

**QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher
Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland**

**The Access to Higher Education Diploma
and credit specifications**

Final draft – March 2006



Preface

This section of the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (the Recognition Scheme) describes the requirements for the achievement of the Access to Higher Education (Access to HE) Diploma and the credit specifications on which its award is based. It also defines the boundaries within which particular requirements for individual Access to HE awards are determined.

This section is intended to work alongside, and in conjunction with, the other sections of the Recognition Scheme which explain the key regulatory and quality assurance mechanisms through which standards are established and maintained. In particular, the detailed requirements relating to programme validation procedures are described in Part 3 of the Recognition Scheme (Principles and criteria for the licensing of Authorised Validating Agencies).

The purpose of these qualification specifications is to provide consistency and transparency in the general academic standards of the qualification and to provide flexibility for students in the ways it can be achieved. The qualification specifications do not attempt to address matters of programme content. The curriculum for individual programmes is proposed by providers of Access to HE programmes, in response to local needs and opportunities, as advised by those receiving students in HE. Providers and receivers act collaboratively to develop and approve appropriate and responsive programmes, within the approved procedures of licensed Authorised Validating Agencies (AVAs).

The Access to HE qualification

Qualifications and awards

1 The Access to HE qualification is known formally and generically as the 'Access to Higher Education Diploma'. As a particular award offered and granted to students, the qualification is referred to by an individual award title which indicates the subject or area of study.

2 Individual award titles have a common format: Access to Higher Education Diploma (subject/area of study) which reflect the intended progression route(s) of the particular programme of study. Titles of Access to HE awards include, for example, Access to Higher Education Diploma (Business Studies); Access to Higher Education Diploma (Health and Social Care); Access to Higher Education Diploma (Art and Design). Where the award is intended to provide progression to combined or less specific progression routes, the award name will reflect this, for example Access to Higher Education Diploma (Combined Sciences); Access to Higher Education (Social Studies combined with Arts). Award titles are approved through AVAs' validation processes. A single Access to HE programme sometimes provides a number of different routes which lead to several different awards titled in this way, all of which are Access to HE Diplomas.

3 The common format for the award title is used on the diploma which is issued to students (which also carries the QAA Access to HE logo). This format for the title of the award is also used in any information provided to receiving institutions (including in Universities and Colleges Admission Service applications) about students' target achievement on individual programmes.

4 The Access to HE Diploma is a credit-based qualification, made in accordance with the terms of the Access to HE credit specifications, as defined within this document and its appendices. Student achievement is recognised both through the award of credit (as identified on a credit transcript) and the award of the qualification (as identified on a diploma), subsequent to the student having satisfied the rules of combination (see paragraphs 12-16). Any further information about the quality of individual student performance in relation to the qualification is provided through different means.

5 Access to HE qualifications are awarded to students on the basis of the satisfactory completion of generic qualification and particular award requirements. The generic qualification requirements are provided here (see paragraph 6); particular award requirements, made in keeping with these generic requirements, are confirmed through the AVAs' validation processes approved by QAA.

Requirements for the award of the Access to HE Diploma

6 The generic qualification requirements identify the number of credits at particular levels that students need to achieve in order to be awarded the Access to HE Diploma. The credit achievement required for the award of the Access to HE Diploma on all Access to HE programmes is a total of 60 credits. Of these 60 credits, a minimum of 45 credits must be achieved at Level 3 and the remainder must be achieved at Level 2 or above. (Levels are defined at Appendix A.) This requirement is constant for all awards of the Access to HE Diploma made by all AVAs, irrespective of the place, subject or mode of study.

7 The particular award requirements additionally identify the number and titles of the particular units from which the credits must be derived. These requirements are stipulated in the rules of combination for the particular award. The rules of combination thereby ensure the coherence of every programme which leads to the award of the Access to HE Diploma (see paragraphs 12-16).

8 All Access to HE students who satisfactorily complete the particular award requirements of the programme on which they are studying are awarded the Access to HE Diploma. The award of the Access to HE Diploma will, in all instances, therefore, indicate that a student has satisfactorily met the generic requirements for achievement of the Access to HE Diploma, as well as the particular requirements for the named award. In so doing, the student will have satisfactorily completed a coherent programme of study, which indicates their readiness for higher education.

9 Units provide the building blocks of Access to HE programmes. The combination of particular units, with particular credit values, provides structured pathways for a coherent programme of study through which credit is achieved and accumulated towards the Access to HE Diploma.

10 The credit achievement requirement does not necessarily equate to the total number of credits which might be available on a programme. Additional credits might be available as a feature of programme design, where additional units are offered within a programme to increase flexibility and choice. However, providers are not obliged to offer more units on a programme than are required to allow a student to achieve the award, and not all students will be able to take additional units, even where they are included within a programme. Thus, while some students may be able to accumulate credits which are additional, or at a higher level, to those which are required for the award of the Access to HE Diploma, these credits cannot be made part of the generic qualification or individual award requirements. If students achieve credits which are in excess of the required achievement (either in number or level), this is indicated on the credit transcript which is issued to students.

Other successful completion criteria

11 There may be other stipulations, in addition to credit regulations, to ensure the fitness for purpose of the programme for the Access to HE award. Any other criteria for the achievement of the qualification are stated separately from the rules of combination, within a statement of successful completion criteria. These might include specific requirements relating to assessment regulations, criteria for differentiating individual student achievement, or professional body or other requirements.

Rules of combination

12 Rules of combination define the required achievement for individual Access to HE awards. The Access to HE Diploma can only be awarded on the basis of the accumulation of credits achieved on the particular set of approved named units which are identified in the rules of combination for that award.

13 Individual programme specifications may require or prohibit certain unit combinations with reference to their own curricular framework or intended progression route(s). Where a number of different named awards, with different award titles, are available within a single programme, rules of combination are approved for each named award.

14 AVAs are responsible for approving the rules of combination for the Access to HE awards made by them. There might be occasions when new rules of combination can be approved without a full programme validation. As an example, if a set of additional units has been developed and approved in order to provide a new award title on an existing programme, this would require approval of new rules of combination, although a full programme validation would not necessarily be required. A formal process for the approval of rules of combination for new named awards is nonetheless a necessity in such circumstances. The two separate processes of programme validation and approval of the rules of combination leading to the Access to HE Diploma are therefore clearly distinguished within AVAs' regulatory processes.

15 All Access to HE awards leading to the Access to HE Diploma comprise units which are designated for the purposes of the rules of combination of the particular award as 'mandatory' or 'optional'. Mandatory units are those which must be achieved in relation to the award of the qualification; optional units are those which provide an element of choice for students within a programme. The rules of combination state the names of mandatory units; optional units from the offer available to students which may be accumulated towards the qualification; and how many units, and at what credit level(s), students will need to achieve particular units in order to meet the requirements for the qualification.

16 Rules of combination are presented according to a standard format. (An example of the format, with guidance notes, can be found at Appendix B.) The information presented to the AVA for approval includes, as a minimum:

- award title
- qualification level
- total credit value
- numbers of credits at specific levels which build towards the total credit value
- credit value and level for mandatory and optional units
- titles of mandatory and optional units
- numbers and levels of credits permitted for the purposes of credit transfer or accreditation of prior learning
- any other requirements in respect of credit accumulation, such as time limits.

Credit accumulation

17 Students accumulate credit towards the award of the Access to HE Diploma. Should a student not achieve all credit requirements for the award of the Access to HE Diploma, those credits that have been achieved are awarded through the same AVA processes as the award of credit for the full Access to HE Diploma.

18 All credits that are accumulated to the award of the Access to HE Diploma must be achieved within the five years prior to its award. After five years, any credit that has been achieved is no longer automatically eligible for accumulation towards the Access to HE Diploma. (The learning from credit that is more than five years old could, however, be eligible if it satisfied the stipulated requirements of the programme for the accreditation of prior learning.) More detailed, or more limited, requirements about the period over which credit can be accumulated are sometimes made in individual cases; this may be appropriate for particular awards or for units on particular programmes (for example, to ensure currency in certain subject areas or for entry to certain programmes of professional training). Specific requirements for individual cases are considered and confirmed through individual AVAs' programme validation processes.

Credit transfer

19 AVAs recognise credits awarded by other AVAs, provided these have been awarded in accordance within the terms of the Access to HE credit framework, where the awarded credits meet the rules of combination for their Access to HE awards.

20 If students transfer from one programme to another (either within or between AVAs), credit may be transferred where this can form a part of the rules of combination for the programme to which the student is transferring.

21 The process of credit transfer is governed by appropriate protocols established by AVAs. Protocols determine parameters and processes which confirm a the credit achievement at the point of transfer from the originating AVA and b the appropriateness of the credit achievement to the receiving programme. The final award of the qualification is the responsibility of the receiving AVA.

Accreditation of prior learning

22 The accreditation of prior learning (APL) provides a means by which students who have already achieved some of the requirements for the award of the Access to HE Diploma, through some means other than study on an Access to HE programme, can be awarded the Access to HE Diploma without necessarily being required to undertake units for which equivalent achievement has already been demonstrated.

23 No more than 50 per cent of the credits required for the award of the Access to HE Diploma may be awarded through APL. The limit for individual programmes (which might be lower than 50 per cent in some instances) is set at the point of programme validation and is stipulated within the rules of combination.

24 Within the Access to HE credit framework, the concepts of, and processes of operation for, APL are commonly defined (see below) and consistently applied within the rules of combination of Access to HE awards.

Accreditation of prior learning (APL) is the generic term to describe processes used to recognise learning achievement outside the rules of combination for the Access to HE qualification for the purposes of demonstrating learning equivalence which meets those requirements.

Accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL) is the process through which previously assessed and certificated learning is recognised as equivalent in relation to meeting the requirements for the achievement of the Access to HE qualification. Where previous learning has already been certificated, no credit is awarded, but students are exempted from relevant credit requirements in relation to the Access to HE qualification.

Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) is the process by which non-certificated learning achieved in a range of learning contexts is recognised in relation to meeting the credit requirements of the rules of combination for the Access to HE qualification. In this process, credit is awarded by the AVA in recognition of learning achievement, and the student is exempted from achieving the units for which equivalent achievement has already been demonstrated.

25 APL can only be awarded by an AVA following a formal process which involves a claim, with evidence, being made by the student, and that claim and evidence being assessed by the provider before a recommendation for APL is made to the AVA. The AVA then considers the recommendation through a formal process to establish whether APL can be awarded in the particular instance.

26 Further advice on the application of a range of principles in relation to this practice can be found in QAA's *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning* (September 2004).

Access to HE credit specifications

Unit specifications

1 A common unit specification applies to all units within the Access to HE credit framework. The unit specification provides the following information in a standard template (see Appendix C):

- title
- learning outcomes
- assessment criteria
- level
- credit value
- unit code.

2 The unit template relates only to the specification of the unit. It does not replace the more extensive information about curriculum content and assessment methods which are presented for the purposes of validation of Access to HE programmes.

3 For the purposes of the unit specification, the following definitions apply:

- **Learning outcomes:** statements of what a learner may reasonably be expected to know, understand or do as the result of undertaking a process of learning. Learning outcomes are expressed in a standard linguistic form (see Appendix C).
- **Assessment criteria:** descriptions of the requirements a learner is expected to meet in order to demonstrate that a learning outcome has been achieved.

Assessment criteria do not in themselves include sufficient information to conduct a valid and reliable assessment of learner achievement in relation to a qualification. Methods of assessment and their relationship to the achievement of the Access to HE qualification are approved at the validation of individual programmes.

Unit banks

4 Each AVA manages and regulates its own local bank of units. The AVA is responsible for maintaining a data management system to provide secure records of all approved units, and the operation of effective procedures for the quality assurance of the unit bank, including procedures for:

- submitting and approving units for inclusion in the AVA's unit bank
- assessing the continuing currency of units
- withdrawing units from the AVA's unit bank.

5 Separate assessment and certification through the award of credit must be available for each unit. AVAs have data management and support systems which are capable of holding the necessary information to enable the AVA to:

- award credit for individual units, as necessary
- award credit for whole qualifications
- hold, retrieve and track learner achievement so that learners are able to accumulate and transfer credit towards the Access to HE qualification within the relevant rules of combination
- comply with relevant data and legislative requirements.

6 The establishment of an AVA unit bank allows the development of mutual recognition of units by providers within the AVA and, potentially, between AVAs. Mutual recognition of units between AVAs requires AVAs to have procedures in place to describe the ways in which units from other AVAs' unit banks may contribute towards the AVA's own Access to HE awards.

Credits and credit value

7 Credit is an award made to a learner in recognition of the quality assured achievement of a unit's designated learning outcomes at a specified level. Within the Access to HE credit framework, the following principles apply:

- credits are only awarded for the achievement of all the learning outcomes of a unit
- learners cannot be awarded a proportion of the credits specified for the successful achievement of a unit for partial achievement of a unit's learning outcomes
- half credits cannot be awarded
- more credits than are specified for the successful completion of a unit cannot be awarded to differentiate between the quality of individual performances
- credits cannot be graded.

8 The credit value of a unit provides the number of credits that may be awarded to a learner for the successful achievement of all the learning outcomes of that unit. The determination of the credit value of particular units is a matter of professional judgement for AVAs within their approved validation processes. These judgements are made on the basis of 'notional learning hours', where one credit represents those learning achievements that can be demonstrated in 10 notional learning hours. The concept of 'notional learning time' therefore takes into account all learning which may be relevant to the achieving the learning outcomes, including directed and private study, practical and project work, assignments and assessment time.

9 Once credit value has been ascribed to a unit, it remains constant, irrespective of the time it may take an individual learner to achieve the learning outcomes, and irrespective of the teaching (or 'guided learning') time involved in the achievement of the learning outcomes.

10 In order to facilitate effective credit accumulation and transfer, there are standard credit values for units on Access to HE programmes. The standard credit values are 1, 2, 3, 6, 9 and 12.

Level

11 The Access to HE Diploma is located at Level 3, as defined by the levels and level descriptors developed through the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (NICATS). (See Appendix A.)

12 The Access to HE Diploma is, however, awarded on the basis of the achievement of credits at levels 2 and 3 (see paragraph 6). It is the level of individual units which determines the levels at which credit is awarded, and all Access to HE units are therefore located at level 2 or 3 (or both) within the NICATS framework. The relationship between the level of particular units and requirements for the qualification is recorded in the rules of combination for the particular award.

Appendix A - NICATS level descriptors

ENTRY LEVEL - employ recall and demonstrate elementary comprehension in a narrow range of areas, exercise basic skills within highly structured contexts, and carry out directed activity under close supervision.

LEVEL ONE - employ a narrow range of applied knowledge, skills and basic comprehension within a limited range of predictable and structured contexts, including working with others under direct supervision, but with a very limited degree of discretion and judgement about possible action.

LEVEL TWO - apply knowledge with underpinning comprehension in a number of areas and employ a range of skills within a number of contexts, some of which may be non-routine; and undertake directed activities, with a degree of autonomy, within time constraints.

LEVEL THREE - apply knowledge and skills in a range of complex activities demonstrating comprehension of relevant theories; access and analyse information independently and make reasoned judgements, selecting from a considerable choice of procedures, in familiar and unfamiliar contexts; and direct own activities, with some responsibility for the output of others.

LEVEL FOUR - develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base; employ a range of specialised skills; evaluate information using it to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable problems; and operate in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.

LEVEL FIVE - generate ideas through the analysis of concepts at an abstract level, with a command of specialised skills and the formulation of responses to well defined and abstract problems; analyse and evaluate information; exercise significant judgement across a broad range of functions; and accept responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.

LEVEL SIX - critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, utilising specialised skills across an area of study; critically evaluate new concepts and evidence from a range of sources; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills and exercise significant judgement in a range of situations; and accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.

LEVEL SEVEN - display mastery of a complex and specialised area of knowledge and skills, employing advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for related decision-making including use of supervision.

LEVEL EIGHT - Make a significant and original contribution to a specialised field of inquiry demonstrating a command of methodological issues and engaging in critical dialogue with peers; accepting full accountability for outcomes.

Appendix B - Rules of combination: notes for guidance

Information required	Comments
Qualification title	The format for the title of the Access to HE qualification should be Access to Higher Education Diploma (subject/area of study) eg Access to Higher Education Diploma (Business Studies); Access to Higher Education Diploma (Health and Social Care); Access to Higher Education Diploma (Art and Design); Access to Higher Education Diploma (Combined Sciences).
Qualification level	The Access to HE Diploma will be at Level 3 within the NICATS framework of levels.
Total credit value	The Access to HE Diploma will have a total credit value of 60 credits .
Numbers of credits at specific levels which comprise the Access to HE qualification	Of the 60 credits, a minimum of 45 must be at Level 3 , with the remaining 15 to be achieved at Level 2 or above.
Credit value and level of mandatory units	This section should set out the credit value and level of mandatory units in relation to the 60 credits required for the achievement of the qualification (eg X credits at Level 3 and Y credits at Level 2 to be achieved through specified named mandatory units – see below).
Credit value and level of optional units	This section should set out the credit value and level of optional units in relation to the 60 credits required for the achievement of the qualification and may be expressed as a maximum or minimum (eg X credits of which a minimum of Y must be at Level 3 to be achieved through a choice of named optional approved units – see below).
Titles of mandatory units	A list of the mandatory units required for the achievement of the qualification together with their credit value and level should be included or appended.
Titles of optional units	A list of the optional units available to learners in relation to the achievement of the qualification, together with their credit value and level should be included or appended.

Information required	Comments
<p>Credit value and level of credits permitted through credit transfer and the award of credit through APL</p>	<p>This section should state the requirements in relation to credit transfer and other arrangements through which learners may demonstrate prior learning achievement, eg a maximum of X credits at Level 2 may be transferred from an appropriate qualification or other learning achievement; a maximum of Y credits at Level 3 may be exempted from the optional units on the basis of relevant prior certificated achievement; a maximum of X credits at Y level may be awarded for APL.</p> <p>Overall, the total proportion of credits awarded on this basis should not exceed 50 per cent of the credits required for the achievement of the qualification.</p>
<p>Other requirements</p>	<p>Other regulatory matters which might be included here might relate to certain kinds of time restrictions, eg at least X credits at Level 3 in Y subject must have been achieved within three years of the award of the Access to HE Diploma; overall, all credits must have been achieved within five years of the award of the Access to HE Diploma.</p> <p>Any excluded combinations should also be included here.</p>

Appendix C - Unit template

Unit title	
Level.....	
Credit value	
Unit code	
Learning outcomes	Assessment criteria
The learner should be able to:	The learner can:
1	1.1 1.2 1.3 1.4
2	2.1 2.2 2.3 2.4
3	3.1 3.2 3.3 3.4 3.5
4	4.1 4.2 4.3
5	5.1 5.2