

The logo for OCN South East Region features the lowercase letters 'ocn' in a bold, purple, sans-serif font. Below it, the words 'SOUTH EAST REGION' are written in a smaller, purple, all-caps, sans-serif font. A large, stylized, curved purple shape, resembling a swoosh or a partial circle, is positioned to the right of the text, partially overlapping the 'n' and extending upwards and downwards.

**ocn**  
SOUTH EAST REGION

# **Access to HE Diplomas**

## **Grading Guidance**

The logo for Access to Higher Education consists of a green circular icon on the left. Inside the circle is a white stylized arrow pointing upwards and to the right. To the right of the icon, the word 'Access' is written in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. Below 'Access', the words 'to Higher Education' are written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

 **Access**  
to Higher Education

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## Access Grading - guidance for centres and moderators

OCNSER has developed a suite of documentation to support our approved Access centres in the implementation of grading for Access Diplomas. These are on our Access web pages and include templates for centres to amend and customise for their own needs and a detailed grading handbook based on the QAA guides.

Please visit <http://www.ocnser.org.uk/access-to-higher-education/grading>

If you have any questions or queries about the implementation of grading please contact one of the following:

- OCNSER Access Office 01227 827823 (Monday – Thursday)
- Director of Access, David Gittins ([d.gittins@ocnser.org.uk](mailto:d.gittins@ocnser.org.uk)),
- Lead Access Development Manager, Jan Mulreany, [j.mulreany@ocnser.org.uk](mailto:j.mulreany@ocnser.org.uk) (until end of December 09)

### Section 1: Introduction – The QAA ‘Access Grading Implementation Handbook’

These guidance notes are designed to complement the QAA ‘Access Grading Implementation Handbook’ and to provide a reference tool primarily for, staff working in Access provider centres and for Access external moderators.

#### ***The QAA Grading Handbook***

- Part A Introduction and principles**
- Part B Key features**
- Part C The Grade descriptors**
- Part D Assigning grade descriptors**
- Part E Grade descriptors and assessment**
- Part F Arriving at the final grade for units**
- Part G Record keeping**
- Part H Moderation**
- Part I Assessment regulations**
- Part J Award and certification**
- Part K Standardisation**

These notes should be always read in conjunction with the QAA Implementation Handbook, which provides the details of the current QAA regulations and guidance governing the implementation of grading for Access Diplomas. All Access tutors should be sure to familiarise themselves with all parts of the QAA guidance.

The complete QAA Implementation Handbook can be downloaded from the QAA website:

<http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/avas/default.asp>

or from the OCNSER website:

<http://www.ocnser.org.uk/access-to-higher-education/grading>

The QAA has also released more detailed guidance to HEIs in relation to grading. This is also available from the OCNSER Access grading web page.

#### **QAA Guidance to HE Admissions Document:**

Access to HE Diploma: making offers for the graded qualification ‘Guidelines for higher education admissions staff September 2009’

## Section 2: The Access Diploma grading model:

### 2.1 Background

The QAA Grading Implementation Handbook states that:

**'The Access to HE Diploma (the Diploma) is a nationally recognised qualification with common requirements relating to the description of student achievement. The Diploma is a credit-based, graded qualification, and requirements relate to both the award of credit and to the award of grades.'**

The QAA has specified that providers and AVAs must implement grading of the Access Diploma from September 2009. All Access providers should be aware that only Access courses which are able to award grades for units will be permitted to run from September 2009. Where students are on two year (or longer) Access courses, units achieved before September 2009 will NOT be eligible for grading retrospectively. Universities will be making offers of admission based upon grades for students who commence their Access courses after September 2009.

### 2.2 Key features

- Only Level 3 units which contribute towards the achievement of the Access Diploma will be graded, Level 2 units are not graded.
- The graded element of any Diploma may therefore be between 45 and 60 credits.
- Grades awarded to Level 3 units can be Pass, Merit or Distinction.
- Pass = achieving the Learning Outcomes for the unit, and assessment criteria at Level 3
- Merit or Distinction = a recognition of higher level of performance than that required by the learning outcomes and assessment criteria (i.e. a Pass)
- Grades are awarded following the consideration of a learner's work against generic criteria, called Grade Descriptors
- Grade Descriptors indicate what skills or level of performance a learner must demonstrate to be awarded Merit or Distinction in 7 key areas (see 2.3 below).
- Each Grade Descriptor contains within it a number of grading components or elements, which give specific detail of the performance to be measured. Not all components are used, and tutors must choose which of these elements to use for each assignment to be graded.
- Each unit must have a minimum of 2 and maximum of 7 Grade Descriptors assigned to it.
- The 'Quality' descriptor (No. 7) must be assigned to all units. Once assigned, the Grade Descriptors will apply to that unit, wherever delivered and however assessed, for the life of the unit.
- New units will have grading descriptors allocated and approved via the validation panel process and they will be identified in the header of the unit description.

### **OCNSER Advice**

Grade Descriptors have been assigned and formally approved for each Level 3 unit currently used in all OCNSER's approved Access Diploma titles. These Grade Descriptors are available in a spreadsheet for each centre. They have been emailed to Access Coordinators. Please contact the OCN Access Office if you are unable to find your centre's L3 Unit grading descriptors.

## **2.3 The grade descriptors:**

There are seven key areas for measuring performance. These are explained in full in Part C of the QAA Implementation Handbook. Tutors should familiarise themselves with the descriptors.

### **Access Grade Descriptors**

- 1. Understanding of the subject**
- 2. Application of knowledge**
- 3. Application of skills**
- 4. Use of information**
- 5. Communication and presentation**
- 6. Autonomy/Independence**
- 7. Quality**

## **2.4 Assigning grade descriptors to units**

When developing new units for validation by the AVA, providers should propose grade descriptors for the units, noting the following:

- Refer to Parts C and D of the QAA Grading Implementation handbook.
- Some grade descriptors will be more appropriate to use than others, depending upon the Learning Outcomes of the unit.
- The appropriateness of grade descriptors will relate specifically to the skills performance to be captured by the learning outcomes in the unit.
- All units will offer a variety of grading opportunities. The grade descriptors should allow tutors to consider the full range of student performance demonstrated in the achievement of the learning outcomes for the unit
- The variety of assessment methods used for the unit is not usually relevant to the decision about which grade descriptors to use and may actually be misleading (and remember that these methods may differ depending on where and how the unit is delivered).
- Many learning outcomes begin with the word 'Understand'. This does not mean that Grade Descriptor 1 (Understanding the subject) will be appropriate for all units.

- When considering which grade descriptors to propose for a unit it may become apparent that the design of the unit requires amendment. For example a subject based unit on the topic of 'Sociology' may have an assessment criterion which includes reference to a group seminar. Rather than simply allocate grade descriptor 5 'Communication and presentation' to the unit, ask the question; 'should this unit make reference to a potential type of assessment, i.e. a seminar when the primary aim of the unit is to acquire subject based knowledge?'. It is a common mistake to include specific assessment types in learning outcomes or assessment criteria and this unit would benefit from being amended as a result<sup>1</sup>.
- Any combination of grade descriptors may be used (minimum 2, maximum 7) and the 'Quality' descriptor must be used in all units.
- It is expected that, in order to cover all grading opportunities, the majority of units will have more than 2 grade descriptors but it is not advisable to use all 7 descriptors.
- Any units which have numerical marking indicated by the learning outcomes should use grade descriptors 1 and /or 3. There is specific QAA guidance on this in Part F. Annex 1.
- It is not expected by the QAA that a Diploma programme will be covered by all 7 descriptors, although clearly this would provide the opportunity for a student's performance to be graded over a broad range of skills related to preparation for higher education.
- The use of one or more of the individual components, or 'grading elements' within a grade descriptor will be decided by tutors at the point of delivery and assessment. This is not decided by validation panels, or during any subsequent unit approval process.

## Section 3: Using the grade descriptors in assessment

### 3.1 Overview

- Each Level 3 unit will be awarded a single grade, either Pass, Merit or Distinction (P, M,D), regardless of the number of assignments required to achieve the learning outcomes for the unit.
- All formal assignments for the unit will therefore attract provisional grade descriptors (there is no overall grade for an assignment).
- Any grade descriptor can be used in one or more assignments if it is relevant to the assessment requirements of more than one assignment.
- Grade Descriptor 7 ('Quality') must be used for all assignments. This allows for a holistic overview judgement to be made on every assignment.

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<sup>1</sup> Use the AVA's amendment to Access course procedure to request an amendment to an approved unit

### 3.2 A practical guide for using the grade descriptors

#### Step 1 : Design an 'Assessment Plan' for the unit

The assessment plan will determine which Grade Descriptors will be used in each assignment used for the unit. As a minimum therefore an **assessment plan** will be made up of the assignments or tasks mapped against the relevant learning outcomes/assessment criteria and the grade descriptors to be used for those assignments/tasks. Once this is done the individual **assignment briefs** for each unit can then be written to include the grade descriptors and information on specific grading components to be used.

#### Units with only one assignment

If the unit is assessed using only one assignment, all the descriptors chosen for the unit will also apply to the assignment.

#### Units with more than one assignment

If the unit is assessed using more than one assignment, the chosen descriptors will be applied across the group of assignments, using them in different combinations for each assignment as appropriate. Grade descriptor 7 must be considered when grading all assignments

#### Example A: Unit using three assignments

A Unit has been assigned grade descriptors 2, 4, 5 and 7 and the unit is assessed via three assignments:

##### Unit Assessment Plan

Unit Title:	Introduction to Biology	
Assignment	Grade Descriptors	Learning Outcomes & Assessment Criteria
First assignment:	Grade Descriptors 2, 5 and 7 <sup>2</sup>	1.1, 1.2
Second assignment:	Grade Descriptors 2, 4 and 7	1.3, 2.1, 2.2
Third assignment:	Grade Descriptors 5 and 7	3.1, 3.2, 3.3

As can be seen from this example a grade descriptor may be used more than once within a unit, this is appropriate if the same sort of performance is required in the assignments (e.g. Presentation and Communication skills). Doing this should provide more confidence about the reliability of the final grade awarded to the student for this descriptor across the unit.

The assessment plan for the grading this unit could also be expressed in this type of table.

Grade Descriptors	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3
2	✓		
4		✓	
5	✓		✓
7	✓	✓	✓

<sup>2</sup> Note: Grade Descriptor No. 7 is used for all units, and must be used for all assignments.

## Step 2: Decide which components of the chosen grade descriptors to use

Tutors decide which components or elements of each chosen grade descriptor are appropriate to the unit and the work being assessed. This will depend on the method of assessment being used for each assignment. Tutors can choose to use the components within a descriptor that they feel will work best for that assignment, within the permitted combination of components for that grade descriptor (this is identified in Part C of the QAA Grading Implementation Handbook).

In the example below grade descriptor 5 has been assigned to the unit because the unit measures performance in communication and presentation skills. In the assignment for the unit the students will prepare reports and are not required to include images. A tutor might therefore choose to use the items underlined, as shown.

### Example B: Grade Descriptor 5, with items to be used underlined

<b>Indicative content for Merit :</b> The student's work or performance demonstrates	<b>Indicative content for Distinction:</b> The student's work or performance demonstrates
<b>Using this descriptor</b> Any items (one or more) from the list	<b>Using this descriptor</b> Any items (one or more) from the list
a. Very good command of format <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>structure</u></li> <li>• use of images</li> <li>• <u>language</u> (including technical or specialist language)</li> <li>• syntax</li> <li>• register</li> <li>• <u>spelling</u></li> <li>• <u>punctuation</u></li> <li>• <u>referencing</u></li> </ul>	a. Excellent command of format <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>structure</u></li> <li>• use of images</li> <li>• <u>language</u> (including technical or specialist language)</li> <li>• syntax</li> <li>• register</li> <li>• <u>spelling</u></li> <li>• <u>punctuation</u></li> <li>• <u>referencing</u></li> </ul>

Check the QAA rules for which combination of grade descriptor components can be used for an assignment (see QAA Handbook Part C for details of each grade descriptor).

## Step 3: provide information for students – ‘the assignment brief’

The clarity and quality of information given to students will be critically important for the success of grading. **Centres should provide students with a written version of the full set of grade descriptors either within a student handbook, or a separate grading guidance document for students.** This will enable them to see what levels of performance are expected at each grade for each of the grade descriptors. Assignment briefs for students must include details of the grade descriptors and grading components being used.

It is essential that this information should be as clear as possible, in order to make grading decisions completely transparent and understandable to students and to minimise any necessity for students to challenge grading decisions made by tutors.

As a minimum it is required that assignment briefs should:

- list the grading descriptors assigned to the unit,
- list the grading components to be used for the assignment,
- tutors should also add some information that explains to the student how they would expect the grade descriptor requirements to be shown in the student's work (i.e. contextualising the grade descriptors<sup>3</sup>),
- it is also good practice to include reference to the learning outcomes/assessment criteria covered by the assignment,
- be clearly laid out and as straightforward as possible for students.

Some centres in the grading pilot combined the assignment briefs with an assignment feedback form for students. Centres should draw on their own experience and practices to decide which option is best. Separating the brief from the feedback might create more paperwork but on the other hand it might be simpler to work with two smaller forms rather than one larger one.

### Example C: grading information for use on assignment briefs

NB: components being used are underlined.

Grading descriptor/ theme	Merit : The student's work or performance	Distinction: The student's work or performance
<b>1. Understanding of the subject</b>	<p>a. <u>demonstrates a very good grasp of the relevant knowledge base</u></p> <p>b. is generally informed by the major conventions and practices of the area of study</p> <p>c. <u>demonstrates very good understanding of the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study</u></p>	<p>a. <u>demonstrates an excellent grasp of the relevant knowledge base</u></p> <p>b. is consistently informed by the major conventions and practices of the area of study</p> <p>c. <u>demonstrates excellent understanding of the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study</u></p>
<b>What this means for your assignment<sup>4</sup></b>	<i>Your discussion will be supported by reference to an accurate knowledge of the Weimar Republic. This knowledge will be related to the 2 historical perspectives studied in this topic and you will show that you understand the main differences between these perspectives.</i>	<i>Your discussion will be supported by reference to a consistently and completely accurate knowledge of the Weimar Republic. This knowledge will be interwoven with an analysis of the 2 historical perspectives studied in this topic. Furthermore you will show that you have a detailed understanding of the differences between these perspectives.</i>

<sup>3</sup> Note: contextualising the grade descriptors is not mandatory. However many tutors in the pilot centres did find it helpful to give this additional information to students.

<sup>4</sup> This is an example of contextualising the grade descriptors

### Example D: a possible way of giving grading information and feedback to students.

In this example, the assignment is using Grade Descriptors 2,4,5 and 7. Such a box could be added to the assignment brief/assessment record sheet, as appropriate to the practice in your centre.

Grade Descriptor	Tutor Comments <sup>5</sup>	Performance against descriptor (P <sup>6</sup> /M/D)
2. Application of knowledge		
4. Use of Information		
5. Communication and presentation		
7. Quality		

### Step 4: Involve Internal Moderators & Standardise

It is important that students are treated consistently across the range of subjects and teaching groups offered on an Access course or within a centre. Centres should therefore take steps to ensure that the information given to students is consistent across subjects and tutors.

Items for internal moderation (the AVA provides templates for devising and internally moderating these)

### OCNSER provides the following templates to support centres:

Click on the icon or paste the address into your web browser:

Document	Link
Access Unit Assessment Plan (including assignment briefs)	<a href="http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2875">http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2875</a>
Internal Moderation Action Plans and other IM templates see Downloads 'Internal Moderation'	<a href="http://www.ocnser.org.uk/access-to-higher-education/access-downloads">http://www.ocnser.org.uk/access-to-higher-education/access-downloads</a>

Decisions on grading will need to be submitted for internal moderation, as part of the usual processes for sampling and moderating students' assessed work. Feedback from internal moderators should address grading decisions and feedback given to learners on performance against grade descriptors as well as achievement of learning outcomes and

<sup>5</sup> Comments should relate to the type of performance described by the chosen components of the descriptor, so that students clearly understand the grade given

<sup>6</sup> There are no descriptor statements for "Pass". Students achieve a Pass by meeting the requirements of all the assessment criteria of a unit

credit level. This can be achieved by either using a standard internal moderation model or by using Access team meetings. In both cases a record should be kept of the activity.

## **Step 5: Grade assignments**

(see QAA Grading Implementation Handbook, Part E 'Using grade descriptors in assessment')

Tutors will mark assignments in the usual way but will be making reference to, and providing judgements on, student achievement in relation to the grade descriptors attached to a unit as well as whether the assessment criteria have been met. The QAA Handbook, Part E, sections 3 – 6 provide detailed guidance about how to use grade descriptors in assessment.

### **i. Numeric Marking**

Further detailed guidance can be found in the QAA Handbook in Part F 'Determining the final grade for a unit', Annex 1. Centres intending to use numeric marking will need to study this QAA guidance closely.

The Pass, Merit and Distinction grades do not have numerical equivalents and numeric marks cannot be converted to grades using the standard method of marking. Numerical marking is permitted for assignments where the student response to a question is either right or wrong. This exception is specifically intended to address the assessment needs of subjects such as mathematics and natural sciences (although might be applicable in other subjects). The only grade descriptors which are eligible for numerical marking are grade descriptor 1. Understanding of the subject and 3. Application of skills. The QAA guidance makes it clear that in most circumstances the outcomes based assessment model does not lend itself to numeric marking.

Where numeric marking is used, achievement must still be mapped to the specific learning outcome in a unit. Grade descriptor 7. Quality must also be used and this is not eligible for numeric marking. Tutors must therefore exercise and overall quality judgement in addition to any Merit or Distinction achieved via a numeric mark.

## **Step 6: Keep records and give feedback to students**

(See Part G of the QAA Implementation handbook 'Providing information and record keeping')

### **i. Introduction**

The key to managing grading on an Access course is to ensure that the recording and feedback mechanisms used are clear and effective for students and staff. By providing students with clear information about how their work will be graded, it should be relatively straightforward for tutors to make grading decisions and give useful feedback to students about how they achieved the grades awarded, and how they might improve their performance.

### **ii. Grade profiles**

Every assignment will have at least 2 grade descriptors allocated to it. Initial grading decisions relating to the grade descriptors for an assignment will form a grade profile for

the unit and from this the eventual overall grade for the Unit<sup>7</sup> will be calculated. Grades allocated are referred to as 'grade indicators' at this stage and should be distinguished from the final grade for the unit. Even when all of the assignments for an individual unit have been marked and returned to students with all of the grade indicators included – the overall grade awarded for that unit is still only provisional until the final awards board confirms it.

Tutors will need to have a record of grades, and how they were allocated at unit level per student. The QAA requires that this be available as part of the auditable evidence trail of the grading process to ensure fairness and transparency. Should a student challenge a grading decision, this information will form an important part of any review and investigation.

**iii. Feedback to students** (See Part G of the QAA Implementation handbook for information related to providing feedback to students)

- Feedback on performance should relate to the grade descriptors and specific grade components
- Care is needed with language used in feedback to students, especially the terms 'very good' and 'excellent'. In grade descriptors 'very good' usually indicates a merit level performance, and 'excellent' a distinction. It may therefore be confusing for a student to receive a comment such as 'excellent essay' and be awarded a merit.
- Tutors can cut and paste the relevant comments directly from the grade descriptors into feedback on grading indicators awarded to aspects of student assignments however it is strongly recommended that this type of pasted information be supported by feedback which is contextualised to the student performance in the assignment.

**iv. Returning work to students**





- 'Grade indicators' may be given to students when returning individual assignments for developmental purposes. However it should be made clear that where the assignment forms one of several for the unit, that the grade is merely an indicator and is not the final grade for the unit.
- Tutors may decide to wait until all assignments for a unit have been submitted and assessed, before giving the overall grade for the unit to the student. If one or more students in a group has been granted an extension to hand work in late or the opportunity to re-submit, then it is important that no potential additional advantage is given to these students. For this reason tutors should consider carefully the impact of giving feedback to students on grade indicators for marked work before any resubmission and/or late submission dates have passed. This may result in delays in handing back marked work to students and late/re-submission dates should be as short as possible.
- Where delays in handing back work are unavoidable tutors could offer verbal feedback to anxious students but delay the physical return of work until all students have submitted their assignments. Centres should adopt a consistent approach across all of their Access provision.

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<sup>7</sup> Where a unit is assessed via a single assignment the single set of grade indicators will be used to make the provisional grade for the unit.

## OCNSER provides the following templates to support centres:

Click on the icon/address or paste the address into your web browser:

Document	Link
<b>Access Assignment Feedback template</b> - for use as the basis for designing an assignment feedback form for tutors to use with students which makes reference to grading	 <a href="http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2873">http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2873</a>
<b>Access student grade profile Excel template v1</b> - a template to record individual student grade profiles across units on an Access course (some stylistic differences from v2)	 <a href="http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2876">http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2876</a>
<b>Access student grade profile Excel template v2</b> a template to record individual student grade profiles across units on an Access course (some stylistic differences from v1)	 <a href="http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2877">http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2877</a>
<b>Access class unit grade summary Excel template</b> – a template for recording the unit grades for whole Access classes	 <a href="http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2906">http://www.ocnser.org.uk/document/2906</a>

## Step 7: Deciding on the final grade for a unit

(Parts E & F of the QAA Implementation handbook give more details of using grades with assessment and arriving at the final grade for units).

### i. Key features

- Grading occurs only when a unit has been achieved at Level 3. Where more than one assignment is used to assess the unit, this means each one will have been completed to a Level 3 standard.
- Each grade descriptor used for a unit will generate at least one grade indicator, more if the grade descriptor has been used more than once in more than one assignment.
- Individual assignments do not receive an overall assignment grade, instead the grade descriptors used for the assignment receive a grade indicator which is subsequently used to form a grade profile from which the overall unit grade is calculated.
- Each grade indicator will be a Pass, Merit or Distinction. The list of all grade indicators forms the 'grade profile' e.g. PPMDD, which is used to determine final grade for unit. It is the mid-point of the list of grade indicators (when placed in order of grade) that determines the grade, e.g. PPMDD = Merit. Only the mid-point of the list of grade indicators may be used to determine the final grade - no other form of average is permitted.
- There is no weighting of individual assignments – all grade indicators produced by assessing student work count equally towards the final grade for the unit

When marking assignments, decisions about the grades to be awarded for the grade descriptors allocated to the assignment will be made by the tutor. Detailed guidelines can be found in the QAA Grading Implementation Handbook in Part F section 4 and 5.

**Example E: Arriving at the final grade for the unit - where there is a single assignment for the unit:**

n.b. Grade descriptors for unit = 2, 4, 5 and 7, all grade descriptors must be used, all assignments must have their allocated grade descriptors 'graded', grade descriptor 7 ('Quality') must be used in all assignments.

ASSIGNMENT 1: ESSAY	
Grade descriptor	Performance against descriptor: P, M, D
2	P
4	D
5	M
7	M
Grade profile	P, M, M, D ↑ midpoint
Final grade for unit	Merit

**Example F: Arriving at the final grade for the unit - where there are several assignments for the unit:**

n.b. Grade descriptors for unit = 2, 4, 5 and 7, all grade descriptors must be used, all assignments must have their allocated grade descriptors 'graded', grade descriptor 7 ('Quality') must be used in all assignments.

ASSIGNMENT 1: ESSAY		ASSIGNMENT 2: CASE STUDY		ASSIGNMENT 3: PRESENTATION	
Grade descriptors for assignment	Performance against descriptor: P, M, D	Grade descriptors for assignment	Performance against descriptor: P, M, D	Grade descriptors for assignment	Performance against descriptor: P, M, D
2	P				
		4	P		
5	D			5	M
7	M	7	P	7	M
Grade indicators for assignment	P, M, D	Grade indicators for assignment	P,P	Grade indicators for assignment	M,M
Grade profile	P,P,P,M,M,M,D ↑ mid-point				
Final grade for unit	Merit				

## ii. Advice when grading units:

The overall unit grade is based on a holistic review of all assessed work for the unit as evidenced in the grade profile for the unit. Tutor judgement may be used in cases where no overall grade is produced by the grade profile, e.g. M, M, D, D, and Grade Descriptor 7 ('Quality'), which looks at the level of overall performance in responding the brief, should be used as the deciding factor when determining the final grade for the unit

No weighting of assignments is permitted, all grade indicators have equal value

Students should be able to clearly understand how the final grade for the unit has been reached, and this should be reflected in the feedback given to the student.

## Section 4: Assessment Regulations

(Part I of the QAA Implementation Handbook provides more detail about 'Assessment and reassessment').

The QAA has outlined a set of 'regulations' which centres offering Access courses must follow. Please ensure that these regulations are adhered to and that any rules at centre level do not clash with them.

A summary of key parts of the regulations and additional guidance from OCNSER follows.

### 4.1 Formal Submission of Assignments:

Centres must operate a formal approach to the submission of assignments which will contribute to the achievement of units. Students should receive notification of the procedures for the submission of assignments (e.g. in a student handbook). Deadlines for the submission of work must be available to students 'in writing before the assignment is undertaken'.

OCNSER strongly advises centres to publish a formal document, such as a handbook, setting out the procedures for submissions.

### 4.2 Draft submissions

A range of practice exists around draft submissions ranging from a refusal to accept any written drafts in advance to tutors giving comments on drafts or plans of work. Where the submission of drafts in some form is permitted by a centre, the rules for this must be clear and consistently applied to all students. Any comments on drafts must NOT contain any reference to potential grading judgements with reference to the draft.

Based on our experience and discussion with staff in centres, OCNSER recommends that draft assignments are not taken in for any formal written feedback from tutors. Where appropriate tutors might wish to offer students the opportunity to discuss the outline of their assignment in general terms which might include looking at an essay plan or similar. However care should be taken to avoid specific assurances about either achieving a Level 3 pass or any grade indicators. Any policy must be applied consistently to all students.

Once an assignment has been submitted and upon marking is deemed to have met the Level 3 assessment criteria relating to the relevant learning outcomes in a unit, no parts of the assignment can be adjusted or amended in order to improve a grade indicator.

#### **4.3 Unsuccessful Submissions & Resubmissions** (Further detailed guidance can be found in QAA Grading Implementation Handbook, section 3.4)

##### **a) Overview**

- Resubmission and hence the subsequent 'reassessment' of an assignment is only permitted when a submitted assignment has failed to reach the required Level 3 criteria as set out in the unit.
- Assignments which meet the Level 3 unit criteria and are marked and graded, cannot be resubmitted in order to improve grade indicators. No 'grade polishing' is permitted

##### **b) Conditions for allowing resubmissions:**

- the original submission is returned to the student, with written feedback which explains which learning outcome(s) has/have not been achieved, and why
- the opportunity for resubmission is explained to the student
- the original submission is retained (by the student or tutor) for moderation purposes
- the particular requirements for resubmission are specified to the student.

##### **c) Where resubmissions are allowed they should be:**

###### **i. Proportionate to the degree of non-achievement**

For example where a single learning outcome is not achieved as a result of a minor omission or error then additional material which is supplemental to than the original assignment may be requested. If one or more learning outcomes are not met as the result of significant omissions or errors then a full re-working of the assignment could be requested.

###### **ii. Consistent with the way in which the learning outcomes were assessed in the original assignment brief.**

This usually means using the same assessment method but if this isn't possible (e.g. where the original formed a part of a group presentation), then the resubmission should use an assessment method which is comparable to the original. Care should be taken that undue advantage is not given to a student by allowing a resubmission. For example re-taking of an examination should involve new questions being set.

Where a unit is assessed via more than one assignment, grade indicators already awarded for assignments which have been accepted and graded are unaffected.

###### **iii. Have clear deadlines**

Resubmitted work should be set a deadline as soon as possible after the feedback to the initial submission has been given, whilst allowing a student a reasonable timescale within which to complete the work.

The re-submission deadline must be communicated to and confirmed as received and understood by the student.

##### **d) Resubmission can involve:**

- i. revision of the original assignment (rather than complete re-write) If this is not practicable (for example for test or examination situations), the resubmission may involve a new task assessing the same set of learning outcomes or a sub-set or individual learning outcomes
- ii. partial resubmission of additional specific aspects of an assignment. In general, this will mean that where non-achievement at Level 3 is the result of omission, then a resubmission of additional material to achieve the learning outcomes is permitted
- iii. where a single learning outcome has not been achieved, the resubmitted work will only address that one learning outcome. Assessment criteria are evidenced through assessment of the learning outcome(s) to which they relate: resubmission of work for individual assessment criteria will not usually be used in isolation.
- iv. Full resubmission of the same, or a new assignment. Where a number of learning outcomes have not been achieved, resubmission is likely to require a major reworking of the assignment.

#### **4.4 Appeals against grading decisions from students**

(see QAA Handbook Part I Section 3.5)

It is possible that some students may challenge the grade indicator decisions made by tutors on their work. This is only permitted to happen at the point at which a student receives the returned and marked assignment with grade indicators. The QAA regulations/guidelines for this can be summarised as:

##### **Appeal Stage 1**

Students must appeal at the earliest opportunity (usually within 1 week of receiving the assessed work).

Tutor meets with student to discuss the issue and resolve by explaining reasons for unit grade or individual grade indicator(s). If an administrative error in transposing grade indicator information to grade profiles or similar is identified, then this can be rectified.

##### **Appeal Stage 2**

If a student is not satisfied with Stage 1, s/he will have her/his appeal considered by 'another appropriately qualified member of the course team or internal moderator', or if available other centre based appeals process.

a) If consideration results in no grounds being found for re-grading then the original tutor grade indicator or overall unit grade decisions are upheld and recorded.

b) If consideration does find grounds for regarding the work in question will be referred immediately to the external moderator for consideration. The external moderator will examine the relevant assignment and will either uphold the original decision or require a new grade/indicator to be recorded. The external moderator's decision will be final.

#### **4.5 Extensions and late submissions**

(Part I 'Assessment and reassessment) of the QAA Implementation Handbook provides more detail about extensions and late submissions in section 3.6)

Centres must have a clear set of procedures, accessible to students, for granting extensions for the submission of work and for dealing with late submissions. Centres have considerable scope to use their own procedures and rules but they must be consistent with the following QAA regulations:

- a) if work is submitted after the formal deadline has passed, and no extension has been granted (and there are no extenuating circumstances which explain the failure to request an extension), all grade indicators relating to that assignment (whether that be all or part of the assessment of the unit) are capped at 'pass'
- b) if an assignment is late and is unsuccessful, there is no opportunity for resubmission except via the referrals process (see QAA Handbook Grading Implementation Part J).

#### 4.6 Referrals

(Part J of the QAA Implementation Handbook 'Award and certification of the graded Access to HE Diploma' provides more detail about 'referrals' in section 4.1)

Where a student has re-submitted an assignment using the process outlined above and the outcome has been unsuccessful and where the failure to pass this assignment prevents a student from achieving an Access Diploma, there is an opportunity for the course team to support a referral to the final exam/awards board. The referral takes the form of a request for a further resubmission of a piece of work to be allowed for this student.

This referrals process is intended to be used for students who are still progressing and developing and where non-achievement might be the result of some external factors such as extenuating circumstances or simply that they had not yet reached their potential at the point in the course when they had to submit and then re-submit the original assignment(s).

The course team has to make a case as to why the student should be allowed to make a further re-submission of one or more pieces of work. The QAA guidelines specify the required information to be prepared.

Since a referral request might arise well before the end of the course, the awards board will not usually have been constituted as this has historically met for one session at the end of the course. The 'Awards Board' is therefore redefined as having an existence from the commencement of the course so that any request for referrals can be made to it during the course. The external moderator, an AVA officer and a member of the centre's Access team are deemed to constitute the core of the awards board for any Access Diploma. A formal request for a referral should therefore be made by the course tutor/team via the centre's Access manager/coordinator who should then forward this to the relevant external moderator and an AVA officer<sup>8</sup>. A record of this will be kept by the AVA and a report made to the final awards board as necessary.

Where a further re-submission is granted by the awards board, the grade is capped at a Pass, should the student be successful. Only in exceptional circumstances should a referral resubmission have a deadline date beyond the final awards board meeting.

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<sup>8</sup> In the first instance this AVA officer will always be the Access Moderation and Quality Officer who may then refer the request on to another authorised AVA officer.

#### **4.7 Extenuating Circumstances**

(See Part J of the QAA Implementation Handbook 'Award and certification of the graded Access to HE Diploma' section 4.2)

Centres must have a clear definition of extenuating circumstances and their related procedures which is made known to students. OCNSER has published a template form for use with extenuating circumstances. Where a decision is made to exempt a student from some of the required unit credits, these will appear as special units on the student's credit transcript identifying that they were achieved via extenuating circumstances and they can only be achieved at a pass level.

#### **Appendix 1: Summary of grading process from QAA Handbook (Part F, section 4)**

##### **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).

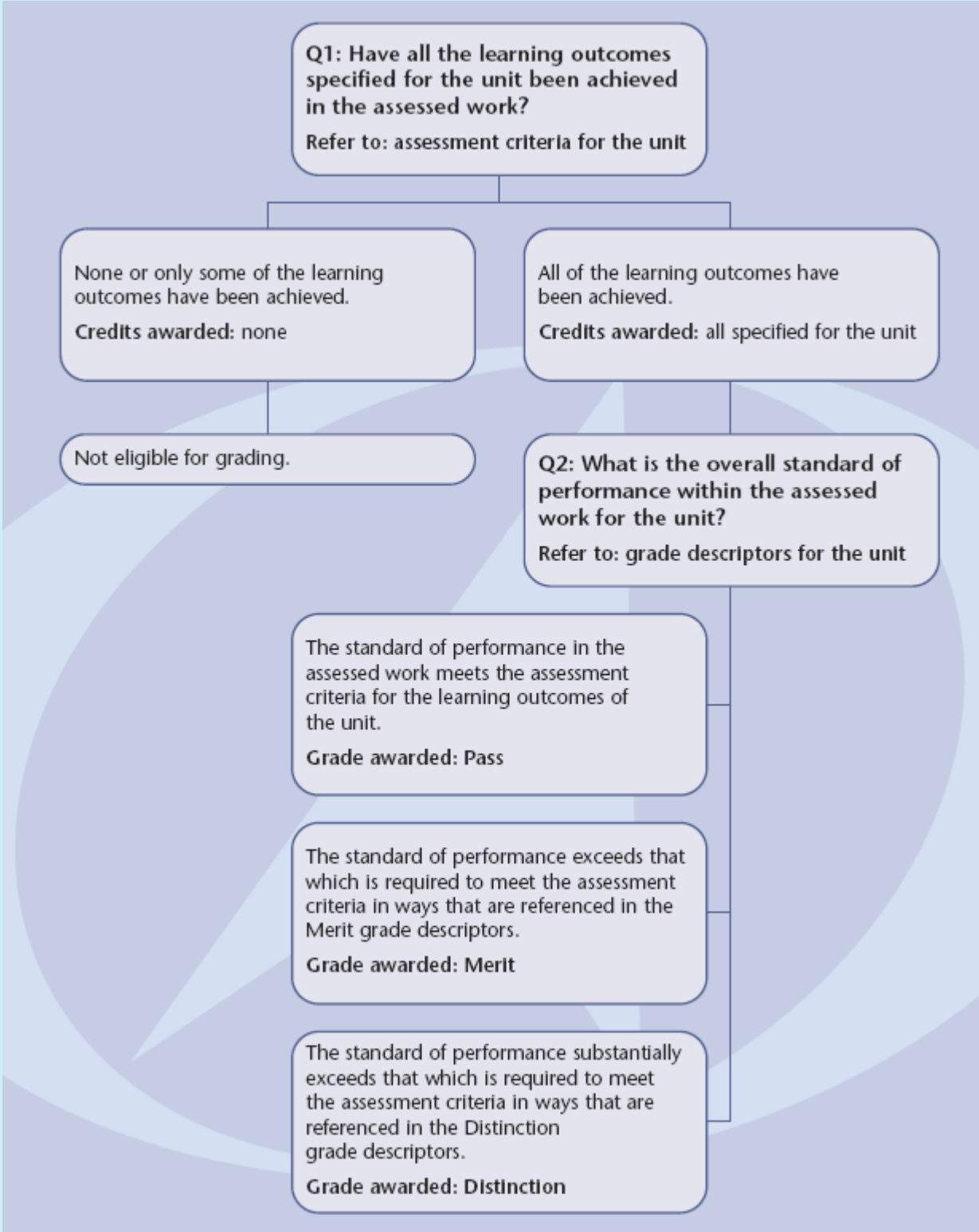
##### **Step 4: Provide feedback to students**

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.)

**Appendix 2: Flow diagram of the grading process**



### Appendix 3: Glossary of grading terminology

Term	Definition
<b>Access diploma certificate</b>	A certificate issued by the AVA for distribution by centres to students, which shows that a student has achieved an Access Diploma, with a specific title and that it is QAA approved. No reference to credits or unit grades.
<b>Assignment brief</b>	The information given to a student outlining the requirements of an assignment to include the grade descriptors and components thereof to be used for grading assessment, a clear submission deadline.
<b>Assignment feedback form</b>	A mechanism for feeding back to the student assessment decisions including grade indicators awarded with an explanation.
<b>Awards Board</b>	A committee with devolved responsibility to make decisions relating to the award of Access Diplomas to students at Access provider/centre level. As a minimum consists of an external moderator, another external moderator or AVA officer, a centre representative.
<b>Credit transcript</b>	A list of all units achieved by a student showing the title, credit value, level and grade. This is produced by the AVA in addition to the Access Diploma Certificate.
<b>External moderation</b>	The process whereby the AVA employs an external, qualified individual to assure the quality of the Access provision and to approve assessment decisions made by a centre.
<b>Grade descriptor</b>	A generic statement defining an area of performance, against which student performance will be measured.
<b>Grade component</b>	A sub part of a grade descriptor which gives a performance indicator statement to allow a grading decision to be made by a tutor/assessor.
<b>Grade indicator</b>	An assessment decision made by a tutor assessor of Pass, Merit or Distinction for a grade descriptor attached to an assignment.
<b>Grade profile</b>	A summary of the grade indicators for a unit made up of a series of grades such as PPPPMMMDD.
<b>Grade profile middle point</b>	The grade(s) in the middle of the grade profile which will be used to determine the overall unit grade e.g. PPM <u>MM</u> DD = Merit, MMMM <u>DD</u> DDDD = Distinction.
<b>Internal Moderation</b>	The process whereby a centre ensures consistency of the application of standards in respect to assessment decisions including the grading decisions.

<b>Numerical marking</b>	Applicable only to grade descriptors 1 & 3 as set out in the QAA Grading Handbook Part F, Annex 1. For use with assessments where the only possible response is either right or wrong. Quality grade descriptor still used in addition.
<b>Quality grade descriptor</b>	The grade descriptor to be used to allow for an holistic overview judgement to be made on student achievement. All units and all assignments must have this attached to them.
<b>Referral</b>	Where an Access course team, requests of the Awards Board that a student who has failed one or more resubmission(s) and who has insufficient credits to pass the course, be given another opportunity to resubmit work in order to pass (any units covered by such a referral are capped at a 'Pass').
<b>Resubmission</b>	Where a formally submitted assignment fails to reach Level 3 a student is allowed to resubmit at the earliest opportunity. No feedback in relation to potential grades can be given by tutors.
<b>Unit Assessment Plan</b>	A plan showing the assignments to be used for a unit mapped against the grade descriptors and the learning outcomes/assessment criteria.