

A student guide to the...

# Access to Higher Education Diploma



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# Access to Higher Education Diploma: the low-down

## A brief introduction

The Access to Higher Education (HE) Diploma is a qualification which prepares students for study at university. It is designed for people who would like to study in HE but who left school without the usual qualifications, such as A levels.

Many Access to HE students go on to succeed at university and beyond, with a large number pursuing new careers and seeing changes in their lives that they had never thought possible.

**'The Access to HE course...was probably the most crucial year of my life.'**

Sue Long, former Access to HE student

There are over 1,000 different courses leading to the Access to HE Diploma and courses are available in most further education colleges in England and Wales. Access to HE Diplomas are available in a range of different subjects, such as Access to HE Diploma (Nursing), Access to HE Diploma (Art and Design), Access to HE Diploma (Business Studies) and a range of others, so you should be able to find a course not too far away that caters for your interests or career ambitions.

**You can find details of all Access to HE courses at  
[www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)**

## What does an Access to HE Diploma course involve?

To achieve an Access to HE Diploma, you need to complete a programme that includes certain units of study in relevant subject areas. You'll be taught study skills - learning how to approach study and the different techniques that you'll need to be a successful student. The whole package of units will have been designed to ensure that you're thoroughly equipped for studying at university. For each unit successfully completed, you'll earn credits that gradually build towards the 60 credits that are required for the Access to HE Diploma.

Many people are nervous when they start an Access to HE course, particularly if they haven't been in a classroom for some time. Tutors are aware of this and take it into account in their teaching: you won't be 'thrown in at the deep end' or tested on things which you forgot years ago. Though you can expect the course to be challenging, the whole purpose of an Access to HE course is to help you to be successful.

## How long will it take?

Most Access to HE Diplomas can be completed in a year or less. For one-year courses, you will typically study for up to 16 hours a week in college (though there is some variation between different colleges), as well as doing a certain amount of private study outside classes. However, many people with family or work commitments prefer to study over two or more years, and most courses allow you to do this. There are also courses provided in the evenings or by distance learning if you need to continue with a full-time job while you study. You still have to accumulate the same number of credits, but if your circumstances change and you find that you can't complete the course in the time you'd planned, you'll be awarded the credits that you've earned. This gives you the flexibility to pick up where you left off at a later time and complete the course, if you're able to.

## Am I too old?

No! Almost everyone considering an Access to HE course worries that they may have left it too late. Your life experience will be valuable on the course and you'll find that other Access to HE students - and students in universities - are of a wide age range.

## What qualifications do I need?

One of the key features of Access to HE courses is that most don't require you to have any particular previous qualifications to start - and it doesn't matter how long it is since you last studied. The Access to HE course will help you to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence you need to prepare you for university, without any assumptions about what you may have done in the past.

If you're not certain which university course is best for you, you will receive advice about the different courses available, as well as advice about how to apply to university, while you're on the Access to HE course.

## Is the Access to HE Diploma recognised by universities?

Access to HE courses have been around since the 1970s and have been designed and developed with the support of universities. Access to HE is therefore widely recognised by UK universities.

When I hear that an applicant to my course is an Access student, I feel very reassured because I know that they will have a good grounding in knowledge and study skills to prepare them for programmes in higher education.

Dr Sarah Goode, Senior Lecturer, Health and Social Care Subject Group,  
University of Winchester

Each year, around 20,000 Access to HE students apply to universities across the UK. What's more, the framework for the approval of Access to HE courses is managed by the universities' own quality assurance organisation, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). A course which is recognised through this framework is permitted to use the Access to HE logo (right), and this also appears on the actual diplomas which are awarded to students.



## How do I apply?

Once you've found a course you're interested in, simply contact the course provider and they will advise you about what you need to do next. There will be forms to fill in and you may be invited in to the college to discuss what you'd like to study and whether Access to HE is suitable for you.

Most courses start in September, with recruitment starting the previous January and going through to the summer before the course starts. However, courses have different start dates: colleges will be pleased to hear from you at any time if you want an informal chat about your options.

## How much does it cost?

The cost depends on the course and your circumstances. Many Access to HE students don't have to pay fees and you may be able to get financial help towards other costs, such as travel or childcare.

You should contact the Access to HE provider well in advance to discuss your own situation. There's a range of financial support that you may be entitled to apply for, including:

- learner support funds
- grants and bursaries
- employer support.

You can also find information and advice on getting financial help from the adult learning areas within the education and learning pages at [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

## Can I do the Access to HE Diploma?

Do any of the following sound familiar? If so, an Access to HE course may be for you.

'I'd always planned to go on to further study but with one thing or another life somehow just took over.'

'I felt a strong desire to push myself to something new, to achieve something.'

'I was...unemployed, living with my parents and felt I had no future.'

'I was...working anti-social hours for very little money.'

'I'd been to 11 schools by the time I was 12 and I guess this messed up my education.'

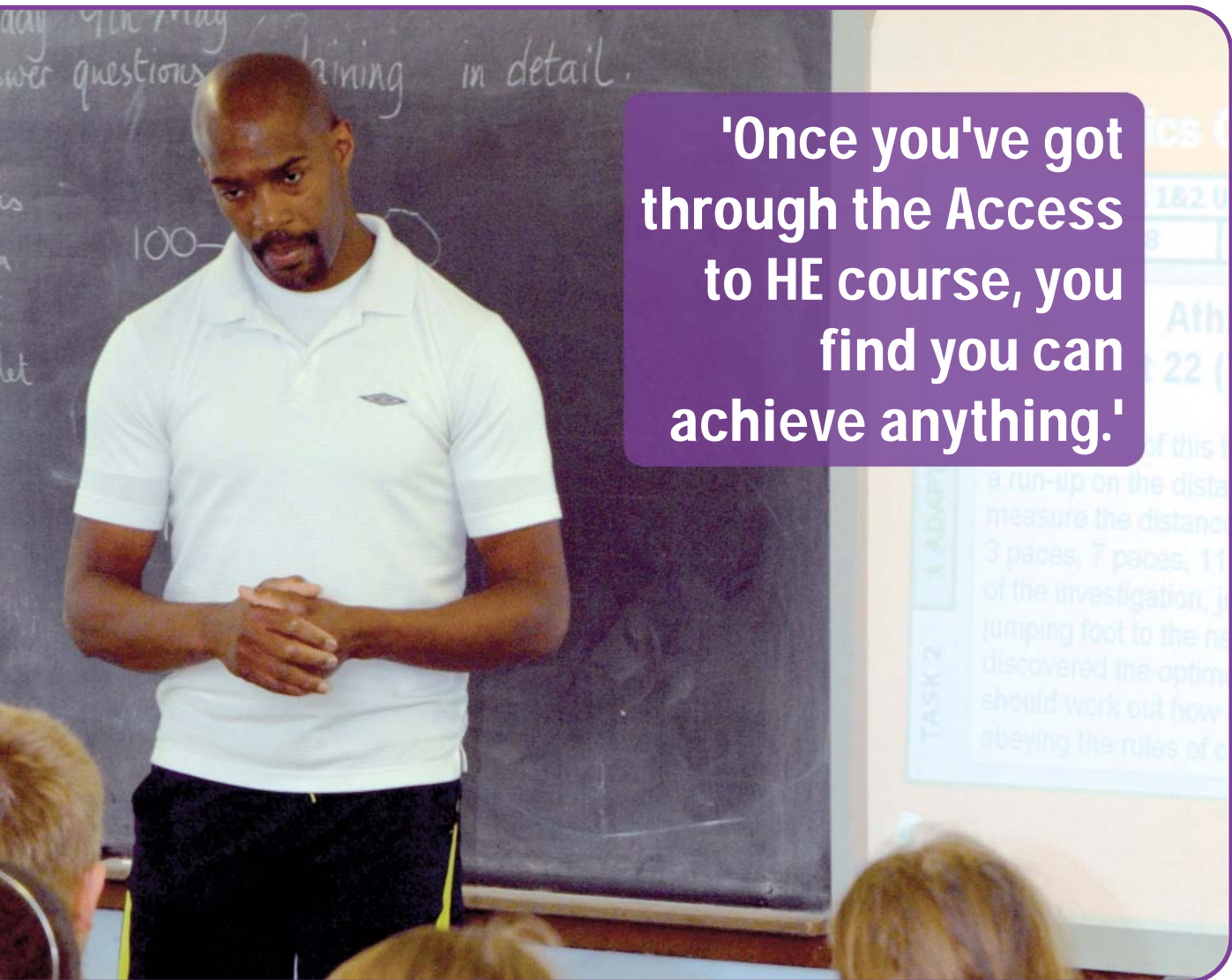
'I left school at 15 with no qualifications. I thought you had to be super-brainy and super-rich to go to university.'

'No-one from my family had ever been to university. In the sort of background I grew up in, that didn't come into the equation - you just left school and went to work.'

Read on to learn more about these former students  
and how Access to HE transformed their lives.

**Access to HE students**  
**Case studies**





**'Once you've got through the Access to HE course, you find you can achieve anything.'**

## **Case study 1: Ian Webber**

**Ian worked as a restaurant manager for a fast food chain before he enrolled on the Access to HE course. He is now a primary school teacher.**

*Ian Webber*

*1998: Access to Health Careers, Sutton Coldfield College*

*2001: BA (Hons) Sports, Physical Education and Community Studies, University of Birmingham*

*2002: Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), University of Birmingham*

*2007: Teacher at Coppice Primary School, Sutton Coldfield*

When I left school, I'd always planned to go on to further study but with one thing or another life somehow just took over. In the back of my mind I think I'd always wanted to be a teacher. Later, I coached a basketball team and this made me realise that I really enjoyed teaching kids.

I was 32 years old and working as a restaurant manager when I decided to enrol on the Access to HE course. I attended an open day at Sutton Coldfield College and met some former students who told me how the course worked and how it had helped them.

To become a teacher, I needed GCSEs in English and Maths. Fortunately, I could do these as part of the Access to HE course. I took the part-time option so I could continue to support my wife and our one-year-old son. I found jobs that I could fit around my course.

**'I coached a basketball team and this made me realise that I really enjoyed teaching kids.'**

At times, I did find it difficult to get to classes on time - I was juggling three different jobs (milkman, running a concession stand and a nightclub doorman), but the tutors understood the situation and my wife gave me a lot of support. I guess I became highly disciplined: I wanted to succeed and so I just kept at it.

The Access to HE course set me up really well for study on my degree at the University of Birmingham. It's a funny thing, but once you've got through the Access to HE course, you find you can achieve anything - because you've already learnt how to study.

A woman with short brown hair, wearing a blue short-sleeved uniform with white piping and a name tag, is smiling warmly. She is standing in a clinical or hospital environment, with medical equipment and a fan visible in the background. Her hands are clasped in front of her.

'The Access to HE course introduced me to the concept of organised study.'

## Case study 2: Gabrielle Holmes

Gabrielle was a full-time housewife before she enrolled on the Access to HE course. She is now a midwife.

## *Gabrielle Holmes*

*2001: Access to HE, Harrogate College*

*2004: BSc (Hons) Midwifery, University of Leeds*

*2007: Midwife at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust*

**I was 36 years old, a mother of four boys (ages two, seven, nine and 13) and a full-time housewife when I enrolled on the Access to HE course at Harrogate College.**

**I wanted to get back to work but I just couldn't face going back to the same type of office work I'd done previously. I felt a strong desire to push myself to something new, to achieve something. My youngest son was two and the time just seemed right.**

**I chose to study part-time so that I could attend classes at night when my husband could take care of the children. At times it was tricky juggling family life with studies and, looking back, I'm not quite sure how I did it. During the days, I'd study while my youngest was at playgroup. Then in the evenings I'd get my books out again once the children were in bed.**

**'The Access to HE course kick-started my self-belief.'**

**The Access to HE course introduced me to the concept of organised study and prepared me for the time and effort I would need to put in if I was going to succeed at university.**

**After completing the course, I set myself the goal of achieving a First Class honours degree and worked my socks off to achieve it. It's taught me that I can achieve anything and I feel I've set a good example for my children.**

**The Access to HE course kick-started my self-belief. It opened up a whole new chapter for me. Would I be where I am now if I hadn't done the Access to HE course? No way!**

**Access to HE courses are the ideal way back into education. With the help of Access to HE, it's never too late to get your degree.**



'Access to HE gave me the opportunity to start afresh, build a career and improve my self-worth.'

### **Case study 3: Dr Erik Johansson Cox**

Erik was unemployed before he enrolled on the Access to HE course. He is now a research scientist.

## *Dr Erik Johansson Cox*

*1995: Access to Science and Technology, Liverpool Community College*

*1999: Master of Physics (MPhys), University of Liverpool*

*2003: PhD, University of Liverpool*

*2007: Research scientist for the Institute of Materials Research and Engineering, Singapore*

**I was 31 years old, unemployed, living with my parents and felt I had no future. The Access to HE course gave me a second chance at a decent life. Now I've got a good job and a standard of living that I'd never dreamed of.**

**With the help of the Access to HE course I'm enjoying a career that has taken me around the world. I took a master's degree and then went on to be awarded a PhD from the University of Liverpool. Since then I've held positions in the United States of America and am currently based in Singapore.**

**Before I took the Access to HE course, I just wanted to get a job, any job. The course seemed to be my only option for a better future.**

**I found the Access to HE course easier than I'd first expected and realised I was smarter than I first thought.**

**It was a great learning environment because there were many other students in my age group and in similar positions. There was a great sense of camaraderie among us and the tutors were excellent.**

**The Access to HE course gave me a head start at university in comparison to the younger students coming in with A levels.**

**Access to HE gave me the opportunity to start afresh, build a career and improve my self-worth. Probably best of all I've made my parents very proud and happy.**

**'There were many other students in my age group and in similar positions.'**

**'I definitely couldn't have taken a degree without first completing the Access to HE course.'**



## **Case study 4: Nneka Akudolu**

**Nneka was working as a waitress before she enrolled on the Access to HE course. She is now a Criminal Barrister.**

## *Nneka Akudolu*

*1997: Access to Legal Studies, Tower Hamlets College*

*2001: LLB Law and Politics, Cardiff University*

*2002: Bar Vocational Course, called to the Bar*

*2007: Criminal Barrister, Chambers of Philip Singer QC*

**I was in a waitressing job, working anti-social hours for very little money. I had to step back and look at my options, but with four GCSEs to my name I felt I didn't really have many!**

**I saw an advert for an Access to HE course taught at Tower Hamlets College. I didn't have any particular career ambitions when I enrolled on the course - I just wanted to get a degree and see where that took me.**

**At the beginning of the course, I found it daunting to get back into studying and doing homework after being out of education for so long, but that soon passed.**

**The tutors were incredibly helpful and motivating, and the students supported and encouraged each other. I was surprised I enjoyed the learning so much. But the real highlight for me was when I received an offer of a place at Cardiff University.**

**I definitely couldn't have taken a degree without first completing the Access to HE course. I had bags of confidence after completing the course.**

**I now have a good job, which will hopefully enable me to be financially stable in the future. My earning capacity has increased enormously.**

**'I didn't have any particular career ambitions when I enrolled on the course - I just wanted to get a degree and see where that took me.'**



**'The Access to HE course gave me a level of fulfilment that I hadn't experienced before.'**

## **Case study 5: Susan Nelson**

**Susan worked as a sales coordinator for a construction company before she enrolled on the Access to HE course. She is now a course coordinator at a college.**

## *Susan Nelson*

*1992: Access to Humanities, Coleg Glan Hafren*

*1995: BSc (Econ) Hons Sociology, University of Wales, Cardiff\**

*1997: MSc Sociology, University of Bristol*

*2006: PGCE, Cardiff University*

*2007: Access to HE course coordinator at Coleg Llandrillo Cymru*

**My father was in the Army while I was growing up and this meant we moved around a lot. I'd been to 11 schools by the time I was 12 and I guess this messed up my education. I left school at 15 with no qualifications and went to work as a goods inward clerk.**

**As time went by, I started to feel intellectually frustrated. I worked in a series of unskilled jobs because I could never prove to anyone that I could do anything more challenging. But all the time I felt sure I was capable of a lot more.**

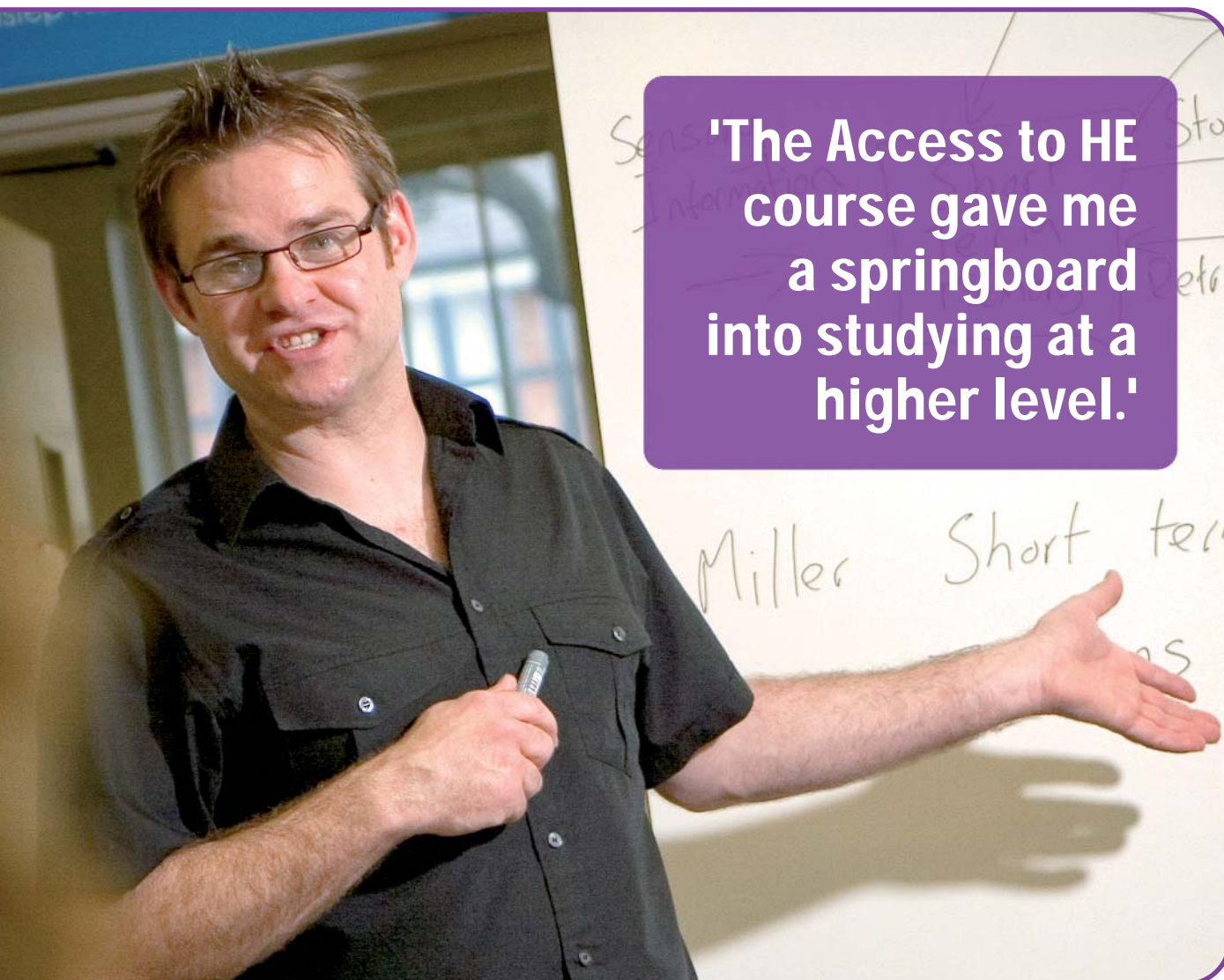
**I was 43 years old and a mother of two school-aged children when a friend told me about the Access to HE course. We decided as a family that we could manage without my earnings for a year while I did the course.**

**'The tutors were so enthusiastic and understood our learning needs really well.'**

**The Access to HE course gave me a level of fulfilment that I hadn't experienced before. The tutors introduced us to subjects and ideas that we'd never come across before - it opened our eyes to a new way of seeing things. The course was really well planned.**

**The tutors were so enthusiastic and understood our learning needs really well. When your confidence was beginning to wobble they'd step in with the right advice. As the course progressed, I learnt how to get the best out of myself and I continued to apply those skills throughout my time at university.**

\* now Cardiff University



**'The Access to HE course gave me a springboard into studying at a higher level.'**

## **Case study 6: Scott Ellis**

**Scott worked as a coal miner before he enrolled on the Access to HE course. He is now a college lecturer.**

## Scott Ellis

*1998: Access to Social Sciences, North Derbyshire Tertiary College\**

*2002: BA (Hons) Social Policy, Sheffield Hallam University*

*2006: MA Social Science Research Methods, Sheffield Hallam University*

*2006: Certificate in Education, North Nottinghamshire College*

*2007: Lecturer at The Dukeries College, Nottinghamshire*

**No-one from my immediate family had ever been to university. In the sort of background I grew up in, that didn't come into the equation - you just left school and went to work at the coalmine. I was 26 when I attended an open day at the college and was advised to consider doing the Access to HE course.**

**I decided to enrol on the part-time course to improve my longer term career prospects. Initially I thought that I'd go into a career in social work, but my interests changed as I progressed through my studies.**

**'I learnt how to manage my time and how to prioritise.'**

**To support my family during the course, I continued to work full-time at the coalmine and managed to fit study in between my shifts. The course helped to improve my knowledge, increase my confidence and raise my aspirations. I learnt how to manage my time and how to prioritise. I found the assignments quite straightforward and it was a great thrill to pass the course.**

**The things I learnt on the Access to HE course gave me a springboard into studying at a higher level. After my degree I took an MA and got a distinction and an award for Best Overall Student. My working hours and conditions are now so much better, my health has improved and all of these things have made a big difference to my family's quality of life.**

\* now part of Chesterfield College



**'The Access to HE course completely changed my life. I had no idea that it would be such a major stepping stone to other things'.**

## **Case study 7: Sue Long**

**Sue was working in the housing department at a city council when she enrolled on the Access to HE course. She worked until recently as a further education access officer.**

## *Sue Long*

*1999: Access to Arts and Humanities, Cambridge Regional College*

*2003: BA (Hons) History, Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge*

*2007: Further education access officer, University of Cambridge\**

**I left school at 15 years old with no qualifications. I thought you had to be super-brainy and super-rich to go to university. No-one in my family had ever been so there was no pressure. I did what everyone did back then and took a typing course.**

**'I made new friends, found I actually enjoyed learning and I developed new interests.'**

**I was 45 years old, a mother of two and working in the housing department of the city council when I found out about the Access to HE course. I'd done quite well in my job but without a degree I couldn't go a lot further.**

**I met people in professions where a degree was required and they weren't that different from me. I started thinking 'maybe I've missed out here'.**

**The Access to HE course completely changed my life. I had no idea that it would be such a major stepping stone to other things. It was probably the most crucial year of my life.**

**The tutors were absolutely fantastic. Many of them had also been mature students. They knew how to motivate us and keep us going.**

**I got a real buzz out of being in the classroom with such a variety of people of different ages, ethnicity and background. I made new friends, found I actually enjoyed learning and I developed new interests.**

**I kept thinking to myself 'I can't believe I've got this second chance'.**

\* Sue is currently enjoying a career break in South America.

**Find out more about previous  
Access to HE students at  
[www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)**



## Further information

If you would like further information on Access to HE courses in your region, contact your local access validating agency (AVA).

<b>Assessment and Qualifications Alliance</b>	<b><a href="http://www.aqa.org.uk">www.aqa.org.uk</a></b>
<b>The Cambridge Access Validating Agency</b>	<b><a href="http://www.cava.ac.uk">www.cava.ac.uk</a></b>
<b>Hampshire Access Validating Agency</b>	<b><a href="http://www.hava.ac.uk">www.hava.ac.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College Network West Midlands Region</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnwmr.org.uk">www.ocnwmr.org.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College Network Eastern Region</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocner.org.uk">www.ocner.org.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College Network East Midlands Region</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnemr.org.uk">www.ocnemr.org.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College Network London Region</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnlr.org.uk">www.ocnlr.org.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College Network North East Region</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnner.org.uk">www.ocnner.org.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College of the North West</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnw.com">www.ocnw.com</a></b>
<b>Open College Network North West Region</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnnwr.org.uk">www.ocnnwr.org.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College Network Oxford, Thames and Chiltern</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnotc.com">www.ocnotc.com</a></b>
<b>Open College Network South East Region</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnser.org.uk">www.ocnser.org.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College Network South West Region</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnswr.org.uk">www.ocnswr.org.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College Network Wales</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnwales.org.uk">www.ocnwales.org.uk</a></b>
<b>Open College Network Yorkshire and Humber Region</b>	<b><a href="http://www.ocnyhr.org.uk">www.ocnyhr.org.uk</a></b>

## About QAA

QAA regulates the national recognition of Access to HE courses. We are responsible for assuring the quality of recognised courses and the adequacy of standards of student achievement on these courses.

To ensure we meet these responsibilities, we have established the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*.

The Recognition Scheme has three elements:

- national level: QAA has overall responsibility for the management of the framework, and the implementation of the Recognition Scheme
- regional level: regionally responsive AVAs are licensed by QAA to approve Access to HE courses and to award the Diploma to students
- local level: providers of Access to HE courses deliver the courses and recommend learners to the AVAs for the award of the Diploma.

**Visit [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)  
to find out more about the work of QAA**

**Visit [www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)  
to find out more about the Access to HE Diploma**

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