



# **Tutors' Quick Guide to Grading**

September 2020

QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education

*Please note that a Grading Scheme review is to be undertaken in 2023.  
The new Tutors' Quick Guide to Grading will be published in September 2023.*

## 1 Who is the guide for?

This practical guide is for anyone working as a tutor on an Access to HE Diploma course. It explains the key features of the method used for grading the Access to HE Diploma. It will serve as a quick introduction for tutors who are new to Access to HE, and provide a reminder for those who have already had training or development on the grading scheme.

## 2 Does this guide provide all the information a tutor needs about grading?

The guide summarises QAA's Grading Scheme Handbook. Although it covers most of the essential, practical information that tutors need in order to include grading in their assessment of Access to HE units, for more detailed guidance tutors should refer to the relevant parts of the full handbook, as indicated by the references given throughout this document. In particular, tutors will need to have a copy of Section B, which contains full details of the grade descriptors.

All parts of the Grading Scheme Handbook are available from the [Access to HE resources](#) page of the QAA website.

## 3 What are the key features of the grading scheme? (see Section A)

- 45 credits are achieved at level 3 from graded academic units and the remaining 15 credits are achieved at level 2 or level 3 from units which are ungraded.
- A student's work must reach the standard needed to Pass (that is, all the learning outcomes must be achieved) in order for credit to be awarded and before it can be considered for grading.
- There must only be one formal opportunity for the assessment of each learning outcome.
- The grades available are Pass, Merit or Distinction.
- There are seven grade descriptors:
  - Understanding of the subject
  - Application of knowledge
  - Application of skills
  - Use of information
  - Communication and presentation
  - Autonomy/Independence
  - Quality(Refer to Section B of the Grading Scheme Handbook for full details about how these are used for grading units.)
- Appropriate combinations of grade descriptors are assigned to all level 3 academic units when they are validated. This information is part of the unit specification.
- Grade descriptor 7 (Quality) is applied to all graded academic units.
- The grade descriptors, in appropriate combinations, are used with units in all subjects and can be used with any of the assessment methods that tutors commonly use.
- The grade descriptors contain statements that describe the standard of performance at Merit and Distinction. There are no grade descriptors for Pass: the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit define the standard for Pass.

- Each grade descriptor is made up of a set of related 'components'. These components describe different aspects of the performance associated with a descriptor for both Merit and Distinction. They also reflect the different aspects of performance valued by different subjects. Tutors decide which components to use from the descriptors assigned to a unit.
- The grading process generates a grade indicator for each of the grade descriptors used in each assignment. The final unit grade reflects the overall standard of work for the unit, based on a review of the grade indicators for the unit (the unit grade profile) and any other relevant information.
- Each unit is given an overall grade in this way: assignments are not given overall grades.
- The Grading Scheme Handbook provides a full specification of the quality requirements that relate to each stage of the grading process. Figure 1 (page 8) provides a summary overview of the process and the requirements at each stage.

## **4 How is the grading scheme used in assessment? (see Sections B and C)**

There are **six steps** that you, as a tutor, should take to grade student work.

### **Step 1**

#### **Check that you know what grade descriptors have been assigned to a unit.**

The grade descriptors assigned to a unit are now a formal part of the unit specification, as approved by your AVA. If you have any doubt about which grade descriptors are assigned to a unit that you are responsible for, you should ask your course coordinator or leader for clarification.

### **Step 2**

#### **For each unit, decide how to use the grade descriptors and grade components in the assessment plan (that is, across the assignment or assignments) for the unit.**

To do this, you need to review the unit's assessment plan. The plan may be based on one or more assignments, and must ensure that there are opportunities for students to achieve all the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit by completing the assignment(s) to the standard required. Within the assessment plan there must only be one formal opportunity for the assessment of each learning outcome.

There are a few rules about how this step works. You need to make sure that:

- you use all the grade descriptors assigned to a unit in the grading of that unit
- where you use more than one assignment to assess a unit, you allocate the assigned grade descriptors appropriately across the assignments. You may use the assigned grade descriptors more than once in a unit, but you do not have to use all of them in all assignments (see example A)
- you use a minimum of two grade descriptors, including grade descriptor 7 (Quality) with all assignments.

Then you must choose which components of the grade descriptors are most appropriate for the subject of the assessment, following the rules about using the components that are given with the details of each grade descriptor (see Section B). The components available to you describe different aspects of performance associated with different subjects, so you should

consider your choice of components carefully, including, if there is more than one assignment, which components to use for each assignment (remembering that different components from the same grade descriptor may be used for different assignments).

**Example A: unit grading plan for a unit using grade descriptors 1, 2, 5 and 7.**

Grade Descriptor	Assignment 1	Assignment 2
1	✓	✓
2		✓
5		✓
7	✓	✓

**Step 3**

**Incorporate information about grading into assignment information.**

Assignment briefs must provide all the information that students need, so that they know what they have to do to meet the standard defined by the grade descriptors and grade components.

Your assignment briefs therefore need to include, in whatever way is appropriate:

- the grade descriptors and grade components you have applied and, as appropriate, what they mean for student work in relation to the particular assignment
- space for your feedback to the student both about their achievement of the assessment criteria and learning outcomes and their performance in relation to grading. This should be specific feedback that will help a student improve their performance in future work.

**Step 4**

Assess and grade completed student work, and record the grades achieved.

Assess student work in the normal way, making sure that you have confirmed that the student has achieved all the learning outcomes and assessment criteria covered by the particular assignment before you consider the work for grading.

When grading student work, make sure that you:

- refer to the guidance given in Section B of the Grading Scheme Handbook if you are uncertain about how to interpret the language in a grade descriptor
- use your professional judgement to make decisions about grade indicators, assessing the extent to which either the Merit or Distinction components used for each grade descriptor best describe the standard of work presented by the student. Your decisions must be based only on this, and must not be influenced by any other aspect of the work
- give a Pass grade indicator where you judge that the learning outcomes for the assignment have been met, but the work does not achieve the standard required for Merit
- record your grading decisions as grade indicators, which together will create a profile of grades for a complete unit (see example B). The overall grade for the unit

is based on this profile. The grading scheme does not use overall grades for assignments, so do not provide such grades for your students

- record the grade indicators only as Pass, Merit or Distinction (you must never use combined or intermediate grades, such as Pass/Merit or Merit+)
- only use Pass, Merit or Distinction when marking. The use of numerical marks is not permitted on QAA-recognised Access to HE Diplomas<sup>1</sup>.

**Example B: a grade profile for one unit for one student.**

	Assignment 1	Assignment 2
1	P	M
2		M
5		P
7	P	M

## Step 5

**Provide feedback to students about their grades and their general performance.**

So that students understand the reasons for the grades given for their work, and know what to do to improve their performance, you should observe the usual principles of good practice in providing feedback. Your feedback should:

- be prompt
- make it clear to students how your judgements about their work relate to the grading requirements by ensuring that you incorporate the language of the grade descriptor (although if this relationship was clear in the assignment information, it does not have to be repeated here)
- be consistent with the level of difficulty described by the grade descriptors (for example, do not say work which has been graded mainly at Merit is excellent)
- contribute to a student's continuing development, by identifying what the student could have done, and therefore might do in the future, to improve their performance.

## Step 6

**Determine and record the final grade for the unit (see Section C)**

As assessed work is successfully completed and graded, you should record grade indicators in a way that creates a unit profile. (This could be in the same way as in example B.) In creating a unit profile, all grade descriptors and therefore grade indicators have equal value (that is, you must not attach a weighting to either grade descriptors or assignments).

Once a unit grade profile is complete, establish the final grade for the unit by reviewing all the grade indicators in the profile, ordering them from Pass to Distinction, and identifying the midpoint grade. (For example, if the grade indicators are MMDDD, the unit grade is D.) Where no midpoint grade is clear (as in example B, where the number of Ps and Ms is the same), you will need to make a professional judgement about the overall standard of the work presented to make a decision about the most appropriate overall grade. In making this

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that use of numerical marking as part of the Access to HE Diploma grading scheme ceased on 1 September 2020.

judgement, you should give particular consideration to the grade indicator(s) that you gave for grade descriptor 7 (Quality), as well as the details of the feedback you gave to the student about their performance in relation to grading. Your reasons for the judgement about the final unit grade must be clearly recorded and provided to students.

## **5 How many times can work be submitted for assessment and grading? (see Sections C and E)**

If a student's work meets all the learning outcomes covered by an assignment, you should grade it in the usual way and it is not eligible for resubmission.

If a student's first attempt at an assignment does not meet one or more of the learning outcomes, the student has one opportunity for resubmission. In these circumstances, you must:

- give feedback to the student about why the learning outcome(s) have not been achieved, but not provide information specific to potential grades. (The purpose of resubmission is to provide the opportunity for a student to meet the learning outcomes, so that the work will be eligible for grading; it is not an opportunity for students to amend work to achieve a higher grade)
- identify the most appropriate type of resubmission, taking into account the particular learning outcomes in which the original work was inadequate
- explain clearly to students the extent and type of resubmission required (this may range from the addition of small amounts of information to a full reworking of the assignment)
- set the earliest possible deadline for resubmission (taking into account the amount of work needed) with the student, so that, wherever possible, all resubmissions are completed and assessed before the awards board
- use the same assessment method for the resubmitted work as for the original, unless this is impracticable or gives the student an undue advantage (for example, by repeating the original test paper).

Work resubmitted in this way, if it reaches the standard required for Pass, is eligible for grading.

If the work does not achieve Pass at this second attempt, a further opportunity is only possible if the matter is referred to the awards board for approval. There are specific requirements associated with the process of referral which you must observe.

## **6 Can a student submit a draft assignment? (see Section C)**

Yes, but only for specific assignments where you have decided that it is appropriate for students to have the opportunity to submit a draft for comment, and this must be made clear to all students in advance. Any feedback on a draft that you provide for students can only be general guidance about the work in relation to the assessment criteria. Your feedback must not provide information about how the student could improve the work to achieve a particular grade, or grades.

## **7 Is student work that is submitted late eligible for grading? (see Section C)**

If you have agreed a deferred submission date with a student because their situation satisfies the criteria for mitigating circumstances, the work may be graded. If the work is late under any other circumstance, you may assess it, but it is not eligible for grading (that is, the only grade that you can give is Pass).

## **8 Can a student appeal a grade (see Section C)**

There is a procedure for representations which applies when a student asks for unconfirmed grade indicators to be reconsidered, after work has been graded but prior to moderation. (Please refer to Annex C5, Section C.)

## **9 How is grading moderated? (see Section D)**

Both the process of grading and the final grades awarded are subject to internal and external moderation. As a tutor, you will find it helpful to keep in mind what external moderators will be looking for, as detailed in the following paragraphs:

The external moderator will want to be confident that you, as a tutor:

- are working with the full, current set of grade descriptors
- have drawn up unit assessment plans that facilitate the appropriate and valid use of the assigned grade descriptors to assess student performance
- provide clear information to students about the demands of the assignments that you set for them
- provide helpful feedback to students in relation to grades given
- conduct the process of grading in assessment consistently and accurately, and that this generates grades which are reliable and valid
- choose components from the assigned grade descriptors which are relevant and valid
- use forms of assessment that are consistent with the requirements of the Access to HE Diploma and credit specifications, and QAA's grading guidance, and in particular that you:
  - make grading decisions with reference only to the grade descriptors assigned to the unit
  - grade student performance in accordance with the published requirements, using only Pass, Merit and Distinction grades, and no other form of grading
  - determine unit grades using the process described in the assessment regulations.

In addition to the practice of individual tutors, the process of external moderation is required to ensure that at course level:

- the use of grades is reliable, and that where there is a comparable standard of performance on comparable types of assessed work by different students, the same grade is recommended
- assessment plans and practice, including assignment briefs and feedback on assessment and grades to students, are internally moderated according to the agreed model of internal moderation
- records relating to grades are properly maintained
- lead moderators (or equivalent) are involved in standardisation (see Section D) and are present at, and are full members of, the awards board (see Section E).

## **Figure 1: From assessment to awards: a summary of the grading process**

### **Planning and carrying out assessment (see Section C)**

- a) Tutors develop unit assessment plans that indicate how learning outcomes will be covered, and grade descriptors will be applied across the assessment of the unit. These plans are internally verified. Tutors also prepare information for students for each assignment about which grade descriptors will be used and how grading will be applied.
- b) Tutors assess student work for level 3 units, in accordance with the assessment plan and guidelines on good practice in assessment provided by the AVA. If the learning outcomes for the assignment have been achieved, the assignment is graded.
- c) 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 regulations. Successful resubmissions are eligible for grading.
- d) Feedback on the assessment of assignments is provided to students, including feedback about their performance in relation to the relevant grade descriptors.
- e) Establish overall unit grade.

### **Moderation of assessment (see Section D)**

- f) Providers apply their internal moderation procedures (as approved by the AVA) to tutors' assessment judgements.
- g) Samples of assessed units are externally moderated, following the AVA's moderation requirements.
- h) 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.)

### **Confirmation and certification of achievement (see Section E)**

- i) The awards board is convened, constituted and conducted to meet the AVA's specification, and in line with QAA's requirements.
- j) 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.
- k) The awards board also makes decisions about referrals and special cases.
- l) The AVA checks the documentation received from the awards board and issues Access to HE Diplomas and transcripts of achievement to students.

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*QAA manages the national framework for the recognition and regulation of Access to HE Diplomas.*