

This document updates and supplements previous guidelines about the Access to HE Diploma published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). These Guidelines and other information about Access to HE are available at www.accesstohe.ac.uk/hestaff.

There have been no changes to the qualification for 2010-11. **These revised Guidelines offer some general guidance and new recommendations for institutions about how they can express entry requirements and make offers to Access to HE students.**

Section A: General guidance on framing entry requirements and offers

1 Expressing qualification requirements

The Access to HE Diploma is the name of the national qualification regulated by QAA. If a qualification has this name it is 'QAA recognised'. All current and archived Access to HE Diplomas are listed on QAA's Access courses database at www.accesstohe.ac.uk.

The 'Access to HE certificate' is the title of the predecessor qualification, which is no longer available. References to 'access courses' may or may not indicate courses which lead to the Access to HE Diploma. The term 'kitemarked' is not used to refer to Access to HE courses.

- ▶ **Recommendation 1: refer to 'the Access to HE Diploma'**

2 Referring to particular Diplomas

Individual Diplomas are approved and named at local level according to subject, for example: Access to HE Diploma (Nursing) or Access to HE Diploma (Law). There is no restricted set of Diploma titles, and curriculum content and course structure for Diplomas with the same name can vary. This means that entry requirements for achievement of Diplomas in particular disciplines are best expressed generically. It is preferable, for example, to refer to an 'Access to HE Diploma in art and design or creative arts subject', rather than 'Access to HE Diploma (Art and Design)'. Over-specification can also cause difficulties because a Diploma with a general title, such as 'Access to HE Diploma (Combined Sciences)', could contain as much study in required subjects (for example, human biology) as a more tightly defined course with a title such as 'Access to HE Diploma (Nursing)'.

- ▶ **Recommendation 2a: in entry requirements, refer to generic disciplines for Diplomas, rather than specific titles**

In conditional offers, it is generally helpful to name the Diploma title given on the application.

If the particular title is not specified, an applicant may not be aware that the offer could be jeopardised if they transferred to a course leading to a different Access to HE Diploma.

- ▶ **Recommendation 2b: in conditional offers, refer to the title of the Diploma named on the application**

3 Requirements for achievement in particular subjects

Each Access to HE Diploma requires the completion of a particular set of units (its 'rules of combination') which, taken together, provide an appropriate preparation for study in higher education. These units should be listed in full, with their title, level (2 or 3) and credit value, on UCAS applications. In some regions, different courses may make use of a common bank of units, but these units are not available across all regions; therefore, any requirements for achievement in particular subjects are best expressed in generic terms, as specifically titled units will not be available to students following all Access to HE courses in similar discipline areas.

In the examples in Section B, most references to detailed subject requirements in the offers exactly mirror those in the entry requirements. In some instances, however, it may be helpful to name particular units listed by the applicant (to clarify which of the units are considered to be 'science units', for example), but care should be taken to ensure that any specific requirements made in offers are consistent with more general entry requirements.

The volume of learning for each unit is indicated by the number of credits for the unit. While the volume of learning required for achievement of the Diploma as a whole is always the same (60 credits, with 45 at level 3), different sized units are combined in different ways on different Diplomas in order to realise that standard total (so Diploma Y may require successful completion of 10 x 6-credit units, whereas Diploma Z may require successful completion of 5 x 9-credit units + 1 x 3-credit unit + 1 x 12-credit unit). An entry requirement which specified, for example, '3 units in mathematics' would not make consistent demands on students on different courses, as this could represent a requirement for anything from 3 credits (3 x 1-credit units) to 36 credits (3 x 12-credit units). It is therefore preferable to refer to a total number of credits to be achieved from units in certain subjects ('18 credits at level 3 from units in mathematics').

- ▶ **Recommendation 3a: in order to ensure requirements about achievement in a particular subject make consistent demands of students on different courses, refer to the number of credits to be achieved from units in that subject**
- ▶ **Recommendation 3b: consider whether more detailed specification about particular unit requirements would be necessary or helpful in conditional offers**

4 Requirements relating to academic performance (grades)

A common system of unit grading now applies to all Diplomas, with grades of Pass, Merit or Distinction being given for each level 3 unit (level 2 units are ungraded). The outcome is a grade profile, recorded on the student's achievement transcript, which is issued with the Access to HE Diploma. An overall grade is not given and cannot be meaningfully calculated because of the differences in size, subject and assessment of units. Requirements for an 'overall grade' cannot be met and may lead to informal calculations being made based on varying assumptions about what is intended. The details and operation of the grading system are described in the information sheet *Grading and the Access to HE Diploma: Brief process outline for HE admissions staff* (www.accesstohe.ac.uk/hestaff).

As grades are awarded for units, the total number of grades achievable varies in line with the total number of units on a course; therefore, if entry requirements specify a certain number of units to be achieved at a certain grade (or simply a certain number of grades) they are making different requirements about the proportion of the qualification to be achieved at that grade. The examples in Section B therefore suggest that graded entry requirements should specify a certain number of credits to be achieved from units awarded at a particular grade ('18 credits achieved from units awarded at Merit').

- ▶ **Recommendation 4: when making requirements and offers based on achievement of grades, specify the number of credits which must be achieved from units awarded at Merit or Distinction**

5 Particular requirements relating to overall credit achievement

The number of credits required to achieve the Access to HE Diploma is 60 credits, with 45 at level 3, and 15 at level 2. This credit requirement is part of the Diploma qualification specification; it was introduced to ensure that all Access to HE students achieve the same number of credits for the same qualification, and grading was introduced to give an alternative mechanism for differentiating between students' performance. As students on all Access to HE courses cannot be awarded a Diploma without achieving this standard qualification requirement, entry requirements and offers do not need to specify '60 credits with 45 at level 3' separately from a requirement to achieve the Diploma.

If applications list units which appear to have a total credit value that exceeds 60 credits, this may be because there is an element of optionality which has not been made explicit. This should be explained in the tutor's reference. Requirements of more than 60 credits would be requiring achievement which falls outside the Access to HE Diploma. Additional credit is not part of the Access to HE Diploma and is not available or achievable for students on most courses. It is therefore not eligible for inclusion on the achievement transcript which gives unit grades.

- ▶ **Recommendation 5: in order to make requirements that will differentiate between different applicants' performance, use grades rather than extra credits**

6 Other considerations

Academic performance and potential - Access to HE students often start courses after being out of education for a number of years, and they may have few prior qualifications. It is a fast-track route (typically delivered in one year), and students have to make rapid progress on an intensive course of study to meet the standards of the award. Continuous assessment means that grades are awarded on level 3 achievement at an early stage of the course. Performance at different stages of the course, demonstrated by the grades awarded across the grade profile, is likely to reflect the steep learning curve undergone by many students.

Predicted grades - as the qualification does not result in an overall grade, no single grade can be predicted. In most instances, it will also be difficult for referees to provide reliable predicted unit grades when the UCAS application is prepared, although tutors should be able to give an indication of the standard of performance in completed units. A request for a second reference may be helpful if more information about a student's performance is required.

Unconditional offers - commonly lead to students withdrawing from their Access to HE course. If the offer is based on an expectation that the course will be completed, but there are no additional requirements, Approach 1 in Section B is recommended.

UCAS Tariff - the Access to HE Diploma is not currently included on the UCAS Tariff.

Exceptions in 2010-11 - all successful students from Access to HE courses in 2010-11 will be awarded the Access to HE Diploma, with an achievement transcript giving details of credits and grades. A small number of applicants who gained their Access to HE qualifications before this may present either ungraded Diplomas (awarded only in 2009 and, in small numbers, in 2010) or ungraded Access to HE certificates (awarded before 2009).

Results confirmation - Access Validating Agencies are the awarding bodies for Access to HE. They develop and validate Access to HE Diplomas, with the involvement of staff from local HE institutions, and they are monitored and reviewed by QAA. They issue Access to HE Diplomas and achievement transcripts to successful students. Contact details for AVAs are available at www.accesstohe.ac.uk/avas/contacts.asp.

Section B: Approaches to setting standard entry requirements and making conditional offers for the Access to HE Diploma

Several approaches are given here so that institutions can specify course entry requirements in prospectuses and for UCAS Entry Profiles, and so that they can make individual offers to Access to HE applicants that are in line with their broader admissions policies. The four approaches suggested below indicate ways of shaping requirements so that they relate to the subject(s) studied (Approaches 1 and 2) and/or to the standard of students' academic performance (Approaches 3 and 4).

Approach 1: achievement of the Diploma (in a general, named discipline area)

This approach is appropriate when institutions require applicants to achieve:

- the total volume and level of the **Access to HE Diploma**, with **no additional requirements in terms of performance** beyond the threshold (Pass grades on all units)
- **no specific requirements in terms of subjects studied** (or with requirements which relate only to the general discipline area of the Access to HE Diploma as a whole).

Entry requirements 1 (examples):

- a the Access to HE Diploma in any subject
- b the Access to HE Diploma in a health-related or science subject
- c the Access to HE Diploma in art and in design or creative arts subject

Conditional offers 1 (examples):

- a the Access to HE Diploma [title as given on application]
- b the Access to HE Diploma (Health Studies)
- c the Access to HE Diploma (Art and Design)

Approach 2: achievement of the Diploma (in a general, named discipline area), with a certain volume of the whole achieved in specific subjects

This approach is appropriate when institutions require applicants to achieve:

- the **Access to HE Diploma** in a general, named discipline area, (or with no requirements relating to the discipline area of the Diploma as a whole), and
- a **certain amount of the Diploma in specific subject area(s)**, but with
- **no additional requirements in terms of performance** beyond the threshold (Pass grades on all units).

Entry requirements 2 (examples):

- a the Access to HE Diploma in any subject, with 30 credits at level 3 achieved in arts or humanities units, including 6 credits achieved from units in English literature
- b the Access to HE Diploma in science or engineering subject, with 9 credits at level 3 achieved from units in mathematics

Conditional offers 2 (examples):

- a the Access to HE Diploma (Combined Arts), with 30 level 3 credits achieved in English literature, history or philosophy units, including 6 credits achieved from units in English literature
- b the Access to HE Diploma (Engineering), with 9 credits at level 3 achieved from units in mathematics

Approach 3: achievement of a certain volume of the Diploma at a standard above Pass

This approach is appropriate when institutions require applicants to achieve

- the **Access to HE Diploma** (whether in a named discipline area or not), and
- a standard of **performance beyond pass for a certain amount of the course**, but
- **no requirements in terms of the performance in any particular subject** area.

Entry requirements 3 (examples):

- a the Access to HE Diploma [specify discipline area, if required, as above] with 12 credits achieved from any units awarded at Merit or Distinction
- b the Access to HE Diploma [specify discipline area, if required, as above], with 18 credits to be achieved from units awarded at Merit or Distinction, including 9 credits achieved at Distinction

Conditional offers 3 (examples):

- a the Access to HE Diploma (Social Studies), with 12 credits achieved from any units awarded at Merit or Distinction
- b the Access to HE Diploma (Education), with 18 credits achieved from any units awarded at Merit or Distinction, including 9 credits achieved at Distinction

Approach 4: achievement in certain subjects within the Diploma at a standard above Pass

This approach is appropriate when institutions require applicants to achieve:

- the **Access to HE Diploma** (whether in named discipline area or not), and
- a **certain amount of the Diploma in specific subject area(s)**, and with
- a standard of **performance beyond pass in specific subject area(s)**.

Entry requirements 4 (examples):

- a the Access to HE Diploma [specify discipline area, if required, as above], with 12 credits achieved from science units awarded at Merit or Distinction
- b the Access to HE Diploma [specify discipline area, if required, as above] with 18 credits achieved from science units awarded at Merit or Distinction, including 6 credits achieved in biology units awarded at Distinction

Conditional offers 4 (examples):

- a the Access to HE Diploma (Environmental Science), with 12 credits achieved from science units awarded at Merit or Distinction
- b the Access to HE Diploma (Nursing), with 18 credits achieved in science units awarded at Merit or Distinction, including 6 credits achieved from biology units awarded at Distinction

Credits and grades - the numbers of credits and particular grades given in examples are illustrative only. Please note that units can be of the following sizes: 1, 2, 3, 6, 9 or 12 credits.

Additional requirements - which relate, for example, to work experience can also be specified in entry requirements and reflected in offers.



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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
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