

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education



Access to Higher Education Development Project

Part 2: research reports

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Access to Higher Education development project

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Section A – research undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

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Discussions with HE admissions staff (QAA 1)

Purpose

- 1 The purpose of these discussions was to identify the views of those who are involved in the admissions process in HE about the development of Access. The aim was to elicit views from this constituency about the current fitness of the Access certificate as a qualification for progression to HE, as well as providing an opportunity to collect ideas about ways in which developments of the qualification might facilitate improved progression into HE for Access students.

Method

- 2 An invitation to participate in discussions was issued to admissions staff working in HEIs in England and Wales. Participants were informed in advance of likely areas for discussion: the current strengths of the Access to HE qualification; factors that help or hinder admissions staff in making fair admissions decisions about Access students; information that is currently available that helps admissions staff make their decisions about Access applicants, and further information that would be useful to assist sound decision-making; the current 'image' and visibility of Access to HE in the admissions arena; areas for development; and ways in which QAA's involvement could bring about improvements.
- 3 Four 'round-table' discussion groups were held during October 2003. A range of institution types and roles relating to HE admissions were represented within each group. Participants included those involved in making individual admissions decisions (from a variety of discipline areas) and those with a more general, institutional role. As an essentially self-selecting group, most of those attending already had a particular interest in Access, and about 25% of participants had a specific widening participation or access brief within their own institution. A number also had direct experience of Access programmes, largely through their involvement with the work of a local authorised validating agency (AVA), having acted as a moderator or sat on an Access recognition panel. Thirty-three HE institutions were represented. (See Appendix A for participating institutions.)

Outcomes - overview

- 4 The nature of the main strengths identified and concerns expressed was similar in all of the groups. While discussions gave an opportunity to identify strengths, as they were intended to identify areas for development, there was an inevitable focus on areas which, from participants' viewpoint, might require change.

Strengths identified

- 5 Access to HE programmes were thought to provide a good general preparation for HE, and positive attitudes were expressed towards Access students as learners in HE. Most students are well prepared for their HE experience and are successful in achieving an HE qualification. Access programmes were regarded as effective in building mature students' confidence in a supportive environment, and the Access certificate was felt to be a meaningful indicator of students' motivation and commitment.
- 6 Those involved in admissions at the institutional level are, in general, familiar with Access, and, notwithstanding some of the difficulties noted below, generally now regard the Access to HE certificate as a 'mainstream' qualification. The involvement of HE in programme recognition and moderation is considered valuable, and national recognition for Access through the involvement of QAA is regarded as important.

- 7 The role of Access in preparing students from under-represented groups was appreciated, and it was noted that Access helped HEIs to meet widening participation targets, and contributed towards a more diverse HE student profile.

Concerns expressed

i Inconsistency in requirements for the award of the Access certificate

- 8 The major concern, expressed by participants in all groups, related to inconsistency between different programmes' requirements for the award of the Access certificate. Participants commented on the considerable diversity in the requirements that exist both between and, in some cases, within, individual providers. The inconsistency was seen primarily in terms of the different credit targets that existed for different programmes.
- 9 While the variation in credit totals was regarded as the most obvious manifestation of inconsistency, concerns were also expressed about the different ways in which those credit totals were arrived at. Mention was made of the effect for fair admissions practices when the numbers of credits available differed on different programmes, so that students on one programme may not be able to meet a credit-based offer made to students on a different programme, and the same credit total achieved by different students could indicate differing proportions of successful completion; variation in different programmes' requirements for the level of achievement of different parts of the programme; variation in types of evidence for achievement at level 3; and differing regulations, for example in relation to re-sitting modules.
- 10 These differing credit requirements and regulations were perceived by some as an indication that the qualification was not standardised. It was felt that the Access award meant different things to different providers, and that this presented a weakness in the national scheme. It was suggested that, as well as creating difficulties for admissions staff, this position undermined confidence in the equivalence of standards of achievement of different Access programmes. Because of this situation, many admissions staff were concerned about being able to make fair and transparent offers to Access students, and some felt that the perception that standards were variable was related to a reluctance, in certain areas of their institutions, to consider Access candidates.

ii Programme content – skills

- 11 Access students were considered, in general, to be at an advantage in relation to other mature students, with better time and study management skills. Some reservations were expressed, however, about particular areas of preparation. Most common among these reservations was a perceived need for better preparation for formal examinations; some also thought referencing skills needed improvement.
- 12 Inconsistency was again raised as an issue in relation to the core skills elements of Access programmes. The variations in practice and requirements for GCSE equivalence by different AVAs and different providers were also noted as posing difficulties. There was substantial support for greater commonality of core skills requirements on Access programmes, although it was recognised that identical requirements for all programmes (eg Access to Nursing and Access to Art and Design) would be unhelpful, and some degree of flexibility would be needed. The need for the involvement of relevant professional and statutory bodies in determining core skills was highlighted.

iii Programme content – subject knowledge

- 13 It was noted that there were no common curriculum guidelines for programmes leading to the same HE route. Many thought there was too much variability between programmes, and it was suggested that, because programmes were primarily centre-developed, there was a need for 'pegs to hang programmes on' to achieve greater national consistency. Some felt that subject benchmarks would help in this regard.
- 14 In some areas, it was felt that subject-specific knowledge was not always sufficient. The problem was felt to be particularly evident in relation to certain maths or science-based HE routes, where a significant knowledge base may be required to embark on an HE

programme. In general, it was felt that, while the curriculum and content of Access programmes worked well as a preparation for humanities and social sciences routes, other areas could be more problematic, and Access students would be more likely to experience difficulty with maths or science-based HE programmes.

- 15 There was some discussion about the different types of preparation provided by general Access to HE programmes and their appropriateness for specific HE routes. There was particular comment about the demands of some vocational routes, especially where a professional body had statutory or other requirements. There were differing views about how this influenced the requirements for different areas, with some vocational disciplines (such as nursing) apparently looking for a very close relationship between the subjects studied pre-HE and the HE route itself. Some other vocational routes (such as law or teaching) were thought to require a broader general education pre-HE, and it was felt that students needed a wider range of knowledge and skills, with a less explicitly vocational focus in the subject content of their Access programme. It was agreed that it was unhelpful when Access programmes provided coverage of the same areas covered in Year 1 of an HE programme.

iv Programme types

- 16 The possibility of the development of Access awards of different sizes was explored. Some thought there might be a market for a short programme that was specifically located as a top-up for those students who already had a 'matriculation' qualification but had been out of study for some time, and needed some kind of refresher programme, with the main emphasis on study skills. It was noted that APEL appeared under-used for a route where students were likely to bring significant work/life experience to their study.
- 17 Otherwise, the main view expressed was that the 'holistic' nature of the Access certificate was useful, and that the integrity of the Access certificate was important for its credibility. Concerns were expressed that any fragmentation could lead to a dilution of standards. The view was also expressed that it would make recruitment more difficult: it was thought that there needed to be a clear cut qualification and that, while there was uncertainty about what was represented by achievement for the current Access to HE certificate, this would be an unhelpful move which would lead to further confusion.

v Programme development and quality assurance

- 18 The best working model was considered to be one wherein a strong relationship was established between an HE provider and a range of local Access providers, which helped to develop a relationship of trust. Some mentioned local examples where this already existed, either through the local AVA or through other consortium arrangements. It was suggested that there was potential for further involvement but that the ownership of programmes by single FE providers for funding created difficulties: it was suggested that consortium funding could help extend the availability of programmes.
- 19 Doubts were expressed by some participants about the effectiveness and robustness of quality assurance processes on some Access programmes, particularly in relation to moderation, which was felt to need clearer attention to standards. Other processes (such as programme recognition) were felt by some to be too bureaucratic, with too little emphasis on programme content, while others felt the process worked well.

vi Information about programmes

- 20 Some expressed the view that, because of the diversity of Access programmes, it was more important to have detailed programme information, with a complete breakdown of individual units or modules, before being in a secure position to make an offer, and this put a time-consuming onus on admissions tutors to find out details of programmes of individual Access applicants. It was felt that, while information about individual programmes was generally available on request, it was not necessarily transparent.
- 21 While admissions staff developed a detailed knowledge about local programmes, they sometimes had difficulties in making reasonable offers to Access students from programmes unknown to the institution, and it was thought that this created barriers for students from outside an institution's area.

vii Information about student achievement

- 22 Many participants regarded the information available about student achievement as insufficiently detailed or reliable. A common view was that the Access certificate, identifying only a threshold level of achievement, did not provide a fine enough instrument for making objective judgements about students' suitability for particular HE programmes, and other information was not comprehensively available.
- 23 It was also argued that this position presented a difficulty for maintaining equity in admissions: because differentiation in individuals' achievement was not identified in the award, institutions had difficulty in providing clear and transparent selection criteria for Access. This created problems both in terms of selecting between Access applicants and in terms of selecting between Access applicants and those coming through other routes. Where the criteria for admission of other candidates was framed in terms of achievement beyond a threshold level, it was not possible to provide equivalent criteria for Access. Concern was expressed about implications for the fair treatment of all applicants in these circumstances.
- 24 There were particular problems on high-demand courses, and it was suggested that the 'pass/fail' nature of the Access certificate disadvantaged Access applicants for such courses. It was recognised that this situation sometimes led to admissions tutors increasing credit requirements, and that this was not a reliable means of identifying the best candidates. Those who expressed support for the introduction of a grading system argued that it would improve access to over-subscribed HE courses by providing a transparent means of selection which would be equitable to all students.
- 25 The absence of a systematic means for differentiation between Access students' achievement increased the reliance on other methods of selection which some regarded as less reliable, or which placed extra requirements on students. In particular, there was greater reliance on references. It was recognised that it was difficult for Access tutors to provide a helpful reference in time for students' applications to meet UCAS deadlines, but while it was common practice to request a later second reference, some felt that they were still left to 'read between the lines' of a reference.
- 26 There was not universal support for the introduction of grading: some individuals strongly opposed it and considered that it was unnecessary, being satisfied that they could make offers on the basis of the achievement of the Access certificate and other information provided by the applicant. Those who were satisfied with the present system also argued that a system of graded achievement would require the detailed specification of grade boundaries, and much more elaborate systems and mechanisms to identify and confirm reliable graded achievement. Concerns were also voiced that HEIs would want to 'outbid' each other if grading were introduced, to the disadvantage of Access students.
- 27 Some saw the qualification as being 'outside the system' because there were no UCAS Tariff points attached to it, and recommended inclusion of the Access certificate in the Tariff. Some reservations were expressed about the implications of such a move, reservations which were principally connected with the difficulty of placing an undifferentiated qualification on the Tariff, with concerns for the status of the qualification if it were marked at its present threshold level.

viii Image

- 28 There was felt to be a problem because Access was not 'marketed', but it was felt that successful marketing depended on greater clarity about what the Access certificate represented and improved credibility of the award. It was suggested that negative images were often based on ignorance, and statistical evidence about student success was felt to be an important element in countering such perceptions. A shift in emphasis from a local to a national brand, with local programmes being more strongly identified with the national brand was advocated. Currently, however, the national identity of Access was felt to be rather weak.

Appendix A: institutions represented in round-table discussions (QAA 1)

- Anglia Polytechnic University
- University of Bath
- Bath Spa University College
- Bishop Grosseteste College
- University of Birmingham
- Bolton Institute of Higher Education
- Bournemouth University
- University of Brighton
- Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College
- University of Cambridge
- University of Central England, in Birmingham
- University of East London
- University of Exeter
- University of Glamorgan
- Goldsmiths College, University of London
- Guildford School of Acting
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Leicester
- London College of Printing
- The London Institute
- The Manchester Metropolitan University
- The University of Manchester
- Open University
- University of Salford
- Sheffield Hallam University
- Southampton Institute
- The Surrey Institute of Art and Design University College
- University of Teesside
- University of Wales College Newport
- University of Wales Swansea
- University of Warwick
- University of the West of England, Bristol
- Wimbledon School of Art

Discussion with regional HE widening participation representatives (QAA 2)

Purpose

- 1 The discussion was intended to elicit the views and suggestions for development of those with strategic involvement in HEIs' widening participation work, in relation to the place of Access within the broader context of policies and initiatives for widening participation in higher education.

Method

- 2 A single regional Aimhigher - Partnerships for Progression group, which had significant engagement with the development of Access in its own region, was identified. Appropriate representatives from all HEIs within that region (the South West) were invited to take part in discussions. Participants were informed in advance of likely areas for discussion: opportunities for growth and development in Access provision; effective structures and mechanisms for stimulating development of provision; relationships between HE and FE through AVAs, and articulation of these with other cross-sector partnerships; strategic fit of QAA-recognised Access to HE and other widening participation initiatives in HE; areas for development in the regulatory framework for Access to HE and the nature of Access programmes; and promotion and marketing.

Outcomes

Flexibility

- 3 In pursuing its own development work in relation to Access provision, the group had noted that the Access Recognition Scheme was more flexible than some had thought, and it was suggested that perceptions of the Scheme might be a problem. The group had worked with the local AVA on work-based learning developments and saw the potential for flexibility in Access in work, institution, and community-based developments with a variety of delivery models. While flexibility of delivery might be difficult to achieve for some Access providers because of institutional and funding constraints, it was observed that there was also a tendency for providers to think primarily in terms of a one-year full-time model, and then add variations to that model: this could limit the development of more radical possibilities.
- 4 It was observed, however, that flexible systems always required clear and explicit overarching rules and requirements. In this context, it was noted that the Recognition Scheme allowed considerable flexibility for AVAs, and the importance of having principles to govern the development of Access was noted.

Strategic developments

- 5 It was suggested that, while the potential for flexibility existed, there was a problem with a lack of drive and initiative to 'stitch things together' strategically. It was agreed that a clear link between Access and Aimhigher would be the most helpful strategic development, as Aimhigher was currently the single vehicle for tying together HE and FE providers and their respective funding bodies in the widening participation area, and funding development would be an important factor in taking Access forward.
- 6 It was noted, however, that a possible outcome of the integration of Aimhigher and Excellence Challenge was that the focus of widening participation work would move further towards the younger age group, and this could damage the effectiveness of Access in recruiting adults. The observation was made that, even when the emphasis was on the young, Access still played a role through the impact of successful adult learners on communities. It was concluded that, if by linking Access to Aimhigher it brought more emphasis to older learners, that would be a positive outcome: it would, however, be a retrograde step if, in that process, Access became subsumed and lost in Aimhigher and the distinctiveness of the Access 'brand identity' were lost.

- 7 AVAs were thought to provide a good mechanism for HE/FE articulation and cooperation, but it was suggested that the current number of AVAs might be too great. This contributed to a lack of consistency, as well as maintaining too many small organisations which were unable to have a strategic impact. A system with fewer, regionally based AVAs would provide a better means for strategic cooperation between HE and FE and would be consistent with a larger regionalisation agenda, including HE regional activity and the proposed regional grouping of LSCs.

Development of vocational and specialist routes

- 8 It was noted that, although Access was well placed to contribute to Aimhigher objectives to develop vocational routes, different areas were currently unevenly served by Access programmes. Nursing, for example, was a particular strength in Access, whereas there were currently few Access programmes in certain other vocational areas, such as hospitality or media.
- 9 There was felt to be an unresolved issue about the extent to which general Access to HE programmes and those which were clearly defined by progression route were able to provide equivalent and adequate specific subject preparation for HE: this affected both vocational and some specialist academic routes. It was recognised that general Access programmes (particularly those delivered by small, rural providers) often attempted to meet a wide range of vocational and other specialist needs. While this may be necessary, in order to maximise recruitment and thereby maintain programmes' viability, there was concern that students could be being offered a false prospectus with a programme which suggested it could lead into a range of areas for which the content of the programme would not, in fact, be able to provide preparation in sufficient depth.
- 10 It was suggested that, in order to address this and to avoid restricting opportunities to progress to certain routes, regional cooperation might be needed, through which the Scheme could respond to varying student interests and providers' needs for economy and viability through multi-modular programmes which extended over more than one provider, with certain specialist modules, which attracted numbers too small to maintain viable separate provision, being available only in certain specified centres.
- 11 There was a concern, however, that, in developing more vocationally specific routes, care should be taken to avoid 'shoe-horning students into programmes'. It was observed that many adults were undecided about a particular progression route when they embarked on an Access programme, and too great an emphasis on vocational routes could reduce opportunities. The general Access programme had an important role for such students.

Consistency

- 12 The variability of programmes, and particularly the variation of credit targets, was identified as an area for essential development. One of the pre-requisites for doing this was dealing with the number of units with similar credit value but different requirements. This proliferation of units could be addressed through continued rationalisation and standardisation of units. Some felt that much greater standardisation was needed nationally. In particular, it was suggested, there was a need to devise a common suite of core units in maths, communications and IT (and build in GCSE equivalence) to be shared between programmes. A longer-term aim might be to achieve a common curriculum infrastructure through a national framework of units with a standard template, using standard levels and credit definitions.
- 13 A potential tension was identified in attempts to move towards greater consistency and the need to maintain responsiveness of programme development and fitness for local needs. However, it was argued that responsiveness would be maintained through the development of new programmes and a greater emphasis on responsiveness to changing HE needs. In this context, it was noted that only a sub-set of institutions received Access students in significant numbers, and some felt that this was because Access was not currently meeting the needs of all institutions. It might be possible to manage the different requirements of different institutions at the regional level, if receivers specified their

requirements, which could be mapped against specific units. Programmes could be built from common units, or new units developed, if necessary, to ensure that Access could meet those different needs, and learners would be advised about particular units which were needed for admission to particular institutions.

- 14 One of the current perceived problems with the Access Certificate is that admissions tutors do not always know enough about programme contents and standards. Regional consortia could help by developing and providing this information with AVAs.

Grading

- 15 In considering the information available about programmes, the question of grading was raised, but opinions on this subject were divided. Some felt strongly that grading should be avoided, regarding it as being 'against the whole ethos of Access', and likely to 'reinforce an elitist system'. They argued that a group of HEIs, acting collectively, ought to be able to distil the essence of what a potential entrant should need, providing a common definition of requirements for entry. The view was also expressed that grading posed potential difficulties for students who gained the Access qualification at the minimum pass level and were unable to travel, so having limited choice of progression. The view was proposed that grading could undermine the value of the Access Certificate to such students and make progression difficult if all institutions in an area required achievement beyond the threshold level.
- 16 Others questioned the resistance to grading, and saw no reason to suppose that institutions currently accepting students with a pass on an Access certificate would increase that demand. It was thought unreasonable that, where students with other qualifications would be made an offer on the basis of achievement at a particular level, for Access students there was just a 'yes or no' option. It was difficult for institutions to provide a transparent definition of their requirements for Access.
- 17 It was noted that this issue was linked to the possible inclusion of Access on the UCAS Tariff: from an institutional point of view, if Access went into the Tariff without being graded, there would be concerns because of the effect on league table positions for institutions with significant numbers of students at the threshold level. This could act as a disincentive to admit Access students to those institutions which already admitted few.

Other areas for consideration

- 18 **Preparation for different types of HE programme.** It was noted that relatively small numbers progressed from Access to HNDs and Foundation Degrees. It was suggested that Access awards differentiated by size might provide better preparation for different types of qualifications. Some felt that this might provide a potentially useful mechanism to avoid grading certificates.
- 19 **Learners with disabilities.** It was noted that the available statistics suggested that Access had been relatively unsuccessful in reaching learners with disabilities (although under-reporting was known to be a problem). It was recognised that this area sometimes presented particular challenges, and additional funding was often required for effective support. Aimhigher funding was thought potentially useful in this area.
- 20 **Promotion and marketing.** Improved promotion and marketing was thought to be very important. It was suggested that QAA's involvement could be used more fully in improving the Access profile in HEIs. The Access logo was thought to be under-used and not widely recognised. It was also suggested that guidelines about what should be included on the Access certificate could be clarified, together, perhaps, with the development of transcript requirements.

Discussions with representatives of key stakeholder groups (QAA 3)

Purpose

- 1 The purpose of these discussions was to gather views and ideas for the development of Access from national organisations with an involvement in policy relating to widening participation in higher education and specific interest in the development of Access provision.

Method

- 2 A single interviewer held a series of individual, largely unstructured discussions with representatives of 13 national organisations (see Appendix B). While this format was designed to encourage wide-ranging and in-depth consideration of participants' own particular areas of interests in relation to the development of Access, participants were informed of likely areas for discussion in advance: the balance between diversity of provision and consistency of quality and standards; the description of achievement on Access programmes; opportunities for and barriers to Access students' progression; under-developed areas and potential areas for further development; the relationship between the Access Recognition Scheme and other widening participation initiatives and areas of policy. These points were used to provide a common framework of reference and as specific prompts during discussions.

Outcomes

- 3 This was a heterogeneous group, and while all participating organisations have an interest in Access provision, representatives brought different perspectives to discussions, reflecting their own particular organisation's areas of interest and expertise. Common areas of concern were raised, but participants provided different emphases in their assessment of where there was a need for particular attention and in their views about ways in which the concerns should be addressed. The summary of responses provided in Appendix A (*Discussions with representatives of key stakeholder groups – summary of responses*) attempts to capture that range of informed voices.
- 4 The responses recorded during discussions were grouped under the themes that were raised most frequently. As a result, not all of the many detailed points and developed arguments made about a wide range of matters have been captured in this summary. Each set of responses was then further divided into two categories: 'problems identified' and 'solutions offered' in order to focus on the specific suggestions for change and development. In some instances, the 'solutions' recorded here were not offered by those who had identified the 'problems', and some of the 'solutions' (see below) may be incompatible with others if all were to be implemented. In addition, 'solutions' were not identified for all of the 'problems' that were raised, although some possible solutions may be implicit in the statement of the problem.
- 5 This classification of responses is not intended to suggest that there is common agreement among all participants or a unified view about ways forward, but is an attempt to bring out particular measures that have been proposed by one or more representatives of this expert group.

Summary of specific 'solutions offered'

(for detail, refer to Appendix B - *Discussions with representatives of key stakeholder groups – summary of responses*)

During discussions, it was proposed, in relation to the main 'problems' identified, that the following measures would assist development:

A. Consistency

1. a qualification benchmarking scheme;
2. greater commonality of programmes, with a common core of key skills;
3. subject benchmarking for Access;

B. Description of achievement

4. a common credit target for the Access qualification;
5. a more transparent record of achievement;
6. development of grading;

C. Flexibility and innovation

7. focused resources made available to encourage development and innovation;
8. flexibility through credit;
9. targets to change the culture around Access in colleges;
10. development of links between Access and HE provision in FE centres;
11. development of work-based learning into Access to improve progression from Access to Foundation Degrees;
12. developing links with industry and improve dialogue with employers, offering benefit to employers;
13. work with professional bodies to ensure acceptance of Access qualification;

D. Funding

14. funding body to change the funding principles;
15. ensure national funding available close to providers to stimulate innovation, and to support AVAs to encourage and coordinate this innovation;
16. Access to feature as route to achieve the Level 2+ target for adults;
17. funding of Access to be transferred to the HE funding body;
18. look again at how consortia work;
19. learner support (perhaps an adult allowance) to be made available;

E. Strategic developments

- 20. clearer articulation with HE widening participation work;
- 21. AVAs to be involved in local strategic partnerships;
- 22. closer relationship between Access programmes and HEIs;
- 23. build on relationship between Access and Tomlinson recommendations;

F. Image and promotion

- 24. raise the profile and promote awareness of Access;
- 25. develop link between Access and Aimhigher to raise profile of Access;
- 26. use of successful case studies/exemplars for promotion;
- 27. ensure that those who provide careers advice have up to date information about Access programmes as a route into various professions;
- 28. Access to be mainstream qualification.

Appendix A - Discussions with representatives of key stakeholder groups – summary of responses (QAA 2)

Problems identified	Solutions offered
A. Consistency <i>'There is a need for greater consistency.'</i>	
1. There is a lot of concern, even among those otherwise broadly supportive of Access, about the lack of consistency among programmes.	Assurance of consistency on Access could be improved through non subject-specific benchmarking scheme by QAA, such as it has recently produced for Foundation Degrees.
2. There is a widespread perception that the only thing these courses have in common is the name.	There is a need for greater commonality of programmes, with a common core of key skills.
3. Where HEIs accept Access qualification without additional requirements, this is often done on the basis of the student commitment and motivation signalled by the Access certificate, rather than certainty about content or level of programme.	If the whole of HE can be engaged in benchmarking, and the standards are applicable for the whole of the, very diverse, HE sector, it should be perfectly possible in Access.
4. The increased emphasis on progression in HE means retention and success of Access students has become more important.	Institutions need reassurance about standards
5. The change to 19+ is likely to mean that more Access students will apply to institutions further afield, increasing the importance of national consistency.	Important to retain generic qualification with portability and national recognition – entitlement to choice of institution.
6. Calls for consistency can be just calls for neatness and tidiness.	
B. Description of achievement <i>'There is currently a lack of transparency about the Access qualification.'</i>	
1. Transparency about qualifications has become standard in HE. HEIs are aware of the extent of variation in Access course requirements. Each course has to be separately assessed by HEIs before a fair offer can be made.	A set number of credits should relate to the qualification, not the curriculum content.
2. The language of 'competencies' is insufficient for the reality of differential achievement: students are disadvantaged by a competency-based qualification.	A more transparent record of achievement is needed.
3. Development of credit transcripts has significant logistical problems in making effective and reliable across a range of awarding bodies.	
4. There are difficulties with selection because ungraded qualification produces reluctance in some HEIs.	Grading is a key point for development.
5. HE is not always persuaded by an assertion that students should be admitted, unless they are convinced of the evidence that students are prepared for HE.	The qualification must be meaningful: it must indicate what the student can do.

6. Entry to the UCAS Tariff would require defining a national minimum level of achievement. 12 level 3 credits as minimum Level 3 requirement for Access seems very low when compared with other HE entry qualifications.	
7. While undifferentiated, only threshold pass can be defined and Tariff points would be allocated at that level. If Access were in the Tariff without grading, it would be awarded at very low level because few points would be available for current volume of study. Once an equivalence is formally established at a low level (whether informally or through the UCAS Tariff) this is likely to lead to <u>further</u> restrictions to Access students being able to progress to certain courses/institutions.	It becomes inevitable that consistent definitions of differentiated achievement must follow definitions of threshold achievement.
8. The need for demonstrable 'equivalence' between Access and other qualifications, takes no account of the particular strengths of Access students.	The element of life experience in the Access certificate matters.
9. Legitimacy of Access qualification questioned because awarding bodies do not inform UCAS of student results – currently depends on student to inform HEIs.	Should AVAs inform UCAS of student results directly?

C. Flexibility and innovation

'There is a sense of a lack of flexibility. It feels like a one-year, full-time course.'

1. While there have been pockets of innovation, no national mechanism exists for building on those or spreading them more widely, beyond word-of-mouth connections. Much Access activity therefore continues to be of a 'traditional' nature and even that which has responded to other developments, such as the creation of modular pathways, is for ease of delivery, not about fundamental change or creative thinking about new ways to attract additional groups.	More flexibility could be achieved by the adoption of a national framework scheme. A better solution is more flexibility and opportunities for curriculum design at the local level throughout the system. There is a need is for national consistency and transferability, but local responsiveness.
2. The funding/target position has hampered growth, as Access programmes have not extended their reach into new areas, and providers are more likely to look to other possibilities for meeting needs which arise.	Innovation occurs where funding is made available to support it. Colleges can be funded to innovate. There is a need for focused resources to encourage development and innovation (particularly in relation to curriculum development) in this area.
3. There should be more flexibility in delivery (eg twilight models, intensive summer schools). Access courses are usually long and expensive. This could be a deterrent for some.	Flexibility should be maximised through credit. Credit should be entirely about outcomes. If learning outcomes are properly defined, they can define end achievement, irrespective of course length.

4. The problem is to do with the history and culture of Access to HE. Access programmes carry their history and traditions with them, and are perceived as an area of provision which may have had its day. The general profile is of an area of provision that has served a useful purpose but may not do so for much longer.	Targets are important in providing managers with levers to change cultures in colleges,
5. There is a lack of connection with other areas of curriculum development and, in many centres, Access programmes occupy a 'special place' which is highly defended by those involved in course delivery.	FE also plays significant role in HE delivery: links though from Access programmes, to HE provision in FE could be better exploited.
6. Potential for Access development in work-place provision. Concern about capacity of AVAs to take responsibility for significant strategic development in business and industry. AVAs very much identified with mainstream FE and voluntary and community groups.	AVAs need a cultural change to be effective in developing links with industry (though recognised that all have found it difficult to establish effective working partnerships with industry). The FE-employer dialogue needs to improve, and needs to offers benefit to (rather than just seeking support or investment from) employers. Work with professional bodies is necessary to ensure their acceptance of Access qualification and avoid rejection of Access students post-graduation.
7. Foundation Degrees are at HE Level 1, so a lower level award would not be appropriate. Access for Foundation Degrees providing a lesser preparation are not the answer. There is a particular need for Foundation Degree students to be 'oven-ready' because a shorter course provides less time for 'growing in' to the course. There would be concerns about a system of programmes which declared themselves appropriate to one HE route only, as 'Access to Foundation Degrees'.	Consideration should be given to how to introduce work-based learning into Access to improve progression from Access to Foundation Degrees. While description of programmes by specific route may be helpful in 'marketing' terms, it is important to avoid over-specification/over-specialisation of programme content for those with significant gaps in their general education.
8. In preparing students for HE, there is a tension between what's appropriate for the students being prepared, and preparing students for what HE is like.	Access course development should not be driven entirely by current HE practice.

D. Funding***'There are funding hindrances which make innovative models difficult to fund'***

1. Because funding is based on the nature of programme delivery which already exists, this discourages innovation, particularly where a new model may attract small numbers in the first instance (and provision is not on NQF). There is a problem for providers about 'critical mass' (particularly in considering work-based learning) which tends to drive them towards more traditional models of large numbers of students in the same place at the same time, doing as many hours as	National funding needs to be made available close to providers to stimulate innovation, but AVAs also need support to encourage and coordinate this innovation. AVAs should play a more strategic role and be more proactive in working with providers. This is not a planning role, but a dynamic role which takes account of the strategic context.
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<p>needed to qualify for full-time funding, but no more than the minimum because of the expense of staff time. (This situation discourages, for example, the use of APEL for learners to contribute to the overall qualification. It is not in the provider's interest to allow students to be exempt from parts of an approved programme of study.) Alternative models are nearly always more expensive, and some of the most 'creative' models are actually merely a response to this difficulty, maximising teaching by the use of mixed-provision classes. Other alternatives often prove more attractive – particularly in the context of HE funding (eg P4P funding makes it possible to deliver types of provision with a smaller volume of study which is difficult under LSC funding regulations.)</p>	<p>In order to effect change, the funding body would need to change the funding principles and FE managers would need to see it to their advantage to challenge some traditional practices.</p>
<p>2. The absence of funding for growth is an obvious disincentive to providers and encourages them to look elsewhere for funding this type of provision.</p>	
<p>3. Equally important are LSC targets which determine LLSCs' and providers' frameworks for planning. The absence of clear targets for Access, or clear guidance which indicates to LLSCs and providers how Access provision might contribute to targets results in uneven understanding and willingness to fund Access. It also creates a waste of staff energy, which has to be spent in making a persuasive case to the LLSC for the funding of individual programmes.</p>	<p>Access should feature as route to achieve the Level 2+ target for adults.</p>
<p>4. The local priorities of LLSCs and emphasis on local vocational and skills shortages is not always helpful for Access programmes and the need to make a case for funding based on their ability to meet other targets may skew them in a particular direction which is not necessarily helpful for the broader widening participation mission. As many Access students take their qualification elsewhere, local targets of this kind are not necessarily appropriate for this type of provision.</p>	
<p>5. LSC has had difficulty in meeting current targets. If this leads to increased focus on 16-18 year olds, at expense of adults, funding for Access could become still more vulnerable.</p>	<p>Development of Access needs to be driven with vigour. If you want funding to have this effect, you have to ask 'Who are the beneficiaries?' Here the answer is 'HE', so the money should be put in the hands of the HE funding body.</p>
<p>6. HEIs' autonomy to make decisions to develop provision (and the amount of money currently available) is not, generally, available to FECs. HEFCE/LSC consortium funding for developing these kinds of innovative projects, but little trickles through to FE. Nearly all consortia are HE-led and decisions about how to spend the funds are mostly made by the HE partners: no reason for the huge differences in money that goes to HE and that which filters down on FE. Rare for FECs to be equal partners in these arrangements.</p>	<p>Need to look again at how consortia work.</p>
<p>7. Inequitable position where Access students are not eligible for student loans,</p>	

but are liable for course fees. Courses fees (£400-£500) for adult students are an obvious disincentive, even where these are remitted, and differing practice between different colleges is unhelpful (and unfair). Obvious problems with comparison with HE Level 0.	
8. Numbers of Access students went down as funds available went down. Local authority awards were withdrawn and nothing was available to replace them.	Learner support (perhaps an adult allowance) should be made available.

E. Strategic developments

1. In centres there is a tension building between the links they have with HE re Access and links established through other teams and networks. The preserved 'special place' of Access programmes and teaching teams can exacerbate this.	There must be much clearer articulation with HE widening participation work. HE involvement through QAA is critical – a real strength.
2. AVAs' involvement with P4P links are variable and patchy – where it is real it makes a significant difference to the strength of the AVA	Effectiveness of AVAs related to how well they map on to other partnerships. Important that AVAs are involved in local strategic partnerships.
3. HE acceptance of the qualification for admission is critical.	Local responsiveness a real strength. The ability to work closely with HEIs is important.
4. Need for emphasis on changing demography: ageing population (unless explicit reference is made to older learners, risk they will be ignored); more people working for longer (need for up-skilling this older workforce, as well as older adults' entitlement to education); increase in participation in work by women; migration and need for recognition and conversion of overseas qualifications.	The FE base of Access work gives it a natural advantage for widening participation because of localness of FE and institutions' capacity to reach community groups etc through their outreach networks. Curriculum structures give potential for feeding people through from much lower levels. FE able to make significant contribution because of essential ethos about widening access to education and meeting community needs. Innovation occurs to attempt to achieve this, but this is often in spite of other pressures, eg funding steers.
5. HE is interested in admitting Access students but wants to be reassured that those students will succeed. But FE perceives HE as creating barriers. Difference lies in the 'comprehensive' nature of FE and the inevitably selective nature of HE.	A closer relationship between Access programmes and HEIs (therefore greater trust) is important.
6. There are parallels between current Tomlinson proposals for Diploma and standard Access Certificate. Discussions trying to avoid fixing age to stage In the long term, if Tomlinson proposals work through, may be that Access will no longer be needed. But if Tomlinson not in schools until 2010, this is v long-term	Makes sense to preserve that closeness and build on it. Need to maintain common core (to include HE skills). It would have to be credit based. Different views about whether all parts of diploma need to be at Level 3, but probably more like

view (probably 10 years to impact).	Access with some parts at Level 2. But Diploma will be graded.
F. Image and promotion 'There is a need to raise the profile and promote awareness.'	
1. There is a problem with a lack of visibility of Access.	A link between Access and Aimhigher would raise profile of Access, both with HEIs and, through the Aimhigher machinery, with the general population.
2. Access has a weak profile in HE. The relatively small proportion of Access entrants to pre-'92 universities is a matter for concern, indicating a lack of recognition or confidence in the qualification.	QAA's involvement in Access is important in ensuring and monitoring quality and standards.
3. Access has image problems. It's associated with middle-class women returners (the 'soft' end of widening participation). There is currently no overwhelming case for re-branding. In spite of concerns about consistency etc, Access does not have an 'image problem': it actually has a lot of positive associations.	The various unhelpful (and largely inaccurate) ideas about Access (eg it's essentially for middle-class women returners), suggest that re-badging for Access might be a good idea.
4. There is an absence of national promotion, and marketing is a problem. Word of mouth (on which Access largely dependent) is a problem, and provides an equal opportunities challenge, because it tends to attract more of the same kind of people.	Successful promotion can be achieved with successful case studies. Raising awareness through the use of a range of exemplars gives a clear sense of what it can do for different people and helps to challenge the perpetuation of inaccurate stereotypes. The long-established position of Access gives it an advantage in this respect, with so many 'success stories'. Important to emphasise what it's for. It's important to ensure that those who provide careers advice have up to date information about Access programmes as a route into various professions.
5. Access has a 'poor relation' status. The 'uniqueness', 'difference' 'special' reputation works against it as much as for it. Does emphasis on mature learners discourage application from younger adults? Does emphasis on disadvantaged groups discourage those who are not?	Access should be a mainstream qualification.

Discussions with representatives of key stakeholder groups (QAA 2)

Participating organisations:

- **Association of Colleges (AoC);**
- **Council of Municipal Universities (CMU);**
- **Department of Health (DoH);**
- **Education and Learning Wales (ELWa);**
- **Higher Education Further Council for England (HEFCE);**
- **Higher Education Further Council for Wales (HEFCW);**
- **Learning and Skills Council (LSC);**
- **National Open College Network (NOCN);**
- **National Institute for Adults in Continuing Education (NIACE);**
- **Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP);**
- **Teacher Training Agency (TTA);**
- **Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS);**
- **Universities UK (UUK)**

Discussions with former Access students (QAA 4)

Purpose

- 1 The purpose of this piece of research related to the project objective to consider how Access courses might be made 'more attractive' to adult learners. It was considered important to attempt to gauge the extent to which adults in the general population are aware of Access, in order to help identify barriers which may exist in increasing the number of Access students.

Method

- 2 Records of discussions with former Access students, conducted as a part of QAA's AVA review schedule, were examined with reference to one common area of questioning at review meetings. The question 'How did you find out about the Access course?' was asked of former Access to HE students at 21 AVA review visits carried out in England and Wales, between April 1999 and November 2003.
- 3 Verbatim notes of meetings were considered, and responses categorised. There were 100 separate responses recorded. This does not include responses from all students present, as not all students answered the question that had been posed.

Findings

- 4 Responses can be categorised as follows:

1. Providing college	51
• <i>student enquiry</i>	(24)
• <i>current/previous student</i>	(17)
• <i>advertisement</i>	(8)
• <i>open days</i>	(2)
2. Word of mouth	18
3. HEI referral	11
4. Careers and other advisory services	8
5. PSB advice	2
6. Learndirect	1
7. Unclear/other	9
Total	100

- 5 There is no indication of any trend or movement between categories over the period during which responses were collected.

Providing college

- 6 Most students (51) found out about Access through a providing institution. Of these, 24 had approached the college with a general enquiry and, once there, had received advice or been given course literature. Advertising (mostly in local newspapers) and various promotional measures (brochures and prospectuses, open days, 'signs in college') had played a role for some, but, on the whole, it was a secondary role, with most students having already gone in to the college before they noticed any explicit marketing of Access.
- 7 Respondents frequently indicated that progression to HE was not their primary goal when they started to make their enquiries ('went in to do pottery and within a week was enrolled

in everything'). Rather, they tended to be 'looking for something to do'; ('had a year to play with...all very vague...phoned around...someone said "how about Access?"). Some simply 'went to college and asked what they had to offer', while others were re-directed after approaching the college with the initial intention to 'go on another course'. Indeed, some found out about Access when they were not even considering a course for themselves, being in the college for some other reason altogether, such as the woman visiting the college with her daughter who was considering hairdressing courses and the local postman who was delivering post to the college.

- 8 A number of those who came to know about the Access course from the providing college (17) had already been attending the college on a different course. In some instances this next step was instigated by the student him/herself ('I did a computer course the previous year and it gave me the itch to carry on'; 'I'd done a course at the college the previous year and it seemed a natural progression'); but, very commonly, the student had been advised to consider the Access course, either on completion of, or instead of, the course on which they were already enrolled. Often, it is individual tutors who are instrumental in encouraging progression in these instances ('did evening class in environmental studies and someone asked if I was thinking of doing a degree and advised Access'; '...doing another course: tutor said Access more suitable'; 'decided to return to study...and tutors said "Why don't you try Access?")

External advisers

- 9 Twenty-one of the students were referred by external advisers, including higher education institutions (11), careers or other advisory services (8) and professional and statutory bodies (2). This group was more likely to include those with specific career ambitions. Those with an express wish to study in HE usually contacted the HEI as a first step, and it was the HEI which then suggested Access as a possible entry route.

Word of mouth

- 10 Word of mouth personal recommendations accounted for a significant proportion (18%) of responses. Those recommending Access were mostly friends or family and, in one instance, 'my daughter who's ahead of me on the same course now'.

Conclusions

- 11 The responses suggest that general awareness of Access is low. Very few students were apparently aware of the existence of the Access programme before they started to make enquiries, and many indicated that they had 'never heard of it' before someone else suggested it to them. Several respondents drew attention to the fact that Access '...does seem a very low key thing...' and even those who completed the Access course often had a rather vague awareness of the place of Access in relation to other qualifications ('wasn't until I'd done it and met others that I realised it was national'.)
- 12 Colleges provide a key source of information and advice, and progression from lower level courses in the college plays an important role. However, it would appear that, on the whole, it is the prospective student who makes an initial, general enquiry: few seem to be attracted through targeting, marketing and promotional mechanisms.
- 13 Indeed, the element of chance was noticeable in responses ('bumped into it'; 'stumbled over Access really'; 'found it by accident'). While some were involved in a purposeful and deliberate pursuit of a career change, there is seldom a sense in the responses of students coming to the Access course as part of a considered 'life plan'.
- 14 It might be fair to conclude that, if Access courses are to become 'more attractive' to potential students, it will be important to ensure that they are more widely known about than currently appears to be the case.