



QAA GRADING SCHEME

LASER Learning Awards

*ADDITIONAL
GUIDANCE FOR
ACCESS
PRACTITIONERS*



Context:

This document provides additional guidance for Access practitioners in terms of the application and interpretation of the QAA Grading Scheme for Access Diplomas. The document is the product of a series of consultations with Access practitioners throughout March 2015. It has been edited by the Access Quality Manager for LASER Learning Awards. It is aimed at improving consistency of interpretation in relation to the interpretation and application of the QAA Grading Scheme framework and it is hoped that it will provide an additional resource to aid practitioners in terms of the interpretation of the QAA Grading Scheme Handbook. It is **not** intended to be used as an alternative to the QAA Grading Scheme handbook and **must** only be used in conjunction with the relevant QAA guidance. The work does not represent specific guidance on the application of individual Grading Descriptor Components. These must be selected and applied in relation to individual assessment plans and assignment briefs. However, the general nature of the commentary is aimed at assisting practitioners in understanding the generic understanding of these in the context of the overall quality of the work. The term '**global judgement**' is used to refer to a totalizing judgement made in respect of the quality of evidence in respect of specific Grade Descriptors statements and should not be confused with the overall quality of the work (with the notable exception of GD7).

Methodology:

Access practitioners were asked to complete additional guidance in respect of **one** Grading Descriptor (of their choice) as an aspect of the Standardization workshops which ran parallel with to the Spring Access Practitioner Group Meetings in March 2015. The exercise did not relate to specific components but rather asked practitioners to consider what they felt the Grading Descriptors (and their components) meant contextually in terms of actual pieces of work (although participants were counselled not to tie this discussion to any particular assignment type). The entire range of grade descriptors were covered by this exercise. The results were then collated and edited by the Access Quality Manager to form this document.

The results are presented as a series of charts for each grading descriptor detailing the key findings in terms of Pass, Merit and Distinction. Although Pass grade work does not have grade descriptors attached, it is included to provide a contextualization of the progressive improvement of quality in terms of shifting from Pass through to Distinction.

Grading Descriptor One: Understanding of the Subject

PASS

There must be sufficient understanding of the subject to satisfy the marker that **all Learning Outcomes** and **Assessment Criteria** are met. The level of understanding / knowledge will be such that it is apparent that the **key ideas / theories / models / perspectives/ practices and conventions** assessed are clearly understood, but the work will lack depth and be characterized by a basic / simplistic grasp of the material. It will not be multi-faceted and there may be some errors, although the work must be of sufficient quality to be satisfied that all the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria are met. Although theories will be evaluated and critiqued, the **understanding will not move beyond** individual critical evaluation in relation to the assessment criteria to show complexity in linking and developing synthesis of analysis in evidencing how theories etc. inter-relate.

Key Indicators:

Understanding *is* Simplistic / One Dimensional / Not Multi-faceted / Basic

May contain some errors although all Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria met.

If a unit contains a knowledge base which is fact based and will be determined by correct / incorrect responses (e.g. Mathematics / Science) this GD is **not** appropriate according to the QAA Handbook. The QAA recommend GD3 (Application of Skills) should be used to measure the application of these intellectual skills.

Numerical marking can be used to determine a grade in relation to GD1 but it cannot determine the overall grade as GD7 (Quality) must always be included in grading any assessment / assignment and this **cannot** be determined by numerical marking. If numerical marking is used the mark scheme must be made clear to students.

MERIT

Work at this level will show a **secure** understanding of the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. Terminology will be accurately employed in the main, evidencing clear understanding. The general scope of the work will show inter-linking of ideas showing a clear understanding of the contextual inter-relationships within the body of knowledge. However, understanding **will not be in depth** and may lack conceptual breadth / depth. It will certainly anticipate conceptual inter-linking of ideas in relation to the body of knowledge but this will not necessarily be joined up or fully developed. The grasp of the topic will be **very good** but capable of being developed to allow for more sophisticated and joined up analysis.

Key Indicators:

Very good level of understanding / Secure grasp of knowledge base beyond Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria / Generally accurate in employing key knowledge of major conventions and practices within the area assessed / Joined up but not fully developed.

Although work will evidence understanding beyond that to meet the Assessment Criteria it **will not** be fully formed and interlinked and it will remain inconsistent in places.

DISTINCTION

An excellent understanding is evidenced in relation to the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. Ideas are consistently interrelated. Work is complex, objective, well-reasoned and evidenced. Its tone is one of 'global' understanding. The work is underpinned by a consistent understanding which makes comparisons and evidences a fully developed critical evaluation in relation to the task. Ideas are fully developed and critiqued. Comparisons and contradictions are fully explored within the work in relation to the knowledge base.

Key Indicators:

Excellent level of understanding / Complex / Global Critique / Joined up analysis

Work at this level will be consistently excellent in evidencing understanding. There will be few 'loose ends' in terms of the discussion of the material

Grading Descriptor Two: Application of Knowledge

PASS

The application of knowledge is such that **all Learning Outcomes** and **Assessment Criteria** are met. This will require the students to *apply* the knowledge within the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria appropriately.

Application will be basic although ideas will be combined in such a way that a relevant argument is alluded to although this will not be complex and will contain inconsistencies in terms of application. There may be areas of omission although the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria will be met. The actual application will remain lacking in consistency in developing insight and analysis and the work will remain superficial in terms of breadth and depth of analysis in relation to the task.

Key Indicators:

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria met but work lacks a coherently structured and consistent application of knowledge to the task. Basic application of knowledge in terms of the development or synthesis of material in responding to the task. Material used is generally not contextualised to the task and lacks clarity in responding to the task.

NOTE: Must not be determined by Numerical Marking

As noted previously this GD will not be appropriate as a means to measure a knowledge base which is fact based and will be determined by correct / incorrect responses (e.g. Mathematics / Science) this GD is **not** appropriate according to the QAA Handbook. The QAA recommend GD3 (Application of Skills) should be used to measure the application of these intellectual skills.

MERIT

Work at Merit level will show selectivity in the manner in which it uses and applies relevant information to the task. The material will not be fully developed in contextualising information / knowledge to the task. However, a very good level of consistency is shown in terms of breadth or depth in how the material is applied.

The structure of the work shows use of the material in the body of knowledge to provide a focussed response to the task. However, further development would be needed to show a 'global' approach based on excellent and consistent application in terms of the breadth and / or depth. The work will show relevant selection of a range of points to create a solid debate but there will be areas where further development is clearly required.

Key Indicators:

Very good evidence of applying knowledge to a task / Breadth **or** depth in terms of relevant application / Material is contextualized in responding to set task.

Inconsistencies remain in terms of a need for further development / contextualization

DISTINCTION

Excellent application of the assessed body of knowledge required to meet Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria to the demands of the set task. Knowledge is contextualized to develop **breadth and depth** of analysis in respect of the set task. The response to the task shows a consistently and convincingly argued (and therefore structurally cohesive) response to the set task. The work provided shows not simply assurance in terms of the knowledge base but the ability to apply it with consistency and originality in framing a response to the tasks set.

Key Indicators:

Excellent consistency in application of knowledge in relation to the topic, showing **BOTH** breadth and depth / Work will always relate information contextually to the task / The assessed work will show coherence, accuracy and precision in its application of knowledge / There will be an excellent development of analysis and synthesis of this information into a logical and comprehensive response

Grading Descriptor Three: Application of Skills

PASS

The application of skills is such that **all Learning Outcomes** and **Assessment Criteria** are met. This will require the students to *apply* the skills within the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria appropriately.

Skills measured by this Grading Descriptor include intellectual (Mathematical or Scientific reasoning skills) and/or Technical or Practical skills (e.g. constructing and undertaking an experiment in Science or Psychology).

This Grading Descriptor should not be applied to the measurement of research skills (GD4), communication skills (GD5) or personal organization and time management skills (GD6).

In judging the application of skills to the task at Pass the basic skills necessary for the completion of the unit will be evidenced but they will lack precision and development. Skills shown will be basic and there will be little evidence of the development of sophistication within their application. A sound use of skills, methods and techniques will be shown, but the work will not be characterized in terms of confident, consistent, creative, innovative, precise, accurate or efficient application of skills to the task.

Key Indicators:

Sound / Basic application of skills as necessary to complete the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria.

Work will lack sophistication and development in terms of the application and use of skills in response to the set task.

Numerical Marking can be used to determine a grade in relation to GD1 but it cannot determine the overall grade as GD7 (Quality) must always be included in grading any assessment / assignment and this **cannot** be determined by numerical marking. If numerical marking is used the mark scheme must be made clear to students.

MERIT

At Merit level work will see a higher level (very good) of consistency in the application of skills. This will be evidenced both in the employment and application of the correct terminology in explaining, communicating and rationalising the choices made in terms of the application of skills. There will be a generally appropriate and accurate employment of skills in terms of the tasks set although this will not be totally sufficient to be termed excellent. There will remain inconsistencies in use and application, although the general consistency of use will be such that the use and application of skills will be termed as very good when taken as a whole.

Key Indicators:

Generally consistent selection and application of skills / **very good** levels of confidence / consistency / creativity / innovation / precision / accuracy / efficiency in terms of the selection and application of skills

There will remain some inconsistencies of application though

DISTINCTION

Excellent and consistent selection and application of skills. Work will be characterized by accuracy and consistency in the use of the appropriate skills set to the task. A 'global' sense of efficiency will be shown in terms of the planning, justification and use of skills in meeting the demands of set tasks. Work need not be perfect but the global sense of the piece will leave the marker confident of an excellent command of the skills set.

Key Indicators:

Accurate and **consistent** application of skills relevant to the tasks. Excellent levels of confidence / consistency / creativity / innovation / precision / accuracy / efficiency in terms of the selection and application of skills

Work need not be perfect but will be of the highest quality in relation to selection and application of appropriate skills.

Grading Descriptor Four: Use of Information

PASS

Work will meet the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. The use of 'new information', which is defined as independently researched information external to hand-outs, core texts etc., will be in line with the requirements of the assessment / assignment task but will not move beyond these. In practical work the material drawn on will not move beyond the minimum required by the unit. Where independent research is required as an aspect of the Learning Outcomes / Assessment Criteria, it will be satisfactory but will not be developed in terms of both the evidence of research skills and / or the contextual use of the researched material.

Key Indicators:

Sound use of independently researched material in line with the requirements of the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. Research will lack sophistication and depth. New information will lack clarity in terms of its development and contextualization to the assessment / assignment task.

NOTE: Must not be determined by Numerical Marking

MERIT

At Merit level work move beyond the necessary use of information to satisfy Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. Depending on the components identified work will show use of information beyond that identified in core texts and hand-outs and will be able to use this in a contextually accurate manner in responding to the demands of the assessment / assignment brief as a model for meeting the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. In practice based work this will be evidenced by the student drawing on a range of sources beyond the minimum required by the work.

Key Indicators: Very good work in terms of the identification of academic research material which has been independently sourced. There will be very good evidence of independent research showing a range of material beyond core materials. The material as applied to the task will show generally very good contextualization in communicating the relevance, significance and synthesis of new material as expressed in terms of the assessment / assignment task. The emphasis on each point is determined by the GDC's applied within the assessment / assignment task.

There may remain some inconsistencies and 'loose ends' but the global judgement in terms of the use of information in relation to the set task should equate to **'very good'**.

DISTINCTION

At Distinction level, work will show a consistent and extensive use of independent research.. Depending on the Grading Descriptor Components identified, work will show use of information far beyond that identified in core texts and hand-outs and will be able to use extensive research in a contextually accurate and consistent manner in responding to the demands of the assessment / assignment brief as a model for meeting the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. In practice based work this will be evidenced by the student drawing on a extensive range of sources beyond the minimum required by the work.

Key Indicators: Excellent work in terms of the identification of academic research material which has been independently and extensively sourced. There will be consistent evidence of independent research showing a range of material well beyond core materials. The material as applied to the task will show consistent contextualization in communicating the relevance, significance and synthesis of new material as expressed in terms of the assessment / assignment task. The emphasis on each point is determined by the GDC's applied within the assessment / assignment task.

There will be few inconsistencies or 'loose ends' but the global judgement in terms of the use of information in relation to the set task should equate to **'excellent'**.

Grading Descriptor Five: Communication and Presentation

PASS

Generally the work will be appropriately presented in terms of meeting the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. There will be **numerous spelling, syntax, punctuation and grammar errors**, although these will not prevent the communication of evidence clearly underpinning the meeting of the appropriate Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. **Structure will be appropriate** in terms of the meeting of criteria, but there will likely be **some structural errors / inconsistencies**. However, the marker will still be able to be assured that the work provides a coherent set of evidence in terms of the satisfaction of Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. In meeting these requirements the work will represent no more than a **sound** attempt in terms of **the format, structure, use of images, use of language, syntax, register, spelling, punctuation and referencing** as appropriate and identified within the Assignment Brief

Key Indicators:

Sound level of communication / presentation employed in response to the assignment task / inconsistency in terms of use of spelling, punctuation and grammar etc. (see above)

NOTE: Must not be determined by Numerical Marking

MERIT

At Merit level work will show **very good** use of appropriate register and specialist / technical language. The work will be structurally accurate in responding to the assignment task. The presentation of the work will be **very good** with clear expression of relevant ideas and information. Cohesion of argument will be generally to a high level although there will be some areas for development. There will also be some minor errors in terms of punctuation and grammar. The work will present a well-rounded and cohesive response to the task and it will be appropriately referenced (if this component is identified).

Key Indicators: Very good in terms of format, structure, use of images, language, syntax, register, spelling, punctuation, referencing (these are the full range of components and are identified / chosen as appropriate in meeting the demands of the specific assessment / assignment brief).

There may remain some inconsistencies and 'loose ends' but the global judgement in terms of the communication and presentation of information in relation to the set task should equate to **'very good'**.

DISTINCTION

Excellent and consistent use of communication and presentation skills throughout the assessed work. There will be few if any punctuation and grammar errors. Sophisticated use of academic / technical language will be employed throughout and information will be contextualized in order to clearly articulate analysis and synthesis of argument. Structurally the work will 'flow' seamlessly with an articulate and logical commentary / analysis being fully developed throughout the piece. The communication and presentation of the work will clearly articulate an **excellent** in depth understanding of the assessed topic.

Key Indicators:

Excellent work in terms of format, structure, use of images, language, syntax, register, spelling, punctuation, referencing (these are the full range of components and are identified / chosen as appropriate in meeting the demands of the specific assessment / assignment brief).

There will be few if any inconsistencies. The global judgement in terms of the communication and presentation of ideas within the work should be such that the marker feels that the communication and presentation skills evidenced are excellent (i.e. first class).

Grading Descriptor Six: Autonomy and / or Independence

PASS

In relation to the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria, the work will provide evidence of skills in relation to personal organization and time management in line with requirements of the unit specification. However, judgements made by the student will be generally / often inconsistent and will lack coherence in responding independently to a research problem. The student will show satisfactory management of their learning but will not seek or react consistently to guidance. The requirements of the assignment will be met but the use and application of skills in relation to autonomous and independent study will be inconsistent and poorly applied. This will underpin poor development of academic rigour in the planning and execution of research in relation to academic problems for example.

Key Indicators:

Inconsistency in judgements related to the independent management of learning / limited levels of independence shown in making decisions in relation to own learning / Poor identification of problems and issues in terms of management of own learning and a failure to seek or follow appropriate guidance and support / Poor response to guidance / Poor time management.

However, in terms of the above the relevant Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria **WILL** be met.

NOTE: Must not be determined by Numerical Marking

MERIT

At Merit level, work will employ generally accurate judgements (the QAA use 'sound' in this context but this is used to relate to pass criteria in other GDCs so is omitted here) in relation to personal organization and time management in completing the work. The student will generally take the lead in initiating discussion of problems in relation to study and will actively seek and respond to guidance. The student will be able to clearly evidence **very good** organization and time management in terms of the management of their own independent study across the scope of the assessed work. The student will be proactive in seeking guidance and support.

Key Indicators:

Very good time management and organization in terms of the management of own study / **Generally consistent** approach to **independent management** of own learning / Ability to **seek and respond to guidance appropriately** / **Proactive** in seeking guidance in relation to specific problems.

There may be some inconsistencies in approach and occasions where work evidences poor judgements (although an evaluative response to these will present clear and appropriate evaluation and planned actions as appropriate). However, the global judgement of the marker should confirm that autonomy and / or independence was displayed to a **very good** level within the assessed work.

DISTINCTION

Excellent and **consistent** evidence of organization and time management within the completed assessed work. The student will almost always be proactive in taking the initiative and seeking guidance and will respond appropriately to it. They will be able to generally execute an individual plan of study / research and will also be able identify problems and inconsistencies in their approach independently and plan actions to remedy these issues. Judgements will be **consistently** sound and accurate in managing their own work.

Key Indicators:

Excellent time management and organization in terms of the management of own study / **Generally consistent** approach to **independent management** of own learning / Ability to **seek and respond to guidance appropriately** / evidence of **independent problem solving** in the management of own learning.

There may be minor inconsistencies in approach and occasions where work evidences questionable judgement (although an evaluative response to these will present clear and appropriate analysis and planned actions as appropriate). However, the global judgement of the marker should confirm that autonomy and / or independence was displayed to an **excellent** level within the assessed work.

Grading Descriptor Seven: Quality

PASS

The work meets **all** Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. The structure and development of the work provides clear evidence of the completion of the relevant criteria. However, in its structure and development of argument, the work lacks coherence and consistency. Arguments are not developed and remain ambiguous in places. Evidence of technical, creative, practical and academic aspects of writing (as appropriate to the assessment) will be of satisfactory quality. Holistically the work will meet the criteria but will not move beyond this in terms of the overall quality of the work. Referencing, for example, will likely be inadequate (although this is not explicitly alluded to in the QAA guidance it can be considered a key aspect of academic writing). QAA guidance does note that this descriptor should **not** be used to measure achievement specifically included within other descriptors (referencing is actually included in GD5) but in the sense that it is an aspect of technical / academic writing it may be considered here (although it is not mandatory in terms of the QAA Specification). Taken as a whole the work will not be considered as 'high quality'.

Key Indicators:

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria are met. Work is **structurally inconsistent** and fails to develop **coherence** in its response to the set task. There remains **ambiguity** in the development of argument within the assessed work. Work **does not flow logically** and is technically lacking as a coherent piece of academic writing.

NOTE: Must not be determined by Numerical Marking

MERIT

At Merit level the 'global judgement' in relation to quality is that the work is that of a **very good** response. Work will show **generally very good levels of consistency** in terms of the development of a **logical** and **fluent** response to the set task. Material discussed is **generally unambiguous** but may not be fully developed / complete in terms of analysis. Written style shows a clear technical and academic register.

Key Indicators:

Very good work structurally / Generally unambiguous / Consistent, logical, fluent development of argument.

There may be some 'loose ends' within the work in terms of areas where the analysis might be more developed or structurally the work may contain some structural inconsistencies. However, the work should be capable of providing evidence of a **very good response** to the assessment / assignment task when taken as a whole.

DISTINCTION

At Distinction level the 'global judgement' in relation to quality is that the work is that of an **excellent** response. Work will show **generally first class levels of consistency** in terms of the development of a **logical** and **fluent** response to the set task. Material discussed is **consistently unambiguous** and will be fully developed. There may be some minor areas for development but these will remain of little significance in the context of the overall assessed work.

Key Indicators:

Excellent work structurally / Consistently unambiguous / Consistent, logical, fluent development of argument across the scope of the assessed work.

There will be few 'loose ends' within the work in terms of areas where the analysis might be more developed or structurally should contain nothing more than **minor** structural inconsistencies. The work should be capable of providing evidence of an **excellent response** to the assessment / assignment task when taken as a whole.