

Access to HE Diploma: implementation of grading

Executive summary

Following the introduction of a common grading scheme on Access to HE courses in 2009-10, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) gathered feedback from the main stakeholder groups about the implementation of the scheme and its impact on stakeholders. The responses to surveys of each of the main groups are detailed in this report. The main conclusions from these responses, considered jointly, are as follows.

a The implementation of the grading scheme has been achieved, in the main, successfully and without major disruption.

None of the stakeholder groups indicated major problems in understanding, implementing, operating or working with the grading system. There were some inevitable teething difficulties and, in some individual cases, a degree of initial uncertainty, where full guidance or training had not been received or followed, or where internal systems and documentation were still being developed. Overall, however, tutors reported that the guidance provided had been helpful to them, and there was a high level of confidence among Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) and tutors about their use of the grading system. Where specific local issues or problems arose, AVAs were able to address these, ensuring that full achievement transcripts, detailing grades awarded for each unit, were awarded to students on all courses. Where tutors indicated that they would value further support and guidance, AVAs generally indicated that they would be able to meet this demand.

An indirect benefit of the introduction of grading was that a number of AVAs took the opportunity to look afresh at their systems in ways which went beyond simply addressing the specific requirements of grading. Tutors also indicated that, at the end of this first year of grading, they had reflected on their assessment practice and were planning to make changes, in ways which AVAs regarded as largely positive. Although some tutors reported increased workloads, the extent of this varied between AVAs, and most of the additional work related to the implementation process itself and adoption of new requirements for providing feedback or tracking student performance. AVAs indicated that they expected this extra workload to decline, as systems and practices became embedded, and that this was an area that they would monitor.

b Students' experience of the grading scheme in its first year was largely positive.

Students were positive about the contribution of grading to the assessment of their work, including the value of information provided before they undertook work to be assessed, and the feedback they received after assessment. Concerns expressed during the development of the grading scheme about potential negative effects on students were not reflected in students'

responses: they understood the system; they regarded the rules of its operation as reasonable; and they reported that grading had had a motivational effect for them. Tutors' perceptions of students' responses were also largely positive, although sometimes less so than indicated by the feedback from students themselves.

In all of these areas there were, of course, exceptions, although the numbers were relatively small. Where individual concerns were expressed by students, most focused on issues of variability, either in terms of the quality or promptness of feedback received, or in terms of the inconsistent application of assessment regulations (see also e). The latter may need some further clarification about how rules should be applied in specific circumstances, as well as reinforcement and monitoring by AVAs (noting that students were primarily concerned about perceptions of unwarranted leniency). While not experienced as a major issue for most students, good practice in the provision of feedback may also be an area in which there is scope for further professional development.

c The grading scheme was, and will be, used by HE institutions to make differentiated offers to Access to HE students.

About three-quarters of respondents from HE admissions reported that, as a consequence of the introduction of grading and other qualification developments, they had either made, or intended to make, changes to their published entry requirements, selection criteria and approaches to offer-making for Access to HE students.

In more than two-thirds of cases, the percentage of Access to HE candidates who were made offers in this first year of grading was reported to be either about the same as, or higher than, the percentage made in the previous year. For entry to HE in 2010, both HE admissions staff and students reported that the most common type of offer (about half) remained the achievement of the Access to HE Diploma without any further requirements. Most other offers required Merit and/or Distinction grades to be achieved. It is clear that 2010 was a transitional year: many respondents indicated that they had not changed entry requirements for 2010 entry - mostly because of the long lead-in time for the publication of prospectuses - and that offers requiring grades were more likely for 2011 entry. The proportion of offers which specify graded achievement is therefore likely to rise as more HE institutions make use of the grading scheme in this way. Requirements for additional credit (that is, in addition to the 60 credits required to achieve the Access to HE Diploma) are reported to be less likely in the future, but requirements for achievement of other qualifications (such as GCSEs) are reported to be more likely.

There are some remaining concerns about the Access to HE qualification among HE institutions, which are considered to be barriers to progression. These principally relate to certain areas of variability between different course requirements and, linked with this, the availability or transparency of information about different course requirements (see also e).

d The full range of grades was used by all AVAs, although there was some variation in the distribution of grades awarded by different AVAs.

As a criterion-referenced system, the grading model itself includes no assumptions about a normal distribution of grades, and QAA had no specific expectations about the likely distribution of grades or acceptable degrees of variation. The proportion of grades awarded for all units across all courses, was 35 per cent at Pass, 35 per cent at Merit and 31 per cent at Distinction. The proportions awarded by different AVAs showed some variation, but it is not possible from

the data available to identify the cause(s) of this variation. There are many factors which might account for differences in grade profiles, including characteristics of particular student cohorts and the predominant subject focus of an AVA's courses, as well as the possibility of variation in the way the grading system has been applied. There is also a possibility that different types of course structure might make certain types of profile more likely, and this is an area in which more analysis and investigation is needed, as well as monitoring over time. AVAs have indicated their own interest in examining differences at local level as part of their analysis and review of the first year's results and continuing oversight of individual course outcomes.

The most common pattern of grade profile was, predictably, a profile which included a combination of grades. Overall, just 4 per cent of students were awarded grade profiles with Distinctions in every unit. There was some variation between AVAs in the proportion of 'all Distinction' profiles awarded, as there was in the proportion of all grades awarded at Distinction (and other grades) within different AVAs. There was no obvious relationship, however, between the proportion of students who were awarded all Distinction grades and the total proportion of Distinction grades awarded within an AVA.

e Some features of the operation of the grading scheme should be kept under review or investigated further, but the model itself does not need substantial amendment or revision.

There is no evidence from the survey responses that there are widespread or systemic difficulties with the grading model itself. Nor were there particular aspects of the model that were identified as being in need of urgent revision. All surveys provided opportunities for comment, but issues raised by one stakeholder group were not, on the whole, reflected in comments from others, and individual issues raised varied from AVA to AVA.

Certain points were raised a number of times, albeit in relatively small numbers, and the main concerns of particular stakeholder groups and areas for further action or continued monitoring are outlined in points a-d. Some further points of detail are also discussed in this report, which may prove useful in informing discussions about future developments and training needs. The following issues emerged from the outcomes of more than one survey, suggesting that further consideration of these specific areas may be useful.

- **Resubmission regulations:** reports from AVAs, including comments made by tutors, indicated some concern about the rules in this area. Although significantly less concern was expressed by students (84 per cent students declared that they regarded the rules as reasonable 'in all cases' or 'in most cases'), there were also a number of comments made by students about this issue. Several different kinds of concern were reported under this single heading, however, and there is no obvious way in which these different concerns would all be addressed by a single change to the regulations or the grading model itself. However, if the regulations are perceived by some as 'unfair', it will be important to explore and understand the reason for these responses, while noting the very large numbers of students who regarded the regulations as reasonable.
- **Variations in credit achievement and availability:** in spite of the introduction of a common qualification specification for all Access to HE Diplomas in 2008-09, respondents to the survey of HE admissions staff indicated that they were seeing applications from some students who were apparently able to achieve large numbers of credits which were additional to the requirements for the achievement of the Access to

HE Diploma. Some concerns were expressed about how common the availability of additional credit might be. Data collected from AVAs at the same time as the grading survey reflects the reality of this position, but also its variability. The causes of this, and implications of any changes, will need to be investigated and more fully understood. Further clarification of the qualification specification may then be required.

Introduction

1 In 2009-10, following a two-year period of consultation, development and piloting, QAA introduced a new, common grading system for the Access to HE Diploma, which was implemented on all Access to HE courses in England and Wales. At the end of the first full year of the operation of the new scheme, QAA asked Access to HE students, HE admissions staff, Access to HE tutors and Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) to comment on a variety of aspects of the grading scheme and its implementation.

2 The purpose of the evaluation was to allow QAA and AVAs to review the success and impact of the scheme's implementation; and to consider whether amendments or other action might be needed, either in relation to the grading model itself, or in relation to the guidance and information provided about its application.

Evaluation methods and respondents

3 Feedback was collected from the main stakeholder groups in a number of different ways. Responses were received from students, HE admissions staff, Access to HE teaching staff and AVAs, representing a range of institutional/AVA types, and from geographical areas across England and Wales.

- **Students** (769 responses from students at 104 colleges)
Students responded to an on-line survey on QAA's Access to HE website between June and September 2010. Individual AVAs were asked to draw providers' attention to the survey and to encourage their students to respond. Results were collated by QAA and forwarded to the relevant AVA, so that AVAs could respond to any outcomes and comments that were specific to their own areas.
- **HE admissions staff** (55 responses from staff at 34 HE institutions)
Staff responded to an online survey on QAA's Access to HE website between October and November 2010. QAA contacted individual HE institutions (HEIs), and all HEIs were invited to respond. Responses were received from individuals involved in centrally administered systems (including those with responsibilities for institutional policy), and from those making admissions decisions at department or faculty level within a range of discipline areas.
- **Access to HE teaching staff** (444 responses from staff at 206 colleges)
Access to HE tutors responded to surveys conducted by AVAs, using a standard set of survey questions and response categories provided by QAA. AVAs disseminated the survey to tutors in whatever form and format they considered appropriate. The results of these surveys were provided to QAA through AVAs' 2010 annual self-evaluation reports.
- **AVAs** (15 responses: 14 from AVAs in England; one from the AVA in Wales)
AVAs analysed their provider and student feedback and reported on it, and on their own experience of the implementation of grading, as part of their annual self-evaluation reports to QAA in December 2010. They were also asked to provide certain information about the grades and grade profiles that they had awarded.

4 This report is therefore based on more than 1,000 responses from different stakeholder groups. Each survey had a focus that was appropriate to the particular constituency, so there is a different emphasis in responses from different groups. This report considers the outcomes of the survey for each group.

Responses from students (769)

Section A - student experience of grading

5 Section A asked students to indicate the extent to which they agreed (from 'in all cases' to 'not at all') with a series of statements about their experience of grading and their views about certain features of the model. Questions were designed to focus on those features that had been most contentious during the development of the grading model.

6 In response to all but one of the 13 statements provided in this section, over 80 per cent of student respondents agreed 'in all cases' or 'in most cases', indicating that, in broad terms:

- students received helpful information about grading, and they knew what they had to do to achieve Merit and Distinction grades
- students received feedback which
 - made it clear why they had achieved particular grades
 - indicated what areas needed further attention to improve grades
 - provided useful information about the progress they were making in different areas of the course
- the standard of work required to achieve different grades given in different subjects, and at different times, seemed comparable to students
- knowing that work was to be graded motivated students to work harder in order to achieve higher grades
- rules about extensions, late submissions and resubmissions were clear and were considered reasonable.

7 For all of the statements provided in this section, the number who agreed 'in all cases' exceeded the number who agreed only 'in most cases', which exceeded the number who agreed 'in some cases', which exceeded the number of those who agreed 'not at all'.

8 Apart from responses to statement 6 (see also paragraph 10), there was just one case where agreement 'in all cases' was less than 50 per cent: this was in relation to perceptions about the comparability of grades, where the agreement 'in all cases' was 49 per cent, and 'in most cases' was 35 per cent. While the responses to this statement (and free-text comments) do not suggest that this was a major problem, they do indicate that about half of students experienced some incidence of grading which they considered to be an example of a lack of comparability in the award of grades. As the statement did not make a distinction between comparability between grades awarded for different units within a subject and grades awarded between different subjects, it is not possible to identify from these responses whether the reservation expressed by some students relates to comparability within or between subjects. However, it does underline the importance of effective moderation and standardisation procedures.

9 The highest levels of agreement related to rules for extensions and resubmissions, where 89 per cent and 87 per cent (respectively) thought the rules were clear in all or most

cases; and 88 per cent and 84 per cent (respectively) thought the rules were reasonable in all or most cases. In relation to resubmissions, 5 per cent felt that the resubmission rules were either unclear or unreasonable (or both).

10 There was just one statement (6) where the total percentage of respondents agreeing 'in all cases' and 'in most cases' was lower than 80 per cent. In response to this statement ('I achieved higher grades at the end of the course than at the beginning'), 57 per cent agreed that this was true 'in all cases' (30 per cent) or 'in most cases' (27 per cent); 23 per cent agreed 'in some cases' and 17 per cent 'not at all'. Where comments were made about this statement, most were to the effect that 'My only reason for not improving on my grades was that I achieved distinction from the beginning onwards', although the data indicates that this cannot have been the explanation for all those whose grades were not higher at the end than at the beginning of the course.

Student comments relating to Section A

11 188 comments were received from 173 (22 per cent) respondents. A large number of these were course specific, and did not relate to grading. Comments were made in these areas:

- **general and course design** (59) - twenty of these were 'signing off' comments in which students made a positive appraisal of their course (some taking the opportunity to commend particular staff). Most of the critical comments did not relate to grading, but referred to matters such as the balance between particular units and timetabling
- **variations between tutors** (26) - most of these were about different interpretations of rules and procedures; only three suggested that there was variation in standards
- **feedback** (25) - range of comments, some indicating inconsistency of approach or poor practice by certain individual tutors, especially in relation to promptness of return; some suggested there was confusion among tutors, particularly at the beginning of the year
- **extensions and late submissions** (18) - the most common kind of comment in this area referred to regulations being applied unevenly or too leniently. A small number regarded as unfair the provision for those with extenuating circumstances to achieve more than a Pass for late work - often because they felt the extenuating circumstances given were trivial or not genuine
- **grades received and the grading system as a whole** (15) - range of comments (including a number of positive reflections). Two wanted an overall grade; a further five wanted percentages
- **resubmissions** (12) - only one comment suggested that there should be unlimited resubmission opportunities, but a number thought there should be the opportunity to resubmit work which had achieved a Pass to improve grades. Of these, most thought it was 'unfair' that those who did not achieve an assignment's learning outcomes (and therefore could achieve no credits for the whole unit) were allowed to resubmit, whereas those who had achieved a Pass were not permitted to do so. In several cases, there was a particular difficulty where the grading system had been overlaid on a pre-existing system where 'parallel units' were used, which allows credits to be awarded at level 2 or level 3 according to the standard of performance
- **uncertainties and confusion** (11) - there were a number of reports of tutors being unclear about how the system worked at the beginning of the year
- **assignment briefs** (9) - most asked for greater clarity; a smaller number asked for more detail
- **two-year students** (6) - some would have liked grades to be applied retrospectively to their first year's work (that is, before grading had been introduced).

Conclusions

12 Students' responses suggest that, in some places, there was some uncertainty and variability in the implementation and use of the grading scheme, especially at the start of the year. Overall, however, it appears that the majority of students experienced grading on their Access to HE courses as positive and unproblematic.

13 Where concerns about specific providers or courses were raised, AVAs have indicated in their annual reports to QAA the actions they intend to take to address these.

Section B - applications to HE

14 Section B asked students about the number of applications they had made and the number and kind of offers they received. Eighty per cent of respondents to this survey (615 students) had applied for a place on an HE course, 87 per cent of whom (535 students) indicated that they had made their applications through UCAS. 533 students (87 per cent of those who had applied) indicated that they intended to take up places in HE in 2010-11.

15 The number of courses that students applied for, and the number of offers received by applicants (questions 3 and 4) were as follows:

Number of HE courses applied for	Number of students making applications	% of applicants	Number of offers received	Number of applicants receiving offers	% of applicants
5	161	26%	5	47	8%
4	56	9%	4	54	9%
3	67	11%	3	83	14%
2	78	13%	2	108	18%
1	253	41%	1	261	42%
			0	51	8%
Totals	615			604	

16 These figures suggest that 98 per cent of these students were made one or more offer, and that applications were made to 1,639 courses, resulting in 1,177 offers (72 per cent).

17 Questions 5 and 6 asked for information about whether applicants had been made certain kinds of offer. (The results of this question can only be broadly indicative of the overall pattern, as respondents were not asked to identify the number of times certain kinds of offer were made.) Where graded achievement was part of the offer, it appears that it was more common for requirements for grades to be made in relation to the achievement of grades on units from anywhere in the course, than in relation either to grades achieved within particular subjects or for individually named units. 192 students (25 per cent) reported that they were made at least one offer which required achievement of more than 45 credits at level 3.

18 It is clear that HEIs used a variety of approaches in framing offers in 2010. The type of offer reported most frequently required applicants to achieve the Access to HE Diploma, but did not require any achievement of grades (44 per cent offers). The next most common requirement was based on achievement of some Distinction grades and some Merit grades (13 per cent of offers). The least common kind of graded offer required some Distinctions but no Merits (5 per

cent of offers). Of the offers made to respondents to this survey, 7 per cent required all level 3 units to be achieved at Distinction.

19 Students were also given the opportunity to describe other kinds of offers they had received. Most of the responses given described the types of offer that had been indicated (in different terms) under question 6, and the results reinforced the same conclusions. There was also some evidence here of a misunderstanding of the grading model by some HE admissions staff, with a small number of offers (made to 3 per cent of respondents to this question) being based on achievement of an 'overall grade'.

Conclusions

20 Among respondents to this survey, nearly all who applied to HE in 2010 were offered places. A variety of approaches to offer-making and specific entry requirements for Access to HE students was used by HEIs, including requirements relating to the achievement of grades. Many offers, however, did not require graded achievement.

Responses from HE admissions staff (55)

21 The survey of HE admissions staff was designed to gather feedback not only about the implementation of grading but also about the impact of wider changes made to the Access to HE qualification since the introduction of the Access to HE Diploma, including the introduction of a common qualification specification.

Reflecting on changes to the Access to HE qualification

22 Questions focused on issues that had been raised previously by HE admissions staff, and which had been a major factor in the development of a revised qualification specification and the introduction of grading. A clear majority of respondents indicated that, in all or most cases, they considered that it was now possible to:

- a provide clear and explicit entry requirements for Access to HE students (65 per cent)
- b develop and operate selection policies that can be operated fairly and consistently for Access to HE students (65 per cent)
- c select applicants on the basis of criteria that reflect broader admissions policies for all applicants (68 per cent)
- d give full consideration to Access to HE applicants for all courses, including for those where there is high demand (75 per cent)
- e make offers that differentiate on the basis of relevant considerations, including academic achievement and performance (66 per cent).

23 Sixteen responses were received in the section provided for comments about remaining 'barriers'. Of these, the majority indicated concerns about the continuing variability that exists between Access to HE courses and the availability and presentation of information about these differences. Areas identified included:

- whether key prerequisites have been met
- the syllabus of maths courses
- the use of Diploma titles

- the total number of credits available to students on different programmes
- the size of units
- assessment requirements (in particular, whether assessment by examination is required)
- the presentation of information on UCAS forms.

Effect of changes on HE admissions policies and practice

24 Seventy-three per cent had either made, or planned to make, changes to their published entry requirements; and 72 per cent had either made or intended to make changes to their selection criteria, in response to changes to the Access to HE qualification. Sixty-eight per cent had either changed or planned to change their approach to making offers to Access to HE applicants, and 47 per cent had either changed or planned to make changes to their consideration of Access to HE applicants on high demand courses.

Access to HE applicants and offers: 2010 entry cycle

25 In relation to numbers of applications and offers made, compared with 2009, in most cases:

- the number of applications received was either about the same (40 per cent) or was higher (38 per cent)
- the number of offers made was either about the same (46 per cent) or was higher (29 per cent)
- the percentage of applicants who were made offers was either about the same (46 per cent) or was higher (22 per cent)
- the percentage of applicants who met their offers was either about the same (44 per cent) or was higher (20 per cent).

Type of offers made: 2010 entry cycle

26 The most common kinds of offers were based on the achievement of the Access to HE Diploma, either with no further requirements (indicated as all or most offers by 46 per cent of respondents); or the achievement of the Diploma and requirements for grades of Merit and/or Distinction with reference to achievement in particular subjects (indicated as all or most offers by 32 per cent of respondents).

27 The least common kinds of offers (of those suggested) were:

- the achievement of the Access to HE Diploma and requirements for additional credit (86 per cent indicated that none or very few offers of this kind were made, and none indicated that this kind of offer was required for all or most offers)
- the completion of an Access to HE course, with no further requirements (64 per cent indicated that none or very few offers of this kind were made).

Changes for types of offers anticipated for the 2011 entry cycle

28 Forty nine per cent indicated that they anticipated changes in the kinds of offers that would be made in 2011. The main kinds of changes anticipated were that they were less likely to base offers on completion of an Access to HE course with no further requirements; achievement of the Access to HE Diploma with no further requirements; and achievement of

additional credits. Offers requiring grades (both with and without reference to performance in particular subjects) were more likely.

Important factors in considering applications from Access to HE students

29 Respondents indicated that the most important considerations were: QAA recognition of the qualification ('very important' for 90 per cent of respondents); the level at which the student has studied certain subjects ('very important' for 79 per cent of respondents); and the appropriateness of the Diploma subject, as indicated by its title ('very important' for 74 per cent of respondents). Also mentioned was the importance of examination and/or witnessed assessment on Access to HE courses.

Information sources

30 Of the sources of information suggested, those that had been most frequently consulted were: QAA's guidelines for HE admissions staff (consulted by 82 per cent), the UCAS UK Qualifications for Entry to University and Colleges (consulted by 79 per cent), and QAA's Access courses database (consulted by 76 per cent).

Other comments

31 Other comments echoed themes that had been raised in the points made about remaining barriers, including instances of significant numbers of credits being offered beyond the 60 required for the award of the Access to HE Diploma and variation between courses and the information provided on UCAS applications. Positive comments included references to changing perceptions of the Access to HE Diploma within HEIs, and the benefit of the grading system in terms of demonstrating parity with entry requirements for other level 3 qualifications.

Responses from Access to HE tutors (444) and AVAs (15)

32 This section summarises information provided by AVAs in their annual self-evaluation reports to QAA in December 2010, which included Access to HE tutors' responses to surveys conducted by AVAs in summer 2010.

Section 1 - the grade descriptors and their components, and their application to units

33 The questions in this section asked tutors about their experience of the grade descriptors themselves, in terms of the language of the descriptors and its relevance to their units, subjects and assessment practice, and in relation to the extent to which the model allows tutors to differentiate between student performance.

34 The total number and percentage of responses from all respondents to the statements in these questions have been collated and calculated.¹ The lowest total percentage of all responses in the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' category for any AVA was 70 per cent, and the highest total percentage was 93 per cent.

¹ Please note that two AVAs did not provide their raw data, so the figures used are based on their reported percentages.

35 For the three AVAs where the overall scores in these categories were in the 70-80 per cent range, there were, in each case, one or two statements that got markedly lower scores than the rest. These statements (b and f) related to:

- (b) the appropriateness of the allocated grade descriptors to units being used by the tutor (strongly agree/agree being 37 per cent in one AVA, and 59 per cent in another). In both cases, the AVA indicated that it had plans to make the review of allocated grade descriptors a priority for the coming year)
- (f) the usefulness of the language of the grade descriptors in supporting feedback to students about their graded performance (strongly agree/agree being 39 per cent in one AVA and 46 per cent in another)

36 It was clear from some of the free text comments relating to statement f that a number of tutors in several different AVAs were under the impression that they could use **only** the language of the grade descriptors in their feedback to students, and that this was constraining. This is a misunderstanding of the guidance on feedback, as although it was always hoped and recommended that tutors use the language of the descriptors to structure their feedback, it was never intended to prevent tutors from using other language as appropriate. The key consideration in the guidance is that feedback and indicative grades should be consistent with each other.

37 Overall support for statement e, 'The difference between the requirements for Pass, Merit and Distinction allowed me to make grading judgements that reflected broad differences in standards of student's performance in my subject', was reasonably high in all AVAs. However, five AVAs reported that this had been a topic about which they had received many queries during the year. Comments in this area focused on what one AVA described as an 'uneasiness on the part of a minority of staff and students' about the 'reliance on "professional judgement" as the basis for distinguishing between Merit and Distinction', with reported concerns about the 'subjectivity' of judgements derived from the descriptors.

38 It is clearly important to ensure that the grade descriptors provide an adequate basis for meaningful differentiation between grades for all courses, and proposals to revise the wording of descriptors in ways which enhance the clarity of their meaning or usefulness will, no doubt, come forward over time (although none were made in the feedback to these surveys). However, the suggestion made in one response that the A level or BTEC model might be something to aspire to may be indicative of an underlying confusion about the necessary nature of assessment in the Access to HE qualification model, and the proper role of tutors within that, that also accounts for some of these queries and uneasiness. Those with experience of qualifications which have a nationally prescribed curriculum and centrally managed assessment, may need particular induction to Access to HE assessment to ensure that they recognise the essential differences between assessment for those other qualifications, and the use within the Access to HE model of common, generic grade descriptors for centre-devised assignments that they themselves assess. The consequences of the flexibility of the Access to HE model, in terms of responsibility at centre level for establishing how the broad requirements of the generic descriptors should be interpreted to identify specific requirements for the assignment, may need particular focus in continuing training and induction of new staff in order to ensure that centres and individual tutors are able to use the grade descriptors confidently and rigorously.

39 Equally, tutors who have long experience of working on Access to HE in a model which uses detailed assessment criteria may need to be reminded that the grade descriptors do not (and cannot) work in the same way as the detailed assessment criteria of units.

40 A slightly different issue focused on difficulties that were experienced (particularly in areas such as Maths, IT and some study skills units), where it was claimed that the assessment criteria were so comprehensive and detailed that there was little opportunity for identifying differentiated performance at level 3.

41 While some indicated some difficulty in differentiating clearly between Merit and Distinction, two AVAs raised the question of whether the three grading bands (Pass/Merit/Distinction) provided sufficient differentiation for HEIs. The different perceptions of the 'broadness' of the grading bands may be an issue that would benefit from some review and clarification of guidance, and an exploration of the practices and views of AVAs where this does not appear to be an issue. The different perceptions may also have a bearing on the overall distribution of grades in this first year.

Conclusions

42 The main themes that emerge from responses in this section are:

- a concern that a system that relies at several points on 'professional judgement' is not 'objective'
- some concerns that the grade descriptors themselves do not provide enough detailed differentiation, and the confidence of some tutors in the use of the model
- some conflicting views about whether the grading bands are too narrow or too broad.

43 Further staff development may help to ensure that those responsible for designing assignments, for providing information to students about the requirements of assessment, and undertaking assessment at local level (as they have always done for Access to HE courses) are able to make explicit the connection between the generic grade descriptors and the particular demands for achieving different grades on individual assignments, and then apply these confidently when making grading judgements.

44 Although several issues have been identified as ones that might need some review, the overall judgement from all the AVAs is that the grading scheme appears to be working satisfactorily, with no issues of such concern that they require fundamental changes to the model. Most of the AVAs also acknowledged that the implementation of the grading model had proceeded more smoothly than they had anticipated, and that the issues that had emerged would, they hoped, be dealt with during 2010-11 as tutors and centres became more experienced and addressed their 'teething troubles'.

Section 2 - operating the grading system

45 The questions in section 2 were divided into two further subsections. The first (statements a-d) looked at tutors' clarity about planning for assessment, the second (statements e-k) for tutors' clarity about assessing student work using the grading scheme.

46 For the first section, the range of these percentage scores in the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' categories was 61 per cent (one AVA) to 91 per cent (two AVAs). For the second section, the range of relevant scores was 79 per cent to 97 per cent.

47 As with Section 1, the overall percentage scores in the lower levels of these ranges were reduced by the lower than average (for the particular AVA) responses to one or more statements. In the first subsection, the statement that attracted low scores was statement c, which relates to numerical marking. The lowest rating for this statement was 17 per cent ('strongly agree' and 'agree'), with five other AVAs reporting responses between 34 per cent and 44 per cent. Six AVAs commented that issues to do with varying aspects of the use of numerical marking had been a topic of frequently raised questions through the year.

48 In the second subsection only one AVA reported a response of less than 50 per cent, which was for statement j, which relates to the rules for referrals.

49 Eleven AVA reports raised concerns about the rules for resubmissions. There were a number of different concerns identified, although they were generally expressed in terms of a perception that the current rules were unfair to students, in a number of different ways:

- a unfair in as much as a student allowed a resubmission to ensure that work was complete (that is, to ensure that it met all the learning outcomes) might be able to achieve a higher grade than a student who achieved all learning outcomes at the first attempt
- b unfair in relation to the concurrent rule that students cannot resubmit work to improve their grade
- c unfair by extension to the practice in other level 3 qualifications that do allow re-sits (A levels) and resubmissions (BTEC)
- d unfair in the context of the practice in some AVAs to allow students whose first submission achieves level 2 to resubmit to improve the work to level 3 standard (in the context of the parallel delivery of level 2 and 3 units).

50 These are not necessarily related issues, and need to be considered separately. However, it does seem that the rules for resubmission are not universally approved, and that these views are influenced by different practices in specific AVAs. The rules, and the implications of possible alternatives, may therefore need to be reviewed.

Overall impact on course structure

51 AVAs were invited to comment on the overall impact of the implementation of the grading scheme on their course structures. The consensus appears to be that this has been minimal. Two AVAs commented that there was some evidence that tutors were deferring level 3 assessments until later in the programme than before, and one expressed a concern that tutors were using a narrower range of forms of assessment than they had before.

Conclusions

52 There are quite high levels of confidence among tutors about the application of grading to their assessment, but that confidence appears to be higher in some AVAs than in others. The use of numerical marking emerges as an area of practice which is still causing some confusion and uncertainty, as do the rules relating to resubmission of student work.

Section 3 - support and guidance

53 Section 3 asked for tutor feedback on the usefulness of a range of types of support and guidance that had been available to them during the year.

54 The results indicate that all forms of guidance had been helpful to tutors, with at least 60 per cent ratings for 'agree' or 'strongly agree' in most categories and often higher than this. In some AVAs, the AVA's own guidance had been found to be slightly more useful than the QAA documents, and there were several comments reported that the full QAA guidance was a large and complicated document. In three AVAs, internal discussions with colleagues had proved to be the most helpful form of support, but again this was within a context of high levels of agreement on the value of all categories of support.

55 In terms of what further guidance would be appreciated, all categories received support, with some emerging more strongly in some AVAs than others. The form of support for which there was the strongest preference, in all AVAs, was written guidance and exemplars, generally followed by training or coaching. Three AVAs however, expressed their concern at the high score in the 'not aware of/did not use' category, and all AVAs had some scores in this category. (The three AVAs all intend to review their communication strategies.) More detailed analysis of the data might identify the extent to which those people asking for further guidance were those who were unaware of existing guidance, rather than needing further or different explanations of how the grading scheme is expected to operate.

Conclusions

56 Overall it appears that providers have welcomed the guidance and support they have been provided with, although it is clear that in some cases it did not reach all tutors. The results for this section of the survey need to be considered in the light of the areas of practice that are causing most concern, in particular numerical marking and resubmission practice.

Section 4 - student responses

57 Section 4 asked tutors for their perception of student response to the grading scheme. For 12 of the AVAs it was possible to work out the overall percentage of scores in the 'in all cases' and 'in most cases' categories for this question. This demonstrates a range of response from 59 per cent to 94 per cent. The remaining two AVAs commented that support for all statements was strong. In some instances AVAs commented that tutor perceptions were slightly more negative than the student attitudes indicated in the outcomes of the AVA student survey.

58 The categories that appeared to be less strongly supported, within this overall pattern, were tutor perceptions of how well students made use of grading information in assignment briefs, and the extent to which students used feedback about grading to improve their performance.

59 Despite some tutor concerns about the fairness of the resubmission regulations, there were generally high levels of support for the view that students accepted them.

60 Almost all of the AVAs reported very few student appeals against their grades.

Conclusions

61 Although there are variations between AVAs, tutors seem generally to be of the view that students are positive about, and accepting of, the grading scheme.

Section 5 - tutor responses

62 Tutors were asked in this section about their experience of the impact of the implementation of grading on their practice. Question 5a related to any plans they have for

making changes in aspects of practice. Question 5b asked for an estimation of the amount of additional work grading has created for them over the year.

63 Between half and two-thirds of tutors reported plans to make some changes in aspects of their assessment practice for the second year of grading. The AVAs' comments about this were universally positive, regarding these planned changes as thoughtful responses to learning about the effectiveness of practice in the first year of implementation.

64 For question 5b, the total scores and percentages about the amount of extra work that had been involved for them in the implementation of grading for the categories 'a lot extra' and 'some extra' were each calculated from the AVA data where this was possible. The scores for 'a lot extra' work ranged from 6 per cent to 43 per cent, and for 'some extra' from 15 per cent to 42 per cent.

65 The overall picture that emerges is, as might be expected, that the implementation of grading created extra work for tutors, although the areas in which this has been most prominent seems to vary from AVA to AVA, perhaps reflecting the way in which the requirements of the grading scheme have had different consequences in terms of the pre-existing approach to assessment practice within each AVA.

66 In the AVA discussion of the results, a number commented that their perception was that the amount of paperwork involved in the new system, including expectations about the amount of feedback given to students and the time taken to record and track grades, was of particular concern to some tutors. All of the AVAs seemed to be of the view that this situation would improve once tutors became more familiar with the scheme.

AVA plans

67 All of the AVAs reported that they were planning to provide further support and guidance to their centres to address the specific areas of concern identified through the survey and through their own feedback from moderation and standardisation processes. The key areas identified, which may give some indication of what may be the most significant issues (although some caution is needed in this conclusion, as AVAs were not asked to provide detailed plans on this subject), were: providing feedback to students, standardisation, assessment planning, designing assignments, assessment regulations, resubmissions, representations and referrals, and support for moderators.

68 Two AVAs specifically mentioned the value of having introduced a common template for aspects of the assessment process, and in particular for assignment briefs. Two others reported their regret that they had not done this in the first year, and their intentions to introduce common templates during 2010-11.

Conclusions

69 A significant number of tutors in the survey reported plans to make changes to their assessment practice as a result of their experience of the first year of grading. A significant number also reported that grading has created additional work for them. AVAs, however, indicated that the amount of additional work was not excessively more than might be expected when introducing new and additional requirements to the assessment system, and that they were optimistic that the extra time needed would be reduced as tutors become more experienced and as revisions to documentation were completed.

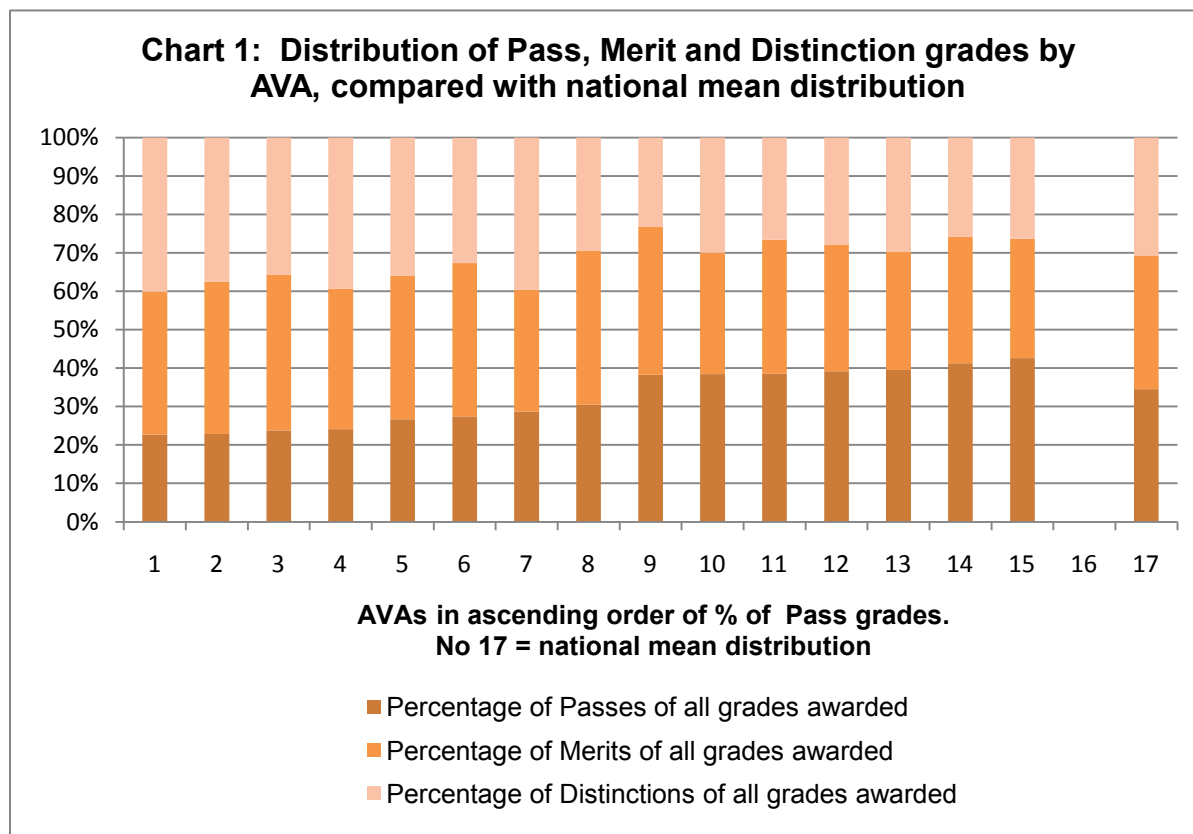
Grading data

70 As part of an evaluation of the implementation process, AVAs were asked to submit data relating both to patterns and distributions of grades across their AVA, and the number of credits achieved by students who were awarded the Access to HE Diploma in 2009-2010. (This data does not include grades awarded for partial achievement, or to students who were in the second year of a two-year programme.)

Distribution of grades

71 As Chart 1 demonstrates, there was some variation in the overall distribution of the Pass, Merit and Distinction grades between AVAs. The national mean was derived from the combined actual totals provided by all AVAs. The distribution of grades nationally in 2010 was 35 per cent, 35 per cent and 31 per cent for Pass, Merit and Distinction, respectively. The range across AVAs was:

- 21 per cent to 42 per cent for Pass (variation -14 per cent to +7 per cent)
- 31 per cent to 41 per cent for Merit (variation -4 per cent to +6 per cent)
- 23 per cent to 40 per cent for Distinction (variation -8 per cent to +9 per cent)



72 There is a general pattern evident that, where fewer Pass grades were awarded, more Distinction grades were also awarded: the range in the percentage of Merit grades awarded is narrower than the range for Pass or Distinction grades.

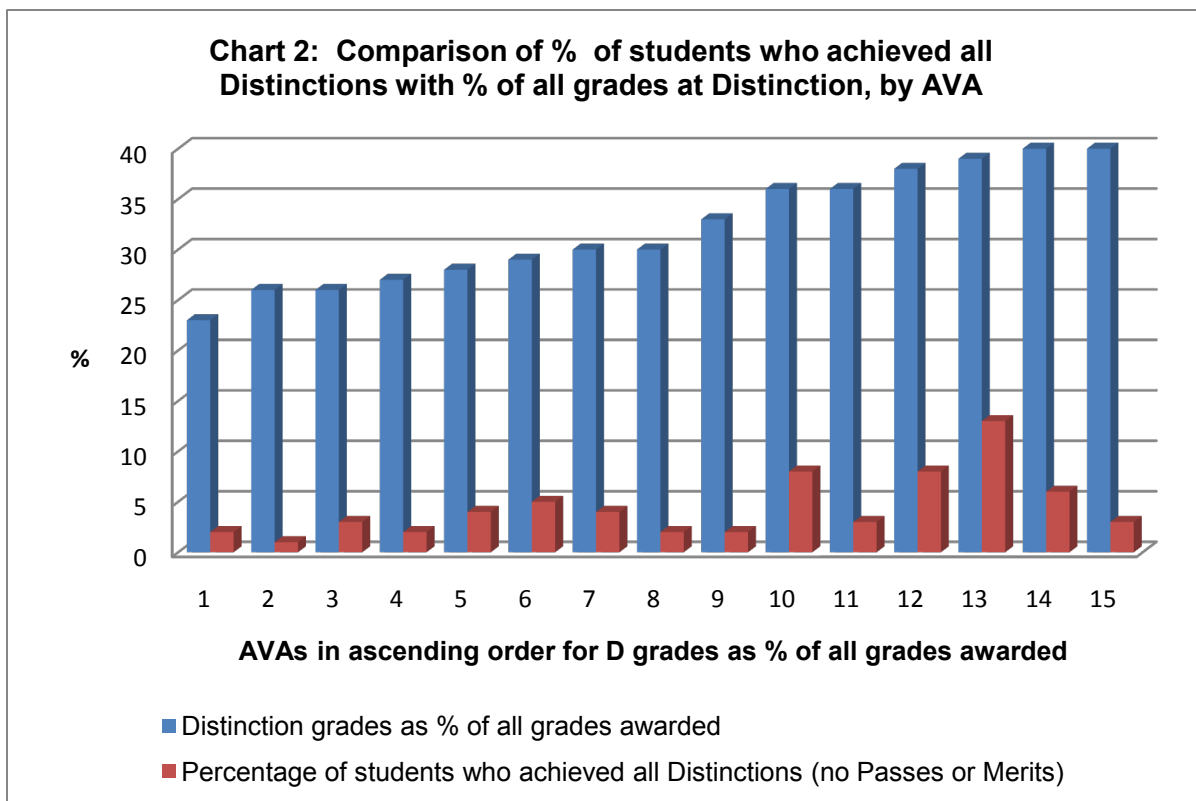
73 In considering these patterns, it is important to be cautious and to bear in mind that Access to HE assessment and grading is criterion referenced, not norm referenced. It should therefore not be assumed that there is a 'normal distribution' that all centres and courses should be aiming for, and from which deviation is a necessary cause for concern. Patterns of grade distribution within centres, or subject areas, or even at unit level could vary considerably from the national mean distribution, but nonetheless be valid and legitimate. A variation in grade profiles between different subjects is a well known feature of graded performance in other qualifications; we may also expect to see some variation between individual student cohorts over time, reflecting differences in actual achievement.

74 The returns for each AVA do not provide data on whether courses, providers or subjects have different distributions, and how any differences that are specific to an individual AVA may have affected overall outcomes. At this stage, AVAs have only been able to report with reference to their own data, and have had to speculate about why certain outcomes might be evident in that data. One AVA suggested, for example, that because of tutors' uncertainty, Merit was the most commonly used (safest) grade, while another explained that because of the same uncertainty, Merit was used least frequently. Several AVAs reported within their returns that they would monitor these patterns closely and would be interested to see the national data; and it is clearly a matter of interest to investigate - though comprehensive explanations might not easily be found - why these differences might have occurred in the outcomes from 15 separate awarding bodies.

Variations in grade profiles

75 Within the distribution pattern for each AVA there will clearly be substantial variety of different overall grade profiles achieved by different students. The data survey asked for details of a variety of such patterns, and they are not all analysed or reported here, but the patterns that may be considered to be of particular significance, such as the number of students who achieved all Distinction grades, have been analysed.

76 As Chart 2 shows, the number of students in any AVA who achieved all grades at Distinction is relatively low in most AVAs, with a range of 1 per cent to 13 per cent. The national percentage of students getting all Distinctions was 4 per cent. Chart 2 also demonstrates that there is no obvious relationship between the proportion of students who get all Distinction grades within an AVA with the number of Distinction grades awarded across an AVA.



77 Throughout the development and pilot phases of the grading scheme, there was speculation as to whether unit size would have a consequence for the likelihood of any particular grade being achieved, and in particular whether it would make it easier or more difficult for a student to gain a Distinction. Grades are awarded for each unit achieved, but because units can be of different credit values (1, 2, 3, 6, 9 or 12), the number of units that students achieve to gain a Diploma can and does vary between AVAs (and sometimes between centres and courses within an AVA). The data suggests that there may be an inverse relationship between the average number of grades awarded and the percentage of students who achieved all Distinctions. It appears to be the case that where fewer (and therefore larger units) are taken, there is a greater likelihood of students achieving all Distinctions. This is not an entirely consistent pattern, but it is sufficient to suggest that further analysis of the relationship between unit size and grades achieved should be undertaken at AVA and national level.

Conclusions

78 The data on grades awarded indicates that there is a degree of variation between AVAs in the proportion of different grades and overall pattern of grade profiles awarded. Because of the nature of criterion referenced assessment some variation across student populations and over time is inevitable, and it is not assumed that the national averages represent a normal distribution to which all should aspire. There is, however, a need for further exploration of both the actual data and distribution patterns, in the context of an understanding of grading patterns in criterion referenced assessment, to ensure that AVAs and QAA can respond appropriately to any variations in grade profiles.



QAA

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