

Subject Descriptor for Nursing and Health Professions

Pilot evaluation

January 2026

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Executive summary

1. The Subject Descriptor for Nursing and Health Professions was published in October 2023. It offers guidance and provides a reference point for the design, delivery, validation and review of programmes across the range of Access to HE Diplomas designed for progression to higher level study in health professions, including those regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and all fields of nursing. Diplomas with the specific titles of Access to HE Diploma (Nursing) or Access to HE Diploma (Health Professions) must meet the essential requirements of the Subject Descriptor in order to use those titles. Compliance is determined through the validation of Diplomas by Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) licensed by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).
2. The Subject Descriptor was piloted between 1 August 2024 and 31 July 2025. Five AVAs and 67 centres took part. Seven centres piloted both Diploma titles; three quarters of participants ran Health Professions. The Subject Descriptor was implemented fully from 1 August 2025.
3. This report offers a summary of the feedback received across the pilot. Feedback was received from AVA officers and staff within participating centres. A summary of the roles of the respondents is outlined in Table 1.
4. The feedback shows participants were positive about the experience of using the Subject Descriptor. Participants welcomed the flexibility for Diploma design afforded through the Subject Descriptor. Although the following areas were identified as more challenging across some participants:
 - constraints to the timeline to prepare for the pilot;
 - securing specialist teaching staff for some elements of the required subject content;
 - variance in numeracy experience and skills within cohorts;
 - contextualisation of content, specifically within the numeracy unit;
 - volume of work required for the ungraded Professional Behaviours Unit;
 - volume and type of assessments.
5. Many of the challenges identified related specifically to the requirements of individual AVAs through the Rules of Combination defining the Diplomas they validated. Participants offered helpful feedback to address many of the challenges identified.
6. The feedback did not identify any areas of QAA's Subject Descriptor documentation that required amendment. A small number of participants commented that including safeguarding within the subject content could be beneficial.
7. Progression was reported as being mainly to nursing and allied health professions, including dentistry, although some students were reported as applying for undergraduate programmes in science, social work and teaching. Table 3 offers details of the progression routes reported by pilot participants.

Pilot

Participants

8. All AVAs were invited to pilot the Subject Descriptor; five AVAs participated.
9. AVAs reported 2,156 students studying at 67 Access to HE providers during the pilot. Of these, 77.5% were registered on Access to HE Diploma (Health Professions) and 22.5% on Access to HE Diploma (Nursing). Two AVAs recorded students against both Diploma titles. Appendix 1 details the participants by AVA.
10. Table 1 provides a summary of all responses received to feedback requests, including mixed group meetings, by AVA, during Term 2. The mixed groups comprised a mix of Access to HE provider staff and AVA officers. The number of responses exceeds the number of participants because it includes every response to each termly request for feedback and therefore includes multiple responses from individuals.

Grouped role	Total responses across the pilot
AVA	12
Coordinator	45
Head of Centre	1
Head of Department	7
Internal moderator	1
Manager - centre	1
Manager - curriculum	3
Manager - development	1
Manager - faculty	2
Manager - learning	1
Mixed group	4
Programme leader	30
Role cleansed	1
Tutor	38

Table 1: Responses by roles grouped

Activities

11. Pilot participants took part in a briefing session and provided feedback via surveys and online group meetings. The online meetings were grouped by AVA. After each termly activity a feedback report was shared with participants and AVAs received detailed feedback from their providers.

Feedback

12. Feedback was obtained from pilot participants at three points throughout the pilot to collect the views of participants, their students and receiving higher education providers of the Subject Descriptor. Views were collected via surveys and, in term 2, a series of AVA specific virtual meetings. Meetings were held with participants from four AVAs. Those pilot participants who were unable to attend the meetings were asked to complete the Term 2 survey.
13. Feedback was received from both AVA officers and a range of staff within participating centres; a summary of the roles of the respondents is outlined in Table 1.

14. The volume of responses in Term 3 was lower than in Terms 1 and 2, corresponding to the summer awarding period. However, each participant responded to at least one feedback request and AVA officers provided information across the pilot period. This feedback was gleaned through AVA interactions with their providers, including through moderation activities.
15. The feedback has been positive with participants welcoming the opportunity to review the content of Diplomas and recognising the benefits of including the required subject content. The greatest number of concerns was raised in Term 1 although feedback in subsequent terms demonstrated that in many cases these concerns had been overcome.
16. The themes of the main concerns identified by across the pilot were:

- **Constraints to the timeline to prepare for the pilot** meaning staff did not have a long lead time to adjust schemes of work, teaching materials and assessment briefs. This was particularly challenging for participants who had not previously included professional behaviours or numeracy units in their nursing or health professions Diplomas.
- **Securing specialist teaching staff for some elements of the required subject content.** In some cases the volume of biology required by a Diploma validated by an individual AVA was higher than had been previously required meaning securing staff time and managing timetabling was challenging. Through Term 2 meetings participants confirmed the minimum requirements of the Subject Descriptor documentation for 15 credits of biology was not too high. They also stated that their AVA's requirements met the progression needs of their cohorts.
- **A variance in numeracy experience and skills within cohorts.** Participants reported the wide range of ages within cohorts meant different methods were used to complete numeracy tasks. This meant the challenges of securing specialist staff to teach the unit were exacerbated, particularly where health professionals taught the numeracy unit. While the numeracy concepts were well understood by the teachers, they found the range of working methods presented difficult to assess. However, this was addressed in many cases by involving students in flipped classrooms and other student peer support mechanisms.

Feedback was also received that the skill level within cohorts meant the time to teach the Level 2 unit was greater than anticipated and therefore flexibility was required in delivery of the unit. This additional time requirement reflected the lack of students' confidence with regards to numeracy that were reported by pilot participants.

- **Contextualisation, specifically within the numeracy unit,** was identified as being very important in demonstrating the relevance of the unit and retaining the interest of students, particularly those already holding a GCSE in maths. However some centres reported difficulties in securing teaching staff who had both subject expertise and confidence in contextualising the content. They commented maths teachers were less confident in contextualising the content for health students. Some participants commented they preferred the drug calculation units from their AVA that they had used previously.
- **The volume of work required for the 3 credit ungraded Professional Behaviours unit.** Some participants stated that students found some elements of the Professional Behaviours unit challenging if they were not working in health care. Many have offered helpful advice for those teaching the unit based on their experience.

- **The number of assessments per unit, exam length and some types of assessment**, for example Vivas, required by some AVAs. However, participants confirmed the range of assessment types detailed in the Subject Descriptor documentation was appropriate.

Essential subject requirements

17. The subject descriptor outlines:

- the minimum credit requirements and essential curriculum content in areas that are expected to be included for progression to higher level study in health professions and all fields of nursing;
- the recommended maximum credit requirements and content in other subjects to support progression to higher level study in health professions and all fields of nursing.

18. The term 'essential' defines content that needs to be included, in its entirety, in a Diploma in order to be subject descriptor compliant, and to a minimum number of credits and a minimum level.

Biology

19. The Subject Descriptor requires a minimum 15 graded credits at Level 3 to be included in a Diploma to demonstrate compliance. Through the pilot activity it was reported that individual AVAs included a larger volume of biology units in the Rules of Combination defining their approved Diplomas.

Challenges

- timetabling and increased teaching hours;
- assessment load;
- AVA-specific unit requirements, including: perceived difficulty level; complexity; content overlap or duplication.

Benefits

- content provides more opportunities to link to industry requirements.

Numeracy (Minimum 3 ungraded credits at Level 2)

20. The Subject Descriptor requires a minimum 3 ungraded credits at Level 2 to be included in a Diploma to demonstrate compliance. It was reported while the unit was not initially popular with students, many had welcomed the opportunities for more practical study to bring the maths calculations and conversions to life. Contextualisation was noted as being important in making the unit relevant. Some participants also commented the unit helped students refresh important numeracy skills. This was especially useful for those who already held GCSE maths but had struggled with university entrance tests. By building confidence and improving numeracy skills, the unit improved progression opportunities.

Challenge

- varied student ability and lack of confidence in their numeracy skills;
- securing qualified staff;
- contextualisation and making the unit relevant for students with existing maths qualifications;

- high resubmission rates due to complex assessment criteria;
- lack of materials to support teachers.

Benefits

- higher education providers felt it was a much needed unit;
- integration into other units;
- building confidence with numeracy skills;
- relating mathematical principles to the role of health professions.

Professional behaviours (Minimum 3 ungraded credits at Level 3)

21. The Subject Descriptor requires a minimum 3 ungraded credits at Level 3 to be included in a Diploma to demonstrate compliance. Through the pilot participants reported some challenges in delivering the unit, however the benefits to progression were recognised. Respondents cited positive responses to the unit from receiving higher education providers.

22. Throughout the pilot participants commented on the volume of work required for this 3-credit ungraded unit with some suggesting it should be graded. Those advocating for grading explained:

- engagement would be different if it were graded, as ungraded units were perceived as less important by students;
- the volume of study meant grading was appropriate;
- the unit could attract UCAS points.

Those advocating against grading explained:

- students are developing fundamental skills and the unit offers a safe space for them to do so;
- tutors would be grading students on who they are and what life stage they are at;
- it could lead to disadvantage for some students as there is too much difference in work and life experience across cohorts;
- it is important for students to recognise they will see changes in their performance over time and this will reflect their experience in their future clinical training.

Challenge

- delivery challenges where students did not have work experience;
- volume of work for a 3-credit ungraded unit and complex criteria;
- lack of materials around reflective tasks.

Benefits

- unit links well to applications to higher education, the context was easy to relate to preparing for university interviews and UCAS personal statements;
- useful in encouraging engagement with students and setting expectations and standards within lessons;
- provides the opportunity to chart progress with academic and practical skills development, some content links to other units delivered in some Diplomas.

Assessment

23. The Subject Descriptor includes recommended assessment methods intended to support AVAs and course providers in including the types of assessment methods their students are likely to encounter on their higher level studies in nursing and health professions. It was reported some AVAs specified the volume and type of assessment required in the Rules of Combination defining their approved Diplomas.
24. Across the pilot some participants offered comments about the Grading Scheme, which were outside of the scope of the pilot. They noted specific challenges for some students in the absence of 'interim graded' feedback where units were assessed by multiple tasks. This is considered also in the [Equality Impact Assessment](#) section.

Challenges

- assessment types such as Vivas, academic posters, and presentations were difficult for some students;
- exams and fitting them into schemes of work. Participants recognised the importance of including opportunities for assessment through examination, although it was requested that the number of exams be kept to a minimum;
- volume of assessments required by AVAs. Participants explained some 3-credit units had multiple assignments, which was seen as excessive;
- word counts and multiple assessment methods. Some participants felt the word limits included in assessment information for their AVAs were unhelpful and restrictive;
- concerns about academic integrity and use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI);
- the clarity of some assignment briefs, where these were provided by their AVA and not written by course teams.

Benefits

- range of options available;
- AVA developed assignment briefs.

Top tips for success

25. Across the pilot some participants were asked what advice they give to tutors delivering and assessing the essential subject content for the first time. The main areas were:

For tutors

- contextualise content to students' future roles to support understanding and engagement;
- use flipped learning, visual aids, and peer learning; this was seen as particularly useful with the numeracy unit;
- deliver ungraded units early in the course; numeracy was recommended to be taught early in the course to support students' preparation for entrance tests at university;
- align assessments with vocational relevance.

For assessment development

- avoid over-assessment, this may be achieved by grouping any repetitive criteria;
- use a mix of formative and summative methods;
- prioritise depth over breadth;
- provide clear, concise assignment briefs and consider workbooks for the numeracy unit.

Equality impact assessment

26. Pilot participants were asked to comment on equality impact in each of the three feedback requests. Very few comments were received in this regard, however the wider needs of students who are neurodivergent, older or do not have English as their first language were recorded.
27. Participants commented that neurodivergent and older students tended to require reassurance through regular feedback and there was the perception that holistic grading of units meant this was not always feasible. Others commented on the support needs for students returning to study specifically in numeracy. There were also comments about the pace of study and the impact of multiple assessments on students with these characteristics. Participants provided examples of successful interventions to support students with protected characteristics.

Data

28. AVAs provided data on the pilot providers through their annual data submission to QAA. A summary of the data is presented in Table 2. Over 2,000 individuals were registered with the pilot AVAs, of these 1,218 were awarded their Diploma. The data records 610 continuing their studies beyond the end of the pilot period.

Registration and completion

No amendments.

	Health Professions	Nursing	Grand Total
Registrations	1,671	485	2,156
Certificated	1,031	187	1,218
Continuing	356	254	610

Table 2: registration and completion data for students included in the pilot

Progression

29. Term 3 feedback asked for information about progression routes. One AVA reported that one receiving higher education provider had refused to accept students because the Diploma includes Level 2 credits and they only accepted Diplomas comprising all Level 3 credits. Conversely, some participants reported more offers from Russell Group universities than previously. Others stated their lower ability students had received offers for direct entry to undergraduate programmes whereas in other years these students would have been expected to complete a foundation year. Other participants stated offers had included a requirement of success in the numeracy unit.

30. Table 3 shows the progression routes reported through feedback received in Term 3. Undergraduate programmes in similar areas have been grouped together for the purposes of reporting.

Undergraduate progression grouped	Sum of mentions
Nursing ¹	51
Midwifery	22
Health professions ²	15
Paramedic	12
Physiotherapy	11
Science ³	8
Radiography	5
Dental	3
Teaching	2
Psychology	2
Social work	2

Table 3: Progression routes identified by applications to higher education

Participant Comments

31. Providers commented on the significant support they had received from their validating AVAs across the pilot. An AVA welcomed the flexibility of the Subject Descriptor commenting it had afforded them the opportunity to streamline and standardise their biology offer across a number of programmes.

32. With regards to the Subject Descriptor itself, participants commented:

- “I think the new content fits in well with the aims of the Diploma and the students are aware of why they have these challenges given to them”
- “The programme has given a thorough understanding of nursing skills and knowledge and prepares learners for HE or their next steps”
- “Generally, the changes have been appropriate and refreshing to update some course content.”

1 Nursing, including adult, mental health, paediatric and associate nursing

2 Health professions, including occupational therapy, occupational health, podiatry, pharmacy and Speech and Language Therapy

3 Science, including bio medical science and forensic science

- “Overall, I think it is an excellent idea to include the Subject Descriptor across the health related Access to HE Diplomas.”
- “Higher education receiving institutions have welcomed the essential subject requirements and the greater alignment to professional practice”.

Conclusion

33. The feedback from the pilot year has been positive with providers welcoming the information and support provided by their AVAs.
34. The new numeracy and Professional Behaviours units, have proved most challenging to implement. Providers and AVAs have identified innovative solutions to meet their local needs. However despite the challenges, the benefits these units offer for progression have been recognised through the feedback.
35. A concern raised by some respondents across the pilot year has been the credit value and volume of study required for the Professional Behaviours unit. The challenges for some students without specific work experience have also been noted. The unit was seen as beneficial in preparing students for higher education interviews and also offered context and supported the content of other Diploma units in some AVAs’ Diplomas. While recognising the valid concerns about this unit, it is directly comparable to an equivalent unit required under the Subject Descriptor for Medicine which has been taught since 2021.
36. Timetabling has been a recurring challenge across the pilot. For some participants was exacerbated by an under-estimation of the time to deliver and support the numeracy unit.
37. The feedback received confirms QAA’s Subject Descriptor documentation is easy to use. The documentation was made available by AVAs as part of a suite of information for their AVA specific Diplomas.
38. It was reassuring to learn that offers have been maintained, albeit with some changes at individual higher education providers. Most students are looking to progress into health professions; students also applied to social work and teaching.
39. Having analysed the feedback, no amendments have been identified to the content of the Subject Descriptor documentation. However in response to feedback from AVA officers the section on essential requirements for biology has been reformatted to show more clearly what topics must be included.
40. The Subject Descriptor compliance mark and [course search](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-course-search)⁴ make it easy to identify Diplomas that are compliant with the Subject Descriptor.
41. QAA officers will communicate with relevant stakeholders throughout the coming academic year to raise awareness of the Subject Descriptor.



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all participants for their contribution to the success of the pilot.

⁴ <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-course-search>

Appendix 1

Pilot participants by AVA

Pilot provider	AVA
Access Courses Online	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Adult Education Wolverhampton	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Burton and South Derbyshire College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Carlisle College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Chelmsford College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Cheshire College South and West	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Community Learning in Partnership (CLIP)	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Darlington College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Dudley College of Technology	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Exeter College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Fareham College (South Hampshire College Group)	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Halesowen College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Heart of Worcestershire College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Herefordshire, Ludlow and North Shropshire College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Kidderminster College NCG	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Learning Curve Group	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Leicester College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Lifelong Learning College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
London Learning Consortium	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Macclesfield College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
New College Durham	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
New College Swindon	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Northampton College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
NSCG	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Open Study College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Redcar and Cleveland College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Sandwell College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Shrewsbury Colleges Group	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
South & City College Birmingham	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
South Devon College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Stockton Riverside College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Stoke on Trent College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Telford College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Tyne Coast College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
University College Birmingham (UCB)	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Walsall College of FE	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Weymouth and Kingston Maurward College	AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
Bournemouth and Poole College	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
Cambridge Regional College	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
Central Bedfordshire College	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
Craven College	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
Heart of Yorkshire Wakefield College	Cambridge Access Validating Agency

Pilot provider	AVA
Lincoln College	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
Nottingham College	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
Petroc	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
Sparsholt College Group - Andover campus	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
West Notts College	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
West Suffolk College	Cambridge Access Validating Agency
Burnley College	Gateway Qualifications
Colchester Institute	Gateway Qualifications
Mediprospects Ltd	Gateway Qualifications
New City College	Gateway Qualifications
Newham College of Further Education	Gateway Qualifications
Norfolk County Council Adult Learning (NCCAL)	Gateway Qualifications
North Hertfordshire College	Gateway Qualifications
South Essex Colleges Group	Gateway Qualifications
Southwark College	Gateway Qualifications
USP College	Gateway Qualifications
West Herts College	Gateway Qualifications
Bedford College	LASER Learning Awards
Brighton Metropolitan College	LASER Learning Awards
East Sussex Coast College Group	LASER Learning Awards
City of Liverpool College	Open Awards
Education Partnership Northeast	Open Awards
Open Awards	Open Awards
Oxbridge Home Learning	Open Awards
Salford City College	Open Awards
University College Isle of Man	Open Awards
Wirral Met College	Open Awards
Wirral Metropolitan College	Open Awards

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