

The Access to Higher Education Grading Scheme

Section A: 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 Higher Education Grading Scheme* ('the Grading Scheme', is one of the regulatory documents of the Recognition Scheme which sets out requirements for the provision of the Access to HE Diploma qualification. The Grading Scheme is made up of five sections which set out the requirements for the grading of the Access to HE Diploma ('the Diploma') for the purpose of ensuring that quality and standards in grading are consistently upheld across all Access to HE provision. As set out in Condition D1.1 of the Access to HE Conditions ('the Conditions'), an AVA must ensure that the content, structure and delivery of Access to HE Diplomas meet the requirements set out in this document.

5. The Grading Scheme has been designed to accommodate the flexibility of the qualification, so that it can be applied to all Access to HE Diplomas, whatever their subject area or structure. It sets out the common requirements, reference points and assessment regulations that define how grading judgements are made and the process for the award of grades.

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

Core features of the Diploma

7. Each Access to HE Diploma is required to have:
 - 7.1. a title which indicates the general subject of study or the intended progression route, and
 - 7.2. an approved set of units of assessment in different areas appropriate for the subject of the Diploma.
8. Successful completion of each unit leads to the award of a certain number of credits, and successful completion of all the required units (which must total 60 credits) leads to the award of the Diploma.
9. Further information on the technical specifications of the Diploma and the minimum requirements for student achievement can be found in *The Access to Higher Education Diploma Specification*.

A common grading scheme

10. The common grading scheme set out in this document has been designed to ensure that the process of grading, and the grades awarded to students on Access to HE courses are:
 - 10.1. **fair and equitable:** consistent and accurate application of the processes of grading ensure that all students are dealt with justly and impartially
 - 10.2. **clear and transparent:** grades given, and why particular grades have been given, are clear, with clear and accessible information about the grading scheme and the significance of grades openly available to all interested parties
 - 10.3. **reliable and valid:** grading decisions accurately reflect the standard of performance of assessed student work, based on common measures of performance used appropriately for the subject, with the award of grades being moderated and assured through secure and robust quality assurance procedures
 - 10.4. **consistent:** grades awarded signify comparable standards of performance on different courses, at different providers, across AVAs and over time.

Key features of the common grading scheme

11. A grade will be awarded for every graded level 3 unit that a student completes successfully as part of an Access to HE Diploma. With all Diplomas comprising of 45 credits from graded level 3 units, and 15 credits from level 2 or level 3 units that are not graded.
12. There is no overall or composite grade for the Access to HE Diploma.
13. The number of grades awarded to a student depends on the number of graded level 3 units required for the particular Access to HE Diploma. This number can vary because, although all Diplomas contain 45 credits from graded level 3 units, these units can have a value of 3, 6 or 9 credits. For example, some Diplomas have a small number of 9-credit units, while others have a larger number of 3-credit units. The number of separate grades awarded to students is therefore a consequence of the structure of the particular Diploma and not a reflection of the student's standard of performance.

14. The grade awarded for each unit will be shown on the achievement transcript that is issued with Access to HE Diplomas. The transcript will also show how many credits were awarded for each successfully completed graded or ungraded unit.

15. [Guidance](#) is available which outlines a summary of the grading process from assessment to award. An infographic of the Grading Scheme is at Appendix A.

Further references in the documents of the Grading Scheme to units means ‘graded level 3 units’ unless otherwise specified.

The grades and grading standards

The grades

16. A grade of pass, merit or distinction should be awarded for each unit.

17. The standard of performance required for a pass grade is the minimum required to meet the specified assessment criteria for the learning outcomes of the unit. There is no separate definition of a pass grade. Merit and distinction grades indicate higher levels of performance within level 3.

18. Students who do not achieve the specified learning outcomes for a unit cannot be awarded credit for that unit. The unit is therefore not eligible for grading. There are no separate grading standards for ‘fail’.

19. The unit grades have no numerical equivalents. They are not derived from or converted into numerical marks. The use of numerical marking is not permitted in the assessment of units approved for use in Access to HE Diplomas.

The grading standards

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

20.1. Knowledge and Understanding

20.2. Subject-specific Skills

20.3. Transferable Skills

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

Grading standards and units

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

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

30. For Grading Standard 3 (Transferable Skills), there is a choice of three components with a requirement that a minimum of two components are to be selected for all graded units (irrespective of size of unit) and that all 3 components must be used at least once in the grading of units across the Diploma. AVAs will need to have processes in place, at the level of the student, to ensure that all three components have been utilised.
31. The use of the grading standards is made more specific when the unit (which may be approved for use on more than one Diploma) is delivered as part of a particular course, through the selection of appropriate sub-components from within the grading standards. The choice of sub-components allows tutors to reflect both the nature of the particular subject (and aspect of the subject) being assessed, and the demands of the type of activity a student would need to engage in to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes.
32. The selected components and sub-components of the grading standards for a unit are made clear to students and are included in the assignment briefs provided to students by

course tutors for each assignment.

33. Units are assessed in different ways: some are assessed through a single assignment, others involve more than one assignment. Integrated assignments may also be used to assess the learning outcomes of two or more different units through one piece of work. Irrespective of the nature or number of separate assignments or individual tasks used to assess the unit, the final outcome is a single unit grade which indicates the overall standard of performance for the unit.

34. Unit grades given to students are accompanied by feedback which allows the student to understand why a particular grade has been assigned. This feedback will focus on the performance indicated by the selected sub-components of the grading standards (in relation to the expectations and requirements for the individual assignment).

35. Practices for managing the submission of student work, including drafts, late submissions and opportunities for resubmission or reassessment are governed by the assessment regulations of the Grading Scheme (see Sections C and E).

Moderation and standardisation (see Section D for full details)

36. Unit assessment plans and assignment briefs include grading requirements. Both are subject to internal moderation or verification.

37. Grading decisions are subject to processes of internal verification and external moderation.

38. All AVAs are required by QAA's Access to HE Conditions E1 to E4 to operate moderation systems and standardisation processes that ensure a common overall approach to assessment and grading and consistent standards in the awarding of grades on the Access to HE Diploma. These systems will ensure:

38.1. assessment practices are consistent with the grading requirements

38.2. minimum standards are consistent with the requirements of the grading standards

38.3. consistent standards are applied across the AVA

38.4. common approaches to the selection, appointment and training of moderators.

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

39. Providers recommend unit grades for award by the AVA. These are confirmed at the Final Awards Board conducted for each course. Condition F1.1 details the procedures required of AVAs for the award of Access to HE Diplomas including the operation of Final Awards Boards.

40. The Final Awards Board makes decisions about special cases and any opportunities for reassessment. The assessment outcomes of these opportunities are approved by a reconvened awards board or some other mechanism as agreed with the AVA.

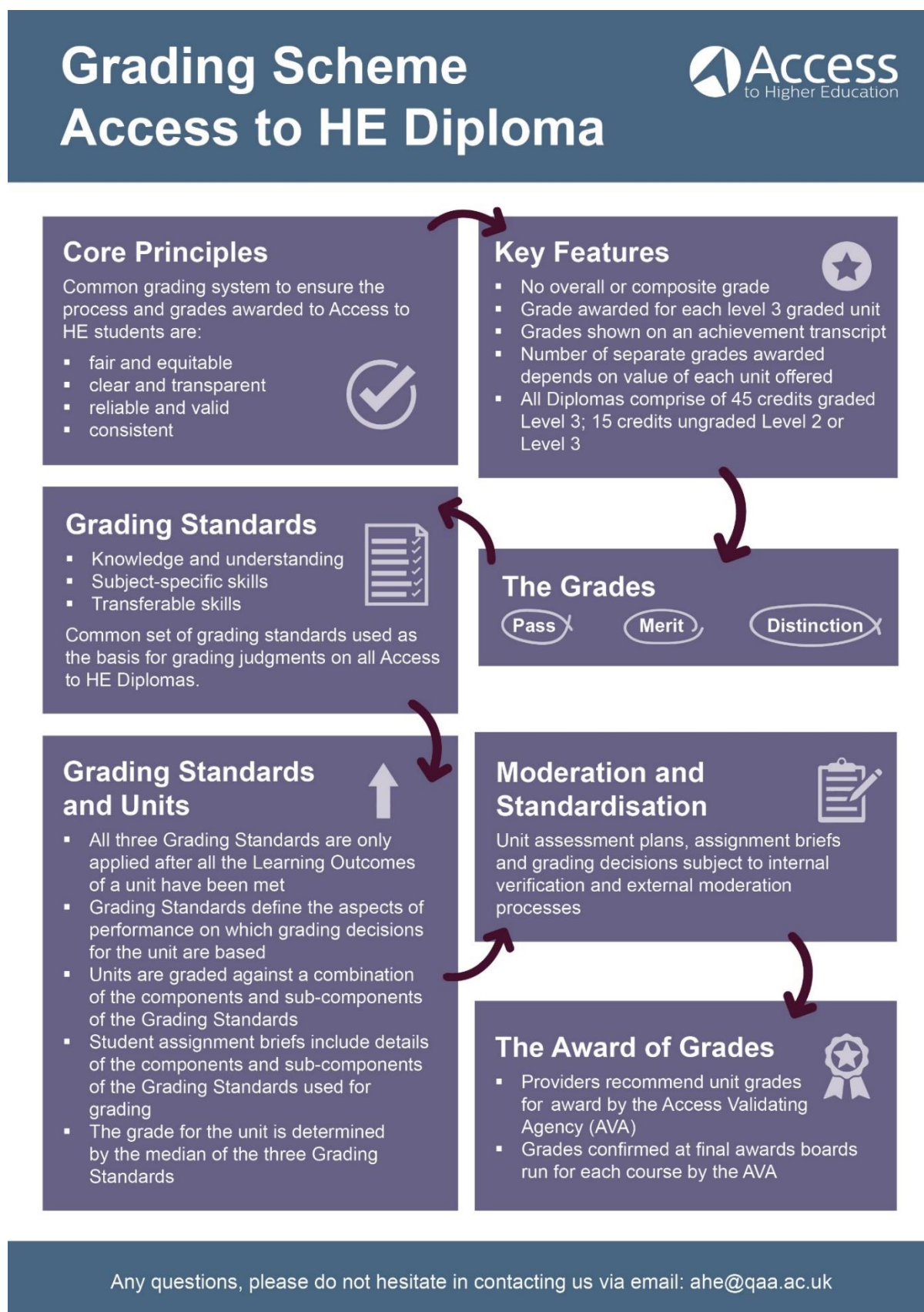
41. AVAs award Access to HE Diplomas to students who achieve the required 60 credits, from the units specified in the Diploma's rules of combination (Condition F1.2). They also issue achievement transcripts, which detail credits and grades achieved (Condition F1.3).

42. Where achievement of the Diploma is gained through credit transfer or accumulated through non-continuous achievement, the grades achieved on the relevant units are carried

forward.

43. Grades are not awarded for units that do not contribute to, or that are additional to the specified requirements of, the Diploma.

Appendix A: A summary of the Access to HE Grading Scheme



Version control

Document title

The Access to Higher Education Grading Scheme - Regulatory Document: Requirements for Access Validating Agencies

Document description

This document is Section A of the Grading Scheme for Access to Higher Education Diplomas and sets out an overview of the Grading Scheme. This is a regulatory document which forms part of the Recognition Scheme published by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Document owner

Access to HE Diploma Manager

Approved by QAA's Board

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Published location

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources/access-to-he-grading-scheme>

Link to other Regulatory documentation

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: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/access-to-he/>

Next review

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Date issued

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V1.0

July 2024

First published version

V2.0

July 2025

Version control added

Updating references to the Licensing Agreement to the Standard Terms for the Licensing of AVAs

Updating references of Annex to Appendix to reflect a change in house style

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. In 2025 both the Specification and Grading Scheme documents were revised to reflect changes to the licensing arrangements for AVAs.

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

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