

## Written evidence submitted by QAA

### Closing the Learning Gap – Opening Up Opportunities for Adults

The purpose of this call for evidence is to gather the views of key stakeholders, partners and providers on their top priorities for adult learning in 2016 and over the next 5 - 10 years.

The deadline for written evidence is 20 May 2016.

**When responding please state whether you are responding as an individual or representing the views of an organisation.**

*Please tick the appropriate boxes below*

<input type="checkbox"/>	I am responding as an individual
What is your name, job title, address, email and telephone number?	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I am responding as an organisation
What is your name, job title, address, email and telephone number?	
Julie Farmer Head of Access QAA Southgate House Southgate Street Gloucester GL1 1UB  <a href="mailto:j.farmer@qaa.ac.uk">j.farmer@qaa.ac.uk</a>	

Please tick a box from the list of options below that best describes you as a respondent.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Business representative organisation/trade body
<input type="checkbox"/>	Business
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)

	Local Authority/ Combined Authority
	Local authority provider of adult and community learning
	Specialist designated institution
	FE College
	FE sector representative organisation/trade body
	FE independent learning provider
	Higher Education Institution
	FE charitable or not-for-profit learning provider
x	Other education (please describe) Quality assurance body
	Trade union or staff association
	Charity or social enterprise
	Student representative body
	Individual
	Policy adviser (please specify area of interest)
	Other (please describe)

## Introduce yourself

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is a higher education charitable company which is limited by guarantee and whose members are representative organisations of the higher education sector: Universities Scotland; Universities UK; Universities Wales; and GuildHE Limited. QAA does not distribute profits to its members or otherwise. The directors of QAA are appointed by the members and other representative organisations within the education sector which include UK Council of Colleges, Department for the Economy (NI), HEFCE, HEFCW and SFC, students in the HE sector as well as other independent directors from industry and the professions.

QAA regulates the Access to Higher Education Diploma, a level 3, credit-based qualification that provides a progression route into higher education specifically designed for adults who left formal education without the qualifications needed for entry to undergraduate study.

The Access to HE Diploma (the Diploma) is unique in that it is regulated by an HE sector body, building on its roots in the Council for National Academic Awards' (CNAA) establishment of a national framework for Access courses in 1989. The Access to HE Recognition Scheme ensures the involvement of higher education in all aspects of Diploma design and quality assurance, through its requirement that there are representatives of

higher education on the boards and committees of Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), the awarding bodies licensed by QAA to award the Diploma.

QAA gathers and publishes data about Access to HE students in its annual Key Statistics document (see <https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/The-Access-to-Higher-Education-Diploma-Key-Statistics-2013-14.aspx>).

## **Executive summary**

This response concentrates on the Access to HE Diploma ('the Diploma') and the courses that enable adult students to achieve it.

The Diploma is a successful adult education qualification:

- preparing adults for HE progression since the 1970s
- designed for adults
- provides academic skills for progression to HE
- regulated by QAA and has the active involvement of HE providers
- over 40,000 students annually.

The Diploma motivates disadvantaged adults to engage in learning because:

- it is tailored to the needs of adult students
- fully-funded for some, loans funded for the rest
- teaching approach appropriate for adults
- links between providers and higher education.

The Diploma is demand-led:

- local flexibility in design
- awarding bodies can develop new Diplomas quickly to respond to demand
- funding regime is responsive
- Adult Learning Loans funding responds to student demand
- Adult Learning Loan 'write-off' for Access students who complete their Diploma and their HE qualification.

Potential barriers to the Diploma meeting demand:

- changes in FE funding as apprenticeships are prioritised
- changes in HE funding, such as maintenance loans and withdrawal of nursing bursary
- rationalisation of providers through Area Reviews and possibly devolution.

Evidence of impact of the Diploma:

- Access students progressing to HE – 235,560 in the past 17 years
- Access students entering HE compared with other entrants:
  - older age profile
  - larger percentage from disadvantaged neighbourhoods
- significant numbers entering skills shortage subjects such as nursing.

Evidence of the cost-effectiveness of the Diploma:

- higher rate of sustained learning than other adult learners taking level 3 qualifications
- lower fee levels than comparable level 3 qualification offered by universities.

Three major policy developments necessary to secure the future of the Diploma:

- support for blended and online learning
- continuation of the loan 'write-off'
- explicit commitment to encouraging mature students to enter and remain in HE.

## **Written submissions are invited addressing the following points:**

### **What is working well and/or not working well with regards to adult education in England?**

1. The Access to HE Diploma has a long history of successfully preparing adults for progression to higher education. Some of the features of the provision that are regarded as contributing to this success are that it has:
  - been provided by further education and adult education providers throughout England and Wales, offering a very local service
  - offered a range of modes and patterns of study (such as part-time or intensive) to meet the diverse needs of its target audience
  - offered a diverse range of subjects, but always with an emphasis on developing the academic skills necessary for higher level study
  - always required the active participation of higher education in the design, approval and quality assurance of the qualification (since 2006, known as the Access to HE Diploma).
2. In 2013, QAA introduced a new specification for the Diploma, creating a more nationally consistent qualification. This made it possible to include the Diploma in the UCAS awarding body linkage (ABL) arrangement (permitting the results of Access to HE students to be electronically submitted by AVAs to universities) and in the new UCAS tariff, which will be used for entry from 2017 onwards (UCAS, 2015).
3. Widening participation profiles are evident among Access to HE student cohorts. Of the 2014-15 cohort of 42,755 registered students, 36 per cent came from a deprived area, and approximately 80 per cent were aged 21 or over (QAA, 2016).
4. The Access to HE website ([www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)) contains numerous case studies of individuals whose careers have followed the Access to HE trajectory from no level 3 qualification to the Diploma, then to a degree, and in many cases on to postgraduate study. The word frequently used about the Access to HE experience was that it was 'transformational'.

### **What policies and/or practices best motivate disadvantaged adults to engage in adult learning?**

5. Research evidence (Busher et al, 2015a and 2015b; James et al, 2013; Jones, 2006) and feedback through QAA's annual monitoring of AVAs indicates that the special features of the Diploma that proved motivational to such students were:
  - local availability of a curriculum offer that could be tailored to reflect the specific subject interests of students and link to their life experiences, demonstrating that they had skills and knowledge that could transfer to the academic context
  - full funding for students for whom it was their first full level 3 qualification
  - the availability of 'pre-Access' programmes (not QAA regulated) for those individuals not yet ready to succeed in a level 3 programme. These have sometimes been known as 'pre-Access' and have been locally determined, being of different sizes, duration and content to meet the individual needs of adults returning to learn after many years out of education.
  - the teaching approach of tutors experienced in delivering the Diploma and working with adult learners, who are able to establish mutually respectful adult relationships with students ('not like school'), build confidence quickly in often nervous return-to-learn

individuals, and progress within a short space of time to challenging them to perform strongly at level 3

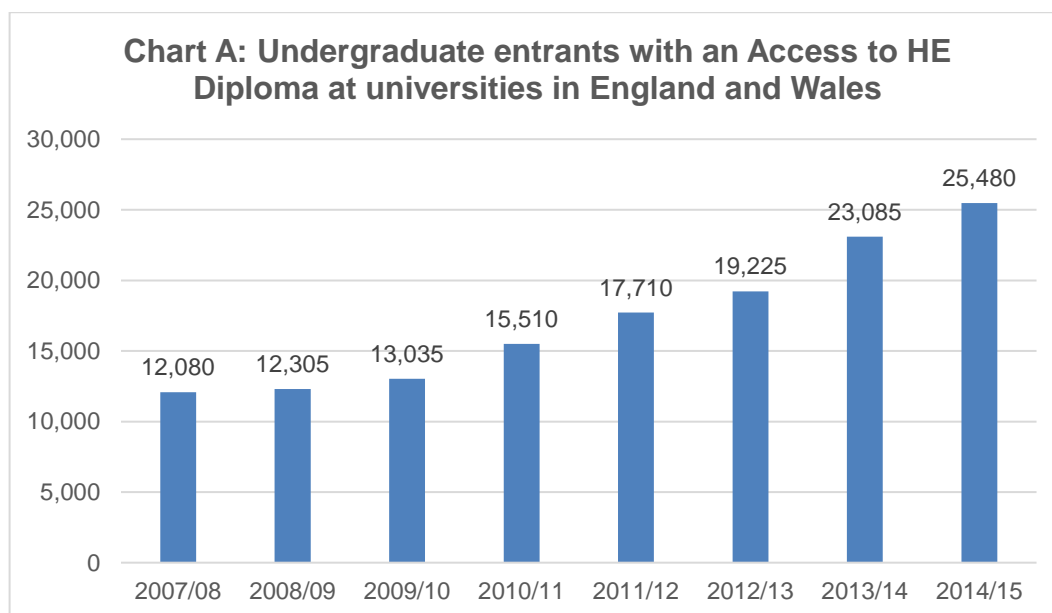
- liaison with other college support services to support individuals with mental health or other personal issues
- peer support and networking
- the availability of delivery options that fitted with family commitments, such as class times between 10.00 and 15.00, nursery facilities on site and intensive programmes (several long days within a week) that fitted with working commitments.
- aspiration raising through collaborative working with higher education providers, facilitating guest speakers, visits, and taster sessions in higher education settings.

### **Do we have a sufficient demand-led approach to adult education? If not, what more needs to be done?**

6. A core feature of the regulatory framework established by QAA for the Diploma is that it allows for some local flexibility in the design of Diplomas to reflect the specific admission requirements of particular subjects or of progression routes available locally to students taking their Diploma with a particular provider (which is most likely to be an FE college). AVAs are also able to develop Diplomas in new subjects relatively quickly. This allows providers to respond to local demand.
7. The funding regime has also, for many years, operated in a way that has generally allowed Access to HE providers to attract growing numbers of students, and subsequently to grow their provision and introduce Diplomas in new subjects.
8. In 2013-14, the co-funding of students over the age of 24 taking a level 3 or 4 qualification was replaced by the requirement for full fees to be paid, or for students to take out a 24+ Advanced Learning Loan. Data from BIS suggests that, so far, the impact of this policy has been generally positive for Access to HE students, with 19,270 applications in 2013-14 and a slight reduction to 17,060 applications in 2014-15 (in the context of an overall decline in all applications between the two years). Take up of these loans has also been relatively good, with 14,410 loans (84 per cent of all applications) ready for payment in 2014-15 (BIS 2015a; 2014), representing approximately two-thirds of Access to HE students in this age group. Any negative impact of the loans policy for Access to HE students must also have been ameliorated by the government's decision that the Student Loans Company would write off any outstanding loan balances owed for an Access to HE course once a student has completed a higher education course. As John Hayes MP, Minister in 2012 said: 'Access courses are designed to help those with low qualifications but high ambitions progress into HE; it is our duty to support those learners.'
9. From 2016-17, these loans are to be extended to the 19-23 age group (renamed Advanced Learner Loans) and the 'write-off' of the loan will continue and also be applied to this age group. The Diploma is also included in the qualifications within the legal entitlement, through which learners between the ages of 19 and 23 taking their first full level 3 qualification are entitled to full funding (currently provided by colleges through their Adult Skills Budget, and from 2016-17 through the new combined Adult Skills Budget). This applies to a significant proportion of Access to HE learners. Any downward pressure on the Adult Education Budget, much of which is ring-fenced for apprenticeships, may therefore have an impact on the number of such learners that colleges can afford to recruit.

10. Take up of Access to HE is also influenced by the funding available for higher education. The replacement of student maintenance grants with loans in higher education may have a negative impact on Access to HE recruitment. As discussed below, a large proportion of Access to HE students currently progress to degrees in nursing, so there is further concern in providers that the removal of the bursary for nursing may also deter adults from taking up the related Access to HE courses.
11. A significant proportion (around 80 per cent) of the 300 or so providers of Access to HE are colleges of further education. The restructuring of post-19 education and training through area based reviews, which are aiming to create 'fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers' (BIS, 2015b, p 3) could have a negative impact on demand for Access to HE courses. There are reports from AVAs that mergers that result from area reviews have in some cases led to the concentration of Access to HE provision in one campus of a merged organisation, where perhaps previously there had been provision in a number of locations. This is especially pertinent for Access to HE students, many of whom have family or caring responsibilities, or need to continue to work while studying, which makes it difficult for them to travel to provision based in a town or area other than the one they live in. It is also as yet unclear what the impact will be of the devolution of aspects of adult education funding.
12. Structural and financial factors may therefore have a negative impact on the levels of take up of Access to HE provision, but in the context of unsatisfied demand.

**What evidence is there on the impact, added-value and/or cost-effectiveness of adult education?**



13. Since QAA started collecting data 17 years ago in 1999, 235,560 Access to HE students have been accepted into higher education. The actual number is inevitably higher than this, but the progression data for Access to HE courses that were offered from the mid-1980s until 1999 were not systematically collected. In recent years the numbers progressing to higher education have grown annually (Chart A). In 2014-15, the majority of these (88 per cent) were aged 21 years old and over, compared with 36 per cent of

entrants with other qualifications, and 22 per cent came from low participation neighbourhoods, compared to 11 per cent of entrants with other qualifications. (QAA, 2016). Thus, in the face of a rapidly declining mature student population (ICoF, 2015), the Diploma continues to provide an important pathway into higher education for mature learners, many of whom have a profile of disadvantage.

14. Students with Diplomas also make an important, but perhaps less appreciated, contribution to productivity and addressing skills shortages. The most obvious example of this is nursing. In 2014-15, 33 per cent of Access to HE students (8,410) who went on to university studied nursing (QAA, 2016). Health care, biological sciences, social work and teaching are other popular choices among Access to HE students, while nearly five per cent of those who progress register on undergraduate programmes in computer science, engineering and technology.
15. Experimental data on outcomes-based success measures published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) also reveals that the sustained learning rate (learners must be in learning in all six months between October and March in the following academic year) for Access to HE students is far higher (63 per cent in 2012-13) than the total population of full level 3 adult learners taking full level 3 qualifications (25 per cent in 2012-13). In fact, Diplomas in sport science, business, engineering, humanities, social science and law outperformed all other full level 3 qualifications for continuation in sustained learning (BIS, 2015c).
16. The average fee for a Diploma is in the region of £3,500. Alternative opportunities for such pre-HE preparation are the Foundation Year (sometimes referred to as year 0) programmes offered by many universities, which will cost students between £6,000 and £9,000 for a one year course.

**Name three major policy developments necessary to secure the future of adult learning in 2016 and over the next 5 -10 years?**

17. One solution that is emerging to the growing concentration of provision and to the pressure on contact time for providers is the growth of blended and online learning. Ensuring the quality of this mode of delivery does, however, require a sophisticated technical infrastructure, staff with the requisite skills in the structuring and delivery of learning in this context, appropriately designed materials, and effective systems for managing the integrity of the assessment process. Adults with weak IT skills also need appropriate support to study in this context. Government policy is to encourage the further development of this mode of learning, and continued investment in both the physical and human resources and skills needed will be vital to ensure its quality and effectiveness.
18. Access to HE students have benefited from the availability of loans and the write-off of those loans for students who complete both their Access to HE Diploma and their higher education course. The continuation of this policy would therefore be helpful in sustaining the viability of this progression route.
19. Guidance from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) for 2014-15 and 2015-16 includes an explicit recommendation to higher education institutions 'to consider how they can attract and support mature learners with non-traditional qualifications into higher education'. OFFA also highlights the benefits for 'individuals, institutions and society' of mature student participation in higher education (OFFA, 2015). This theme continues in

OFFA's 2016 guidance. Given that OFFA's assessment of the impact of access agreements (OFFA, 2016) shows that 'institutions are less likely to make progress on targets relating to part-time and mature students compared to those around young, full-time undergraduates' it would be helpful to adults with aspirations to study in higher education if this policy emphasis was strengthened.

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