

The Access to Higher Education Grading Scheme

Section B: The Grading Standards

Published: July 2023

Revised: July 2025

Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
2	Guidance about terms used in the standards.....	2
3	The grading standards in detail	3
	Grading Standard 1: Knowledge and Understanding.....	3
	Grading Standard 2: Subject-specific Skills	4
	Grading Standard 3: Transferable Skills	5
4	Further information.....	7

1 Introduction

This section of the Grading Scheme Handbook introduces the detail of the three grading standards along with some examples of how these might be interpreted in the context of different subject areas. It also provides more detail than Section A on the application of the grading standards.

Grading only takes place once a student has met all the learning outcomes for a unit (that is, the student has passed the unit). As each learning outcome is assessed once only (see Section C: Unit Assessment Plans) the student must, by definition, have successfully completed all assignments associated with the unit before grading can take place. The three grading standards (Knowledge and Understanding, Subject-specific Skills and Transferable Skills) are not expressed in the context of individual subject areas, but they can, through careful selection of components and sub-components in appropriate combinations, be used on all courses, with all graded units and for all assignments associated with a graded unit.

The components and sub-components to be used with a particular unit are selected with reference to the main aspects of student performance that need to be considered when grading decisions are made for that unit.

Each of the three grading standards comprises a set of components and sub-components. Some of these are more relevant to particular subject areas than others, whilst some terminology used is more relevant to particular types of assessment than others. Sub-components should be specified for each unit in the unit assessment plan and in the case of Grading Standard 3 (Transferable Skills) the components for each unit must also be selected and specified in the unit assessment plan. For units with multiple assignments, sub-sets of the sub-components may be selected as appropriate to the individual assignment(s), but all the sub-components chosen for the unit should be addressed through the totality of the assignments for that unit. The selected components and sub-components of the grading standards (at merit and distinction) are then included in the assignment brief(s).

Each of the three grading standards also includes a statement which describes the characteristics or qualities typical of performance at merit, and a parallel set of components which describes typical performance in the same areas at distinction. There are no components for pass because a pass grade is gained when a student meets the learning outcomes but does not achieve the standard required for merit. The selection of relevant sub-components must be consistent across both merit and distinction. Additional sub-components cannot be added to differentiate between merit and distinction.

The grading scheme is not based on an assumed one-to-one relationship between the grading standards and learning outcomes (although it is possible that in some units, because of the way the learning outcomes have been structured, something close to a one-to-one relationship may emerge). Judgements about student work in relation to grading apply across the work for a unit, whether that unit is assessed through one, or more than one, assignment.

2 Guidance about terms used in the standards

The grading standards make use of general terms such as 'very good' and 'excellent' which are commonly used in assessment situations as a shorthand to summarise a standard of performance. These terms are contained within the statements that describe performance at merit and distinction. The precise meaning of these terms varies slightly between different subject areas and assignments, but some general principles should be observed:

- All of the merit statements relate to performance that is 'significantly better than pass (learning outcomes have been achieved), but not as good as distinction'.
- The word 'generally' often features in the components for merit, and the word 'consistently' for distinction. Tutors using the statements containing this language should take 'generally' to mean 'in most cases/instances' and 'consistently' to mean 'all the time/in almost every case/reliably'.
- The word 'excellent' is used a number of times within the statements to denote 'distinction'. This should not be interpreted to suggest that absolute perfection is required in a student's work before a distinction grade can be awarded. It would be more appropriate to look for work that is outstanding within the context of a level 3 assessment, even though it contains some small mistakes, omissions or imperfections.

3 The grading standards in detail

Grading Standard 1: Knowledge and Understanding

Using this standard

Utilise both components. For component (b) for 3 credit units, select a minimum of 2 and maximum of 4 of the most relevant sub-components; for 6 and 9-credit units, select a minimum of 2 and maximum of 6 . Choices must be consistent across merit and distinction.	
Merit The student, student's work or performance:	Distinction The student, student's work or performance:
a. generally demonstrates the ability to apply knowledge appropriately in a given context showing breadth OR depth of knowledge in responding to the demands of the unit, with b. a very good understanding and use of (choose from): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facts • concepts • theories • models • methods • perspectives • ideas • principles • practices • procedures 	a. consistently demonstrates the ability to apply knowledge appropriately in a given context showing breadth OR depth of knowledge in responding to the demands of the unit, with b. an excellent understanding and use of (choose from): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facts • concepts • theories • models • methods • perspectives • ideas • principles • practices • procedures
There is no grading standard for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of the learning outcomes of a unit	

Interpreting the standard

This standard provides the opportunity for assessors to judge the extent to which a student has acquired and applied the subject-specific and subject-related knowledge relevant to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria for a given unit.

The knowledge base should be defined and applied in relation to the particular subject and focus of the unit. This acknowledges that there are different types of knowledge in different subjects (see examples below).

Examples in different subjects: Biology - homeostatic mechanisms; Business - accounting theories and principles; Psychology - different theories/perspectives; Healthcare - hallmarks of professional practice and evidence-based practice; Mathematics - the basic concepts, for example, algebra, geometry, statistical concepts and tests; History - different types of conflict, the concept and examples of 'hidden voices', models for structuring historical arguments; English literature - different types of literature and linguistic terminology; Creative arts - the different forms, basic elements, tools used, criteria used to judge creativity, tactile art and experimentation, materials exploration, art technology and the internet, history of art, studio practice.

Summative assessment of the knowledge base and its application should be based only on the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit.

Grading Standard 2: Subject-specific Skills

Using this standard

For all units irrespective of size, select a minimum of 2 and maximum of 4 of the most relevant sub-components in (b). Choices must be consistent across merit and distinction.	
Merit The student, student's work or performance:	Distinction The student, student's work or performance:
a. generally demonstrates an ability in selecting and using skills as required by the unit, with b. very good levels of (choose from): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accuracy • precision • efficiency • creativity • innovation • reasoning • insight • focus • interpretation 	a. consistently demonstrates an ability in selecting and using skills as required by the unit, with b. excellent levels of (choose from): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accuracy • precision • efficiency • creativity • innovation • reasoning • insight • focus • interpretation
There is no grading standard for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of the learning outcomes of a unit.	

Interpreting the standard

- The premise of component (a) is that all assessment criteria pose a problem/challenge of varying degrees of complexity, requiring the student to use different skills in responding to them. Therefore, assessors will need to make a judgment on how well the student has analysed and responded to the requirements/demands of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria within the assessed evidence. Skills may be intellectual, technical or practical.
- Discipline-specific intellectual skills include: critical thinking, use of information, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, reasoning, argumentation and problem-solving in line with the requirements of the assessment criteria command verbs.
- An example of an intellectual skill in history could be analysing causation and consequences of a conflict. In English literature, an example could be a textual analysis. For an independent project it could be generating a hypothesis or research question.
- An example of a technical skill in computing could be designing a computer programme. In research it could be using tools for data analysis (for example, Microsoft Excel). In education/teaching, an example could be designing online learning resources. In accounting, an example could be using accounting software. In art and design, an example could be using different pencils to show line, tone and texture.
- An example of a practical skill in science could be undertaking an experiment.
- Summative assessment of the skills required should only be based on the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit.

Grading Standard 3: Transferable Skills

Using this standard

<p>There are 3 components for this grading standard; (a), (b) and (c). A minimum of 2 components must be selected for all graded units (irrespective of size of unit). All 3 components must be used at least once across the assessment of the Diploma. Components (a) and (b) each have a set of sub-components. Select a minimum of 2 and maximum of 4 of the most relevant sub-components for both (a) and (b).</p>	
<p>Merit The student, student's work or performance:</p>	<p>Distinction The student, student's work or performance:</p>
<p>a. demonstrates very good communication and/or presentation skills evidenced by the use and/or selection of (choose from):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • format • structure • grammar • syntax • spelling and punctuation • imagery • artefacts • digital software • number • metrics • paralanguage <p>b. demonstrates autonomy and/or independence evidenced by a very good ability to (choose from):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plan, organise and complete work • respond appropriately to supervision • conduct independent research • manage time • collaborate with others • take responsibility for own contributions • reflect on own performance <p>c. generally adheres to academic and/or professional conventions in use of technical/specialist language and/or format in responding to the instructions set out in the assignment brief (see below for examples).</p>	<p>a. demonstrates excellent communication and/or presentation skills evidenced by the use and/or selection of (choose from):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • format • structure • grammar • syntax • spelling and punctuation • imagery • artefacts • digital software • number • metrics • paralanguage <p>b. demonstrates autonomy and/or independence evidenced by an excellent ability to (choose from):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plan, organise and complete work • respond appropriately to supervision • conduct independent research • manage time • collaborate with others • take responsibility for own contributions • reflect on own performance <p>c. consistently adheres to academic and/or professional conventions in use of technical/specialist language and/or format in responding to the instructions set out in the assignment brief (see below for examples).</p>
<p>There is no grading standard for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of the learning outcomes of a unit.</p>	

Interpreting the standard

Component (a) is a crucial transferable skill for university and/or professional practice. It allows assessors to make a judgement on how well the student has communicated and/or presented their response to the requirements of the assessment - be it an essay, report, exam, portfolio or other assessment mode. In assessment requiring student presentations, paralanguage refers to verbal and non-verbal communication.

Component (b) is based on the premise that autonomy and independence are also crucial pre-requisites for university and/or professional practice. These can be evidenced by an assessment of performance against selected sub-components which will vary depending on the nature and scope of the assessment task(s). For some assignments this may include a judgement of a student's ability to work with others as well as taking responsibility for their own contributions, for example for group presentations.

Component (c) allows assessors to make a judgement on the degree to which students have followed the instructions set out in the assessment brief, for example it may be that the student has evidenced very good or excellent knowledge and skills but not followed the brief. If students were asked to show their calculations in a maths exam but failed to do so, they will not have followed the instructions even though their calculations may be correct. For academic conventions, if a student was required to write an article for publication, the correct acknowledgement of all published sources used would be expected. For a business report, an executive summary, table of contents, introduction, body and conclusions/recommendations would be expected. For an art exhibition, assessors would expect that it should be characterised by a prominent theme that ties the pieces together and makes them feel like part of a larger whole. For subjects such as Healthcare, Medicine, Engineering and Education, professional conventions indicate the student's awareness and understanding of the expectations of that profession.

Summative assessment of these transferable skills should only be based on the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit and requirements of the brief.

4 Further information

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

Version control

Document title

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

Document description

This document is Section B of the Grading Scheme for Access to Higher Education Diplomas and sets out the detail of the three Grading Standards. 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

Date: March 2025

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 A, C - E

the Access to HE Diploma Specification

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

Next review

Date: July 2028

Version

Date issued

Update information

V1.0

July 2024

First published version

V2.0

March 2025

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

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.

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*

Updated July 2025

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2025
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
www.qaa.ac.uk/access-to-he