

## EDUCATION BUREAU CIRCULAR MEMORANDUM NO. 44/2023

From : Secretary for Education

To : Supervisors / Heads of all  
Secondary Schools

Ref.: : EDB(FE) CR 2/2041/22

Date : 5 July 2023

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

#### **Summary**

This circular memorandum serves to inform heads of secondary schools of the promulgation of the updated Revised Common Descriptors for Associate Degree (AD) and Higher Diploma (HD) programmes which supersede the previous version promulgated in February 2017. The new version is updated following the completion a review on sub-degree education, which more sharply reflects the respective positioning of AD and HD, thereby enabling our society to have clearer and more realistic expectations of them, and enhances the positioning of HD in the Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) pathway. This circular memorandum should be read in conjunction with the relevant Education Bureau (EDB) Circular Memorandum on Applied Learning Courses<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Background**

2. Sub-degree education in Hong Kong embraces two qualifications, i.e. AD and HD, which are both worthwhile standalone qualifications. Their characteristics are stipulated in the Common Descriptors for Associate Degree and Higher Diploma Programmes (Common Descriptors), i.e. the EDB's guidelines for sub-degree programme operators to develop and operate such programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> This circular memorandum (CM) should be read in conjunction with the CM on Applied Learning Courses for the relevant cohort. For example, AD and HD programmes for the 2024/25 academic year should be read in conjunction with EDBCM No. 118/2021 "Applied Learning Courses (2022-24 Cohort; 2024 HKDSE)". The EDBCMs on Applied Learning Courses are available at the Applied Learning webpage - [www.edb.gov.hk/apl](http://www.edb.gov.hk/apl).

3. In view of the recommendations by the Task Force on Review of Self-financing Post-secondary Education and the Task Force on Promotion of VPET, the EDB appointed the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) as a consultant and launched a review in late 2020 on the differentiation between AD and HD qualifications, and enhancement of the positioning of HD in the VPET pathway, among others. Following rounds of research and consultations<sup>2</sup>, the EDB has concluded the review of and updated the Common Descriptors which will come into effect in the 2024/25 academic year.

4. Key findings of the review are that there should be a sharper differentiation between AD and HD to reflect their respective positioning, thereby enabling our society to have clearer and more realistic expectations of them. The AD qualification is more generic, with the primary purpose of providing appropriate opportunities for articulation to general degrees for AD graduates with suitable capabilities and aspirations. On the other hand, the HD qualification is more specialised and should be strengthened to serve as a main pillar in the VPET pathway to provide graduates with a solid foundation and specialised knowledge and skills for either immediate employment at para-professional level or articulation to specialised degrees. At the same time, HD should be more inclusive to give due recognition to relevant learning and working experience, including Applied Learning (ApL) subjects in secondary schools (for example, operators may give bonus points for the result of the ApL subjects that are relevant to the programme).

5. On the other hand, to encourage institutions to admit students from diverse backgrounds, including those who demonstrate non-academic achievements, and provide them with further articulation opportunities, the EDB will also increase the quota levels for institutions to admit applicants on special considerations to sub-degree and degree programmes that are subject to accreditation by the HKCAAVQ<sup>3</sup>. The adjustments relevant to sub-degree programmes will be reflected in the updated Common Descriptors, and these adjustments will take effect from the 2023/24 academic year to benefit institutions and students as soon as practicable. The EDB together with the

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<sup>2</sup> Details including the key findings of the review are set out in the relevant discussion paper for the Legislative Council Panel on Education - <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr2023/english/panels/ed/papers/ed20230203cb4-71-2-e.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Details are set out in the EDB's press release on 4 July 2023 - <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202307/04/P2023070400464.htm?fontSize=1>.

HKCAAVQ will continue to closely monitor the implementation to ensure that the quality of the programmes complies with the accreditation standards.

### **Major Updates to the Common Descriptors**

6. To have the differentiation between AD and HD and enhancement measures for the two qualifications holistically implemented in different areas (including programme objectives, learning outcomes, minimum entry requirements, curriculum design, mode of study, level of industry engagement, and articulation / employment pathways), the EDB has updated the Common Descriptors. Major updates include:

- (a) the differentiation in the positioning of AD and HD is clearly set out at the preamble;
- (b) the adjustment of quota levels mentioned in paragraph 5 above from 5% of the total intake on a programme basis and 3% on an institutional basis to 15% and 10% respectively;
- (c) for AD programmes –
  - (i) institutions are required to publish more specific information about articulation pathways to assist prospective students in making an informed decision;
  - (ii) institutions are required to keep track of their AD graduates articulating to degree programmes; and
  - (iii) in the course of accreditation and re-accreditation, institutions are required to ascertain their proposed targeted articulation pathways and explain any gaps between the targeted and actual articulation outcomes; and
- (d) for HD programmes –
  - (i) the articulation pathways and positioning characteristics should be reflected by the award titles;
  - (ii) institutions are encouraged to give due recognition to ApL subjects that are relevant to the programme (e.g. by giving bonus points for the result of the ApL subjects) for admission purposes;

- (iii) institutions are encouraged to be more inclusive to allow in-service and experienced applicants to be admitted through Recognition of Prior Learning and credit accumulation and transfer arrangements;
- (iv) institutions are encouraged to use work-based learning, project-based learning, etc. to help familiarise students with real world situations; and
- (v) institutions are encouraged to engage industries, professions and trade associations in the design, delivery and assessment of the programmes.

### **Other Updates to the Common Descriptors**

7. In addition to the adovementioned updates stemming from the Review of Sub-degree Education, the EDB also takes this opportunity to set out under Note (1) of “Minimum Entrance Requirement” that Level 2 in Mathematics Extended Part (Module 1 or Module 2) is also recognised as one of the five Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination subjects in fulfilling the minimum entrance requirement. Currently, the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities have also been gradually recognising such result, which will be recognised in full starting from the 2024 Joint University Programmes Admissions System application for admission purpose for the 2024/25 academic year onwards<sup>4</sup>.

8. The updated Common Descriptors (versions which will come into effect in the 2023/24 academic year and the 2024/25 academic year) are available on the websites of the Concourse for the Self-financing Post-secondary Education (<https://www.cspe.edu.hk/en/Resources-CommonDesc.html>).



### **Enquiries**

9. General enquiries may be directed to the Further Education Division of the EDB at 3509 7412 or (for enquiries related to the Extended Part of

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<sup>4</sup> For details, please refer to the relevant website of the EDB – <https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/kla/ma/u.pdf>.

Mathematics) to the Curriculum Development Institute of the EDB at 2153 7460.

( Kasper NG )  
for Secretary for Education

c.c. Heads of Sections – for information