



# **GCSE equivalence and the Access to Higher Education Diploma**

February 2008

## Introduction

1 GCSE qualifications are included among the entry requirements for certain higher education (HE) programmes. In some instances, the requirement is waived for Access to HE students, as the Access to HE qualification itself may be regarded as providing sufficient evidence of the required level of achievement. This is not always the case, however. A higher education institution (HEI) may sometimes require students to provide other evidence of achievement in order to demonstrate that they meet the HEI's standard admissions criteria, particularly where the HE programme concerned leads to the award of a professional qualification.

2 In response to this situation, Access validating agencies (AVAs) have worked with local HEIs to develop 'GCSE-equivalent' units or free-standing awards. Such units may be specified within the rules of combination for the award of an Access to HE Diploma, or they may be delivered in addition to the units specified by the rules of combination. This guidance explains how these units or qualifications can be formally recognised within the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (the Recognition Scheme). Examples of different approaches are given at Annex A.

## Application to HE: advice to students

3 Access to HE providers should ensure that students who are offered a GCSE-equivalent qualification as part of their programme of study are aware that:

- the acceptance of such qualifications for admission to HE depends on the admissions policies of individual HEIs: while HEIs generally accept GCSE-equivalent units/qualifications where they have been involved in the approval of the course, and often accept those approved elsewhere, there can be no guarantee that these qualifications will be accepted unless a HEI explicitly makes such a guarantee
- such qualifications have no formal status for other purposes, or recognised equivalence outside the context of HE admissions.

4 Where GCSE qualifications are stipulated as entry requirements to a HE programme, students should be advised to confirm that the GCSE-equivalent qualification is accepted by the HEI(s) to which they are intending to apply, before they make their application.

## Specific requirements relating to initial teacher training (ITT)

5 It is a statutory requirement that all entrants to ITT have achieved a standard equivalent to GCSE at grade C in English and mathematics. Those who intend to train to teach pupils aged 3-11 must also have achieved a standard equivalent to a grade C in a science subject. ITT providers in HE are required to ensure that these minimum requirements are met by all entrants to courses of ITT.<sup>1</sup> The requirement

---

### <sup>1</sup> 1 Entry requirements

All ITT providers must ensure all of the following:

#### **GCSE requirement**

R1.1 That all entrants have achieved a standard equivalent to a grade C in the GCSE examination in English and mathematics, and that all who intend to train to teach pupils aged 3-11 additionally have achieved a standard equivalent to a grade C in the GCSE examination in a science subject.' *Revised ITT requirements*. Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2007. This document is available at [www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/i/revised\\_itt\\_requirements.pdf](http://www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/i/revised_itt_requirements.pdf)

does not specify, however, what ITT providers should accept as providing 'a standard equivalent to' GCSE grade C: this is decided by individual ITT providers as an aspect of their admissions policies, specific entry requirements and individual selection criteria.

6 Although HEIs make their own decisions about what constitutes 'a standard equivalent to' GCSE, the Training and Development Agency for Schools states that Access to HE courses can provide evidence of achievement at a level which is equivalent to GCSE in the required subjects<sup>2</sup>. This guidance is based on a formal, long-standing agreement<sup>3</sup>, which allows the requirement for GCSE equivalence to be met through demonstrated achievement on Access to HE courses. The agreement provided a common mechanism that could be operated at local level by AVAs working with local ITT providers, which would enable Access to HE students to meet the statutory requirements without having to study for GCSEs as well as studying for the Access to HE qualification.

7 As is the case more generally (see paragraph 3), while AVAs' GCSE-equivalents are often accepted by ITT providers, no individual ITT provider is obliged to accept the GCSE-equivalent elements of an Access to HE course (or free-standing AVA GCSE-equivalent qualifications) as an alternative to GCSEs. Some may accept only standard GCSEs or seek other evidence of equivalent achievement. In addition, some ITT providers may require more than the minimum. This may be stated in terms of achievement of a higher grade in one or more of the required GCSEs. Some may also ask applicants to take a special test (including those who already have GCSEs at grade C) to demonstrate achievement at a level equivalent to their requirements.

8 The AVA licensing criteria require AVAs to ensure that 'where an Access to HE programme is intended to lead to further study for a professional qualification, students are made aware of, and given the opportunity to meet, the entry requirements of the professional body concerned'.<sup>4</sup> AVAs must therefore ensure that a provider delivering an Access to HE course which is intended to provide progression to ITT can also enable students to meet the statutory requirements of GCSE equivalence in English, mathematics and science. Annex A provides some illustrations of ways in which this can be achieved.

9 ITT providers should be aware that the statutory GCSE requirements may be evidenced in Access to HE students' applications either separately from, or as part of, the Access to HE Diploma. Where GCSE-equivalent qualifications are offered within the Diploma, this will be identified on the student's application and confirmed on the credit transcript which is issued by an AVA with the Access to HE Diploma.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'ITT access courses usually enable you to attain the appropriate level in English, mathematics and science ... You should check with your nearest access course provider whether their courses cover ITT entry requirements, and whether these are acceptable to your chosen ITT provider(s)'. *GCSE and equivalent qualifications for entry to initial teacher training courses*, Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2006. This document is available at [www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/g/gcse-equiv-quals.pdf](http://www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/g/gcse-equiv-quals.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *DES Circular 3/91*

<sup>4</sup> Criterion 3.6, *QAA recognition scheme for Access to HE in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Principles and criteria for the licensing of Authorised Validating Agencies*, October 2005. This document is available at [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/recognition05/recog\\_principles.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/recognition05/recog_principles.pdf)

## **Approval and use of GCSE-equivalents**

10 The formal agreement (see paragraph 6) requires AVAs to involve ITT providers in the approval of GCSE-equivalent courses. It remains the case that, in order to claim GCSE equivalence on Access to HE courses (whether through integrated units or free-standing qualifications), AVAs must ensure that ITT providers are involved in the approval process and that those providers formally confirm at validation that the course meets their requirements for GCSE equivalence.

11 An AVA or provider may not claim the designation 'GCSE-equivalent' for a set of units, under the terms of the Recognition Scheme, unless ITT providers are involved in the approval process, as described above. The involvement is required, including where the Access to HE course on which the units are to be used is designed for purposes other than progression to ITT. Processes for programme amendment and revalidation should also take account of this requirement.

12 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) regulations, and the authority to use the designation 'GCSE-equivalent', apply to an approved set of units only when those units are being taken as part of an Access to HE course. If the same set of units is used for any other purpose, or on any other programme, therefore, the AVA and provider should consider whether there is some other authority which allows it to designate the units as 'GCSE-equivalent'.

### **GCSE equivalence and the Diploma credit specification**

13 Within the context of the specification for the Access to HE Diploma, AVAs and Access to HE providers must consider how any credits achieved for GCSE-equivalent components of a course relate to the achievement of the overall credit total for the Access to HE Diploma.

14 Given the typical credit value of one GCSE-equivalent on an Access to HE course (approximately 12 credits at level 2), it is unlikely that more than one GCSE-equivalent can be wholly accommodated within the Access to HE Diploma specification (60 credits, with at least 45 of these at level 3) without the use of integrated units (see Annex A, Model 1). In most circumstances, therefore, AVAs and providers will need to consider how GCSEs (or equivalents) which may be required for progression to HE can be offered within a student's programme of study, where it is not possible to provide them as a part of the Access to HE Diploma course. The award of credits for one or more GCSE-equivalent qualifications may therefore need to sit outside the award of the Access to HE Diploma. In no circumstances, will the need to provide GCSE equivalence lead to an exception to the standard credit target of 60 credits (including 45 at Level 3) for the award of an Access to HE Diploma.

15 Where an AVA-validated GCSE-equivalent does not contribute to the rules of combination for an Access to HE Diploma and is delivered outside the Diploma, it is not formally part of a QAA-recognised Access to HE course and is not regarded as such for the purposes of funding by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Additional learning which is included in a student's programme of study (including GCSE-equivalents) may be eligible for LSC funding if it leads to an eligible learning aim. However, eligibility for LSC funding is not a guarantee of LSC funding.

## Certification

16 Students applying to certain HE courses (including ITT) may need to present evidence of certificated achievement to the receiving HEI to demonstrate that the GCSE requirement has been met. Where the requirement has been met by achievement which is additional to the Access to HE Diploma, this evidence will be either the actual GCSE certificates, or GCSE-equivalent certificates awarded by the AVA (or acceptable equivalents-from other awarding bodies).

17 Where the requirement has been met by the award of credit for GCSE equivalence units which are integrated within the rules of combination for an Access to HE Diploma, the unit transcript will indicate which units relate to the achievement of the particular GCSE-equivalent(s) that has/have been integrated.

18 As credits are awarded to students against units of assessment, evidence may be drawn from anywhere in the programme, or previously achieved qualifications/units, using the AVA's rules for accreditation of prior learning/credit exemption. Although evidence may therefore be counted for more than one purpose, GCSE equivalence will only be **certificated** once.

19 Any separate GCSE-equivalent certificates awarded by the AVA do not carry either version of the QAA Access to HE logo, irrespective of whether they are awarded as part of, or in addition to, the Access to HE Diploma. The Access to HE logo<sup>5</sup> may only appear on Access to HE Diplomas.

---

5



Recognised by

**The Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education**

## Annex A

### Possible models for providing GCSE equivalence for Access to HE

GCSE (or equivalent) requirements can be accommodated in a number of different ways in relation to an Access to HE student's programme of study. The models outlined below are described here for illustration: the acceptability of any particular model depends on whether it meets the requirements given in the main part of this document and the validation requirements of the awarding AVA.

The pattern of study for an Access to HE student who requires GCSE or equivalent qualifications is determined not only by the options made available on a course by the particular award's rules of combination, but also by the student's prior achievement of the required GCSEs. On enrolment, students may have already achieved all, some or none of the necessary GCSEs or GCSE-equivalent qualifications. The extent to which a proposed model can respond to such differences in students' prior achievement needs to be considered during the process of course development. Different ways of providing GCSE equivalence through different kinds of course structures are indicated below. These are not the only possible models, and some may be successfully combined.

#### Model 1 - Achievement of all GCSE-equivalents available within the Access to HE Diploma through integrated units

<b>Requirements for prior achievement</b>
None
<b>Access to HE Diploma requirements</b>
45 credits at level 3 and 15 credits at level 2, including credits from identified units within the rules of combination which allow the specified learning required for up to three approved GCSE-equivalent qualifications to be demonstrated.
<b>Additional achievement required for ITT progression</b>
No additional achievement is required if learning outcomes for all three GCSE-equivalents (in English, maths and science) are integrated in other specified units.

A course based on this model will have been designed to allow GCSE-equivalent achievement to be demonstrated through assessed work which may also be used to demonstrate other kinds of achievement required for the Diploma. In these circumstances, the requirements for GCSE equivalence must be separately identified and separately assessed. The needs of all students who wish to achieve GCSE-equivalent qualifications can be met by this model, whatever their prior achievement.

#### Model 2 - Some GCSE-equivalents available within the Access to HE Diploma

<b>Requirements for prior achievement</b>	
None	
<b>Access to HE Diploma requirements</b>	
45 credits at level 3	12 credits at level 2 ( = one -equivalent in English, mathematics or science) 3 credits at level 2 - other study
<b>Additional achievement required for ITT progression</b>	
GCSE Grade C or equivalent*	GCSE Grade C or equivalent*

This model permits GCSEs (or equivalents) to be achieved before, within or after the Access to HE Diploma course. Students are able to achieve at least one GCSE-equivalent via the taught Access to HE course and within the Access to HE Diploma. Where a student requires more than one GCSE-equivalent, the rest are achieved in addition to the required achievement for the Access to HE Diploma. The study associated with this additional achievement could be completed consecutively or concurrently with the course of study associated with achievement of the Access to HE Diploma. The needs of all students who wish to achieve GCSE-equivalent qualifications can be met by this model, whatever their prior achievement.

**Model 3 - All GCSEs (or equivalents) achieved concurrently with, or subsequent to the Access to HE Diploma**

<b>Requirements for prior achievement</b>		
None		
<b>Access to HE Diploma requirements</b>		
45 credits at level 3		15 credits at level 2
<b>Additional achievement required for ITT progression</b>		
GCSE Grade C or AVA-validated GCSE-equivalent in English*	GCSE Grade C or AVA-validated GCSE-equivalent in mathematics*	GCSE Grade C or AVA-validated GCSE-equivalent in science*

Students following this option who wish to progress to ITT will follow as much of the parallel programme as necessary to supplement any prior GCSE achievement.

**Model 4 - Achievement of all GCSEs (or equivalents) required prior to entry to the Access to HE course**

<b>Requirements for prior achievement</b>		
GCSE Grade C or equivalent (on entry)	GCSE Grade C or equivalent (on entry)	GCSE Grade C or equivalent (on entry)
<b>Access to HE Diploma requirements</b>		
45 level 3 credits		15 level 2 credits
<b>Additional achievement required for ITT progression</b>		
None		

This model requires applicants to the Access to HE course to have achieved all the necessary GCSEs (or equivalents). A programme based on this model would therefore be available to students aiming to progress to ITT **only if** they already held the required GCSEs (or equivalents).

\*Where delivered outside the Access to HE Diploma, an AVA-validated GCSE equivalent is not eligible for LSC funding.