

This bulletin is our principal means of updating Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) about developments. For more information about any of these items, email access@qaa.ac.uk

Access to HE Diploma - all set for grading!

All sections of the *Grades and the Access to HE Diploma: implementation handbook* (*Grading implementation handbook*) are now available on the Access to HE website (www.accesstohe.ac.uk/avas). A brief, web-based guide for tutors is currently being prepared. This, and revised guidance for HE staff, will also be published on the website shortly.

Student views

At the end of the pilot project, over 100 students who had been involved in the grading pilots provided feedback, either through meetings or an online survey. The results of the online survey, summarised below, were replicated in the feedback given at meetings. Both gave encouragingly positive messages about the way grading was perceived by students.

- **Understanding of grade descriptors:** 91 per cent of students said they understood how the grade descriptors related to their assignments 'well' or 'very well', and 8 per cent answered 'fairly well'. One student gave the answer 'not well'.
- **Understanding how unit grades are decided:** 92 per cent said they understood how the final grade for a unit was decided 'well' or 'very well'. One student said 'not well'.
- **Understanding of relationship between performance and grade:** 98 per cent said it was clear to them why they had been given the grade they had in all or most cases. One student said 'only in some cases'.
- **Comparability of grades:** 75 per cent thought that the grades given for different units were comparable in terms of the standard of work required; 20 per cent were unsure about this; and six per cent (three students) thought results were not comparable.
- **Benefits:** 68 per cent were of the view that grading was motivating; 62 per cent considered that it gave them more information about how well they were doing; and 52 per cent felt it was good to be able to recognise a range of performance standards. Only one student felt there were not any benefits.
- **Disadvantages:** 22 per cent felt that a potential disadvantage was that grading might be demotivating for some students, and a similar number were concerned that students might be required to achieve high grades for HE entry. However, only six per cent felt that grading made assessment more complicated, and 50 per cent felt there were no disadvantages at all.

Access headlines...Access headlines..

For AVA action

AVAs need to consider a number of items in this bulletin:

- **Views invited on:**
 - the AVA review method (by 1 September)
 - *Key statistics* (by 1 October)
- **Data protection:** is your registration with the Information Commissioner up to date?
- **Free:** claim your copies of *A student guide to the Access to Higher Education Diploma* (500 copies available to each AVA, free of charge, while stocks last). The guide won't be re-printed.
- **AVA websites:** consider how you can develop your website to be useful to those looking for information about Access to HE courses.
- **Grading:** note,
 - (i) the information here (page 2) about grades and certification for part-time students continuing from last year
 - (ii) Julie Farmer will be in touch soon to arrange a visit in the autumn. Decide when and how the AVA could most benefit from a day's specialist help on grading.

QAA Board review

Professor Gareth Parry and Dr Anne Thompson have been appointed as evaluators to undertake the project which will inform the Board's review (see *Bulletin May 2009*). They will be speaking to a number of key stakeholders, including groups of AVAs, as part of the project. Further details of the project are available on the website (www.accesstohe.ac.uk/aboutUs/project09.asp).

Regulatory notes for AVAs

Grades and certification for students who registered pre-2009

From 2009-10, the Access to HE Diploma will be a graded qualification; all courses leading to the Access to HE Diploma will use the common grading model; and all student work will be graded according to the common procedures and criteria. The 'Access to HE' title may not be used for any course or qualification that does not meet the full requirements of the *The Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications* and the *Grading implementation handbook*, and such amendments as may be issued by QAA from time to time. The title is reserved for use by licensed AVAs in relation to courses and awards recognised by QAA through approved procedures.

- **Students who start Access to HE courses from August 2009 onwards**, who complete all requirements of the rules of combination of an Access to HE Diploma, will have the standard of their performance recognised through the award of grades, using procedures and in the manner described in the *Grading implementation handbook*.
- **Students who started Access to HE courses in, or before, 2008-09**, who completed some of the units required by a Diploma's rules of combination and who go on to complete the Diploma requirements in 2009-10, or after, will be assessed in the same way (that is, using grades) and to the same criteria (that is, the assigned grade descriptors for the unit) as all other students. They will be awarded:
 - (i) **an Access to HE Diploma**
 - (ii) **a transcript of achievement** which specifies, in relation to each unit achieved during 2009-10 (or later), the number and level of credits and the grade achieved. (This assumes the normal position that a transcript of achievement will have been issued for any achievement pre-2009-10, which will show ungraded achievement. If earlier achievement has not been accredited, two separate transcripts should be issued to show pre-2009 ((ungraded)) and post-2009 ((graded)) achievement)
 - (iii) **a supplement to the transcript**, which carries the AVA's logo, which explains that a full grade profile is unavailable because some units were achieved before the introduction of grading.
- **Where achievement includes accreditation of prior learning (APL) or credit transfer**, please note the procedures described in Part J of the *Grading implementation handbook*.

Students who will have incomplete grade profiles because of their pattern of study should make this position clear in their applications to HE. There should be no attempt to provide grades for achievement which was confirmed before grading was introduced.

Monitoring and review 2009-10

We'll be monitoring progress with grading implementation during 2009-10, so that, wherever possible, we can pick up and address any issues as they arise. One of the key mechanisms for this will be a continuation of the meetings we held in 2008-09 with AVA representatives to discuss grading implementation and other qualification developments. Dates will be circulated soon. We'll also review all aspects of the operation of grading when the first full year has been completed.

In order to support the early stages of implementation, QAA has also asked Julie Farmer, grading consultant, to make a one-day visit to each AVA during the early autumn. Julie will contact AVAs directly to arrange convenient dates for her visits and discuss the kind of assistance that would be most useful. This might include one or more of the following:

- talking through the detail of the grading guidance with all AVA officers who will be involved with Access to HE during implementation
- addressing a group of Access to HE coordinators or moderators
- discussing broader implications for unit or assessment development.

Feedback, please

Review method

Before the next review cycle starts in 2010-11, QAA will be reconsidering the AVA review method and making some revisions. We'll be taking into account the post-review evaluation provided by AVAs, as well as the conclusions of *Learning from AVA review 2005-09* (currently in preparation). At the same time, we will also be updating the licensing criteria to ensure that they reflect changes to the qualification and other changes to the broader context in which Access to HE operates that have occurred since the criteria were last revised.

A development group of experienced reviewers will work with QAA officers on this project. The group will report to the Access Recognition and Licensing Committee (ARLC) and will be chaired by Penny Blackie, a member of the ARLC. AVAs will be invited to comment on draft documentation later in the year, but views about the review method are also invited at this stage, so that all ideas can be considered from the start of this process. Please let us have your views (if these are additional to those provided in your review evaluation) by email (access@qaa.ac.uk) by 1 September.

Key statistics

The 2009 editions of our annual Access to HE data publications (*Key statistics* and the *Joint agency statistical report*) were published in June and are both on the website (www.accesstohe.ac.uk/partners/statistics).

Key statistics is now 10 years old and we shall be reviewing its format and content for next year's edition. We are interested in your views about this publication and would especially like to hear:

- how do you use the hard copy version?
- what changes to the format could make it more useful?
- what changes to the content would you like to see?

Please send your views by email (access@qaa.ac.uk) by 1 October.

Access courses database

The Access courses database has completed its first year of operation, with several further developments being made over recent months, including:

- various improvements to the public search
- arrangements which will enable AVAs to reuse the information in the database for the AVA annual statistics return
- an updated user guide for all AVAs.

Enquiries and websites

The database is clearly proving popular with potential students and, naturally, once they have found a course that interests them, they want more specific course information and provider contact details. We anticipated this need in the database's design, and asked AVAs, in the March and October 2008 editions of the *Bulletin*, to ensure that the AVA web page to which the database is linked offers a useful next step. Some AVAs have now developed web pages which provide course contact information and, in these cases, potential students can often go straight to the provider for the information they need. However, if an AVA's web pages don't provide further information about courses, enquirers may then contact the AVA directly. So please make sure that, as a minimum, the AVA contact details given are for the most appropriate person for dealing with such enquiries. We're not intending to make provider contact details available in the public search for the database: such details are all too often out of date and we don't have the direct contact with providers that would be needed to ensure that our database is current and accurate. In order to respond to student interest and make the most of the potential of the database for increasing student numbers, we once again encourage AVAs to develop course-specific web pages which will provide enquirers with the information they're looking for.

Annual data submission

Pilot for new method of data collection from providers

QAA is working with the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) Data Service to look at whether AVAs in England could receive providers' annual Access to HE learner statistics data from the Data Service, rather than, as currently, requiring providers to submit this data to both the LSC and to AVAs.

A pilot exercise has been devised by QAA and the Data Service, which is being overseen by QAA's Access Data Development Group. The learner data from a number of AVAs, gathered in the normal way from providers, will be compared with data received from the Data Service. If the pilot is successful, and demonstrates that learner data is comparable, complete and reliable when gathered in this way, we hope that the new scheme will be implemented for all AVAs in 2010 (covering data for the 2009-10 academic year, submitted to QAA by 1 December 2010).

The Data Service will contact and work closely with a number of AVAs for this pilot project. One immediate action that has been identified for all AVAs is the need to attend to their registration with the Information Commission for data protection purposes. Further outcomes which have implications for all AVAs will be communicated when we become aware of them.