

## **Generic Undergraduate Grade Descriptors**

These generic grade descriptions form the foundation for the assessment of all students in the Undergraduate Regulatory Framework [URF] and apply to all programmes/courses at all levels within the URF. They are necessarily couched in generic language since they have to be applicable to the broad range of academic disciplines and programmes offered in the Framework. Each course or programme team will develop more specific criteria within the broad approaches set by these generic descriptors and modules will, in turn, provide more explicit information within the framework set by generic and programme criteria. It is the responsibility of course teams to establish strategies for developing and communicating specific grade guidance and supporting their staff and students' engagement with, and understanding of, appropriate grade descriptors. The objective is to ensure comparability of approach throughout the URF.

### **Guidance for students and staff**

The grade descriptions are public. They are intended for students as well as staff, and are designed to enable students to understand the broad conceptions of learning within which the Framework's assessment processes operate and to be relevant to the detailed tasks which students are required to undertake. They are intended to begin to answer the fundamental questions 'what must I do/what is expected of me to gain such and such a grade/degree class etc.'. Course or programme-specific grade descriptions will then provide additional information supplemented by material provided by the modules themselves.

There are a number of aspects for staff to consider when customizing these descriptors for particular disciplines, courses, programmes and modules.

1. All the pass descriptors are expressed in positive terms, about what the student has demonstrated to achieve that mark rather than in terms of what has not been done, and this should be reflected in programme specific versions. For example, the description for a D should not be expressed in terms of what such work lacks that may otherwise have earned a C.
2. It is important to 'translate' some of the generic phrases in these descriptions into the programme, course or module context by using appropriate subject language and, if possible, offering some concrete examples. For example, articulating what is meant by 'commanding the curriculum requirements', what might be acceptable evidence, data, material and resources in the discipline and how personal meaning and values articulate appropriately in the discipline.
3. In specific module terms, there will be a need to indicate the level of sophistication of data gathering, methodology, evaluation and communication that is appropriate for the academic level within the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications [FHEQ] and the assessment task.
4. The structure of the grade descriptors purposely emphasizes process as well as outcome in the descriptions. This emphasis on process as well as outcome should be

maintained in the customized course / programme-level descriptors in order to clearly convey the approaches to assessment and learning we are seeking to encourage and reward.

### **The structure of the grade descriptions**

The grade descriptions below are set out according to the grade system used at University of Worcester, and mapped on to the conventional categories or sub-divisions of the honours degree in British higher education. These form a hierarchical system in which categories are, in some respects, linked to each other, each building on and developing from (and towards) attainments recognised in other categories. Although necessarily expressed as a series of discrete steps, in practice transitional attainment will often be evident in students' work. Work could, for example, demonstrate attributes of both the C and B categories at the same time, and the eventual decision as to where to place it will depend on tutor's professional academic judgment and the application of the moderation process in line with the University's assessment policy. The complex nature of work at this academic level cannot be reduced to a clear-cut series of mutually exclusive categories and grade descriptors cannot be interpreted as such. The category descriptions indicate the general characteristics of different types of work which lead to their assignment to particular categories.

### **Learning in Higher Education**

Underpinning the various grade descriptions outlined below are a number of frameworks and theoretical models of learning in Higher Education. Fundamentally the criteria are informed by the FHEQ, which set out descriptions of the broad learning outcomes students need to demonstrate to achieve qualifications at the various academic levels and descriptions of what typical holders of higher education awards are able to do. The NICATS generic level descriptors provide more detailed learning outcomes for each level of undergraduate study.

The theoretical frameworks add to these by helping to identify the progression, in terms of the student conception of learning in higher education, we are seeking to encourage and reward through assessment. Broadly speaking this may be characterized as proceeding from a conception in which, at one extreme, learning is about acquiring and reproducing value-free, factual information and the 'correct' answer through to the other extreme where learning is a process of self-actualization, in which the student is establishing their own position and values in relation to a [super] complex world, taking active responsibility for their judgements and operating purposefully and autonomously. The opposite ends of this polarity represent a fundamental shift in the approach to and conception of learning: from a conception of learning as a relatively passive, receptive process in which the truth is 'out there' and must be acquired and recapitulated without significant adaptation by the student, to a conception in which learning is personal, the student actively seeks to abstract and create meaning, relates it to their own developing values, develops interpretation of the material and sets it in a broader context to challenge received opinion.

In more detail, students' approach to or conceptualisation of learning would be expected:

- at D [third class] grade to be based on receiving material provided by others, memorising this material and the transmission of it; to demonstrate an underlying belief that there is a single outcome to the task set; and evaluation is about the expression of opinion based on the received 'correct' answer. Safe or satisfactory practice would be regarded as being able to follow the rules.

- at C [lower second class] grade to be collecting expert opinion, prioritising the acquiring of material, skills or procedures which are needed, and the ordering of them into relevant categories; evaluation is about choosing between many equally valid, or equally uncertain, alternative expert answers. Satisfactory practice would be expressed as recognizing and following the different but appropriate rules for different settings and being able to explain how the rules apply.
- at B [upper second class] grade to demonstrate an active attempt to abstract meaning and synthesize material in developing an interpretation of the task or evidence. Students take responsibility for their learning; evaluation is about forming, building and substantiating a judgement, even, at higher levels, in complex situations or where the evidence is partial. The conception of satisfactory practice at this grade is about being able to explain the evidence and value base for practice and why rules, protocols or practices are appropriate.
- at A [first class] grade to demonstrate the ability to develop appropriate independent interpretations and/or evaluations of the task or evidence, and appreciate the relationships between knowledge or analysis derived from a particular task and perspectives beyond the areas under immediate consideration. There is recognition that evaluation is about the formulation of personally meaningful judgements on the basis of currently available evidence. Learning has relevance and meaning for the student beyond its own discrete sphere. The conception of effective practice will be evidence-informed but will embrace personal values and may involve challenging established protocols and practices.

### **The Generic Grade descriptors**

Each grade category is prefaced by a general introductory statement, followed by a discussion of the *approaches* to assessment characteristic of work at each grade. Detailed criteria indicating the *outcomes* normally expected of work at that category follow.

#### **Grades D-, D, D+ (Third class honours degree)**

D grade represents the basic level of attainment required of an honours degree graduate. Student work will demonstrate comprehension of the task but will be dependent upon some received opinion and sources. Some, sometimes unsubstantiated, evaluation will be offered in terms of proposing and supporting a simple 'single right answer'.

Process: data and/or evidence collection is characterised by the gathering of some relevant material. Students report or recapitulate material and expert opinion rather than transforming it. There will be a tendency to reduce complex academic debate to simpler 'black or white' options. Practice is safe and abides by set codes and rules.

Outcomes: the response demonstrates basic relevance to the task, but provides a limited range of responses to it. The responses recognise and command selected aspects of the curriculum requirements and seek to provide a factually accurate answer. Sources of data or evidence are referenced in a way which allows the reader to locate them. The work conveys much of the material clearly through appropriate formats.

#### **Grades C-, C, C+ (Lower second class honours degree)**

At C grade, students will be able to demonstrate comprehension of the task and an ability to collate a range of expert opinion. A range of sources relevant to the task will be used and evaluation undertaken within the range of received opinions.

Process: data and evidence are collected from a range of relevant sources. Students report or recapitulate the material in a structured and relevant manner, with some partial evaluation of it. There is recognition of the complexity of academic debate. Practice is underpinned by an awareness of all relevant codes, protocols and guidelines and how they are applied appropriately in the student's situation.

Outcomes: the work demonstrates relevance to the task and provides a range of responses to it. The responses recognise and command most of the curriculum requirements and provide analysis and explanation of them. The descriptions will appear sequential and free-standing rather than reflective and related but will, in themselves, provide a clear and generally coherent account. The sources will be referenced using the appropriate scholarly conventions. Some evaluation will be undertaken, possibly in terms of choosing between the range of expert opinion reported. The work demonstrates ability to communicate the material clearly through the appropriate format.

Grades B-, B, B+ (Upper second class honours degree)

At B grade, students will be able to develop and sustain a personal judgement within the limits of the task set. It will demonstrate comprehension of the task and synthesise, explain and evaluate the evidence available. A wide range of sources relevant to the task will be used, and will be located within a critical interpretation of the task.

Process: data and evidence are collected from a wide range of relevant sources and are ordered in a clear and coherent presentation. The focus of students' response to the task, in which students take an active role, is in the evaluation and interpretation of data to present a meaningful response. Students join the academic debate and transformation of knowledge takes place. Practice is informed by personal values of professionalism, ethical practice, inclusivity and ongoing personal development.

Outcomes: the work is relevant to the task, and provides a range of responses to it which recognise and command the curriculum requirements. The work demonstrates evidence of ability to synthesise evidence and to assess conflicting interpretations of it to reach an independent coherent resolution. The work is communicated clearly and effectively, using a logical, progressive structure.

Grades A-, A, A+ (First class honours degree)

The distinctiveness of A grade work is in students' ability to develop and sustain a personal judgement, which extends beyond the limits of the task set or concepts taught, and thus includes creative and original elements. This involves independent interpretation of the task, setting it in a broader value-based or theoretical context, and setting their judgements within a recognition of the limits of our knowledge. This is based in comprehension of the task, the use of the full range of relevant sources, and in ability to analyse, explain, evaluate and challenge the evidence available.

Process: data and evidence are collected from the full range of relevant sources and are ordered clearly, coherently and systematically. The focus of students' response to the task, in which students take an active role, is in the assessment and interpretation of data, but this is informed by independent personally meaningful judgement indicating autonomous learning.

Practice is shaped by a clear commitment to personal values of professionalism, ethical practice, inclusivity and ongoing personal development.

Outcomes: the work is relevant to the task, and provides a range of responses to it which recognise and command the curriculum requirements. The work demonstrates evidence of ability to synthesise evidence and to evaluate conflicting interpretations of it to reach a novel, independent, personal resolution. Students successfully demonstrate relationships between knowledge or analysis derived from different contexts. The work demonstrates ability to communicate the material clearly, articulately and persuasively.

#### Failing work

Work which fails to attain a pass standard can fall into a variety of different categories. Such work normally demonstrates partial awareness and comprehension of the task, is largely descriptive, offers unsubstantiated opinion as evaluation, has some crucial factual inaccuracy and is dependent upon a restricted range of sources.

#### Fail: grade E (narrow fail)

Process: data and evidence collection is characterised by the gathering of only a restricted amount of relevant material. Students attempt to report or recapitulate material rather than transforming it and are not always successful in this. Any evaluation is unsubstantiated.

Outcomes: the response demonstrates only partial relevance to the task, and provides a limited range of responses to it. The responses are predominately descriptive, and do not consistently succeed in recognising or commanding the curriculum requirements. Only elements of the work are clearly communicated and may not be through an appropriate format.

#### Fail: grade F (clear fail)

Process: data and evidence collection is characterised by the gathering of little relevant material. Students attempt to report or recapitulate material rather than transforming it but are rarely successful in this.

Outcomes: the response demonstrates restricted relevance to the task, and provides few responses to it. The responses are descriptive, and rarely succeed in recognising or commanding the curriculum requirements. The work is not clearly communicated through an appropriate format.

#### Fail: grade G

Process: there is little evidence of engagement with the task or of an attempt at data collection or presentation relevant to it.

Outcomes: the response is largely irrelevant and fails to recognise or command the curriculum requirements. The work is not communicated through an appropriate format.

#### Fail: grade H

Process: there is no evidence of an attempt to tackle the task(s) set.

Outcomes: there is nothing of relevance in the work presented or submitted.

## Further Reading:

- Barnett, Ronald (1999) *Realizing the University in an Age of Supercomplexity* (Maidenhead, SRHE / Open UP)
- Baxter Magolda, M (1992) *Knowing and Reasoning in College* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass)
- Biggs, John & Tang, C (2007) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (Maidenhead, SRHE / Open UP)
- Perry, William G., Jr. (1970), *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston).
- Quality Assurance Agency, (2008) *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, accessed 11/5/2011 at:  
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08/default.asp>

Further guidance on assessment and the use of grade descriptors can be found on the ADPU web pages at: <http://www.worc.ac.uk/adpu/staffguides.htm>

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## Revision History

Committee	Date	Change
LTSEC and ASQEC	June 2011	Document was updated as part of the normal three-year review cycle: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Revised to stress the need to customise these at programme/course level and for course teams to develop a strategy for developing and communicating course/programme, module or assignment specific grade descriptors.</li><li>Revised language to bring phrases like 'academic judgement' in line with the regulatory framework and to include reference to moderation and assessment policy.</li><li>Added point 4 to guidance on customising at programme/course level - to require use of process as well as outcome elements.</li><li>Updated further reading.</li></ol>
ASQEC	June 2007	Version 1 approved