



Award and Assessment of the Access to HE Diploma 2021-22

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Access to HE providers for their positive engagement and their diligence in ensuring Access to HE students successfully received their Access to HE Diplomas this summer and are supported in their progression into higher education from September 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption for us all and as we approach the new academic year, QAA is determined to ensure that we continue to support Access to HE providers and their students. Despite the rollout of the vaccination programme and the easing of restrictions across the UK, continuing uncertainty means that we still need to make sure we have safeguards in place to support students and providers in the form of an Extraordinary Regulatory Framework in 2021-22.

We have consulted with our key stakeholders including Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), the Department for Education (DfE), Ofqual, Qualification Wales, UCAS and other organisations (for example, the Association of Colleges (AOC), Colegau Cymru and the Black Further Education and Leadership Group (BFELG)) and a range of providers; and the feedback we've had is in support of continuing with the existing arrangements, with some additional support measures.

The arrangements in place for the 2021-22 academic year will:

- ensure that students have the opportunity to achieve their Diploma by being taught and assessed so that they are prepared for the transition to higher education
- continue to safeguard against any potential future disruption as a result of the pandemic, building upon the arrangements implemented in the 2020-21 academic year.

We know that the current environment continues to pose challenges for many students, and that Access to HE students often balance significant additional responsibilities alongside their studies. The arrangements in place will provide flexibility so that providers can work with their Access Validating Agency (AVA) to put in place arrangements that fit local needs, and that meet the individual needs of their learners. By doing so, QAA aims to ensure equity of opportunity for all students.

QAA's priority is to ensure that students receive fair and robust results and that the distribution of grades this year follows a similar pattern to the grades received in previous years. With guidance from QAA, AVAs will continue to support course providers in implementing robust quality assurance mechanisms to ensure consistency is applied across all Access to HE Diplomas awarded. This will also ensure that grades are as robust as those in previous years so that all stakeholders can have confidence in them.

The key facts below provide further information for Access to HE providers on:

- the arrangements for the award and assessment of the Access to HE Diploma
- for dealing with those exceptional circumstances where a student will be unable to submit all the evidence required for the assessment and award of unit(s) that make up the Diploma.

Teach	Teaching the content of the Diploma should continue to ensure every student has the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to progress to higher education.
Assess	Assessments should continue where possible. If a student can be assessed, they should be assessed.
Adapt	Assessments, delivery and/or units can be adapted, where necessary and appropriate, to support students to continue learning.
Support	<p>Support is available for students from their providers if a student is finding it difficult to learn or be assessed this academic year. In addition, further adaptations to the course may be available to support students to continue learning. Students should discuss the options with their provider.</p> <p>Support may be available where providers are finding it difficult to deliver and assess the Access to HE Diploma this academic year. Providers should discuss the options with their AVA.</p>
Quality assure	<p>To ensure grades are fair, equitable and robust, effective quality assurance arrangements will be applied. These will take account of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ adaptations to the delivery, assessment or units delivered on the Diploma ○ extenuating circumstances that may have affected student performance in assessment. <p>Based on evidence presented, a moderator may adjust grades either upwards or downwards to ensure no student is advantaged or disadvantaged in relation to their peers.</p>
Award	<p>If a student can be assessed, they should be assessed and awarded, based on planned assessments.</p> <p>In those exceptional cases where a student cannot be assessed, the student may still be awarded unit(s) that make up the Diploma, through extenuation. The tutor/provider will draw upon either further adaptations to assessments or alternate lines of evidence to determine whether the unit can be awarded.</p>
Results	Confirmed results will be released by AVAs to providers no later than the deadline for results to be uploaded to UCAS. Providers should check with their AVA when confirmed results will be released to them.
Appeal	If a student is not satisfied with their grades they can appeal.

Frequently Asked Questions - Providers

Below are some of the questions we have received from **providers** about the award of the Access to HE Diploma under the current circumstances. We have set out greater detail about how the arrangements will work and why they are in place.

Q: Why are the arrangements designed as they are?

A: The arrangements for the award of the Access to HE Diploma in 2021-22 were designed to ensure that students studying an Access to HE Diploma during the pandemic had every opportunity to be assessed and acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to facilitate their progression into higher education, building upon the arrangements for the 2020-21 academic year.

The Access to HE Diploma is not only intended to demonstrate that a student has achieved the necessary academic qualification to progress into higher education, but it is also designed to prepare students fully for their experience of higher study. Giving students every opportunity to be assessed will help them build confidence that they have the necessary tools to succeed. It will also provide assurance to higher education providers that a student is prepared for higher education. Many Access to HE students have been out of study for several years, and the teaching and learning model used on the Diploma is designed to provide them with the best possible foundation for the discipline of higher education study.

This is why it is important that teaching and assessment continue whenever possible. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic it is possible that, in some exceptional circumstances, not all assessments will be able to take place. For students, the additional pressures of work, caring responsibilities or illness may affect their ability to engage with teaching, learning and assessment. For providers, the current circumstances may make the delivery and/or assessment of the Diploma challenging. To ensure fairness, tutors can adapt assessments where these situations arise. The key points are listed below.

1. Where all assessments for the qualification have taken place as normal or in an adapted form, they will determine the student's level of attainment.
2. In those exceptional cases where a student cannot be assessed, the student may still be awarded unit(s) that make up the Diploma, through extenuation. The tutor/provider will draw upon either further adaptations to assessments or alternate lines of evidence to satisfy the award of unit.

We believe that the approach being taken is fair and ensures students have the best preparation possible to help them transition into higher education.

Q: How are you ensuring parity between Access to HE students and A level students and other Level 3 qualifications?

A: The arrangements for the award of the Access to HE Diploma provide as much parity as we are able to give within the different cohorts of students studying courses which are intrinsically very different.

There are necessary differences in the arrangements between Access to HE Diplomas and other Level 3 qualifications that facilitate progression to higher education (that is, quality assurance processes and in those exceptional cases where a student **cannot** be assessed, the student **may** still be awarded unit(s) that make up the Diploma, through extenuation). These differences recognise the variations in the qualifications themselves and the students that study them.

The Access to HE Diploma is:

- a credit-based qualification designed for adults wishing to enter higher education; therefore, in order to achieve the award of the Diploma the student must complete the units that make up the programme of study

- usually completed by the majority of students over the course of one academic year
- assessed through continuous assessment; this means students complete assessments throughout their course of study.

The Extraordinary Regulatory Framework (ERF) that was introduced in response to the pandemic allows for providers to adapt the course to meet the needs of students to give them the best opportunity to complete. Adaptations are proposed at provider level because they know their students best in addition to any local issues caused by the pandemic, and courses can be designed to meet related needs.

The ERF in 2020-21 has also been designed to allow for adaptations to be made according to students' personal circumstances. To ensure grades are fair and robust, effective quality assurance arrangements will be applied. These can take account of extenuating circumstances that may have affected student performance in assessment. Based on the evidence presented, a moderator may adjust grades either upwards or downwards to ensure no student is advantaged or disadvantaged in relation to their peers.

Q: Why can't the credit volume be reduced?

A: The Diploma is a credit-based award and, in order for the Diploma to be awarded, evidence must therefore be presented to demonstrate that all credit required for the award of the Diploma has been achieved. There is no overall grade for the Access to HE Diploma as is the case for A levels. Access to HE students will receive a unit transcript that outlines the unit grades awarded.

If the credit volume was reduced, it would not be possible to make the award of the Diploma needed to support progression into higher education.

While it is not possible to reduce the number of credits, other adaptations, such as reducing the volume of assessment needed, are possible. In those exceptional cases where a student **cannot** be assessed, the student **may** still be awarded unit(s) that make up the Diploma, through extenuation. The tutor/provider will draw upon either further adaptations to assessments or alternate lines of evidence to determine whether the unit can be awarded.

Q: How much flexibility are providers allowed?

A: The ERF in 2021-22 gives providers considerable flexibility to adapt the Diploma so it can be taught and assessed during the pandemic. It sets out the parameters under which AVAs can operate which allows them to discuss and approve with providers adaptations for the award of the Diploma.

Providers can adapt assessments, delivery and/or changes to units delivered, where necessary and appropriate, to:

- support teaching and learning, and assist in mitigating any possible effects of previous or future disruptions to teaching, learning and assessment relating to the pandemic
- make assessments as manageable and flexible as possible, for example, to address the impact of public health guidance
- safeguard against any future disruptions relating to the pandemic, such as local lockdowns or closure of facilities.

In addition, there are provider flexibilities in place to support students who are finding it difficult to learn or be assessed at this present time.

These may include:

- further adaptations to assessment schedule/tasks, delivery and/or units delivered
- additional study support where there are extenuating circumstances (for example, counselling support)
- breaks in learning
- extensions to length of learning programme or assignment deadlines
- continuing into the next academic year.

It is important to appreciate that providers are given flexibility of approach in individual circumstances. It is also important that providers and AVAs are able to discuss and agree how these approaches might operate in different circumstances.

Q: What do the arrangements look like for units where a student cannot submit all of the evidence required for the award of such units?

A: In those exceptional cases where a student has been unable to submit all of the assessments required for the achievement of each unit, through no fault of their own, the tutor/provider can draw upon either further adaptations to assessments or alternate lines of evidence to determine whether the unit can be awarded.

Sufficient evidence will need to be available for tutors/providers to make a judgement on the award of a unit. This means that tutors/providers may map to existing evidence or may need to ensure additional student assessment or alternative evidence is generated. The available evidence must relate to the learning outcomes of each unit being assessed. For graded units, the available evidence must relate to the learning outcomes of each unit being assessed **and** the grade descriptors assigned to the unit.

Continued teaching of the Diploma will be vital to ensure that the most complete sources of evidence are available on which the tutor/provider can base their judgement.

Tutor/provider judgements can only be based on evidence of what the student can do, not what a student has the potential to achieve.

To ensure students have confidence in the results awarded this year, the evidence submitted to support the award of a unit will be subject to quality assurance arrangements.

On completion of the Diploma, students will continue to receive a unit transcript and it will not be possible to identify from the transcript the units awarded through extenuation.

Q: What are extenuating circumstances and how are they evidenced?

A: Any circumstances or factors likely to impact adversely on student achievement and progression. These circumstances or factors are usually either unforeseen or unpreventable and outside the control of the student.

For many students, the pandemic will have impacted their learning experience. The exact nature and severity of that impact will be dependent on a complex interaction of factors at provider (centre), Diploma and student (individual and/or cohort) level.

Providers will have procedures for dealing with cases of extenuating circumstances. In most cases, extenuating circumstances that affect achievement on individual units (for example, in relation to requests for extended deadlines) are handled at course level, and appropriate action and decisions taken according to the provider's approved procedures.

AVAs will have processes in place to also consider cases where extenuating circumstances have affected performance in more than one area or in any other way that falls outside the

provider's normal processes. This will also include exceptional cases where extenuating circumstances have affected the completion or submission of work for assessment.

If extenuating circumstances impact student performance, such circumstances will be taken into account when quality assuring grades, through the process of moderation and standardisation. Tutors, Internal Moderators and External Moderators will ensure decisions are fair, robust and equitable based upon careful consideration of the extenuating circumstances and student overall performance across their programme of learning.

These procedures have been developed through collaboration with our key stakeholders including AVAs, DfE, Ofqual, Qualifications Wales, UCAS and other organisations, and based on the experiences of students and providers during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years.

Support information

If you have any questions about the arrangements for assessment and awarding of the Access to HE Diploma, please contact your AVA to discuss individual support needs.

We will continue to provide updates on the [QAA website](#).

You can also read our [FAQs](#).

If you need help or further support, please speak contact QAA officers at AHE@gaa.ac.uk

From 6 September 2021, we will be running a series of webinars on the arrangements for the award and assessment of the Access to HE Diploma in 2021-22, please go to our [events](#) page for further detail. Please contact us at ahe@gaa.ac.uk if it would be helpful for QAA to run a bespoke session for your organisation.