

**Grading the Access to  
Higher Education Diploma:  
progress towards implementation  
(revised)**

**June 2008**



## **Please note**

This document has been revised to incorporate two new appendices:

**Appendix 2: A common model for grading the Access to HE Diploma - summary of key features.**

**Appendix 3: QAA Access to HE Diploma grading trials draft generic Level 3 grade descriptors - version 2.**

The document is otherwise unchanged.

# Grading the Access to Higher Education Diploma: progress towards implementation

## Introduction

1 Between April and July 2007, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) undertook a consultation on a system of grading for the Access to Higher Education (HE) Diploma (the Diploma)<sup>1</sup>. Responses were invited from all higher education institutions (HEIs); further education (FE) colleges; Access validating agencies (AVAs) and other interested organisations. One hundred and twenty-eight responses were received: 37 per cent from FE colleges; 29 per cent from HEIs; 13 per cent from AVAs and 19 per cent from others (2 per cent unknown).

2 The consultation document outlined general proposals for grading the Diploma, as well as specific proposals for two alternative possible models: unit grading; and portfolio grading, these having been identified as the two models with greatest potential at an earlier stage. Comments about individual proposals were invited, and respondents were asked to indicate their preferred model for grading the Diploma.

3 The consultation was developed by the Access Qualification Development Group (AQDG), which reports to QAA's Access Recognition and Licensing Committee (ARLC). Responses were analysed by QAA's Information Unit, and the AQDG received the full analysis. In considering the analysis, the AQDG noted that:

- 98 per cent of all respondents agreed with the proposal that there should be a common system of grading for the Access to HE Diploma
- 80 per cent of respondents expressed a preference for unit grading
- the different groups of respondents all expressed the same overall preference for unit grading by a clear majority
- all of the detailed proposals in both the section giving common proposals and in the section giving proposals for unit grading were approved by a clear majority of all respondents.

4 In view of the clear steer given by these outcomes, the AQDG recommended that the unit grading model should be taken forward. This recommendation was ratified by the ARLC, and it was agreed that QAA should proceed with the programme of further development and testing of the agreed model which had been proposed in the consultation. Given the clear rejection of the portfolio model, this has been given no further consideration, either in subsequent development work or within this report.

5 A summary of the key consultation outcomes<sup>2</sup> was published in August 2007. It noted that, while consultation responses gave strong support for unit grading and for each of the individual proposals for unit grading given, there were several areas in which a number of respondents had sought clarification or expressed some reservation. The summary report explained that, although these concerns were expressed by a minority of respondents, they would be given particular attention as developments were taken forward, and each would be 'clarified, modified, subject to testing and/or reviewed once implemented'. This report provides further clarification

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<sup>1</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/grading/consultation/](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/grading/consultation/)

<sup>2</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/grading/consultation/GradingConsultationOutcomesAug07.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/grading/consultation/GradingConsultationOutcomesAug07.pdf)

or indicates the further action that has been, or will be, taken in relation to the particular concerns identified (see pages 4-14).

## **Developments 2007-08**

6 Different types of AVAs from different parts of England and Wales have been involved in the programme of further development and testing. The AVAs identified providers of different types and sizes to participate in the tests and trials. In total, the providers selected to take part were responsible for delivering 48 programmes in 17 curriculum areas (including all the major areas of Access to HE provision).

7 Activity started when the results of the consultation were known, in summer 2007, and related first to the development of generic grading descriptors. Draft descriptors were developed with reference to a number of different types of baseline information. The consultation had stated that the grades should 'signify a range of identified academic performance within Level 3', making reference to the level descriptors produced by the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) through joint working with the Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (in Wales) and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (in Northern Ireland), but indicating that any revisions to these descriptors would be taken into account in the work for Access to HE. The more recently developed Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) unit level descriptors for Level 3, which had been based on the NICATS descriptors, were therefore used as a starting point<sup>3</sup>. The information derived from these unit level descriptors was augmented by what was also known about the particular sort of performance HEIs are reported to be interested in when differentiating between applicants, from work carried out by UCAS. The types of performance used to differentiate outcomes used in a number of other marking and grading systems, such as the new GCEs, BTEC Nationals, BTEC HNDs, OCR Nationals, and the new 14-19 Diplomas, were also reviewed. The first set of draft grading descriptors was deliberately inclusive and extensive, in order to make it possible to test out the relevance of key concepts in some detail.

8 In the first phase of the trials (September 2007-March 2008), practitioners were asked to test the descriptors' appropriateness for assessing a range of Access to HE students' work. Feedback was collected via face-to-face meetings and an online survey. Revisions were made in response to this feedback, and a further draft of the grading descriptors was shared with a wider AVA reference group and a group of HE admissions staff. A second, much less extensive, version of the grading descriptors was drafted to reflect these results.

9 The project's second phase (from April 2008) will seek to confirm the suitability of the revised descriptors, but other questions will now form the focus of tests. In particular, decisions need to be made about how to generate a grade for a unit where there has been more than one assessment task for that unit. Phase 2 will also start to look in more detail at the impact of introducing grading on internal and external moderation.

10 In specifying the characteristics of the grading scheme, QAA is concerned to ensure that its requirements are appropriate to its role as the regulatory body for Access to HE. While QAA has a role in maintaining the credibility of the qualification for progression to HE, it is the AVAs that are the awarding bodies within the QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to HE, and it is they that will be responsible for the

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about the QCF see [www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_8150.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_8150.aspx)

detailed operation of the grading scheme. Some matters of detail may be more appropriately specified by AVAs than by QAA, and QAA will continue to discuss these with AVAs. Nonetheless, guidance will be developed for AVAs and providers to allow the necessary procedures to be developed during 2008-09, to allow the first graded Access to HE Diplomas to be awarded in 2009-10, as indicated in the consultation document.

## **Actions and clarification relating to consultation responses**

Respondents to the consultation were asked to indicate one of four responses to each individual proposal: 'agree'; 'some reservations'; 'substantial reservations'; or 'disagree'. Where a proposal is noted below as having been 'agreed', this indicates the percentage of respondents who gave the first of the four possible responses.

### **A common grading system**

**1.1** A common grading scale will be used on all Access to HE courses and awarded for all Access to HE Diplomas.

**1.2** Details of the grading system will be published by QAA, as part of the Recognition Scheme.

11 Over 98 per cent of respondents agreed that all Access to HE Diplomas should use a common grading scale, published as part of QAA's Access Recognition Scheme. The case for introducing a grading system was described as 'unassailable'. The introduction of grading was generally thought to be a development that was 'long overdue', which would bring 'greater status and credibility to the award'.

12 There were a small number of reservations about difficulties associated with ensuring consistency in applying a common grading system to an area of provision with significant variation in course content and assessment practices; and a few respondents were concerned that grading might have a detrimental effect on students who lacked confidence, especially early in the course.

13 By contrast, numerous statements emphasised the benefits, in terms of motivating students and raising their confidence, as well as providing proper recognition of their achievements. Many also noted the increased transparency and fairness that a graded Diploma would bring to HE admissions processes for Access to HE students.

#### **14 Further action**

- **The applicability of the grading system for the full range of provision** will be a key focus of the testing and further development of the grading model. Tests will involve Access to HE practitioners working on a range of courses in different curriculum areas and with different structures; the grading guidance will emphasise procedures to assure the consistent application of grading; and this subject will be explored further in consideration of moderation developments.

- **The importance of the broad framework for feedback on assessment**, of which grades form a part, will be noted in the grading guidance. The guidance will stress the importance of assessment for learning as well as assessment of learning, and draw attention to the need to ensure that assessment with grading is planned and managed carefully to minimise the possibility of detrimental effects on students lacking in confidence.

## The grading scale

- 2.1** The grading scale will use three grades: 'pass', 'merit' and 'distinction'.
- 2.2** Only those three grades can be awarded.
- 2.3** The grades have no numerical equivalents.

15 Eighty-five per cent of respondents agreed with the proposals that the grading scale should use three grades and that no intermediate grades should be available. Reservations and requests for clarification came from those wishing to see a more differentiated scale, although there was no common view about what that should be.

16 The area attracting most comments in this section was the proposal that grades would have no numerical equivalents and some respondents asked for clarification of the rationale for this proposal. Comments related largely to perceived advantages of percentages and were often linked to calls for greater differentiation.

17 A further matter raised within this section was the question of how grades would relate to feedback on individual assignments which might include a numerical element, especially with reference to the assessment of maths.

18 Some responses to this section also queried whether 'fail' should have been specified as a fourth 'grade'. This query raised the question of whether units which had been 'failed' would be recorded on the grade profile.

19 Some responses appeared to assume that it was being proposed that the only feedback that would be provided to students would be one of the three grades.

### 20 Further clarification

- **Why only three grades?** A three-point scale was recommended because the more grades there are on a scale (when describing performance within a single level), the narrower are the bands of performance which must be defined. This creates real challenges in providing distinct and separate definitions for every grade, each of which is clearly differentiated from the grade above and below it on the scale. With more grades, there are more grade boundaries, and more judgements about boundary decisions - based on finer distinctions between the grades - therefore have to be made, verified and standardised. The consistency and reliability of judgements is more difficult in these circumstances, particularly where grades are not based on responses to common tasks for assessment. It is important that the common grading scheme does not suggest a level of precision about differentiated achievement which cannot be provided in reality.

The use of 'pass', 'merit' and 'distinction' was also recommended because of the common use of this scale in a number of qualifications, and the consequent familiarity of the grades across the FE and HE sectors and more widely.

- **Why can't numerical (percentage) equivalents be given?** The achievement of the Diploma depends, first, on the award of a set number of credits from specified units. Assessment for credit requires consideration of whether each of the learning outcomes in the unit has been achieved<sup>4</sup>. It is only beyond that point of base line achievement that graded performance is relevant. A 'percentage' (or other numerical) mark makes a measurement of performance or achievement along a

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<sup>4</sup> For further details see the *Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications*: [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/creditspecificationsdraft06/creditspecificationdraft06.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/creditspecificationsdraft06/creditspecificationdraft06.pdf)

continuous scale from 0-100 (or other fixed point), and asks an assessor to consider how well a task has been performed along that scale. While such a grading scheme may include guidance describing what the performance might look like at various points along the scale, it will be a matter of individual judgement as to exactly which number is given as the 'mark'. The difficulties outlined above ('Why only three grades?') would be exacerbated with the even greater number of points on the scale.

While there may be some circumstances in which a numerical mark may be a legitimate part of the outcome of the assessment of a particular task or assignment, this should be differentiated from a 'numerical equivalent' which suggests that there could be some means of 'translation' between numbers and grades which could be applied universally, regardless of the particular assessment activity. The mechanistic application of such 'translation tables' for the assessment of all units, is not able to capture the differences of specific assessment tasks or learning outcomes of a unit.

- **What about 'fail'?** It is possible for a student to fail a unit. However, this is not a 'grade' in the same sense as others, and will be defined in the grading guidance only in terms of the non-achievement of the unit: there is no grade descriptor for 'fail'. If the specified credits for a unit have been achieved, then the minimum achievement for that unit is 'pass'.
- **Will students only get feedback about their performance in terms of one of these three grades?** No. The formal grade is only one part of the feedback to students and should never be given in isolation. More detailed feedback to individuals would be expected in terms of specific areas for improvement, as well as particular strengths and individual progress demonstrated in the assessed work. This qualitative feedback is likely to refer both to the particular expectations for the individual assignment and to the generic grade descriptors.

## 21 Further action

- **The relationship between assessment of individual assignments and the award of grades to units** (where units include more than one assessment task) is to be explored in detail as part of the programme of testing and further development. Particular attention will be paid to the question of how assessed work which may legitimately result in a numerical mark (for example, in some mathematics assignments) should relate to overall unit grades.
- The grading guidance, in its discussion of the broader assessment context (see above), will make clear that **feedback should not be restricted to the award of an isolated grade**, and that a student should be able to identify from the feedback provided why a particular grade has been awarded.



## Academic standards

**3.1** The grades relate to differentiated achievement within Level 3.

**3.2** The standard of performance required for a 'pass' grade on the Access to HE Diploma is the same as the minimum required for the Access to HE certificate.

22 Ninety-five per cent of respondents agreed that grades should relate to achievement within Level 3 and that the standard required for a 'pass' grade on the Access to HE Diploma should be the same as the minimum for the Access to HE certificate.

23 The proposal was regarded as providing welcome continuity, but it was suggested that it should be restated that 'pass' continued to indicate 'HE progression level' (ie the current definition given within the QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to HE).

24 A small number of respondents expressed concern that HEIs may change their current admissions requirements for Access to HE students and routinely require merits or distinctions where a pass had previously been accepted. It was also suggested that there was a risk that the awarded grades would be seen in isolation by HEIs. The need for Access to HE tutors to provide references including robust supporting information for consideration by HEIs was also stressed.

### 25 Further action

- **A good practice guide for HE admissions staff** will be developed by QAA, working with those involved in HE admissions. The guide will emphasise that a pass is awarded for performance at a level which is equivalent to the level which has hitherto been required for the award of the Access to HE certificate (ie 'HE progression level'), and that the validation of pre-existing Access to HE courses to meet the Diploma specifications has involved the recalibration of courses to provide a common credit requirement for Access to HE. This first step in the development of the Diploma provides a common base from which offers using grades can be made. The guide will stress, in particular, that differentiation can be achieved through making offers which use the agreed grading system for Access to HE, rather than through requesting the achievement of additional credits - which led to Access to HE students being made unachievable offers and which created the 'credit inflation' on Access to HE courses in recent years.

However, the guide will also encourage an holistic approach to the consideration of Access to HE applications which does not focus only on the grades achieved.

- **The grading guidance** will provide advice to Access to HE tutors about the sort of supplementary information that HEIs may need in order to make fair offers, and note the importance of appropriate references for Access to HE applicants.

## Grade descriptors

**4.1** A common set of generic grade descriptors is used as the key reference point for all grading decisions.

**4.2** Each grade descriptor comprises a series of statements to describe typical performance at the grade. Grades are awarded on the basis of a 'best fit' evaluation of the standard of performance demonstrated in the evidence of achievement.

**4.3** Grade descriptors would be derived from the Level 3 descriptor.

26 Eighty-two per cent of respondents agreed with the proposals regarding grade descriptors. In general, it was thought that grade descriptors would 'help to maintain standardisation across subject areas and across all schemes nationally, identifying performance at different levels within a common framework'.

27 A number of respondents commented on the challenges involved in devising a set of grade descriptors that would be appropriate for the assessment of different kinds of knowledge and skills assessed through a variety of types of assessment activity. Some respondents warned against the danger of descriptors that were 'mechanistic', while others were uncertain about the notion of a 'best fit' evaluation and were concerned that without 'concrete criteria' there was a danger of 'subjective assessment' or inconsistencies of interpretation in their use by Access to HE tutors. Comments in this section suggested that, for some respondents, there might be some confusion between 'grade descriptors' and 'assessment criteria'.

### 28 Further clarification

- **What is meant by 'generic grade descriptors'?** In the context of the Access to HE qualification, 'grade descriptors' are broad statements about the qualities or features that describe the standard of performance which would commonly be found within work of a particular band of performance (the grade). Assessment using grade descriptors involves making a professional judgement about which of a given set of descriptors best describes the overall standard of assessed work. This concept is distinct from that of 'assessment criteria' which, for the Diploma, are statements of the specific requirements which must be identified within the assessed work, through which it can be demonstrated that a particular learning outcome has been met. Grade descriptors for the Access to HE grading scheme will be 'generic' so they can be applied to all units on all courses, but will be specific to the Access to HE scheme, insofar as they will relate to qualities or features that are appropriate for successful study in HE. The way in which both assessment criteria and grade descriptors are used for assessment on Access to HE is illustrated in Appendix 1.

### 29 Further action

- **The development of the grade descriptors** is the first priority in the next stage of development, and practitioners and other stakeholders will be consulted, as they are developed, to ensure their applicability for different courses and types of assessment, and to identify the type of guidance required for practitioners to be able to contextualise the descriptors for different subjects and situations.

- **The definition and use of grade descriptors** will be included in the grading guidance. The need for staff development in this area will be considered.

## **Student achievement to be graded**

**5.1** Grades are awarded for achievement on those Level 3 units which are specified in the rules of combination as required for achievement of any Access to HE Diploma.

**5.2** Formally recorded grades relate only to this material. Achievement which leads to the award of credit through Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is not graded.

30 Ninety-one per cent of respondents agreed with the proposal that grades should be awarded for achievement on the Level 3 units specified in the rules of combination for the achievement of any Access to HE Diploma. Some felt that grades should be awarded for achievement on Level 2 units. This was also raised in Section 8 and is considered under that section. (See paragraph 45, below).

31 There were some questions about the proposal that achievement which leads to the award of credit through APL is not graded, with a small number of respondents suggesting that students might be penalised if APL was not graded. Comments also referred to the importance of giving details of credit awarded via APL in information provided to HEIs about Access to HE students' Diploma achievement.

### **32 Further clarification**

- **If credits are awarded via APL**, the achievement which led to the original qualification or award would have been assessed within its own assessment context and will carry a grade which has legitimacy within that context (or will be derived from a form of assessment for which grading is not given). A grade from the Access to HE scheme given to that prior achievement would not share that context, so is unlikely to be awarded on an equivalent basis. Any prior qualification which allows credit to be awarded for the Access to HE Diploma will therefore continue to carry that grade, and that information would be provided on the student's application to HE.

## Assessment and moderation

- 6.1 Students are informed about grading requirements at the start of the course.
- 6.2 Common assessment regulations will be developed and will apply to all courses.
- 6.3 The award of grades is subject to internal and external moderation.
- 6.4 Moderation of grades takes place at the same time as other moderation.
- 6.5 Standardisation procedures will be necessary.

33 Around 95 per cent of respondents supported the proposals regarding assessment and moderation. These were seen as essential within and across AVAs, in ensuring the credibility and acceptance of the Access to HE Diploma by HE institutions.

34 Some respondents asked for clarification about what was meant by 'common assessment regulations' and how they would be developed. Several queries were also made in relation to implications for internal and external moderation, and the standardisation of grades.

### 35 Further clarification

- **What is meant by 'common assessment regulations'?** 'Assessment regulations' relate to procedures for matters such as resubmissions, referrals and extenuating circumstances. They do not include matters such as assessment methods, or particular assessment tasks, which are considered at the course development stage and confirmed at the point of validation.

### 36 Further action

- **Common assessment regulations will be developed** by surveying AVAs' current regulations and identifying areas of common practice as the basis of a set of common regulations to apply to all Access to HE courses.

- **Work to develop guidelines on a common approach to moderation** will also take AVAs' current practices as a starting point. It will take into account the common requirements relating to moderation on Access to HE courses currently specified in the AVA licensing criteria, noting that approaches may need to be reconsidered to assure consistency and reliability in the award of grades. AVAs will be consulted in the development of these guidelines.

## Grades and credits

**7.1** The award of grades is additional to the award of credit.

**7.2** Achievement on units is graded: credits are not graded.

**7.3** The number of grades awarded depends on the number of units.

37 Around 80 per cent of respondents indicated that they supported these proposals.

38 The proposal that the number of grades awarded would depend on the number of units received support from most, though some HEIs expressed reservations about the impact for admissions of a grade profile which comprised grades awarded to units of varying sizes. Some stressed that admissions staff would require clear information about how the grades awarded related to the credit volume of the units taken. Others felt that Access to HE courses should have a standard number of units of standard sizes and raised the question of whether unit size could make it more/less likely that a top grade could be achieved.

39 A number of respondents, recognising the association between successful completion of units with achievement of credits, requested clarification about the proposal that credits would not be graded, as they felt that, if the standard of performance on units were graded, it would be difficult to avoid the implication that credits were being graded.

### 40 Further clarification

- **Why not have a standard number of units of standard sizes?** The grading model is being designed specifically for the Access to HE Diploma, recognising the value of the diversity of provision, and the flexibility of the current scheme, which places responsibility for course development and validation at local or regional level. It is not intended to use grading to change these essential principles of Access to HE, but to require only such changes as are needed to provide a workable and valid means of differentiated assessment which describes achievement in a standard way.
- **Why are credits not graded if units are?** The credits awarded for a unit provide a measure of the volume of learning: the grade indicates the standard of the student's performance.

### 41 Further action

- **The good practice guide for HE admissions** (see paragraph 25, above) will provide guidance on how to make best use of the rich source of information about students' achievements - in a range of subjects over the whole course - that is provided by the credit transcript and grade profile, to make appropriate offers to Access to HE students.
- **The relationship between the award of credit and the award of grades** will be explained in the grading guidance (to include a chart or diagram, as Appendix 1) to ensure that any assessor and/or moderator who is new to this qualification will have a standard reference point to explain the basis on which credits and grades are awarded for units.
- **The implications of the use of very small units** will be monitored as the grading scheme is developed through testing.

## Grades for units

- 8.1** Achievement on Level 3 units is graded: Level 2 units are not graded.
- 8.2** One grade is awarded for each Level 3 unit.
- 8.3** Formative feedback for units including more than one piece of assessed evidence may use the same grades, but formative grades have no formal status.
- 8.4** The general principle to be applied for units with several constituent parts is that grades should indicate performance on the majority of assessed evidence of achievement for the unit.

42 More than 90 per cent of respondents agreed with the proposal that one grade should be awarded for each Level 3 unit, although some sought clarification about the proposal that Level 2 units should not be graded and what the status of Level 2 achievement would be.

43 It was also suggested that grades for the initial units undertaken at the start of an Access to HE course should not be included in the grade profile, in order to avoid adverse effects on students' confidence.

44 Some requested clarification regarding the status of 'formative grades'. Some were of the view that no informal grades should be used for formative assessment. Others thought it would be helpful if formative grades were included on the transcript, or that formative grades should be available for internal and external moderation. In some instances, there appeared to be confusion between discussion of the status of 'formative grades' (linked to Proposal 8.3) and the method for deriving unit grades which have a number of separate constituent parts (linked to Proposal 8.4).

45 A number of comments were made about the principle proposed for deriving a grade for units with several constituent parts. Some asked how a grade would be awarded when there was no majority of assessed evidence for one particular grade, with some having the view that the grade should be based on an average and not a majority. Others considered that the proposal was overly complicated, or that the approach was too mechanistic, and that clear guidelines would be required to ensure consistency and equity across courses and providers.

### 46 Further clarification

- **Why no grades for Level 2 units?** The proposal was made in order to avoid bringing unnecessary complexity to the grading system, with an additional set of grade descriptors to be used, and to ensure that it would be clear for all involved that, where there were grades, these grades always applied to achievement at the same level (Level 3) and therefore signified the same standard of performance. The proposal was also related to ensuring that, although there may be different numbers of units which would be awarded grades, there was always a constant volume of learning that was represented by graded achievement (45 credits).

It was also noted that the use of ungraded Level 2 units might be helpful for those who wished to plan the delivery of their course to include an ungraded element at the start of the course.

- **What will be the status of Level 2 units?** The status of Level 2 units will remain unchanged: successful completion of the Level 2 units which are specified in the rules of combination for the Diploma will be essential to achieve the full credits required for the Diploma.

- **Why do formative grades have 'no formal status'?** The intention behind this proposal was to acknowledge that tutors may wish to make use of the grades as a means of helping to describe performance within feedback given for formative work. They have no 'formal status', however, as the use of the grades in this way is not regulated through the mechanisms of the grading scheme, will not have been subject to the AVA's moderation procedures or other quality assurance mechanisms, and will not be reported in the formal award.

#### 47 Further action

- **The way in which assessment and feedback on individual assignments will relate to grades for units** will be one of the major areas of further development and testing. Tests will focus particularly on how grade descriptors are used to provide a workable model for providing grades at unit level when more than one assignment contributes to the unit. The grading guidance will provide full information on this for providers.

- **Key terms will be defined and used consistently** in the grading guidance and good practice guide to avoid confusion and differentiate clearly between grades that might be used in different ways, such as 'formative', 'summative', 'interim' and 'predicted' grades.

## Recording grades

**9.1** Grades are shown on a grade profile, which is presented on the credit transcript.

**9.2** No overall grade is provided.

48 Ninety-three per cent agreed with the proposal that grades should be shown on a grade profile presented on the credit transcript. It was also noted that it would be important for the transcript to indicate the size of the units studied, and some thought it would be useful if dates were to be included on the transcript to indicate student progress.

49 A large number of reservations were expressed, however, about the proposal that no overall grade would be provided. It was noted that, with varying numbers and sizes of units on different courses, a variable number of grades would be reported, and some expressed the view that this would create difficulties for HEIs in comparing the achievements of applicants from different Access to HE courses. Mixed views were expressed by HEIs about whether this would actually create difficulties for them.

50 Concerns about this led one AVA to suggest that a 'final project' or similar could provide the basis for a single 'summative' grade.

### 51 Further clarification

- **Why no overall grade?** The proposal that there should be no overall grade was made after detailed consideration of possible means of deriving a single grade from unit grades and the likely impact of doing so. The problems of providing a single grade relate principally to the differences between the number and size of units on different Access to HE courses, but also because those units involve the assessment of different kinds of knowledge and skills in different subject areas at different stages of the course. It is clear that a simple aggregation of the unit grades, or a calculation based on some kind of algorithm, could not provide a grade which was meaningful or a reliable indicator of the achievement of students on all courses.

A single grade so calculated may therefore not only mask important variations within a student's individual profile of achievement but would be likely to be significantly misleading if used to compare the performance of students on different courses. It was considered preferable to provide a model which would allow HEIs to take into account as much detail as they considered appropriate for making their own decisions, through providing transparent information about performance and progression within different subjects or areas of competence, or at different stages of the course.

In making this proposal, the AQDG was also aware of the work of the Burgess Group<sup>5</sup>, relating to the future of the honours degree classification, and its observations about the difficulties associated with defining a final outcome of student achievement through a single index of performance.

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<sup>5</sup> The Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group, chaired by Professor Robert Burgess



- **Why not provide just one grade based on a single ‘final project’?** This model was considered at an earlier phase of the development process and was rejected for a number of reasons, including:
  - a pre-requisite for this model would be the inclusion on all courses of a ‘final project’. No such requirement exists; it is not currently universal practice on Access to HE courses, and it may not be a form of assessment which is appropriate for all courses. If this were to be the basis of a single grade, there would need to be further national specification about the nature, scope and credit value of such projects, and this would necessarily impact on the way courses were structured
  - if this were to be the only grade awarded, it is likely that it would be used as a significant measure for HE admissions. Experience elsewhere suggests that, where one element of assessment has such major significance, this is likely to skew learning and teaching in a number of ways, not least that it would place a disproportionate emphasis on the graded element of the course at the expense of other, equally important, elements of the course
  - uncharacteristically weak performance on this single piece of work, could have very substantial negative consequences for students
  - the use of this form of end assessment would not allow students to learn from the grading of their work.

## 52 Further action

- **The credit volume of each unit will be stated** (along with its title, level and grade) as part of the grade profile, both in the student’s application to HE and on the credit transcript which is issued with the Diploma. Grading guidance to providers and AVAs will remind them that this is essential information.

## Uses of grade profiles

**10.1** Grades on grade profiles reflect the pattern of study (which may include grades for units of different sizes), and may indicate a student's pattern of achievement or development.

**10.2** Provisional grades on completed units may be included in applications but, in most cases, confirmed grades are not likely to be available.

53 Seventy-three per cent of respondents supported the proposed use of grade profiles.

54 Mixed views were expressed about the use of provisional grades, with some unclear as to why confirmed grades would not be available and others stating that provisional grades may be misleading, as it might be too early in the process to accurately predict grades. It was also noted that a requirement to predict grades early in the course could restrict the choice learners would have in the pathways that could then be studied. It was suggested that tutors should provide an analysis of student performance and potential rather than using provisional grades.

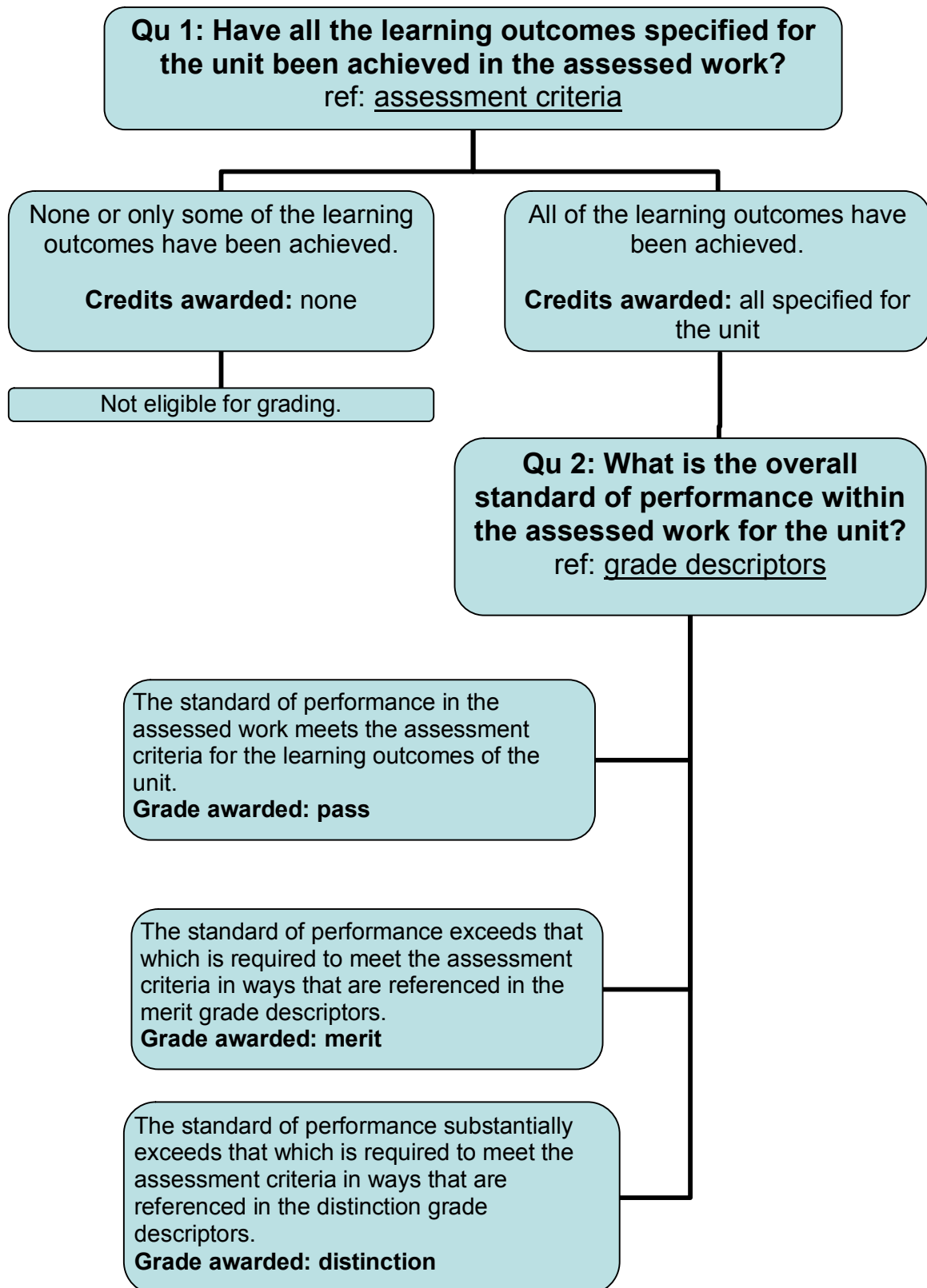
55 It was also proposed that there should be a standardised format for the reporting of results to HE institutions.

### 56 Further clarification

- **Confirmed grades are unlikely to be available** because most Access to HE courses are one-year courses, and moderation of grades will not have taken place when students make their applications by the standard application date.

### 57 Further action

- **The arrangements for reporting confirmed results to HEIs** will be standardised. QAA will discuss with UCAS how this might be best achieved.
- **The use of provisional grades in applications to HE** will be further considered and advice on this subject will be included in the grading guidance and the Good Practice Guide.



## **A common model for grading the Access to Higher Education Diploma - summary of key features**

As a result of the national consultation undertaken in summer 2007 (see Introduction, paragraphs 1-5), it was established that the Diploma should be graded according to a common model based on grading individual units. The main features of the unit grading model proposed and agreed through the consultation are:

- 1 **A grade will be awarded for each Level 3 unit** which is specified within the award's rules of combination and is successfully completed by the student. Level 2 units will not be graded.
- 2 **No overall or final aggregate grade will be given.** As the number and size of units on different courses varies, the number of grades gained by students will vary (and will represent achievement on different sized units).
- 3 **The grades will be 'pass', 'merit' and 'distinction'.** The standard required for achievement of a 'pass' grade will be the same as the minimum standard requirement for the award of the Access to HE certificate to date; 'merit' and 'distinction' grades will indicate higher levels of achievement within Level 3.
- 4 **A common set of grading descriptors will be used as the reference point for all grading decisions.** Each of the grade descriptors will comprise a series of statements describing typical performance at the grade. Grades will be awarded on the basis of a 'best fit' evaluation of the standard of performance demonstrated in the evidence of achievement. The grades will have no numerical equivalents.
- 5 **Grades will indicate performance on the majority of assessed evidence of achievement.** Units may be assessed in different ways and may include several separate constituent parts.
- 6 **Grades will be subject to internal and external moderation,** and common moderation procedures and assessment regulations, relating to matters such as resubmission, will apply to all Access to HE courses. (This work is under development.)
- 7 **Grades will be formally recorded on a grade profile,** which is presented by the AVA with the Diploma and the credit transcript.

## **QAA Access to HE Diploma grading trials**

### **Draft generic Level 3 grade descriptors (version 2)**

#### **About the descriptors**

a There are seven draft grade descriptors in this second version, which are being used for Phase 2 of the grading trials, constructed to reflect key aspects of performance identified during Phase 1. These are intended to provide succinct expressions of each aspect in ways that are distinct from each other, and which are sufficiently straightforward to understand, apply and recall.

b The descriptors represent key components or attributes of performance and are not designed to reflect a particular approach to completing work (for example: a model based only on process, which refers only to aspects of planning; a model based purely on acquisition of knowledge, that does not allow for process skills to be graded), as the scope for, and significance of, different approaches varies between different subject disciplines and units.

c In Phase 2 we are exploring a model that makes it possible for different descriptors to be selected and used in different combinations for different units, so that descriptors that are most appropriate to their subject and the unit in question can be used.

d The pass grade in all cases is defined as 'the achievement of the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the unit being assessed'. Merit or distinction grades are awarded on the basis of the extent to which the work exceeds the requirements of 'pass' and meets the standards described by the grade descriptors for 'merit' or 'distinction'.

e This version of the grade descriptors also includes a column that indicates some of the sort of guidance that will be developed to support the implementation of grading. Further work will be undertaken on this through Phase 2 of the trials.

f These revised grade descriptors (version 2) have been arrived at through research about other Level 3 qualifications and detailed work with Access to HE tutors and AVAs during Phase 1 of the trials. They have also have been discussed with a group of HE admissions staff, who unanimously supported the overall structure and the content of these descriptors. However, these descriptors are still draft, and feedback from Phase 2 will contribute to a review of the content before the final version is published later in the year.

## Application of the descriptors during Phase 2

g The seven grade *descriptors* are generic statements indicating the sort of performance a student has to demonstrate for their work to achieve a particular grade. This contrasts with *criteria*, which are specific statements of required achievement (as used, for example, when confirming that learning outcomes have been met through the use of assessment *criteria*). This distinction affects the way in which descriptors, as opposed to criteria, are applied:

- the use of '**criteria**' in assessment involves an approach in which the assessor must seek and identify evidence that each criterion has been met
- '**descriptors**' provide a reference point against which work is compared to assist in making a professional judgement about the band of performance which best describes the work being assessed.

h One of the aims of Phase 2 is to test what sort of additional information or guidance may be needed (and how this should be provided) in order for students, assessors and moderators to be clear about the sort of performance that is needed to achieve a particular grade.

i Within each grade descriptor, the bulleted content describes the type of performance associated at each grade with the theme or keyword. Some of these are more applicable for certain subject disciplines or assessment situations than others. So, in applying the descriptor to the assessment of a unit, only those aspects of the descriptor which are appropriate will be used.

j The same descriptor can be used more than once if the unit is assessed using more than one assignment, and can be used in different combinations for the individual assignments. For example, if grade descriptors 2, 4, 5 and 7 are chosen as appropriate to a unit, and the unit has two assignments, it may be that descriptors 2 and 4 are relevant to one assignment, and descriptors 4, 5, and 7 are appropriate to the other assignment. This means that a grade descriptor may be used more than once within a unit: this could be entirely appropriate if the same sort of performance is required in both assignments (for example, presentation and communication), and will help to emphasise the particular importance of certain aspects of performance in individual subject disciplines. This use of certain descriptors in several different assessment situations will also support the reliability of the final grade awarded to the student.

k Another key consideration for Phase 2 is how a final grade will be arrived at when more than one assessed piece of work contributes to the assessment of a single unit. Work is continuing on this.

l Version 2 of the draft grade descriptors contains the 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 between different subject areas and assignments, but there are some general principles to be considered in applying the descriptors:

- although the word 'excellent' is used a number of times to denote 'distinction', this need not imply perfection, which would make it very difficult for any student to achieve and may introduce uncertainty about level, in the assessment of responses to more complex assessment tasks. It would be

more appropriate to look for work that significantly exceeds the standard required for a pass, allowing for some small mistakes, omissions or imperfections, as long as these do not detract from the outstanding nature of the work at Level 3

- all the 'merit' descriptors relate to performance that is better than pass, but not as good as distinction. The words 'very good' and 'generally' often feature in the indicative content for merit. Feedback from Phase 1 of the trials indicated that most people did not have difficulty differentiating between 'generally' and 'consistently', and it may well be that the distinction between 'very good' and 'excellent' proves to be equally unproblematic. As Phase 2 progresses we will be asking participating tutors for examples of how they have interpreted these words and phrases.

m Although pass, merit and distinction are comparative terms, their use does not imply norm referencing: grading decisions do not involve comparing learner X with learner Y, but they do involve comparing a piece of work against the descriptors.

DRAFT

Draft generic Level 3 grade descriptors (version 2)

| Keyword or phrase for the grade descriptor | A <b>pass</b> grade is awarded for a unit where the student achieves the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the unit being assessed. | Indicative features for merit:<br>The student, student's work or performance...  | Indicative features for distinction:<br>The student, student's work or performance...   | Guidance/amplification (to be developed during Phase 2)  |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| 1. Understanding of the subject            |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a is <b>generally</b> informed by the major conventions and practices of the area of study</li> <li>b draws on the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study</li> <li>c demonstrates a <b>very good</b> grasp of the relevant knowledge base</li> <li>d goes beyond the minimum required to pass.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a is <b>consistently</b> informed by the major conventions and practices of the area of study</li> <li>b draws <b>extensively</b> on the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study</li> <li>c demonstrates an <b>excellent</b> grasp of the relevant knowledge base.</li> </ul> | <p>'Area of study' may include the related area of work where appropriate, such as music performance, media production or theatre for example.</p> <p>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 programme.</p> |



| Keyword or phrase for the grade descriptor | A <b>pass</b> grade is awarded for a unit where the student achieves the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the unit being assessed. | Indicative features for merit:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>  | Indicative features for distinction:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>   | Guidance/amplification (to be developed during Phase 2)  |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| <b>2. Application of knowledge</b>         |   | a makes use of relevant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ideas</li> <li>▪ facts</li> <li>▪ procedures</li> <li>▪ theories</li> </ul> with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>breadth or depth</b> that goes beyond the minimum required to pass</li> <li>▪ <b>very good</b> levels of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ consistency</li> <li>▪ creativity</li> <li>▪ precision</li> <li>▪ accuracy</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | a makes use of relevant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ideas</li> <li>▪ facts</li> <li>▪ procedures</li> <li>▪ theories</li> </ul> with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>breadth and depth</b></li> <li>▪ <b>excellent</b> levels of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ consistency</li> <li>▪ creativity</li> <li>▪ precision</li> <li>▪ accuracy</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <b>Breadth or depth/ breadth and depth</b><br>- a judgement about how this applies to particular subject areas/assessment activities is involved.<br><br>When applying this descriptor, a selection may be made from 'ideas', 'facts', 'procedures' and 'theories', as appropriate. Similarly, there may be a choice from the points under 'with', but some of the items in this list <b>must</b> be used. |

| Keyword or phrase for the grade descriptor | A <b>pass</b> grade is awarded for a unit where the student achieves the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the unit being assessed. | Indicative features for merit:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>  | Indicative features for distinction:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>  | Guidance/amplification (to be developed during Phase 2)   |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| <b>3. Application of skills</b>            |   | a selects and applies appropriate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ skills</li> <li>▪ techniques</li> <li>▪ methods</li> </ul><br>with <b>very good</b> levels of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ confidence</li> <li>▪ consistency</li> <li>▪ creativity</li> <li>▪ innovation</li> <li>▪ precision</li> <li>▪ accuracy</li> </ul> | a selects and applies appropriate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ skills</li> <li>▪ techniques</li> <li>▪ methods</li> </ul><br>with <b>excellent</b> levels of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ confidence</li> <li>▪ consistency</li> <li>▪ creativity</li> <li>▪ innovation</li> <li>▪ precision</li> <li>▪ accuracy</li> </ul> | A decision is made regarding which bullet points from the sub-sets (eg confidence, consistency, etc) are appropriate, ensuring that the list is stretching and demanding. |

| Keyword or phrase for the grade descriptor | A <b>pass</b> grade is awarded for a unit where the student achieves the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the unit being assessed. | Indicative features for merit:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>  | Indicative features for distinction:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>   | Guidance/amplification (to be developed during Phase 2)   |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| <b>4. Use of Information</b>               |   | <p>a makes <b>some</b> use of additional information</p> <p>b accurately appraises the relevance and value of the information</p> <p>c shows a <b>very good</b> grasp of the meaning and significance of new information</p> <p>d combines or synthesises information in ways that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ accurate</li> <li>▪ appropriate</li> </ul> <p>In practice-based work:</p> <p>e is <b>generally</b> informed by research that draws on a range of <b>sources</b> and <b>resources</b> that goes beyond the minimum required for the work.</p> | <p>a makes <b>extensive</b> use of additional information</p> <p>b accurately appraises the relevance and value of the information</p> <p>c shows an <b>excellent</b> grasp of the meaning and significance of new information</p> <p>d consistently combines or synthesises information in ways that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ accurate</li> <li>▪ succinct</li> <li>▪ innovative</li> <li>▪ creative</li> </ul> <p>In practice-based work:</p> <p>e is consistently informed by research that draws on an <b>extensive</b> range of <b>sources</b> and <b>resources</b>.</p> | <p>A judgement is made about the interpretation of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>additional</b></li> <li>▪ <b>extensive</b></li> </ul> <p>in relation to the sources provided or identified for the assignment, and should be guided by what is appropriate to the subject, the type of information and the task/activity.</p> <p>Additional information may come from one core resource or a number of sources, as appropriate within the resources available to the student for the assignment.</p> |

| Keyword or phrase for the grade descriptor | A <b>pass</b> grade is awarded for a unit where the student achieves the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the unit being assessed. | Indicative features for merit:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>   | Indicative features for distinction:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>  | Guidance/amplification (to be developed during Phase 2)  |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| <b>5. Communication and presentation</b>   |   | a demonstrates a <b>very good</b> command of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ format</li> <li>▪ structure</li> <li>▪ tone/register</li> <li>▪ language (including technical or specialist language)</li> <li>▪ spelling/punctuation</li> <li>▪ syntax</li> <li>▪ use of images</li> <li>▪ referencing</li> </ul> | a demonstrates an <b>excellent</b> command of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ format</li> <li>▪ structure</li> <li>▪ tone/register</li> <li>▪ language (including technical or specialist language)</li> <li>▪ spelling/punctuation</li> <li>▪ syntax</li> <li>▪ use of images</li> <li>▪ referencing</li> </ul> | Presentation of work may be written, oral and/or visual.<br><br>Work should demonstrate that it is designed to meet the needs of its intended audience and complies with the conventions of the subject and assessed activity. |

| Keyword or phrase for the grade descriptor | A <b>pass</b> grade is awarded for a unit where the student achieves the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the unit being assessed. | Indicative features for merit:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>  | Indicative features for distinction:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>   | Guidance/amplification (to be developed during Phase 2)  |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| <b>6. Autonomy/ independence</b>           |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a initiates appropriate actions</li> <li>b makes <b>generally</b> sound judgements about how to complete work</li> <li>c identifies problems for completing work and promptly seeks guidance</li> <li>d responds promptly and effectively to guidance</li> <li>e demonstrates <b>very good</b> time-management.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a initiates appropriate actions</li> <li>b makes <b>consistently</b> sound judgements about how to complete work</li> <li>c identifies problems for completing work and independently generates and pursues solutions</li> <li>d works effectively with a high level of independence</li> <li>e demonstrates <b>excellent</b> time-management.</li> </ul> | Judgements about the levels of student autonomy and independence should be made with reference to the general levels expected of students at this level, and the parameters of independence possible in relation to specific types of assessment activities. |

| Keyword or phrase for the grade descriptor | A <b>pass</b> grade is awarded for a unit where the student achieves the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the unit being assessed. | Indicative features for merit:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>  | Indicative features for distinction:<br><b>The student, student's work or performance...</b>  | Guidance/amplification (to be developed during Phase 2)  |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| 7. Quality                                 |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a is structured in a way that is in most cases logical and fluent</li> <li>b contains some ambiguities or incomplete thinking</li> <li>c taken as a whole, demonstrates a very good response to the <b>demands</b> of the brief/assignment</li> <li>d is in most aspects fit for purpose.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a is structured logically</li> <li>b has ideas which are expressed fluently and succinctly</li> <li>c contains arguments and ideas which are unambiguous and cogent</li> <li>d taken as a whole, demonstrates an excellent response to the <b>demands</b> of the brief/assignment</li> <li>e is entirely fit for purpose.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Demands</b> may be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• academic</li> <li>• technical</li> <li>• creative</li> <li>• practical</li> </ul> |