



# **Access to HE Diploma: Toolkit for HE Admissions Staff**

Part A: Setting entry requirements and making offers

Part B: Grading and the Access to HE Diploma

Part C: PowerPoint presentation

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# Part A: Setting entry requirements and making offers

## 1 The Access to HE qualification

### 1.1 The Access to HE Diploma specification

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published the current specification for the Access to HE Diploma (the Diploma) in September 2013. Details of the current specification are available on the [QAA website](#).<sup>1</sup> The specification was updated in January 2020.<sup>2</sup> These guidelines update and replace previous guidelines published by QAA for higher education admissions staff about the Access to HE Diploma. All current guidance documents, and other information about Access to HE, are also available on the [QAA website](#).<sup>3</sup>

From September 2014, students have registered on Diplomas that comply with the current specification. Information relating to legacy qualifications is available in Appendix 1 of this document; a comparison of the 2006 and 2013 specifications is available in Appendix 2.

**The key features of the current specification are:**

- the **total** credit requirement is **60 credits**
- of these 60 credits, all Diplomas must contain **45 credits from graded Level 3 units** that are concerned with **academic subject content**
- the remaining 15 credits must consist of **ungraded Level 2 or Level 3 units**
- the grades available for graded units are Pass, Merit or Distinction (as defined in the requirements of the Access to HE Grading Scheme,<sup>4</sup> available on the [QAA website](#))<sup>5</sup>
- unit values may be of three, six or nine credits.

### 1.2 Awards, registration and certification

Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) licensed by QAA are the awarding bodies for the Diploma. All current AVAs are listed on the [QAA website](#).<sup>6</sup> All approved Access to HE providers and courses recognised as leading to the achievement of the Diploma are listed on QAA's Access to HE courses database. A list of all current Access to HE courses is available at: [www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk).

Under the terms of the current specification (2013, updated in 2020), students must be registered for units to the value of 60 credits (including their choice of optional units where these are available) within 12 weeks of the start of their course, or before they apply to higher education, whichever is the sooner; opportunities to make changes to this registration

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<sup>1</sup> The Access to Higher Education Diploma specification (2013, update 2020), available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources)

<sup>2</sup> Annex A, A3 updated to prohibit the use of special characters in Diploma titles A3 '...Access to HE Diploma titles may not include the following special characters: semi colon (;), colon (:), ampersand (&)' Annex C, C6 updated to align to the level descriptors used by Ofqual regulated qualifications 'C6 ...For the purposes of this specification the definition of the characteristics of achievement at level 3 as currently defined in Section E of Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition (level requirements, including level descriptors), serve as the key reference point.'

<sup>3</sup> Access to HE publications, available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources)

<sup>4</sup> Access to HE Grading Scheme (September 2020), available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources)

<sup>5</sup> Access to HE publications, available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources)

<sup>6</sup> Access Validating Agency profiles, available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/regulation-and-licensing/avas/ava-profiles](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/regulation-and-licensing/avas/ava-profiles)

are only allowed under defined, limited circumstances.

Successful Access to HE students are awarded a Diploma. The certificates of achievement issued by different AVAs vary in appearance, but all include QAA's Access to HE logo and the words 'recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education'. All students are also issued with an achievement transcript, which lists all the units achieved, and, for each unit, the level and number of credits awarded, in addition to, where relevant, the grade. To ensure that the distinction between the Level 3 units that are graded and those that are ungraded remains clear, the achievement of the ungraded units is recorded as achieved/not achieved on achievement transcripts. Any concerns about the legitimacy of evidence of certification should be referred to QAA by emailing: [AHE@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:AHE@qaa.ac.uk)

### 1.3 Results confirmation

To support the admissions process, UCAS's Awarding Body Linkage (ABL) scheme systematically transfers information about student achievement from awarding bodies such as AVAs, via UCAS, to higher education providers that are UCAS members. UCAS now processes individual unit results to institutions via the ABL process. There is no restriction regarding the timing of the communication of offers from higher education providers to Access to HE Diploma students, as the Access to HE Diploma is not covered by the UCAS embargo period.

### 1.4 UCAS tariff

Previously, the Access to HE Diploma was not included in the UCAS tariff, because the tariff methodology could not be applied to a qualification such as the Diploma, which had a degree of local determination and flexibility. However, the current specification, implemented in September 2014, has increased the consistency of structure and volume of academic content in Access to HE Diplomas. This, coupled with the approach to the UCAS tariff, which uses a qualification's size and grades, means that Access to HE is therefore included in the UCAS [tariff tables](#), which has been used for entry **since September 2017**.

The methodology used to calculate the UCAS tariff points for the Access to HE Diploma is aligned with that used for the calculation of tariff points for A level grades.

For example:

- 45 Access credits at Distinction are positioned at the same tariff points as three A grades at A level (144 tariff points)
- 45 Access credits at Pass are positioned at the same tariff points as three E grades at A level (48 tariff points)
- 30 credits at Distinction and 15 at Merit are positioned at the same tariff points as an A level profile of ABB+ (128 tariff points).

Further information is provided in [UCAS tariff points for entry to higher education](#).<sup>7</sup> This includes the different grade credit profiles (the number of credits at each grade: Pass, Merit or Distinction) and the associated tariff points. There are a number of different combinations that can result in a certain total of tariff points.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.ucas.com/undergraduate/what-and-where-study/entry-requirements/ucas-tariff-points](http://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/what-and-where-study/entry-requirements/ucas-tariff-points)

For example, in the tariff, 128 tariff points could be gained through different Access to HE Diploma grade combinations as follows:

Grade credit profile: number of credits at each phase			Tariff points
Distinction	Merit	Pass	
36	3	6	128
33	9	3	128
30	15	0	128

## 2 Framing entry requirements

### 2.1 Expressing qualification requirements: The Access to HE Diploma

The name of the national qualification regulated by QAA is the Access to HE Diploma (the Diploma). If a qualification has this name, it is QAA recognised. All current and archived recognised Diplomas are listed on QAA's Access to HE courses database. A list of current Access to HE courses is available at: [www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)

The Access to Higher Education Certificate (the Certificate) is the title of the predecessor qualification, which is no longer available. References to 'access courses' may or may not indicate courses that lead to the Diploma. QAA does not use the term kitemarked to refer to recognised Diplomas.

### 2.2 Referring to particular Diplomas

Although the current specification has introduced greater consistency in Diploma structures, with all Diplomas containing 45 credits from graded Level 3 units concerned with academic subject content, it is still possible for Diplomas with the same title to have different content, and for Diplomas with very similar content to have slightly different titles.

This is because:

- individual Diplomas are approved and named by subject at AVA level, using a common titling format - for example, Access to HE Diploma (Nursing) or Access to HE Diploma (Law) - which must be adhered to, but which allows the subject title to be determined by the AVA
- there is no national statement of the range of expected content relating to Diplomas with the same title.<sup>8</sup>

This means that entry requirements for the achievement of Diplomas in particular disciplines are best expressed generically. It is preferable, for example, to refer to an 'Access to HE Diploma in art and design or creative arts subject' rather than 'Access to HE Diploma (Art and Design)'. Over-specification can also cause difficulties, because a Diploma with a general title, such as 'Access to HE Diploma (Combined Sciences)', could contain as many credits in subjects specified in entry requirements (for example, human biology) as a Diploma with a more tightly specified title, such as 'Access to HE Diploma (Nursing)'.

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<sup>8</sup> The subject descriptor Medicine brings greater standardisation to Diplomas titled Access to HE Diploma (Medicine) and defines the minimum requirement of content for a Diploma that is designed and publicly claims to provide the preparation needed for progression to undergraduate study in Medicine.

## 2.3 Requirements for achievement in particular subjects

To achieve a Diploma, students must register for, and achieve, a particular approved set of units to a total credit value of 60 credits. From 2014-15 these units should be listed on students' applications, with the unit title, level (2 or 3), credit value (three, six or nine) and status of the unit as graded or ungraded.

Some units are used on more than one named Diploma approved by the same AVA, but other units are unique to a named Diploma. AVAs do not share units. Requirements for achievement in particular subjects are therefore best expressed in generic terms, as specific units are not available to all students taking different Diplomas in the same, or similar, discipline areas.

## 2.4 Requirements for specific amounts of achievement in particular subjects

The total volume of learning required for a Diploma is always the same (60 credits, with a minimum of 45 at Level 3), but different sized units can be combined in different ways to realise that standard total.

For example:

Diploma Y	Diploma Z
60 credits to be gained through the completion of:	60 credits to be gained through the completion of:
20 x 3-credit units	5 x 9-credit units 1 x 3-credit unit 2 x 6-credit units
45 graded credits to be gained from:	45 graded credits to be gained from:
15 x 3-credit units (45 credits)	5 x 9-credit units (45 credits)

These potential differences in unit size should be considered when making offers to prospective students. An entry requirement that specified, for example, '3 units in mathematics' would not therefore make consistent demands on students taking different Diplomas, as this could represent a requirement for anything from nine credits (three x three-credit units) to 27 credits (three x nine-credit units).

It is therefore preferable in entry requirements to refer to subjects in generic terms and to the total number of credits to be achieved in those subjects, for example, 18 Level 3 credits from mathematics units. Some students or providers may refer to 'modules', generally meaning sets or clusters of units. This term has no formal status within the Access to HE Diploma specification.

## 2.5 Requirements relating to overall credit achievement

The Diploma has a standard credit value of 60 credits, with at least 45 credits at Level 3, and **students cannot be awarded a Diploma without achieving this**. From the academic year 2014-15, no student has been able to register for, or achieve, more than 60 credits. Differentiation of students' academic performance is achieved through the application of grading. Any applications that offer units with a combined value of more than 60 credits should be queried with the applicant.

## 2.6 Requirements relating to academic performance (grades)

A common system of unit grading applies to all Diplomas. Please note that from 2014-15 all Diplomas include a fixed volume of 45 credits that must be derived from graded Level 3 units concerned with academic subject content. Differentiated achievement in these units is recorded as Pass, Merit or Distinction. The details and operation of the Grading Scheme are described in Part B of this document: Grading and the Access to HE Diploma.

Students' differentiated achievement on the 45 credits from graded Level 3 units is recorded on the student's achievement transcript, issued with the certificate of achievement of the Diploma. **No overall grade is given as this cannot be meaningfully calculated because of the differences in credit value, subject and assessment of units.** A requirement for an overall grade is therefore not appropriate, and may lead to informal calculations being made, based on varying assumptions about what is intended.

As a grade is awarded for each unit the total number of grades that a student can achieve is determined by the total number of graded units that make up the required 45 credits: for example, a student taking five x nine-credit units will achieve five grades, while another taking 15 x three-credit units will achieve 15 grades. An entry requirement that specified a certain number of grades (or units) to be achieved at a particular grade would therefore require students on different courses to achieve different proportions of the Diploma at that grade. The examples in Section 3 suggest that graded entry requirements should specify a certain number of credits to be achieved from units awarded at a certain grade, for example, 18 credits achieved at Merit.

## 2.7 Assessing academic potential (predicted grades)

Diplomas are designed to prepare adults who may have been out of education for a number of years to progress into higher education. Diploma courses are typically delivered in one year, and students often have to make rapid progress to meet the standards of the Diploma. Grades awarded at different stages of the course often reflect the trajectory of the steep learning curve followed by many students; grades awarded for units completed early in the course may not reflect students' full potential.

Referees may find it difficult to provide reliable predicted grades in the early months of a course, when UCAS applications are being prepared, for units to be assessed towards the end of the course. Tutors should, however, be able to give an indication of the standard of performance in completed units, although grades are not confirmed until they are externally moderated, usually at the end of the course. A request for a second reference, to be provided later in the course, can be helpful in gathering fuller information about a student's potential. **As the qualification does not result in a single grade, an overall grade cannot be predicted.**

## 2.8 Additional requirements

To ensure that the curriculum and assessment of Diplomas are appropriate to support progression to higher education, QAA's criteria for Diploma approval require the involvement of higher education staff in the development and validation of every Diploma. It is recognised, however, that particular higher education courses may have additional admissions requirements. Where this is the case the following points may be relevant.

- **GCSE requirements**  
Where a higher education provider requires applicants to have achieved GCSEs in one or more subjects, this should be clearly specified in terms of the subject of the GCSE(s), and the grade(s) required.

- **Non-academic experience**  
If the course requires students to have certain types and/or durations of practical or work experience, this should be made clear in the entry requirements.
- **Additional Level 3 qualifications**  
Entry requirements that ask for additional Level 3 qualifications are likely to be regarded as unrealistic for most Access to HE students (unless they already hold the additional qualification) because of substantial practical and financial barriers to undertaking the study necessary for such achievement. Access to HE providers may be willing to be flexible with individual students' timetables, but allowing an Access to HE student to study for an additional Level 3 qualification, as well as the Diploma, may not be feasible or fundable, even if the two qualifications were undertaken consecutively.
- **Additional Level 3 credit**  
Although the Diploma has had a credit target of 60 credits, in the previous specification (implemented in 2006), it was possible, under certain circumstances, for students to achieve more than 60 credits. To ensure consistency, under the current specification no student is able to achieve more than 60 credits under any circumstances. From 2014-15 entry requirements that specify more than 60 credits will no longer be achievable for any Access to HE student.

## 2.9 Making offers

Higher education providers, who specify clear entry requirements for Access to HE students, provide useful information to help AVAs and providers structure their Diplomas to meet those requirements. Where higher education providers have not provided detailed entry requirements for Access to HE applicants, the guidance in Sections 2.1 to 2.8 should be helpful in framing conditional offers. In either instance, the following further points should be taken into consideration.

In **conditional offers** it is generally helpful to name the Diploma title given on the application. If the title of the Diploma, as provided by the applicant, is not specified, an applicant may not be aware that their offer could be jeopardised if they transferred to a course leading to a different Diploma.

While it is suggested that references to specific units in framing entry requirements are avoided, it may sometimes be helpful when making conditional offers to name particular units listed by the applicant to clarify which of the units are regarded, for example, as acceptable science units. Care should be taken, however, to ensure that specific conditions made in offers are consistent with more general entry requirements and the relevant UCAS tariff points.

Because of their life circumstances if **unconditional offers** are made to Access to HE students by higher education providers, it is common for them to withdraw from the course and therefore not complete their Diploma. While it is recognised that, in making an unconditional offer, a higher education provider has made a judgement that the applicant has the capability to succeed in the course that they have applied for, completing the Diploma will ensure that the applicant is well prepared to progress to higher education. For students who have taken out an Advanced Learner Loan there may also be personal financial implications of non-completion, with students being liable to repay the loan for the Access to HE Diploma that would otherwise be written off upon completion of a higher education programme. If an unconditional offer is thought appropriate because a higher education provider is confident that the student will be suitably prepared for higher education by completing the Access course, irrespective of what grades are achieved, then Approach 1



in Section 3 is recommended.

## Further information

- The Office for Students ([OfS](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk))<sup>9</sup> is the independent regulator of higher education in England. Their aim is to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. Their work covers all students whether undergraduate or postgraduate, national or international, young or mature, full-time or part-time, studying on a campus or by distance learning.
- Universities and Colleges Admissions Service ([UCAS](http://www.ucas.com))<sup>10</sup> is an independent charity providing information, advice, and admissions services to inspire and facilitate educational progression. UCAS is the centralised service that students use to apply to university.
- The [Quality Code for Higher Education](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code)<sup>11</sup> is a key reference point for UK higher education, protecting the public and student interest, and championing UK higher education's world-leading reputation for quality.

## 3 Examples of approaches to setting entry requirements and conditional offers

Several approaches are provided to enable higher education providers to specify appropriate course entry requirements in prospectuses and for Qualification Information Profiles (QIPs), and to make offers to Access to HE applicants that are in line with their broader admissions policies.

The credits and particular grades in the examples provided are illustrative only. Note that under the current specification, units can only be of three, six or nine credits.

### Approach 1: Achievement of the Diploma (in a general, named subject discipline area)

This approach is appropriate when institutions require applicants to achieve:

- the total volume and level of the Access to HE Diploma, with no additional requirements in terms of performance beyond the threshold (achievement of all units, with Pass grades for graded units, positioned at 48 tariff points from September 2017)
- no specific requirements in terms of subjects studied (or with requirements that relate only to the general discipline area of the Access to HE Diploma as a whole).

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<sup>9</sup> [www.officeforstudents.org.uk](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk)

<sup>10</sup> [www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)

<sup>11</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code)

<b>Entry requirements 1 (examples):</b>	<b>Conditional offers 1 (examples):</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the Access to HE Diploma in any subject</li> <li>b the Access to HE Diploma with 48 tariff points</li> <li>c the Access to HE Diploma in a health-related or science subject</li> <li>d the Access to HE Diploma in Art and Design or creative arts subject</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the Access to HE Diploma (title as given on application)</li> <li>b the Access to HE Diploma (title as on application) with 48 tariff points</li> <li>c the Access to HE Diploma (Health Studies)</li> <li>d the Access to HE Diploma (Art and Design)</li> </ul>

### **Approach 2: Achievement of the Diploma with a specific number of UCAS tariff points (in a general, named subject discipline area)**

This approach is appropriate when institutions require applicants to achieve:

- the total volume and level of the Access to HE Diploma with a specific number of UCAS tariff points, but with no additional requirements in terms of how the total might be reached
- no specific requirements in terms of subjects studied (or with requirements that relate only to the general discipline area of the Access to HE Diploma as a whole).

<b>Entry requirements 2 (examples):</b>	<b>Conditional offers 2 (examples):</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the Access to HE Diploma in any subject, with 128 tariff points</li> <li>b the Access to HE Diploma, with 128 tariff points in a health-related or science subject</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the Access to HE Diploma, with 128 tariff points (title as given on application)</li> <li>b the Access to HE Diploma, with 128 tariff points (Health Studies)</li> </ul>

### **Approach 3: Achievement of the Diploma (in a general, named subject discipline area), with a certain volume of the whole achieved in specific subjects**

This approach is appropriate when institutions require applicants to achieve:

- the Access to HE Diploma in a general, named discipline area (or with no requirements relating to the discipline area of the Diploma as a whole)
- a certain amount of credit in specific subject area(s), but with no additional requirements in terms of performance beyond the threshold (that is, Pass grades on all units).

<b>Entry requirements 3 (examples):</b>	<b>Conditional offers 3 (examples):</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the Access to HE Diploma in any subject, with 30 Level 3 credits from units in arts or humanities, of which at least six credits are from units in English literature</li> <li>b the Access to HE Diploma in a science or engineering subject, with 12 Level 3 credits from units in mathematics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the Access to HE Diploma (Combined Arts), with 30 Level 3 credits from English literature, history or philosophy units, of which at least six credits are from units in English literature</li> <li>b the Access to HE Diploma (Engineering), with 12 Level 3 credits from units in mathematics</li> </ul>

## Approach 4: Achievement of a certain volume of the total Diploma at a standard above Pass

This approach is appropriate when institutions require applicants to achieve:

- the Access to HE Diploma (whether in a named discipline area or not)
- a standard of performance beyond Pass for a certain amount of the 45 credits from graded units
- no requirements in terms of the performance in any particular subject area.
- a specific tariff point requirement and a standard of performance beyond Pass for a certain amount of the 45 credits from graded units.

Entry requirements 4 (examples):	Conditional offers 4 (examples):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the Access to HE Diploma (specify discipline area, if required), with 12 credits at Merit or Distinction (61 tariff points and above)</li> <li>b the Access to HE Diploma (specify discipline area, if required), with 18 credits at Merit or Distinction, of which at least nine credits must be at Distinction (77 tariff points and above)</li> <li>c the Access to HE Diploma (specify discipline area, if required), with 45 credits at Level 3, of which 30 must be awarded at Distinction, and 15 at Merit or higher (128 tariff points and above).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the Access to HE Diploma (Social Studies), with 12 credits at Merit or Distinction (61 tariff points and above)</li> <li>b the Access to HE Diploma (Education), with 18 credits at Merit or Distinction, of which at least nine credits must be at Distinction (77 tariff points and above)</li> <li>c the Access to HE Diploma (Law), with 45 credits from graded units awarded at Level 3, of which 30 must be awarded at Distinction, and 15 at Merit or higher (128 tariff points and above).</li> </ul>

## Approach 5: Achievement in certain subjects within the Diploma at a standard above Pass

This approach is appropriate when institutions require applicants to achieve:

- the Access to HE Diploma (whether in named discipline area or not)
- a certain amount of credit in specific subject area(s)
- a standard of performance beyond Pass in specific subjects or subject area(s)
- a specific tariff point requirement and a standard of performance beyond Pass in specific subjects or subject area(s).

Entry requirements 5 (examples):	Conditional offers 5 (examples):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a Access to HE Diploma (specify discipline area, if required), with 12 credits from science units awarded at Merit or Distinction (61 tariff points and above)</li> <li>b Access to HE Diploma (specify discipline area, if required), with 18 credits from science units at Merit or Distinction, of which six credits must be achieved in biology units awarded at Distinction (74 tariff points and above)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a the Access to HE Diploma (Environmental Science), with 12 credits from science units awarded at Merit or Distinction (61 tariff points and above)</li> <li>b Access to HE Diploma (Nursing), with 18 credits from science units at Merit or Distinction, of which 6 credits must be achieved in biology units awarded at Distinction (74 tariff points and above)</li> </ul>

c Access to HE Diploma (specify discipline area, if required) with 30 credits at Distinction from biology and chemistry units, and the remaining 15 credits at Merit or higher (128 tariff points and above).	c Access to HE Diploma (Science), with 30 credits awarded at Distinction from biology and chemistry units, and 15 credits from other science units awarded at Merit or higher (128 tariff points and above).
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## Good practice recommendations

Recommendation	
<b>1</b>	Refer to 'the Access to HE Diploma'
<b>2a</b>	In entry requirements refer to generic disciplines for Diplomas, not particular titles
<b>2b</b>	In conditional offers refer to the title of the Diploma named on the application
<b>3a</b>	To ensure consistency in requirements about the amount of achievement in a particular subject, refer to the number of credits to be achieved (not the number of units) in that subject
<b>3b</b>	In conditional offers ensure that any specification of requirements does not exceed 60 credits
<b>3c</b>	In conditional offers consider whether more detailed specifications about particular subject requirements might be necessary or helpful
<b>3d</b>	If tariff points are included in conditional offers, any additional requirements relating to the required grade profile or subject areas should also be specified
<b>4</b>	When making requirements and offers based on achievement of grades, specify the number of credits (not units) that must be achieved at Merit or Distinction (within the maximum total available of 45 credits)
<b>5</b>	Consider asking for a second reference to gain more information about students' academic potential
<b>6</b>	Consider alternative approaches to making unconditional offers (see Section 3, Approach 1)
<b>7</b>	If any additional qualifications or other requirements (such as work experience) are a prerequisite, ensure that such requirements are made clear in published entry requirements
<b>8</b>	Review offer libraries on admissions IT systems to ensure that titles and unit requirements are up to date, as results and grades are now available via UCAS ABL (for higher education providers that are UCAS members)

## Part B: Grading and the Access to HE Diploma

Brief outline for higher education admissions staff, updated to reflect the requirements of the current Diploma specification.

Other information and guidance available on the QAA [website](#)<sup>12</sup> includes:

- [The Access to HE Diploma Specification](#) (2013, updated 2020)<sup>13</sup>
- [Grading Scheme Handbook: Index](#)<sup>14</sup>
- [Access to HE courses database](#) (a complete list of all courses leading to the Access to HE Diploma).<sup>15</sup>

1 A common grading system was introduced on all Access to HE Diploma courses in 2009-10.

2 All Access to HE Diplomas are made up of units. The total credit value of a Diploma is 60 credits. Of these 60 credits, 45 credits are derived from graded Level 3 units concerned with academic subject content. The remaining 15 credits are derived from units that are not graded.

3 The grades available are Pass, Merit or Distinction. No other grades or intermediate grades are used. The grades are not converted from percentages or other numerical marks, and have no numerical equivalents.

4 A grade is awarded for each of the graded Level 3 units, resulting in a grade profile. There is no overall, average or single aggregate grade for the Diploma.

5 Grades are derived from the use of seven generic Grade Descriptors:

- Understanding of the Subject
- Application of Knowledge
- Application of Skills
- Use of Information
- Communication and Presentation
- Autonomy and/or Independence
- Quality.

6 The Grade Descriptors, in appropriate combinations, are used as the basis for grading judgements on all units and with all assessment methods on all Diplomas. The combination of Grade Descriptors to be used with any particular unit is confirmed when the unit is validated. At least two Descriptors must be used for each unit, including Grade Descriptor 7 (Quality), which is used for all units. Each of the seven Grade Descriptors comprises a set of related components.

7 Each component is made up of two statements, one of which describes characteristics or qualities that are typical of academic performance at Merit (for example, work 'is structured in a way that is generally logical and fluent'); the other is a complementary statement for the same component that describes academic performance at Distinction (for

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<sup>12</sup> QAA website [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

<sup>13</sup> The Access to Higher Education Diploma specification (2013), available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources).

<sup>14</sup> Grading Scheme Handbook: Index, available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources)

<sup>15</sup> Access to HE course database, available at: [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/course-search](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/course-search)

example, work is 'structured in a way that is consistently logical and fluent').

8 The knowledge and skills requirements of a unit are expressed as a set of learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria. A student's work must reach the standard needed to Pass (that is, all the learning outcomes must be achieved) before it can be considered for grading. A Pass grade is awarded when a student achieves the learning outcomes for the unit but does not meet the requirements defined by the relevant Merit descriptors: there are no separate Grade Descriptors for Pass.

9 In order to ensure that the Grade Descriptors are used appropriately for the particular subject and assignment requirements, tutors identify the components from a unit's Descriptors, which are relevant to the assignment when they specify the assignment requirements. For example, there is a component within the Communication and Presentation Descriptor that relates to 'the use of images'. This component would not be included in the assignment brief if the use of images was not relevant for the assessment of the particular assignment, and would not contribute to the tutor's considerations in assessing the quality of the student's performance.

10 Some units are assessed by more than one assignment. The grading process (see the [Grading Scheme Handbook: Index](#))<sup>16</sup> generates a grade indicator for each of the Grade Descriptors used in each assignment, producing a unit grade profile, on the basis of which a decision about the final grade for a unit is made. Each unit is given an overall grade in this way: individual assignments are not given overall grades.

11 As well as specifying details of the grading model and process, QAA specifies the assessment regulations that apply on Access to HE courses. Regulations are detailed in the Grading Scheme Handbook and cover the following aspects of assessment.

- **Resubmissions**

One resubmission opportunity may be provided for any individual assignment (unless mitigating circumstances have been accepted).

Successful resubmissions must be graded following the same process as used for successful submissions and grades are given accordingly

If a student's resubmitted work does not meet all the learning outcomes (and, therefore, does not meet the requirements for Pass), the only means by which a further opportunity for resubmission can be provided within the same registration period is through referral. Grades for work resubmitted through referral are capped at Pass.

- **Late submission**

If work is submitted after the formal submission deadline has passed, and where no extension has been granted, grades are capped at Pass.

If work is submitted after the formal submission deadline without an extension having been granted and the work does not meet the learning outcomes, there is no opportunity for resubmission except via the referrals process.

- **Drafts**

Particular restrictions apply to the submission of drafts. Opportunities to submit

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<sup>16</sup> Grading Scheme Handbook: Index, available at:  
<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources>

assignments (or parts of assignments) in draft for comment and feedback by tutors before the formal submission date are permitted only for the particular assignments where the tutor has decided that this is appropriate and has specified this in advance.

- **Grades confirmation**

Moderation of grades are subject to internal moderation and to external moderation by external moderators, who are appointed and trained by AVAs.

Following moderation, the award of grades is confirmed at awards boards, conducted according to a process specified by QAA.

12 The unit grades are recorded on the student's achievement transcript, which is issued with the certificate of achievement of the Access to HE Diploma by the AVAs.

13 AVAs are responsible for the design and operation of standardisation mechanisms, including standardisation within and between centres and over time, and moderator training for standardisation.

## Part C: PowerPoint Presentation

A PowerPoint presentation on the current [Access to HE Diploma specification](#)<sup>17</sup> is also available. These annotated slides provide a comprehensive introduction to the Access to HE Diploma specification and the key changes from the previous specification.

A [higher education admissions](#)<sup>18</sup> presentation is also available, which includes information relating to the introduction of the qualification into the UCAS tariff tables for use from September 2017.

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<sup>17</sup> Part C: Presentation - The Access to HE Diploma specification, available at:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/about-us/access-to-he-toolkit-presentation-specification.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/about-us/access-to-he-toolkit-presentation-specification.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Part C: Presentation - Access to HE: Information for higher education admissions, available at:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/about-us/access-to-he-toolkit-presentation-admissions.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/about-us/access-to-he-toolkit-presentation-admissions.pdf)



## Appendix 1: Legacy qualifications

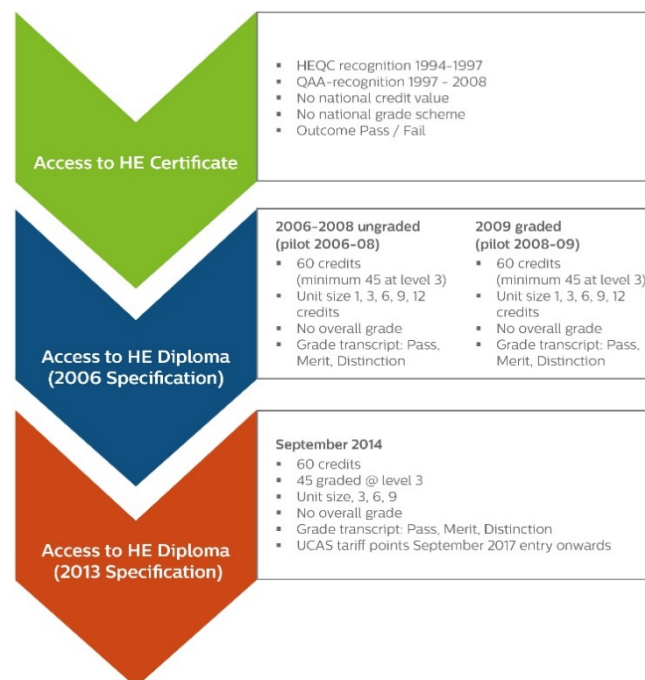
Students applying to higher education with a legacy QAA-recognised Access qualification may present differences in the qualification in comparison to those who have completed Diplomas under the current specification.

A legacy qualification should not necessarily preclude an applicant from securing a place at a university. Universities in the UK set their own entry requirements for higher education courses, and these vary depending on the subject, the specific course, and the course provider. This autonomy extends to the specification of arrangements for the admission of 'mature students' - that is, students going to university or college after a period of time out of full-time education. Many universities operate admissions processes which take account of prior learning and/or experience in considering the applications of mature students. It would not be unreasonable for a university, acting within the parameters of its admissions policy, to request that an applicant demonstrates their suitability to undertake a course of higher education by more recent means. This could also be the case of a mature student with other legacy qualification, including other Level 3 qualifications. The decision to accept qualifications as suitable for admitting applicants, and the extent and recency of the qualification that successful candidates are required to hold, rest solely at the discretion of the admitting university.

If a higher education institution has any specific concerns regarding the content or validity of the qualification, it is recommended they contact the Access Validating Agency (awarding body). Alternatively, if you have any questions or concerns about legacy qualifications, please contact QAA by emailing: [AHE@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:AHE@qaa.ac.uk)

### Access to HE qualification timeline:

The diagram below presents the timeline for the Access to HE qualification. In one form or another the Access to HE Qualification has existed for over 40 years.



Since 2010, Access to HE Diplomas have been awarded with unit grades of Pass, Merit or Distinction, based on achievement of a standard 60-credit requirement. This continues to be the current model

In 2009 (and, in a small number of exceptional cases, in 2010), Access to HE Diplomas were awarded without grades, based on achievement of the standard 60-credit requirement.

Before 2009 Access to Higher Education Certificates were awarded. No common format was applied to titles and there were no national agreements about credit (so different numbers of credits were required on different courses). Any grades awarded before September 2009 were awarded on the basis of local agreements only. There is therefore no relationship between any grades that may have been awarded before September 2009 and grades awarded as part of the current national Access to HE Grading Scheme.

Consequently, these students are not able to meet any entry requirements that include merit or distinction grades and may have an all pass credit profile, as this was the only outcome available at the time they completed their Diploma.

## **Appendix 2: The 2006 and 2013 specifications compared**

### **Maximum possible credit value of student achievement**

The 2006 specification introduced the required credit value of 60 credits for all Diplomas. However, because it also recognised that in certain circumstances it might be necessary for students to achieve more than 60 credits, Access to HE applicants to higher education since that time may have provided information about units with a total credit value of more than 60 credits. To ensure equity and consistency, the current (2013) specification introduced a requirement that all students register for named units to a value of exactly 60 credits; from 2014-15 units with this total credit value should be listed by name on students' applications to higher education.

### **Registration deadlines**

The 2006 specification contained no specific requirements with regard to student registration. The current (2013) specification requires that, from September 2014, students must be registered for named units within 12 weeks of the start of their course, or before they apply to higher education, whichever happens first.

### **Ungraded Level 3 units**

At the time that the Access to HE Grading Scheme was introduced it was possible for Access to HE students to achieve a Diploma with between 45 and 60 credits from Level 3 units, all of which were graded. The current (2013) specification fixes the value of credit to be derived from graded units at 45 credits. In order to allow local determination and flexibility in the use of the remaining 15 credits, the facility use of ungraded Level 3 units has been introduced, alongside the continuation of the option to derive these credits from Level 2 units. The content of ungraded units at either level may be concerned with study skills or generic English or maths, and at Level 3 may also be concerned with academic subject content relevant to the title of the Diploma. The statement of the outcome of such units is 'achieved' or 'not achieved'. Further information about the concept of ungraded Level 3 units and how they may be used, and about the definition of academic subject content, can be found in the specification document.

### **Credit value of units**

The range of credit values available for units has been reduced to three, six or nine. Units of one, two or 12 credits, which were allowed in the 2006 specification, may no longer be used.

### **GCSE equivalent units**

Under the 2006 specification it was possible for Diplomas to include units that were accepted by some higher education providers as meeting their requirements for GCSE achievement in English, maths or science (generally known as GCSE equivalent units). The claim to GCSE equivalence was regulated by QAA through requirements relating to the process of Diploma approval. From the academic year 2014-15 the claim to GCSE equivalence will no longer be regulated by QAA and any claims to GCSE equivalence are not supported by QAA. However, some Diplomas may continue to include, within the 15 credits of ungraded units, some Level 2 units that relate to English or maths, if this has been agreed through the development and validation process to be the most appropriate use of those units to support the intended progression. Individual higher education providers may decide that such units, where offered, meet their requirements for achievement in English and maths.

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*QAA manages the national framework for the recognition and regulation of Access to HE Diplomas. [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)*