

# Calculating grades for the award of the Access to HE Diploma

Information for **Access to HE**  
course tutors and senior  
course managers

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## Introduction

1. On 3 April 2020, QAA announced that students who planned to complete their Access to HE course **by 31 July 2020** would now receive calculated grades for all remaining assessments with submission dates after 20 March 2020.
2. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has been working closely with the Department for Education (DfE), Ofqual and other organisations to produce a **clear, fair and consistent** approach to assessment for the award of the Access to HE Diploma and other level 3 qualifications with the same intent – supporting students to transition into higher education.
3. The following information is relevant to all providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that offer the QAA recognised Access to HE Diploma, regulated by QAA and awarded by the following Access Validating Agencies<sup>1</sup>:
  - Agored Cymru
  - AIM Qualifications and Assessment Group
  - Ascentis
  - The Cambridge Access Validating Agency
  - Certa
  - Gateway Qualifications
  - LASER Learning Awards
  - One Awards
  - Open Awards
  - OCN London
  - Open College Network West Midlands.
4. Due to the measures implemented by the Government in these extraordinary times, we will be applying an **extraordinary regulatory framework** to support students completing their studies by 31 July 2020.
5. As far as was practical in the current circumstances, we have consulted with AVAs, course tutors and senior course managers across the sector as we developed this framework.
6. QAA will continue to consult on a number of changes to our regulations that allow this year's results to be delivered in the changed circumstances, including:
  - the principles underpinning the quality assurance and standardisation process
  - arrangements for appeals
  - arrangements for students expected to complete after 31 July
  - an equalities impact assessment
  - statistical publications for 2019-20 outcomes.
7. The following information is provided in the context of the most up-to-date advice for educational settings provided by the Department for Education (DfE) and Public Health England.<sup>2</sup> If that advice changes, senior course managers and course tutors should consider this information in the light of any updated guidance.

**Students have been advised that if their case has not been addressed by the guidance on how grades will be calculated they should either speak to their course tutor or AVA.**

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<sup>1</sup> AVAs are awarding bodies licensed by QAA to award Access to HE Diplomas

<sup>2</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19)

## QAA Grading Scheme: Grading the Access to HE Diploma

8. The [QAA grading scheme<sup>3</sup>](#) will be applied to all assessments (ie assessed work) with a planned submission date on or before 20 March 2020.

### Extraordinary Grading Scheme

9. The extraordinary grading scheme will be applied to all remaining assessments with a planned submission date after 20 March 2020 for students who are due to complete their Access to HE course **by 31 July 2020**.
10. It is our expectation that students will have completed a minimum of 50% of planned assessed work by 20 March 2020. If you have students that have not achieved this threshold, you should contact your AVA.
11. Course tutors are best placed to judge the likely performance of their students on course. QAA and AVAs will do everything they can to make sure grades awarded this year are as fair as possible for students, to better ensure that grades are comparable between AVAs, providers and subject areas. This will include putting sampled estimated assessment grades through:
  - Provider internal moderation
  - AVA external moderation
  - AVA standardisation processes
  - National standardisation processes.

AVAs will ask providers/course tutors to generate:

### 12. Estimated assessment grades

- 12.1 The course tutor will estimate the assessment grades (ie grade indicators of pass, merit or distinction) for each of the grade descriptors assigned to each assessment (ie assessed work) that was planned for submission after 20 March 2020.
- 12.2 Estimated assessment grades will be based on a range of evidence, including:
  - 12.2.1 prior attainment on course
  - 12.2.2 formative assessments (assessment **for** learning); and
  - 12.2.3 any other records of student performance over the course of study.
- 12.3 Prior attainment on course is defined by all assessments completed by 20 March 2020. This will include both formative (assessments **for** learning) and summative assessments (assessments **of** learning).
- 12.4 Estimated assessment grades can be based on a range of evidence but will **not include** summative assessments. Therefore, any assessments completed after 20 March 2020 will be treated as formative assessments (assessments **for** learning).
- 12.5 Course tutors may hold other records of student performance over the course of study. If you have questions, please speak to your AVA.
- 12.6 The estimated assessment grades submitted to AVAs must reflect a fair, reasonable and

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<sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources)

carefully considered judgement of the most **likely** grades a student would have achieved if they had completed their assessments. Senior course managers should emphasise the need for judgements to be objective and fair.

### 13. Calculated unit grades

13.1 The course tutor will review all the grade indicators that have been given for a unit and will determine the final grade for the unit, using the standard method ([Grade Scheme Handbook Section C<sup>4</sup>](#)). This may include actual and estimated assessment grades for units partially completed.

### 14. Tutor reference

14.1 In addition to estimating grades, course tutors will be asked to produce a reference for each student to further support applications to higher education or employment during these exceptional times, now and in the future. It is expected that students will receive the tutor reference no later than 27 July 2020, to align with the upload of results to UCAS. **Tutor references will not be included in the range of evidence to inform estimated assessment grades.**

14.2 Further information on the content themes for the tutor reference will follow.

## Which students will receive calculated grades?

It will include all students due to complete their QAA recognised Access to HE Diploma by 31 July 2020.

It does not include students that have:

- withdrawn
- an expected completion date after 31 July 2020.

## Which Access to HE Diplomas will have calculated grades applied to them?

It will include all QAA recognised Access to HE Diplomas that have students who are due to complete by 31 July 2020.

## Are Access to HE distance learning Diplomas included?

Yes. It will include all QAA recognised Access to HE Diplomas that have students who are due to complete by 31 July 2020.

## Does a student need to apply for calculated grades?

No. If the student is due to complete by 31 July 2020 they will automatically receive calculated grades for all remaining assessments with submission dates after 20 March 2020.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources)

## What about students that are due to complete after 31 July 2020?

Students who plan to complete their Access to HE Diplomas after 31 July 2020 will be supported to complete their studies through changes to the delivery of teaching and assessment of the course.

Access to HE course tutors are working hard to adapt to new ways of delivery and assessment and are developing materials to help students get the most out of their learning in order to prepare them for higher study.

We know that the current environment is a really challenging one, and we want all students to be supported as effectively as possible during this time. Access to HE providers and AVAs already have in place procedures to allow such students to request extensions to deadlines and to identify where extenuating circumstances may affect their academic performance, should the current situation make studying difficult. These procedures will certainly be available to all students. It is also possible that some assessments may be rescheduled.

The [current QAA grading scheme](#) will apply to students that are due to complete after 31 July 2020. Students have been advised that if they feel their case has not been addressed by this guidance they should speak to their course tutor.

Further guidance will follow in due course.

## Will estimated assessment grades just be applied to exams or all assessments after 20 March 2020?

A student completing their Diploma by 31 July 2020 will now receive estimated assessment grades for **all remaining assessments** with submission dates after 20 March 2020. The assessment may include exams, or other forms of assessments, for example, essays, practical work and presentations.

## How will I estimate assessment grades?

Estimated assessment grades will be based on your holistic professional judgement, balancing the different sources of evidence available to you. Course tutors will have a good understanding of their students' performance and how they compare to other students within each Diploma this year, and in previous years. We want senior course managers and course tutors to consider each student's performance over the course of study and make a realistic judgement of the assessment grades each student would have been most **likely** to get if they had taken the assessments. This could include an outcome of 'not achieved'.

In coming to this holistic judgement, course tutors should assume that it is no easier or harder for a student to achieve grades this year, compared to previous years.

Course tutors should draw on existing records and **available evidence** (as far as possible in the context of current public health advice). It is important that the judgements are objective, and they should only take account of evidence about student performance. This will include the following, where it is available:

Estimated assessment grades will be based on a range of evidence, including:

- prior attainment on course
- formative assessments (assessment for learning); and
- any other records of student performance over the course of study.

The following evidence is to be used to support the quality assurance of the estimated assessment grades only:

- previous results in your centre for each named Diploma
- the performance of this year's students compared to those in previous years

Please note that estimated assessment grades are not the same as:

- target grades (often set a little higher than likely to be achieved to motivate students)
- predicted grades provided to UCAS in support of university applications.

Given the timing of the announcement, we recognise that providers will have incomplete evidence, and that the range and amount of evidence will vary between different subjects. **Judgements should only be made on the evidence that is available.**

## **How will I estimate achievement for ungraded units?**

As stated above, we are asking course tutors to use their professional experience to make a fair and objective judgement of the achievement on each assessment they believe a student would have been **likely** to have achieved.

It is important that providers take into account the full range of available evidence when they make judgements about student achievement for ungraded units, including prior attainment on course; formative assessments; and any other records of student performance over the course of study.

## **What about students who have an agreed reasonable adjustment or access arrangement?**

Where students have an agreed reasonable adjustment (for example a reader or scribe), or other students have an agreed access arrangement, the judgement should take account of likely achievement with the reasonable adjustment/access arrangement in place.

An extenuating circumstances request (ie special consideration), in the event that a student is unable to take an assessment or suffers a traumatic event that might affect their performance, will not apply after 20 March 2020; instead judgements should reflect how the students would have performed under ordinary circumstances. Where illness or other personal circumstances might have affected performance in previous assessments completed prior to 20 March 2020, providers should bear that in mind when making their judgements.

## **Will students see the estimated assessment grades that I submit?**

No. Providers will not share estimated grades until students' final results have been confirmed. This is to protect the integrity of the tutors' judgements, and to avoid tutors feeling under pressure to submit grades that are not supported by evidence.

## **Sharing data with students**

Students will want to know that the process of generating estimated assessment grades is rigorous, objective and fair. We have published information for students that providers may wish to circulate.

Data subjects (students) are able to request their personal data under Article 15 of the General Data Protection Regulation. However, in respect of personal data such as marks or other information processed by a Data Controller for the purposes of determining results, an exemption from disclosure exists under paragraph 25(2) of the *Data Protection Act 2018*. This allows Data Controllers (in this case providers) to delay disclosure of such information until after results have been confirmed.

Providers must not, under any circumstances, share the estimated assessment grades with students or any other individuals outside the provider before final results have been issued. **Estimated assessment and calculated grades can only be shared with your AVA and their representatives.** This is to protect the integrity of course tutor judgements, and to avoid tutors and senior course managers being put under pressure by students to submit a grade that is not supported by evidence. Since the final grades for some or all students within a provider could be different from those submitted, it also helps to manage students' expectations.

Once the estimated assessment grades and calculated unit grades have been internally moderated and submitted to AVAs, the process to produce the confirmed grade outcomes will start. This will include external moderation and standardisation.

## **Does a student have to continue to complete assessments to inform the estimated assessment grades?**

No. There is no requirement for providers to set assessments for the purposes of determining an estimated assessment grade. In addition, providers do not need to ask students to complete any unfinished assessment work or work expected to be re-submitted after 20 March 2020, for the purposes of estimating grades. If you have any questions regarding late submissions, please speak to your AVA.

No student should be disadvantaged if they were unable to complete any work set after many providers [closed](#)<sup>5</sup> on 20 March 2020.

Where assessments have been completed after 20 March 2020, course tutors and senior course managers will need to be aware that such evidence may suggest a change in a student's performance. In many cases this is likely to reflect the circumstances and context in which the work was done.

We have encouraged, via [public statements](#) that students should continue learning wherever they can, and this may include the completion of formative assessments (pieces of work that support **their** learning).

## **Can a student continue to complete their assessments?**

We know that many Access to HE students are engaged in a tricky balance between work, family responsibilities and studies. However, it is important that all students are as well prepared as they can be for their transition into higher education, so that making use of the resources prepared by Access to HE tutors and participating in continuing virtual teaching and tutorials, where possible, is key to ensure students have covered all the subject knowledge required of a Diploma.

Continuing with learning will help all Access to HE students feel more confident that they are ready to take the next step in their education or career pathway. We expect Access to HE course tutors to continue to deliver teaching and support. Therefore, we encourage students to continue their learning wherever they can. A student may wish to continue to complete **formative assessments**,

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<sup>5</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19)

where possible. Students have been advised to contact their course provider for further advice. Please note that any assessments completed after 20 March 2020 will be considered to be **formative assessments under the extraordinary grading scheme**. Tutors may provide developmental feedback on these formative assessments.

**Formative assessment** refers to a wide variety of methods that course tutors use to conduct in-process evaluations of student comprehension, learning needs, and academic progress during a lesson, unit, or Diploma. In other words:

- **formative** assessments are **for** learning
- **summative** assessments are **of** learning.

In terms of estimating assessment grades, there is **no requirement** for course tutors to set assessments for the **purposes of determining an estimated assessment grade**.

## **When and how will estimated assessment grades be submitted to Access Validating Agencies (AVAs)?**

AVAs will provide detailed instructions to their providers on how to submit **assessment and unit grades** for students due to complete by 31 July 2020. In terms of what will be submitted, it will include:

- **Record of prior attainment on course (up to and including 20 March 2020)**
- **Record of estimated grades (21 March 2020 to 31 July 2020).**

Providers should submit assessment and unit grades for all students for whom they are confident that they can make a judgement; for example they can provide evidence to support the judgements. It will be important for providers to make sure that their submissions are complete and accurate as grades can only be issued for those students who have had grades entered for them.

The final date for AVAs to receive this submission will be **Friday 5 June 2020**

Please do not contact AVAs at this time to ask about the specifics of submitting data.

## **Will I need to submit the evidence I have used for estimating assessment grades?**

Providers will need to retain all the evidence for the purposes of moderation and standardisation exercises. AVAs will contact providers with sample lists to be externally moderated. Senior course managers will be asked to [confirm](#) that the estimated assessment grades are a true representation of student performance.

## **How can we assure students that estimated assessment grades will be accurate?**

In an extraordinary situation such as this, course tutors are best placed to judge the likely performance of their students had the courses been completed as normal. In the interests of fairness to students, judgements made by course tutors should be consistent. AVAs will therefore moderate and standardise the judgements once estimated grades have been submitted.

## **How will estimated assessment grades be quality assured and standardised?**

To make sure that grades are fair, AVAs and providers will ensure estimated assessment grades go through a process of internal moderation, external moderation, AVA standardisation and national standardisation.

As part of the moderation process, if grading judgements in some providers appear to be more severe or generous compared to national grade outcomes in recent years, AVAs will adjust the assessment grades of some or all of those students upwards or downwards accordingly.

In terms of national standardisation, QAA will consult on the principles of this model shortly, but we expect it will look at evidence such as the:

- prior attainment on course of students at each provider, AVA and by subject
- expected national grade outcomes for this year's students
- national grade outcomes of the provider, AVA and subject in recent years.

We will do this to align the judgements across providers, so that, as far as possible, your students are not unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged. This means that the estimated assessment grades you submit and the final unit grades that students receive could be different.

## **Internal sign-off within the centre**

### **Senior course manager sign-off**

Each set of estimated assessment grades and calculated unit grades for a Diploma must have been internally moderated before being signed off by the senior course manager. Where a course tutor might have a personal interest in a candidate (for example as a relative), the senior course manager should make sure that additional controls are put in place, as appropriate.

The senior course manager will be required to submit the following declaration when the estimated assessment grade and calculated unit grade data is submitted:

I confirm that the estimated assessment and calculated unit grades are accurate and represent the professional judgements made by the course tutors, and that entries were appropriate for each student. Having reviewed the data and completed relevant quality assurance processes, including internal moderation, I am confident that they honestly and fairly represent the grades that these students would have been most likely to achieve if they had completed the assessments after 20 March 2020 as planned, and that they have not been disclosed to the student. I understand that AVAs will undertake quality assurance measures with QAA, and that, if the profile of grades submitted is substantially different from what might be expected based on my centre's historic results and the prior attainment of this year's students on course, the grades for my centre will be adjusted to bring them into line with national grade outcomes.

AVAs may investigate any attempts to undermine this system which might be regarded as malpractice or maladministration.

## **When will results be released?**

Results will be released at about the same time as in previous years to allow timely transfer to UCAS and higher education providers. Once actual assessment, estimated assessment and

calculated unit grades have been confirmed through the moderation and standardisation processes, the provider may update their students.

## **Will estimated assessment grades carry the same weight as grades issued in previous or future years?**

The estimated assessment grades awarded to students will have equal status to grades awarded prior to 20 March 2020 and also in other years, and should be treated in this way by universities, colleges and employers.

The grades awarded for each unit will be shown on the achievement transcript that is issued with Access to HE Diplomas. The transcript also shows how many credits were awarded for each successfully completed graded or ungraded unit. Grades will be reported in the same way as in previous years.

## **Can a student appeal their grades?**

We recognise that some students may feel disappointed that they have not been able to complete their assessments.

We are all focused on making sure students are not disadvantaged by these unprecedented circumstances including to allow for an appeal where appropriate. Under the circumstances, the normal arrangements for appeals will not apply. We are considering what arrangements might be put in place to allow an effective and fair appeal and will consult shortly with AVAs and providers on proposals.

If a student does not feel their calculated grades reflect their expected performance, they will have the opportunity to appeal **or** they may choose to sit their assessments at the earliest reasonable opportunity (when all providers are operating [normally](#)). Students should be made aware that taking their assessments later may impact their progression to university in September. In addition, if a student does not believe the correct process of assessment for the award of the Access to HE Diploma has been followed in their case, they will be able to appeal.

## **If a student felt that their calculated grade(s) did not reflect their performance and chose to sit their assessment(s) at the earliest reasonable opportunity, will they still be able to go to university this year?**

When all providers are operating [normally](#), students may still choose to take an assessment or assessments even where their university or college place has been confirmed. However, it will take time for the results of these assessments to be issued, so they will need to discuss with their higher and further education institution whether to start their course as planned or to delay their entry.

QAA has spoken to UCAS and was reassured to hear that institutions intend to be flexible wherever possible and will do all they can to support students to progress.

## **If a student takes an assessment at the earliest reasonable opportunity, which grade will stand – the actual or estimated assessment grade?**

Students who choose to take an assessment or assessments when all providers are operating normally, the **actual assessment grade** will stand. Please note that an actual assessment grade may be lower than the estimated assessment grade.

## **Will a student be able to progress to the next stage of education or employment with these grades?**

The approach being taken, as described above, will enable students to move onto the next stage of their education or employment in the autumn as planned, subject to meeting the requirements set by the receiving institution or employer.

### **Next steps**

15. Senior course managers and course tutors should now make arrangements to do the following:

- Consider what evidence will be available to course tutors.
- Begin the work to generate estimated assessment grades and calculated unit grades
- Make sure that estimated assessment or calculated grades are not shared with students.
- Apply quality assurance processes, including internal moderation
- Check estimated assessment and calculated unit grades are complete and correct before submission to their AVA.

16. AVAs will provide detailed information about how to submit the data.

### **Further advice and information**

17. If you need further information, please take a look at our [frequently-asked questions](#)<sup>6</sup> and/or contact your [AVA](#).

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<sup>6</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/en/contact-us/faqs/coronavirus-\(covid-19\)](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/en/contact-us/faqs/coronavirus-(covid-19))

## Key terms

**Access Validating Agencies** – awarding bodies licensed by QAA to award Access to HE Diplomas

**Assessment grades** – grade indicators of pass, merit or distinction, for each of the grade descriptors assigned to each assessment that was planned for submission after 20 March 2020

**Calculated unit grade** – the final grade for a unit calculated using the standard method ([Grade Scheme Handbook Section C<sup>7</sup>](#)). This may be based:

- on actual and estimated assessment grades
- solely on actual assessment grades, where all summative assessments for a unit have been completed
- solely on estimated assessment grades, where no summative assessments have been completed

**Extraordinary grading scheme** – regulations to be applied to assessments on QAA-recognised Access to HE Diplomas with a planned submission date after 20 March 2020, for students who planned to complete their Access to HE course by 31 July 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

**Estimated assessment grade** – a course tutor's holistic professional judgement of the assessment grades the student would have been most likely to get if they had taken the assessments; they are based on evidence and take into account the student's performance over the course of study

**Formative assessment** – refers to a wide variety of methods that course tutors use to conduct in-process evaluations of student comprehension, learning needs, and academic progress during a lesson, unit, or Diploma. They are pieces of work that support learning, or assessments **for** learning. They are not graded

**Planned assessed work** – work planned for submission in the schedule of assessments; this may include formative as well as summative assessments

**Prior attainment on course** – is defined by all assessments completed by 20 March 2020. This will include both formative (assessments **for** learning) and summative assessments (assessments **of** learning). It can include grades and/or grade indicators in the unit grade profile

**QAA Grading Scheme** – regulations for the application of grading to QAA-recognised Access to HE Diplomas

**Record of prior attainment** – details of assessment grades and unit grades for assessed work completed on or before 20 March 2020

**Record of estimated grades** – details of estimated assessment and unit grades determined by the professional judgement of course tutors under the terms of the extraordinary grading scheme

**Standardisation (processes)** – for the purposes of the extraordinary grading scheme, standardisation processes are statistical checks to ensure that graded outcomes are comparable, for example between AVAs, providers and subject areas

**Summative assessment** – assessments **of** learning which are graded

**Unit grades** – final grade for the unit arrived at by establishing the midpoint of grades in the unit grade profile.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources)

| <b>Version control</b> |                    |               |  |
|------------------------|--------------------|---------------|--|
| <b>Version number</b>  | <b>Date issued</b> | <b>Author</b> | <b>Update information</b>  |
| V1.0                   | 9 April 2020       | J Mizon       | First published version  |
| V2.0                   | 27 April 2020      | J Mizon       | <p>Previously circulated clarification note added to <a href="#">How will I estimate assessment grades?</a> on page 6:</p> <p><b>Clarification:</b><br/>           Estimated assessment grades will be based on a range of evidence, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• prior attainment on course</li> <li>• formative assessments (assessment for learning); and</li> <li>• any other records of student performance over the course of study.</li> </ul> <p>The following evidence is to be used to support the quality assurance of the estimated assessment grades only:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• previous results in your centre for each named Diploma</li> <li>• the performance of this year's students compared to those in previous years</li> </ul> |

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QAA manages the national framework for the recognition and regulation of Access to HE  
Diplomas. [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)