

## Notes & issues arising from the OCNSER grading event, held at British School of Osteopathy, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2009

The original questions, submitted in advance, for the event are included below in italics. Responses and points emerging from the meeting are included as text below the questions. Hyperlinks to the QAA Grading Handbook are included if you are viewing this document online

### a) General

*Is it not at best very likely, and at worst inevitable that the three tiered grading system will, over time, lead to a 'merit' becoming the new standard benchmark for achievement by Access learners?*

A view in the meeting was expressed regarding the potential danger that 'merit' might come to be perceived as the new norm for student achievement, especially if offers from higher education begin to coalesce around definitions of 'merit' achievement as the required standard. The ways grading is used by higher education admissions departments around the country in determining offers, will be a key factor in influencing whether or not this happens.

**Actions:** The QAA, AVAs and Access provider centres need to actively engage with colleagues in HE admissions, to support an appropriate use of grades within offers.

### b) Use of grade descriptors

*Original questions related to the use of grade descriptors in the following contexts:*

#### **Specific grade descriptors:**

- **Descriptor 1 'Understanding of the subject':** it was not the intention to have this descriptor used for every unit but rather for units where it was desirable to make a formal assessment of acquired subject knowledge. Hence it is likely to appear in academic subject units but has less relevance for skills based units such as 'Using ICT' or 'Essay writing techniques'.
- **Descriptor 5 'Communications':** practice across AVAs has varied but this grade descriptor was intended to be applied to units where an aspect of communications formed an integral part of the unit content. The formal assessment of a student's ability to communicate, is often carried out through specific study skills units which form a part of an Access Diploma. Additionally some subject specific units identify specific communication related activities, such as seminars or presentations, within their learning outcomes.

#### **General issues re grade descriptors:**

- When using the grade descriptors with students, for example on assignment briefs, it is important **not to re-interpret the descriptors and their components** by re-wording them in a way which could be confusing or misleading. QAA advice is to use the wording of the components as they are within [Section C of the QAA Grading Implementation Handbook](#).

- **Use of grade descriptor components:** when choosing components of grade descriptors to apply to an individual assignment, the same components should be used consistently across both merit and distinction levels. Thus it is not permissible for example to use two components for a merit and then use the same two plus a third one for a distinction.

### c) Assessment

*i. Where more than one assignment is used to evidence a unit, is it acceptable to give grade indicators to students for assignments as they are completed in order to help them improve in later assignments for that unit?*

- Yes, this is an important aspect of enabling students to develop their performance. It is however important to remember that once a student has submitted an assignment and it has been graded (i.e. it has been assessed as meeting Level 3 and therefore awarded a pass, merit or distinction), the assignment cannot be re-submitted in order to improve the grade awarded.

*ii. Some of the wording used in the components could be seen as being more appropriate to a basic pass rather than a 'merit'. For example use of 'generally' to describe consistency of performance.*

- It is recognised that in trying to use words and phrases to consistently describe achievement in relation to grading, there will be the potential for different groups of users to have potentially differing interpretations. This is the inevitable result of a system which can accommodate such a wide range of learning and assessment. There is detailed guidance on the use of generic terminology in the [QAA Grading Implementation Handbook \(Part E; Section 5\)](#).

### d) Assessment regulations

*i. Is it fair that a student who submits a piece of work within the deadline, which just passes at Level 3 achieves a Pass grade, whilst a student who knowingly submits a piece of work below Level 2 standard, will have the opportunity to re-submit and potentially achieve a Merit or Distinction?*

- Some students may seek to cynically exploit the option of being able to re-submit assignments which do not achieve level 3 on the first attempt. However there is a danger of engineering a restrictive submissions policy just to prevent the potential abuse of the system by a relatively small number of students. Furthermore the opportunity for students to re-submit assignments, as part of their steep learning trajectory, is a key aspect of the learning journey of many Access students.

Where tutors feel that students are exploiting the resubmission opportunity, it is within their power to impose strict limitations on these opportunities. For example students might be given a very short window within which to resubmit, possibly as short as by the end of that same day, or the next day.

ii. *Is it possible to limit the total number of re-submission opportunities for an individual student on an Access Diploma? For example a student may only re-submit up to four assignments. After that the work will only be accepted at Level 2 (if unit available) or a fail.*

- Centres may set their own regulations (subject to approval by the AVA) which permit a reasonable opportunity for resubmissions, but which has an upper limit on the number of times an individual student may resubmit assignments across a single Access Diploma title. Any such limit should be consistently applied at centre level and all students should be made aware of it. In order not to undermine the intention of the QAA regulation regarding the opportunity to resubmit assignments, the limit should be one that provides adequate opportunities for students to take advantage of the resubmission offer, balanced against excessive resubmissions which might result in a student just achieving an Access Diploma but not really being ready for entry to HE<sup>1</sup>.

#### **e) Moderation**

- The role of external moderators in relation to grading was a cause of some concern. The AVA officers made it clear that external moderators were being advised to be supportive of the implementation process and additional advice on how to scrutinise grading will be produced by the AVA for early January 2010.
- Centres are urged to include in their own internal moderation processes, the monitoring of how grade descriptors and components are being applied to assignments and how grade indicators are then being awarded.

#### **f) Standardisation**

*It was suggested that the different use of grade descriptors and their components in relation to individual assignments across units used in more than one centre, could lead to a lack of consistency in the process leading to the award of grades for such units.*

- The responses pointed out that there was a potential variation in the way tutors allocated grade descriptors across assignments, both within and across centres. The number of assignments used to assess the same unit will also vary, again potentially both within and across centres. The Access grading system is designed to allow diversity and enable tutors to use a wide range of assessment models.

A uniform assessment model would be very restrictive and require a much more centralised approach to curriculum planning.

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<sup>1</sup> This limit should be set at centre level but OCN SER would not expect this limit to be lower than four without a detailed explanation being submitted. This is a benchmark of four resubmission opportunities per student on an Access Diploma title. Note that once a individual piece of work has been resubmitted once, there are no further resubmission opportunities for that piece of work. The four resubmission opportunities apply to separate formal assignments across any part of a student's studies on an Access to HE Diploma title.

## g) University admissions and offers

- i. *Offers are already being made by some HE institutions which are virtually impossible for a student to achieve, for example all Level 3 units at distinction grade. Other offers want an overall 'merit' or 'distinction' for the Diploma. How should we respond to such offers and will the QAA grading scheme ever develop into one capable of awarding a single overall grade?*
- Access centres should feel able to engage in positive discussion with HE admissions staff where offers have been made which are impossible or inappropriate for students to achieve.

The QAA guidance for HE Admissions staff is available to download from the OCNSER Access web pages. OCNSER's own advice to HEIs on making offers using grading is also available. For both go to:  
(<http://www.ocnser.org.uk/access-to-higher-education/access-grading>).

Where issues are not resolved by such discussion, OCNSER asks that centres send full details of such offers to the Director of Access at the Canterbury Office. The AVA will (with the approval of the Access centre) seek to resolve or clarify issues with HE institutions directly and where necessary will pass details of inappropriate offers to the QAA.

- The present grading system is not able to support a single overall grade and it is not currently the intention of the QAA to revisit this issue, however the grading system will doubtless grow and develop in the coming years.
- ii. *The UCAS 'Apply' system has a box for an overall Access Diploma grade.*
- QAA has recently been made aware of this and has contacted UCAS to try and remedy the situation. In the meantime the advice is to either leave the box blank (if the system permits this) or enter n/a or similar.

The AVA is setting up a virtual 'Access Network for HEIs' in the region and is exploring ways of communicating information about the ways of helping admissions staff to design useful offers for Access students.