



Policy Document

Access to HE Diploma Specification & Assessment Framework

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. LASER Access to HE Diploma Specification.....	4
Specification Rules.....	4
2. LASER Access to HE Diploma Titles	5
3. Requirements of the LASER Access Diploma Specification	7
Independent Academic Study Units (IAS)	7
Examination Policy.....	7
Further guidance	8
Units, Credits and Examinations	8
Interpretations of 'Examination'	8
4. Diploma Assessment Framework.....	9
Required Assessment Models:.....	9
Recommended Assessments:	11
Consequences for External Verification/Moderation:	12
Annex One: Glossary of terms for assessment methods	14
5. Implementation Timetable	18
LASER Access Contact Information	18

Introduction

This document contains a summary of the Laser Learning Awards' Access to HE Diploma Specification and Assessment Framework. This sets out the distinctive characteristics of Access Diplomas validated by Laser Learning Awards as an Access Validating Agency (AVA) licensed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

It is LASER's responsibility to implement the national Access Diploma Specification¹ on behalf of the QAA and to set its own curriculum and regulations within the QAA national rules and regulations.

Purpose and aim of the Access to HE Diploma

The Access to HE Diploma is intended to prepare people without traditional entry qualifications for degree level study at university. It may also be used by people wishing to make a career change or who have been out of formal education for a significant time in order to gain the skills and confidence required for direct progression to employment or further study. The Access to HE Diploma is regulated by QAA and widely recognised as a progression route by universities across the UK.

Target Group

The Access Diploma is open to all learners but is designed to be accessible for individuals who, as a result of their socio-economic or personal circumstances, may not have been able to consider progression to degree level study. The Access Diploma therefore provides a second chance for individuals who, for whatever reason, were not able to take full advantage of their formal secondary education.

¹ See [QAA Access Diploma Specification \(2013\)](#)

1. LASER Access to HE Diploma Specification

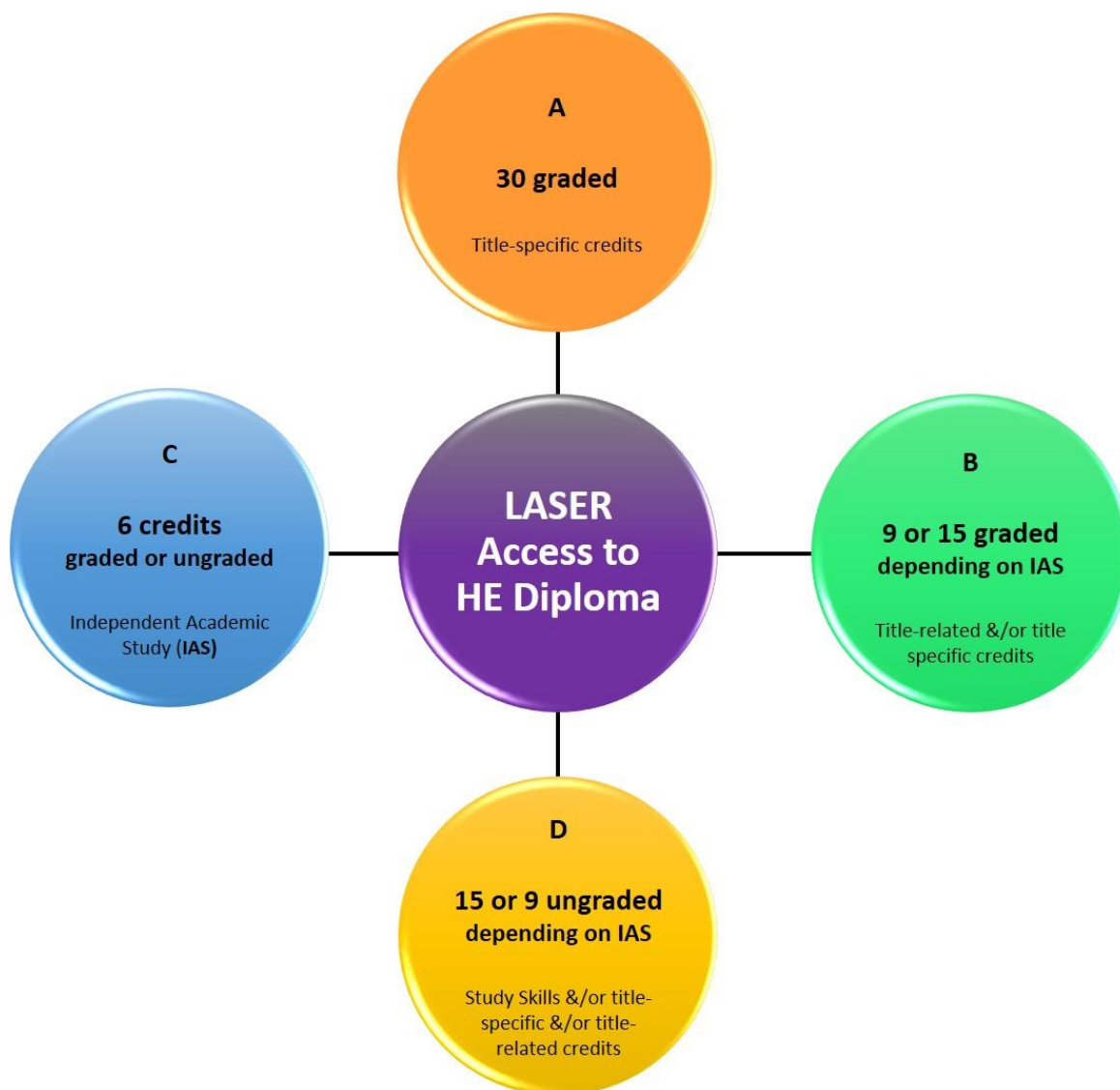
All individual LASER Access Diplomas meet the generic requirements of the LASER Access to HE Diploma Specification (see below), which in turn complies with the [QAA Access Diploma Specifications \(2013\)](#).

Underneath the generic specification there is a Diploma Specification Framework for each LASER validated Access to HE Diploma title. This outlines the subject modules available in each title, the unit lists with minimum, and if appropriate maximum, credit choices in each module and the Diploma Assessment Framework for that title. Individual Rules of Combination are then selected based on the framework choices for each diploma offered in a centre.

Specification Rules

All LASER Diplomas are made up of 45 graded credits (sections A, B, C below) and 15 ungraded credits (section D).

- A. At least 30 graded credits are selected from the modules listed in Group A, these units are chosen as specific to the subject of the named Diploma and are all at level 3. There may be minimum/maximum numbers of credits defined in each module depending on the Diploma.
- B. 9 graded credits (15 credits if IAS is to be offered ungraded) are selected from either the modules listed in Group A and/or from the additional modules offered in Group B. Group B units are related to the subject of the named Diploma or will complement learning. These units are all at level 3.
- C. 6 credits are required to be selected from the appropriate Independent Academic Study unit (IAS) for the Diploma title. These units are all at level 3 and can be chosen to be offered as graded or ungraded within the centre's Rules of Combination.
- D. 15 ungraded credits (9 if IAS is to be offered ungraded) are selected from the modules listed in Group D which include study skills, English Language and Maths and/or ungraded versions of units available in Group A or Group B. These units are generally at level 3 but selected units may be available at level 2.



The validated LASER Access Diploma titles are listed in section 2. These are the only titles permitted to be used and each one has a unique Learning Aim code which must be used if claiming public funding for a course. The rules of combination for these diploma titles as offered at each centre may vary depending on the choice of units (from the selection available for each Diploma Title Specification) to meet the demands and needs of Access students and progression routes.

2. LASER Access to HE Diploma Titles

Whilst the number of validated titles for LASER was reduced in 2013, there is still a range of similar Access Diploma titles which share much in common in terms of their content and aims but which put Access applicants at a potential disadvantage compared to those studying on A Levels and other qualifications. Therefore, to bring greater consistency to the Diploma, LASER has reduced the

number of titles validated. This will enable LASER to work with our HEI partners in a more focussed way to promote progression for LASER students.

Having fewer LASER Access to HE Diploma titles also has the benefit of reporting against larger 'regional' data sets when using software such as Pro-Achieve as they give a broader base for comparison and will give a more realistic benchmark for the purposes of comparison and target setting.

Each Access to HE Diploma title has an individual Diploma Specification including an assessment framework, potential progression routes and a summary of the Subject Groups and modules (A, B, C & D above) available in that diploma. It lists the units that can be selected in each module and defines the rules to be applied (for example minimum or maximum credits in specific subject areas, barred combinations, etc).

LASER also offers bespoke Access to HE titles that have been developed to meet specific local need or that have defined progression routes. These are not listed below but can be discussed with LASER directly.

Diploma Title	Learning Aim
Access to HE Diploma (Animal Management)	40010132
Access to HE Diploma (Art and Design)	40010144
Access to HE Diploma (Business Studies)	40010156
Access to HE Diploma (Computing)	40010168
Access to HE Diploma (Counselling)	4001017X
Access to HE Diploma (Criminology)	40010181
Access to HE Diploma (Engineering)	40010193
Access to HE Diploma (Healthcare Professions)	4001020X
Access to HE Diploma (Humanities and Social Sciences)	40010090
Access to HE Diploma (Humanities)	40010211
Access to HE Diploma (Medicine)	40010223
Access to HE Diploma (Psychology)	40010259
Access to HE Diploma (Science)	40010107
Access to HE Diploma (Science and Social Sciences)	40010119
Access to HE Diploma (Social Sciences)	40010260
Access to HE Diploma (Social Work)	40010272
Access to HE Diploma (Sport Science)	40010284
Access to HE Diploma (Teaching and Education)	40010120
FURTHER TITLES TO BE IDENTIFIED/DEVELOPED AS REQUIRED²	

² Further titles could be developed either as bespoke titles based on local need and/or defined progression routes or they may be suggested to be developed for all and added to the list above.

3. Requirements of the LASER Access Diploma Specification

Independent Academic Study Units (IAS)

This requirement is in recognition of the importance placed by universities on the ability of students to undertake independent academic study in preparation for undergraduate study. The aim of the LASER independent academic study units is to allow students to develop and utilise a range of academic skills to independently engage with a substantial body of academic subject knowledge.

Independent academic study units are primarily assessed in relation to academic subject knowledge and the acquisition of skills directly related to that subject rather than assessing the generic study skills that need to be used to carry out the piece of independent study.

All IAS units are 6 credits and can be offered graded or ungraded depending on local need. There is a complementary Planning and Presentation unit that accompanies the IAS units which can be offered as an ungraded unit to sit alongside the IAS if desired. If a centre chooses to offer their IAS as ungraded, they can select the remaining 6 graded credits from either Group A or Group B.

Independent Academic Study Guidance is available for further support.³

Examination Policy

- All LASER validated Access Diploma Titles must contain at least four opportunities for students to experience appropriate forms of examination.
- At least two examinations should be summative assessments and must generate assessed evidence in terms of Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria.
- The remaining two examination experiences may be formative assessments and therefore may not be included as evidence in terms of the final assessment of a unit in relation to Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria (this does not preclude a centre choosing to include all four examinations as forms of summative assessment of Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria). Additional examinations may be used as summative assessments subject to any guidance set out in a diploma's 'assessment framework'.

³ Available from the LASER online resource bank or the Access Office

Further guidance

Where a Diploma contains four academic subjects there might be one examination opportunity in each e.g. Professional Studies; Biology; Sociology and Psychology.

Where Diploma Titles contain two academic subject areas e.g. Humanities and Social Science where possible there should be two examinations in each subject area. Where this is not judged appropriate then the Diploma should make alternative arrangements such that four examination opportunities are identified across the scope of assessment. This should be approved by the External Moderator for the centre.

In cases where the above cannot be applied as there is not a clear division of subject areas within a Diploma Rules of Combination document, the centre will need to ensure that there is a minimum of four opportunities for assessment by examination (with at least two examinations contributing to summative assessments of units).

Units, Credits and Examinations

An examination may form the total assessment of a unit in terms of the generation of evidence for all Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria. However, this is not a requirement. An examination may also legitimately constitute the assessment of one or more of the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria within the scope of an overall unit assessment plan. The scope, range and design of the 'examination' remain at the discretion of the centre although it will be subject to scrutiny by External Moderation. In terms of the overall Diploma Assessment Plan there would be requirement for four assessments based upon examinations to be included (although two of said examinations may be noted to solely formative).

Interpretations of 'Examination'

The AVA offers a broad based and pragmatic interpretation of 'examination' such that it includes a range of written tests and exercises under formal, controlled conditions. This may be in class as a group or also held in a hall with an entire cohort present. Examinations may be 'seen' papers or 'open book'; they may include practical tests / observations or viva voce examinations. For creative studies this may include a range of activities such as the presentation of work, performances and the production of artwork or artefacts within a controlled environment.

The nature of the interpretation of examination shall remain with the centre and should be judged on the norms and requirements of the individual academic disciplines. However, in framing these

judgements centres should remember that these decisions will be scrutinized as a facet of the External Moderation System.

4. Diploma Assessment Framework

To increase standardisation both in terms of the units offered within (and across) LASER validated Access to HE Diploma titles as well as the models of assessment employed therein, LASER has developed a series of standardised 'assessment frameworks' for each validated Access to HE Diploma title. These incorporate requirements and recommendations in terms of the 'models of assessment' employed within a given Diploma title. These requirements and recommendations are all founded upon likely assessment models in terms of individual progression from the said Diploma title and aim to increase 'equity' in assessment between common Diploma titles delivered by different Centres. The requirements and recommendations within individual Diploma Assessment Framework documents operate alongside, and in conjunction with, the LASER Examination Policy as set out within Section 3 (see above). It will be the case that in some Diploma Assessment Frameworks the required frequency of examination may be higher than in others as a result of their increased use as a method of assessment in terms of likely progression routes from the said diploma title. All diploma titles will need to be compliant with the base level requirements of the LASER Examination Policy, but some specified diploma titles may be required to evidence a higher frequency of use than that envisaged within the LASER Examination Policy as a result of the Diploma Assessment Schedule requirements for the given Diploma Assessment Framework. The LASER Examination Policy therefore applies as a generalized 'base level' requirement for all diploma titles which may then be subject to variation as a result of the Diploma Assessment Framework for the specific diploma title.

All LASER validated Access to HE programmes must include a **Diploma Assessment Schedule** as a part of their validation/revalidation process and the schedules will be required to be updated and available for review as part of the yearly 'External Verification/Moderation' cycle. They will form the key 'evidence' that the diploma is compliant with the requirements of the individual Diploma Assessment Framework.

Required Assessment Models:

All LASER validated Access to HE programmes offered by approved Access to HE Providers in relation to the specified title(s) they operate will be required to evidence the use of the **Assessment Models**

noted within the said diploma specification as part of the **Diploma Assessment Schedules** employed within their programmes.

These required models will represent the Assessment Models employed for the assessment of graded provision (although they may be further used in terms of the assessment of ungraded provision). Therefore, there will need to be evidence of graded assessments for units which employ assessment models in line with the identified requirements noted within the individual Diploma specification.

The inclusion of the models noted within the **Diploma Assessment Schedule**⁴ for a given programme is a **requirement** for a diploma to be **compliant**. The requirements include a ‘Suggested Weighted Frequency of Use’ and provision for comments. Requirements are set out in tabular form (see example below).

Assessment Model ⁵	Suggested Weighted Frequency of Use	Comments
<i>See individual Diploma Title Specification for actual assessment requirements</i>	High / Moderate / Low	<i>See below for definition of ‘weighting’ terms</i>

High frequency suggests that the model should be employed to assess significant or substantive graded content across the programme. As each centre will develop their own ‘Unit Assessment Plans’ it is not possible to provide a simple ‘rule’ in terms of use but a high frequency of use suggests, for example, that the model is employed in some form to assess six credits of a fifteen credit subject module (although it may be supplemented by other assessment models in terms of the given individual units). In terms of an overall diploma title it will likely constitute the predominant (or most frequently used) assessment model for that diploma title (or at least one of the major assessment models). Where more than one model is noted as ‘High Frequency’ those models are expected to be substantively used across the scope of the Access Diploma title. However, the actual appropriateness of their use will be determined by contextual considerations at centre level.

⁴ Contained within the overall **Diploma Specification Framework**

⁵ Definitions of the meanings of given **Assessment Models** are contained within Annex One, on page 12.

Moderate Frequency suggests that the assessment model will be used often but not predominantly across a given diploma title. In contextualising this expectation, it could be that each fifteen-credit module (where this applies) might use the model once (or perhaps twice) as a means of assessment in relation to their units. It will be expected that it will appear frequently but will not constitute a core or predominant assessment methodology. At diploma level there will be multiple occurrences of this model, but they will not be as frequent as those noted as high frequency. The actual number of times that they are employed will ultimately be determined by individual/contextual circumstances at centre level.

Low Frequency use suggests that although they are infrequently required to be used they must be employed at some point within the Diploma Assessment Schedule as a means of assessing graded credit. They must be used at least once in terms of assessments for the diploma. Once again in determining the reasonable use of low frequency assessment models, judgments will rely upon individual contextual factors at centre/diploma level.

As there are no individual rules or quotas set, External Moderators will be asked to exercise their judgment in deciding whether diploma titles conform to the requirements of the **Diploma Assessment Framework**. The Required Assessment Models have been developed via consultation with HE and Subject Specialists and reflect the predominant 'norms of assessment' within the given diploma area. Therefore, External Moderators should reflect upon whether assessments across a given diploma (as evidenced within the Diploma Assessment Schedule) reflect the spirit of the requirements. As such these requirements set a framework for what would be considered 'good practice' in preparing students for progression.

Recommended Assessments:

The Diploma Assessment Schedule, as noted above, also includes 'recommended models of assessment'. These are models of assessment which are recommended for inclusion within the overall assessment models for the diploma. There is no requirement that they represent the model of assessment for a given unit and they can be applied to both graded and ungraded units. Their inclusion does not debar the use of alternative models of assessment where it is reasonable to justify their inclusion based on individual content or progression. There is no limit to the number of times any model may be employed although a possible 'weighting' in terms of use is included. These recommendations are presented in tabular form (see example below).

Recommended Assessment Model	Possible Weighting	Comments
<i>See Diploma Title for recommended assessments</i>	Strongly Recommended / Recommended / Suggested	

Recommended models of assessment, as their title implies, are recommended and therefore where there is reasonable argument for **not including** a given model this will **NOT** render a programme non-compliant. However, these models form a guide for External Moderators in evaluating the Diploma Assessment Plan for a given centre.

Consequences for External Verification/Moderation:

All Diploma Titles will be expected as a part of validation/revalidation to supply and keep updated (year-on-year) a **Diploma Assessment Schedule** which must be available for inspection as an aspect of the external scrutiny undertaken by External Moderators. The **Diploma Assessment Schedule** should clearly evidence the **'Required Assessment Models'** noted above. Furthermore, the document should also evidence (as far as is practicable) the **'Recommended Assessment Models'**. However, External Moderators will need to consider Diploma Assessment Schedules and apply local level considerations in terms of judging their 'fitness for purpose'. Increased content of law for example in Humanities diplomas may likely increase the expected frequency of Case Studies, whereas the absence of Law may justify a lack of use.

The **Required Assessments** must be used broadly used in line with the **'Suggested Weightings'** identified. However, the appropriate frequency of actual use will be determined by the External Moderator applying a *'reasonableness test'* at centre/diploma level. If a required assessment model were to be completely omitted this would certainly constitute non-compliance and there would be a need for a **Condition** to be set to remedy this oversight. Moreover, an unjustified lack of use (or over-use) may also result in **Recommendations** or **Conditions** being set by an External Moderator to address concerns and promote a more equitable overall assessment plan in line with the Diploma Assessment Framework.

In terms of **Recommended Assessments** these are not absolute requirements and constitute a series of suggested or possible assessment models allied to a suggestion as to their likely suitable frequency of use. A diploma is not required to evidence these models, but it is suggested that they may be useful based on intelligence from HE. Once again External Moderators will need to employ a

‘reasonableness’ test to frame a judgment as to whether the assessment models employed by the centre are appropriate for progression in light of local centre/diploma level needs.

It should finally be noted that where centres/assessors deem it appropriate any assessment model may be employed so long as it forms a ‘reasonable method of assessment’ for a given unit. The above framework identifies the **required** and **suggested methodologies of assessment for a given diploma title**, which now form a part of the regulatory provision within the overall Diploma Specification. The requirements and recommendations identified have been arrived upon through consultation with HE and Subject Specialists and should be seen as an expression of ‘good practice’ in terms of ensuring assessment remains relevant to progression. The use of other models is entirely appropriate to address local student needs. In the final analysis any assessment model must be judged to be a ‘reasonable’ means of assessing the identified Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria and if this is the case it is appropriate. The LASER Diploma Assessment Framework simply identifies the frequency and likely use of different models of assessment within the scope of the identified Diploma title to reinforce a more standardised assessment experience for Access students and to ensure their readiness for progression to HE (whilst retaining centre/assessor flexibility as far as is possible).

Annex One: Glossary of terms for assessment methods

Assessment method	Operational definition	Notes
1. Case study	An in-depth and detailed examination of a person, group or situation.	Popular method of assessment (and research) in healthcare e.g. study of a patient presenting with different health problems. Also a popular model of assessment in Law which allows students to apply law to a given situation / scenario.
2. Essay	A short written piece on a particular subject or theme which responds to set question requiring the synthesis of discussion or argument.	Addresses a question or given subject/theme; normally in continuous prose with an introduction, main body and conclusion; normally word ranges: 1000 – 2500 words.
3. Extended essay	A longer written piece on a particular subject or theme.	Addresses a question or given subject(s)/theme(s); has an introduction, main body which is likely to have sub-headings, and a conclusion; word allowances > 3000 words related to unit credit value.
4. Examination	A question or set of questions to test a candidate's knowledge, skills or attitudes taken under controlled conditions.	Includes seen and unseen examinations with pre-specified rules e.g. whether candidate can take in notes, calculators or not. It may also include 'take away' exams where students are set written tasks to independently complete within a short timeframe.
5. Experiment	A procedure undertaken in a controlled environment to demonstrate known facts or theories, test a hypothesis, or make a discovery.	Would normally require a written 'write up' of the purpose, method and findings. Experiments are typically used within Science based areas but are also employed in Social Sciences (e.g. Psychology)
6. Laboratory / Practical Class (Observation)	A teaching session which is usually included in curricula in the experimental sciences, biomedical sciences and engineering disciplines. It provides an opportunity to apply and investigate conceptual knowledge, and to develop a wide range of skills, including data collection, analysis and presentation, and problem solving and team working.	Would normally require a 'witness statement' in terms of the practical work assessed and maybe used in association with a 'written report' of some kind to extrapolate upon the issues raised. There is some similarity here to the 'experiment' listed above (at five) although the key difference is that the 'observation' established the student has a competence in terms of a particular skill / task rather than the ability to discuss, analyse or evaluate said task.
7. Portfolio of evidence	A collection of evidence to demonstrate competence and/or knowledge which may comprise of a series of 'shorter tasks' which are assessed against a single assessment / assignment brief.	Can be paper-based or electronic; can include 2D and 3D formats; popular in art and design but may be used elsewhere to group a series of Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria which may not be easily incorporated into a single task within a single assessment / assignment brief.

Assessment method	Operational definition	Notes
8. Presentation	A demonstration of knowledge, skills or attitudes to an audience using either audio and/or visual aids.	May be an individual or group presentation. When using Group Presentations assessors need to ensure that the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria which are being assessed as evidenced individually by all participants. Normally assessment will involve the submission of some form of written evidence to support the award of credit.
9. Project	An individual or collaborative endeavour to address a subject of interest to the student(s)	Covered currently under IAS although this form of assessment may be used elsewhere for units which require empirical or qualitative research to be undertaken. When projects are undertaken in groups, once again, care must be taken to ensure that all participants individually evidence the assessed Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria.
10. Reflective log	An ongoing personal record of the student's learning experiences which includes analysis, evaluation and reflection in and on practice.	Popular in healthcare and other professional areas; may be electronic. This may also be relevant in Creative areas such as Art and Design, Creative Writing and Music and may also form a part of the general assessment of the IAS in terms of the evaluation of planning and review.
11. Report	A written account for a given audience on a specific subject which has: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a clear purpose • specific evidence which has been analysed and applied to a particular problem or issue • recommendations. 	Popular in business
12. Workbook	An assessment which is structured and contains a series of tasks which are mapped to relevant Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria which the student undertakes independently.	This assessment model may be used in virtually any area although it is commonly used in the Sciences. It is useful where a unit is assessed via a 'single student submission' although the actual Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria may not easily be evidenced by a single piece of work (e.g. an essay). The benefit of this model is it allows for separate sub tasks to evidence the individual Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria whilst retaining the ability to capture the grading of the assessment against a single assessment / assignment.

Assessment method	Operational definition	Notes
13. Literature Review	A written response to a particular text.	Primarily used within the study of English Literature / Media. It will require the student to formulate a written critique of the given text which may or may not draw on alternative academic sources depending on the nature of the task. The model may be broadened within Media to include 'Textual Analysis' of film or other media. The model may also be employed in Social Sciences in a more restricted sense to critique a given text.
14. Poster	A form of assessment which requires the student to evidence Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria via the Presentation of a 'poster' which communicates relevant information	This model may be employed where the student is required to be 'discerning' in terms of presenting key information in relation to a particular assessment. This model of assessment is often used to assess part of a unit as it would be difficult to capture all the information for a whole unit within a single poster in the required depth for Level 3. It has been popularly used within Science and Social Science and has also been employed within the overall assessment of IAS units by some Centres (where the student summarizes the broader content of their research project within a more synthesized poster to capture the 'headline information'). It provides an effective means of assessment in relation to not only capturing understanding and knowledge but also the ability to communicate knowledge effectively to a particular target audience.
15. Information Leaflet	A model of assessment which requires the student to develop an information leaflet which evidences relevant Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria.	Commonly (although not exclusively) used within Health Studies and Science. The model allows for the student to provide a more in depth and detailed response to set criteria than a poster but also requires the student to focus on clarity of communication of understanding and knowledge to an identified target audience. This model may be used for example in terms of a 'health promotion leaflet' on a given issue or disease.
16. Developing a Webpage	The student is required to design and develop a 'webpage'.	An assessment model used in Information Technology / Computing and also potentially Business which assesses both technical design skills and also communication skills in the sense that the Webpage should communicate effectively with its target audience.

Assessment method	Operational definition	Notes
17. Production of an artefact	The student is required to make or assemble something to a pre-agreed specification and assessed on completion against the pre-agreed marking scheme allowing credit also for reflection by the student.	Commonly used in Engineering but also may be relevant to Art and Design.
18. Production of a Design Specification	The student is not actually required to make anything but is required to produce a detailed specification which would enable production.	Commonly used in Engineering. Examples of evidence could include CAD drawing, materials list and production schedule against a pre-agreed specification.
19. Data Analysis	The assessment model requires the student to undertake analysis of a data set which may or not be obtained by the student's own research. The analysis will apply academic skills to identify relevant information and trends within the data set.	This model of assessment may be appropriate to a number of disciplines. It requires the student to apply a given set of analytical tools in relation to the area to data and to present their findings in terms of said analysis.

5. Implementation Timetable

From September 2019 centres can move across to the new framework with immediate effect, and all proposed new programmes will be expected to conform to the **LASER Access to HE Diploma Specification and Assessment Framework**.

During 2019-20, LASER will undertake a mapping exercise for all current provision with a rolling programme established to move centres onto the framework-based specification as soon as possible and no later than their scheduled revalidation date⁶. Individual centres will be contacted by LASER to offer support and guidance during this phase of work.

LASER Access Contact Information			
Role	Name	Email	Telephone
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Access Customer Support Officer	Jo Harrison	j.harrison@laser-awards.org.uk	01227 811827

⁶ Revalidation of courses will then take place centrally every 5 years with individual centres completing course approval and confirmation of provider approval in place of the current discrete revalidation exercises.