



# QH Supplement 15A: Grade based marking descriptors

## 1. Introduction

---

- 1.1 This document defines the NTU grading descriptors for application to undergraduate and postgraduate assessment.
- 1.2 The purpose of defining these descriptors is to provide the NTU standard against which Schools can develop their own grading schemes.

## 2. Notes on the general grading descriptors

---

- 2.1 The general grading descriptors define, for each level, the standards of performance expected across the NTU grading scale. These are aligned with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ).
- 2.2 The descriptors define common characteristics expected of work at each of the different grade bands.
- 2.3 In designing or revising courses, course teams and module convenors should ensure that course outcomes at each level are appropriate aligned to the level descriptors of the FHEQ and the award descriptors (see Sections 3 and 4 of the Quality Handbook).
- 2.4 The descriptors also include (**bold** text) elements of the Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy. These define different levels of understanding across the grades in terms of the structural complexity of students' responses.
- 2.5 Schools and academic teams may choose to refine the general grading descriptors to suit specific discipline areas, however, it is important to retain the SOLO Taxonomy features of the descriptors.

### 3. Level 4 – General grading descriptors

Class	Grade	General characteristics
FIRST (Excellent)	Exceptional 1st	Exceptional knowledge and understanding of the subject and its underlying concepts; critical evaluation/synthesis/analysis and of reading/research; evidence of breadth and depth of reading/research to inform development of work; excellent communication; performance in some, if not all, areas 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 in order to select and justify individual working practice; highly developed problem solving skills to complete work with accuracy and fluency. Broadly meets expectations set by the industry/employment context.
	High 1st Mid 1st Low 1st	Excellent knowledge of the subject <b>as the student is typically able to go beyond what has been taught (particularly for a high 1<sup>st</sup>);</b> evidence of breadth of reading/research to inform development of work; demonstrates strong communication skills. Autonomy in the completion of practical tasks/processes; the ability to adapt in response to change or unexpected experiences; excellent technical/artistic decision making; a clear and authoritative grasp of the task/process. Broadly meets expectations set by the industry/employment context.
UPPER SECOND (Very good)	High 2.1 Mid 2.1 Low 2.1	As below but very good work characterised by evidence of wider understanding of the subject as the student <b>is typically able to relate facts/concepts together with some ability to apply to known/taught contexts;</b> identification and selection of material to inform development of work; demonstrates good communication skills. A confident approach to practical tasks; solid grasp of the related processes, tools, technology; creativity in the completion of the task; proficiency is demonstrated in an accurate and highly coordinated performance. Approaches standards set by the industry/employment context.
LOWER SECOND (Good)	High 2.2 Mid 2.2 Low 2.2	A good breadth of knowledge and understanding of the taught content although <b>balanced towards the descriptive rather than analytical;</b> uses set material to inform development of work; addresses all aspects of the given brief; communication shows clarity but structure may lack coherence. Competence in technical/artistic skills; tasks/processes are completed with a degree of proficiency and confidence; effective judgements have been made when completing tasks/processes; process/workflow is broadly accurate and most aspects are completed with autonomy. General adherence to rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context.
THIRD (Sufficient)	High 3 <sup>rd</sup> Mid 3 <sup>rd</sup> Low 3 <sup>rd</sup>	<b>Knowledge and understanding is sufficient to deal with terminology, basic facts and concepts</b> but fails to make meaningful synthesis; relies on set material to inform development of work; generally addresses most of the requirements of the given brief; communication/presentation is generally competent but with some weaknesses. An ability to reproduce learned aspects of practical tasks/processes and apply them in the same or similar scenarios; tasks/processes are attempted but follow a largely procedural and/or mechanistic formula. Errors in workflow or completion of the task; general adherence to appropriate rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context.

Class	Grade	General characteristics
FAIL (Insufficient)	Marginal 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	Highly insufficient or no evidence of knowledge or understanding of the subject; <b>understanding of taught concepts is typically at the word level with facts being reproduced in a disjointed or decontextualised manner</b> ; ignores set material in development of work; fails to address most or all of 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 of no merit OR absent, work not submitted, penalty in some cases of upheld academic misconduct.

## 4. Level 5 – General grading descriptors

Class	Grade	General characteristics
FIRST (Excellent)	Exceptional 1st	Exceptional breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding of the area of study; 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 deemed to be 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. Meets expectations set by the industry/employment context.
	High 1st Mid 1st Low 1st	Outstanding/excellent knowledge and understanding of the area of study <b>as the student is typically able to go beyond what has been taught (particularly for a mid/high 1<sup>st</sup>)</b> ; evidence of extensive and appropriate selection and critical evaluation/synthesis/analysis of reading/research <b>beyond the prescribed range</b> , 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 in order 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.

Class	Grade	General characteristics
		Meets expectations set by the industry/employment context.
UPPER SECOND (Very good)	High 2.1 Mid 2.1 Low 2.1	<p>Very good knowledge and understanding of the area of study as the student <b>is typically able to relate facts/concepts together with some ability to apply to known/taught contexts</b>; 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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Adherence to standards set by the industry/employment context.</p>
LOWER SECOND (Good)	High 2.2 Mid 2.2 Low 2.2	<p>Good knowledge and understanding of the area of study <b>balanced towards the descriptive rather than analytical</b>; 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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>General adherence to standards set by the industry/employment context.</p>
THIRD (Sufficient)	High 3 <sup>rd</sup> Mid 3 <sup>rd</sup> Low 3 <sup>rd</sup>	<p><b>Knowledge and understanding is sufficient to deal with terminology, basic facts and concepts</b> 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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Errors in workflow or completion of the task; general adherence to appropriate rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context.</p>
FAIL (Insufficient)	Marginal Fail	<p>Insufficient knowledge and understanding of the area of study; some ability to select and evaluate reading/research however work is more generally descriptive; fails to address some aspects of the brief; a limited use of sources to advance work; arguments may be weak/poor or weakly/poorly constructed; communication shows limited clarity, poor presentation, structure may not be coherent.</p> <p>The ability to reproduce some learned aspects of practical tasks/processes and apply them in the same or similar scenarios; tasks/processes are attempted but follow a largely procedural and/or mechanistic formula; a lack of proficiency in most areas; guidance may be needed to reproduce aspects of the task and/or apply learned skills; limited evaluation of performance in practical tasks.</p> <p>Errors in workflow or completion of the task; failure to adhere to appropriate rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context.</p>

Class	Grade	General characteristics
	Mid Fail Low Fail	Highly insufficient knowledge or understanding of the area of study; <b>understanding is typically at the word level with facts being reproduced in a disjointed or decontextualised manner</b> ; fails to address the outcomes addressed by the brief; typically ignores important sources in development of work and data/evidence inappropriately used; weak technical and practical competence hampers ability to demonstrate/communicate achievement of outcomes. Practical tasks are attempted and may display skill in some areas; a general level of incompetency; a significant number of errors; very little evidence of evaluation of performance in practical tasks. Incomplete tasks; failure to adhere to rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context.
ZERO	Zero	Work of no merit OR absent, work not submitted, penalty in some cases of upheld academic misconduct.

## 5. Level 6 – General grading descriptors

Class	Grade	General characteristics
FIRST (Excellent)	Exceptional 1st	Exceptional breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding of the area of study; 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 deemed to be beyond expectation. <b>Work may achieve or be close to publishable or commercial standard.</b> The ability to make decisions and systematically carry out tasks/processes with autonomy in unpredictable situations; exercise of initiative in the completion of practical tasks; exceptional leadership skills and evidence of personal responsibility 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. Meets and may exceed expectations set by the industry/employment context.
	High 1st Mid 1st Low 1st	Excellent knowledge and understanding of the area of study <b>as the student is typically able to go beyond what has been taught (particularly for a mid/high 1<sup>st</sup>)</b> ; evidence of extensive and appropriate selection and critical evaluation/synthesis/analysis of reading/research <b>beyond the prescribed range</b> , 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 a high level of autonomy; creative flair and the ability to (re)interpret predefined rules/conventions in order to select and justify individual working practice; excellent 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. Meets expectations set by the industry/employment context.

Class	Grade	General characteristics
UPPER SECOND (Very good)	High 2.1 Mid 2.1 Low 2.1	<p>Very good knowledge and understanding of the area of study as the student <b>is typically able to relate facts/concepts together with some ability to apply to known/taught contexts</b>; evidence of appropriate selection and critical 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.</p> <p>Broadly autonomous completion of practical tasks/processes; ability to adapt in response to change or unexpected experiences; technical/artistic decision making is very 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.</p> <p>Adherence to standards set by the industry/employment context.</p>
LOWER SECOND (Good)	High 2.2 Mid 2.2 Low 2.2	<p>Good knowledge and understanding of the area of study <b>balanced towards the descriptive rather than critical or analytical</b>; evidence of appropriate selection and evaluation of reading/research, some may be beyond the prescribed range, but generally reliant on set sources to advance work/direct arguments; communication shows clarity but structure may not always be coherent.</p> <p>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 well-coordinated performance; tasks are completed with a good level of independent thought and autonomy; an ability to reflect on practical work and set future goals.</p> <p>General adherence to standards set by the industry/employment context.</p>
THIRD (Sufficient)	High 3 <sup>rd</sup> Mid 3 <sup>rd</sup> Low 3 <sup>rd</sup>	<p><b>Knowledge and understanding is sufficient to deal with terminology, basic facts and concepts</b> but fails to make meaningful synthesis; some ability to select and evaluate reading/research however work may be more generally descriptive; general reliance on set sources to advance work; arguments may be weak or poorly constructed; communication/presentation is generally competent but with some weaknesses.</p> <p>Competence in technical/artistic skills; tasks/processes are completed with a degree of proficiency and confidence; tasks are completed with a sufficient level of independent thought; effective judgements have been made; evaluation and analysis of performance in practical tasks is evident.</p> <p>Errors in workflow or completion of the task; general adherence to appropriate rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context.</p>
FAIL (Insufficient)	Marginal Fail	<p>Insufficient knowledge and understanding of the area of study; some ability to select and evaluate reading/research however work is more generally descriptive; fails to address some aspects of the brief; uses set sources to advance work; arguments may be weak/poor or weakly/poorly constructed; communication shows limited clarity, poor presentation, structure may not be coherent.</p> <p>The ability to reproduce some learned aspects of practical tasks/processes and apply them in the same or similar scenarios; tasks/processes are attempted but follow a largely procedural and/or mechanistic formula; a lack of proficiency in most areas; guidance may be needed to reproduce aspects of the task and/or apply learned skills; limited evaluation of performance in practical tasks. Errors in workflow or completion of the task.</p> <p>Failure to adhere to appropriate rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context.</p>

Class	Grade	General characteristics
	Mid Fail Low Fail	Highly insufficient knowledge or understanding of the area of study; <b>understanding is typically at the word level with facts being reproduced in a disjointed or decontextualised manner</b> ; fails to address the outcomes addressed by the brief; typically ignores important sources in development of work and data/evidence inappropriately used; weak technical and practical competence hampers ability to demonstrate/communicate achievement of outcomes. Practical tasks are attempted and may display skill in some areas; a general level of incompetency; a significant number of errors; very little evidence of evaluation of performance in practical tasks. Failure to adhere to rules/conventions set by the industry/employment context.
ZERO	Zero	Work of no merit OR absent, work not submitted, penalty in some cases of upheld academic misconduct.

## 6. Level 7 – General grading descriptors

Class	Grade	General characteristics
DISTINCTION (Excellent)	Exceptional Dist.	Exceptional breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding evidenced by own independent insight and critical awareness of relevant literature and concepts at the forefront of the discipline; evidence of extensive and appropriate independent inquiry operating with advanced concepts, methods and techniques to solve problems in unfamiliar contexts; Cogent arguments and explanations are consistently provided using a range of media demonstrating an ability to communicate effectively in a variety of formats using a sophisticated level of the English language in an eloquent and professional manner to both technical and non-technical audiences; a sustained academic approach to all aspects of the tasks is evidenced; academic work extends boundaries of the disciplines and is beyond expectation of the level and <b>may achieve or be very close to publishable or commercial standard</b> .
	High Dist. Mid Dist. Dist.	Excellent knowledge and understanding <b>evidenced by some clear independent insight and critical awareness of relevant concepts some of which are at the forefront of the discipline</b> ; evidence of appropriate independent inquiry operating with core concepts, methods and techniques to solve complex problems in mostly familiar contexts; Arguments and explanations are provided that is well-supported by the literature and in some cases uses a range of media demonstrating an ability to communicate effectively in a limited number of formats using own style that is suited to both technical and non-technical audiences; a sustained academic approach to most aspects of the tasks is evidenced; <b>one or more aspects of the academic work is beyond the prescribed range</b> and evidences a competent understanding of all of the relevant taught content.
COMMENDATION (Very good)	High Comm. Mid Comm. Comm.	Very good knowledge and understanding is evidenced as the student <b>is typically able to independently relate taught facts/concepts together some of which are at the forefront of the discipline</b> ; evidence of some competent independent inquiry operating with core concepts, methods and techniques to solve familiar problems; Arguments and explanations are provided that are typically supported by the literature and in some cases may challenge some received wisdoms; competently uses all taught media and communication methods to communicate effectively in a familiar settings; an academically rigorous approach applied to some aspects of the tasks is evidenced; some beyond the prescribed range, may rely on set sources to advance work/direct arguments; demonstrates autonomy in approach to learning.

Class	Grade	General characteristics
PASS (Good)	High Pass Mid Pass Pass	Good knowledge and understanding of the area of study <b>balanced towards the descriptive rather than critical or analytical and mostly confined to concepts that are not at the forefront of the discipline</b> ; evidence of some independent reading and research to advance work and inform arguments and approaches; Arguments and explanations are limited in range and depth although some are adequately supported by the literature albeit descriptively rather than critically; competently uses at least one taught media and communication method to communicate appropriately in familiar settings; although the approach applied to some aspects of the tasks may lack academic rigour, there are some clear areas of competence within the prescribed range. Relies on set sources to advance work/direct arguments and communicated in a way which shows clarity but structure may not always be coherent.
FAIL (Insufficient)	Marginal Fail	<b>Knowledge and understanding is marginally insufficient as the student is typically only able to deal with terminology, basic facts and concepts</b> ; Adequate knowledge of concepts within the prescribed range but fails to add meaningful detail or make sufficient links between concepts and facts to adequately solve problems posed by the assessment; some ability to independently select and evaluate reading/research however there is a strong reliance on set sources and to provide descriptive and unsubstantiated arguments/methods; communication/presentation is competent in places and at a threshold level as it fails to demonstrate clarity and focus; inability to adequately define problems and make reasoned judgements; The general approach to tasks lacks rigor and where there is competence and rigor, it is not sustained.
	Mid Fail	<b>Knowledge and understanding is insufficient as the student only evidences an understanding of small subset of the taught concepts and techniques</b> ; fails to make sufficient links between known concepts and facts to adequately solve relevant aspects of the brief/problem; little ability to independently select and evaluate reading/research with almost total reliance on set sources and unsubstantiated arguments/methods; communication/presentation may be competent in places but fails to demonstrate structure, clarity and/or focus; inability to adequately define problems and make reasoned judgements; The general approach to tasks lacks rigor and competence.
	Low Fail	<b>Knowledge and understanding is highly insufficient as the student is unable to evidence any meaningful understanding of two or more taught concepts or methods</b> ; very limited evidence of reading and research to advance work; inadequate technical and practical skills as the student is unable to use and apply such skills to address problems or make judgements; limited or lack of understanding of the boundaries of the discipline and does not question received wisdom; approach to learning lacks autonomy and approach to tasks is not sustained; inability to communicate coherently.
ZERO	Zero	Work of no merit OR absent, work not submitted, penalty in some cases of upheld academic misconduct.



Nottingham Trent University Quality Handbook  
Supplement 15A: Grade based making descriptors

<b>Policy owner</b>
CADQ

<b>Change history</b>			
<i>Version:</i>	<i>Approval date:</i>	<i>Implementation date:</i>	<i>Nature of significant revisions:</i>
Sept 2016	30.09.16	01.10.16	Includes revised general grading descriptors for levels 4-6 as approved at the April 2016 ASQC meeting
Sept 2017	30.09.17	01.10.17	None
Sept 2018	12.09.18	01.10.18	None
Sept 2019	11.09.19	01.10.19	None
Sept 2020	16.09.20	01.10.20	None
Sept 2021	07.09.21	01.10.21	None
Sept 2022	22.09.22	01.10.22	None
Sept 2023	14.09.23	01.10.23	None
Sept 2024	19.09.24	01.10.24	None

<b>Equality Impact Analysis</b>		
<i>Version:</i>	<i>EIA date:</i>	<i>Completed by:</i>