

Part D: Identifying and approving grade descriptors for units

This document provides regulation and guidance about the process by which appropriate grade descriptors are identified and then formally approved by an Access Validating Agency (AVA).

1 Responsibilities

- QAA is responsible for identifying, approving and maintaining the generic grade descriptors that are used for grading the Access to HE Diploma (Diploma). (The full grade descriptors are given in Part C.)
- **AVAs are responsible for ensuring that appropriate descriptors are identified and formally approved for each unit.**
- Providers are responsible for selecting the appropriate components of the descriptors to be used when individual student assignments are assessed. (See Part E for guidance on this process.)

2 Process for approving appropriate grade descriptors

During the initial grading implementation phase, grade descriptors are assigned to existing approved units by processes designed by individual AVAs. These processes have to meet certain overarching requirements and particular timescales which have been specified separately to AVAs. Approval processes during the implementation phase should be appropriate to the nature and organisation of the provision that the AVA validates, and consistent with its own quality assurance structures and procedures.

Individual AVA approval processes for assigning grade descriptors to units in the initial implementation phase should also take account of the guidance about considering and identifying the individual descriptors that is provided in sections 3 and 4 of this document.

After the initial grading implementation phase, the process for approving grade descriptors for use with individual units is undertaken as part of AVAs' formal processes for unit validation. In addition:

- a the approval process includes explicit consideration of the appropriateness of the proposed descriptors
- b the approval process confirms that the process for identifying appropriate descriptors for units (as described in section 3 below) has been correctly followed
- c the approved descriptors are specified on unit templates and form part of the formal course documentation
- d once descriptors have been approved for a unit, those descriptors are applied whenever and wherever that unit is delivered
- e once approved, any change to a unit's named descriptors must be approved by the AVA.

3 Process for identifying grade descriptors for units

The process for identifying appropriate grade descriptors for units takes place as part of the process of unit development and specification. As part of that process, the following points are taken into account:

- a those involved in identifying the descriptors to be used with particular units have subject expertise which is relevant to the units being considered
- b appropriate descriptors are identified for use with every level 3 unit which is included in the rules of combination of an Access to HE Diploma

- c all seven descriptors are considered as potentially eligible for inclusion among the descriptors to be assigned to a unit
- d it is not a requirement to use all seven descriptors
- e a maximum of seven, and a minimum of two, descriptors are identified for each unit. In most cases, the number of descriptors for a unit will be greater than the minimum of two
- f all units use grade descriptor 7 (Quality)
- g any combination of descriptors can be recommended for use with a unit
- h the appropriateness of the descriptors for different units is identified through considering which aspects of performance differentiate students' achievement for that unit. The unit's learning outcomes are the key reference point for considering the appropriateness of the different grade descriptors
- i the group of descriptors identified for the unit will allow tutors, in assessing student work for grades, to reward the full range of types of performance which may be relevant to assessment of a student's performance on the unit
- j decisions about which descriptors to assign should be based on capturing all the grading opportunities offered by the unit, and not on any other consideration
- k decisions about which specific components of a descriptor are to be used for grading are made by tutors when delivering and assessing the unit.

4 Considering and identifying appropriate grade descriptors

The seven grade descriptors (see Part C) describe different types of performance, all of which are relevant to successful study in higher education. This is likely to be reflected by the use of most, if not all, of the seven descriptors at some point within the different units that make up any Diploma's rules of combination.

The importance and significance of different types of performance is likely to differ between different subject disciplines. As a result, it is quite likely that some units will naturally relate to more descriptors than others. It is also likely that different Diplomas will feature some descriptors more frequently than others, reflecting the different kinds of performance that are particularly valued in different subjects.

The descriptors are designed to capture the grading opportunities that naturally occur when a unit is delivered and assessed. The fundamental questions are 'What is this unit asking of a student?' and 'What sort of things does a student need to know or do in order to achieve the learning outcomes of the unit?' The answers to these questions should not be affected in any way by how the unit is assessed.

The guidance provided here about the individual grade descriptors is intended to help those involved in the process of deciding which descriptors should be used with particular units.

Grade descriptor 1 - Understanding of the subject

Key questions

Do the learning outcomes of this unit require a student to demonstrate their understanding of the subject? Does the type of understanding required offer opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding beyond that needed for 'Pass'?

Comment

In some mathematics, IT and science units there is a discrete aspect of knowledge needed for the unit which a student either knows or does not know. Where a unit is of this type, grade descriptor 3 (Application of skills) is the most appropriate descriptor, in that students apply intellectual skills associated with mathematics or science to solve problems.

Grade descriptor 2 - Application of knowledge

Key questions

Do the learning outcomes of this unit require a student to demonstrate that they are able to apply their knowledge? For example, does it require them to apply theories; to provide explanations; to apply models to solve problems?

Comment

It is expected that this descriptor will be relevant to a large number of units. For certain types of mathematics and science units, however, grade descriptor 3 (Application of skills) is the more appropriate descriptor to use.

Grade descriptor 3 - Application of skills

Key questions

Does this unit require a student to demonstrate the application of one or more skills? If so, what are those skills and are they most appropriately covered by any other descriptor?

Comment

This descriptor can apply to intellectual, technical or practical skills. It should not be used for skills covered by other descriptors such as research skills (covered in grade descriptor 4), communication skills (covered in grade descriptor 5) or personal management skills (covered in grade descriptor 6). In mathematics, the ability to solve mathematical problems is regarded as an intellectual skill.

When considering the appropriateness of this descriptor to a unit, particular care should be taken to focus only on the learning required by the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit, disregarding anything that is known about how the unit is or may be assessed. This is to avoid two potential scenarios where it is possible to lose sight of the explicit purpose of a unit.

The first of these scenarios is applying the descriptor to aspects of student work which may occur because of the assessment method chosen. For example, tutors may ask students to produce a public health information pamphlet to convey information about a subject, in order to demonstrate their understanding of a subject. The learning outcomes do not require the students to demonstrate visual design skills, so this aspect of the work should not be assessed or graded.

The second example is where, in a science unit, students are required to discover some information through experimentation. The skills of the student in carrying out the experiment should only be graded as a 'skill' if there is a learning outcome which explicitly asks for demonstration of such skills, as opposed to the student being required to demonstrate their ability to apply a theory (Application of knowledge) to generate information through experimentation.

Grade descriptor 4 - Use of information

Key question

Does this unit require a student to work with new information? (This may include any or all of the stages of the process, from finding the information to evaluating and validating it.)

Comment

This capability is most frequently required within units that focus on research or on the methodology of the social sciences, although it may also be present in units on other topics.

Grade descriptor 5 - Communication and presentation

Key question

Does this unit require a student to communicate information in order to demonstrate their understanding of a subject, their ability to apply their knowledge, use information or manage their learning?

Comment

The ability to express oneself in a literate, articulate and appropriate way is critical for many disciplines and it is therefore likely that a significant number of units will provide opportunities for the use of this descriptor. The descriptor does not limit the choice of assessment methods for a tutor delivering the unit, as it encompasses oral and written forms of communication. The presentational aspect of the descriptor refers to appropriate forms and structures, and not to design aesthetics unless these are explicitly required by the unit.

This descriptor is not intended to cover the symbolic representation of ideas and information used in aspects of mathematics, IT and science. It should only be used for units within these disciplines where there is a clear requirement for a significant piece of work that would involve communication as described by the descriptor, such as a substantial investigation or project.

Grade descriptor 6: Autonomy/independence

Key question

Does this unit explicitly require the student to demonstrate their ability to manage their own learning, including planning, looking for and responding to guidance?

Comment

As with the other descriptors, this descriptor should only be used where the type of behaviour it describes is a clear requirement of the unit. With this descriptor in particular there is a danger of assuming that almost any unit could provide such opportunities if managed appropriately by the tutor. One of the aims of all courses leading to the achievement of the Access to HE Diploma is to help students become independent and autonomous learners. Courses therefore include units which are designed specifically to provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate such attributes; for example, units which relate to major final projects, extended essays, research skills units and so on. This descriptor is most appropriately used in such units.

Grade descriptor 7 - Quality

All units use this descriptor.



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