Awarding the Access to HE Diploma

Information for students completing the Access to HE Diploma after 31 July 2020
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Introduction

1 The COVID-19 outbreak is the most significant challenge we have all faced in at least a generation and our priority is to ensure that we continue to support our students during this time of uncertainty.

2 On 3 April 2020, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) announced that students who plan to complete their Access to HE course after 31 July 2020 would be supported to complete their studies through changes to the delivery of teaching and assessment of their course.

3 The Access to HE Diploma (the Diploma) is a nationally-recognised qualification which is designed to provide preparation for study in higher education for adults returning to education. Individual Diplomas are validated and awarded by Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), according to regulations and specifications set by QAA.

4 For each Diploma there is an approved set of units of assessment in a number of different areas which are appropriate for the subject of the Diploma. Access to HE Diplomas awarded to students who were due to complete their Diploma before 31 July 2020 will still be made up of 60 credits. Some credits will be awarded based on successful completion of units and some calculated for assessments due after 20 March 2020.

QAA grading scheme: Grading the Access to HE Diploma

5 The QAA grading scheme will continue to be applied to all assessments (that is, assessed work). The following information outlines how assessment grades will be awarded.

6 A grade is awarded for every graded Level 3 unit that a student completes successfully as part of an Access to HE Diploma. All Diplomas comprise 45 credits from graded Level 3 units, and 15 credits from Level 2 or Level 3 units that are not graded. There is no overall grade for the Access to HE Diploma.

7 The number of grades awarded to a student depends on the number of graded Level 3 units required for the particular Access to HE Diploma. This number can vary because, although all Diplomas contain 45 credits from graded Level 3 units, these units can have a value of 3, 6 or 9 credits. So, for example, some Diplomas have a small number of 9-credit units, while others have a larger number of 3-credit units.

8 The grade awarded for each unit is shown on the achievement transcript that is issued with Access to HE Diplomas. The transcript also shows how many credits were awarded for each successfully completed graded or ungraded unit.

The grades

9 A grade of pass, merit or distinction can be assigned to each graded unit. There are no separate grade descriptors for 'not achieved'. A student may not achieve a unit if the specified learning outcomes for a unit were not met.

The grade descriptors

10 There is a common set of broad, generic grade descriptors which are used as the basis for all grading judgements on all courses. The seven descriptors relate to different aspects of performance which are relevant to the assessment of a student’s readiness for higher study. They are presented under the following headings:

1. Understanding of the subject
2. Application of knowledge
3. Application of skills
4. Use of information
5. Communication and presentation
6. Autonomy/independence
7. Quality
Using the QAA grading scheme

11 The assigned descriptors for a unit are made clear to students and are included in the assignment briefs provided to students by course tutors for each assignment.

12 Units are assessed in different ways - some are assessed through a single assessment (assignment); others involve more than one assessment. Integrated assessments may also be used to assess the learning outcomes of two or more different units through one piece of work. Irrespective of the nature or number of separate assessments or individual tasks used to assess the unit, the final outcome is a single unit grade which indicates the overall standard of performance for the unit.

13 When the tutor grades student assessments, they give assessment grades (of pass, merit or distinction) for each of the grade descriptors selected for use with the particular assignment(s) that have been designed to assess the unit.

14 Practices for managing the submission of student work, including drafts, late submissions and opportunities for resubmission or reassessment are governed by the regulations of the QAA grading scheme.

Quality assuring graded Access to HE Diplomas

15 To make sure that grades are fair and not unduly affected by the current situation, AVAs and providers will ensure that assessment grades go through a process of internal moderation, external moderation and standardisation.

16 The AVA’s operation of moderation ensures that consistent assessment standards are applied in all instances where Access to HE Diplomas, or common units are delivered on more than one course or more than one occasion.

17 The AVA ensures that its providers operate rigorous internal moderation procedures which meet the AVA’s requirements, and which facilitate:

17.1 the application of consistent standards of demand in assessment
17.2 assessment design that maximises reliability and validity in assessment outcomes
17.3 the consistent and accurate application of QAA assessment regulations.

18 The standardisation procedure provides opportunities for tutors, internal moderators and external moderators to share, discuss and, where necessary, recalibrate their expectations relating to the standards of work expected by:

18.1 the requirements of any work at Level 2 or Level 3
18.2 the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the specific units that they work with
18.3 the grade descriptors.

19 If you have any further questions that are not addressed, please contact either your provider or AVA.

Where a student feels their case has not been addressed by this guidance, they should speak to either their course tutor or AVA.
Will I receive calculated grades?

Current information advises that students due to complete their QAA-recognised Access to HE Diploma by 31 July 2020, will receive calculated grades. Students due to complete after 31 July will be supported to complete their studies through changes to the delivery of teaching and assessment of their course. If you have any concerns regarding your specific circumstances, please speak to your provider.

We want to ensure that you receive fair results and that there is parity with other students on qualifications with a completion date after 31 July 2020 with a similar intent, which is progression to higher study.

We expect your provider to support you as effectively as possible during this time. Access to HE providers and Access Validating Agencies already have procedures in place to allow you to request extensions to deadlines and to identify where extenuating circumstances may affect your academic performance, should the current situation make studying difficult. These procedures are available to all students.

If you feel your grades during this period do not reflect your previous performance, please speak to your course tutor.

Do I have to continue to complete assessments?

Yes. We know that many Access to HE students are engaged in a tricky balance between work, family responsibilities and studies. However, it is important that you are as well prepared as you can be for your transition into higher education, so continuing with learning and assessments, where possible, is important to ensure you have covered all the subject knowledge and skills in order to meet the requirements of your Diploma. Continuing with learning and assessments will also help you feel more confident that you are ready to take the next step in your education or career pathway.

Access to HE providers and Access Validating Agencies already have procedures in place to allow you to request extensions to deadlines and to identify where extenuating circumstances may affect your academic performance, should the current situation make studying difficult. These procedures are available to all students.

Where assessments have been completed after 20 March 2020, course tutors and senior course managers will be expected to exercise caution where the outcomes from the assessments suggests a change in performance. In many cases this is likely to reflect the circumstances and context in which the work is done.

To make sure that grades are fair and not unduly affected by the current situation, AVAs and providers will ensure that assessment grades go through a process of internal moderation, external moderation and standardisation. As part of the moderation process, AVAs may adjust the assessment grades of some assessments upwards or downwards accordingly.

The current situation means I am unable to study because I am a key worker/carer or now have additional commitments, what should I do?

Access to HE Diplomas have been designed to be responsive to changes in circumstances, for example, during a period of illness. If you are unable to study, please talk to your course provider about the best way to continue with your Diploma.
Options include:

a. making an application for extenuating circumstances
b. applying for an extension to assessment submission dates
c. a short pause¹ of less than four weeks - for example, if you are in self isolation - this will not necessarily affect the planned end-date of your course
d. a formal break or suspension in learning.

If your course is not publicly funded, your course provider will be able to discuss other options that may be available to you.

You should contact your course provider to agree the appropriate steps taken that will be based on both you and your course provider's circumstances.

**I am unable to access the online lessons and materials, what should I do?**

If you are unable to access online lessons and materials you should contact your course provider so that you can discuss the options available to you.

**I am finding it difficult to study with only online lessons and materials and am worried it will affect my grades and completing the Diploma, what should I do?**

You should contact your course provider if you are concerned about your learning because of the adaptations to the way the course is delivered. You may be able to get access to additional support or tools to help you study online.

Course providers may also adapt or reschedule the delivery of their courses to allow you to revisit topics delivered once course providers return to normal operation.

Where assessments have been completed after 20 March 2020, course tutors and senior course managers will be expected to exercise caution where the outcomes from the assessments suggest a change in performance. In many cases this is likely to reflect the circumstances and context in which the work is done.

To make sure that grades are fair and not unduly affected by the current situation, AVAs and providers will ensure that assessment grades go through a process of internal moderation, external moderation and standardisation.

**What do I do if I feel the work I've produced does not reflect my previous performance?**

We know that the current environment is a really challenging one, and we want you to be supported as effectively as possible during this time. Access to HE course tutors are working hard to adapt to new ways of delivery and assessment, and are developing materials to help you get the most out of your learning and assessment in order to prepare you for higher study.

Access to HE providers and Access Validating Agencies already have procedures in place to allow you to request extensions to deadlines and to identify where extenuating circumstances may affect your academic performance, should the current situation make studying difficult. These procedures are available to you. It is also possible that some assessments may be rescheduled. If you feel your grades during this period do not reflect your previous performance, please speak to your

¹ relates to publicly funded provision in England
course tutor.

Where assessments have been completed after 20 March 2020, course tutors and senior course managers will be expected to exercise caution where the outcomes from the assessments suggests a change in performance. In many cases this is likely to reflect the circumstances and context in which the work is done.

To make sure that grades are fair and not unduly affected by the current situation, AVAs and providers will ensure that assessment grades go through a process of internal moderation, external moderation and standardisation.

Can I apply for extenuating circumstances?

Yes. We know that the current environment is a really challenging one, and we want you to be supported as effectively as possible during this time. Access to HE providers and AVAs already have in place procedures to allow you to identify extenuating circumstances that may affect your academic performance, should the current situation make studying difficult.

To discuss your specific circumstances, please speak directly to your course tutor.

How do I apply for extenuating circumstances?

Please contact your course tutor who will explain how to apply.

Can I apply for an extension to an assessment submission deadline?

Yes. Access to HE providers and AVAs already have procedures in place to allow you to apply for an extension, should the current situation make studying difficult.

To discuss your specific circumstances please speak directly to your course tutor.

How do I apply for an extension to an assessment submission deadline?

Please contact your course tutor who will explain how to apply.

Can I apply for a break in learning?

Yes. Access to HE providers and AVAs already have procedures in place to allow you to take a break in learning, should the current situation make studying difficult. You and your course provider can agree to suspend learning while the learner takes a break. This allows the learner to continue later with the same eligibility that applied when they first started their learning.

Publicly-funded courses in England and Wales already have provision for ‘breaks/suspension in learning’ or for a range of circumstances.

Guidance from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) states:

‘The course provider and the learner can agree to suspend learning while the learner takes a break. This allows the learner to continue later with the same eligibility that applied when they first started their learning.

We are extending the current breaks in learning rules for ESFA funded AEB and advanced learner loans to:
- allow a break in learning at the learner’s request where a learner is self-isolating, or caring for others affected by coronavirus (COVID-19) and is unable to continue by distance learning and/or an online offer
- allow a break in learning to be recorded where a provider is unable to deliver because of the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on their own business and there is no possible delivery by distance and/or online learning.

If your course is not publicly funded, your course provider will be able to discuss other options that may be available to you.

Guidance from Student Finance Wales states:

‘If you suspend your studies Student Finance Wales will reassess your application. Your grant entitlement will then be recalculated based on your period of attendance until you suspended your studies.’

To discuss your specific circumstances please speak directly to your course tutor.

**How do I apply for a break in learning?**

Please contact your course provider who will explain how to apply.

**How will you ensure my grades will be fair?**

To make sure that grades are fair, AVAs and providers will ensure grades go through a process of internal moderation, external moderation, and standardisation. These quality assurance processes will take into account any extenuating circumstances identified. As part of the moderation process AVAs may adjust the assessment grades of some assessments upwards or downwards accordingly to ensure that no student is advantaged or disadvantaged.

**Can I appeal my grades?**

Your provider will have processes in place to support you. If you feel your grades during this period do not reflect your previous performance, please speak to your course tutor.

**I am currently studying GCSE’s or functional skills alongside my Access to HE Diploma, what happens about these qualifications?**

GCSEs and functional skills are regulated by Ofqual and we recommend that you speak to your course tutor or refer to the information produced by Ofqual.

**I wasn’t due to finish my Diploma until after 31 July 2020, but my circumstances have changed which means I have more time to study - can I finish earlier?**

You should speak to your course provider to find out if it is possible for you to complete earlier. In some cases, it may be possible to complete some units of study earlier than planned which may mean you can complete your Diploma before your original end date.

Your Diploma will be awarded and quality assured as noted on page 1 and 2.
Further advice and information

If you need further information, please take a look at our frequently-asked questions and/or contact your provider.

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