

This document replaces previous guidelines for admissions staff published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): *Access to HE Diploma: a new qualification* (January 2007) and *Access to HE Diploma: qualification developments* (November 2008).

An electronic version of this document is available to download and print from the Access to HE website (www.accesstohe.ac.uk/heStaff).

1 What's new for 2009-10?

- All Access to HE courses now lead to the award of the Access to HE Diploma.
- Access to HE Diplomas will be awarded with grades from 2010 onwards (see below).

2 What are the main characteristics of the Access to HE qualification?

- **A standard title:** the Access to HE Diploma. Individual awards are named according to subject, such as Access to HE Diploma (Nursing) or Access to HE Diploma (Law).
- **Credit based:** the standard number of credits required for the award of all Access to HE Diplomas, in all providing institutions, is 60 credits (with 45 at level 3).
- **Unitised:** each Access to HE Diploma requires the completion of a particular set of units of study (the 'rules of combination'), which are approved when the course is validated. Units can be different sizes (so different units have different credit values), but the total number of credits from the required units for all Diplomas is always 60. The standard credit units permitted on Access to HE Diplomas are 1, 2, 3, 6, 9 and 12.
- **Graded:** a standard grading system has been introduced to ensure that all Access to HE Diplomas are graded, and that all Diplomas are graded in the same way.

3 Will there be any exceptions in 2010?

For 2010 entry onwards, the vast majority of Access to HE applicants will be offering the Access to HE Diploma with grades. There may be a small number of exceptions, including:

- students who started an Access to HE course before 2009, but who complete the course in 2010 (mostly part-time students), may present an Access to HE certificate or an ungraded Diploma. An ungraded Diploma awarded in these circumstances will nonetheless be accompanied by information about graded achievement in 2009-10 (see section 7)
- students who completed an Access to HE course in 2009 may present ungraded Access to HE Diplomas
- students who completed an Access to HE course before 2009 may present Access to HE certificates.

Earlier versions of the Access to HE qualification are not invalidated by the introduction of the graded Access to HE Diploma. It is important that offers should not disadvantage applicants who achieved qualifications in the past and that offers do not, for example, require grades of those who completed courses before grades were introduced.

4 What sort of grading system is used?

- A common system of **unit grading** has been adopted. A grade is awarded for each level 3 unit successfully completed (see section 5). Level 2 units are not graded.
- A **Pass, Merit or Distinction** grade is given for each unit. No other grades are used. Grades cannot be 'converted' to percentages or other numerical marks.
- A **standard set of grade descriptors** is used to decide which grade should be given. There are seven grade descriptors, which can be used for all subjects. When the unit is validated, a selection of appropriate grade descriptors is confirmed.
- Student work is **assessed against the selected grade descriptors** and a standard process is used for establishing the grade for the unit.
- **There are standard assessment regulations** on matters such as resubmissions, referrals and confirmation of grades at final awards boards.
- A **profile of all grades** is given on the transcript of achievement, which is issued at the same time as the Access to HE Diploma. There is no single final grade.

Full details of all aspects of the grading method, including the seven grade descriptors, are given in the *Grading implementation handbook* (www.accesstohe.ac.uk/avas).

5 How many grades do students get?

The total number of grades available varies according to the structure of the course the student follows and, in particular, the number of level 3 units specified in their Access to HE Diploma. As Diplomas can be structured with different combinations of units of various sizes (that is, with different credit values), the number of units (and therefore of grades) varies.

The total number of separate grades awarded is not, therefore, related to the standard of individual students' performance. A higher number of grades merely indicates that the course has been structured using a greater number of small units, while fewer grades indicates that the course has been structured using a smaller number of large units.

6 What changes to offers will be needed in 2010?

For institutions or departments that previously made offers which did not ask for anything additional to the achievement of the Access to HE qualification, no change is needed: there has been no change to the volume of learning on the course or the standard of performance required to achieve the Access to HE qualification at Pass level.

For institutions or departments that previously made offers which required the achievement of additional credits or particular grades, the following should be noted:

- **only 60 credits can be awarded on an Access to HE Diploma.** Any additional credit is not recognised as part of an Access to HE Diploma. The qualification has been redeveloped, so it now has a standard credit specification: courses which previously required a higher number of credits were recalibrated and 'readiness for study in HE' is indicated by the award of 60 credits on all courses. Funding by the Learning and Skills Council recognises this common credit requirement for the Access to HE Diploma, and public funding is not available for providers to deliver the additional units that would be required to add more credits to an Access to HE Diploma. An offer which requires a student to achieve more than 60 credits on an Access to HE programme is therefore unachievable for most students. (On UCAS applications, students sometimes give details of all units available to them, including alternative options. This can suggest that more than 60 credits are available to them when this is not actually the case. The personal statement or tutor reference should explain the position.)
- **only grades consistent with the common grading scheme are available.** See details above, but note: there is no single overarching or aggregate grade; the Pass, Merit, Distinction grades cannot be converted into percentages or other types of numerical marks; no other kinds of grades are used; and each grade reflects performance on an individual unit.

What sort of offers will make sense for Access to HE from 2010?

Different approaches are possible, to allow institutions to make offers for Access to HE students which are in line with their broader admissions policies. The following guidance is provided for institutions to consider in relation to a) information about entry criteria and admissions policies for inclusion in course and institutional prospectuses and in UCAS Entry Profiles; and b) offers to individual Access to HE applicants.

a) Approaches to offers for all Access to HE applicants

- **Achievement of the Access to HE Diploma:** an offer based on the achievement of the Access to HE Diploma equates to a requirement that a student achieves the standard 60 credits (with at least 45 at level 3), on a planned, coherent programme of study which has been designed and approved as a preparation for HE study. This offer can be applied for all Access to HE Diplomas.
- **Achievement of an Access to HE Diploma in certain subject area(s):** when specifying general requirements, it is important to remember that 1) there is no prescribed or restricted set of titles for Access to HE; 2) Diplomas with the same title do not necessarily have identical curriculum content or structure; and 3) generically-titled Diplomas can involve a high volume of study in specific academic subjects. Some caution is therefore needed to avoid over-specifying the requirement.
- **Achievement in relation to certain subject areas:** offers can require that a particular volume of a student's achievement (expressed as a certain number, or proportion, of the total credits) should be derived from units in certain general subject areas. (Remember that it should be a number or proportion of credits, **not a number of units**, that is specified in this way. See section 5.)
- **Achievement at a particular level or grade:** offers can indicate that a specified volume of the total achievement, or of achievement in a certain subject (expressed as a certain number, or proportion, of the total credits) must be achieved at level 3. An offer can also ask for units with a specified total credit value to be achieved at a certain grade. (Remember that the volume/proportion of credit, **not a number of units**, should be specified. See section 5.)

b) Approaches to offers for individual Access to HE applicants

- **Achievement of a particular, named Access to HE Diploma:** an offer which specifies the achievement of the particular Diploma named on the application ensures that, to meet the offer, a student must successfully complete the course which leads to that Diploma, with the particular units detailed on the application.
- **Achievement in relation to certain subject area(s), or particular units:** an offer can specify certain groups of units or individual units to be achieved. (This may be helpful if some optionality is indicated.) Such offers should make careful reference to the details of units provided on the application.
- **Achievement of particular units at particular levels or grade:** an offer which specifies the units to be achieved at level 3 (from those listed on the application as available at level 2 or 3) will ensure that students' achievement in the specified units is at least at the threshold of level 3. An offer which specifies units named on the application to be achieved with a particular grade will ensure that students' performance in those units is at least at the standard signified by that grade.

These approaches may be used in combination: they are not exclusive alternative options. An offer could, for example, require the achievement of 1) a particular Access to HE Diploma (or Diploma in a general subject area); 2) particular units (or a certain number of credits from units in certain subjects); 3) specified units at a particular level or grade.

Unconditional offers may be appropriate for applicants who have already achieved the Access to HE Diploma. If a student is currently studying on an Access to HE course, however, an unconditional offer may lead the student to leave the course without completing the programme of study or achieving the Diploma requirements.

7 How is the achievement of Access to HE students recorded?

- **Access to HE Diplomas** state the title of the particular award and carry the certification version of the Access to HE logo (which includes the words 'recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education'), as well as the name of the awarding agency.
- A **transcript of achievement** is issued with each Access to HE Diploma. The transcript records, for each level 3 unit successfully completed, the credits achieved and grade awarded; and for each level 2 unit, the number of credits achieved.

8 What other information is relevant when considering or making offers to Access to HE applicants, and where can it be found?

Qualification information

The UCAS APPLY system asks applicants to identify whether they are offering an Access to HE certificate, Access to HE Diploma or other (non QAA-recognised) access qualification. Students have been asked to use the formal title of their Diploma on their application, given in the standard format. A searchable database of all QAA-recognised Access to HE qualifications is available on the Access to HE website (www.accesstohe.ac.uk). The archive section of the database also lists Access to HE certificates and other non-current titles.

Course information (unit titles, credit value and level)

Applicants should include on their application details of the title, credit value and level for each unit they are studying. Unit information for each Diploma is also available from individual Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), the awarding bodies for Access to HE. Contact information for AVAs is available at www.accesstohe.ac.uk/avas

If detailed curriculum information about an individual applicant's programme of study is needed, the course coordinator/manager at the providing institution should be contacted.

Academic performance and potential

While tutor references have an important role to play, references given for applications which meet the 15 January UCAS deadline will be written at a very early stage of a one-year course: tutors may have limited knowledge about a student's performance to date, and it may be difficult for tutors to give a full, well-founded estimation of a student's capabilities and potential. If the institution requires further information, a second, follow-up reference may be requested.

Similarly, 'predicted grades' cannot be reliably provided (and, given the nature of the unit grading system, this would not be practicable). Nonetheless, tutors should be able to report on whether students are achieving at level 3, and give a general indication of the standard of performance on completed units. Please note, however, that unit grades are not confirmed, and therefore have no formal status, until they have been moderated by the AVA.

The target group for Access to HE is adults who have been out of education for some time. They will therefore bring life experience, but may have few or no other formal qualifications. The lack of other recent study experience means that many students will have a steep learning curve in order to achieve the Access to HE Diploma within the usual one-year course.

The Access to HE Diploma is a level 3 qualification, largely assessed by continuous assessment. Students therefore have to start achieving at level 3 at an early stage of the course. Even very able students who are achieving high grades for level 3 units by the end of the course are not likely to be achieving such grades from the start of the course.

Other background information and more details about the Access to HE qualification and grading is available on the Access to HE website (www.accesstohe.ac.uk).

General enquiries may be addressed to accesstohe@qaa.ac.uk



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