

The Access to Higher Education Grading Scheme

Section D: Moderation and Standardisation

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1 Introduction

This section of the Grading Scheme Handbook summarises the ways in which a common overall approach to grading and consistent standards are secured in the award of grades on the Access to HE Diploma, through the processes of standardisation and moderation.

As awarding bodies for the Access to HE Diploma, Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) are responsible for the standards of the awards that they make. Each AVA is required to maintain a system of moderation through which it assures the consistency and sufficiency of standards of student achievement. The *Access to Higher Education Conditions* (Condition E1) require that AVAs take steps to “have in place and implement clearly documented standardisation and moderation procedures that ensure a common overall approach to assessment and grading and consistent standards in the awarding of grades on the Access to HE Diploma.”

Section E of the *Access to HE Conditions* sets out the requirements AVA’s must meet in order to obtain and maintain their licence with regard to setting, delivering and moderating assessments.

2 Ensuring consistent standards

The Access to HE Grading Scheme specifies a number of common processes and other features (detailed in other sections of this guidance, as indicated below) which collectively create a framework designed to ensure consistency in the overall practice of grading.

The common application of these particular features provides the essential foundations for consistency of outcomes and thereby assures the quality of the grading process. Moderation and standardisation perform vital roles within this framework.

These features are:

- three common grading standards, which define the areas of performance that are assessed by grading on Access to HE Diploma courses (see Section B)
- a set of merit and distinction statements for each of the grading standards, which provide standard reference points for all grading decisions (see Section B)
- detailed components for each merit and distinction statement, which allow the standards to be modified within specified limits, so that they become equally appropriate for different subjects and different assignments (see Section B)
- guidance about the wording of the standards and their components and sub-components to support a common understanding and interpretation of the standards (see Section B)
- detailed instructions on the process to be followed to arrive at a final grade for each unit (see Section C)

- regulations about the number, types and operation of reassessment opportunities that are permitted (see Section C)
- requirements relating to moderation, which define the means by which moderators confirm that grading processes are operated as intended and grading standards are used consistently in making grading judgements (see Section D)
- standard procedures which relate to the confirmation and award of grades by providers/centres and AVAs (see Section E).

a) Award through extenuation, moderation and standardisation

Section D of the Grading Scheme Handbook summarises the ways in which a common overall approach to grading and consistent standards are secured in the award of grades on the Access to HE Diploma, through the processes of standardisation and moderation.

As awarding bodies for the Access to HE Diploma, AVAs are responsible for the standards of the awards that they make. Each AVA is required to maintain a system of moderation through which it assures the consistency and sufficiency of standards of student achievement.

The shift to 'extenuated' models of assessment should be treated as any other assessment model.

Evidence submitted for the award of the Diploma through extenuation should be quality assured in line with the regulations set out under the Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education.

3 Judgements and process

Both moderation and standardisation are concerned with ensuring the consistent application of the process of assessment and grading, as described above. However, following common procedures does not, by itself, ensure common outcomes, as outcomes also depend on the individual decisions that are made. Similarly, external confirmation that certain procedures have been followed, while essential in providing a common basis for awards, is not sufficient to ensure that consistent judgements have been made and that outcomes for students are fair. While it is not possible to entirely separate assessment decisions from the assessment process, as decision making is a part of that process, it is nonetheless important to give special attention not only to **how** judgements are made but to **what** judgements are made.

4 Standardisation

The use of grading on the Access to HE Diploma means that **standardisation needs to give particular attention to the differentiated judgements** that are indicated by the award of different grades. An AVA's standardisation mechanisms should provide a focus on judgements made about the use of grade indicators of pass, merit and distinction, as they are applied for each of the grade descriptors, in different subject areas.

Each AVA is responsible for the design and operation of its own mechanisms for standardisation, and for specifying the format and focus of its standardisation events. Condition E1 requires that AVAs must ensure their mechanisms take account of the need for:

- standardisation within providers
- standardisation between providers
- moderation standardisation.

The particular standardisation mechanisms used will depend on an AVA's size, the geographical distribution of its providers/centres, the organisation of provision (for example, the extent of the use of common units by different providers/centres), and the nature of assessment (for example, the extent to which students are assessed through common assignments). In all cases, however, an AVA's standardisation mechanisms should be designed to secure assessment (including grading) judgements that are:

- **valid** - standards of awards are consistent with the external reference points for the Access to HE Diploma (that is, grades given to assessed work reflect the standard of achievement defined by the unit's learning outcomes and the grade components and sub-components that are applied from the grading standards)
- **reliable** - consistent standards are operated in the award of grades by individual tutors, within course teams and between providers/centres across the AVA as a whole, and over time (that is, the same grade(s) is/are given where comparable standards of performance have been demonstrated).

5 Moderation

The guidance given here operates within the broader context of the *Access to Higher Education Conditions*, which provide the overarching principles and specific requirements for the moderation of Access to HE awards. The *Access to Higher Education Conditions* continue to provide the main reference point with regard to the QAA's expectations about AVAs' procedures for moderation, and the Grading Scheme and associated guidance is intended to supplement, rather than replace, any or all of the existing Access to Higher Education Conditions.

AVAs must ensure that their moderation procedures and guidance for moderators comply with the *Conditions* ensuring standards of student achievement are both valid and reliable.

a) Internal moderation

Conditions E4.1 and E4.2 require that “an AVA must have requirements in place to ensure that its Providers operate rigorous internal moderation procedures which facilitate:

- the application of consistent standards of demand in assessment
- assessment design that maximises reliability and validity in assessment outcomes
- the consistent and accurate application of the requirements of The Access to Higher Education Diploma Specification and The Access to Higher Education Grading Scheme.”

In practice, this should mean that internal moderation has been conducted in accordance with the AVA's published requirements, which includes regular consideration of the operation of the grading process and of the appropriateness of grades proposed. In most cases, the moderation process operates at two levels: internal moderation/verification and external moderation.

The AVA should publish its requirements in relation to internal moderation, which will pay regard to providers' own quality systems and will monitor and confirm the operation of internal moderation through the external moderation process. There may be some cases where it is not possible to provide for robust internal moderation. The AVA is responsible for making alternative arrangements to achieve the same ends in such circumstances.

b) Recruitment, selection and appointment of external moderators

Condition E4.3 requires that “an AVA should operate standard procedures for the selection and appointment of external moderators, which ensure that moderators:

- have relevant teaching and assessment experience in adult, further or higher education;
- have relevant and current subject knowledge for their area(s) of responsibility at a level at or higher than the level they are moderating;
- are external to the Provider(s) they are required to moderate; and
- have declared known and perceived conflicts of interest that are recorded by the AVA.”

Those acting as moderators should have expertise and experience which must be sufficient to enable them to differentiate standards of student performance within level 3 in the subject areas for which they are appointed to act as moderators.

c) The induction and training of external moderators

Condition E4.4 requires that “an AVA is responsible for inducing and training external moderators to ensure they are sufficiently qualified to:

- make judgements about the standards of performance that demonstrate achievement in accordance with the Ofqual Level 3 descriptor in England, or Level 3 of the *Credit and Qualifications Framework in Wales* (CQFW)
- judge the comparability of assessment input and outcome standards across the provision that they moderate.”

Moderators should be made aware that they have a role as guardians of standards for Access to HE, and the implications of this role in relation to the award of grades are made clear before they embark on any moderation activity.

Condition E4.4 also requires that “an AVA should make available to moderators and Providers written guidance which details all aspects of the assessment model for the Access to HE Diploma, including information about grading standards and processes.”

In practice, this means that moderators are fully informed about:

- how the Access to HE Diploma is assessed
- how the award of grades relates to the award of credits and the qualification as a whole
- the centrality of the common grading standards and how their components and sub-components are assigned to units
- the specific requirements relating to how grading standards and their components and sub-components are applied to student work
- the process for determining unit grades.
- moderators have the opportunity to discuss and clarify with the AVA features of the assessment model about which they may be unclear.

d) The process of external moderation

In line with the standard procedures required in Condition E4.3, AVAs should ensure:

- all relevant staff at providers/centres are given, or have access to, the full, current set of grading standards (as published on the [QAA website](#))
- assessment plans and assignment briefs create valid, reliable and fair opportunities for differentiated judgements about the related student performance to be made
- unit assessment plans facilitate the valid use of the components and sub-components of the grading standards assigned to assess student performance
- helpful feedback is provided to students in relation to grades given
- assessment practices are consistent with the requirements of the Access to HE Diploma and credit specifications, and QAA's grading guidance, and in particular:
 - judgements about grades are made with reference only to the components and sub-components of the grading standards assigned to the unit
 - student performance is described in accordance with the published requirements, using only pass, merit and distinction grades, and no other form of grading is used
 - unit grades are determined according to the relevant procedures and assessment regulations, as described in QAA's grading guidance.
- the process of grading in assessment has been conducted consistently and accurately, and generates grades which are reliable and valid
- the choice of components and sub-components from the grading standards is relevant and valid
- the use of grades at course level is reliable - where there is a comparable standard of performance on comparable types of assessed work by different students, the same grade is recommended
- records relating to grades are properly maintained (see Section 6, below)
- lead moderators (or equivalent) are involved in standardisation and are present at, and full members of, awards boards (see Section E)
- AVAs receive and act on regular reports from moderators (Condition E4.5).

e) Sampling of students' work for external moderation

In line with the standard procedures required in Condition E4.3, AVAs should ensure:

- The number of samples of assessed work is consistent with the AVA's guidance about minimum sample size and how this should be calculated. AVA guidance may also allow the moderator to make particular requirements to respond to subject norms and to take account of exceptionally small or large cohorts.
- The range of samples of assessed work is consistent with the AVA's guidance about range. This will specify that the sample should include a range of different students' evidence of achievement for the same complete units, with records of the related unit grade profiles and proposed unit grades.

6 Record keeping

AVAs must ensure that providers/centres can provide such records as are necessary for the

reliable award of Access to HE Diplomas with grades. Condition B5 requires that an AVA is “responsible for recording and retaining accurate records of its award of grades, credits and Diplomas.”

Through moderation, AVAs must confirm that full and formal records are properly maintained by providers/centres, and that records are clear, comprehensive and accessible, in order to ensure that the evidence on which their awards are made is current, complete and reliable.

AVAs' policies and practices relating to records management and retention should be consistent with principles of good records management and current data protection legislation and should ensure that records relating to assessment and awards:

- are held securely to prevent unauthorised access to them
- are maintained and updated as necessary to ensure that they are accurate and current
- can be accessed and transferred securely, as necessary, to other locations, systems or technologies, including for purposes of credit accumulation and transfer to other AVAs
- are destroyed securely if they do not need to be retained.

AVAs may work with providers/centres to develop common guidance or standard paperwork for providing information about assessment, assignment requirements, feedback and records of assessment outcomes.

7 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](#).

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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.

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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