

Part B: Key features

1 Units to be graded

- A grade is awarded for each level 3 unit that a student completes satisfactorily as part of an Access to HE Diploma (Diploma) course.
- Level 2 units are not graded.

2 The grades

- A grade of 'pass', 'merit' or 'distinction' is awarded for each unit.
- No other grades or intermediate grades (for example, 'merit/distinction') are used.
- 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, as defined by the grade descriptors (see below).
- Students who do not achieve the specified learning outcomes for a unit are not awarded credit for that unit. They are therefore not eligible for a grade: there are no separate grade descriptors for 'fail'.
- The unit grades have no numerical equivalents. They are not converted from or translated into numerical marks. Some use of numerical marks may be appropriate in relation to certain kinds of assessment. **Separate guidance** is provided on the use of numerical marks.

3 The grade descriptors

- There is a common set of broad, generic grade descriptors (see Part C) that relate to areas of performance which are relevant to the assessment of a student's readiness for study in HE. The descriptors are grouped under seven headings:
 - Understanding of the subject
 - Application of knowledge
 - Application of skills
 - Use of information
 - Communication and presentation
 - Autonomy/Independence
 - Quality
- The descriptors are not subject-specific, nor do they relate to particular types of assessment. They can be applied to units in different subjects and are appropriate for use with a range of assessment methods.
- Each of the seven descriptors comprises two sets of statements describing characteristics or qualities which are typical of performance at the different grades: for each descriptor, one set of statements relates to the merit grade and one set of statements relates to the distinction grade.
- The full set of detailed descriptors is made available to all students, and the use of the descriptors in assessment on the course is explained to students when they start their Access to HE studies.
- The detailed descriptors are provided in **separate guidance**.

4 Grade descriptors and units

- Not all of the grade descriptors are used for every unit. An appropriate selection of descriptors is assigned to the unit when it is validated. The decision about which descriptors should be assigned to the unit takes into account the aspects of performance which are relevant to the individual unit. In this way, the rules of combination which identify the particular set of units which comprise each Diploma will also, through the overall balance of descriptors assigned to the specified units, reflect the broad types of performance which may be particularly valued or emphasised in the subject which is the focus of the Diploma.
- The assigned descriptors are a formal part of the unit for its use on any Diploma, wherever that unit is used and however it is assessed.
- **Separate guidance** is provided for AVAs on how descriptors are assigned to units for validation.

5 Use of grades at course level

- The grade descriptors assigned to a unit at validation are the key reference point for grading decisions made at course level. Other descriptors, which have not been assigned to the unit, or any other factors, do not contribute to judgements about grades.
- The assigned descriptors are refined when the unit is used on an individual course. This process involves the selection of elements from within the descriptors, as appropriate to the nature of the particular subject and the type of activity a student would need to engage in to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes.
- The assigned descriptors (and selected elements of descriptors) for a unit are made clear to students, and are included in relevant assignment briefs.
- Units are assessed in different ways. Some units are assessed through a single assignment: others involve more than one assignment. The outcome is a single grade for the unit, which indicates the overall standard of performance, irrespective of the number of separate assignments or individual tasks which are used to assess the unit. The general principle which lies behind the award of grades for units which are assessed by several constituent parts is that the final grade should indicate the standard of performance across the unit as a whole.
- **Separate guidance** is provided on how elements of descriptors are selected for use; how the different grade descriptors are taken into account in making grading judgements; how the grade for a unit is determined; how unit grades are arrived at where more than one assignment is used to assess a unit; and other matters relating to the use of descriptors at course level.
- Grades given to students are accompanied by appropriate feedback which allows the student to identify why a particular grade has been awarded. This feedback is likely to refer to the performance indicated by the selected descriptors, as well as expectations and requirements for the individual assignment.
- There are standard requirements which relate to matters such as retakes, resubmissions and referrals. **Separate guidance** provides the common assessment regulations for the Diploma.

6 Moderation and standardisation

- Grading decisions are subject to a process of internal verification and external moderation.
- There are common moderation procedures and assessment regulations, and a standard definition of the moderator's role, which apply to all Access to HE courses.
- Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) operate procedures for the standardisation of the award of grades.
- Requirements relating to the selection, appointment and training of moderators are included in the AVA licensing criteria. **Separate guidance** is provided about the operation of moderation and standardisation in relation to grading.

7 The award of grades

- The final grades for units which are recommended for award by the AVA are confirmed at the final award board conducted for each course. **Separate guidance** about final award boards is provided in the common assessment regulations.
- The grades achieved by a student are formally reported in grade profiles.
- The total number of grades reported in students' grade profiles depends on the number of units which make up a particular Diploma: there is no standard number of grades reported on grade profiles. The number of units varies because there is no standard size for units (that is, they have different credit values), and Diplomas are designed with different combinations of units of various sizes. So while the total volume of learning for an Access to HE Diploma is constant (at 60 credits) and the total volume of learning eligible for grading is constant (at 45 credits), the number of grades (and the volume of learning which receives any individual grade) varies between courses. The total number of separate grades awarded is, therefore, not related to the standard of individual students' performance.
- The individual grades awarded to a student indicate the standard of performance on a range of units of different sizes, involving different types of learning achieved at different stages, as appropriate to the particular course. Because of this range and degree of differences, and the need for higher education to identify the standard of performance in particular areas, no overall or final aggregate grade is awarded.
- Grade profiles are awarded by AVAs at the same time as the Diploma and credit transcript are awarded.
- 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. (The 'shelf life' of individual units is determined when they are validated by the AVA.)
- If a student fails a unit, there is no achievement - in terms of credits or grades - to be recorded. A failed unit does not form part of the formal record of achievement.
- Grades are not awarded for achievement that does not contribute to the Diploma. Any such additional achievement and its assessment does not form a part of the qualification specifications for the Diploma, detailed in the QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to HE.

8 Further information

Full details of the Access to HE grading scheme, and all associated guidance documents for AVAs, course providers and HE admissions staff, are available on the Access to HE website (www.accesstohe.ac.uk).



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