling dystopian soothsayers, bursts of hectic progress and repeated dead-ends. This brief history of credit is a connected account, tracing a (more or less) linear narrative over half a century. We will identify the most important protagonists in the UK higher education credit story and document their contribution to the evolution of credit policy and practice. Whereas Rothblatt sees credit in the USA as having an ‘administrative history’, credit in the UK has more of an educational history or indeed a political history. For all that

credit may appear tangential or peripheral to the many rather than the few, it has proven to be a cause championed by passionate zealots and opposed by an intransigent establishment.

This is a brief history of credit in UK higher education from the 1960s to the present day. It is not a comprehensive history of 'Learning Credit' which is a wider concept including aspects of credit-based learning in the further education (FE) sector and in the workplace (for a wider appraisal of 'learning credit', including the development of 'vertically integrated' regional credit initiatives such as the CQFW, NICATS and SCQE,¹ please see Bridges & Flinn, 2010). It is not a history of comparative 'international credit developments', including the European Higher Education Area's European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, although this has served as a reference point for the developing history of credit in UK higher education. We will not dwell upon educational theories about curriculum design and/or learning outcomes, other than to highlight when such debates were prevalent in the sector during this timeframe. Nor is this a documented account of every scheme or system in UK higher education that purports to be about credit. For this credit history to be sufficiently detailed to be valuable, but sufficiently brief to be accessible, the parameters of the research scope must be clearly drawn. It is therefore a brief, yet comprehensive, overview of the field.

But why write a history of credit? Because history speaks with conviction to contemporary concerns and we would be wise to remember that 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' (Santayana, 1910). It should also be noted that this is an interpretive history, focussing both on the 'what and when' and upon the 'how and why' of credit developments in UK higher education. By way of introduction, this opening chapter will briefly consider the origins of the credit system used in UK higher education, review a conceptual model by which the development of

credit systems within universities can be understood and discuss two earlier attempts to compartmentalise credit developments in the UK into ‘discrete stages’ of a credit history. As subsequent chapters will reveal, this chapter does not seek to divide credit developments into phases but instead attempts to offer a linear narrative of developing policy and practice over half a century.

There are numerous definitions of credit (like snowflakes, no two are the same) yet such philosophical disparity should not encumber this history, for in our terms ‘credit’ is a proxy for widening access and student choice, for curricular flexibility and mobility of learning, for the clarity and consistency in regulation and policy that credit-based practices demand. In short, credit provides a transparent, enabling framework within which students can be supported and sustained through their learning journey. In this guise credit is both championed and condemned, celebrated and feared, and embedded and rejected. It is staggering that millions of Millennials today have billions of credits between them, yet they may be wholly unaware of this. Credit, like oxygen, may be taken for granted by those who need it whilst it is plentiful, only becoming evident when supplies run short.

THE ORIGINS OF CREDIT

Whilst the use (and idea) of credit is relatively new to UK higher education, it is well developed in the higher education system in the USA. Yet the first effective and significant credit system boasts a truly obscure pedigree. Educational developers focus on the ‘compositional features’ of such concepts as learning outcomes, assessment criteria and level descriptors to define the role of credit. Yet we would be well advised to remember that the true origins of credit lie not in the pedagogic

instruments of curricular design but in the bureaucratic detail underpinning the superannuation of professors in the USA at the turn of the twentieth century.

A hugely affluent industrialist, Andrew Carnegie invested much of his wealth into public education programmes, financing libraries and universities throughout the USA, embodying his maxim that ‘The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced’ (1889). His ‘Carnegie Foundation’ provided retirement pensions for university professors from 1906, an innovation which was very well received by a grateful faculty. There were, of course, qualifying criteria in determining which college professors would be eligible for the pension. To be eligible for a pension, retiring professors must have taught at universities recruiting students from schools and colleges that met certain standards. Perhaps the most important of these standards was that the ‘High School’ from which university students were recruited must have delivered at least 120 hours of contact time in a given year. This measure of educational currency soon became known as the ‘Carnegie Unit’ (with a semester’s study leading to a ‘half-unit’ of 60 hours).

The Carnegie Foundation was not the first body to consider some element of quantification and calibration of university education in the USA. In the period 1872–1884 Harvard University began developing contact hour standards and permitted individual faculties to offer ‘choice’ to students alongside their ‘major’ field of study. Despite Harvard’s success in winning endorsement for their standards by the National Education Association of the USA in 1894, their innovations did not inspire widespread adoption. Instead, the integration of the monolithic education system in the USA around the development of the first fully functioning system of academic credit was facilitated by the bureaucratic act of attaching the ‘Carnegie Unit’ to eligibility for the award of pensions from the Carnegie Foundation in 1906. By 1910, the majority of

secondary educational institutions in the USA had adopted the Carnegie Unit, proving that nothing drives change like the retirement benefits of senior academics...

Fast-forward over a 100 years and witness how the Carnegie Unit has become embedded within the US higher education system. Not only do 'Carnegie Units' still facilitate benchmarking of entry standards but they are also used in faculty workload (planning and budgeting) models, inter-institutional comparisons and student-specific 'degree audit' calculations. Critically, for our purposes, the Carnegie Unit underpins policy and practice in student mobility (and therefore credit transfer) in the USA and also the reporting of student attainment via transcripts. Robertson (1996) states that (t)here are no *systems* of credit transfer (USA) since credit transfer *is the principle* upon which institutions organise themselves' (my emphasis).

Whilst naysayers may reject the USA model of credit-based higher education achievement as commercial and inferior to that in the UK, over the past 50 or so years credit pioneers and policy-makers alike have repeatedly looked to the USA as a model of learner-centred higher education for the UK to follow. As we will discover, UK higher education features many of the attributes of a credit system but lacks a consistent and underpinning (US style) credit philosophy. How this has come about will be explained in due course, but how this may best be understood is outlined below.

DEVELOPMENTS IN CREDIT: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

One of the main differences between the USA and UK higher education systems is that UK higher education does not have a national credit framework. This is a theme to which we will (repeatedly) return, as it forms a fault-line that runs throughout

the history of credit in UK higher education; a national credit framework remains an unresolved aspiration for some and a dangerous notion for others. In consequence, there is no ‘off-the-shelf’ model of credit policy and practice that can be easily adopted by UK universities. Instead, each university is essentially re-inventing the wheel in adopting credit, determining their own contextualised definitions and practices. Yet whilst each university follows a different path, it has been argued that the stages through which universities progress towards adopting credit are broadly common and that the characteristics and approaches of universities will determine the type of credit system that they eventually implement.

In an article to which we will refer later in much more detail, Robertson (1996) offers a ‘conceptual model’ for understanding the development of credit systems within individual universities. In this model, Robertson outlines a series of ‘descriptive categories’, by which institutional credit systems may be characterised. The institution’s appetite for credit is mapped against a continuum in which credit policy is either ‘soft’ or ‘hard’: ‘soft’ policies are those that tolerate credit, whilst ‘hard’ policies are those in which credit use is actively pursued by the institution. Another continuum runs between ‘minimalist’ or ‘maximalist’ credit strategies, where credit practice is either mainstreamed (‘maximalist’) or marginalised (‘minimalist’).

By establishing each institution’s location within these continua, Robertson argues that the ‘mode’ of credit development within a given university can be categorised as follows:

- ‘Soft’ credit transfer with ‘minimalist’ strategies equates to *Philanthropic mode*, in which credit use is ‘tolerated’ yet credit transfer is ‘minimal, marginal and largely optional’.
- ‘Soft’ credit transfer with ‘maximalist’ strategies equates to *Access mode*, enabling accreditation of prior learning, work-based learning and supporting widening

participation; credit transfer may be limited but there is the potential for this to be mainstreamed.

- ‘Hard’ credit transfer with ‘minimalist’ strategies equates to *Efficiency mode*, often characterised by modular provision and increased (if not ‘wider’) student participation; credit transfer brings resourcing benefits.
- ‘Hard’ credit transfer with ‘maximalist’ strategies equates to *Learner enabled mode*, offering systematic choice and flexibility, a seamless merging of modularity and credit which places the learner at the centre of arrangements.

Robertson suggests that institutions starting out on their credit journey may begin in ‘philanthropic mode’ (first generation), developing ‘access’ or ‘efficiency’ cultures (second generation) in-keeping with their institutional histories/missions and possibly head towards ‘learner enabled mode’ (third generation) as their credit policies and practices mature. Yet the ‘third generation’ of a ‘learner enabled mode’ remains aspirational for most universities owing to,

[...] the disinclination of our post-secondary and higher education institutions to reform themselves radically, and the reluctance of academics to offer a constructive critique of their own professional practices and values.... (Robertson, 1996, p. 60)

The value of Robertson’s conceptual framework of credit development within individual universities lies in its adaptability to a range of contexts, stressing the developmental flows of individual institutional cultures towards and about credit as a ‘normative arc’ which is followed in different settings at different paces, as [Fig. 1](#) refers.

Yet this is a descriptive model only; it should not be taken too prescriptively. For example, a university operating within

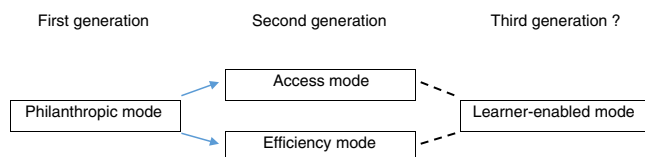


Fig. 1. Robertson's Conceptual Model of Credit Development.

the 'access mode' may be at an early stage of evolution (generation 2.0), on the way to a further ('efficiency') mode of credit development (as generation 2.1). It does not necessarily follow that universities will follow 'either' the access or efficiency modes; an institution that initially develops a widening access policy based on credit and then discovers the efficiencies that credit-based learning affords (and vice versa) may do both. To demonstrate how this model can be used to illustrate credit developments more broadly, we shall now apply it to Robertson's 'division' of credit developments into distinct historical phases.

A CREDIT HISTORIOGRAPHY

In fact, two authors have sought to map and define the timeline of events in the history of credit in the UK and in doing so they took different approaches to undertaking the task. Writing in 1996, Robertson identified the 'cultures' from which credit developed in UK higher education from the 1960s to the 1990s, also predicting a further model for the twenty-first century. Writing over a decade later, Bridges (2010a) sought to articulate sequential 'phases' between 1963 and 2010 within which to map wider credit developments in UK higher education, the UK FE sector and in the European context. We shall consider each of these approaches further before analysing the history of UK higher education credit developments in detail.