

A Guide to Assessment and Grading Without Numerical Marking

Here's what you need to know:

1. Numerical marking is no longer permitted in Access to HE

From the start of the 2018/19 academic year, a change to QAA regulations for Access to HE means that numerical marking is no longer permitted on any Access to HE Diploma. Previously, there were some very limited instances where this was possible. This exception was relevant to Grade Descriptors (GD) 1 and 3 in the context of calculations (i.e. fixed response assessments). All exceptions have now been withdrawn.

2. How do I assess and grade work which involves answers to numerical calculations that are either right or wrong?

Where Assessment Criteria (ACs) require learners to demonstrate how to carry out a specified type of calculation it is a good idea to provide an assessment that gives the learner more than one opportunity to do that calculation within their first attempt at the assessment. If the learner does not demonstrate that they can carry out the calculation successfully, then a resubmission opportunity would be given, in line with the usual regulations.

The issue of grading mathematical material is more complex, most particularly where calculations are involved. The two aspects to consider here are the differences between Merit for GD1 and GD3 and Distinction for GD1 and GD3.

3. Using grade descriptors for fixed response assessments

Using Grade Descriptor 1: Understanding of the Subject

Choose one or more of the components (choices must be consistent across merit and distinction).	
Merit	Distinction
The student, student's work or performance: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates a very good grasp of the relevant knowledge base is generally informed by the major conventions and practices of the area of study demonstrates very good understanding of the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study 	The student, student's work or performance: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrates an excellent grasp of the relevant knowledge base is consistently informed by the major conventions and practices of the area of study demonstrates excellent understanding of the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study.

For this Grade Descriptor, the minimum choice is ONE component, that matches across Merit and Distinction. For example, if you select 'a' for Merit, you must select 'a' for Distinction. Look carefully at the three components (a, b and c) and select one or more that is most relevant to the assignment brief.

For assessments involving calculations, it is likely that component 'a' would be selected, as in the following example:

Merit	Distinction
The student's work: a. demonstrates a very good grasp of the relevant knowledge base.	The student's work: a. demonstrates an excellent grasp of the relevant knowledge base.

Rather than using a numerical mark to determine whether the student has demonstrated a very good or excellent grasp of the relevant knowledge, the decision should be based on a more holistic view of the assessment. This could take into consideration how the calculation was made/solved (for example, with the consideration of workings) or could rely upon whether solutions were mostly correct/accurate or all/almost all correct/accurate.

This, of course, must not be applied to ACs individually, but to **the assignment as a whole**. It is essential that this is not based on a numerical calculation written in any way on the assessment. Tutors are advised to carry out standardisation activities to help them become familiar and confident with this new way of grading fixed-response assessments.

Grade Descriptor 3: Application of Skills

Choose: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one or more of the items in a and/or <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one or more of the items in b, with any of the items in c (Choices must be consistent across merit and distinction: where a and b are both used, the skills, techniques or methods applied in b must be those also selected in a .)	
Merit	Distinction
The student, student's work or performance: a. generally selects appropriate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills • techniques • methods and/or b. applies appropriate (selected or given) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills • techniques • methods with c. very good levels of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confidence • consistency • creativity • innovation • precision • accuracy • efficiency 	The student, student's work or performance: a. consistently selects appropriate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills • techniques • methods and/or b. applies appropriate (selected or given) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills • techniques • methods with c. excellent levels of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confidence • consistency • creativity • innovation • precision • accuracy • efficiency

The guidance at the top of the table for this grade descriptor gives the rules for selecting components and items across Merit and Distinction. It is worth bearing in mind when looking at this Grade Descriptor, that simply selecting all components and items is not time-saving. It will ultimately make assessment very difficult as there will be many components and items to grade against. In addition, some of these are very likely to be inappropriate for the assignment set, therefore creating confusion for learners and difficulty for assessors.

Selecting ONLY the most appropriate items from each component will help make the grading process clear and well-defined for all those involved. For calculation based assessments, GD3 could look like this, for example:

Merit	Distinction
The student: a) generally selects appropriate methods with c) very good levels of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • precision • accuracy 	The student: a) consistently selects appropriate methods with c) excellent levels of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • precision • accuracy

As with Grade Descriptor 1, grading here could take into account how the calculation was solved, for example, with the consideration of workings, then consider issues of precision and accuracy – again, by **making a judgement holistically across the whole assignment**, without relying upon the use of numerical marking.

4. How do I get an overall grade for the unit?

The example (right) shows a unit with two assignments.

Arrange ALL the grades awarded to both assignments in ascending order, as shown in the Unit Grade Profile box.

Select the middle (median) grade.

Do not allocate numerical values to the grades to ‘calculate’ an overall grade.

If there is an even number of grade descriptors and the mid-point is between two different grades, the final grade usually reflects the Quality descriptor (GD7).

Unit title		
	Unit coverage	
	Assign. 1 (LOs 1 and 2)	Assign. 2 (LOs 3, 4, 5)
Grade descriptors		
1	Understanding of the subject	P
2	Application of knowledge	M
3	Application of skills	
4	Use of Information	M
5	Communication and presentation	P P
6	Autonomy and/or Independence	
7	Quality	P P
Unit grade profile		PPPPM
Unit grade		Pass

5. What are the common errors in grading?

To ensure that learners get the correct grade, remember the following:

- Award a grade profile to the WHOLE assignment, not every individual AC
- Use the guidance in Section 4 to find the overall grade for a unit. Do not allocate a numerical value to grades achieved and then ‘calculate’ an overall grade
- Award an overall grade to a UNIT and not to component assessments. Individual assignments should have a grade profile reflecting all the GDs covered in them
- Always use the allocated unit GDs when grading; do not add or omit GDs or use any other grading system
- Numerical marking is not permitted under any circumstances.

Contact details

If you wish to discuss any aspect of this policy and/or have a related query please contact the Access quality support team by:

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