

## Introduction

Sheffield Hallam University uses a University Grade Descriptor (UGD): generic grade and level descriptors for application to undergraduate and postgraduate assessment, including foundation degree (FdA / FdSC /FdEng) and other provision eg Foundation Year. The UGD also shows the relationship between classification and percentage, as applicable to assessment at task and / or module level. The purpose of defining these descriptors is to determine the University standard against which Departments can develop their own courses, modules and marking schemes.

The generic grade descriptors define, for each level, the standards of performance expected across classification categories. These are aligned with the generic level descriptors within the UGD document. The descriptors define common characteristics expected of work at each of the different marking bands, at each level of study. The descriptors also include **(bold text)** elements of the [Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes](https://www.johnbiggs.com.au/academic/solo-taxonomy/) (SOLO) taxonomy. These define different levels of understanding across the grades in terms of the structural complexity of students’ responses. Departments and Course Teams may choose to contextualise the general grade descriptors to suit specific discipline areas; however, it is important to retain the Solo Taxonomy features of the descriptors.

## What are the generic level descriptors?

The generic level descriptors (or level outcomes) provide a guide to the relative demand, complexity, depth of study and degree of learner autonomy expected of a learner at different stages of study irrespective of the subject and context. The University generic level descriptor is consistent with the Ofqual(Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation) National Qualifications Framework Levels 4, 5, 6 and 7. Descriptions reference the [QAA Quality Code for Higher Education](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code) (2018).

In designing / re-designing courses, course teams should ensure that course and module learning outcomes at each level are appropriate to the generic **level descriptor** within the UGD document. This should be used to design course and module outcomes and write pass descriptors.

# The [revised UGD3 descriptor tables](https://www.shu.ac.uk/myhallam/university-life/university-rules-and-regulations/marking-and-grades/university-grade-descriptors) are now found on webpages in MyHallam, so an appropriate page link can be shared with students on your Blackboard site.

* [Generic Level Descriptors (Level Outcomes)](https://www.shu.ac.uk/myhallam/university-life/university-rules-and-regulations/marking-and-grades/university-grade-descriptors/learning-outcomes) - for reference in course / module design and development of pass descriptors
* [Foundation Years](https://www.shu.ac.uk/myhallam/university-life/university-rules-and-regulations/marking-and-grades/university-grade-descriptors/foundations-years)
* [Level 4 – Generic Grade Descriptors](https://www.shu.ac.uk/myhallam/university-life/university-rules-and-regulations/marking-and-grades/university-grade-descriptors/level-4---generic-grade-descriptor)
* [Level 4 – Foundation Degree](https://www.shu.ac.uk/myhallam/university-life/university-rules-and-regulations/marking-and-grades/university-grade-descriptors/level-4---foundation-degree)
* [Level 5 – Generic Grade Descriptors](https://www.shu.ac.uk/myhallam/university-life/university-rules-and-regulations/marking-and-grades/university-grade-descriptors/level-5---generic-grade-descriptor)
* [Level 5 – Foundation Degree](https://www.shu.ac.uk/myhallam/university-life/university-rules-and-regulations/marking-and-grades/university-grade-descriptors/level-5---foundation-degree)
* [Level 6 – Generic Grade Descriptors](https://www.shu.ac.uk/myhallam/university-life/university-rules-and-regulations/marking-and-grades/university-grade-descriptors/level-6---generic-grade-descriptors)
* [Level 7 – Generic Grade Descriptors](https://www.shu.ac.uk/myhallam/university-life/university-rules-and-regulations/marking-and-grades/university-grade-descriptors/level-7---generic-grade-descriptor)

## What should I be using with my students?

The 2024-25 approach has been revised based on feedback from staff and students, and in light of new data regarding good honours awards, as well as ongoing organisational changes.

All courses should use this “Revised UGD3” for all provision if possible.

* The 0-16 scale has been removed and stood down.
* Staff and students should use of the descriptive categories (mid-2.1, etc) and the categorial percentage. The equivalent % does not need to be used on rubrics and feedback reports.
* The UGD is normally applied at **overall task** level (more detail below).
* The **grade descriptors** should form part of or be used alongside student facing marking grids (rubrics) and feedback reports for assessment tasks.

## If I have a module with both new and continuing students, what approach should I adopt?

This Revised UGD3 is having a big bang rollout. Please use this version with all students.

## What is the estimated timeline for implementation of GBA?

There are no immediate plans to introduce GBA 0-16 as per previous grade descriptors.

How will this be shared with students?Links to the UGD will be available in the Assessment and Awards section of MyHallam and as such will be available to all students for reference. At the local level, this can be communicated on course organisation Blackboard sites as a general reference for all students, in Assessment sections of Blackboard as a generic reference for students, and as part of individual task rubrics (see example included at the end of these FAQ). Subject areas should agree a consistent approach and apply this.

## Does the UGD apply to exams, phase tests or exam-like course work where a fixed mark (due to correct / incorrect answers) is the result?

Raw-score assessments such as phase tests and exams are exempt from having to give a categorical percentage. You may give the true raw score – even if that is not a specified categorical grade. EG: a student achieves 10/10 on a series of calculation based questions in a phase test. You can now award them 100%.

Does the university grade descriptor apply to Foundation degree awards?

Yes. We have developed a version of the UGD to apply to FdA / FdSc / FdEng, as well as other awards that do not fit the standard undergraduate or postgraduate classification bands (University Cert of HE; BTEC HNC; University Cert in Education (Cert Ed); University Dip of HE; BTEC HND; Advanced Dip of HE; Ordinary Degree; Graduate Cert; Graduate Dip).

## Does the UGD apply to Foundation Year (Level 0)?

These courses operate as 'access courses' and fundamentally are pass/fail for no academic credit, even if students are given grades. However, we have developed an Foundation Year UGD which should be used to acclimatise students to the assessment practices they will experience as they progress through their award.

Does the UGD apply to Level 7?Yes.

## Can the grade descriptors be amended?

Colleagues can amend descriptors to add context if this works better for them, but references to the **SOLO taxonomy** (in bold) should remain. Colleagues should be careful not to develop overlong / confusing rubrics and advice is available from LTA leads (or similar) to support development work if needed.

## Should we amalgamate the UGD with local house style rubrics?

Amalgamation is difficult and can lead to overlong rubrics that are confusing. If this is a concern, using the Revised UGD3 (a **generic** rubric) showing categorical grades alongside one that shows **module / task / subject specific outcomes and assessment criteria** is fine. Using two rubrics shouldn't cause confusion - the UGD can be used to 'fine tune' the marking from the subject specific rubric, and this can be made clear to students (see examples in the appendix). The UGD could be published on a course organisation page and linked to from each module page to avoid repetition.

## Is the aim to remove module specific rubrics (with module learning outcomes and related assessment criteria) and replace with the generic UGD?

No. Module learning outcomes and specific assessment criteria can be incredibly helpful to provide students with subject / context specific assessment information. The UGD can be used alongside these. Module specific rubrics should be designed using the generic level descriptors to ensure consistency.

## What are the differences between franchised collaborative provision and ‘validated-only’ provision?

Categorical marking / grading is not a mandatory requirement for EXVAL partners as it is policy/practice initiative rather than a regulatory requirement. We should however be supporting our franchised partners to adopt it as good practice. So far, its implementation has been inconsistent across partners not least due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

As we are sticking to percentages only in the refined UGD3, all partners should be able to work with this.

## Is the UGD meant to be used at individual assessment level?

The scale is meant to enhance consistency at the task level. It’s applied at **task level** – but doesn’t necessarily need to be published against every individual task. It could be published in the module or course guide for example, or on the course organisation site under Assessment. **The overall module mark may not fall into the UGD categories**, which is fine.

How should the UGD be used for task components, for example sections of an exam, or parts A and B of an assessment task?
The UGD should be applied at **overall task level** i.e. only the final task mark is subject to categorical marking and subject areas should decide how to design their assessments to enable the UGD to be used in this way. If your current practice is to indicate a grade for individual parts of an assessment that comprise the overall task, the UGD can also be used to allocate these grades. These individual grades can then be combined into the final overall task grade that is submitted to an assessment board (as in the example above for numerical disciplines).

It’s possible to get 100% in my assessment task. Should I use the UGD?Yes. This should be marked as exceptional 1st (equivalent to 96% for reasons explained above).

## What about pass/fail tasks / modules?

Use the revised UGD to provide indicative grades to students so that they are acclimatised to how their work will be assessed later on their course, and because it is beneficial for students to know ‘how they have done’.

Some modules have two tasks; module grades might end up not being on these categorical points?
The primary purpose is to encourage consistency and coherence at task level, as well as avoid skewing in classification outcomes – the overall module mark is less important.

What about capped marks?The Revised UGD3 incorporates 40% and 50% as part of the equivalent percentage categories, to allow alignment with capped marks.

What about trailing students?
As UGD3 is more beneficial to students than previous versions, please use this refined version wherever possible.

## Advice regarding applying student peer assessment using UGD? What about assessments that have a group and individual element?

It’s not necessary to use the UGD for peer assessment activities (as in, students using the UGD to assess each other). There are simpler ways to engage students in peer assessment. For assessments that have a group and individual element, bear in mind the overall aim of the UGD is to promote consistency at task level in marking and moderation, and of the revised UGD to address the ‘skewing effect’ of the upper and lower end of the scale. If the final % mark that a student gets for a module (due to a combination of marks) is not a UGD category, this is ok. If you have systems whereby peer assessment contributes a given % to a student mark (or can increase or decrease another student’s individual mark) then it may be simpler to adopt alternative methods – one method is to make the group task pass/fail with peer assessment as a mandatory component but not one that impacts a grade. Another is to indicate that the peer assessment can contribute to the final grade with the tutor retaining overall judgment – e.g. ‘your individual grade may be increased or decreased as a result of the assessment of your peers and evidence of your contribution to the group’. This way, the tutor can choose the most appropriate UGD category and is not restricted to a specific % increase / decrease as a result of peer assessment. More examples of approaches to the marking of group work are available, [here are some examples](https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=ltcpgdprp).

If summative module marks are not on the categorical scale is that ok?
Yes, that’s fine.

## Can I use a weighted total in Blackboard to help students calculate a final provisional module mark?

The use of weighted totals for final provisional marks has always been challenging as rounding works differently in Blackboard to SITS. As long as students are told that all grades they see are provisional and subject to our normal systems and scrutiny then you may use a weighted total.

## Glossary of key terms

**Aim:** Statement of intent for the session / module /course, written from a tutor perspective, e.g. *the module aims to develop knowledge and skills in reverse engineering and* ….

**Learning outcome (or learning objective):** Statement of intent written from the student perspective; breaks down the aim into measurable chunks: *by the end of the session / module / course, the student will be able to…..*

**Assessment criteria (or marking criteria):** These describe what a student needs to evidence in order to achieve the learning outcome at different grade bands (eg pass, merit, distinction; 3rd,2.1,2.2,1st). They should relate to the learning outcomes in terms of content.

**Pass descriptor:** The set of assessment criteria that reflect the **threshold** pass standard / pass mark (UGD 4 or 40% undergraduate; UGD 7 or 50% postgraduate) for each learning outcome. When writing assessment criteria, it's usually best to start with the pass descriptor and then work down and up.

**Grade descriptor:** Similar to assessment criteria, these describe what works ‘looks like’ for different components at different grades (e.g. 2.2, 2.1, 1sT). They are usually generalised, for example comprehension / skills / presentation) rather than related to the content of specific learning outcomes.

**UGD** - university grade descriptor: a version of the above for Hallam, for each level of study.

**Level descriptor:** Defines what student achievement needs to demonstrate at Level 4, L5, L6, L7 - we should use level descriptors to write accurate learning outcomes and pass descriptors.

**Marking grid / assessment grid / rubric:** The module learning outcomes with their associated assessment criteria, specific to the task, indicating how work will be marked. Can also refer to a generic marking grid such as a grade descriptor. Different approaches exist, which is where confusion arises.

**Categorical marking:** Limiting the grades that can be given to (for example) to only use 2s, 5s and 8s in every 10 (e.g. 52, 55 or 58) to promote consistency among markers (such as to avoid awarding 9s), and aid standardisation.

**Grade / mark**: the ‘score’ given to a piece of assessed work. May be numerical or alphabetical, although ‘mark’ usually indicates a number.

**Formative**: assessment and associated feedback that is designed to support / contribute to final assessed task/s, but where a mark is not formally submitted or recorded.

**Summative:** assessment and associated feedback that is formally submitted and recorded and may contribute to the final award classification.

**Task**: an assessed piece of work on a module for which a single (UGD) mark must be submitted.

**Capped mark:** a mark awarded at the threshold pass standard for work that is a second attempt following referral (or in some cases, a penalty for academic misconduct).

**Work of no merit:** submitted work that in the judgement of the academic has no value in relation to the learning outcomes (thus awarded 0).

# Task 1 (Viva and supporting information) - Assessment feedback report - EXAMPLE

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Student name and number:  | Submission deadline:  |
| Assessing tutor name: | Date Submitted: |

| ***Learning Outcomes*** | ***Fail***  | ***Third***  | ***2.2***  | ***2.1***  | ***First***  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Review factors influencing your specialist context**  | No / limited review of factorsNo literature is used to support review | Review of some influencing factorsSome literature is used to support review | Review of key influencing factorsRelevant literature is used to support review | Review of key and current influencing factorsKey relevant literature is used to support review | Key and current relevant influencing factors are identified Influence of these factors critically reviewed, demonstrating a clear understandingWide range of relevant and current literature used effectively to support review  |
| **Design and implement a small scale research activity** | No / inappropriate design and/or implementation of research activity No literature used to justify research design | Design and implementation of research activity Some literature used to justify research design | Appropriate design and implementation of research activity Relevant literature used to justify research design | Appropriate design and effective implementation of research activity Relevant literature used to justify research design | Appropriate and innovative design and highly effective implementation of research activity Wide range of relevant and current literature used effectively to justify research design and implementation |
| **Present evidence to support processes and outcomes of research** | No / insufficient evidence is presentedEvidence is poorly presented | Some evidence is presented Limited review of evidence has taken placeEvidence is presented adequately  | Key evidence is presented Some review of the evidence has taken placeEvidence is presented clearly | Range of relevant evidence presented Evidence has been interpreted and reviewedEvidence is presented clearly and effectively | Wide range of key evidence is presented Evidence has been interpreted and critically reviewed in some depthEvidence is presented clearly, effectively and innovatively  |
| **Identify implications of research for personal and professional development** | No / limited implications of research are identifiedImplications identified are not relevant to personal and professional development | Some relevant implications of the research for personal and professional development are identified | Some relevant implications of the research for personal and professional development are identified and justified | A range of relevant implications of the research for personal and professional development are identified and justified. | A wide range of current and future implications of the research are identified and justified in depth Implications identified are highly relevant to personal and professional development  |
| **Tutor feedback** (please also see comments on any submitted work, if applicable) **(Mid-2.1)**  | **Strengths**: You provided a good review of influencing factors and selected the key relevant literature to support this. Your design was appropriate and justified. You presented your evidence clearly and you and identified and justified useful implications for personal and professional development. **Areas for improvement**: The implementation of your research suffered slightly due to timing, which could have been addressed. Your evidence, while presented clearly, needed a little more critical interpretation as to the meaning of what you found. What other perspectives might there be?**Further development:** Look outside the set reading to expand your knowledge further - follow up on citations in key texts to expand your literature use. Check your evidence base, be careful not to present things as accepted fact if this can be debated / challenged.  |

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# Task 1 (Viva and supporting information) - understanding your mark - EXAMPLE

As well as assessing your work against the module learning outcomes and assessment criteria, your marker has used the guidance below to award your final grade for your work. These descriptors also provide you with more general guidance to improve your mark.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Class** | **Category** | **General Characteristics** |
| 1st | Exceptional 1st | Exceptional breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding of the area of study, **significantly beyond what has been taught in all areas**; evidence of extensive and appropriate selection and critical evaluation/synthesis/analysis and of reading/research beyond the prescribed range, in both breadth and depth, to advance work/direct arguments; excellent communication; performance beyond expectation. The ability to make decisions and carry out tasks/processes with autonomy; excellent leadership skills in group contexts; creative flair; extremely well-developed problem-solving skills; the ability to carry out sustained critical reflection on practical work within the wider context of industry/workplace. Fully meets expectations set by the industry/employment context. |
| 1st | High 1st | Outstanding/excellent knowledge and understanding of the area of study as the student is **typically able to go beyond what has been taught (particularly for a mid/high 1st**); evidence of extensive and appropriate selection and critical evaluation/synthesis/analysis of reading/research **beyond the prescribed range**, to advance work/direct arguments; excellent communication; performance deemed beyond expectation of the level. The ability to make decisions and carry out tasks/processes with autonomy; creative flair and the ability to (re)interpret predefined rules/conventions to select and justify individual working practice; highly developed problem-solving skills; accuracy and fluency; excellent command of skills appropriate to the task; the ability to reflect critically on practical work within the wider context of industry/workplace. Broadly meets expectations set by the industry/employment context. |
| Mid 1st |
| Low 1st |
| 2.1 | High 2.1 | Very good knowledge and understanding of the area of study as the student is **typically able to relate facts/concepts together with some ability to apply to known/taught contexts**; evidence of appropriate selection and evaluation of reading/research, some beyond the prescribed range, may rely on set sources to advance work/direct arguments; demonstrates autonomy in approach to learning; strong communication skills. Broadly autonomous completion of practical tasks/processes; ability to adapt in response to change or unexpected experiences; technical/artistic decision making is highly developed; a clear command of the skills relevant to the task/process; ability to reflect on practical work and set future goals within the wider context of industry/workplace. Adherence to standards set by the industry/employment context. |
| Mid 2.1 |
| Low 2.1 |
| 2.2 | High 2.2 | Good knowledge and understanding of the area of **study balanced towards the descriptive rather than analytical**; evidence of appropriate selection and evaluation of reading/research but generally reliant on set sources to advance work/direct arguments; communication shows clarity, but structure may not always be coherent. A confident approach to practical tasks; a solid grasp of the related processes, tools, technology; creativity in the completion of the task; proficiency is demonstrated by an accurate and coordinated performance; tasks are completed with a good level of independent thought; some autonomy is evident; an ability to reflect on practical work and set future goals. General adherence to standards set by the industry/employment context. |
| Mid 2.2 |
| Low 2.2 |
| 3rd | High 3rd | **Knowledge and understanding sufficient to deal with terminology, basic facts and concepts** but fails to make meaningful synthesis; some ability to select and evaluate reading/research however work may be more generally descriptive; strong reliance on available support set sources to advance work; arguments may be weak or poorly constructed; communication/presentation is generally competent but with some weaknesses. Competence in technical/artistic skills; tasks/processes are completed with a degree of proficiency and confidence; tasks are completed with a basic level of independent thought; effective judgements have been made; basic evaluation and analysis of performance in practical tasks is evident. Errors in workflow or completion of the task; general adherence to appropriate rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context. |
| Mid 3rd |
| Low 3rd |
| FAIL | Borderline Fail | Insufficient knowledge and understanding of the subject and its underlying concepts; **some ability to evaluate given reading/research however work is more generally descriptive; naively follows or may ignore set material in development of work**; given brief may be only tangentially addressed or may ignore key aspects of the brief; communication shows limited clarity, poor presentation, structure may not be coherent. Practical tasks are attempted; skill displayed in some areas; there are a significant number of errors; a lack of proficiency in most areas; guidance may be needed to reproduce aspects of the task and/or apply learned skills. Tasks may be incomplete; failure to adhere to some of the rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context. |
| Mid Fail |
| Low Fail |
| FAIL | Very Low Fail | No evidence of knowledge or understanding of the subject; **no understanding of taught concepts, with facts being reproduced in a disjointed or decontextualised manner**; ignores set material in development of work; fails to address the requirements of the brief; lacks basic communication skills. A general level of incompetency in practical tasks; an evident lack of practice; set tasks are not completed; few or no skills relating to tasks are evident. No adherence to rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context. |
| ZERO | Zero | Work not submitted, work of no merit, penalty in some misconduct cases. |