



The Access to HE Diploma is Changing: Information for UCAS Correspondents

Issue date - November 2023

Following QAA's formal communication to UCAS Correspondents on 5 July 2023 announcing changes to the Access to HE Diploma, we are now issuing some further detail.

Changes come into effect for new Access to HE Diploma students registering for a Diploma from 1 August 2024 onwards. **The first entrants to HE with the revised Diploma Specification and Grading Scheme will be in Academic Year 2025-26.** For the new Subject Descriptor in Nursing and Health Professions there will be a pilot running from 1 August 2024 (for first entry to HE in Academic Year 2025-26) with full implementation from 1 August 2025 (for first entry to HE in Academic Year 2026-27).

The changes introduce some further standardisation to the Diploma and to students' experience of learning and assessment. There are no changes to the way transcripts and grades are presented and no changes to the UCAS Tariff Tables.

Continuity of structure

The following features of the Diploma remain in place:

- The Diploma will remain as 60 credits overall, with 45 level 3 credits (graded), with the remaining 15 credits at level 2 or 3 (ungraded)
- Unit sizes remain as 3, 6 or 9-credit units (where 1 credit = 10 notional learning hours)
- Grading of units will remain as Pass, Merit and Distinction
- The maximum credit that can be transferred under credit transfer remains at 30 credits
- UCAS Tariff Tables remain unchanged

Will the changes impact on how offers are made to Diploma students?

For the most part, how you make offers to Access to HE Diploma students will not need to change.

- The changes to the **Diploma Specification** may lead to some existing Diplomas changing the number and size of units offered, but the total number of credits will remain at 60 credits and the number of **graded** credits required to achieve the Diploma remains at 45 credits.
- The changes to the **Grading Scheme** will not change the Pass, Merit and Distinction grades awarded for each graded unit and there is no impact on the UCAS Tariff Tables. As now, a Diploma student with an All Distinction profile will continue to be positioned at 144 tariff points and a student with an All Pass profile will continue to be positioned at 48 tariff points.

Changes to the Diploma Specification

Change	What this means for HE admissions and Access students' transition into HE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A minimum of one unit of EITHER 6 credits OR 9 credits to be included in each Diploma (graded or ungraded credit). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every Diploma student will study at least one unit that is larger than 3 credits. The purpose of this is to provide Access to HE students with experience of studying and assessment in at least one larger unit to aid their transition into HE. If you currently receive students who have Diplomas made up of 20 x 3-credit units, you will no longer see a transcript with 20 units. The maximum number of units on a transcript will be 19. As the larger unit(s) of study can come from graded or ungraded units, it will continue to be possible that the 45 graded credits required to achieve the Diploma can be made up of 15 x 3-credit units.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A maximum of 30 credits that can be made up of 6 or 9-credit units (ungraded and graded credits count towards the maximum of 30 credits). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every Diploma student will study at least 10 x 3-credit units. The remainder will be made up from a combination of 3, 6 or 9-credit units. If you currently receive students who have Diplomas with a structure of, for example, 45 graded credits from 5 x 9-credit units, this structure will no longer be available. These Diplomas will be restructured to provide a broader balance of 3, 6 and 9-credit units. The content of the Diplomas will generally remain the same. If changes to content are required these will go through the same rigorous quality assurance and procedures that are currently in place.

Change to the Grading Scheme

The assessment and grading of the Access to HE Diploma is, and will continue to be, a dualistic system. Students are assessed on the Learning Outcomes of a unit through the Assessment Criteria in order to achieve credit for a unit. Grading criteria are then applied to distinguish between performance at the levels of Pass, Merit or Distinction.

The current Grading Scheme has seven different grading criteria (known as Grade Descriptors). Of these one is mandatory and there is a choice of a minimum of one, or a maximum of six, additional Grade Descriptors on which to base grading decisions. The seven Grade Descriptors have effectively been conflated into three Grading Standards which are Knowledge and Understanding, Subject Skills and Transferable Skills and these will each be applied to **every** unit and assessment.

Change	What this means for HE admissions and Access students' transition into HE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three Grading Standards (Knowledge and Understanding, Subject Skills, and Transferable Skills) to be applied equally to all units and across all assessments in a unit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There should be no difference in how offers are expressed because each graded unit will continue to have a Pass, Merit or Distinction grade attached to it. Students' experience of assessment and grading should become both broader and more consistent with the application of all three Grading Standards to all units.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HE Pro-Vice-Chancellors for Learning and Teaching (or equivalent role) identified the following transferable skills as beneficial for Access to HE students to support their transition to, and progression in, HE¹: communication and/or presentation skills; autonomy and/or independence; ability to follow academic and/or professional conventions. These three have been incorporated into the revised Grading Scheme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There should be no difference in terms of how offers are expressed. HESA figures for retention (in HE) for Access to HE students compared to adult students with other Level 3 qualifications show that Access to HE students are more likely to remain in HE after the first year². This indicates that the Access to HE Diploma is providing appropriate preparation for HE. QAA will continue to consider ways to improve retention figures and, using HESA data, continue to monitor the success of Access to HE students in HE.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unit grades will only be determined when all pieces of assessment for a unit have been assessed and the student has achieved the credits for the unit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There will be no difference in the quality of the information HE providers receive about indicative grades³.

¹ Identified in 2019-20 as part of the initial scoping exercise for the review of the Grading Scheme.

² HESA data on non-continuation in 2021-22 shows that 11.7% of Access to HE students were not in HE the year after entry, compared to 12.2% of mature students with other Level 3 qualifications.

³ Grades for all units remain indicative until confirmed at Final Awards Boards.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grades for individual pieces of assessment within a unit will not be awarded. Currently there is a mix of practice in assessment with some Access to HE Diploma providers grading each piece of assessment and others waiting until all pieces of assessment within a unit are successfully completed. For consistency, all providers will grade once the credits for the unit are achieved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Admissions Teams who request indicative grades throughout the year should note that indicative grades for larger units with multiple assessments over a period of time will not be available until all assessments for those units are completed. However, individual assessments will be marked as they are submitted and therefore tutors will have an impression of a students' likely performance. The limit on the number of larger units permitted within each Diploma means that there will be a minimum of 10 x 3-credit units in each Diploma. For those Diplomas that will be increasing the number of 3-credit units, indicative grades may be available for these earlier in the year.

The effective date for the changes to the Diploma Specification and Grading Scheme is 1 August 2024 for new students registering for the Diploma. First entry to HE will be in the Academic Year 2025-26. However, not all Diploma students progress to HE immediately after completion, therefore it should be expected that applications will be made from Access to HE students who have achieved their Diploma against the legacy Specifications and Grading Schemes. You can continue to make these students offers in the same way that you have always done.

A comprehensive list of legacy qualifications, charting the changes to the Access to HE Diploma over time, will be provided as part of the HE Admissions Staff Toolkit (see below for details).

A new Subject Descriptor for Nursing and the Health Professions

Subject Descriptors for Access to HE Diplomas define the minimum requirement of content for a Diploma with a specific title. The Subject Descriptor for Medicine was designed in conjunction with the Medical Schools Council and introduced in 2021. The Subject Descriptor for Nursing and Health Professions has been designed in conjunction with HE, FE, NHS and NMC (with reference to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards). This new Subject Descriptor is being piloted from 1 August 2024 (for first entry to HE in Academic Year 2025-26) and will be fully implemented for from 1 August 2025 (for first entry to HE in Academic Year 2026-27).

From 1 August 2025, **all** Access to HE Diplomas with the titles Access to HE Diploma (Nursing) and Access to HE Diploma (Health Professions) must be compliant with the Subject Descriptor.

The full details of the new Subject Descriptor can be found using the link at the bottom of this bulletin, but in brief, the new Subject Descriptor includes essential subject content requirements of:

- Biology: a minimum of 15 Level 3 graded credits
- Professional Behaviours (Nursing and Health Professions): a minimum of 3 Level 3 ungraded credits
- Numeracy in Health Context: a minimum of 3 Level 2 ungraded credits

The essential content has been developed and defined in conjunction with HE, FE and professional bodies.

Beyond the 21 credits of defined content, the Subject Descriptor makes recommendations for the study of additional subjects in areas relevant to the intended progression route.

What does this mean for HE admissions and Access to HE students' transition to HE?

Admissions offers will continue to be made as now, on the basis of a student's qualifications, personal statement, reference and (where applicable) interview.

What you will have certainty about is that from 1 August 2025, all new students registering for the Access to HE Diploma (Nursing) and the Access to HE Diploma (Health Professions) will have followed the structure and content of the Subject Descriptor outlined above. The essential content detailed in the Professional Behaviours unit will give students an understanding of professional standards, the role of the regulatory bodies, ethics, managing risk, and reflective practice. The Numeracy in Health Context unit will provide students with experience of numeracy skills which can be applied in professional healthcare settings. The essential content has been designed to ensure students are prepared for their HE studies and gain confidence in their numeracy abilities, whilst recognising that individual HE providers will determine how they assess a student meets the NMC's minimum standards for numeracy required for entry to undergraduate programmes in Nursing.

How is a Subject Descriptor Diploma different to other QAA-recognised Diplomas?

For a Diploma to be described as compliant with the Subject Descriptor, it must meet the essential requirements set out in the Subject Descriptor. The difference between Diplomas that are compliant and those that are not relates solely to the inclusion of those essential requirements. Compliance is determined through the validation of the Diploma by an Access Validating Agency (AVA).

AVAs and course providers will continue to offer other Diplomas which facilitate progression to nursing and health professions. These Diplomas may have similar subject content to that contained within the Subject Descriptor, but they are not required to include the essential requirements. Whilst these Diplomas will not have the titles Access to Higher Education Diploma (Nursing) or Access to Higher Education Diploma (Health Professions), they remain appropriate and valid routes to undergraduate programmes in these subject disciplines.

Students with Diplomas with different titles will continue to apply for places on Nursing or Health Professions courses. Diploma titles such as Psychology and Mental Health, Science, Health Science, Health and Social Care, and Midwifery will continue to be available. Students with these Diploma titles should continue to be considered for offers in the same way as they are now, i.e., on the basis that they either meet, or exceed, the requirements for general entry to HE and for specific courses.

QAA is updating the HE Admissions Staff Toolkit. This will contain full details of the changes, examples of structuring offers to Access to HE Diploma applicants, and an updated section on legacy qualifications. We anticipate the Toolkit will be published on our website by beginning of December 2023.

In the meantime, you can view the full information about the current and updated Diploma Specification, Grading Scheme and Subject Descriptor at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-recognition-scheme-documentation-2024>

If you have any questions on this update or any other queries about the Access to HE Diploma, please do not hesitate to email us at ahe@qaa.ac.uk.

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