

# Consultation on revisions to the 2006 specification for the Access to HE Diploma

## Introduction

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is responsible for the Access to HE Recognition Scheme and regulates the Access to HE Diploma. In 2011 QAA initiated a review of the way in which the 2006 Access to HE Diploma and credit specification (the specification)<sup>1</sup> had been implemented by the 13 Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) currently licensed to award the qualification. The aim of the review was to determine the extent to which the specification continued to ensure that the Diploma provided the best possible preparation for mature students who left school with few formal qualifications, but who subsequently wanted to progress to higher education.

During the academic year 2011-2012 extensive research included:

- national surveys of Access to HE students, Access to HE provider staff and higher education admissions staff<sup>2</sup>, and five national roundtable meetings attended by representatives of all interested parties
- meetings and discussions with each AVA.

The findings of this research were that choices made by AVAs and providers in the implementation of the specification since 2006 have led to considerable variability in Diploma structures and content. From a national perspective this variability has consequences which give cause for concern, in that it can lead to:

- inequitable opportunities for Access to HE students to achieve their Diploma
- inconsistency in the credit volume of students' graded level 3 achievement
- uncertainty about the comparability of Diplomas
- difficulties for higher education in developing appropriate generic entry requirements, creating barriers to progression for Access to HE applicants.

In response to these findings, QAA concluded that future Access to HE students would benefit from improvements in the consistency, transparency and comprehensibility of the Diploma, thereby ensuring the continuing quality of their learning experience, and enhancing their progression opportunities. QAA is therefore now consulting on proposals for revisions to the specification which are designed to bring about such improvements.

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<sup>1</sup> The relevant documents can be found at:

[www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/creditspecificationsdraft06/default.asp](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/creditspecificationsdraft06/default.asp)

[www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/Access%20to%20HE%20Diploma%20-%20clarification.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/Access%20to%20HE%20Diploma%20-%20clarification.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> There were two surveys of higher education admissions staff. The first, in June 2012, explored their experiences of managing admissions for Access to HE students. The second, in October 2012, sought their views on possible changes to the specification. The report of the findings of the October 2012 survey can be found at: [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/Diploma\\_survey\\_report.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/Diploma_survey_report.pdf)

## Who should respond?

We welcome contributions to this consultation from organisations and individuals in England and Wales with an interest in the future of the Access to HE Diploma, but particularly from AVAs, colleges of further education and other organisations that provide Access to HE courses, institutions of higher education, and employer and student representative bodies.

## Timescales

This consultation closes on **22 March 2013**. A revised specification will be available in outline by early summer. The full specification will be published in early autumn 2013. Any necessary development work by AVAs and providers will take place during 2013-14. Access to HE Diplomas structured in accordance with the revised specification will be implemented from the academic year 2014-15, and students with these Diplomas will be applying for entry to higher education from the 2015 academic year. Information about the changes will be widely circulated and supported by a programme of briefings during the 2013-14 academic year, so that higher education institutions can reconsider and align entry requirements with the revised Diploma specification.

## How to respond

The five proposals for the revision of the specification are presented and explained in this document for discussion within institutions. With each proposal there is a short set of questions.

Responses should be submitted to QAA through the [online survey tool](#).<sup>3</sup> Once responses have been submitted it is not possible to re-enter the online form to make changes, so it is recommended that responses are discussed and drafted in this document, and then copied and pasted into the online form. We kindly request that you submit responses via the online form, rather than sending this document.

## Other ways to participate in the consultation

A series of roundtable discussions will run concurrently with the period of this consultation. Information about these roundtable meetings has been circulated widely and can also be found on the Access to HE website ([www.accesstohe.ac.uk/news/detail.asp?ctrlID=108](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/news/detail.asp?ctrlID=108)).

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<sup>3</sup> [www.surveymonkey.com/s/AHED2013Consultation](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/AHED2013Consultation)

## The consultation

The consultation consists of five separate but related proposals, each of which has a short set of questions to structure your response. **We therefore recommend that respondents consider all of the proposals and their views about them before reaching final conclusions about each proposal.**

## The aims of the proposals

The main aim of the proposed revisions to the Access to HE Diploma specification is to ensure that all Access to HE students have equitable opportunities to achieve the qualification and to progress to higher education, by improving the consistency, transparency and comprehensibility of all Diplomas. At the same time, the proposals deliberately retain a degree of flexibility in the local determination of the content and structure of Diplomas, so that students continue to benefit from courses designed by partnerships of AVAs, providers and higher education to provide clearly articulated progression routes.

## The scope of the proposals

The proposals, taken together, are intended to revise the specification so that it establishes:

- 1 a minimum amount of academic subject content that all students must achieve
- 2 a fixed credit volume of graded credit that all students must achieve
- 3 a reduction in the range of unit credit values that can be used, thereby reducing the number of grades that could be presented by successful students
- 4 consistent and fair opportunities for student achievement of the Diploma
- 5 a credit and level structure that is compatible with these other revisions.

## GCSE equivalents and the Diploma: a change of policy

At the time the 2006 specification was developed many Access to HE courses included groups of units in English language, mathematics and science that were accepted by some higher education courses as meeting their requirement for GCSEs in these subjects. In 2008 QAA published guidance about how these 'GCSE equivalent' units could be accommodated within Diploma courses that complied with the new specification and many AVAs continued to offer them.<sup>4</sup> Current government policy is to encourage the achievement of the GCSEs at grade C or better for all students, including adults of any age. The extent to which 'GCSE equivalent' units are accepted by higher education varies between and within institutions, and courses are increasingly specifying GCSE achievement in entry requirements, often at grade B. Feedback from former Access to HE students indicates that 'GCSE equivalent' units may not be accepted by employers, and the lack of the GCSE(s) can create barriers for Access to HE students who seek to progress to further study (in many cases after graduating) or employment. Data from AVAs indicates that the use of GCSE equivalent units in Access to HE courses is declining, and that increasing numbers of students do not have the opportunity to take such units as part of their Access to HE course. QAA research also demonstrates that the inclusion of GCSE equivalent units within some Diplomas but not others has been a significant factor in the variability in the volume of level 3 credit (and therefore also grades) achieved by Access to HE students.

QAA recognises that providing opportunities for students to improve their skills in English language and mathematics have been and will continue to be an important function of the Access to HE Diploma, and that AVAs and providers will continue to want to be able to include units in these subjects in their Diplomas. However, for all of the reasons discussed

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<sup>4</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/GCSEequiv/default.asp](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/GCSEequiv/default.asp)

above, QAA has decided no longer to regulate the claim of GCSE equivalence made for **any** sets of units within Access to HE Diplomas from the academic year 2014-15. Such a change of policy does not prevent AVAs working with their local higher education institutions, as many currently do, to develop suites of units which are accepted by those institutions as being equivalent to GCSEs for the purposes of entry to their courses. The opportunities for this practice to be accommodated by Diploma courses, however, will be determined by whatever revised structural model for the Diploma emerges from this consultation.

## **What the consultation does not include**

The current specification addresses aspects of the Diploma (such as the unit specification, and the use of the recognition of prior learning and credit transfer) which are not included in the consultation. In particular, there are no proposals to revise two important aspects of the Recognition Scheme:

### **a The size of the Diploma**

Throughout the recent research and discussions about the Diploma there has been general agreement that the total credit volume of 60 credits is still the most appropriate size for the qualification. QAA is therefore not proposing to revise the total credit value of the Diploma, which remains at 60 credits. The five proposals in this document should be considered in the context of this overall credit value.

### **b The Grading Scheme**

The Grading Scheme was introduced since the 2006 specification, and there are no proposals to revise the grading model. The revised specification will therefore include appropriate references to the grading scheme, and current references to 'forms of student differentiation' will be removed.

## The Proposals

### Content of the Diploma: academic subject content

#### **Proposal 1: the specification is revised to ensure that students taking any Diploma achieve a minimum credit volume of 45 level 3 credits from units concerned with academic subject content.**

The 2006 specification does not stipulate any particular requirements with regard to the content of Diplomas. Details of content and curriculum for each Diploma are left for providers and higher education to determine, within a framework for Diploma development and validation managed by an AVA.

It is not intended to substantially alter this position, and the flexibility it provides for Diplomas to be structured in ways that are responsive to the needs of specific subjects or progression routes. However, our review indicated that higher education has some concerns, in relation to standards and fair offers, about the variability in the volume of credit that relates to academic subject content achieved by students on different Diploma courses. The highest priority was given to securing some national consistency in the amount of credit achieved for academic subject content, with around four-fifths of respondents to our higher education survey favouring a minimum national requirement of at least 45 credits of academic subject content from any Diploma, while leaving the detail of that content, and the use of the remaining credits, to be determined by AVAs and providers.

The term 'academic subject content' denotes content that is **not** study skills or general mathematics or English language. It may include specialist English, maths or science units needed for the particular named Diploma (for example, Maths for Engineers) as well as academic skills that are related to specific forms and fields of knowledge, such as technical writing skills or laboratory practice for science students.

#### **Points to consider**

- i The remaining 15 credits may be derived from a combination of level 2 and level 3 units, or from units which are all at level 3, depending on the preferred model for credit structure that emerges from this consultation.

#### **Do you agree with this proposal?**

- a Yes
- b Yes with reservations
- c No
- d Have no view

#### **Please explain your response.**

(You might like to use the space below to work on your response before submitting via the online form):

## **The total credit volume to be achieved from graded units**

**Proposal 2: the specification is revised to ensure that students taking any Diploma report grades achieved for level 3 units with a total credit value which is the same for all Diplomas.**

The 2006 specification allows for 15 credits to be achieved from units at either level 2 or level 3. When grading was introduced, this choice of level made it possible for students to achieve between 45 and 60 credits from graded level 3 units. The research indicates that while some students do achieve more than 45 credits at level 3, this opportunity is not available to all students. The resulting variability in the grade profiles achieved by students also creates some concerns for higher education in comparing the achievement of different Access to HE students. In the October 2012 survey nearly two-thirds of respondents from higher education indicated a preference for all Diplomas to provide results that relate to the same volume of credit derived from graded units. Proposal 5 asks for your views on three different models of credit structure, each of which contains a fixed volume of credit that can be derived from graded units. This proposal concerns the principle of establishing such a requirement; the exact amount will be determined by the structure of the model that is taken forward.

### **Points to consider**

- i A nationally consistent volume of credit derived from graded level 3 units ensures all Access to HE students have a clear and nationally consistent target for graded achievement, and can compete for places in higher education on the basis of individual grade profiles derived from the same volume of credit.
- ii The level 3 units which are graded could also be those that provide the minimum of 45 credits of academic subject described in Proposal 1, but would not necessarily be so.
- iii A consistent volume of credit derived from graded level 3 units ensures that higher education can set clear and explicit entry requirements for Access to HE students, thereby helping to ensure that students are clear from the beginning of their studies about what they need to achieve to progress, and courses can be structured to ensure close articulation with the target progression routes.

### **Do you agree with this proposal?**

- a Yes
- b Yes with reservations
- c No
- d Have no view

### **Please explain your response.**

(You might like to use the space below to work on your response before submitting via the online form):

## Reducing the number of grades in grade profiles

### **Proposal 3: that the specification is revised so that the range of possible unit credit values for use on Access to HE Diplomas is reduced to 3, 6, or 9 credits**

In 2006 the range of possible unit credit values was specified at 1, 2, 3, 6, 9 or 12 credits. Because the Access to HE grading scheme is based on unit grading, this range of credit values for units leads to significant variation in the numbers of grades achieved by different students. Higher education institutions are also receiving more applications from students based outside their local area, and consequently with Diplomas validated by different AVAs, with structures that generate different numbers of grades. In the October 2012 survey, 83 per cent of higher education admissions staff indicated their support for a requirement that the numbers of grades in grade profiles be made more consistent by either reducing the range of unit sizes available or requiring a uniform unit size for all Access to HE Diplomas.

#### **Points to consider**

- i Students will benefit if the number of grades in grade profiles is reduced and their relative achievements are therefore more straightforward to compare.
- ii Some Diploma courses contain 1 and 2 credit units at level 3 and that are therefore graded. This practice adds grades to grade profiles which represent only small volumes of credit.
- iii 12 credit units are not found in many Diplomas, but since the introduction of grading the grade that they generate represents a large amount of credit compared with other units.
- iv To move to one standard unit credit value would entail significant amounts of work for all AVAs and providers. The research suggests that although certain universities and higher education institutions would prefer all Diplomas to generate the same number of grades, this is less significant for them than a fixed volume of credit derived from graded level 3 units. It is therefore not proposed at this time that a revised specification should require that all units used on Access to HE courses be of the same credit value.

#### **Do you agree with this proposal?**

- a Yes
- a Yes with reservations
- b No
- c Have no view

#### **Please explain your response.**

(You might like to use the space below to work on your response before submitting via the online form):

## Ways of achieving the Diploma

**Proposal 4: that from the date the new specification is implemented, students may only be registered and certificated for units to the total value of 60 credits.**

Data collected over the last few years suggests that some students have the opportunity to register for and achieve credits in excess of the 60 needed for their Diploma and then choose the best graded units for their final achievement profile. As this practice is not universally available to students it represents an unequal opportunity for students to achieve. However, in order to ensure that all students have appropriate and equitable opportunities to achieve, the current assessment regulations regarding referral of work (that is, an opportunity for a second resubmission of work that has failed to achieve the required learning outcomes) will also be revised to allow for students to be granted referrals at any time during a course, subject to approval and monitoring through the external moderation system.

### Points to consider:

- i Students with credits awarded through recognition of prior learning or credit transfer would register for less than 60 credits, as appropriate.
- ii One reason currently given for the need for additional credit is that students may not be taking the volume of credit needed in specific subjects to meet course offers made by higher education, and may therefore need to take some additional units during the year, often at short notice. The opportunity to respond in this way is not available to all students; for example, some smaller providers do not have the resources to facilitate additional study. Diploma achievement which is consistent in terms of the total volume of credit should enable higher education to publish generic entry requirements which would be available to Access to HE students from the beginning of their course, so that they study the combination of subjects and credits needed for their chosen progression route.

### Do you agree with this proposal?

- a Yes
- b Yes with reservations
- c No
- d Have no view

### Please explain your response.

(You might like to use the space below to work on your response before submitting via the online form):

## The credit structure of the Diploma

**Proposal 5: that the specification is revised to ensure a credit structure that is compatible with a fixed volume of credit derived from graded units, using one of the models described.**

The 2006 specification defines the credit structure of the Diploma as 60 credits of which a minimum of 45 credits must be achieved at level 3 and the remainder must be achieved at level 2 or above.

The opportunity within this structure for students to achieve 15 credits at either level 2 or 3 has, since the introduction of grading, been a key factor in the variability of grade profiles between students. One way to address this variability and ensure equal and consistent opportunities for all Access to HE students is to specify a fixed volume of credit derived from graded level 3 units to be achieved in all Diplomas. Proposal 2 asked for views on this principle. The alternative structural models that are proposed all feature a fixed amount of credit derived from graded level 3 units.

The three proposed alternative models offer slightly different responses to views that have been expressed through the research about where the qualification should be positioned to ensure that it meets the needs of Access to HE students and higher education for some years to come.

**Model a: The revised Diploma is based on a structure of 45 level 3 credits from graded level 3 units, with the remaining 15 credits derived from level 2 units or level 3 units which are pass/fail only (that is, they will not be subject to grading).**

### Points to consider

- i This model introduces the concept of using some pass/fail level 3 units within a Diploma. Such units would never be graded, and would never have grade descriptors attached to them. Within the requirements of the current specification, students may achieve between 45 and 60 credits at level 3, and these credits in excess of the minimum of 45 required are all graded. This both adds to the challenge for students who are returning to study, and is a factor in the variability in grade profiles achieved by different students. By including some pass/fail level 3 units in a Diploma as, for example, introductory units, students would have the opportunity to develop their capability to achieve at level 3 in preparation for the challenge of achieving the higher standards of performance needed to satisfy the grade descriptors.
- ii Subjects that are reported to require more academic subject content at level 3 than can be accommodated within 45 credits (for example, it is suggested this is the case in subjects such as science or engineering) could choose to use these pass/fail units as introductory units that would add to the total level 3 credit volume derived from academic subject content.
- iii Rules of combination for Diplomas based on this model would specify what volume of the 15 credits is to be derived from level 2 units and what from pass/fail level 3 units.
- iv This model accommodates English language, mathematics or study skills content at level 2.
- v In this model the minimum of 45 credits of academic subject content could be derived from the level 3 graded units, but would not necessarily be so.
- vi The model can accommodate other proposed revisions
  - a fixed volume of graded credit
  - a minimum requirement for 45 credits at level 3 of academic subject content
  - a reduction in the range of credit values for units.

**Model b: The revised Diploma has a structure of all 60 credits at level 3 with 45 credits derived from graded level 3 units, and 15 credits derived from pass/fail level 3 units.**

**Points to consider**

- i This model is a variant that no longer includes level 2 achievement, positioning the Diploma as a fully level 3 qualification.
- ii The model offers the opportunity for pass/fail level 3 achievement, for reasons similar to those explained for Model a.
- iii Rules of combination for Diplomas based on this model would specify the pass/fail level 3 units to be included.
- iv This model does not accommodate English language, mathematics or study skills content at level 2.
- v In this model the minimum of 45 credits of academic subject content could be derived from the level 3 graded units, but would not necessarily be so.
- vi The model can accommodate other proposed revisions:
  - a minimum requirement for 45 credits at level 3 of academic subject content
  - a fixed volume of graded credit
  - a reduction in the range of credit values for units

**Model c: The revised Diploma has a structure of 60 credits from level 3 graded units.**

**Points to consider**

- i A specification that requires all Access to HE students to achieve 60 graded credits at level 3 represents an increase in the overall level of demand of the qualification.
- ii This model provides the level of achievement for Access to HE students that some highly selective courses would welcome.
- iii Courses based on this model would need to be carefully planned and structured if students are not to encounter formal graded assessment early in their course.
- iv This model does not accommodate English language, mathematics or study skills at level 2. All such content, if included, would be in the form of level 3 graded units.
- v In this model the minimum of 45 credits of academic subject content would inevitably be derived from level 3 graded units.
- vi The model can accommodate other proposed revisions:
  - a fixed volume of graded credit - in this model, at 60 credits
  - a minimum requirement for 45 credits at level 3 of academic subject content
  - a reduction in the range of credit values for units.

**Please rank the proposed models in order of preference from 1, most favoured, to 3, least favoured**

Model a -

Model b -

Model c -

**Please explain your response**

(You might like to use the space below to work on your response before submitting via the online form)

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