

The Access to HE Grading Scheme

Section A: Introduction and Summary

July 2023

Applicable to new students registering from 1 August 2024

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1 Introduction

The Access to HE Diploma (the Diploma) is a nationally recognised qualification which is designed to provide a preparation for study in higher education for adults returning to education.

Individual Diplomas are validated and awarded by Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), according to specifications and assessment regulations set by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Each Access to HE Diploma has a title which indicates the general subject of study or the intended progression route. For each Diploma there is an approved set of units of assessment in different areas which are appropriate for the subject of the Diploma. Successful completion of each unit leads to the award of a certain number of credits, and successful completion of all the required units (which must total 60 credits) leads to the award of the Access to HE Diploma.

The common requirements which apply to the award of credit for all Diplomas are detailed in *The Access to Higher Education Diploma Specification, July 2023*, available on the [QAA website](#).

Access to HE Diplomas are also graded, using a grading scheme which has been designed to accommodate the flexibility of the qualification, so that it can be applied to all Access to HE Diplomas, whatever their subject or structure. The various sections of *The Access to Higher Education Grading Scheme* jointly detail the common requirements, reference points and assessment regulations that define how grading judgements are made and the process for the award of grades.

Good practice in grading involves assessment for learning as well as assessment of learning and, properly implemented, the grading scheme has a role and value in enhancing students' learning experience by giving feedback to students about their progress during the course, as well as providing information about their performance at the end of the course.

2 Core principles

The common grading scheme has been designed to ensure that the process of grading, and the grades awarded to students on Access to HE courses, will be:

- **fair and equitable** - consistent and accurate application of the processes of grading ensure that all students are dealt with justly and impartially
- **clear and transparent** - grades given, and why particular grades have been given, are clear. Clear and accessible information about the grading scheme and the significance of grades is openly available to all interested parties
- **reliable and valid** - grading decisions accurately reflect the standard of performance of assessed student work, based on common measures of performance used appropriately for the subject. The award of grades is moderated and assured through secure and robust quality assurance procedures
- **consistent** - grades awarded signify comparable standards of performance on different courses, at different providers/centres, across AVAs and over time.

3 Key features of the grading scheme

a) Grading and the Access to HE Diploma

- A grade is awarded for every graded level 3 unit that a student completes successfully as part of an Access to HE Diploma. (All Diplomas comprise 45 credits from graded level 3 units, and 15 credits from level 2 or level 3 units that are not graded.)
- There is no overall or composite grade for the Access to HE Diploma.
- The number of grades awarded to a student depends on the number of graded level 3 units required for the particular Access to HE Diploma. This number can vary because, although all Diplomas contain 45 credits from graded level 3 units, these units can have a value of 3, 6 or 9 credits. So, for example, some Diplomas have a small number of 9-credit units, while others have a larger number of 3-credit units. The number of separate grades awarded to a student is therefore a consequence of the structure of the particular Diploma and not a reflection of the student's standard of performance.
- The grade awarded for each unit is shown on the achievement transcript that is issued with Access to HE Diplomas. The transcript also shows how many credits were awarded for each successfully completed graded or ungraded unit.

Further references in this document to 'units' means graded level 3 units unless otherwise specified.

b) The grades

- A grade of pass, merit or distinction is awarded for each unit.
- The standard of performance required for a pass grade is the minimum required to meet the specified assessment criteria for the learning outcomes of the unit. (There is no separate definition of a pass grade.) Merit and distinction grades indicate higher levels of performance within level 3.
- Students who do not achieve the specified learning outcomes for a unit cannot be awarded credit for that unit. The unit is therefore not eligible for grading. There are no separate grading standards for 'fail'.
- The unit grades have no numerical equivalents. They are not derived from or converted into numerical marks. The use of numerical marking is not permitted in the assessment of units approved for use in QAA-recognised Access to HE Diplomas.

c) The grading standards (see Section B for full details)

There is a common set of broad, generic grading standards which are used as the basis for all grading judgements on all courses. The three grading standards relate to different aspects of performance which are relevant to the assessment of a student's readiness for higher study.

- 1 Knowledge and Understanding
- 2 Subject Specific Skills
- 3 Transferable Skills

Each of the three grading standards includes a set of more detailed component items which describe types of performance associated with the standard (see Section B.) For each

component there are parallel statements at merit and distinction, which describe increasingly demanding standards of achievement. (The distinction grade does not introduce new or 'higher level' capabilities or skills compared with merit.) When tutors use the standards for the grading of a particular unit, they select the most appropriate sub-components of the standards. In the case of Grading Standard 3 (Transferable Skills), tutors also choose **at least two out of the three components**, before selecting the relevant sub-components. This allows the generic framework to be tailored to the specific nature of different subjects.

d) Grading standards and units

- All three grading standards are used with every graded unit and across every assignment within a graded unit.
- In units with more than one assignment it is not permissible to award a grade to each assignment; grading takes place at the level of the unit only.
- In units with more than one assignment it is not permissible to use individual assignments to grade individual grading standards (for example, assignment one cannot be used to grade only Knowledge and Understanding with assignment two used to grade both Subject specific skills and Transferable skills).
- The choice of sub-components at unit level is normally made during the construction of the unit assessment plan and should be appropriate to cover the range of individual assignments. Therefore the sub-components are not assigned when a unit is validated.
- Only when all assignments for an individual unit are assessed and the tutor has determined that the student has met all the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria for all unit assignments (and therefore has passed the unit) will grading of the unit take place. Grades for individual assignments must not be awarded.
- A grade indicator for each grading standard is awarded at pass, merit or distinction. The tutor will review all assignments associated with the individual unit and determine if the student has demonstrated the standard for the grades of merit or distinction or whether the outcome remains as a pass.
- The tutor must record in writing their justification for the grade indicator awarded for each grading standard.
- The tutor reviews the three grade indicators that have been awarded for the unit and determines the overall grade for the unit, using a standard method, which is detailed in Annex C2, Table 1. The overall grade is a recommendation to the awards board, where it will be considered and confirmed by the Board.

e) Use of the grading scheme at course level (see Section C for full details)

- For Grading Standard 3 (Transferable Skills), there is a choice of three components with a requirement that a minimum of two components are to be selected for all graded units (irrespective of size of unit) and that all 3 components must be used at least once in the grading of units across the Diploma. AVAs will need to have processes in place, at the level of the student, to ensure that all three components have been utilised.
- The use of the grading standards is made more specific when the unit (which may be approved for use on more than one Diploma) is delivered as part of a particular course,

through the selection of appropriate sub-components from within the grading standards. The choice of sub-components allows tutors to reflect both the nature of the particular subject (and aspect of the subject) being assessed, and the demands of the type of activity a student would need to engage in to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes.

- The selected components and sub-components of the grading standards for a unit are made clear to students and are included in the assignment briefs provided to students by course tutors for each assignment.
- Units are assessed in different ways: some are assessed through a single assignment, others involve more than one assignment. Integrated assignments may also be used to assess the learning outcomes of two or more different units through one piece of work. Irrespective of the nature or number of separate assignments or individual tasks used to assess the unit, the final outcome is a single unit grade which indicates the overall standard of performance for the unit.
- Unit grades given to students are accompanied by feedback which allows the student to understand why a particular grade has been awarded. This feedback will focus on the performance indicated by the selected sub-components of the grading standards (in relation to the expectations and requirements for the individual assignment).
- Practices for managing the submission of student work, including drafts, late submissions and opportunities for resubmission or reassessment are governed by the assessment regulations of the grading scheme (see Sections C and E).

f) Moderation and standardisation (see Section D for full details)

- Unit assessment plans and assignment briefs include grading requirements. Both are subject to internal moderation or verification.
- Grading decisions are subject to processes of internal verification and external moderation.
- All AVAs are required by QAA's AVA Licensing Criteria to operate moderation systems and standardisation processes which ensure:
 - assessment practices are consistent with the grading requirements
 - minimum standards are consistent with the requirements of the grading standards
 - consistent standards are applied across the AVA
 - common approaches to the selection, appointment and training of moderators.

g) The award of grades (see Section E for full details)

- Providers/Centres recommend unit grades for award by the AVA. These are confirmed at the Final Awards Board conducted for each course.
- The Final Awards Board makes decisions about special cases and any opportunities for reassessment. The assessment outcomes of these opportunities are approved by a reconvened awards board or some other mechanism as agreed with the AVA.
- AVAs award Access to HE Diplomas to students who achieve the required 60 credits, from the units specified in the Diploma's rules of combination. They also issue achievement transcripts, which detail credits and grades achieved.

- Where achievement of the Diploma is gained through credit transfer or accumulated through non-continuous achievement, the grades achieved on the relevant units are carried forward.
- Grades are not awarded for units that do not contribute to, or that are additional to the specified requirements of, the Diploma.¹

¹ *The Access to HE Diploma Specification, July 2023*, paragraph 8 details the maximum credits a student may be registered for.

4 From assessment to awards: A summary of the grading process

All units include learning outcomes and assessment criteria. These are formally approved when the unit is validated. All three grading standards are applied to all graded units once the learning outcomes of the graded unit have been met.

- Tutors develop unit assessment plans that indicate how learning outcomes and the components and sub-components of the grading standards will be applied across the assessment and grading of the unit. These plans are internally verified. Tutors also prepare information for students for each assignment about which components and sub-components of the grading standards will be used and how grading will be applied.
- Tutors assess student work, in accordance with the assessment plan and guidelines on good practice in assessment provided by the AVA. If the learning outcomes for all the assignments for an individual unit have been achieved, the unit is graded.
- If any of the learning outcomes covered by the assignment have not been achieved, there is one opportunity for resubmission. Resubmissions and their reassessment must be managed in accordance with the resubmission process outlined in the assessment regulations (see Section C). Successful resubmissions are eligible for grading.
- Summative feedback on the assessment of a unit is provided to students, including feedback about their performance in relation to the relevant grading standards.
- Formative feedback and feedforward on individual assignments is provided to students where a unit is assessed by more than one assignment (see Section C).
- Providers/Centres apply their internal moderation procedures (as approved by the AVA) to tutors' assessment judgements.
- Samples of assessed units are externally moderated, following the AVA's moderation requirements (see Section D).
- The course team records its recommendations for each student in respect of the award of credits and grades (for each unit) and the award of Access to HE Diplomas. (This normally involves the completion of standard AVA documentation.)
- The awards board is convened, constituted and conducted to meet the AVA's specification, and in line with QAA's requirements (see Section E.)
- The awards board deliberates on the recommendations made, and approves the award of credits, grades and Access to HE Diplomas to students who have met the relevant requirements.
- The awards board also makes decisions about referrals and special cases (see Sections C and E).
- The AVA checks the documentation received from the awards board and issues Access to HE Diplomas and transcripts of achievement to students.

5 Further information

Full details of *The Access to Higher Education Grading Scheme*, and all associated guidance documents for AVAs, course providers and HE admissions staff, are available on the [QAA website](#).

6 Summary of the Access to HE Grading Scheme

Grading Scheme Access to HE Diploma



Core Principles

Common grading system to ensure the process and grades awarded to Access to HE students are:

- fair and equitable
- clear and transparent
- reliable and valid
- consistent



Key Features



- No overall or composite grade
- Grade awarded for each level 3 graded unit
- Grades shown on an achievement transcript
- Number of separate grades awarded depends on value of each unit offered
- All Diplomas comprise of 45 credits graded Level 3; 15 credits ungraded Level 2 or Level 3

Grading Standards

- Knowledge and understanding
- Subject-specific skills
- Transferable skills



Common set of grading standards used as the basis for grading judgments on all Access to HE Diplomas.

The Grades

Pass

Merit

Distinction

Grading Standards and Units



- All three Grading Standards are only applied after all the Learning Outcomes of a unit have been met
- Grading Standards define the aspects of performance on which grading decisions for the unit are based
- Units are graded against a combination of the components and sub-components of the Grading Standards
- Student assignment briefs include details of the components and sub-components of the Grading Standards used for grading
- The grade for the unit is determined by the median of the three Grading Standards

Moderation and Standardisation



Unit assessment plans, assignment briefs and grading decisions subject to internal verification and external moderation processes

The Award of Grades



- Providers recommend unit grades for award by the Access Validating Agency (AVA)
- Grades confirmed at final awards boards run for each course by the AVA

Any questions, please do not hesitate in contacting us via email: ahe@qaa.ac.uk

This section of the Grading Scheme replaces the equivalent section in *The Access to Higher Education Diploma Grading Scheme, September 2020*. It applies to all new students registering on Diplomas from 1 August 2024. The Access to HE Diploma Specification has also been updated to apply to all new students registering on Diplomas from 1 August 2024.

For students registered before 1 August 2024, please visit www.qaa.ac.uk/access-to-he for details of *The Access to Higher Education Diploma Specification, January 2020* and *The Grading Scheme, September 2020*.

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