

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

Data Service pilot outcomes

The pilot undertaken with a group of AVAs to look at whether providers' annual Access to HE learner statistics could be supplied to AVAs by the Data Service, has now been completed and evaluated.

Of the six AVAs which originally volunteered to take part, five completed the pilot exercise, providing feedback on discrepancies between data they had collected from providers and submitted to QAA for 2007-08 and 2008-09 and that supplied by the Data Service for the same periods. All five AVAs experienced significant difficulty with the format and interpretation of the data, so that making comparisons was, in itself, both challenging and time-consuming. There were discrepancies in many areas, for which there was no obvious explanation, and one AVA concluded that it would still need to collect data from providers in order to verify the data received from the Data Service, thereby defeating the purpose of the exercise, as well as doubling the workload involved for the AVA.

The Access Data Development Group has therefore concluded, with regret, that more work is needed before we can rely on this mechanism for receiving accurate data at AVA level. Nonetheless, the objective is still considered worthwhile, and some of the pilot AVAs have volunteered to continue working with QAA and the Data Service on this project. However, for the time being, we will be asking AVAs to continue to collect data from providers using the established mechanisms.

Award titles and SSA codes: information request

Comparison of data about registered learners by Sector Subject Areas (SSAs), as received from AVAs and as supplied to QAA by the Data Service, shows some significant variations. We want to try to lessen the variation in this area and would therefore be grateful if AVAs could inform us, by Friday 7 May:

- What guidance (if any) does the AVA provide, or what factors are taken into account, for decisions about award titles for Access to HE Diploma courses?
- What guidance (if any) does the AVA give providers about how Access to HE courses should be coded in returns that are made to the Data Service?
- Given that QAA's 'z' subject course codes (that relate to combined subjects) are not used for SSA codes, should QAA continue to collect data against these categories, or should AVAs be required to classify all courses against SSA codes in their data returns to QAA? (What would be the advantages and disadvantages of making this change?)

Access headlines...Access headlines..

Coming soon

Art and design practitioners' meeting: 13 May, Birmingham

We're undertaking a small study to look at how grading is being handled in relation to the specific characteristics of art and design/creative arts courses. The first step is a consultation with art and design practitioners at a meeting to be held on Thursday 13 May in central Birmingham, at the Studio (www.studiovenues.co.uk). The meeting will be conducted by Julie Farmer, who will be joined by Professor Susan Orr, Professor of Pedagogy in Creative Practice, York St John University. Professor Orr is an expert on assessment in art and design and a member of the Access Qualification and Development Group. We hope that all AVAs will be represented and are holding places for two practitioners from each AVA, in the first instance. Please identify practitioners who can represent the AVA at this event. (Sign-up details will shortly be sent direct to AVA contacts for forwarding to providers.)

Access to HE conference: 17 June, London

The Access to HE conference on Thursday 17 June will provide an opportunity to celebrate past achievement and look forward to the future of Access to HE. The conference is to be held at BMA House, London, which is near Euston Station (www.bmahouse.org.uk/bmahouse.nsf).

Invitations will be going directly to AVAs and others shortly.

LAD codes

Any requests from colleges about Learning Aims Database (LAD) codes should now be directed to the Data Service (the Service Desk - 0870 2670001 or servicedesk@thedata-service.org.uk). It may be helpful to course providers to understand the following:

- 1 new courses (and changes to courses) are added to QAA's Access to HE courses database by the AVA responsible for a college's provision
- 2 QAA sends a monthly report to the Data Service, giving details of all courses added or amended within the Access to HE courses database
- 3 the Data Service allocates Learning aim codes to the LAD, according to its own internal processes
- 4 QAA has provided a hyperlink from our Access courses database to the LAD, so a provider can find their courses' LAD codes via the Access to HE website. The way in which this information can be accessed is:
 - go to the Access to HE website (www.accesstohe.ac.uk)
 - type the name of the provider into the keyword search for the courses database, which is on the website's home page
 - click 'course search'
 - (double click on the 'provider' column heading to sort the provider list, if necessary)
 - click 'view details'
 - the course record that is returned includes a 'Learning aim reference'
 - click on the hyperlink of the 'Learning aim reference': this provides a direct link to that course's page on the LAD on the Data Service's website.

QAA's role is to advise the Data Service about recognised Access to HE courses: it has no remit in relation to the actual allocation of LAD codes.

Grading

Clarification on procedures for late and unsuccessful assignments

Part I (section 3.6) of the Grading implementation handbook explains that 'if an assignment is late and unsuccessful, there is no opportunity for resubmission except via the referrals process'. Part J (section 4.1) makes no specific reference to this circumstance, however, and states that 'The awards board is able to consider a referral only where the resubmission process has been completed.' In this instance, 'the resubmission process' should be taken to include cases of late failed assignments, where an automatic entitlement to resubmission is not available. So such cases should be considered as referrals by the awards board.

Awards boards

Please make sure that providers are fully aware of the requirements made in Part J of the Grading implementation handbook, and that AVA arrangements are in place for awards boards. We are aware that there are some significant changes (including, for example, requirements about specific circumstances in which aegrotat awards may and may not be made). These may be new for providers and may require changes to former practices and policies.

Access to HE credit and qualification specification

QAA wrote to all AVAs in November 2008 with clarification about the qualification specification, following reports from HE admissions staff that information provided by Access to HE applicants suggested varying interpretations of the specification. AVAs were asked to ensure that no courses were operating in ways that were inconsistent with this guidance. However, HE admissions staff have again reported discrepancies between the qualification specification and the information presented on some UCAS applications. It could be that students have completed applications inaccurately or misleadingly, and we are considering how best to provide some guidance for students making UCAS applications. However, AVAs are asked to review sections 4 and 5, in particular, of the November 2008 clarification (now available on the website www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications) and make adjustments to courses as may be needed to be entirely consistent with the requirements.

Funding

In February, the Learning and Skills Council published guidance about funding for Access to HE in 2010-11, stating that 'Access to HE courses will continue to be considered as full level 3 qualifications for the purpose of defining priority provision.' It is important that providers are aware of this position. The relevant Guidance Note is available at <http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/nat-skillsfundingagencyguidancenote2-feb10.pdf>.

Thanks

- for comments on the draft operational description for the revised AVA review method. The proposals were positively received by AVAs, and revisions are now being made in a number of areas in which suggestions were received
- for corrections made to eradicate discrepancies between the Access course database and the AVA statistics submission. This has helpfully improved the quality of the course data held by QAA.

Published since the last bulletin

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

Learning from AVA review 2006-09
(www.accesstohe.ac.uk/avas)

Following the completion of the reviews of all 15 AVAs, an analysis was undertaken of the review reports, supplemented by information and comments received from reviewers and from AVAs. The information was then used to look at both the effectiveness of the review method itself, and the main messages emerging about AVAs. *Learning from AVA review 2006-09* reports those findings.

The report concluded that the AVA review method was generally fit for purpose and had been operated largely consistently throughout the review cycle. A detailed analysis of the conditions and recommendations set for the renewal of AVA licences indicated that the current licensing principles and criteria are well understood by AVAs and are used to develop effective systems and procedures. There is, however, scope for some modification and clarification of both the review method and in some details of the licensing criteria. There is also scope for considering, more precisely, the nature of good practice and potential enhancement within AVAs, with commendations being more targeted to specific systems or procedures that are worthy of dissemination. The report is feeding in to the development of the review method and other Recognition Scheme developments.

Access to HE courses: retention, selection and demand
(www.accesstohe.ac.uk/avas/AccessCoursesRetentionSelectionDemand.pdf)

The 2009 special appendix for the AVA self-evaluation reports focused on questions of retention, selection and demand. The purpose of this work was to shed light on differing retention rates, to investigate the use of retention benchmarks and selection strategies, and to facilitate the sharing of good practice in improving retention.

Most AVAs reported that providers had increased their emphasis on retention, and developed a range of strategies to improve retention. AVAs reported that most providers considered that retention rates had improved, although the difficulty in demonstrating a clear link between any particular action taken and any observed improvement in retention was recognised. Interestingly, the national data does not indicate any significant change in withdrawal rates.

Changes to recruitment and selection procedures were commonly noted and providers generally indicated that there had been positive outcomes as a result. In this instance, providers' views about improved success rates are reflected in the national data, where a major improvement over the last five years is recorded in QAA's data on the success of students registered to complete within the year.

The publication concludes by noting the strong overall demand for Access to HE courses in 2009-10, with AVAs describing increases as 'substantial' and 'dramatic'.

