



GCSE equivalence and the Access to HE Diploma

July 2006

A Introduction

1 GCSE qualifications are included among the entry requirements for certain higher education (HE) programmes. In some instances, the requirement is waived for Access to HE students, as the Access to HE qualification itself may be regarded as providing sufficient evidence of the required level of achievement. This is not the case in all instances, however, particularly where the HE programme concerned leads to the award of a professional qualification, and a higher education institution (HEI) may require students to provide other evidence of achievement in order to demonstrate that they meet the HEI's standard entry criteria.

2 In response to this situation, authorised validating agencies (AVAs) have worked with local HEIs to develop 'GCSE-equivalent' units or free-standing qualifications to meet their needs. This guidance explains how these units or qualifications can be accommodated in programmes leading to the Access to HE Diploma.

Advice to students

3 Access to HE students who are offered a GCSE-equivalent qualification as part of their programme of study should be made aware that such qualifications have no formal status or recognised equivalence outside the context of HE admissions.

4 In addition, students should be made aware that the acceptance of such qualifications for admission to HE is dependent on the admissions policies of individual HEIs. While HEIs generally accept GCSE-equivalent units/qualifications where they have been involved in the approval of the course, and may also accept those approved elsewhere, there can be no guarantee that these qualifications will be accepted unless an HEI explicitly makes such a guarantee. Where GCSE qualifications are stipulated as entry requirements, students should be advised to confirm that the GCSE-equivalent qualification is accepted by the HEI(s) to which they are applying, before they make their application.

Specific requirements relating to ITT

5 It is a statutory requirement that all entrants to initial teacher training (ITT) have achieved a standard equivalent to GCSE at grade C in English, mathematics and, for those born after September 1979, a science subject. ITT providers in HE must ensure that these minimum requirements are met by all entrants to courses of ITT.¹ The requirement does not specify, however, what ITT providers should accept as providing 'a standard equivalent to' GCSE grade C: this is decided by individual ITT providers as an aspect of their admissions policies and specific entry requirements.

6 Although HEIs may make their own decisions about what constitutes 'a standard equivalent to' GCSE, the Training and Development Agency for Schools does state that Access to HE courses can provide evidence of achievement at a level which is equivalent to GCSE in the required subjects.² This guidance is based on a formal agreement³ made in 1991, which first allowed the possibility of GCSE equivalence being provided through Access to HE courses. The agreement provided a common mechanism that could be operated at local level by AVAs working with local ITT providers, which would enable Access to HE students to meet the statutory requirements, without having to study for one or more GCSEs as well as their Access to HE studies.

7 The agreement specified that AVAs should involve ITT providers in the approval of such GCSE-equivalent courses. It remains the case that, in order to claim GCSE equivalence on Access to HE courses (whether through integrated units or free-standing qualifications), AVAs must ensure that ITT providers are involved in the approval process and that those providers formally confirm that the course meets their requirements for GCSE equivalence. Processes for programme amendment and revalidation should also take account of this requirement.

8 As is the case more generally (see paragraph 4), no individual ITT provider is obliged to accept the GCSE-equivalent elements of an Access to HE course (or free-standing AVA GCSE-equivalent qualifications) as an alternative to GCSEs. Some may accept only standard GCSEs or seek other evidence of equivalent achievement. In addition, some ITT providers may require more than the minimum. This may be stated in terms of achievement of a higher grade in one or more of the required GCSEs. Some may also ask applicants to take a special test (including those who already have GCSEs at grade C), to demonstrate achievement at a level equivalent to their requirements.

B AVA licensing requirements

9 Each AVA is required, by the terms of its licence, to ensure that 'where an Access to HE programme is intended to lead to further study for a professional qualification, students are made aware of, and given the opportunity to meet, the entry requirements of the professional body concerned'.⁴ AVAs must therefore ensure that any Access to HE programme which is intended to lead to ITT provides students with the opportunity to meet the statutory requirements of GCSE equivalence in English, mathematics and science.

10 The AVA licensing criteria also require that AVAs, through the validation process, 'ensure that a programme is fit for purpose as a preparation for study in HE in general, and with reference to the programme's main intended progression route(s) in particular, through its consideration and confirmation of

- ... successful completion criteria, where these are additional to the requirements of the common Access to HE qualification specification'.⁵

C GCSE equivalence and the Diploma credit specification

11 Within the context of the specification for the Access to HE Diploma, AVAs will need to consider, with Access to HE providers, how any credits achieved for GCSE-equivalent components of a course relate to the achievement of the overall credit total for the Access to HE Diploma.

12 Given the total credit value of one GCSE-equivalent on an Access to HE course of, typically, about 12 credits at level 2, it is unlikely that three GCSE-equivalents can be wholly accommodated within the Access to HE Diploma specification (60 credits, with at least 45 of these at level 3). It is therefore necessary to consider ways in which the GCSE equivalence elements can be offered within the approved programme, even though it may not be possible to provide them as a part of the Access to HE *qualification*. Just as, in the past, some students achieved GCSEs or GCSE-equivalent qualifications in addition to the Access to HE certificate, so the award of credits for one or more GCSE-equivalent qualifications may need to sit outside the award of the Access to HE Diploma.

13 For Access to HE programmes which are validated as providing progression to ITT, therefore, it may be necessary to include successful completion criteria which are additional to the specification for the Access to HE Diploma, as defined by the rules of combination for the award. For these programmes, an AVA will be expected to satisfy itself at the point of validation that the programme enables students to work towards the achievement of the necessary GCSE equivalences*, as well as working towards the defined achievement for a named Access to HE Diploma.

14 AVAs will be able to validate Access to HE programmes which meet these requirements in different ways, as appropriate to the provider's overall programme organisation and curriculum offer. **In no circumstances, however, will the requirement to provide GCSE equivalence lead to an exception to the standard credit target for the award of an Access to HE Diploma.**

15 In order for an award to carry the title 'Access to Higher Education Diploma (ITT)' or 'Access to Higher Education Diploma (ITT)' (or any other title that implies progression to ITT), the achievement of all three GCSE-equivalents must be included within the 60-credit diploma specification. If the programme is not so arranged, an alternative title should be used.

D Ways of accommodating the achievement of GCSE equivalence on Access to HE courses

16 There are a number of ways in which GCSE equivalence requirements can be accommodated on Access to HE programmes. The acceptability of any model is determined by whether it meets the requirements given in Sections A-C of this document. The options outlined below are presented as illustrative examples of ways in which these requirements may be met.

17 The pattern of study for any individual student on an Access to HE programme which provides progression to ITT is determined not only by the organisation of the programme and options made available, but also by the student's prior achievement of the statutory requirements. On enrolment, students will:

- i. have achieved all the necessary GCSEs or GCSE-equivalent qualifications at the time they enrol on the Access to HE programme
or
- ii. have achieved one or two of the necessary GCSEs or GCSE-equivalent qualifications at the time they enrol on the Access to HE programme but need to achieve one or two more
or
- iii. have achieved none of the necessary GCSEs or GCSE-equivalents.

The extent to which a proposed model can respond to these differences in prior achievement will also need to be considered and clarified, as part of the process of programme development.

* It will be permissible for the achievement of credits contributing towards the GCSE equivalences also to contribute to the achievement of the Access to HE Diploma, with the condition that there should be no double-counting: credits could not contribute to both the Access to HE Diploma and one or more GCSE equivalences.

18 In all instances, it is important to remember that credits are awarded against units of assessment and that evidence may be drawn from anywhere in the programme, or previously achieved qualifications, using the AVA's rules for accreditation of prior learning/credit exemption. Therefore evidence may be counted for more than one purpose if appropriate, but credits will only be awarded once against any given unit.

19 The following models are differentiated by the way in which they provide for the GCSE-equivalent requirements in relation to the programme of study which leads to the award of the Access to HE Diploma.

Model 1

Requirements for prior achievement

GCSE Grade C or equivalent (on entry)	GCSE Grade C or equivalent (on entry)	GCSE Grade C or equivalent (on entry)
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Access to HE Diploma requirements

45 level 3 credits	15 level 2 credits
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Additional achievement required for successful programme completion

None

This model requires applicants to the Access to HE programme to have achieved all the necessary GCSEs (or equivalents), as a condition of entry to the programme. A programme based on this model would therefore be available to students aiming to progress to ITT only if they already held with the required GCSEs (or equivalents).

Model 2

Requirements for prior achievement

None

Access to HE Diploma requirements

45 credits at level 3	12 level 2 credits (→ one GCSE-equivalent in English, mathematics or science)
	Three level 2 credits - other study

Additional achievement required for successful programme completion

GCSE Grade C or equivalent 12 level 2 credits	GCSE Grade C or equivalent 12 level 2 credits
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This model does not require or assume prior achievement of GCSEs or equivalents. Students without the full GCSE equivalence requirements are able to achieve at least one GCSE-equivalent via the taught Access to HE programme and within the Access to HE Diploma. Where a student requires more than one GCSE-equivalent, the rest are achieved in addition to the required achievement for the Access to HE Diploma. The study associated with this additional achievement could be completed consecutively or concurrently with the programme of study associated with achievement of the Access to HE Diploma.

For this model, successful completion of the Access to HE programme is defined as the requirements for the Access to HE Diploma (as stated in the rules of combination for the award) and achievement of the required GCSEs (or equivalent).

Model 3

Requirements for prior achievement

None

Access to HE Diploma requirements

45 credits at level 3	15 credits at level 2
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Additional achievement required for successful programme completion

GCSE Grade C or equivalent in English 12 level 2 credits	GCSE Grade C or equivalent in mathematics 12 level 2 credits	GCSE Grade C or equivalent in science 12 level 2 credits
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This model does not require or assume prior achievement of GCSEs or equivalents. Students following this option who wish to progress to ITT will follow as much of the parallel programme as necessary to supplement any prior GCSE achievement.

For this model, successful completion of the Access to HE programme is defined as the requirements for the Access to HE Diploma (as stated in the rules of combination for the award) and achievement of the required GCSEs (or equivalent).

¹ 'All providers must...

R1.2 Ensure that all entrants have achieved a standard equivalent to a grade C in the GCSE examination in English and mathematics.

R1.3 Ensure that all entrants born on or after 1 September 1979 who enter primary or key stages 2/3 training have achieved a standard equivalent to a grade C in the GCSE examination in a science subject¹.

Qualifying to teach: professional standards for qualified teacher status and requirements for initial teacher training. Training and Development Agency for Schools. 2006.

² ITT access courses usually enable you to attain the appropriate level in English, mathematics and science ...You should check with your nearest access course provider

whether their courses cover ITT entry requirements, and whether these are acceptable to your chosen ITT provider(s)'.
GCSE and equivalent qualifications for entry to initial teacher training courses. Training and Development Agency for Schools. 2005.

³ DES Circular 3/91

⁴ Criterion 3.6. *Principles and criteria for the licensing of Authorised Validating Agencies*. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. October 2005.

⁵ Criterion 3.5 *Principles and criteria for the licensing of Authorised Validating Agencies*. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. October 2005.