

Summary Report on survey 'HE Offers to Access Students February 2010'

Introduction

This survey was undertaken with OCNSER validated Access to HE providers during February 2010. It is an initial survey designed to produce an overall first impression of the impact of grading on the ways in which HEIs have made offers to Access students applying for places on degree provision for entry in September 2010.

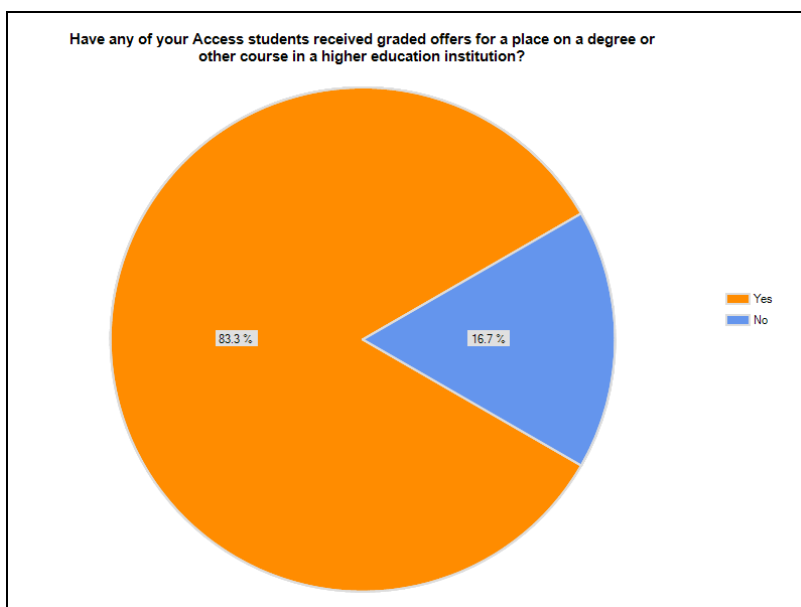
The first section of the survey (**Quantitative Impact**) requested approximate quantitative data relating to the frequency of use and types of graded offers made by HEIs. This data is neither final nor definitive and it is our intention to follow up this survey with further investigations later in the year.

The second part of the survey (**Qualitative Impact**) sought to gain a range of impressions about the impact of graded offers on Access learners. The views expressed in the returns are the impressions of Access staff working in colleges on how they believe Access students have been reacting to graded offers from HEIs. They are thus views one step removed from Access students but given the experience and the engagement of Access staff with the applications process, these views should be considered as valid insights to student reactions.

18 out of 29 Access centres responded to the survey. Relatively few respondents skipped any of the questions, with the exception of the final open ended invite to comment on the impact of grading which was skipped by 8 respondents.

Part 1 'Quantitative Impact' – Summary and Analysis

Question 1.1: Have any of your Access students received graded offers for a place on a degree or other course in a higher education institution?

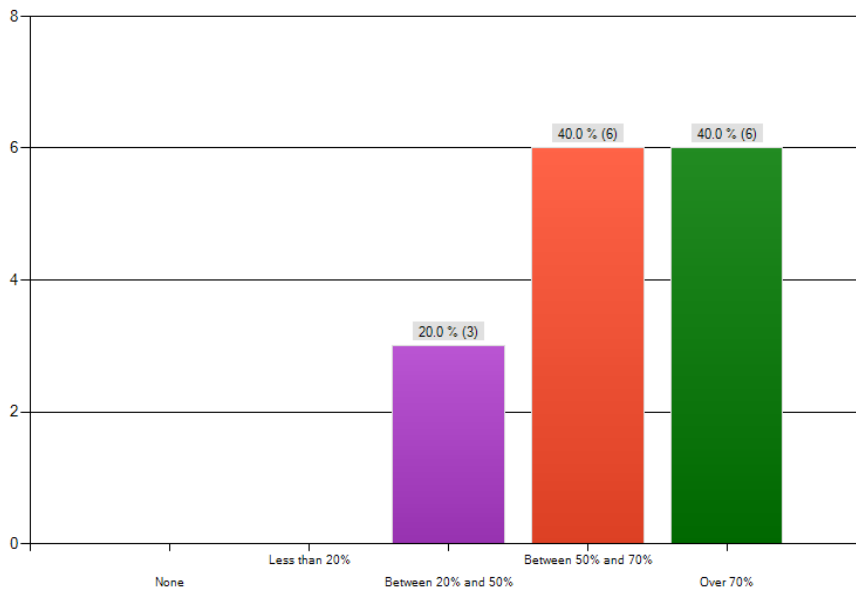


83.3% of centres have Access students who have received graded offers from HEIs which represents 15 actual centres. The remaining 16.7% (or 3 centres) reported no graded offers.

This suggests an already widespread use of graded offers to Access students during 2009-10.

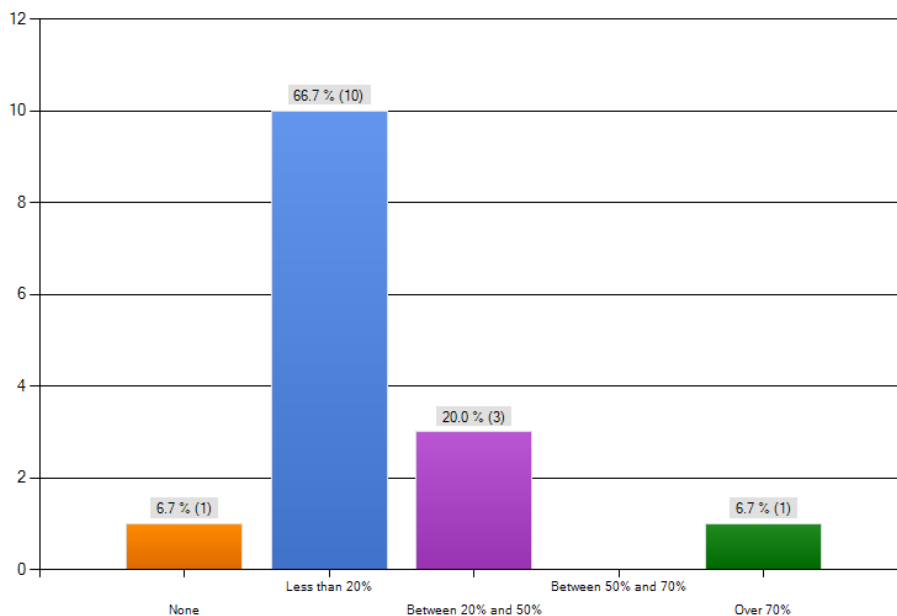
Question 1.2:

Roughly what proportion of your Access cohort has received standard Pass/Fail offers for their intended HE destinations?



Question 1.3:

Roughly what proportion of your Access cohort has received graded offers for their intended HE destinations?

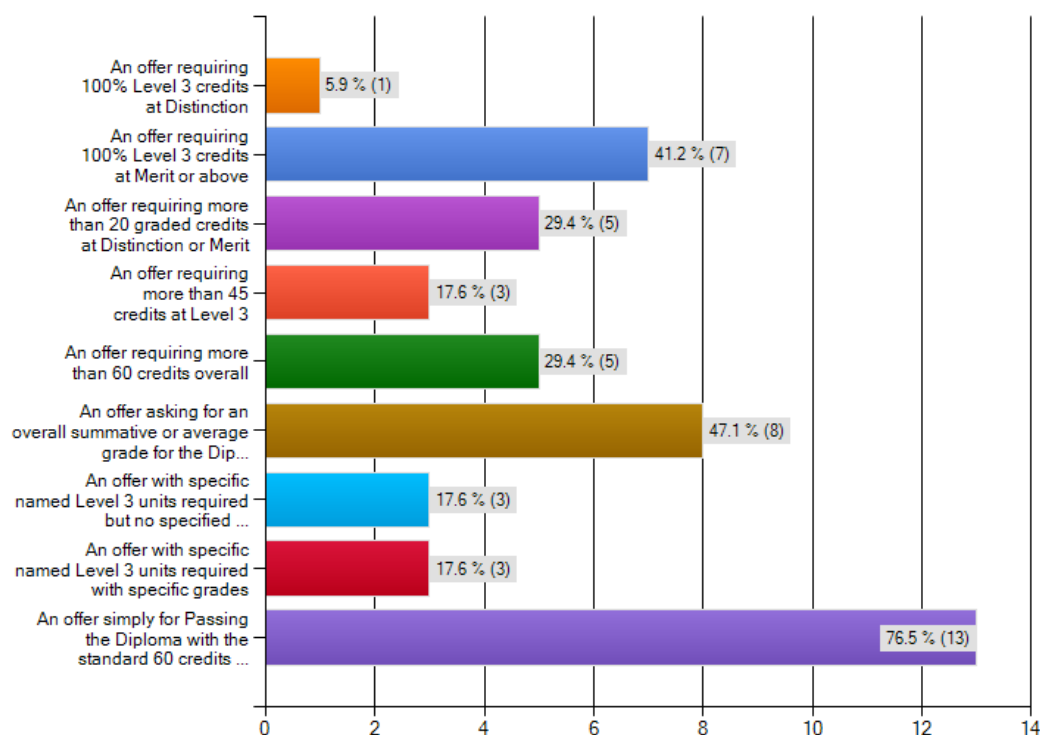


The responses to these two questions were intended to provide an indication of the current balance of graded versus ungraded offers being made to students. This should be seen in the context of the standard Pass/Fail offer as still being potentially applicable to the majority of courses which receive applications from Access students. The introduction of grading was intended to broaden the range of degree provision to which Access students could apply.

The responses to Question 2 suggest that in 15 of the 18 centres, most Access students are continuing to receive Pass/Fail offers. The response to Question 3 suggests that whilst graded offers are being made, they are not yet the norm with 10 centres reporting less than 20% of their students receiving graded offers.

Question 1.4:

Please indicate which of the following types of offers one or more of your Access students have received (more than one may be applicable)



Whilst the previous responses suggest that most offers are still being framed as pass/fail, where graded offers are made, a significant number of these are at the higher end of graded requirements. 7 centres report students having received graded offers of 100% credits at merit or above.

5 centres reported offers in excess of the QAA maximum of 60 credits for an Access Diploma. This once again suggests a significant misunderstanding of the Access Diploma specifications amongst some HE admissions staff.

Of particular interest is the number of centres (8) reporting that one or more students have received an offer asking for 'an overall summative or average grade for the Diploma'. This both illustrates a further lack of awareness of Access grading and a desire by some HEIs to see an summative grade for the Diploma.

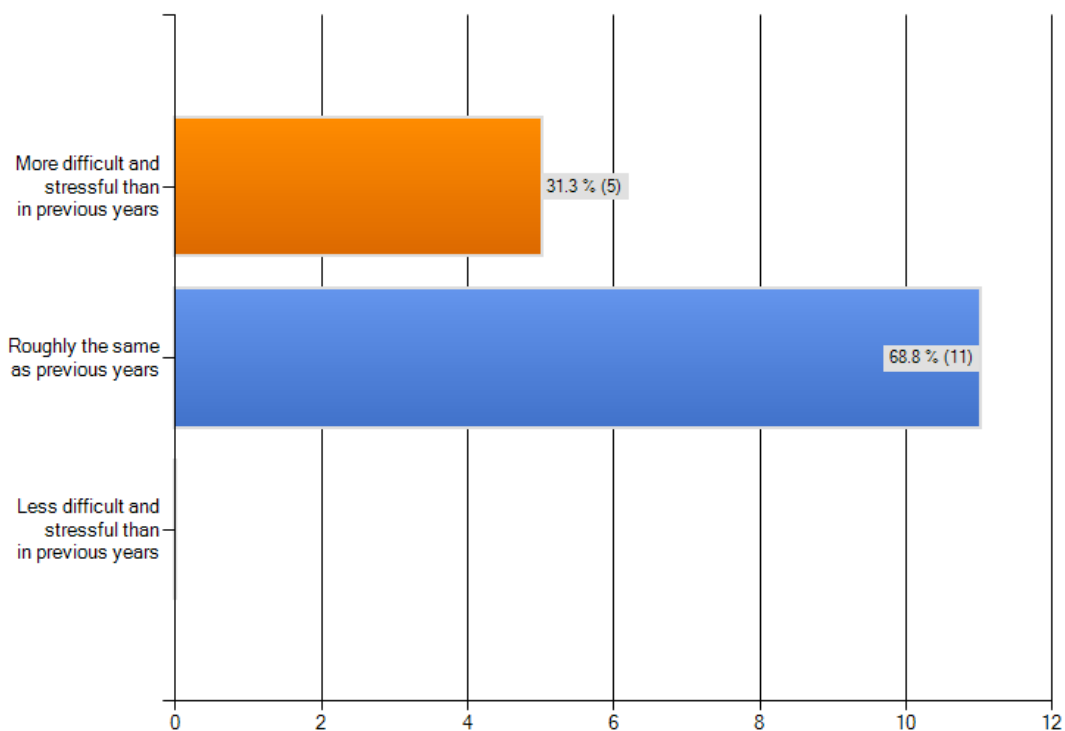
Relatively few centres reported offers based on specified units being achieved, either with or without specified grades. Whilst it is early in the life of the new grading scheme, this might be the result of the potential complexity for HEIs in verifying the subsequent individual student achievement of specified units.

13 centres indicated that the standard offer of 60 credits on a pass/fail basis continues to be used as the basis for a standard offer.

Part 2 'Qualitative Impact' – Summary and Analysis

Question 2.1:

In your opinion, have students on balance found the process of applying to and receiving offers from HEIs:



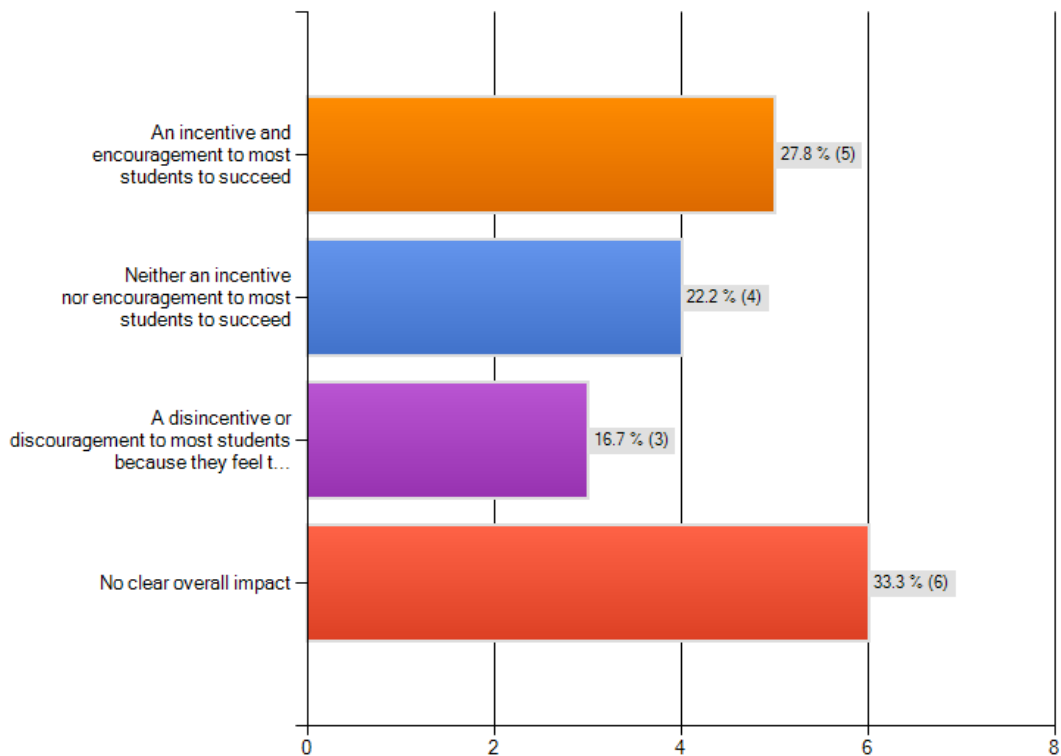
No centres reported that the process was less difficult or stressful for students than in previous years with 5 centres reporting that it was more difficult. Care needs to be taken in interpreting this data since it may well be that respondents are including their own feelings of stress as well as identifying such stress in students! A clear majority felt the impact was neutral (see bar 2 above).

Text comments made by respondents included:

- “The application process is fine but it is the offers that is causing concern”
- “Much more stressful because of the increased uncertainty that they will be able to gain their places in the end.”
- “This year's students do not know any different!!!”

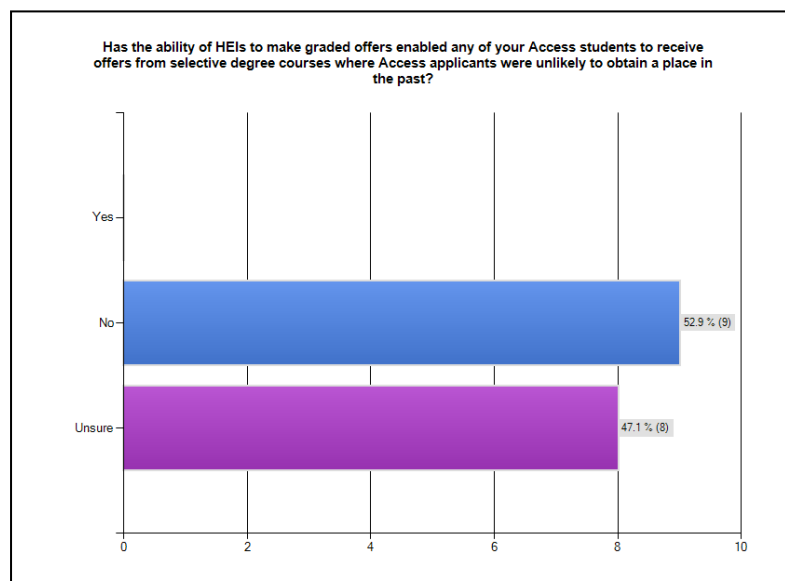
Question 2.2:

Has the impact of HEI graded offers on students been:



The balance of responses to this question would seem to suggest that by a small margin, Access staff felt that the introduction of graded offers acted as an incentive to students. However most respondents either felt that it made no impact or that it was not clear what impact it made.

Question 2.3:



There is as yet no clear evidence to indicate that the introduction of grading has made any impact on the ability of Access students to secure places on degree courses with much higher levels of selection for entry.

However as nearly all the additional text comments indicated, it is too early in the applications process for 2009-10 for this to be properly assessed.

Question 2.4: Please make any further overall comments relating to the introduction of grading for the Access Diploma and its impact on the admissions process to HE for Access students this year.

Free text comments were invited in this section and a selection is included below.

- “I fear for the future as I am sure that more will be demanded in terms of merits and distinctions.”
- “It can be very difficult to predict a grade in November on UCAS when very few, if any, assessed work has been marked.”
- “I think all Colleges should have been able to operate a pilot year of the grading system before the universities were able to ask for grades. The additional workload - putting grading in place AND dealing with the new university requirements (providing them detailed information on the actual and predicted grades for each student they're interested in) has been a complete nightmare.”
- “Students are requesting a re-mark of assignment if only a pass is achieved. Tutors feel under pressure to compromise their professional judgement when marking.”
- “Grading by unit does not work and creates a lot of misunderstanding and difficulties for the admissions teams in universities because of the variable amount of grades each individual might achieve. It also creates an enormous amount of extra marking for staff and puts pressure on students. It could demoralise and lead to student withdrawal for those who are only achieving a pass. Just when I thought we had a standardised entry system across the country that all university admissions could understand it now feels like we are going backwards!”
- “As expected we've had some cases where the universities have asked for a percentage pass. We then write to them to clarify. We've yet to have many offers coming in so it's hard to judge.”
- “We are being asked to send in further information about predicted grades. This means we will be reassessing when the "core units" are assessed as if they are done early in the first term it does disadvantage students”

There is clearly a level of apprehension and anxiety amongst staff in Access centres about the impact of grading and there were no purely supportive comments made in the text responses. Two of the responses refer to request for 'predicted grades' yet the QAA grading guidance for HE admissions makes it clear that predicted grades should not form part of an offer. Some tutors clearly feel that grading has put them under more pressure when it comes to marking work for students.

It should be noted that only 8 of the respondents contributed to these free text responses and as such care should be taken when assessing how representative these views might be of colleagues in other institutions.

Summary of key points

- A large majority of students at centres have experienced graded offers (15 out of 18 centres).
- The pass/fail offer remains in widespread use for most Access students
- Where graded offers are being made there is a significant level of inconsistency between the types of offer made by different HEIs, and some conflict with the specifications of the Access grading scheme which indicates a level of misunderstanding amongst HE admissions about how to make such offers.
- The overall impact of grading on the student perception of applying to HE is either neutral (68.8%) or tending towards being more stressful (31.3%), than in previous years.
- It seems to be too early to assess the impact of graded offers on students' commitment to their courses.
- It is too early to judge whether grading has already, or will in future, enable Access students to gain entry to more selective entry degree courses.
- There are some widely shared concerns and anxieties amongst Access practitioners about the impact of grading on their own workloads and on the future of the application process for Access applicants to HE.