

Part E: Using grade descriptors in assessment

This document provides guidance for tutors about how various components of the grade descriptors are selected for use with individual assignments; and about how the descriptors are used in the assessment process.

1 Responsibilities

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

2 Introduction to using the descriptors

- a When student work which contributes to the award of the Access to HE Diploma is assessed, two processes are involved: the first for the award of credit (made with reference to the unit's assessment criteria); the second for the award of grades (made with reference to the unit's grade descriptors). This two-stage process is illustrated in Annex 1 of this part of the guidance.
- b The grade descriptors are generic. For the purposes of the Access to HE grading system, this means that they have been designed and developed so that they can be used on all courses, all units and all assignments. Each unit has a certain group of the descriptors approved for use with it when the unit itself is validated. The particular descriptors that are approved for the unit identify the types of performance that are to be considered when making a judgement for grading purposes.
- c Each descriptor includes a number of types of performance associated with the descriptor, identified by a number of different characteristics of that performance. Some of these characteristics are more relevant in certain subjects than others and some terms will also be more relevant for use with particular types of assessment than others.
- d In order to take advantage of the full scope and flexibility which has been built into the descriptors and make them relevant for specific assignments, tutors should identify which components of the grade descriptors to be used are most relevant for the particular assignment. The selected components of the unit's descriptors are then included as part of the assignment brief. This indicates to the student what is required to achieve a Merit or Distinction grade (a Pass grade being gained through the achievement of the learning outcomes).
- e The sorts of judgements that have to be made by tutors when they use the grade descriptors for assessment are the sorts of judgements that are necessary in order to provide full feedback to students about their performance and progress. The Access to HE grading scheme recognises that students benefit from receiving detailed feedback of this kind, as well as providing a means by which such feedback can be codified and such achievement recognised.

3 Principles for selecting grade descriptors for the assessment plan (one or more assignments) of a unit

- a All the grade descriptors assigned to a unit are used in the grading of a unit.
- b Where more than one assignment is used to assess a unit, a grade descriptor may be used more than once, but it is not a requirement that all of the selected grade descriptors are used for all assignments.
- c Grade descriptor 7 (Quality) is used for all assignments.
- d Each grade descriptor contains a number of components (as detailed in Part C). The rules about how these components can be used and combined are given with each grade descriptor (under the section 'Using this descriptor'). Decisions about which components of a grade descriptor to apply within the assessment of a unit are made at provider/tutor level.
- e Components are designed to reflect the different types of performance regarded as important by different subjects. Tutors apply only those components of a grade descriptor which describe the type of performance that the subject and assessment requires.
- f Tutors' decisions about which descriptor components to select for use with an assignment should ensure that students can be rewarded for performance which exceeds the standard required for Pass in all relevant areas.
- g Tutors provide students with information about how the work will be graded as part of an assignment brief, including details about which individual components of the grade descriptors are to be used in assessing the particular assignment.
- h Tutors provide feedback to students on their performance with reference to the selected components of the grade descriptors applied, using the descriptor components to identify particular strengths or areas for development.

4 Numerical marking

The Pass, Merit and Distinction grades do not have numerical equivalents, and the use of the grade descriptors as described above will not allow for direct conversion of numbers to grades (or vice versa). The principles and process for the use of numerical marking within the Access to HE grading scheme are given in Part F.

5 General guidance about terms used in the descriptors

The grade descriptors make use of a number of general terms such as 'very good' and 'excellent' which are frequently used in assessment situations as a shorthand to summarise a level of achievement. Exactly how these are interpreted will vary slightly between different subject areas and assignments, but there are some general principles that should be observed.

Generic terms used to describe Merit and Distinction level performance

All of the Merit descriptors relate to performance that is 'better than Pass, but not as good as Distinction'.

- The word 'generally' often features in the indicative content for Merit, and the word 'consistently' for Distinction. Tutors using the descriptors containing this language should take 'generally' to mean 'in most cases/instances' and 'consistently' to mean 'all the time/in almost every case/reliably'.
- The word 'excellent' is used a number of times within the descriptors to denote 'Distinction'. This should not be interpreted to suggest that absolute perfection is required in a student's work before a Distinction grade can be awarded. It would be more appropriate to look for work that significantly exceeds the standard required for a Pass, but allows for some small mistakes, omissions or imperfections, where such imperfections do not detract from the outstanding nature of the work.

6 Specific guidance about each grade descriptor

The guidance provided here about the individual grade descriptors is intended to help those involved in incorporating the grade descriptors into an assessment plan for a unit.

Grade descriptor 1 - Understanding of the subject

Interpreting this descriptor

- 'Area of study' could include the related area of work where appropriate; for example, music performance, media production, forensic science investigation.
- The 'knowledge base' should be defined in relation to the subject and the focus of the unit. For example, in an IT unit the relevant knowledge base would be the knowledge needed in order to be able to achieve the unit, rather than a detailed knowledge of all aspects of a complex program.
- Numerical marking may be used with this descriptor. (For guidance see the notes on numerical marking in Part F.)

Grade descriptor 2 - Application of knowledge

Interpreting this descriptor

- Tutors should think carefully about the appropriateness of the items in component c to the assessment, and use only those terms which a student has the opportunity to demonstrate through the assessed work. In a science unit, for example, it is unlikely that it would be appropriate to require both 'accuracy' and 'creativity'.
- Interpretation of 'breadth **or** depth' and 'breadth **and** depth'. Tutors need to make a judgement about how this applies to their subject area and the assessment task.
- Numerical marking is **not** allowed with this descriptor.

Grade descriptor 3 - Application of skills

Interpreting this descriptor

- Tutors should think carefully about the appropriateness of the items in component b to the assessment, and use only those terms which a student has the opportunity to demonstrate through the assessed work.
- The choice of items from the component should indicate the type of behaviour or performance that the assessment is designed to encourage, for example innovation may be more important than accuracy; precision may be more important than creativity.
- Numerical marking may be used with this descriptor. (For guidance see the notes on numerical marking given in Part F.)

Grade descriptor 4 - Use of information

Interpreting this descriptor

- Tutors need to consider carefully which aspects of a student's work in terms of identifying and using new information are important for grading purposes. The extent to which the whole process, as described, is undertaken will vary between subjects and units.
- **'Additional'** and **'extensive'** - the meaning of 'additional' and 'extensive' will always be relative, and will need to be defined, therefore, in relation to the sources provided or identified for students for an assignment. Tutors should also be guided by what is appropriate to the subject, the type of information and the nature of the assessment task. Additional information may come from one core resource or a number of sources, again as appropriate within the resources available to the student for the assignment.

Sources and resources

- **'Sources and resources'** can be taken to include a wide range of types, and could include personal reflection and experience.

Grade descriptor 5 - Communication and presentation

Interpreting this descriptor

- The choice of appropriate components from the descriptor will depend on the form of presentation required. The descriptor is designed to accommodate oral and written forms of presentation, but it does not extend to the vocal and performance skills associated with oral presentation, which, if significant in an assessment, should be covered by grade descriptor 3. Equally, the term 'presentation' relates to the choice of structure and format, and does not refer to the aesthetics of design.
- Work should demonstrate that it is designed to meet the needs of its intended audience and to comply with the conventions of the subject.
- The term 'image' should be widely interpreted; it may include, for example, drawings, photographs, charts and diagrams and therefore is relevant to many subjects. However, the significance of the image should be in the contribution that it makes to conveying the student's response to an assignment, rather than its aesthetic merits.
- The term 'register' should be widely interpreted; it includes several aspects of the use of language to convey a particular tone, style and level of formality. While Access to HE students will be expected to develop an appropriate 'academic register', this will mean different things in different subjects and for different kinds of task.
- In some disciplines (for example, law, mathematics) the use of technical language is an essential aspect of a Pass standard of work, and will therefore be required by the learning outcomes and/or assessment criteria of the unit. However, this descriptor could be used in such situations to recognise the accurate and effective use of non-technical language to convey meaning. It is therefore for each discipline to decide what aspect of the use of language this descriptor should cover.

Grade descriptor 6: Autonomy/independence

Interpreting this descriptor

- The items taken together can relate to either informal or formal planning processes. They will be relevant to work that takes the form of a significant project, but could also be used for smaller scale items of work that offer scope for students to work independently.
- Any combination of items can be used to reflect the different ways in which students may take some responsibility for their work, whatever its nature.
- '**Specifies**' here means that the student both identifies one or more problems and articulates the nature of that/those problems. This may be done through conversation and discussion, or through a formal written process of planning and review.
- Tutor judgements about the levels of student autonomy and independence should be made with reference to the behaviour expected of Access to HE students, and to the degree of independence possible in the context of specific types of assessment tasks and activities.

Grade descriptor 7 - Quality

All units use this descriptor

Interpreting this descriptor

The grade awarded against this descriptor should be similar to those awarded against any other descriptor(s) used. If a tutor finds a significant difference between their judgement against this descriptor and that awarded through the other descriptors used, they should reflect on the way in which those descriptors, and this descriptor, have been applied in order to confirm their judgement.

'**Demands**' might be

- technical
- creative
- practical
- academic.

Annex 1

