

# Updated Revised Common Descriptors for Associate Degree and Higher Diploma Programmes

(Effective since the 2024/25 academic year)

## **Preamble**

Sub-degree education in Hong Kong embraces the Associate Degree (AD) and Higher Diploma (HD) qualifications.

AD and HD are both worthwhile standalone qualifications, pitching at the same Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF) Level 4, with their own distinctive positioning reflected in the programme objectives, learning outcomes, minimum entry requirements, curriculum design, mode of study, level of industry engagement, and articulation/employment pathways.

AD is a standalone qualification for a broad knowledge base and generic skills, and facilitates a smooth articulation for qualified graduates who aspire to pursue degree programmes.

HD, as one of the key pillars in the flexible Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) pathway with multiple entry and exit points, has a stronger vocational and/or professional orientation and provides graduates with flexible employment and articulation opportunities. On the one hand, it equips graduates with specialised skills and knowledge and a job-ready exit qualification with industry recognition; on the other hand, it enables graduates to pursue studies leading to degree or professional qualifications, usually in more specialised fields.

AD and HD have their respective articulation and employment pathways whilst generally speaking, learners may cross over as they see fit.

This document describes the features of AD and HD, providing guidance to institutions when developing AD and/or HD programmes for both internal and external quality assurance purposes. This document should be read in conjunction with the Generic Level Descriptors under the HKQF<sup>1</sup>, as well as the Manual for the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process of the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ)<sup>2</sup> (applicable to those programmes that need to undergo any relevant accreditation process by the HKCAAVQ).

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://www.hkqf.gov.hk/en/KeyFeatures/levels/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Available at [https://www.hkcaavq.edu.hk/en/forms\\_and\\_guidance\\_notes/accreditation\\_academic\\_vocational\\_professional\\_accreditations/](https://www.hkcaavq.edu.hk/en/forms_and_guidance_notes/accreditation_academic_vocational_professional_accreditations/).

AD Common Descriptors	HD Common Descriptors
<p><b><i>Programme Objectives</i></b></p> <p>AD should equip learners with a broad knowledge base and a solid foundation of generic skills, facilitating a smooth articulation for qualified graduates who aspire to pursue degree programmes.</p> <p>It should also support lifelong learning and the pursuit of active citizenship.</p>	<p><b><i>Programme Objectives</i></b></p> <p>As one of the main pillars in the VPET pathway, HD should support economic and manpower needs of industries, professions and the society at large, and provide graduates with flexible employment and articulation opportunities.</p> <p>HD should convey a clear picture to learners about its vocational and/or professional orientation, for instance by relating to a specific job title/role(s).</p> <p>HD should also serve as a bridge to enable graduates to pursue studies leading to professional or degree qualifications, including those in more specialised fields, as appropriate.</p> <p>HD should also support lifelong learning and the pursuit of active citizenship.</p>
<p><b><i>Learning Outcomes</i></b></p> <p>Holders of AD should be able to demonstrate learning outcomes that meet the standards of HKQF Level 4 in accordance with the Generic Level Descriptors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A broad knowledge base and a solid foundation of generic skills (e.g. civic responsibility, communication skills, critical thinking and analysis, digital skills) upon which further studies can be built.</li> <li>- A stronger self-awareness and understanding of one's aptitudes, abilities, orientations and inclinations.</li> <li>- An appreciation of the major socio-political, cultural and economic issues in the local, national, regional and international contexts.</li> <li>- A strong sense of social responsibility and civic values, a passion in pursuing creativity and innovativeness, and the spirit of lifelong learning.</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Learning Outcomes</i></b></p> <p>Holders of HD should be able to demonstrate learning outcomes that meet the standards of HKQF Level 4 in accordance with the Generic Level Descriptors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An ability to integrate generic and specialised skills to perform skilled tasks, requiring some discretion and judgment, and, where appropriate, undertaking a supervisory role, upon which further studies along the VPET pathway or immediate employment in the relevant fields can be built.</li> <li>- An ability to present and evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems, and to propose appropriate solution.</li> <li>- A stronger self-awareness and understanding of one's aptitudes, abilities, orientations and inclinations.</li> <li>- An appreciation of the major socio-political, cultural and economic issues in the local, national, regional and international contexts.</li> <li>- A strong sense of social responsibility and civic values, a passion in pursuing creativity and innovativeness, and the spirit of lifelong learning.</li> </ul>

<b>AD Common Descriptors</b>	<b>HD Common Descriptors</b>
<p><b><i>Minimum Entrance Requirements</i></b></p> <p>The minimum entrance requirements for AD are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Level 2 in five HKDSE subjects <sup>(1)</sup> including Chinese <sup>(2)</sup> and English. Applicants are allowed to use Applied Learning (ApL) subjects <sup>(3)</sup>.</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Minimum Entrance Requirements</i></b></p> <p>The minimum entrance requirements for HD are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Level 2 in five HKDSE subjects <sup>(1)</sup> including Chinese <sup>(2)</sup> and English. Applicants are allowed to use ApL subjects <sup>(3), (4)</sup>; or</li> <li>- Relevant and substantial work experience and/or prior qualification(s) obtained in or outside Hong Kong (e.g. assessed through recognition of prior learning and credit accumulation and transfer), with demonstrated ability to undertake sub-degree education.</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Other Acceptable Equivalent Qualifications</i></b></p> <p>Applicants who possess other acceptable equivalent qualifications, including non-local qualifications obtained in or outside Hong Kong, are eligible to apply for admission to AD programmes.</p>	<p><b><i>Other Acceptable Equivalent Qualifications</i></b></p> <p>Applicants who possess other acceptable equivalent qualifications, including non-local qualifications obtained in or outside Hong Kong, are eligible to apply for admission to HD programmes.</p>
<p><b><i>Special Admission Quota</i></b></p> <p>Applicants falling short of the minimum entrance requirements or other acceptable equivalent qualifications can be admitted on special considerations but should not account for more than 15% of the total intake on a programme basis, and not more than 10% on an institutional basis.</p>	<p><b><i>Special Admission Quota</i></b></p> <p>Applicants falling short of the minimum entrance requirements or other acceptable equivalent qualifications can be admitted on special considerations but should not account for more than 15% of the total intake on a programme basis, and not more than 10% on an institutional basis.</p>

AD Common Descriptors	HD Common Descriptors
<p><b><i>Curriculum</i></b></p> <p>AD should have a curriculum that consists of at least 60% of generic contents (e.g. civic responsibility, communication skills, critical thinking and analysis, digital skills). In line with the purpose of articulation to degree programmes, AD should equip students with essential academic skills, including research and data literacy, etc.</p> <p>Institutions are encouraged to adopt credit accumulation and transfer arrangement as appropriate to minimise repeated learning, and to effectively support lifelong learning.</p>	<p><b><i>Curriculum</i></b></p> <p>HD should have a curriculum that consists of at least 60% of specialised contents. Institutions should engage industries, professions and trade associations as appropriate in the design, delivery, assessment, and review of the programmes, of which the curriculum should feature an integration of generic and specialised contents and the use of work-based learning, project-based learning or similar pedagogies, with an aim to enable application by learners in real-world situations, thereby meeting the requirements of a specific job title/role, facilitating articulation to relevant degree programmes (if applicable), and supporting economic and manpower needs of industries, professions and society at large.</p> <p>The provision of work-based learning, project-based learning and similar opportunities should consider the benefits of having non-local exposure, for example in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.</p> <p>Institutions are strongly encouraged to adopt Specifications of Competency Standards and Vocational Qualifications Pathways under the HKQF as the basis of curriculum design.</p> <p>Where possible, institutions are strongly encouraged to allow different modes of learning with multiple entry and exit options.</p> <p>Institutions are encouraged to adopt credit accumulation and transfer arrangement as appropriate to minimise repeated learning, and to effectively support lifelong learning.</p>

AD Common Descriptors	HD Common Descriptors
<p><b><i>Quality Assurance</i></b></p> <p>For self-accrediting institutions, AD programmes must undergo their own internal quality assurance mechanism.</p> <p>For non-self-accrediting institutions, their AD programmes should be accredited by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic &amp; Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ).</p> <p>All institutions are required to submit annual returns on quality-related matters (including such details as may be required from time to time) to the Education Bureau and HKCAAVQ.</p> <p>Institutions offering AD programme(s) are required to keep track of their graduates articulating to the targeted or planned degree programme(s). The Education Bureau and HKCAAVQ may request such information for monitoring the quality of the AD programmes. Where necessary, institutions will be required to explain any gaps between the targeted and actual articulation outcomes.</p>	<p><b><i>Quality Assurance</i></b></p> <p>Institutions are required to engage industries, professions, trade associations in the design, delivery, assessment, and review of HD programmes.</p> <p>For self-accrediting institutions, HD programmes must undergo their own internal quality assurance mechanism.</p> <p>For non-self-accrediting institutions, their HD programmes should be accredited by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic &amp; Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ).</p> <p>All institutions are required to submit annual returns on quality-related matters (including such details as may be required from time to time) to the Education Bureau and HKCAAVQ.</p> <p>Institutions offering HD programme(s) are required to keep track of the graduate destinations. The Education Bureau and HKCAAVQ may request such information for monitoring the quality of the HD programmes. Where necessary, institutions will be required to explain any gaps between the targeted and actual articulation/employment outcomes.</p>
<p><b><i>Exit Qualifications</i></b></p> <p>The general expectation is that qualified AD graduates can articulate to senior year places or Year 3 of four-year degree programmes.</p> <p>To better serve the purpose of facilitating a smooth articulation for qualified graduates who aspire to pursue degree programmes, institutions are required to publish more specific information about the articulation pathways to facilitate prospective students in making an informed decision, which may include but not limited to the specific programmes that graduates may articulate to, the number of available places, and entry requirement.</p>	<p><b><i>Exit Qualifications</i></b></p> <p>The general expectation is that qualified HD graduates can articulate to senior year places or Year 3 of four-year degree programmes or pursue studies leading to professional qualifications usually in specialised fields.</p> <p>To better serve the development of VPET pathway, institutions are required to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specify the job titles/roles that the HD programmes lead to<sup>(5)</sup>; and</li> <li>- seek industry/professional recognition for HD programmes where appropriate, and publish such information to facilitate prospective students in making an informed decision.</li> </ul>

## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> If one of the five HKDSE subjects is Citizenship and Social Development subject, the minimum entrance requirement would become “Attained” for Citizenship and Social Development subject and Level 2 in four other HKDSE subjects including Chinese and English. Besides, Level 2 in Mathematics Extended Part (Module 1 or Module 2) is also recognised as one of the five HKDSE subjects in fulfilling the minimum entrance requirement.
- <sup>2</sup> For non-Chinese-speaking learners, institutions offering AD and HD will continue to accept alternative Chinese Language qualifications for students who have met the specified conditions: (a) students who have learned Chinese Language for less than 6 years while receiving primary and secondary education; (b) students who have learned Chinese Language for 6 years or more in schools, but have been taught an adapted and simpler Chinese Language curriculum not normally applicable to the majority of students in local schools. ApL Chinese (for non-Chinese speaking students) should, in general, be accepted as an alternative Chinese Language qualification, among other acceptable alternative Chinese Language qualifications.
- <sup>3</sup> The ApL subjects do not include ApL Chinese (for non-Chinese speaking students) as this subject is introduced to provide an additional channel exclusively for non-Chinese speaking students to obtain an alternative Chinese language qualification. For the 2012-2017 HKDSE Examinations, students attaining the results of “Attained” and “Attained with Distinction” in the ApL subjects are accepted as attaining the competencies required at Level 2 and Level 3 or above of Category A subjects of the HKDSE Examination respectively for the purposes of further studies and work. Effective from the 2018 HKDSE Examination, the reporting of students’ performance is refined to “Attained”, “Attained with Distinction (I)” and “Attained with Distinction (II)”. Performance of “Attained with Distinction (I)” is comparable to Level 3 while “Attained with Distinction (II)” is comparable to Level 4 or above of Category A subjects of the HKDSE Examination.
- <sup>4</sup> Institutions are encouraged to give due recognition to ApL subjects that are relevant to the programme for admission purposes (e.g. by giving bonus points for the result of the ApL subjects).
- <sup>5</sup> Award titles for HD should specify the targeting industries or professions, for example, HD in Accounting, HD in Electrical Engineering, HD in Early Childhood Education, HD for Legal Executives, HD in Nursing (Enrolled Nurse - General), HD in Pharmaceutical Dispensing, and HD in Social Work.