

**Access to HE data  
trends survey -  
final report**

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# Access to HE data trends survey - final report

## Section 1: Overview

### Context

1 In autumn 2008, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) undertook a data trends survey to explore the reasons for a fall in the number of Access to HE students between 2005-06 and 2007-08. The survey was prompted by QAA's review of annual data submissions and commentaries provided by Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), which indicated that there had been a decline in registrations over a longer period, with the number of registrations in 2007-08 (35,275) being the lowest total recorded since QAA first published this data in 2000-01 (see Table 1). This overall trend was reflected in nearly all of the individual submissions from AVAs throughout England and Wales.

2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
<b>38,685</b>	<b>40,485</b>	<b>40,220</b>	<b>45,875</b>	<b>43,635</b>	<b>41,985</b>	<b>37,820</b>	<b>35,275<sup>1</sup></b>

**Table 1: Number of all student registrations (full-time and part-time)**

2 There was also a marked downward trend in the number of providers delivering Access to HE courses, with a fall in the number of providers every year since 2001-02 (see Table 2). The extent to which this can be accounted for by college mergers, and whether, when mergers have occurred, equivalent provision has been maintained as separate courses or reorganised and consolidated is not known.

2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
<b>417</b>	<b>421</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>410</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>349<sup>2</sup></b>

**Table 2: Number of providers offering Access to HE courses**

3 The national trends for the total number of courses do not follow the same pattern as the data relating to numbers of students or providers (see Table 3). The number of courses has fluctuated and, as courses are commonly merged or redefined as they are developed for periodic revalidation, course figures may not be a reliable indicator of changes in the totality of provision available. Such fluctuation is particularly apparent in the high numbers of new courses recognised in 2006-07 and 2007-08, following a notable decline in the previous two years. This pattern probably reflects the redesign of courses in preparation for the phased introduction of the Access to HE Diploma in 2007-08 and 2008-09.

	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
Courses available	1,281	1,568	1,407	1,506	1,341	1,258	1,557
Courses running	<b>961</b>	<b>1,233</b>	<b>1,125</b>	<b>1,210</b>	<b>1,079</b>	<b>1,057</b>	<b>1,211<sup>3</sup></b>
New courses recognised	259	147	166	88	50	286	243

**Table 3: Number of Access to HE courses**

<sup>1</sup> Of these, 93 per cent were on courses in England; 7 per cent were on courses in Wales.

<sup>2</sup> Of these 93 per cent were providers in England; 7 per cent were providers in Wales.

<sup>3</sup> Of these, 94 per cent were courses running in England; 6 per cent were courses in Wales.

4 The number of Access to HE qualifications awarded has also fallen in recent years (see Table 4). However, while the trend here is broadly comparable with the trend of registrations, with a peak in numbers in the middle of the period, the proportion of all registered students who achieved the Access to HE qualification has increased over the period<sup>4</sup>.

2001-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
<b>16,404</b>	<b>17,085</b>	<b>18,395</b>	<b>19,605</b>	<b>20,690</b>	<b>20,103</b>	<b>19,925</b>	<b>18,838</b>

**Table 4: Number of Access to HE qualifications awarded**

5 As a result of the improved achievement rate, the number of qualifications awarded in 2007-08 was higher than the number awarded in 2001-02. However, the fact that the number of Access to HE qualifications awarded has decreased each year since 2004-05 was considered a matter of some concern, and the continuing overall decline in the number of students was therefore considered an area which merited further investigation.

## **Approach**

6 The national data trends were presented at QAA's Access to HE conference in June 2008. Delegates discussed the trends and were invited to offer explanations for the apparent decline in student numbers. The outcomes of the discussions were analysed, and the possible contributory factors that had been most frequently identified by delegates formed the basis of a questionnaire to all providers.

7 The questionnaire focused on the period 2005-06 to 2007-08 and was in three parts (see Annex 1). Both Part A (relating to the number of courses) and Part B (relating to the number of students) asked whether providers had seen a rise or fall, or whether numbers had remained the same during this period. As the purpose of the survey was to investigate reasons for identified downward trends, this was the primary focus in the questionnaire itself. However, in relation to both course and student numbers, the questionnaire provided opportunities for respondents to indicate factors which they considered had contributed to any rises as well as any falls in numbers. Part C of the questionnaire provided a section for additional comments.

8 The electronic questionnaire was sent to AVAs, who forwarded it to all current Access to HE providers. Respondents returned completed questionnaires direct to QAA, where they were analysed by QAA's Information Unit. The findings from responses to this questionnaire are given in Section 2 of this report.

9 The responses to the survey by each AVA's providers were also collated and sent to the relevant AVA for comment. All AVAs provided a commentary through a

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<sup>4</sup> The figures given in Table 1 include registrations of both students who are intending to complete their course in the year of registration, as well as part-time students who are not aiming to complete in the year of registration. Actual achievement rates cannot, therefore, be accurately calculated from this data. However, more detailed data, published in the Access to HE Joint Agency Reports ([www.accesstohe.ac.uk/partners/statistics/default.asp](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/partners/statistics/default.asp)), indicates that achievement rates have increased by about 10 per cent over the period.

special appendix to their annual report to QAA, and these were then analysed. A summary of AVAs' responses is given in Section 3 of this report.

## Responses

10 223 responses were received, from a total of 209 providers. (A small number of providers made returns for individual courses or by centre.) This represents a response rate of 61 per cent of all Access to HE providers in 2008-09. In general, responses were made by individuals who were course leaders/coordinators. This group is likely to be closely involved with student recruitment. Some may be less closely involved in providers' decisions about developing or reducing provision.

11 The response rate for different AVAs varied between 32 and 98 per cent of providers delivering courses validated by the AVA. As a result, and as some AVAs are significantly bigger than others, responses from providers in some parts of the country (for example, the West Midlands) provide a higher proportion of total responses than providers in some others (for example, the South West). (See Annex 2 for details.) However, no particular regional trends were identified.

## Key findings

12 About a fifth of current Access to HE providers responding to the survey saw a fall in the number of courses between 2005-06 and 2007-08, but for the majority, the number of courses remained about the same over the period. However, almost a third of those who reported that the number of courses had been stable indicated that the number of students had fallen (see Table 5).

		Courses				
		Same	Increase	Decrease	Other	Total
Students	Same	71	3	11	0	85
	Increase	21	24	3	1	49
	Decrease	43	5	30	1	79
	Other	3	1	1	5	10
	Total	138	33	45	7	223

**Table 5: Relationship between changes in course and student numbers**

13 The primary factors identified for falls in the number of Access to HE courses related to a fall in the number of students. Another frequently mentioned factor was the closure of some, particularly part-time, courses because they did not meet benchmarks for retention. As the most significant factors for a decline in provision related to a fall in the number of students, however, the reasons for changes in the number of students are of particular significance in understanding changes in the number of courses.

14 More than a third of respondents had seen a fall in student numbers between 2005-06 and 2007-08 and slightly more had seen the number of students remain the same. The primary factors identified by providers for falls in student numbers related to fees and financial difficulties experienced by students. The increased costs of undertaking an Access to HE course were highlighted as a deterrent to potential students: increases in fees, changes to eligibility for fee remission, and a lack of access to other financial support, were all identified as primary causal factors where student numbers had declined. In other places, the capping of Access to HE student numbers had contributed to a decline.

15 Providers' efforts to improve retention rates have affected student numbers in two ways: as well as the closure of courses which did not meet retention benchmarks, more selective recruitment has been introduced, and while this has improved retention rates, it has also led to lower numbers on some courses.

16 While the overall trends have been clearly downward, and the difficulties faced by providers in maintaining Access to HE provision and attracting students were strongly stated in responses to the survey, respondents also cited examples of providers who had been able to respond to student demand and develop provision. Some reported that support for development at senior level in the organisation, including the promotion and advertising of courses, together with strategies to minimise fees and other costs, was associated with increased or stable student recruitment and the development of provision which increased the opportunities available to adults for progression to HE.

17 A complex picture of interrelated factors emerged from the responses to the survey, and responses from AVAs explained some of the dynamics at work that had impacted on student and course numbers. The following table gives a summary of the enablers and inhibitors identified by providers and AVAs for growth and decline in the number of Access to HE courses and student enrolments.

	<b>Enablers</b>	<b>Inhibitors</b>
<b>Students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affordability               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- low/remitted fees</li> <li>- level 3 entitlement</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Financial support for costs of study</li> <li>• Flexible learning modes               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- part-time</li> <li>- evening</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Course offering               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- response to subject demand</li> <li>- pre-Access courses</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Courses fees               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- level</li> <li>- ineligibility for fee remission/level 3 entitlement</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Lack of financial support</li> <li>• Risk of loss of benefits</li> <li>• Managing study and employment</li> <li>• Lack of evening or part-time provision</li> </ul>
<b>Providers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student demand</li> <li>• New courses and pathways               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- response to student demand</li> <li>- response to local HE routes</li> <li>- response to local skills needs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Commitment at senior level</li> <li>• Targeted marketing and advertising</li> <li>• Reputation of provider/success of students</li> <li>• Funding arrangements for part-time provision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding priorities</li> <li>• Thresholds and targets               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- capping of student numbers</li> <li>- minimum group numbers</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Retention benchmarks               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- selective recruitment</li> <li>- closure of part-time courses</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Recruiting/retaining specialist staff</li> <li>• Appropriate accommodation</li> <li>• Reduction in NHS recruitment</li> <li>• Alternative study options</li> </ul>

## Section 2: Survey outcomes

### Part A - changes in the number of courses

18 Providers were asked to indicate what change, if any, there had been in the number of courses in the three-year period between 2005-06 and 2007-08. A decline in the number of courses was reported by 21 per cent; 15 per cent reported a rise; but most respondents (64 per cent) stated that, overall, the number of courses had remained the same (see Table 6).

Status	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Overall number of courses fell	45	21%
Overall number of courses rose	33	15%
Overall number of courses remained the same	138	64%

**Table 6: Change in the number of courses, as reported by providers**

#### A1 - numbers of courses falling (21 per cent)

19 Providers who stated that they had experienced an overall decline in the number of Access to HE courses were asked to indicate reasons for the fall (see Table 7). The largest number of responses to this question (23 - more than twice as many responses as for any other named reason) reported that courses had closed because the number of students recruited to the course/s as a whole was too low for the provider's minimum requirements for course viability. A further 11 respondents stated that the fall was attributable to the fact that the number of students choosing certain options (modules/units or modes of study) was too low and, without these, numbers on previously viable parts of the provision fell to non-viable levels.

20 Eleven providers stated that the course/s had not meet the provider's benchmark for retention or achievement, and seven indicated that courses had not contributed to funding or strategic targets and so had been closed.

21 When respondents were asked to indicate the three most significant factors that they considered to be responsible for the fall in the number of courses, the same factors were identified. The main factors named by respondents in this section as being of greatest significance, were:

- the number of students recruited to the course/s as a whole was too low for the provider's minimum requirements for course viability
- the course/s did not meet the provider's benchmark for retention or achievement
- the number of students choosing certain options (modules/units or modes of study) was too low and, without these, the numbers on other previously viable parts of the provision fell to non-viable levels
- other (varied and specific to the institution)
- there were difficulties with recruiting or retaining appropriate specialist staff.



Reasons for fall	Number of providers
The centre's Access to HE provision has been reorganised (perhaps as a result of a new framework approach by the AVA or provider), so the same provision is offered within a smaller recorded number of separate courses.	6
The provider has reorganised its provision as a result of merger and reduced the number of courses.	2
The number of students recruited to the course/s as a whole was too low for the provider's minimum requirements for course viability.	23
The number of students choosing certain options (modules/units or modes of study) was too low and, without these, the numbers on other previously viable parts of the provision fell to non-viable levels.	11
The course/s did not meet the provider's benchmark for retention or achievement.	11
The course/s was not considered to contribute to national funding targets.	4
The course/s was not considered to contribute to the provider's strategic targets.	3
There were difficulties with recruiting or retaining appropriate specialist staff.	10
Appropriate facilities were not available to support the course (eg laboratory facilities for science-based courses).	1
Reason not known.	0
Other.	14

**Table 7: Reasons for fall in the number of courses**

22 As this survey was conducted among current Access to HE providers, responses do not, on the whole, capture information relating to courses delivered by providers which have now stopped delivering Access to HE. However, one response was made by a college which had withdrawn from Access to HE, and the explanation given in this instance points to the way in which it is often a combination of factors, rather than a single cause, which leads to a decision to stop delivering Access to HE:

'The College has discontinued the Access provision. Amongst the contributing factors were: 1. The level of fee that would have to be charged prices us out of the reach of Access students. 2. The limited number of adult places allotted to the College can be used more effectively in other provision. 3. Recruitment has always been at a level at which the course has not been able to contribute fully to College overheads. 4. Pressure on classroom space exacerbated the contribution difficulties. Please note that the College has taken this step with much reluctance. We believe that for those students who are able to take full advantage of an Access to HE programme it is truly transformational. Better funding arrangements would allow us to restart these programmes and make a contribution to areas of the workforce that are considered priorities ie teaching, nursing and science.'

## **A2 - numbers of courses rising (15 per cent)**

23 An increase in the total number of Access to HE courses was identified by 33 providers, although the increased number of courses had not always been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number of students (see Table 5).

24 The primary reasons cited for increases in the number of courses were:

- **Student demand** for specific courses (for example: 'a higher demand for specific courses has led to the need for provision of additional courses'; 'Law and Social Science programmes were added in response to learner enquiries'; 'we ran an additional group of Access to Health Studies due to demand'; 'higher demand for specific courses has led to the need for provision of additional courses, for example, the Forensic Science pathway'.) Reference was made, in particular, to demand for provision associated with health professions. Subjects mentioned included midwifery, radiography, osteopathy and paramedic science, as well as more general nursing or health studies pathways.
- **Provider supply** of new pathways (for example: 'we developed other pathways such as Sports Studies & Science'; 'Access to HE Music was added'; 'We introduced a new pathway, Access to Computing. This was after a request from the relevant department in the college'). In one instance, where the provider was a university, the development of new provision reflected 'a changing degree portfolio within the University', and one respondent referred to market research having identified 'a need for additional courses to meet specific skills sector needs'. Another noted that 'Biomedical science is a local priority area'.
- **Other** reasons given included changes made to the mode of delivery, with examples given which associated increases with new part-time or evening courses. One provider described the outcome of a substantial internal review, including focus groups, a review of resources and teaching spaces, and changed staff roles, stating that 'by doing this, we have seen an increase in student numbers rise from 117 enrolments in 2007 to 191 enrolments in 2008'.

## **A3 - numbers of courses remaining the same (64 per cent)**

25 Where providers reported that the number of Access to HE courses had remained the same, there were a number which reported changes and reorganisation in provision - with courses being merged or withdrawn and new courses being introduced, and changes made in the mode of delivery - which were not reflected in the total number of increases or decreases.

## **Part B - changes in the number of students**

26 Providers were asked to indicate whether there had been any change in the number of students on Access to HE courses over the period (see Table 8). Over one third of providers (37 per cent) stated that there had been an overall fall in the number of students, while just under a quarter (23 per cent) stated that they had

experienced an increase in the number of student registrations. The largest proportion (40 per cent) reported that the number had stayed the same<sup>5</sup>.

Status	Number of responses	% of responses
Overall number of students fell	79	37%
Overall number of students rose	49	23%
Overall number of students remained the same	85	40%

**Table 8: Overall change in the number of students**

### **B1 - numbers of students falling (37 per cent)**

27 Seventy-nine providers reported an overall fall in the number of students registered on Access to HE courses over the period. Where providers reported a fall in the number of students registered, they were asked to identify the reasons for the decline, selecting from a list of possible factors that had been identified as significant contributory causes by Access to HE practitioners at the 2008 Access to HE conference (see Table 9). The individual factors most frequently cited as contributing to a fall in student numbers were (in order of number of mentions):

- potential students are eligible for fee remission but their work/personal situation means that they are unable to support themselves while studying (47)
- potential students are deterred by the fees or other costs of study in HE (41)
- potential students are not eligible for fee remission in FE and are deterred by the fees or other costs of study on an Access to HE course (40)
- retention benchmarks have led to more selective recruitment procedures, and 'borderline' students are less likely to be accepted than previously (38)
- other financial/personal changes (31).

Reasons for fall	Number of responses
<b>Nature of provision</b>	
The provider's Access to HE provision no longer includes courses in the subject area(s) some potential students want to study.	13
Part-time Access to HE course(s) have been reduced.	23
Evening Access to HE course(s) have been reduced.	21
The centre no longer provides 'pre-Access' or other level 2 provision which previously provided a stepping stone into Access to HE.	10
A reduction in NHS recruitment led to a decline in applicants for Access to HE courses leading to nursing/health-related professions.	27
Other changes in the nature of provision (please detail).	17
<b>Recruitment and selection</b>	
The provider has reduced marketing or promotion of Access to HE.	10
Retention benchmarks have led to more selective recruitment	38

<sup>5</sup> Given the unlikely scenario of identical year-on-year student numbers, it is assumed that this response indicates a general impression that there was no significant growth or decline.

procedures, and 'borderline' students are less likely to be accepted than previously.	
Students are not able to transfer from a full-time to a parallel part-time course, so may withdraw rather than transfer and register for a second year of study.	12
Other changes in recruitment or selection policies/practices.	14
<b>Financial/personal factors</b>	
Potential students are deterred by the fees or other costs of study in HE.	41
Potential students are not eligible for fee remission in FE and are deterred by the fees or other costs of study on an Access to HE course.	40
Potential students are eligible for fee remission but their work/personal situation means that they are unable to support themselves while studying.	47
Potential students risk losing essential benefits if they study on an Access to HE course.	25
Other financial/personal changes.	31
<b>Alternative study options</b>	
Potential students who may previously have taken an Access to HE course now choose to study on Year 0 or equivalent courses provided in HE.	15
Potential students who may previously have taken an Access to HE course now choose to study on Foundation Degrees provided in FE or HE.	17
Other alternative study options.	18
<b>Other (not included in the above categories)</b>	<b>15</b>

**Table 9: Reasons for fall in the number of students**

28 When considered in relation to five main sections into which the possible reasons had been grouped, the total responses in each section were:

- nature of provision - 111
- recruitment and selection - 74
- financial/personal factors - 184
- alternative study options - 50
- other - 15.

29 Respondents were also asked to indicate the three most significant factors that they considered to be responsible for the fall in student numbers. In response to this question, the four factors identified most frequently by respondents were the same as those identified through the earlier question in paragraph 27, albeit with the first and second factor reversed in order of frequency of mentions (deterrent effect of costs of HE; eligible for fees but unable to support themselves; costs of FE study and not eligible for fee remission; impact of retention benchmarks). However, the fifth most frequently mentioned factor in response to this 'top three' question was 'part-time Access to HE course(s) have been reduced'.

30 The loss of part-time provision had been mentioned in 23 responses to the more general question about contributory factors and the loss of evening provision was also mentioned frequently (21). The separation of 'part-time' and 'evening' provision in the earlier question, and the fact that a part-time mode of delivery may not always be regarded as a separate course, may have led to the significance of the loss of part-time provision as a whole (including evening provision) being undervalued in the results from the earlier question, as given in Table 9.

## **B2 - numbers of students rising (23 per cent)**

31 Of the 223 providers who responded to the survey, 49 reported an increase in student numbers, of which 48 responded to the request to suggest possible reasons for the increase.

32 The single factor most frequently mentioned as leading to a growth in student numbers (35 per cent of all comments in this section) was the provider's increased promotion of Access to HE courses:

- **Targeted marketing and advertising** of programmes had been successful: 'stronger and more focused advertising has led to greater interest in the course'; 'increased Access provision and targeted marketing led to a 30% increase in numbers in 2007-08'; 'there has [also] been a major investment in college HE publicity and resourcing which may have contributed to growth'.
- **Marketing in relation to links to HE provision** within the college or in local HE institutions had been useful: '...much clearer marketing campaign that links our Access courses to the HE that is delivered at the College. This academic year (08/09) we have seen a significant increase in learner numbers on the Health and Humanities pathways'; 'the HE unit and faculties have worked with the Marketing Unit to promote Access in local communities and to advertise the programme through a range of media including radio'; '...some of our Access pathways offer progression routes to our foundation degrees which are validated by our partner Universities. In 2008-09 recruitment rose by 23% over 2007-08.'

33 Some also emphasised informal or indirect methods of promotion. Examples were given of courses being promoted through word of mouth, and this was sometimes linked to the success of former students and reputation of the course: 'success of students on the course, and progression of students to HE thereby encouraging others to enrol'; 'success of previous students generating "word of mouth recommendations"'; 'Good reputation - students learning about the course through word of mouth'.

34 In addition, many responses indicated several factors at work (and pointed to the relationship between these). To a large extent, the responses reinforced reasons given for increased numbers of courses (see paragraph 24):

- **Response to demand:** 'growth in those applying for nursing and social work'; 'more students for the Humanities and Health related courses'; 'new programmes to meet local demand'; 'courses written to accommodate need'.

- **Commitment to growth by the provider:** 'renewed interest (at Principalship level) in Access as a key progression route to HE.... The faculties were asked to increase their numbers'; 'we were allowed to increase our targets and hit the higher targets'; 'there was no cap on student recruitment'; '...the fact that the senior management are committed to widening participation for all...'
- **Development of part-time and evening provision:** 'there was a very high demand for part-time evening provision'; 'the evening programme grew and this was the largest factor'; 'Introduction of p/t day course. Introduction of evening course'.

35 Similarly, there were responses which provided a mirror image of reasons that had been given for the decline in numbers (see paragraphs 27-30):

- **Financial support:** 'no course fees as yet'; 'tuition fees deliberately kept low (ie much lower than the assumed fee LSC expect us to collect)'; 'the Access programmes are free for students'; 'capping of charges'; 'Adult Learners Grant and support with travel and childcare'; '...level 3 entitlement was an incentive'.
- **Development of pre-Access courses:** 'development of an integrated pre-Access course'; 'introduction of pre-Access programme'; 'The provision of a pre-Access course, thus affording the learner an opportunity to consider their commitment to an extended study programme. The pre-Access course allows the provider to assess the appropriateness of the course for each learner'.

### **B3 - numbers of students remaining the same (40 per cent)**

36 Eighty-five providers reported that the number of students enrolled on Access to HE courses had remained the same, and 47 of these also made some comment. Many comments indicated that, while overall numbers had remained constant, this masked certain changes that had taken place. Some reported a fluctuation in numbers over the period: 'Fees were introduced in 2006 (I think) for over 25's so the numbers fell. However, fees were then abolished a year later which resulted in student numbers returning to their original level'. In relation to changes in subjects delivered there was no clear pattern reported and, for example, while some saw 'a shift towards more students wanting Nursing/Midwifery', others had found that 'numbers for midwifery have reduced, however there have been increases in Teaching and Science pathways'.

37 One factor that was mentioned a number of times to explain constant numbers was **restrictions on growth**. The main causes given to explain this were:

- **Capping of numbers:** 'numbers capped by college'; 'the college has a specific quota'; 'we recruit to our maximum number of places each year'; 'I was told to cap numbers'; 'there has been more demand than places we are able to offer'; 'the course recruits well...and reaches the target number'.
- **Staff or room shortage:** 'we could expand, but are curtailed by staff availability'; 'numbers have remained constant because we are constrained by staff availability and accommodation. Could recruit more in other circumstances'; 'no increase could be accommodated in the rooms available to the course'; 'we are restricted because of space in the college'.

38 Several noted a **change in age profile**: 'different demographic but numbers steady'; 'decrease in 30+ age group offsets any gains in the younger cohort 19-29'; 'the age profile has changed with a greater percentage of younger students'.

39 Changes to the mode of delivery indicated a trend towards a **reduction in part-time provision** and increase in the proportion of full-time delivery ('only change had been the decision to stop part-time provision'). Comments in this section suggested that the major reason for this reduction related to funding. One respondent, reporting that 'the number of registered part-time learners have reduced and the number of FT learners have increased (mainly from the 19-21 year old age group)', commented, by way of explanation that 'most potential part-time learners who are not subject to fee remission are deterred from enrolling onto the programme because of course fees'. The problem of funding for part-time students was also emphasised by others: 'learners who were required to pay the full fees chose not to start the course leading to a reduction in numbers for our part-time programme'.

40 Another respondent explained how and why the provider had retained the same numbers, in spite of the difficulty: 'overall numbers remained much the same but we **reclassified the students** by retaining the one year full-time programme, abandoning the two year part-time programme and introducing a one year level 2 full-time programme as a foundation for the full-time one year programme. The motivating factor was changes to the funding'.

### **Part C – any other comments**

41 Respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments, and 80 (36 per cent) elected to do so. Some comments drew attention to individual or local successes. Others focused on particular challenges faced by providers or students. Almost half of the additional comments referred to financial constraints. Many made comments about the impact of funding priorities and increased course fees, and the effects for Access to HE of the policy emphasis on provision for younger students. Causes and effects of the decline of part-time provision again featured strongly in responses.

42 Most comments reinforced or provided illustration of points also made under previous categories:

- **Student demand** was buoyant in some areas: 'in 08/09, the recruitment target within my curriculum plan was 18...the current number stands at 41'; 'recruitment for 2008/09 has exceeded expectations - target numbers were met within a week of enrolment'; 'we have interviewed far more candidates this year than we did last year'.
- **Funding priorities** led to limits on targets for Access to HE student numbers: 'For 2008/09 the emphasis on 16-18 is a priority. 19+ targets have decreased (from 200 to 150). At the same time applications for Access rose by about 30%'; 'if we were able to draw funding for adult provision in the same way that we could for 16-19 then our Access to HE provision would expand dramatically, we would be able to offer a first class educational opportunity, especially in Science subjects, to more than the 50 full-time places that we currently have funding allocation for'.
- **Insufficient specialist staff or facilities** could limit course development: 'In many ways, at X College we could accommodate more students. Over the

past couple of years we have capped numbers in the day at 50 for Nursing (constraint being lab size), and have usually capped at 35 for Humanities & Social Sciences, and 35 for Teacher Training/Science combined - again, capacity in labs and staffing being the constraint here'.

- **Increases in course fees** had a negative impact on recruitment: 'our fees rose dramatically from £300 in 06/07 to £900 in 07/08 and our initial recruitment was the lowest ever'; 'figures are down despite enthusiasm at interview. Research in to funding [then] proves to be problematic for prospective learners and they have to decline their place on Access'.
- **Level 3 entitlements** had both positive and negative effects:
  - a) for those under 25: 'the Level 3 entitlement has supported learners and been a positive effect where financial considerations by the students have had to be taken into consideration'; 'the "no tuition fee" for students who are aged between 19-24 (being their first level 2/3 qual) has made a difference'
  - b) for those over 25: 'The removal of fee remission for many mature FE students is causing some people to consider other options. The college carried out a price sensitivity analysis on Access fees and concluded that roughly 66% of Access learners were covered by the level 3 entitlement policy. It is the remaining 33% who are more likely to be deterred from returning to study'.
- **Other financial considerations** also made a difference: 'students often find it a financial strain to give up employment in order to change their career options'; 'students receiving JSA were targeted during autumn 07-08 and a number of able students who could have successfully completed their course withdrew'; 'child care provision (cost not availability) is the single greatest problem'; 'due to funding changes/cuts there are no longer the student support services in place that there once were'. A respondent from Wales commented 'the Welsh Assembly Learning Grant of up to £1500 pa for students on low income has proved helpful in both recruiting and retaining members of the major target groups for the programme. The Grant does not affect students' benefits such as Income Support'.
- **Part-time provision had declined** because of differential funding/fees: 'our Access programmes are mostly part-time and offered as rolling programmes and as such receive unequal recognition from the LSC to similar full-time courses'; 'We can exempt full-time students from course fees whereas the evening part-time option has had its fees increased again. This reflects national policies, of course, in terms of cutting back on part-time adult funding'; 'Part-time subjects which used to be extremely popular are now declining due to course fees. In 2007-08 all our evening provision was cancelled as part-time students who usually use this provision found the cost prohibitive'; 'although our situation seems stable, changes in adult funding have now resulted in our evening pt provision being withdrawn as from Sept 2009'.
- **Part-time provision was particularly vulnerable** because retention rates were often weaker: 'we have stopped all part-time provision from 08-09 due to poor success rates - despite the demand being there initially, so there will be a reduction in numbers this year'; 'the college has made the decision to no longer offer part-time provision on our Access course from this academic year...we experienced problems with retention and completion on our evening



provision and we found that this provision was not viable...the demands of working full-time, and often bringing up young families, was too great a pressure on a number of our learners'.

- **A changed age profile** had resulted from policy changes, with some negative consequences: 'the overall proportion of applicants from the 19-21 age range is increasing (this is the cohort that has the highest attrition rate too)'; 'We are finding [also] that the age of students wishing to join Access is on average lower as perhaps they have not succeeded at A levels and are looking for a fast track into HE. They find the intensity of the course sometimes daunting and this can lead to poor retention'; 'nearly all our applicants are young (19–21) and on benefits - we are losing the traditional mature applicant who is either returning to study or looking for a career change'.
- **Commitment to growth by the provider** was important for maintaining numbers. One respondent explained: 'This college has managed to maintain Access to HE provision because of the dedication of senior staff to provide educational opportunities to all people, whatever their age. The college has suffered any financial penalties that this may have incurred. It may not always be possible to maintain this because of the funding capping that applies to VI Form colleges and adult provision'; while another, less well-supported respondent reported that 'reduction in funding for adult provision means the college has withdrawn all pt and evening provision and is no longer supportive of Access', and concluded that 'Access would cease if the college was able to attract more 16-19 learners as they are better funded'.

43 A number of comments also sought to explain the **inter-relatedness of the different factors** involved:

'Some students (those under 25) are entitled to fee remission, but younger students do not seem to have the same commitment to the course and will often not attend regularly as they are working. Older students (those over 25) are not entitled to fee remission (unless in receipt of benefits) and cannot afford the FE fees. Often these older students are on low incomes but fall into the poverty trap where any benefits used to top up income become lost when they come on the course. Most then need to work to supplement their income and as the course is now not a part-time course (studied over 2 years), but must be studied in a year, they find if they miss any study due to work commitments that the course is far too intensive to catch up again, and then usually leave. It is therefore a culmination of all reasons stated. Several are also put off by HE fees and the need to work'.

### Section 3: Commentaries by AVAs

44 This additional element of the data survey was designed to capture the observations of AVAs on the providers' responses and the wider perspective and overview that they may have, given the additional information which is available to them, including the outcomes of their own monitoring and quality assurance procedures. AVAs also had the opportunity to comment on whether the views expressed by the providers who had submitted responses to QAA were representative of the position across the AVA as a whole. Two AVAs suggested that those responding to the survey were not wholly representative of the picture in their AVA: both suggested that those responding were 'more likely to be providers who maintain healthy numbers of students', whereas those who did not respond were 'more likely to be...faced with internal issues of funding, staffing, resources, management'.

45 The AVAs' commentaries generally supported and extended the points made by the providers and many attempted to explain the connections between different factors at work. The main explanations provided by AVAs are summarised below.

- **Funding priorities have led to reduced targets in some places, and potential demand may not be fully met.**

'LSC funding is targeted according to government priorities, with the current emphasis on 16 to 19 year old learners and 19+ targets reduced. This has occurred at a time when some colleges have experienced an increase in applications for Access to HE courses.'

'The funding debate generates for providers a tension between the offer and the income derived from that offer. What is clear is that different providers have responded to this tension in different ways. Some have reduced recruitment levels, others have capped them whilst yet others may decide to allow the "market" to decide.... The variation [in the] number of learners in any one year may not be reflective of the level of demand for "Access" nor its perceived value but rather individual responses to individual funding allocations.'

- **Increased fees and other costs to students, together with restricted eligibility for fee remission and the lack of availability of financial support, have a deterrent effect for potential Access to HE students.**

'It is clear that a significant number of centres are passing on both the 'assumed income' element of LSC funding and the cost of accreditation to learners. Whilst potential learners are protected (to varying degrees) by fee remission policies and financial support mechanisms, it is clear that Access provision now involves a significant cost to some learners where previously it did not. Where personal and/or family income is too high for fee remission to apply and too low for course fees to be affordable there is, in effect, a 'fee trap' which may serve to exclude a proportion of low income learners, who previously would have studied free of charge.'

'Though some categories of students are eligible for fee remission, there are still many students, particularly those aged 25 or over who have got a full Level 2 and are not on benefits, who have to pay high fees for an Access course, often equivalent to the annual fees for a degree course.'

'Recruitment has been affected by the inability of fee remitted learners to locate the additional resources and support necessary to allow them to undertake study at Level 3.'

'The personal costs of undertaking an Access to HE course are considerable and could involve giving up employment, arranging and paying for care, increased travel costs and the time required to attend the course and complete the assessments.'

- **Part-time provision has been reduced**

'...at the end of 2006 there was a change in funding which made it uneconomic for Colleges to run part-time courses. There were two responses to this: one was to withdraw all part-time provision and the other was to make full charges to the Access learners. Both of these responses were adopted by different courses/providers and the result was a dip in total registrations'.

'The majority [of the AVA's providers] have either closed some part-time provision or are keeping it under careful review.'

- **Retention benchmarks have a negative impact on the provision of part-time Access to HE because the demand for part-time provision comes, predominantly, from those who have the kinds of personal circumstances which are related to common reasons for non-completion. This has a particular impact for Access to HE because students with such circumstances are also major target groups for the provision.**

'Part-time courses are a target for closure because their retention and success rates are often below benchmark because the students who choose these options tend to have substantial caring and work commitments.'

'The relative decline in learners registered on part-time day/evening provision...reflects, at least in part, decisions in some centres to do away with these modes of attendance. At the centre level, these decisions may be rational, particularly given the emphasis placed on retention as an indicator of success.... Nevertheless, there will be particular categories of learners for whom a full-time course may be impractical; or inappropriate:

- those whose personal circumstances requires them to work on a full or part-time basis
- those with significant caring responsibilities
- those whose potential is slower than expected to emerge
- those whose circumstances change post enrolment.

Learners within these categories will effectively be excluded where part-time provision is not offered in their local area.'

- **The application of retention benchmarks has led to more selective recruitment procedures and an overall reduction in numbers. There may be a tension between more selective recruitment as a mechanism for improving retention and widening participation.**

'The emphasis placed on reaching benchmarks in retention and success rates has led Access to HE co-ordinators to introduce much more selective recruitment procedures for Access to HE, and this has led to a reduction in the number of students.'

'Programme teams are expected to run classes of viable size and to meet challenging targets for retention and achievement of learners: but to do so may...result in more selective admissions. Thus effective retention and achievement strategies actually reduce recruitment figures. Providers actively implementing a widening participation agenda risk other targets not being met.'

- **There is little promotion or marketing of Access to HE, although there are some indications that this can have a positive effect.**

'It is encouraging to note 'more effective marketing' as a factor for improvement as the AVA has encouraged this but with little effect.'

'Moderator reports and provider self-assessment reports have noted improvements in marketing of Access course and recruitment as a result of revalidation of programmes and the implementation of the Access to HE Diploma.'

- **There has been an increase in the number of younger students on Access to HE programmes, but this has led to some problems.**

'...a small but significant increase in learners in the 19 year old category. Providers, however, report that this is not necessarily a positive outcome. It can have a negative impact on retention with many of these younger learners leaving....'

'15% of learners were under 19. ...this is a very substantial increase on previous years. We do not know how, or if, those learners under 19 were funded. However, we do know that ILR returns for under 19 students are not being made by colleges this year, in response to clear guidance from LSC.'

- **It is unclear whether changes in NHS recruitment have had any effect on recruitment for Access to HE.**

'One college...recruited 49% fewer students this year than last. It attributes this largely to a perceived decline in bursaried places available in local HEIs.'

'This factor alone accounts for 50% of the reduction in registrations between 2006/07 and 2007/08.'

**but:**

'The comment on reduced registrations due to a reduction in NHS recruitment does not apply across the region...there has been an overall increase in both recruitment and achievement in health pathways (most of which are Nursing and midwifery).'

'...despite adverse publicity and concerns about the availability of HE places in nursing and the caring professions, and issues of employability

subsequently, which were current some 18 months ago...the proportion of Access to HE students on these courses has steadily increased.'

- **Alternative courses may be more attractive for some individuals who would previously have undertaken an Access to HE course.**

'Moderators report that providers have cited direct competition from the growth in Foundation Degrees, Year 0 and other level 3 provision having an effect on recruitment rates, particularly in art and design.'

'Some students are now being directly recruited onto a Foundation Degree, often in an FE college, and are not being required to have the same formal qualifications as are required to progress directly onto an Honours Degree. Other students are taking Year 0 courses run by HEIs, to take them directly into their chosen option.'

## Annex 1: Access to HE data trends survey questionnaire

**Please note:** the electronic version of this form will allow boxes to expand for longer responses.

<p><b>Name of AVA</b> _____</p> <p><b>Name of provider</b> _____</p> <p><b>Name of centre (if different from provider name):</b> _____</p> <p><b>Completed by (name of contact for AVA reference):</b> _____</p> <p><b>Role</b> _____</p>
---

<b>Part 1 - Changes in the number of courses*</b>	
Between 2005-06 and 2007-08, did the overall total number of Access to HE courses (ie disregarding any fluctuations within that three-year period) delivered at your centre <i>Tick one of the following options, and then complete the relevant section below.</i>	Tick (✓)
remain the same	
rise	
fall	
other (eg centre delivering Access to HE for less than three years) <i>Please specify here, and then proceed to Part 2</i>	
<p><b>If A</b> (number of courses remained the same) <i>Add any comments you wish to make here, and then proceed to Part 2.</i></p>	
<p><b>If B</b> (number of courses rose) <i>Describe factors contributing to the rise here, and then proceed to Part 2.</i></p>	

<p><b>If C</b> (number of courses fell)</p> <p>Which of the following factors contributed to the fall?</p> <p><i>Tick all that apply in the section that follows, then proceed to Part 2.</i></p>	<p>Tick (✓) all that apply</p>
<p>The centre's Access to HE provision has been reorganised (perhaps as a result of a new framework approach by the AVA or provider), so the same provision is offered within a smaller recorded number of separate courses.</p>	
<p>The provider has reorganised its provision as a result of merger and reduced the number of courses.</p>	
<p>The number of students recruited to the course/s as a whole was too low for the provider's minimum requirements for course viability.</p>	
<p>The number of students choosing certain options (modules/units or modes of study) were too low and, without these, the numbers on other previously viable parts of the provision fell to non-viable levels.</p>	
<p>The course/s did not meet the provider's benchmark for retention or achievement.</p>	
<p>The course/s was not considered to contribute to national funding targets.</p>	
<p>The course/s was not considered to contribute to the provider's strategic targets.</p>	
<p>There were difficulties with recruiting or retaining appropriate specialist staff.</p>	
<p>Appropriate facilities were not available to support the course (eg laboratory facilities for science-based courses).</p>	
<p>Reason not known.</p>	
<p>Other <i>(please specify)</i></p>	
<p><b>NOW PLEASE COMPLETE THE SECTION BELOW</b></p>	
<p>If you have ticked more than one of the above, please put the most important three in order of greatest significance (where 1 = most significant):</p> <p>1</p>	

2	
3	
<b>Part 2 - Changes in the number of students</b>	
Between 2005-06 and 2007-08, did your centre's overall total number of student registrations (ie disregarding any fluctuations within that three-year period) <i>Tick one of the following options and then complete the relevant section below.</i>	Tick (✓)
remain the same	
rise	
fall	
other (eg centre delivering Access to HE for less than three years) <i>Please specify here, and then proceed to Part 3.</i>	
<b>If A</b> (the number of students remained the same) <i>Add any comments you wish to make here, and then proceed to Part 3.</i>	
<b>If B</b> (the number of students rose) <i>Describe factors contributing to the rise here, and then proceed to Part 3.</i>	
<b>If C</b> (the number of students fell) <i>Tick all that apply in the section that follows, then proceed to Part 3.</i>	Tick (✓) all that apply
<b>Nature of provision</b>	
The provider's Access to HE provision no longer includes courses in the subject area(s) some potential students want to study.	
Part-time Access to HE course(s) have been reduced.	
Evening Access to HE course(s) have been reduced.	
The centre no longer provides 'pre-Access' or other Level 2 provision which previously provided a stepping stone into Access to HE.	
A reduction in NHS recruitment led to a decline in applicants for Access to HE courses leading to nursing/health-related professions.	
Other changes in the nature of provision (please detail)	



<b>Recruitment and selection</b>	
The provider has reduced marketing or promotion of Access to HE.	
Retention benchmarks have led to more selective recruitment procedures, and 'borderline' students are less likely to be accepted than previously.	
Students are not able to transfer from a full-time to a parallel part-time course, so may withdraw rather than transfer and register for a second year of study.	
Other changes in recruitment or selection policies/practices ( <i>please detail</i> )	
<b>Financial/personal factors</b>	
Potential students are deterred by the fees or other costs of study in HE.	
Potential students are not eligible for fee remission in FE and are deterred by the fees or other costs of study on an Access to HE course.	
Potential students are eligible for fee remission but their work/personal situation means that they are unable to support themselves while studying.	
Potential students risk losing essential benefits if they study on an Access to HE course.	
Other financial/personal changes ( <i>please detail</i> )	
<b>Alternative study options</b>	
Potential students who may previously have taken an Access to HE course now choose to study on Year 0 or equivalent courses provided in HE	
Potential students who may previously have taken an Access to HE course now choose to study on Foundation degrees provided in FE or HE	
Other alternative study options ( <i>please detail</i> )	
<b>Other (not included in the above categories)</b>	
<i>(please specify)</i>	
<b>NOW PLEASE COMPLETE THE SECTION BELOW</b>	
<p>If you have ticked more than one of the above, please put the most important three in order of greatest significance (where 1 = most significant):</p> <p>1</p> <p>2</p>	

3

**Part C: any other comments**

*Please use this section to provide further specific detail or examples of any of the above.*

Please return the completed form **by email** to: [information.unit@gaa.ac.uk](mailto:information.unit@gaa.ac.uk)  
or **by post** to: Information Unit, QAA, Southgate House, Southgate Street,  
Gloucester, GL1 1UB

No later than **Friday 19 September 2008**

## Annex 2: Response rates

AVA	Number of responses received	Number of providers at 31 July 2007 (source AVA stats)	Proportion of providers who responded (approx)
Assessment & Qualifications Alliance	8	12	67%
Cambridge AVA	8	10	80%
Hampshire AVA	5	13	38%
OCN Wales	16	23	70%
OCN East Midlands Region	12	21	57%
OCN Eastern Region	23	28	82%
OCN London Region	25	36	69%
OCN North East Region	9	14	64%
OCN North West Region	12	36	33%
OCN Oxford Thames & Chiltern	10	17	59%
OCN South East Region	16	23	70%
OCN South West Region	8	25	32%
Open College of the North West	19	27	70%
OCN West Midlands Region	39	40	98%
OCN Yorkshire & Humber Region	13	24	54%

**Table A1: Provider responses to Access to HE data survey by AVA**

AVA	Number of students remained the same	Number of students increased	Number of students decreased	Other	Total responses
Assessment & Qualifications Alliance	2	1	5	0	8
Cambridge AVA	3	1	4	0	8
Hampshire AVA	3	0	1	1	5
OCN Wales	5	4	7	0	16
OCN East Midlands Region	6	4	2	0	12
OCN Eastern Region	5	10	7	1	23
OCN London Region	12	5	8	0	25
OCN North East Region	2	3	3	1	9
OCN North West Region	8	2	2	0	12
OCN Oxford Thames & Chiltern	3	0	6	1	10
OCN South East Region	4	5	7	0	16
OCN South West Region	2	4	2	0	8
Open College of the North West	6	7	4	2	19
OCN West Midlands Region	14	3	19	3	39
OCN Yorkshire & Humber Region	10	0	2	1	13
Total	85	49	79	10	223

**Table A2: Reported increases and decreases of student numbers (by AVA)**