

Access to HE Diploma (Social Sciences) Diploma Specification

Valid from: August 2026
Learning Aim Code: 40016237

Website: skillsandeducationgroupaccess.co.uk
Telephone: 0115 854 1620

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Access to HE Diploma Background and Aims

The Access to Higher Education Diploma is a full Level 3 UK qualification. It is regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) which licenses Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) to accredit and award the Access to Higher Education Diploma in the UK.

Access to Higher Education Diplomas enable students to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to progress to higher education. They are key to widening participation from groups traditionally underrepresented at higher education institutions and are therefore aimed particularly, though not exclusively, at adults without traditional qualifications.

The aims of the Access to HE Diploma are to:

- prepare students who are returning to education for progression to Higher Education, further training in a related vocational or occupational area
- help students develop the skills and knowledge they need to achieve on their chosen HE course or career pathway
- familiarise students with the teaching and learning methodologies and assessment strategies found in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)
- help students to gain confidence in their abilities, to review and monitor their own progress and to become independent students
- develop students' research, planning, analytical and evaluation skills
- enable students to make informed choices about future progression routes.

Diploma Development

Skills and Education Group Access has worked with curriculum specialists and higher education colleagues to develop the Access to HE Diploma (Social Sciences). Every Diploma is validated by the AVA through a robust and rigorous peer panel process which then recommends approval to the AVA's Access to HE Committee. By taking into consideration the views of Further and Higher Education practitioners, the AVA ensures that the Diploma meets all QAA requirements and that it enables students to complete a planned, balanced and coherent programme of study, through which they have been able to acquire subject knowledge and develop academic skills which are relevant to the intended progression route(s).

C1 (34.1): This QAA recognised Access to HE Diploma is validated for delivery within the UK by a provider with a main base in the UK (including the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man) only.

C1 (34.2): Only students with a UK address (including BFPO) can be registered for an Access to HE Diploma.

Diploma Specification

The QAA Diploma Specification states that the Access to HE Diploma is a:

- unitised qualification, based on units of assessment which are structured in accordance with the Access to HE unit specification
- credit-based qualification, operated in accordance with the terms of the Access to HE credit specification
- graded qualification, as determined by the Access to HE Grading Scheme.

This Diploma Specification should be read in conjunction with the QAA Access to HE Diploma Specification, the QAA Access to HE Grading Scheme and associated AVA policies and procedures.

About this qualification

AVA Diploma Title	Main Classification (Sector Subject Area)	Sub- Classification
Access to HE Diploma (Social Sciences)	11 - Social Science	11.2 - Sociology and Social Policy

This Diploma specification is valid from: 01/08/2026

Diploma revalidation date: 31/07/2031

Purpose of the Diploma:

The Access to HE Diploma (Social Sciences) provides students with a broad introduction to social sciences disciplines and academic study at Level 3. It is designed to prepare students for progression to higher education by developing subject knowledge, critical thinking, research skills, written communication and independent study.

The Diploma includes units in sociology, psychology, criminology, social policy and related social sciences themes, enabling students to explore social behaviour, institutions, inequality, development and contemporary issues while building the academic confidence and study skills needed for further study.

A. Key Knowledge:

1. Sociology and Social Policy:

- understanding of sociological explanations, socialisation, family, social inequality and contemporary social issues
- knowledge of sociology as a discipline, including key concepts, perspectives and ideas that have shaped the field
- understanding of welfare, social policy, diversity, rights and the role of social institutions

2. Psychology:

- knowledge of key psychological perspectives and approaches
- understanding of cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, personality theories, aggression and social interaction
- exploration of psychological disorders, therapeutic strategies and health psychology perspectives

3. Criminology:

- understanding of current issues in criminology and theoretical approaches to criminology
- knowledge of crime, deviance, crime and society, and criminological profiling
- exploration of the social and theoretical dimensions of criminal behaviour

4. Applied Social Sciences:

- understanding of safeguarding, health and illness, social work roles and responsibilities, and globalisation and development
- exploration of how social sciences can be applied to contemporary issues and professional contexts

5. Politics and Communication:

- knowledge of political theories and concepts
- opportunities to develop written communication and argument through appropriate optional units

B. Subject-Specific Skills:

1. Research and Analysis:

- conduct research in social sciences subject areas
- analyse evidence, arguments, theories and data
- apply research skills in preparation for assignments, projects and investigations

2. Evaluation and Interpretation:

- evaluate sociological, psychological and criminological perspectives
- interpret contemporary social issues using appropriate theories and concepts
- compare explanations, arguments and approaches within and across social sciences disciplines

3. Application of Knowledge:

- apply social sciences knowledge to real-world issues and case studies
- explore how theory informs practice in areas such as health, safeguarding, welfare and social policy
- use subject-specific terminology appropriately and accurately

4. Academic Communication:

- produce structured academic writing
- present reasoned arguments supported by evidence
- communicate ideas clearly and appropriately for different academic purposes

C. Transferable Skills:

1. Academic and Research Skills:

- development of academic writing, reading, note-making and referencing skills
- improvement of research skills, information literacy and independent study
- increased confidence in preparing for higher education study

2. Communication and Organisational Skills:

- development of clear written and spoken communication
- improved ability to present ideas and findings effectively
- stronger organisation, time management and study skills

3. Professional and Ethical Skills:

- understanding of ethical considerations in research and professional practice
- awareness of reflective practice and professional expectations
- ability to apply social sciences perspectives to real-world issues and contexts

Intended Progression Routes

D2.1 (52.2): Access to HE Diplomas are intended to provide a preparation for study in UK higher education, but the award of a Diploma does not provide guaranteed entry to UK higher education programmes.

The following progression routes were agreed at the point of validation as being appropriate choices for students who achieve the Access to HE Diploma (Social Sciences), subject to the course entry requirements and application process.

Anthropology	Health and Social Care	Social Sciences
Criminology	International Studies	Social Work
Cultural Studies	Policing	Sociology
Early Childhood Studies	Politics	Teaching
Education Studies	Psychology	Working with Children and Young Families
Forensics/Criminology	Social Anthropology	Youth and Community
Forensic Psychology	Social Policy	

Providers delivering this Diploma should consult receiving HEIs to confirm that progression opportunities are appropriate and current. Evidence of HEI consultation and progression opportunities will be identified in the provider's Programme Submission Document.

Accuracy of Information and Diploma Titles

Providers are responsible for ensuring that students receive accurate, clear and timely information relating to the Diploma structure, assessment, grading and progression opportunities. Students must be made aware of the exact validated Diploma title against which they are registered and providers must ensure that published or promotional information does not misrepresent the approved qualification.

Providers must ensure that all information provided to prospective and current students is accurate, clear and not misleading, including information relating to programme content, assessment, grading, progression opportunities and any additional costs associated with study.

Access to HE Diploma provider assessment strategy advice

QAA states that the Access to HE Diploma provides '*HE progression opportunities for adults who, because of social, educational or individual circumstances may have achieved few, if any, prior qualifications*'. They also state that, '*Students who are awarded the Diploma will have completed a planned, balanced and coherent programme of study, through which they have been able to acquire subject knowledge and develop academic skills which are relevant to the intended progression route(s)*'. Therefore all approved providers need to develop Diploma assessment strategies which outline what assessment activities the students will undertake, how they will be used and why they have been chosen in order to achieve the learning aims:

1. **What** is the aim of the diploma assessment strategy?
2. **How** will it be achieved?
3. **Why** has this approach been chosen?

Assessment design:

Access to HE Diplomas should be assessed using innovative and contemporary methods, tailored to prepare students studying at Level 3 for study at Higher Education. Assessment design should be holistic, ensuring students can demonstrate acquired knowledge, understanding and skills in and across units and assessments should reflect those likely to be encountered on Higher Education courses in the same field of study. Specific assessment guidance should be provided for each unit to ensure consistency and fairness across assessment practice. Providers are responsible for ensuring that assessment strategies remain planned, balanced and coherent across the Diploma and that

assessment demand remains proportionate and manageable for students. Effective assessment design begins at the planning stage and should be informed by the Provider Handbook, the QAA Access to HE Grading Scheme and associated AVA guidance.

In addition, providers must ensure that assessment methods are chosen which afford students opportunities to demonstrate the requirements of the three Grading Standards; Knowledge and Understanding, Subject Specific Skills and Transferable Skills. Providers should ensure that students are given opportunities to demonstrate the selected Grading Standards and their components through assessment activities and that grading decisions are appropriately contextualised to the assessment tasks, evidence produced and unit content being assessed. Further, assessment methods should reflect, where appropriate, the forms of assessment commonly encountered within Higher Education and should support the development of independent study, research, analytical and reflective skills.

Assessment design should comply with the requirements of the most current QAA Grading Scheme and also be aligned to the principles of assessment: Validity, Authenticity, Reliability, Currency and Sufficiency (VARCS). Providers are encouraged to consider integrated assessment approaches where appropriate. Integrated assessment should be planned and documented through the Diploma Assessment Planner (AP1), Unit Planner (AP2) and Assessment Brief (AP3) and must ensure that Learning Outcomes, Assessment Criteria and Grading Standards remain clearly mapped and assessable. Integrated assessment should reduce unnecessary duplication whilst maintaining the validity, reliability and transparency of assessment decisions.

Within the delivery of the Diploma, tutors and assessors should ensure that students' work remains current, relevant and authentic including where generative artificial intelligence tools are used. Students should be supported to acknowledge and reference the use of such tools appropriately to ensure transparency.

Providers must ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place for the authentication of student work and for the management of academic misconduct, maladministration and inappropriate use of artificial intelligence in accordance with AVA policies and procedures.

Providers may recognise valid evidence generated through other assessment activities where that evidence demonstrably meets the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria of a unit. Such decisions must be supported by explicit mapping, appropriate records and adherence to the principles of assessment (VARCS).

Tutor/Assessor qualifications and experience specifically required for delivery and assessment of this diploma:

Generally, and as a minimum, it is expected that provider staff teaching on the Diploma have the required professional competence and skills necessary for the mode(s) of delivery to be used, and the level of subject expertise necessary to teach and assess the units available on the Diploma.

Providers must also ensure that appropriate learning resources, student support and delivery infrastructure are available to support the effective delivery and assessment of the Diploma.

Rules of Combination

Where options are available within a single set of rules of combination, which allow alternative requirements for the achievement of a named Diploma, the alternatives permitted by the options are consistent, in terms of academic challenge and demand, and will require equivalent standards for achievement, whenever and wherever it is delivered.

Access to HE Diploma (Social Sciences)	
Credit Value of the Diploma:	60
Students must achieve 60 credits in total in accordance with the rules of combination for the Diploma.	
All Diplomas are 60 credits, irrespective of the place, subject or mode of study. Of the 60 credits 45 must be from graded units concerned with academic subject content, with the remaining 15 credits to be achieved from ungraded units. In addition, all students must study a minimum of ten 3 credit units and at least one 9 or 6 credit unit up to a maximum of 30 credits, which may or may not be graded.	
Students can achieve up to a maximum of 30 credits at Level 3 through credit transfer and the award of credit through the recognition of prior learning.	
Students undertaking any Access to HE Diploma, whatever their mode of study, must be: a) registered and certificated for units to a maximum value of 60 credits b) registered for units to the value of 60 credits no later than 84 days from the start date of their Access to HE course, or before the student makes a formal application to a higher education course through UCAS or any other application process, whichever date occurs first.	

Appendix 1 - Units of Assessment – Access to HE Diploma (Social Sciences)

For every unit included in the table, further information is included in the Unit Specifications, including learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

Grading Standards (Applied to all graded units)

1	Knowledge and Understanding of the Subject
2	Subject Specific Skills
3	Transferable Skills

The Rules of Combination include mandatory graded units to ensure that all students complete a programme of study that reflects the breadth of the social sciences. This prevents the diploma from being achieved through units drawn from a single subject area.

Mandatory Graded Units

Unit Title	National Code	Level	CV
Key Aspects of Psychology	PK1/3/AA/04G	Three	6
Sociology: Concepts and Perspectives	EE2/3/AA/26G	Three	6
Theoretical Approaches to Criminology	EE2/3/AA/23G	Three	6

The remaining optional units of the Diploma enable providers to design a coherent programme of study that reflects the intended progression routes of their students, while meeting the structural requirements of the Access to HE Diploma.

Optional Graded Units (Please select 27 credits from this list)

Unit Title	National Code	Level	CV
Application of Sociological Approaches to Contemporary Issues	EE2/3/AA/27G	Three	3
Race and Ethnicity in Modern Societies	EE2/3/AA/30G	Three	3
Socialisation	EE2/3/AA/31G	Three	3
Sociological Explanations	EE2/3/AA/32G	Three	3
Theories of Crime and Deviance	EE2/3/AA/33G	Three	3
Family	EE9/3/AA/01G	Three	3
Language: Original Writing	FN2/3/AA/08G	Three	3
Stress and Eating Disorders	PA1/3/AA/06G	Three	3
Health Psychology Perspectives	PK1/3/AA/07G	Three	3
Psychological Disorders and Therapeutic Strategies	PK1/3/AA/09G	Three	3

Unit Title	National Code	Level	CV
Perspectives in Psychology	PK1/3/AA/21G	Three	3
Aggression	PK1/3/AA/23G	Three	3
Social Interaction	PK1/3/AA/26G	Three	3
Personality Theories	PK1/3/AA/29G	Three	3
Psychological Profiling	PK1/3/AA/30G	Three	3
Child Development Early Socialisation	PK3/3/AA/07G	Three	3
Cognitive Psychology	PK8/3/AA/02G	Three	3
Safeguarding	PR2/3/AA/07G	Three	3
The Welfare State	PR2/3/AA/10G	Three	3
Social Inequality	PR2/3/AA/11G	Three	3
Current Issues in Criminology	EE2/3/AA/02G	Three	6
Crime and Society	EE2/3/AA/09G	Three	6
Sociology: Ideas that Shaped the World	EE2/3/AA/28G	Three	6
Globalisation and Development	EE2/3/AA/29G	Three	6
Crime and Deviance	EE2/3/AA/24G	Three	6
Health and Illness	PA1/3/AA/05G	Three	6
Research Skills: Project	PK1/3/AA/33G	Three	6
Social Psychology	PK1/3/AA/32G	Three	6
Developmental Psychology	PK3/3/AA/02G	Three	6
The Role and Responsibilities of a Social Worker	PR1/3/AA/06G	Three	6
Social Policy and the British Welfare State	PR2/3/AA/02G	Three	6
Values, Diversity and Rights	PR2/3/AA/09G	Three	6
Research Project: Criminology	EE2/3/AA/22G	Three	9
Politics: Theories and Concepts	EA2/3/AA/04G	Three	6

Optional Ungraded Units (Please select 15 credits from this list)

Unit Title	National Code	Level	CV
The Safe and Ethical Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence	CK5/3/AA/01U	Three	3
Crime and Deviance	EE2/3/AA/02U	Three	3
Sociological Explanations	EE2/3/AA/05U	Three	3
Family	EE9/3/AA/01U	Three	3
Principles of Reflection	HB1/3/AA/03U	Three	3
Academic Writing Skills	HC7/3/AA/01U	Three	3
Researching and Understanding Opportunities in Higher Education	HC7/3/AA/04U	Three	3
Research Skills	HC7/3/AA/17U	Three	3
Presentation Skills	HC7/3/AA/18U	Three	3
Perspectives in Psychology	PK1/3/AA/02U	Three	3
Crime and Society	EE2/3/AA/04U	Three	6

Inclusion and Exclusion rules of combination

Barred Unit 1	National Code	CV	Barred Unit 2	National Code	CV
Key Aspects of Psychology	PK1/3/AA/04G	6	Perspectives in Psychology	PK1/3/AA/02U	3
Crime and Society	EE2/3/AA/04U	6	Crime and Society	EE2/3/AA/09G	6
Family	EE9/3/AA/01U	3	Family	EE9/3/AA/01G	3
Sociological Explanations	EE2/3/AA/05U	3	Sociological Explanations	EE2/3/AA/32G	3
Perspectives in Psychology	PK1/3/AA/02U	3	Perspectives in Psychology	PK1/3/AA/21G	3
Crime and Deviance	EE2/3/AA/02U	3	Crime and Deviance	EE2/3/AA/24G	6
Research Project: Criminology	EE2/3/AA/22G	9	Research Skills: Project	PK1/3/AA/33G	6
Research Project: Criminology	EE2/3/AA/22G	9	Research Skills	HC7/3/AA/17U	3
Research Skills: Project	PK1/3/AA/33G	6	Research Skills	HC7/3/AA/17U	3