

This bulletin is our principal means of updating Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) about current developments. Please contact us directly ([access@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:access@qaa.ac.uk)) for more information about any of the items mentioned here, or if you have any questions.

## Database special

### Who is the database for?

We have designed the Access courses database for a range of users, including potential students, higher education (HE) admissions staff and AVAs. It also supports AVAs' data submissions to QAA, with the course information section of the submission now being pre-populated directly from the database. Critically, QAA staff rely on the database to provide information required by the Data Service and Skills Funding Agency (SFA). The way in which information from QAA leads to the allocation of Learning Aims Database (LAD) codes is explained in the SFA's document, *The Qualification Journey* ([http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/SFA/SFA\\_QCF\\_Qualification\\_Journey\\_Oct\\_2010.pdf](http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/SFA/SFA_QCF_Qualification_Journey_Oct_2010.pdf))

### How many people use it?

During 2009-10, 175,828 searches were performed on the database, with the highest number of searches being made in the summer. Most use a free 'keyword' search; and the most frequently used keywords are 'science' and 'nursing'. Most of those using the menu of subject areas (20 per cent of all searches), also appear to be looking for courses in these areas. The table below shows the six most popular subject areas searched using this criterion and compares the proportion of searches with the proportion of students registered on Access to HE courses in those areas in 2008-09.

Subject area (abbreviated)	Searches	% of total	% AHE learners in 2008-09
Nursing and subjects allied to medicine	5,618	16%	18%
Science and mathematics	4,043	11%	4%
Education and training	2,276	6%	4%
Other health, public services and care	2,260	6%	14%
Business, administration and law	1,982	6%	2%
Medicine and dentistry	1,804	5%	4%
Other	17,474	49%	55%
<b>Total</b>	<b>35,457</b>		

## Access headlines...Access headlines..

### For AVA action

AVAs need to consider a number of items in this bulletin:

- **Survey:** remind HE partners to respond to the grading survey.
- **UCAS applications:** remind providers:
  - 1 of the importance of putting accurate information on applications
  - 2 leave the 'overall grade' box empty
  - 3 make clear in references where units are optional
  - 4 contact the HE institution directly if a student is made an offer which requires an 'overall grade'.
- **AVA websites:** consider how you can develop web links to be useful to those looking for information about Access to HE courses.
- **Annual self-evaluation report and statistics:** submission due by 1 December 2010.
- **Funding guidance:** the SFA's guidance (*Adult Learner Responsive Funding Requirements 2010/11*) is available at: <http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/SFA/Adult-Learner-Responsive-funding-guidance-2010-11.pdf>
- **Free:** claim your copies of *A student guide to the Access to Higher Education Diploma*, and let providers know that copies are also available to them.



### How do users find more information about courses?

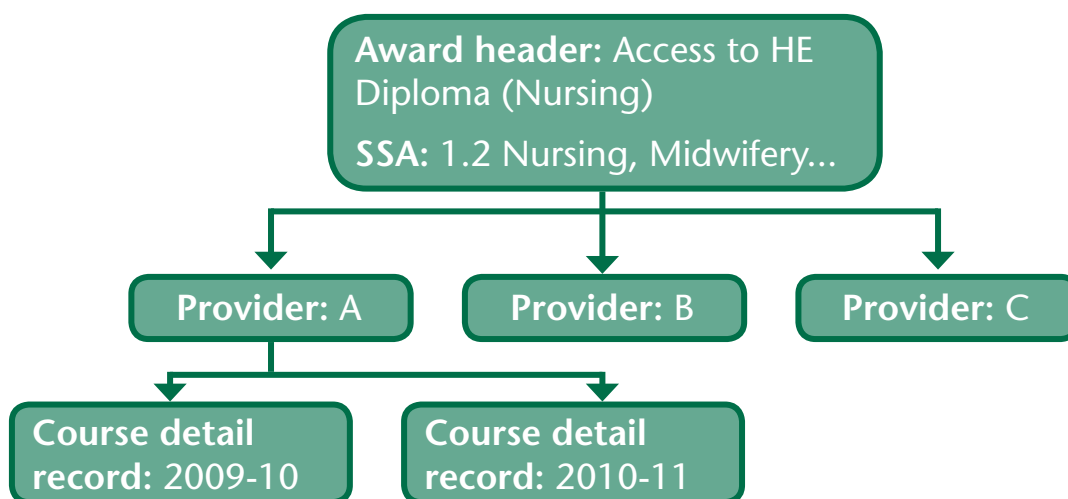
As many users are looking for detailed course information, we ask AVAs to provide weblinks that they can readily update to provide a next step for users. AVAs can do this directly for their own courses through the AVA administration section of the database, and AVAs can choose the approach they want to adopt, for example in the ways listed below.

- a) An AVA can use the same link for all its courses, which takes users to a page on the AVA's own website. The page on the AVA's website should include contact details for each course provider to give a 'two click' solution for users from the Access to HE website looking for course information. (**Remember:** users are more likely to phone the AVA if the link does not take them to the information they are looking for. A link to the general 'Access to HE' section of an AVA's own website will only be helpful if it clearly signposts how users can find specific course information.)
- b) An AVA can provide different links for different courses. This could be something which the AVA develops itself (that is, a bespoke web page for each course detailing its content and structure) or it could be a link to the provider's website. This can be especially helpful if the link is to a part of the provider's website which holds information about their Access to HE courses and contact information. (**Remember:** links to others' websites need regular checking to ensure they remain current and do not take users to a 'dead end'.)

### How does the database work?

Within the database, a 'course' is defined by the combination of the Diploma title (the 'award header') and a particular provider. When AVAs supply course information for the database, they provide the award header and a subject code, then add the names of providers using that award header.

The combination of award header and provider creates a unique record for each of a provider's courses, irrespective of whether any parts of the course content or delivery are shared with others using the same Diploma titles, or with other Diplomas delivered by the same provider. The course detail record includes particular details about each course, such as validation year and study locations. At the end of each year, AVAs check, update and confirm all their records and the database produces a new set of records for the following year ('course rollover'). QAA provides the Data Service with full course detail information after the course rollover, and regular update reports are supplied throughout the year.



### How are changes to course records made?

AVAs provide information about new courses and update existing course records through the secure AVA administration part of the database: each AVA has a password and an administrator's guide which explains how to do this. (If you have lost your guide or password, please contact us and we can provide replacements.) Making amendments is generally straightforward, but some areas need special attention.

- **Course names**

If a provider wishes to change the title or subject code for a course, the AVA needs to be aware that when it makes these changes there are implications for the other course detail records linked to the award header. We will work with you to make any changes needed so that the data contained in the database is accurate and current.

- **Provider names**

While AVAs can amend most course information, changes to provider names can only be made by QAA. Before making any changes, we cross-check provider names with funding bodies, the UK Register of Learning Providers and QAA's database of providers, so that the course can be identified in searches, and appropriate funding codes are allocated.

- **College mergers**

Because each course record is allocated a unique code based on a provider and an award header element, the database will not support duplicate courses (that is, the same Diploma title for two courses at a single provider). We know that this can occur temporarily when colleges merge: contact us and we will ensure that the database reflects the provision as validated. However, we urge AVAs to work with providers to resolve the position as quickly as possible, to avoid the confusion that can result from two different courses with identical names existing at the same provider.

- **Provider transfers**

If a course transfers from one AVA to another, this is regarded as a new course and both AVAs need to take action. The AVA from which the course transfers must discontinue course records. (Discontinued courses remain searchable in the public search for five years from the date they were discontinued.) When it has transferred, the new AVA then creates new course records.

### **How does QAA develop the database?**

During 2009-10, tool tips were added to all the search boxes to help users and to minimise zero returns. Further developments made in 2010-11 include improvements to the public search, and a change to the text on the search results to make it clear that the contact details provided are for the AVA.

## **Other news**

### **Statistics submission**

This year some AVAs experienced difficulties collecting statistics from providers. The Data Service has now issued a note to providers asking them to cooperate with AVAs in the collection of annual statistics: [www.thedataservice.org.uk/News/20101029\\_ava\\_pilot.htm](http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/News/20101029_ava_pilot.htm)

As this note explains, we are working closely with the Data Service and a number of AVAs to pursue the statistics submission pilot, looking again at how AVAs might be able to receive annual provider statistics from the Data Service, rather than having to collect it themselves from providers. The pilot will compare data that AVAs have received from their providers with an equivalent data set generated by the Data Service. If your AVA would be interested in participating in the pilot, please contact us.

We are planning to evaluate the outcome of the pilot in March 2011 and will then inform all AVAs of any changes to the data collection process for the 2010-11 data (submitted to QAA by 1 December 2011).

### **Applications to HE**

Please remind providers that:

- students should use the full, correct **Diploma title**, as listed on the courses database, given in the standard format: Access to HE Diploma (xxx)
- students should enter the **complete name of the AVA** as the awarding body on applications
- students should enter **details of units** they will be studying (not all units available on the course). If some units are optional and the student has not yet confirmed their selection, make sure this is explained in the tutor's reference: it is important to ensure that the application does not suggest that more than 60 credits can be achieved within the Access to HE Diploma

- a set of units may be described as a '**GCSE equivalent**' qualification only if they have been approved through an AVA procedure which meets the requirements specified in QAA's guidance on GCSE equivalents
- referees should leave blank the box that is provided on the UCAS application for a predicted '**overall grade**'. (If a student receives an offer which requires an 'overall grade', contact the HE institution to explain that overall grades are not awarded for the Access to HE Diploma, and point them to QAA's *Guidelines for higher education admissions staff*.)
- if the application is completed early in the academic year, tutors are unlikely to be able to predict **unit grades** reliably: this position is explained in QAA's *Guidelines for higher education admissions staff*. However, tutors may be able to make predictions in follow-up references. If unmoderated unit grades achieved by a student are included in the tutor reference to support statements about the standard of the student's performance, the provisional status of such grades must be made clear.

### **HE admissions staff grading survey**

HE admissions staff have been invited to respond to a survey about the impact of changes to the Access to HE qualification ([www.accesstohe.ac.uk/heStaff](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/heStaff)). The outcomes of the survey, together with the results of the tutor and student surveys, will be reviewed in early 2011. The survey closes on 30 November 2010.

### **Case studies**

We are always looking for success stories which might include those currently studying Access to HE, those at university, and graduates, as well as course teams who are contributing to students' successes. Email details to us at [access@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:access@qaa.ac.uk).

Please remind providers that *A student guide to the Access to HE Diploma* is still available free of charge. Contact our distribution agents Linney on 01623 450788 or by email [qaa@linney.com](mailto:qaa@linney.com) (limit of 50 free copies per order).

### **Published since the last bulletin**

The following documents are now available on the Access to HE website:

*Grading and the Access to HE Diploma: Brief outline for higher education admissions staff*

[www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/AdmissionsGuidanceHEStaff/AccessGradingOutline2010.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/AdmissionsGuidanceHEStaff/AccessGradingOutline2010.pdf)

*Access to HE Diploma: entry requirements and conditional offers - Guidelines for higher education admissions staff - September 2010*

[www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/AdmissionsGuidanceHEStaff/AccessAdmissionsOutline2010.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/AdmissionsGuidanceHEStaff/AccessAdmissionsOutline2010.pdf)

A revised statement on benchmarking from the Data Service

[www.accesstohe.ac.uk/LSC/benchmarking\\_data.asp](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/LSC/benchmarking_data.asp)

