Graded outcomes in assessment

The grading of results in vocational education and training is a controversial topic. Training Packages do not specify whether or not units should be graded. However, many units delivered in TAFE NSW have been set up so that student results show a graded outcome (Competent, Competent with Credit, Competent with Distinction).

An argument in favour of graded outcomes is that they can provide additional information to students, employers and educational institutions about the level of performance demonstrated by a student. However, many VET professionals argue that grading is inconsistent with a competency-based training system, and that issuing graded results undermines the value of what it means to be competent.

The traditional method of assigning marks as a percentage does not sit comfortably within a competency-based system. Where a unit requires graded results, the challenge for Institute teachers is to develop and implement a suitable approach to the assessment process.

Which units require graded results?

Whether a unit will be graded or not is decided during the implementation of a new/revised training package and is recorded in ebs at the unit product level by the TAFE NSW Quality Services Unit (QSU). Once a decision has been made to grade a particular unit in TAFE NSW, this applies in all circumstances of delivery across all Institutes. You can view the grade code assigned to a unit in ebs.

In ebs Agent, from the Homepage, enter the product code into Product Search. Click on Search and follow the link:

In ebs Client, use Product Search to bring up the unit. Click on the product code at the top of the navigation window and check the “Grade code” assigned to the unit. Individual Institutes or Head Teachers are not permitted to change the grade code status of a unit.
Principles for assigning graded results

Assessment tools developed for units with graded outcomes should follow these principles:

- A graded outcome is only to be considered and awarded once a candidate has demonstrated competence. In other words, the student must have met all of the requirements of the unit of competency before a higher grade can be awarded. The Users’ Guide to the RTO Standards 2015 (website) is specific about this: “If your RTO applies any form of grading to learners, ensure that this is applied only after the learner has been assessed as fully competent and is in addition to a determination of competent or otherwise”

- Decisions about which grade is awarded to a student should be based on clear criteria specifying the requirements for each grade. These grading criteria should be provided to all the students at the start of the delivery of the unit.

- Assessments producing graded outcomes should be consistent with the principles of assessment, that is, they must be valid, reliable, fair and flexible.

- Validation processes must be undertaken to ensure the validity and reliability of graded outcomes and to facilitate the continuous improvement of assessment tools.

Strategies for assigning graded outcomes

- Consider developing a rubric, or scoring tool, for the unit. This is a description of the level of performance for different grades for a competency. This can be mapped to the unit requirements. A rubric is sometimes formatted into a table or matrix. A rubric shows the level of performance, rather than just a tick indicating that the criterion has been achieved. See below for an example of a rubric from a TAFE NSW Unit Guide.

- Assessment tools need to be developed that will ensure sufficient evidence is collected to enable judgement against the criteria for the graded outcome. A marking guide will provide advice to the assessor about the application of the grades.

- Application of the grading criteria should work regardless of the delivery mode or the nature of the evidence provided by different students. The assessor needs to consider the evidence against the grading criteria and make a judgement about whether the criteria for the higher grades have been met.

- Extra caution needs to be taken with assessment of clustered units. Within a cluster of units, there could be a combination of graded and ungraded units. Remember that the assessment outcome for each individual unit must be recorded for each student. Prepare a table that outlines how the requirements of each unit are covered by the assessment tool and identify the additional criteria for the different grades for graded units.

- Examples of assessment tools for graded units are included in the Examples tab in About Assessment.

Extract from TAFE NSW Unit Guide regarding application of grades for ICAB4171B - Develop cascading style sheets from Information Technology Training Package ICA05:
Assessment tools need to be designed to capture evidence of competence as well as levels of performance at credit and distinction.

Graded assessment only applies after competency is achieved on first attempt of the assessment.

The following broad criteria can be used to grade students work:

For a credit grade, criteria may include:

- demonstrate ability to understand and interpret requirements without assistance.
- demonstrate some high level understanding of necessary skills to complete tasks
- demonstrate a high level of research ability
- ability to be a positive and supportive member of a group (where applicable)
- consistently shows a positive approach to mastering a task independently
- demonstrate ability to consistently self assess to achieve outcomes to meet situation criteria
- ability to plan and prioritise workload unsupervised
- demonstrate consistently a high quality with presentation of own work
- consistently reliable and responsible for own outputs at a high level

For a distinction grade, criteria may include:

- demonstrate ability to consistently self assess own and others performance in achieving outcomes
- demonstrate ability to recall appropriate skills using own initiative
- consistently shows ability to be a positive and supportive member of a group (where applicable)
- demonstrate high level of problem solving skills in a range of contexts
- demonstrate excellence in the use of verbal and written communication skills
- demonstrates at exceptional level the ability to transfer learning to tasks without guidance
- demonstrates the ability to build on own research to achieve at exemplary levels
- consistently performs tasks to best practice over and above industry standards
- exceptional high level of presentation skills
- demonstrates team leadership skills (where applicable)
- demonstrates high level of clear and accurate communication

Grading of results remains a controversial topic in assessment practice. If you are keen to explore this topic further, access the following resources:

- Go to NCVER (website) and search for “graded assessment”. You could then look at one of the following papers:
  - Graded assessment in Vocational Education and Training (website)
  - Using rubrics to support graded assessment in a competency-based environment (website)
- Graded assessment in Queensland (pdf – 240KB) – a discussion paper
- WA Graded Assessment Model – Implementation at RMIT (website)