

Introduction

Purpose of the guide:

The purpose of this document is to:-

- give guidance which contributes to how each provider's assessment practice can meet the criteria for fair and equitable assessment as set down by QAA and One Awards and
- meet the needs of the diverse range of students studying on Access to HE Diploma courses.

For some time contextualisation of grade descriptor components has been the focus of much discussion and debate amongst students, assessors, internal and external moderators. Access to HE students often have little academic experience and hence no context in which to place the requirements of grade descriptor components. This experience can be gained over time, allowing students to form associations and links which will enable them to understand the context. In the short term it is incumbent on assessors to provide this guidance and to assist in this aspect of learning, which will prepare students for their future study in HE.

It is also intended to be a document which will promote discussion and lead to improvements in the process of contextualisation. All those involved in assessment in Access to HE Diploma programmes are invited to contribute to the on-going development of these guidelines.

Benefits:

It is intended to:-

- provide guidance on contextualisation, which will be a guide and point of reference for all those involved in assessing Access to HE diplomas
- enable all those involved to have standard terms of reference
- develop a common understanding of the requirements to encourage good practice
- support a standardised approach to contextualisation, within and between providers.
- encourage contextualisation which not only adheres to QAA and One Awards requirements, but also meets the needs of students
- provide the information and guidance which assessors need to develop their own techniques and skills in contextualisation
- provide the means by which assessors and course teams can put together a comprehensive, valid and reliable set of assessments

Intended audience:

This document offers guidance and support for all assessors, internal and external moderators.

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Guide to the contextualisation of Grade Descriptor Components in Access to HE Diploma assignments		

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Mapping to QAA and other One Awards documents and guidance:

- QAA Grading Scheme Handbook, Sections B and C.
- One Awards Guide to the Assessment and Grading of the QAA Access to HE Diploma.
- One Awards Guide to Contextualising Grade Descriptor Components video on One Awards TV

Definition:

A process by which guidance is given on the fuller meaning or interpretation of the chosen grade descriptor components in relation to the assessment tasks students have been asked to complete.

Why do we do it?

- To give the student a clear and informative statement of how their performance is to be judged against a grade descriptor.
- To give guidance which is meaningful to students in relation to the subject matter of the assignment and the ways in which the tasks are written i.e. the interpretation should be valid.
- To help students to understand the meaning of the academic language used in the grade descriptors

What are the benefits of getting it right?

- Fairer and more equitable grading judgments
- Gives students the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and reach their full potential
- A more useful learning experience for the students to take forward into subsequent assignments and onto Higher Education
- Increases the objectivity of summative feedback, grading judgements and responding to representations.
- Enables the internal moderators to give more reliable and valid feedback

What are the dangers of getting it wrong?

- Unfair and opaque grading judgements
- Danger of confusing and demoralising students
- Danger of giving students too much or the wrong guidance leading to invalid grading judgements
- Failure in giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability and achieve their potential
- More subjective summative feedback, grading judgements and responding to representations
- More challenging for the internal moderators to provide valid feedback

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How do I go about it?

There can be a temptation for the contextualisation to be too generic in nature or quite simply not appropriate. It is essential that the grade descriptor components are fully understood to enable the contextualisation to be correctly applied. Some grade descriptors are more challenging to contextualise than others.

A useful example is Grade descriptor 7 (Quality), one which all assessors and moderators have to deal with. Despite this, it is one which causes significant difficulty and the grading judgements made are not always valid. Subjective terms, which are found in the components of this grade descriptor e.g. very good and excellent, need to be correctly interpreted and contextualised.

The process of contextualisation

It is important that the correct sequence of events is followed to ensure that contextualisation is appropriate.

1. Carefully read the grade descriptor components, as given in the QAA Grading Scheme handbook (Part B).

QAA provide lists of components for each grade descriptor and additional guidance on how they can and cannot be used e.g. QAA guidance is clear in stating that grade descriptor 7 should not capture or reward aspects of the assignment that should more appropriately be graded through the application of another grade descriptor. Frequently the need to reference an assignment with the inclusion of a bibliography or reference list is used. This is however, covered by descriptor 5. Sometimes the quality of the writing is referred to, punctuation, grammar etc., again these are covered by descriptor 5. The other grade descriptor components which may be infringed are those of descriptor 6, Autonomy and/or independence.

2. Ensure that the choice of grade descriptor and components are compatible with both the assessment method used and the subject matter in the assignment and that the number chosen is proportionate.

This should have been considered in the writing of the diploma assessment plan (AP1) and unit assessment plan (AP2) forms and have been the subject of internal moderation. If using descriptor 7a for example, the most appropriate assessment methods are those which inherently have a structure or sequence, ideally one which is widely recognised. An examination paper in which short factual or numerical answers are required or diagrams labelled or annotated would not be best suited. The purpose of the assessment process is to provide fair and equitable judgements on a student's ability. Too many components can make the assessment too challenging and the grading judgements too complex, reducing their reliability e.g. in grade descriptor 2, component "a" gives 6 options and component "c" gives seven. It is also essential that the interpretation of terms is clear and precise. In grade descriptor 2a, ideas, facts, theories, perspectives, models and concepts are listed. Can you confidently define and clearly explain to students what each means and how it would be judged? Be very clear what the difference is between a merit and distinction judgement e.g. what is the difference between a very good and an excellent response to the assignment brief? This clarity of understanding of the grade descriptor components is essential for effective contextualisation.

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3. Discuss the contextualisation with colleagues, both assessors and internal moderators.

Be very clear about the interpretation of the components. Carefully analyse the wording and exactly what is meant. Don't assume a meaning, articulate the meaning verbally or in writing. Ensure the interpretation is open to scrutiny. This is particularly useful in the case of frequently used grade descriptors e.g. grade descriptor 7. Ensure that there is a common understanding within the assessment and internal moderation team of the ways in which the descriptor can be used and how it should be interpreted. It is also essential to consider the students and the terms and language used in the explanations which will be most helpful to them.

4. Write the statements contextualising the components and submit the assignment brief (AP3) for internal moderation.

If prior discussions and agreement have already taken place between assessors and internal moderators there should be common thinking on the contextualisation.

An example

Grade descriptor 7a is a useful one to consider in more detail. The text in the QAA Grading Scheme Handbook is:-

The students work or performance

Merit – a) is structured in a way that is generally logical and fluent

Distinction – a) is structured in a way that is consistently logical and fluent.

What do we mean by “logical and fluent”? One way of expressing this is to say:-

If a structure is to be logical it must follow a set, recognised and clear sequence; a sequence in which any element of the structure is followed by one which is reasonable and appropriate. For it to be fluent it must flow freely, without hesitation or deviation.

In written work this may relate to the sequence and content of sentences and paragraphs in an essay, chapters in a book, verses in poetry, sections and subsections in reports.

In maths and science it may relate to the sequence of steps involved in an investigation or research project. It may be the sequence of chemical formulae in a chemical reaction or a sequence of calculations in solving a maths or engineering problem. In Computing it may be the development and outcome of software or web page design.

In music or drama it could be related to the artistic performance.

How do we distinguish between merit and distinction? What is the difference between “generally” and “consistently”?

- For a merit the structure must usually, mostly or widely be logical and fluent. There may, however, be some inconsistencies or unevenness in the structure or performance.
- For a distinction the structure or performance must be uniformly logical and fluent. It should be without inconsistencies or significant failure to maintain a high level of evenness and consistency.

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How might the selection of 7a be influenced by the assessment method used?

The most appropriate assessment methods are those which inherently have a structure or sequence, ideally one which is widely recognised. For example an essay, report, poetry, academic poster, report of a laboratory investigation, research project, mathematical calculations, chemical equations, development of computer software, the composing of a musical score, a dramatic performance, creating a life drawing.

Those assessment methods which rely on a short, brief factual answer where structure and fluency cannot easily be demonstrated should be avoided. For example an exam paper in which short factual or numerical answers are required or diagrams labelled or annotated.

Summary

- Contextualisation is a process by which guidance is given on the fuller meaning or interpretation of the chosen grade descriptor components in relation to the assessment tasks students have been asked to complete.
- Contextualisation helps students to understand the meaning of academic language and to learn how to use the guidance in subsequent assignments and when they progress to Higher Education
- Contextualisation allows fairer and more equitable grading judgments to be made
- It is essential that the grade descriptor components are fully understood to enable the contextualisation to be correctly applied
- Ensure that the choice of grade descriptor and components are compatible with both the assessment method used and the subject matter in the assignment and that the number chosen is proportionate
- Engage with colleagues, both assessors and internal moderators, to ensure the most effective implementation of contextualisation.
- Most importantly **keep it simple, don't overcomplicate!**