

Part F: Determining the final grade for a unit

1 Introduction

This document provides guidance for tutors about how to use the grade descriptors to determine the final grade of Pass, Merit or Distinction for a unit. It also explains how, in certain circumstances, numerical marking can be used to contribute to that final unit grade (see Annex 1). The grade descriptors themselves, and guidance about how they are assigned to units and used with particular assignments, are given in Parts A-E of the implementation handbook.

2 Units and assignments

The grading process involves assessing the standard of a number of different aspects of a student's performance in relation to the grade descriptors. Tutors ensure the relevance of a unit's assigned descriptors through the choice and application of specific components of the descriptors for the particular assessment tools which are used to assess the unit ('assignments'). Some units are assessed using a single assignment; others use two or more assignments. The number of assignments used to assess a unit depends on various considerations, including the number and type of learning outcomes and credit volume of the unit. Whether units are assessed through one or more than one assignment, the principles for determining a final grade, which are set out in this document, are the same. Where the process varies, this is explained in the Process details (section 5), which follow the Process outline (section 4).

3 Professional judgement

Professional judgement in assessment for Access to HE is exercised by tutors who use the grade descriptors in ways that are meaningful and appropriate for their subject, just as they use their professional subject knowledge and expertise in deciding how to teach and assess particular units and in judging whether the learning outcomes have been achieved or not. The use of a standard set of grade descriptors and the application of a common method of arriving at final grades is designed to ensure that grades are not based on the subjective decisions of individuals. These features provide evidence for, and comparability of, grading judgements on all Access to HE courses. At the same time, the choice available within the grade descriptors and the recognition that professional judgement has a legitimate role to play in arriving at grades avoids a purely mechanistic approach that presumes that assessment is a precise science governed by computation rather than judgement.

Tutors' professional judgements in assessment, which relate particularly to the knowledge, experience and qualification they have in particular subject areas or disciplines, are confirmed, and may be challenged, by the professional judgements of those involved in the quality assurance procedures of Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), including processes for moderation and standardisation.

4 Process outline

(Please also see the information given in the Process details section.)

In order to determine a final unit grade, the tutor will:

Step 1

Assess assignments in relation to the chosen grade descriptors

The tutor considers the student's work in relation to each of the descriptors chosen for an assignment. The tutor decides, for each of these descriptors, whether the standard of the student's performance is better described by the Distinction (D) or Merit (M) statement for that descriptor, or whether the work does not reach the standard described by the Merit statement and is at Pass (P) standard. Where more than one assignment is used to assess a unit, the process is the same for each assignment.

Step 2

Record decisions as a unit grade profile

The tutor records the decisions made as a series of grade indicators (D, M or P) for each assignment. Together, these indicators provide the unit grade profile. Where more than one assignment is used to assess a unit, the resulting grade profile contains a grade indicator for each of the grade descriptors used with each assignment.

Step 3

Review the grade indicators given across the whole unit grade profile and make a judgement about the unit grade

The tutor reviews the totality of grade indicators that have been given across the whole unit. (These may have been given for one or more than one assignment.) The tutor identifies the midpoint of all the grade indicators in the unit profile: this is the grade for the unit. If an even number of grade indicators has been recorded at different grades, the tutor makes a judgement about which grade better represents overall performance in the unit, having given particular consideration to the grade indicator(s) given for grade descriptor 7 (Quality).

Step 4

Provide feedback to students

The tutor provides student feedback which explains grading decisions with reference to the grade descriptors that have been used.

Step 5

Maintain records and make these available for quality assurance purposes

The tutor maintains auditable records of unit grade profiles and final unit grades. (See Part G.)

5 Process details

Step 1

Assess assignments in relation to the chosen grade descriptors

Principle 1a: The grade descriptors assigned to a unit are the basis of the judgement made in determining the grade for the unit.

A student's work is considered with reference to the grade descriptors that were assigned to the unit when it was validated (see Part D) and, in particular, the aspects of performance described by the components of descriptors that were selected for assignments when they were designed (see Part E). Students will have been informed that these selected components were to be the basis of the judgement for the grade for the unit, and will have received guidance about how they are being assessed in the context of particular assignment(s).

It is important for the validity of grades awarded, and for consistency and fairness of assessment of students, that each of the unit's assigned grade descriptors is considered and given a grade indicator (D, M or P) and that judgements are based only on the selected components of the descriptors. (The descriptors are not attached to particular learning outcomes.) Only those aspects of a student's performance or approach that relate to the agreed descriptors for an assignment contribute to grading decisions: any other factors are not taken into account.

Principle 1b: A grade represents a standard of performance within a range which is identified by the grade statements for each grade descriptor.

When the tutor is assessing the standard of student performance achieved in relation to any particular grade descriptor, they consider which of the grade statements for that descriptor provides the best description of the student's work. Each grade represents a range of performance for the particular descriptor: a Distinction grade indicator (D) indicates that performance in an assignment is best described by the Distinction statement; a Merit grade indicator (M) indicates that performance in an assignment is best described by the Merit statement; and a Pass grade indicator (P) indicates that performance meets the relevant learning outcomes¹, but does not reach the standard described by the Merit statement.

Step 2

Record decisions as a unit grade profile

Principle 2: Grading decisions are recorded and together comprise a profile of grades for a student's work for a complete unit.

Where only one assignment is used to assess a unit: the unit grade profile consists of one grade indicator (D, M or P) for each grade descriptor assigned to the unit.

Where more than one assignment is used to assess a unit: grades are generated and recorded as the work progresses to create a more extended unit grade profile or matrix. The grade descriptors for the unit are applied as appropriate across the different assignments in the unit assessment plan. Any of the unit's descriptors may be applied to more than one assignment and, where this occurs, different components of a grade descriptor may be used for different assignments. In these circumstances, the resulting unit grade profile, which will include more than one grade indicator (D, M, P) for each or any of the descriptors assigned to the unit, will reflect the relative significance of each of the types of performance described by the descriptors for the unit.

Grade indicators can only be D, M or P; no intermediate or modified grade indicators can be given.

¹ If any of the learning outcomes has not been met, the process to be followed is subject to the AVA's assessment regulations. (See guidance on assessment regulations.)

Step 3

Review the grade indicators across the whole unit grade profile and make a judgement about the unit grade

Principle 3a: The final grade for the unit is based on all the grade indicators (D, M, P) given in the unit grade profile.

All of the grade indicators in the unit grade profile and the number of grade indicators given for each grade are taken into account in determining the unit grade.

Principle 3b: The final grade for the unit is arrived at by establishing the midpoint of grades in the unit grade profile. This is reviewed and confirmed by the tutor's judgement, following consideration of all of the assessed work for the unit.

Where only one assignment is used to assess a unit: the grade which is at the midpoint² of all the grade indicators given for the unit (recorded as a unit grade profile) is the unit grade (for example, PMM = M; DMDD = D; PMPMD = M). The tutor reviews the evidence for judgements made about the standard of performance against different grade descriptors, to confirm grade indicators and in order to be able to explain the grade to the student, and records the unit grade.

Where more than one assignment is used to assess a unit:

- The grade which is at the midpoint² of all the grade indicators given for all the assignments which contributed to the assessment of the unit (recorded as a grade profile), is the unit grade. The process is the same as for a unit assessed through a single assignment (that is, by determining the midpoint of grades across the profile as a whole), except that there are likely to be more grade indicators in the unit grade profile to consider. The tutor reviews the evidence within the student's work which has led to judgements made about the standard of performance against different grade descriptors, to confirm grade indicators and in order to be able to explain the grade to the student, and records the unit grade.
- Final grades are not determined by giving grades for individual assignments and then calculating an overall grade from assignment grades. This is because the midpoint of several midpoints from different assignments can sometimes give a false outcome. The consideration of performance using the profile of grades across the whole unit better reflects the nature of the Access to HE Diploma as a unit-based qualification.
- For each assignment, the tutor makes a record of grade indicators and provides this to students with feedback about their performance in relation to the grade descriptors that have been used in assessing the assignment. However, as the decision about the unit grade is only made at the completion of the unit, no assignment grade is recorded in the feedback or provided in any other way that suggests it might be used to determine a final unit grade. Only when all of the unit's assignments have been assessed can achievement for the unit (both in terms of the award of credit and grading) and the final unit grade be determined.

In most cases, the midpoint grade will be clear (for example, PMDM indicates a Merit grade for the unit). **Where no midpoint grade is clear** (for example, PPM), the final decision is based on the tutor's professional judgement about the overall standard of the work presented. The grade indicator(s) given for grade descriptor 7 (Quality) is/are given particular consideration in making this judgement. The reasons for the judgement should be clear in feedback to the student.

² The unit grade might be seen as a median of the grades given in the unit grade profile, but as there are no standard numerical values for the grades, the midpoint cannot be reliably derived by calculating an arithmetical median.

Principle 3c: All the grade indicators given for each of the individual assigned descriptors for a unit are of equal value when considered for the grading judgement.

Grade descriptors are assigned to units because they capture aspects of performance that are significant in the achievement of the unit: peripheral or insignificant aspects of performance are not being graded. All the assigned descriptors of a unit therefore have an equivalent value within the unit. The requirement that grade descriptor 7 (Quality) should be used for all units ensures that the quality of the final outcome of assessed work is accorded particular value in the assessment of all Access to HE units.

Aspects of performance which are especially valued in individual subject areas will be given particular value in assessment through their repeated use in the assessment of a large number of units on a course, or in different assignments within the same unit. There should be no attempt to 'weight' parts of units or assignments in any other way. Rather, the tutor responsible for the assessment plan should consider the unit in advance and amend the plan, if necessary, to ensure that the distribution of assignments is not likely to lead to disproportionate value being given to minor parts of the unit³.

Principle 3d: The grade for a unit is based on a holistic review of all the work assessed, the overall profile of grades achieved, and the tutor's professional judgement about what grade best represents the overall achievement of the student within the unit.

The selected components of the grade descriptors identify features of performance which, taken together, provide an overall description of the standards which would be expected to characterise the assessed work on a unit which is awarded a Merit or Distinction grade. While students' performance is considered in relation to individual grade descriptors, and tutors give feedback which relates to individual descriptors, the intention is not to atomise performance or assessment, but to allow evidence-based, professional judgements to be made about the standard of the assessed work for a unit as a whole, and to provide useful feedback to students about why they have been awarded a certain grade, helping them identify the particular areas in which they can improve their performance.

Step 4

Provide feedback to students

Principle 4: Students receive information which explains how grade descriptors are to be used in assessment, and feedback on their performance in relation to the descriptors assigned for the unit.

The prior information given to students about assignments details the components of the selected grade descriptors to be assessed. This may be supplemented by information given to students that contextualises the grade descriptors, clarifying what would be expected of them to achieve particular grades within individual assignments.

Feedback to students includes reference to how the particular grade indicators given relate to the particular strengths or areas for development in the student's work, so that it is clear to the student how the final unit grade was determined and to highlight areas of their performance that need particular further attention.

Where more than one assignment is used to assess a unit: although unit grades are confirmed only when the unit has been completed, students should, nonetheless, receive feedback in relation to individual assignments. In most circumstances, interim feedback which relates to aspects of performance being assessed by individual assignments is important in order for students to understand how their performance is developing.

³ It may be appropriate, for example, to include a very small assignment as a task within a larger assignment, rather than assessing it as a separate assignment.

Step 5

Maintain records and make these available for quality assurance purposes

Principle 5: All grading decisions are recorded both on the written feedback provided to students and in the tutor's own record.

The tutor maintains auditable records of unit grade profiles and final unit grades, which can be used for purposes relating to internal and external moderation and for the award of Diploma grade profiles. (Information about record-keeping by providers is set out in Part G of the implementation handbook.)

Tutors' professional judgements in assessment are confirmed, and may be challenged, by the professional judgements of those involved in the AVA's quality assurance procedures for moderation and standardisation. These play an important role in ensuring the validity and comparability of grades awarded. (Guidance about these matters is provided in Parts H and K.)

Annex 1: Numerical marking and grading

Introduction

The grading model for the Access to HE Diploma results in grades of Pass, Merit or Distinction for each unit, representing the overall standard of a student's performance for the unit. Each unit grade is derived from assessment against two or more grade descriptors, which indicate various aspects of performance that are relevant to a preparation for study in higher education.

Each descriptor provides sets of statements for Merit and Distinction. (Pass indicates performance which meets the learning outcomes but does not meet the standard required for Merit.)

For most units, the grade descriptors can be used effectively to differentiate student performance by providing a basis for broad, qualitative judgements about the standard of the aspects of performance relevant to the unit. In some cases, however, units include outcomes for which there is a fixed response (that is, where answers are either right or wrong). This may be a legitimate area for assessment, and a numerical mark may then indicate a direct relationship with the standard of performance. In these circumstances, numerical marking may be used to contribute to a final grade for a unit, but the rules below must be applied in order to maintain the coherence of the grading model and ensure comparability of outcomes.

Rules for the use of numerical marking

- a The use of numerical marking is limited solely to those assessment situations where the only possible response is either right or wrong⁴.
- b Numerical marking is used only to derive a mark for individual grade descriptors which can assess a fixed response. The only grade descriptors which are eligible for numerical marking are grade descriptor 1 (Understanding of the subject) and grade descriptor 3 (Application of skills).
- c Because all units must use a minimum of two grade descriptors, and one of these is grade descriptor 7 (Quality), no unit can be assessed entirely through grade descriptors 1 and/or 3. The numerical mark therefore only contributes to part of the final unit grade.
- d Even where numerical marking is applied to a unit, a Pass is always defined through a student's achievement of the associated learning outcome(s), and not through a specific mark on a scale, unless it can be shown that achieving that mark guarantees that the student has also achieved the learning outcome. Numerical marking is therefore only used to clarify the achievement of Merit or Distinction.
- e Before they undertake an assignment, students are informed of the numerical scale that is being used and the numerical mark required for the award of Merit and Distinction.
- f Numerical grade boundaries for Merit and Distinction are determined at centre level, in relation to the nature and standard of the assessment set and the expectations of the Merit and Diploma statements for grade descriptors 1 and/or 3. Numerical scales and boundaries are quality assured through moderation processes, but neither QAA nor any AVA will provide or endorse standard numerical equivalents for grades.
- g If numerical marking is used for both grade descriptor 1 and 3, the mark for each should come from the assessment of different aspects of the work (and points e and f apply), to derive separate grade indicators for each of the descriptors.
- h Final unit grades cannot be directly derived from, or converted into, numerical marks.
- i All outcomes recorded on the grade profile are grades (D, M, P), not numerical marks.

⁴ This definition includes those situations where a clear logical process needs to be applied in order for a right answer to be arrived at, such as is found in mathematics.

Commentary

Rules a and b

Units where this form of assessment may be appropriate are most frequently found in subjects such as mathematics and the sciences, but may also be found in other subjects, where a concrete knowledge-base is being assessed, and where the assessment does not allow for interpretation, judgement, degrees of understanding or alternative responses. In these circumstances, units assess the student's ability to demonstrate either that they know and/or that they can do certain things, where the only possible outcomes of the demonstration of that ability are either right or wrong.

In a science unit, for example, there might be a learning outcome that specifies aspects of knowledge that need to have been acquired for the student to then experiment with and/or apply the knowledge (facts, principles, formulae and so on) in ways that are also assessed within the unit. In this situation, it is only the assessment of the acquisition of that knowledge that is assessed in a way that leads to a numerical mark, and numerical marking would be used with grade descriptor 1 (Understanding of the subject). The application of the knowledge in an experiment would be graded using other descriptors, such as grade descriptor 2 (Application of knowledge) and possibly grade descriptor 5 (Communication and presentation).

In mathematics, however, it may be the case that the specific knowledge needed in a unit is a given that must be acquired for the student to achieve a Pass (that is, the learning outcome) and it is the skilful application of that knowledge to calculation that generates different standards of performance in a way that can be graded. In this context, numerical marking may be used within grade descriptor 3 (Application of skills). (Assessment of any other type of application of skills, such as the practical skills involved in media or art, is of a different kind and numerical marking would not be appropriate.)

Rule c

Given the aim of Access to HE courses to prepare students for higher education, and the fact that the Access to HE Diploma is a level 3 qualification, assessment of individual units will be expected to require more of a student than can be captured through assessments based on student responses that are either right or wrong. All units must also offer opportunities for students to achieve grades through their performance across all parts of the unit, so it would be inappropriate to use only numerical marking for a unit. As a minimum, therefore, grade descriptors 1 or 3 must be balanced and supported by the use of grade descriptor 7 (Quality).

Rule d

This is a fundamental principle of the Access to HE Diploma and credit specifications, and any approach to assessment based on learning outcomes. Setting a particular mark as equivalent to Pass may not guarantee that the learning outcomes have been achieved. As with the operation of the grading model generally, tutors must ensure that the first judgement made about student work is whether or not the learning outcomes have been achieved. The assessment tool should provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their ability to perform beyond this standard in a way which justifies a Merit or Distinction grade, in the context of the particular discipline.

Rules e-i

Tutors delivering units on Access to HE courses devise their own assessment tools, and a tutor's ability to devise an assessment that is valid, reliable, relevant and appropriate is quality assured through the moderation process. For this reason, decisions about the mark that equates with performance at Merit and Distinction level can only be made by the tutor, who must be able to provide the rationale for that decision to students and moderators.

In this context it is entirely inappropriate for any external requirement for a particular point on any scale of marking to be used to equate to Merit and Distinction grades.

Summary

A fundamental rationale for outcomes-based assessment is that it provides students with explicit information about what they have to know or be able to do to achieve a unit. Assessment decisions are made by judging student work against the relevant outcomes and assessment criteria. Assessment systems which present assessment decisions as numerical marks commonly use a number on a scale to provide a proxy for a qualitative assessment of the standard of the work as a whole. Such assessments usually encapsulate a number of judgements, but do not make these individual judgements explicit, so the mark itself does not indicate to a student what they have achieved. The use of such marking systems in any way other than that outlined above within an Access to HE unit is therefore inappropriate. Numerical marking must only be used in the limited circumstances described in this guidance.



The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education,
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB.
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786