



# **Grading Scheme Handbook**

## **Section A: Introduction and Summary**

December 2018

QAA Recognition Scheme for  
Access to Higher Education

# 1 Introduction

The Access to HE Diploma (the Diploma) is a nationally recognised qualification which is designed to provide a preparation for study in higher education for adults returning to education.

Individual Diplomas are validated and awarded by Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), according to regulations and specifications set by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Each Access to HE Diploma has a title which indicates the general subject of study or the intended progression route. For each Diploma there is an approved set of units of assessment in a number of different areas which are appropriate for the subject of the Diploma. 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 Access to HE Diploma.

The common requirements which apply to the award of credit for all Diplomas are detailed in *The Access to Higher Education Diploma Specification (2018)*, available at [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications)

Access to HE Diplomas are also graded, using a grading scheme which 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 or structure. The various sections of the *Access to HE grading scheme* jointly detail the common requirements, reference points and regulations that define how grading judgements are made and the process for the award of grades.

Good practice in grading involves assessment for learning as well as assessment of learning and, properly implemented, the grading scheme has a role and value 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.

## 2 Core principles

The common grading scheme has been designed to ensure that the process of grading, and the grades awarded to students on Access to HE courses, will be:

- **fair and equitable** - the consistent and accurate application of the processes of grading ensure that all students are dealt with justly and impartially
- **clear and transparent** - grades given, and why particular grades have been given, are clear. Clear and accessible information about the grading scheme and the significance of grades is openly available to all interested parties
- **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. The award of grades is moderated and assured through secure and robust quality assurance procedures
- **consistent** - grades awarded signify comparable standards of performance on different courses, at different providers/centres, across AVAs and over time.

### 3 Key features of the grading scheme

#### a) Grading and the Access to HE Diploma

- A grade is awarded for every graded level 3 unit that a student completes successfully as part of an Access to HE Diploma. (All Diplomas comprise 45 credits from graded level 3 units, and 15 credits from level 2 or level 3 units that are not graded.)
- There is no overall or composite grade for the Access to HE Diploma.
- 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. So, 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 a student is therefore a consequence of the structure of the particular Diploma and not a reflection of the student's standard of performance.
- The grade awarded for each unit is shown on the achievement transcript that is issued with Access to HE Diplomas. The transcript also shows how many credits were awarded for each successfully completed graded or ungraded unit.

**Further references in this document to 'units' means graded level 3 units unless otherwise specified.**

#### b) The grades

- A grade of pass, merit or distinction is awarded for each unit. 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.
- 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 grade descriptors for 'fail'.
- The unit grades have no numerical equivalents. They are not derived from or converted into numerical marks. The regulations currently permit a restricted use of numerical marks, in relation to the assessment of certain types of performance on specific assignments. (See Section C, Annex 1). If used in these restricted circumstances, numerical marks contribute to the final grade for the unit, using a method prescribed by the regulations. No other use of numerical marks is permitted. **Please note that use of numerical marking as part of the Access to HE Diploma grading scheme will cease on 1 September 2020.**

#### c) The grade descriptors (see Section B for full details)

There is a common set of broad, generic grade descriptors which are used as the basis for all grading judgements on all courses. The seven descriptors relate to different aspects of performance which are relevant to the assessment of a student's readiness for higher study. They are presented under the following headings:

1. Understanding of the subject
2. Application of knowledge
3. Application of skills
4. Use of information

5. Communication and presentation
6. Autonomy/Independence
7. Quality

Each of the seven descriptors includes a set of more detailed component items which describe types of performance associated with the descriptor (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 descriptor for the grading of a particular assignment, they select the most appropriate components of the descriptor. This allows the generic framework to be tailored to the specific nature of different subjects.

#### **d) Grade descriptors and units**

- Not all of the grade descriptors are used with every unit. A selection of descriptors is assigned when the unit is validated, on the basis of a judgement about which descriptors are relevant in assessing how well a student has performed on the unit. In this way, the balance and emphasis of the combination of grade descriptors used across all the units approved for a particular Diploma reflects the relative significance of those types of performance for the subject of the Diploma.
- Once this decision has been made, the grade descriptors assigned to a unit become a formal part of the specification of that unit, and changes can only be made through the AVA's formal process for amendments to units. The assigned descriptors are used whenever the unit forms a part of a Diploma.
- The subset of grade descriptors assigned at validation defines the aspects of performance on which grading decisions for the unit are based. No other types of performance may be considered in making grading judgements.

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

- The use of the assigned grade descriptors 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 components from within the descriptors. The choice of 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.
- The assigned descriptors (and selected components of descriptors) for a unit are made clear to students and are included in the assignment briefs provided to students by course tutors for each assignment.
- 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.
- When the tutor grades student assignments, they give grade indicators (of pass, merit or distinction) for each of the grade descriptors selected for use with the particular assignment(s) that have been designed to assess the unit.
- The tutor reviews all the grade indicators that have been given for the unit and determines a final grade for the unit, using a standard method, which is detailed in the regulations. (See Section C.)

- Grades given to students are accompanied by feedback which allows the student to understand why a particular grade has been awarded. This feedback will focus on the performance indicated by the selected descriptors and their components (in relation to expectations and requirements for the individual assignment) in order to explain the grade indicators given.
- Practices for managing the submission of student work, including drafts, late submissions and opportunities for resubmission or reassessment are governed by the regulations of the grading scheme. (See Sections C and E).

**f) Moderation and standardisation (see Section D for full details)**

- Unit assessment plans and assignment briefs include grading requirements. Both are subject to internal moderation or verification.
- Grading decisions are subject to processes of internal verification and external moderation.
- All AVAs are required by QAA's AVA licensing criteria to operate moderation systems and standardisation processes which ensure:
  - assessment practices are consistent with the grading requirements
  - minimum standards are consistent with the requirements of grade descriptors
  - consistent standards are applied across the AVA
  - common approaches to the selection, appointment and training of moderators.

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

- Providers/Centres recommend unit grades for award by the AVA. These are confirmed at the final awards board conducted for each course.
- 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.
- 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. They also issue achievement transcripts, which detail credits and grades achieved.
- 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.
- Grades are not awarded for units that do not contribute to, or that are additional to the specified requirements of, the Diploma.

## 4 From assessment to awards: a summary of the grading process

(All graded level 3 units include learning outcomes, assessment criteria and grade descriptors. These are formally approved when the unit is validated.)

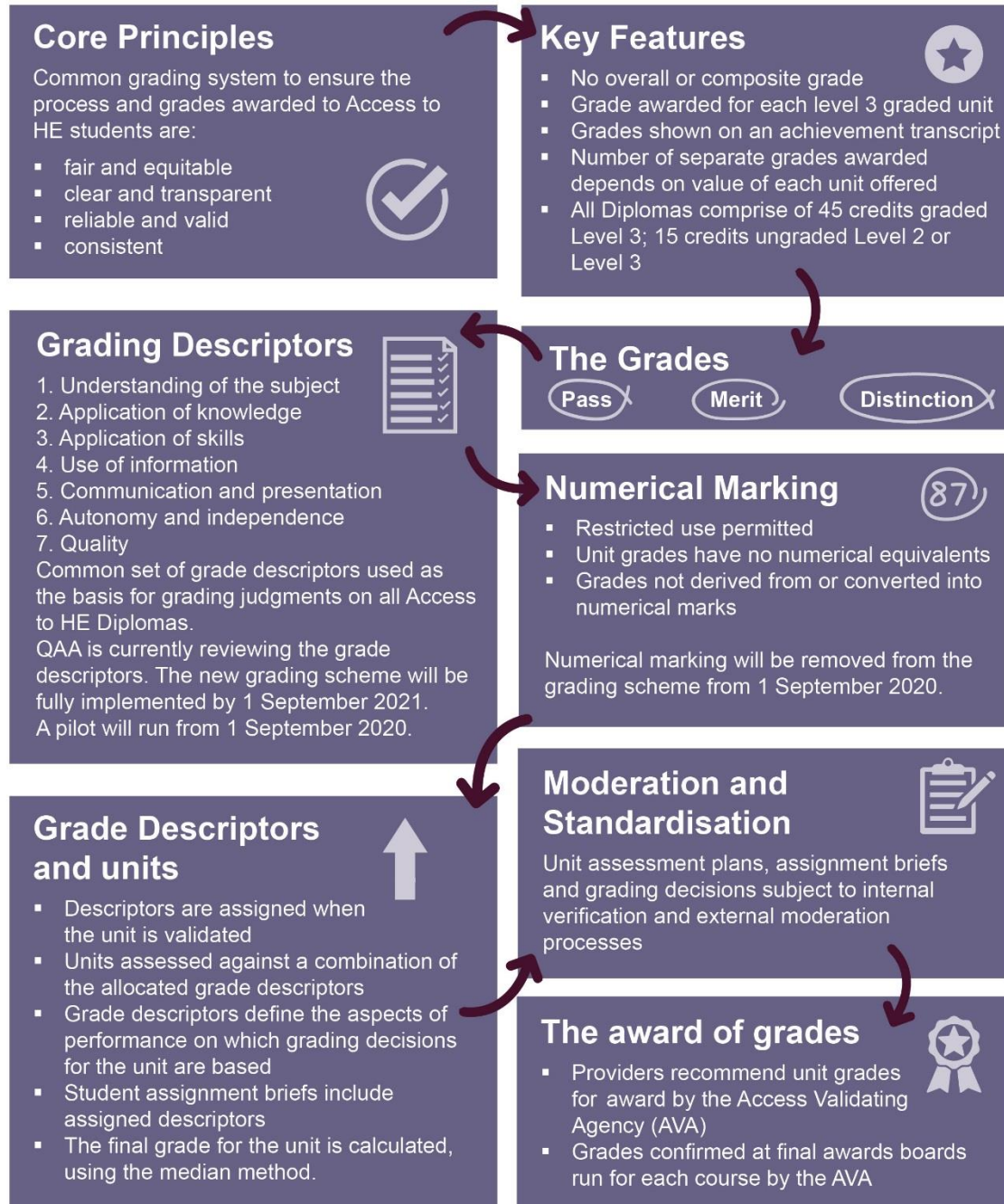
- Tutors develop unit assessment plans that indicate how learning outcomes and grade descriptors will be applied across the assessment of the unit. These plans are internally verified. Tutors also prepare information for students for each assignment about which grade descriptors will be used and how grading will be applied.
- Tutors assess student work, in accordance with the assessment plan and guidelines on good practice in assessment provided by the AVA. If the learning outcomes for the assignment have been achieved, the assignment is graded.
- If any of the learning outcomes covered by the assignment have not been achieved, there is one opportunity for resubmission. Resubmissions and their reassessment must be managed in accordance with the resubmission regulations (See Section C and Annex C2.) Successful resubmissions are eligible for grading.
- Feedback on the assessment of assignments is provided to students, including feedback about their performance in relation to the relevant grade descriptors.
- Providers/Centres apply their internal moderation procedures (as approved by the AVA) to tutors' assessment judgements.
- Samples of assessed units are externally moderated, following the AVA's moderation requirements (See Section D).
- The course team records its recommendations for each student in respect of the award of credits and grades (for each unit) and the award of Access to HE Diplomas. (This normally involves the completion of standard AVA documentation.)
- The awards board is convened, constituted and conducted to meet the AVA's specification, and in line with QAA's requirements (See Section E.)
- The awards board deliberates on the recommendations made, and approves the award of credits, grades and Access to HE Diplomas to students who have met the relevant requirements.
- The awards board also makes decisions about referrals and special cases (See Sections C and E).
- The AVA checks the documentation received from the awards board and issues Access to HE Diplomas and transcripts of achievement to students.

## 5 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](#).

## 6 Summary of the Grade Scheme

# Grading Scheme Access to HE Diploma



Any questions, please do not hesitate in contacting us via email:  
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**QAA2256 - Dec 18**

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