

# The Access to Higher Education Diploma Specification

Regulatory Document:  
Requirements for Access  
Validating Agencies

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## Introduction

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education ('QAA') is the regulator of the Access to Higher Education (HE) Diploma ('the Diploma') and is responsible in its charitable objects to provide advice to governments on Access course recognition. QAA also registers and holds the qualification trademarks. In maintaining the means through which the Diploma is recognised by governments for funding, QAA operates The QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to HE ('the Recognition Scheme'). The Recognition Scheme refers to QAA's arrangements for exercising its responsibilities in respect of the Diploma, and includes a framework of requirements set out in documentation through which QAA permits Access to HE Diploma courses to be developed, validated and approved, and Diplomas awarded, by Access Validating Agencies ('AVAs') under licence (the 'Licence').

2 QAA will award and permit AVAs to maintain a licence for these purposes on the basis that they agree to adhere to QAA's requirements in relation to the Diploma as set out in:

2.1 **The Standard Terms for the Licensing of Access Validating Agencies** ('Terms') which set out the terms that AVAs must agree to in order to become an AVA and maintain its Licence.

2.2 **The Access to HE Conditions** ('Conditions') which are the obligations an AVA must comply with (or demonstrate its ability to comply with) to become an AVA and to maintain its licence.

3 The Standard Terms and Conditions make clear requirements, expectations or arrangements which are set out in further documentation within the Recognition Scheme. This includes arrangements for licensing and monitoring, the Access to HE Grading Scheme, the Access to HE Diploma Specification and Subject Descriptors. It also includes additional guidance which QAA may issue which sets out further information about how QAA may assess compliance with the condition, or to assist AVA's interpretation of the requirements.

4 This document, the Access to HE Diploma Specification, is one of the regulatory documents of the Recognition Scheme which sets out the technical specifications for the Access to HE Diploma ('the Diploma') and the minimum requirements for student achievement. The purpose of these specifications is to ensure consistency and transparency in academic demand and standards of the Access to HE Diploma and equity for students in the ways it can be achieved. As set out in Condition D1.1 of the Access to HE Conditions ('the Conditions'), an AVA must ensure that the content and structure of Access to HE Diplomas meet the requirements set out in this document.

## Qualification characteristics

### Characteristics of the Diploma

- 5 The Access to HE Diploma is a:
- 5.1 unitised qualification, based on units of assessment which are structured in accordance with the Access to HE unit specification
  - 5.2 credit-based qualification, where each unit has a credit value of 3, 6 or 9 credits and is operated in accordance with the terms of the [Access to HE credit specification](#)
  - 5.3 graded qualification, as determined by the Access to HE Grading scheme, and
  - 5.4 level 3 qualification (aligned to the Regulated Qualifications Framework in England), regulated by QAA.

### Titles of named Diplomas

6 The generic title of the qualification is the 'Access to Higher Education Diploma'. Individual named Diplomas are referred to by an award title which indicates the academic subject or area of study of the award and may also indicate the intended progression route.

7 Individual named Diplomas are required to have titles that follow the following format:

- 7.1 Access to Higher Education Diploma (name of subject/area of study/progression route)
- 7.2 for example, Access to Higher Education Diploma (Business Studies); Access to Higher Education Diploma (Health and Social Care); Access to Higher Education Diploma (Nursing); or Access to Higher Education Diploma (Art and Design).

8 Where the Diploma is intended to provide progression to combined or less specific progression routes, the name must reflect this, by specifying the particular subject area(s) covered by reference to any of the major subject groupings (that is, arts, humanities, sciences, social sciences):

- 8.1 either singly, for example, Access to Higher Education Diploma (Combined Science)
- 8.2 or in any combination, for example, Access to Higher Education Diploma (Social Studies combined with Arts), or
- 8.3 by reference to discrete subjects within any one of these groupings, for example, Access to Higher Education Diploma (History and Law).

9 The common format for the named Diploma title must be used on the certificate of achievement which is issued to students and carries the QAA Access to HE logo. This format must also be used in all formal communications which refer to a named Diploma, including information provided to receiving higher education providers (including UCAS applications) about the named Diploma for which a student is registered.

10 Access to HE Diploma titles may not include the following special characters: semicolon (;), colon (:), and ampersand (&).

11 Award titles are approved through AVA's validation processes as one element of a named Diploma.

## Specification for the achievement of the Access to HE Diploma

- 12 The generic requirements for the Access to HE Diploma are that:
- 12.1 of the total credit of 60 credits, 45 credits must be achieved at level 3 from graded units which are concerned with academic subject content (see [Diplomas and units](#));
  - 12.2 the remaining 15 credits must be achieved at level 2 or level 3 from units which are ungraded (see [Diplomas and units](#))
  - 12.3 at least one 6 or 9 credit unit must be achieved in a student's programme of study (this can be a graded or ungraded unit); the maximum number of credits that can be achieved from 6 or 9 credit units is 30 credits.

## Additional requirements for the achievement of a named Access to HE Diploma

13 The specific requirements for a named Diploma, including the full set of units to be available to students (see [Diplomas and units](#)) and information about how these must or may be combined, must be specified in the [rules of combination](#) (see below). The set of units to be used, and the specific rules of combination for each named Diploma, must be approved by an AVA.

## Diplomas and units

14 All Diplomas should be constructed from a set of units that have been approved by an AVA for use in that Diploma. They must have a specified credit value and level (see [Credit accumulation](#)).

### Unit specification

#### Definitions

**Learning outcomes** means a statement of what a student may reasonably expect to know, understand or do as the result of undertaking a process of learning. Learning outcomes are expressed in a standard linguistic form.

**Assessment criteria** means descriptions of the requirements a student is expected to meet in order to demonstrate that a learning outcome has been achieved.

15 A common unit specification applies to all units within the Access to HE credit framework. The unit specification must provide the following information in a standard template (see Table 1, page 4 for an example):

- title
- level
- credit value
- unit code
- learning outcomes
- assessment criteria
- graded or ungraded
- type of unit (academic subject content/other)

16 The unit template relates only to the specification of the unit. More extensive information about curriculum content and assessment methods should be presented for the purposes of validation and approval of named Access to HE Diplomas and courses.

17 The level of a unit is determined by reference to the level descriptors. The level of credit awarded to a student for achievement of the unit is prescribed by the level of the unit, and credit cannot be awarded at any other level. The standard of individual performance may affect the achievement of the unit or the grade awarded; it does not affect the level at which credit is awarded.

**Table 1: Example unit specification**

<b>Unit title</b>	
<b>Level</b>	
<b>Credit value (3, 6 or 9)</b>	
<b>Unit code</b>	
<b>Graded/ungraded</b>	
<b>Type: Academic subject content/other</b>	
<b>Learning outcomes</b>	<b>Assessment criteria</b>
The student should be able to:	The student can:
1	1.1 1.2 1.3
2	2.1 2.2 2.3
3	3.1 3.2 3.3 3.4

18 The information required about a unit as set out in paragraph 15 is a mandatory requirement. However, the template set out above is illustrative only. In particular, the number of learning outcomes and assessment criteria are an example only. The number of learning outcomes and assessment criteria used for a unit should be determined by the nature and complexity of the performance being described; they may also be affected by the credit value and level of the unit. However, while it is not appropriate to be prescriptive, good practice indicates that a small number of learning outcomes (only one or two) provides

insufficient detail to establish a standard on which to base reliable and valid assessments (even if there are large numbers of assessment criteria), while many learning outcomes may indicate over-specification and a consequent rigidity in assessment requirements.

### **Units designated as having academic subject content**

19 For a unit to be classified as having academic subject content it must satisfy the following criteria:

- 19.1 The content of the unit, as expressed in its learning outcomes, must be drawn from the knowledge and skills of subjects that are directly related to the subject of the named Diploma(s) in which the unit will be used, as indicated by the Diploma title. This applies to the full range of Diploma subjects, including technically-orientated subjects such as multimedia, as well as subjects such as history or sociology. The unit may include skills that relate to specific forms and fields of knowledge needed for a particular named Diploma (such as mathematics for engineers or laboratory skills for science students). Units will not meet the academic subject content requirement if they are principally concerned with personal development, generic English/Welsh or mathematics, or study skills.
- 19.2 If the unit requires the student to select a topic for an assessed piece of work, this topic must be located within a knowledge domain relevant to the subject(s) of the named Diploma and approved by a tutor who is a subject expert.
- 19.3 The student's work for the unit must be supported and assessed by a tutor who is an expert in the subject of the unit.

In addition, for a unit or set of units concerned with a large-scale piece of work, such as a research project (for example, a 6 or 9-credit unit, or two or three units of 3 credits that form a set of units that collectively address all stages of a research project), the following criteria must also be met:

- The learning outcomes must relate directly to both the demonstration of the application of the required academic skills (such as research skills) and the students' engagement with, and command of, the relevant aspects of the knowledge domain and conventions of the academic subject within which the work is located.
- Assessed work for the unit must be undertaken solely for the achievement of that unit or set of units (that is, it is not 'cross-referenced' to or from the work submitted for assessment for another unit).

### **Graded and ungraded units**

20 Grading operates at a unit level and is applied only to those units approved by an AVA for grading within a named Diploma.

21 Student achievement of the units which make up the 45 credits derived from graded units will be recorded at Pass, Merit or Distinction for each unit, in accordance with the requirements of the Access to HE Grading Scheme. No other form of differentiation of student achievement is permitted.

22 All named Diplomas must include 45 credits derived from graded level 3 units. The remaining 15 credits are derived from ungraded level 2 or level 3 units.

23 Level 3 units which are not graded must be clearly identified as such in the validation documents and rules of combination for a named Diploma. These units may not be graded under any circumstances when used within a named Diploma specification that has included

them as ungraded units.

24 Graded level 3 units must satisfy the criteria for units of academic subject content (see above). Ungraded level 3 units may also be concerned with academic subject content.

25 AVAs must approve the designation of units as graded or ungraded for their use within a named Diploma. Where similar content is required as a graded unit in one Diploma and an ungraded unit in another, AVAs must approve separate units, with appropriate unit specifications (that is, the graded unit will include information about grading) for this purpose.

## Rules of combination

26 The ways in which units must or may be combined for the achievement of a named Diploma must be specified in the rules of combination for that Diploma. Rules of combination should be presented according to a standard format. The minimum information that must be provided is set out in Annex A.

27 While this specification sets out, at a generic level, the minimum amount (in terms of credit value) of certain types of content that must be included within any Diploma, the detail of the content of a named Diploma is contained within the set of units approved for that Diploma by an AVA. How these units are to be used in relation to each other is defined in the rules of combination of that Diploma.

28 All Diplomas must contain 15 credits derived from either level 2 or ungraded level 3 units. The decision about the volume of credit to be achieved at either of these levels to make up these 15 credits within a named Diploma should be informed by the requirements of the intended progression route(s) of that Diploma.

29 Rules of combination are an essential component of all Access to HE Diplomas. They operate at the level of student requirements and achievement. They must specify all the units that will be made available to students studying for a named Diploma. In order to be awarded the Diploma, students must achieve:

29.1 those units that are designated as mandatory, and

29.2 those units that they have chosen from the units that are designated as optional.

30 All Diplomas contain mandatory units and may also contain optional units. Any choices available to students within the rules of combination of any named Diploma must be such that all students are ensured of the opportunity to achieve the generic requirement of 45 credits at level 3 from graded units concerned with academic subject content. Any choices available to students within the rules of combination of any named Diploma must be such that all students are clear about both the requirement to study at least one 6 or one 9-credit unit and the 30-credit maximum that is applied to the use of 6 and 9-credit units.

31 All units listed for use for a named Diploma must be classified in each of the following ways for the purposes of the rules of combination of that Diploma:

31.1 level 2 **or** level 3

31.2 graded **or** ungraded

31.3 academic subject content **or** other content

31.4 mandatory **or** optional



32 The set of units and rules of combination approved for any named Diploma must be such that collectively they constitute the foundation for a clearly structured and coherent programme of study for students, with a range and balance of content that ensures students are prepared for successful study in higher education.

## Other successful completion criteria

33 Any other requirements for the achievement of the qualification must be stated separately from the rules of combination, within a statement of successful completion criteria. These might include specific requirements relating to assessment regulations, professional body or other requirements.

## Credit accumulation

34 Students accumulate credit towards the award of the Diploma. In general, they do this by achieving units of a particular credit value (3, 6 or 9 credits) through the process of assessment on an Access to HE course, but may also do this through the processes of credit transfer and through the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

## Credit and units

### Definitions

**Credit** means an award made to a student in recognition of the quality assured achievement of a unit.

35 Within the Access to HE credit framework, the following principles apply:

35.1 credits are only awarded for the achievement of all the learning outcomes of a unit

35.2 students cannot be awarded a proportion of the credits specified for the successful achievement of a unit for the achievement of some but not all of a unit's learning outcomes

35.3 half credits cannot be awarded

35.4 the credit value of a unit is a constant attribute of a unit, whether or not it is graded.

36 The credit value of a unit indicates the number of credits that may be awarded to a student for the successful achievement of all the learning outcomes of that unit. The determination of the credit value of a unit is a matter of professional judgement for AVAs, exercised within their validation processes. These judgements are made on the basis of 'notional learning hours', where one credit represents those learning achievements that can be demonstrated in 10 notional learning hours. The concept of 'notional learning hours' therefore takes into account all learning which may be relevant to the achievement of the learning outcomes, including directed and private study, practical and project work, assignments and assessment time.

37 Once credit value has been ascribed to a unit, it remains constant, irrespective of the time it may take an individual student to achieve the learning outcomes, and irrespective of the teaching time involved in supporting the achievement of the learning outcomes.

38 Each unit has a credit value of 3, 6 or 9 credits. Units of any other size are not permitted.

## Credit and grading

39 The award of credit for the achievement of a graded unit results from the achievement of the learning outcomes of the unit (that is, on the achievement of a standard denoted as Pass within the Access to HE Grading Scheme). It is not permitted to require student achievement at a standard higher than Pass for the award of credit. Additional credit cannot be awarded to reflect a standard higher than Pass that has been achieved by a student.

40 Grading of individual units can only take place once a student has successfully completed all assignments associated with that unit and therefore the student is deemed to have passed the unit by meeting all the learning outcomes and assessment criteria and is eligible for the award of credit.

## Credit and level

41 The Access to HE Diploma is a level 3 qualification. 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](#)<sup>1</sup> (Level requirements including level descriptors) serves as the key reference point.

42 The Access to HE Diploma is awarded on the basis of achievement that may include some credits at level 2, as well as credits at level 3. The level of a unit determines the level at which credit is awarded (see paragraph 17).

## Credit accumulation

43 Students accumulate credit towards the award of a named Diploma. If a student does not achieve all the credit requirements for the award of a named Diploma, the credits that have been achieved are awarded through the same AVA processes as those used for the award of credit for the full Diploma.

44 The assessment strategy for a Diploma must not preclude the possibility of a student achieving units (and therefore awarded credit) on an individual (that is, unit-by-unit) basis.

45 Units for which credit has been awarded must have been achieved within the five years prior to the award of the related named Diploma. After five years, any credit that has been achieved is no longer automatically eligible for accumulation towards that Diploma. Credit awarded for one or more units achieved more than five years prior to the award of the related named Diploma could, however, be legitimately included in the 60 credits for which that Diploma is awarded if they satisfy the requirements for RPL (see paragraphs 49-55). More detailed, or more limited, requirements about the period over which credit can be accumulated are sometimes made in individual cases; this may be appropriate for particular named Diplomas or particular units (for example, to ensure currency in certain subject areas or for entry to certain programmes of professional training). Specific requirements for individual cases are considered and confirmed through AVAs' Diploma and course validation processes.

## Credit transfer

46 AVAs may recognise credits awarded by other AVAs, provided these have been awarded in accordance with the terms of the Access to HE credit framework.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications)

47 The process of credit transfer is governed by appropriate protocols established by AVAs. These protocols specify the processes by which AVAs confirm both the nature and volume of the credit that has been awarded to a student at the point of transfer from the originating AVA, and the relevance of the achievement to which that credit relates to the receiving named Diploma. The receiving AVA is responsible for the final award of the qualification.

48 If a student transfers from one named Diploma to another (either within or between AVAs), credit already achieved may be transferred where this is derived from units that are acceptable within the rules of combination for the named Diploma to which the student is transferring, subject to the maximum of 50% of the units of any Diploma being achieved through this mechanism and/or through RPL. In determining the relevance of credit to be transferred, AVAs should consider whether the knowledge, subject skills and transferable skills acquired correspond to, or complement, the content of the receiving Diploma.

### **Recognition of prior learning (RPL)**

49 Students can gain exemption from, or credit for, a limited number of units of a named Diploma through RPL.

50 No more than 50% of the credits required for any named Diploma may be awarded through RPL (see also paragraph 48). The limit for any named Diploma (which might be lower than 50% in some instances) is stipulated within the rules of combination of that Diploma.

51 Within the Access to HE credit framework, the concepts and operation of RPL are commonly defined (as below) and must be consistently applied.

52 Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the generic term for processes used to recognise learning achieved outside the formal course of learning designed to support student achievement of a named Diploma. It includes recognition of both experiential and certificated learning.

53 Accreditation of prior certificated learning is the process through which previously assessed and certificated learning is recognised as demonstrating achievement equivalent to that required to achieve one or more units of a named Diploma. As the previous learning has already been certificated, no credit is awarded, but students are exempted from the achievement of credit to a value judged by an AVA to be equivalent.

54 Accreditation of prior experiential learning is the process by which non-certificated learning achieved in a range of learning contexts is recognised as demonstrating learning equivalent to that needed to achieve one or more of the units required for the award of a named Diploma. In this process, a student presents evidence from previous experience, which is then assessed against the learning outcomes of the unit(s) being claimed. If the evidence satisfies the requirements of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit, the unit is achieved and the student awarded the associated credit. Units achieved in this way are not graded.

55 AVAs must have procedures for the management of RPL. RPL can only be awarded by an AVA as the result of a formal process specified by the AVA which involves a claim with evidence being made by a student on an individual basis.

## Recognition of student achievement

56 Student achievement should be recognised both through the award of credit (as identified on an achievement transcript) and the award of the qualification (as identified on a certificate), subsequent to the student having satisfied the requirements of the rules of combination of the named Diploma for which they are registered.

57 The award of the Diploma will, therefore, indicate that a student has successfully met the generic requirements for achievement of a Diploma, as well as the particular requirements of the named Diploma.

## Awarding the Diploma

58 Access to HE Diplomas are awarded by AVAs, as the individual awarding bodies. AVAs may use their own design for the Access to HE Diplomas which they issue and must ensure that they include:

- 58.1 the Access Recognition Mark, used in accordance with the technical specifications set out in the Access to HE trademarks and compliance mark Regulatory Document: *Requirements for the Use of Access to HE Trademarks*
- 58.2 the specific title of the Diploma, in the standard format for Access to HE Diploma titles, as prescribed in paragraphs 6 to 10 of this document, and no other title
- 58.3 the name and logo of the AVA
- 58.4 the signature of the chair and/or chief executive officer
- 58.5 the unique issue number.

59 Access to HE Diplomas must not carry any other logos, signatures or course names than those set out in paragraph 9. AVAs with Access to HE provision regulated by Cymwysterau Cymru/Qualifications Wales, and delivered by providers in Wales, may include the Cymwysterau Cymru/Qualifications Wales logo on certificates for this provision only.

60 The Access Recognition Mark must only be used on the single document that is the Access to HE Diploma. It may not be used on credit transcripts or any additional paperwork that may be issued at the same time as the Diploma.

## Development of Access to HE Diplomas

61 Access to HE Diplomas are developed and awarded by AVAs licensed by QAA. In developing Diplomas, AVAs must ensure that they involve input from higher education subject experts.

62 Specifically, this advice should be focused on the appropriateness of the proposed Diplomas, in order to confirm that new Diplomas provide a suitable preparation for higher education in the subject(s) or progression route(s) indicated as per the [rules of combination](#).

## Appendix A: Requirements for the completion of rules of combination for a named Diploma

Section/item	Information required
a) Diploma title	The title must be in the prescribed format for named Diplomas ( <a href="#">Titles of named Diplomas</a> )
b) The units approved for use in this Diploma	<p>A list of the units approved for use in the named Diploma should be included or appended. This list must indicate for each of these units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>whether it is concerned with academic subject content (<a href="#">Units designated as having academic subject content</a>)</li> <li>whether it is a graded or ungraded unit (<a href="#">Graded and ungraded units</a>)</li> <li>the credit value of the unit (3, 6 or 9) (<a href="#">Credit and units</a>)</li> <li>whether it is mandatory or optional (<a href="#">Rules of combination</a>)</li> <li>the level of the unit (2 or 3).</li> </ul>
c) Summary of the number of credits at specific levels which comprise the named Diploma ( <a href="#">Specification for the achievement of the Access to HE Diploma</a> )	<p>All Diplomas are 60 credits.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>of the 60 credits, 45 must be at level 3 from graded units concerned with academic subject content, with the remaining 15 to be achieved at level 2 or level 3 from ungraded units</li> <li>all students must register for at least one 6 or one 9-credit unit as part of their programme of study; this can be a graded or ungraded unit</li> <li>the maximum number of credits that can be made up from 6 or 9-credit units is 30 credits</li> <li>graded and ungraded 6 and 9-credit units will count towards the maximum.</li> </ul>
d) Credit value and level of mandatory units	This section must specify the total credit value of units at level 2 (if any) and level 3 (if any) that must be achieved from units which are designated as mandatory.
e) Credit value and level of optional units	This section must specify the total credit value of units at level 2 (if any) and level 3 (if any) that must be achieved from units which are designated as optional.
f) Titles of mandatory units	The units which are mandatory must be indicated on the list of units approved for this Diploma, which is included or appended (see item b above).
g) Titles of optional units	The units which are optional must be indicated on the list of units approved for this Diploma, which is included

	or appended (see item b above).
h) Credit value and level of credits permitted through credit transfer and the award of credit through the recognition of prior learning	<p>This section must state the requirements in relation to credit transfer (<a href="#">Credit transfer</a>) and other arrangements through which students may demonstrate prior learning achievement (<a href="#">Recognition of prior learning (RPL)</a>).</p> <p>For example, a maximum of X credits from Access to HE units awarded at level 2 may be transferred; a maximum of Y credits at level 3 may be exempted from the optional units on the basis of relevant prior certificated achievement; a maximum of X credits at Y level may be awarded through the accreditation of prior experiential learning).</p> <p>Overall, the total proportion of credits awarded or exempted through either credit transfer and/or recognition of prior learning must not exceed 30 credits (that is, 50% of the credits required for the achievement of the Diploma).</p>
Other requirements	<p>Other regulatory matters which may be included here might relate to certain kinds of time restrictions. For example, at least X credits at level 3 in Y subject must have been achieved within the three years prior to the award of the named Diploma.</p> <p>Any excluded combinations of units should also be included here.</p>

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<b>Link to other Regulatory documentation</b> the Standard Terms for the Licensing of Access Validating Agencies the Access to HE Conditions the Access to HE Grading Scheme Sections B - E the Access to HE Diploma Specification Please refer to: <a href="https://www.qaa.ac.uk/access-to-he/">https://www.qaa.ac.uk/access-to-he/</a>		
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This document was first published in July 2023 and has been updated to incorporate the introduction of the Access to Higher Education Conditions in July 2025.

The 2023 specification replaced The Access to Higher Education Diploma Specification, January 2020. It applies to all new students registering on Diplomas from 1 August 2024. The Access to HE Grading Scheme was also 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](http://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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