Transitions into and within Higher Education

An exploration of approaches and good practice

August 2025

Medr
Y Comisiwn Addysg Drydyddol ac Ymchwil
Commission for Tertiary Education and Research

Contents

1. Executive summary

This Medr-commissioned report examines how learners transition into and through higher education (HE), with a focus on improving access and outcomes for under-represented groups in Wales. These groups include individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, care-experienced learners, carers, people with disabilities and from ethnic minorities.

Through the exploration of good practice from across the UK, five key themes are identified that support successful transitions.

- **Belonging** – a strong sense of community improves student retention and wellbeing.
- **Skills development** – early and integrated academic support builds confidence and capability.
- **Information** – clear, inclusive and impartial information enables informed decision-making and enables realistic expectations.
- **Induction** – structured and ongoing induction prepares students for their HE journey.
- **Peer mentoring** – support from fellow students enhances social and academic integration.

Examples of good practice highlight the importance of personalised support, inclusive approaches and collaboration. These include activities and tools available in-person and digitally and delivered or constructed by a wide range of staff or student peers, representing the diversity of the student population.

In Wales, a range of 14 case study initiatives demonstrate how strong and effective collaboration between tertiary education providers, government, funders, regulators and QAA can raise aspirations, build confidence and support learners from diverse backgrounds. These initiatives often combine provision of clear and impartial information about HE, finance and study options, academic preparation, wellbeing support, mentoring and accessible resources.

Addressing barriers to participation and progression requires a holistic approach that integrates clear information, academic skills development and social and emotional support throughout the student journey.

2. Introduction and context

Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, which is responsible for funding, overseeing and regulating post-16 education in Wales, was formed in response to the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act (2022). The Act places several duties on Medr, including the promotion of equality of opportunity by:
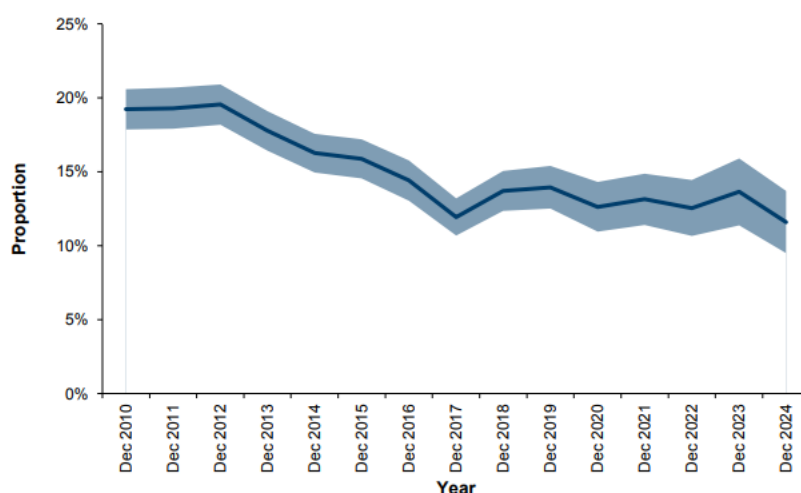
- increasing participation in tertiary education and improving retention rates among under-represented groups.
- reducing attainment gaps.
- supporting students from under-represented groups to continue their tertiary education, find employment, or start a business.

In this context, 'under-represented groups' are groups that are under-represented in Welsh tertiary education as a result of social, cultural, economic or organisational factors. These include people within the lowest two quintiles of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), care-experienced learners and carers, people with disabilities and those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

There were 150,680 enrolments at Welsh higher education (HE) providers in 2023-24; 2% fewer than in 2022-23 (154,385)[1] although 1% more than in 2021-22 (149,045).[2] The number of learners in Welsh further education (FE) institutions has increased from 99,925 in 2022-23, 105,785 in 2023–24 to 108,645 unique learners enrolled in 2023-24.[3] Nevertheless, in its Strategic Plan 2025-2030, Medr states that participation rates in tertiary education are "too low"[4] with only 67.4% of working-age adults in Wales being qualified to Level 3 or higher against a target of 75%.

Medr's Strategic Plan also states that the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) is "too high". The NEET rate for people aged 16 to 24 in Wales was 11.6% in the year ending December 2024.[5] There is, however, a positive trend that the NEETs population has reduced by around 10% since 2010 and by 4.5% over the last decade. However, in the last five years the proportion of young NEETs has only reduced by 0.9% - see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Young people aged 16 to 24 not in education employment or training in Wales with 95% confidence intervals.[5]

Aggregated NEET data for three years ending December 2024 indicate that approximately one-third (36.3%) of NEETs in Wales (aged 16-24) are qualified at or above Level 3.[6] This means that young people are leaving school or college with Level 3 qualifications and becoming economically inactive at some time before their 25th birthday. Targeted support for young people to enter, or be retained in HE, has potential to reduce the NEETs population.

This project has been commissioned by Medr to explore how tertiary providers in Wales, and across the UK, support progression into and through higher education, with a focus on approaches that may contribute to increasing participation and improving outcomes for under-represented groups. The findings draw on examples of good practice collated by QAA through sector projects, Enhancement Themes in Scotland, quality reviews, and member-led initiatives in England. Welsh good practice is represented through a set of case studies curated for this project and published in full on the QAA Cymru website.

3. Widening access and transitions

Medr has a clear desire to increase participation in tertiary education and a strategic duty to increase participation from under-represented groups. Typically, deliberate attempts to increase participation of those under-represented in tertiary or higher education is described as 'widening' access or participation. Widening access does not in isolation increase total participation in HE but if the rate of recruitment of traditional students continues and there is an increase in recruitment of under-represented groups, there will be an increase in participation overall and an increase in the proportion of under-represented people in HE.

Each UK nation has its own approach to fair and widening access to HE. In Wales, HE providers that want their full-time undergraduate courses to be automatically designated for HE student support must submit a Fee and Access Plan to Medr. The current guidance, published by HEFCW in May 2024, states the aim of Fee and Access Plans is to make significant and lasting contribution to widening access to HE in Wales, increasing participation, improving retention, reducing attainment gaps and improving employment and further study outcomes for students from under-represented groups. Noting the importance of retention, many providers focus some of their widening access activity on ways to support under-represented students in their transition to HE from school or college and provide continued support as they transition through their HE journeys.

In 2016, the Commission on Widening Access, established by the Scottish Government, published its Blueprint for Fairness - a system wide plan to achieve equal access to higher education.[7] A key target proposed by the Commission and adopted by the Scottish Government is: "By 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds[8] should represent 20% of entrants to higher education. Equality of access should be seen in both the college sector and the university sector." The Scottish Framework for Fair Access website was subsequently launched in May 2019, developed to help access practitioners in schools, colleges, universities and the third sector plan and evaluate ways of helping people from disadvantaged backgrounds access HE. Up until 2023-24, the Scottish Funding Council published agreed outcome agreements for each Scottish tertiary education provider which outlined each provider's key commitments to fair access and transitions. The Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model replaces outcome agreements from the 2024-25 academic year. The new model comprises seven outcomes that apply to both colleges and universities including 'Student interests, access and success'. In addition to the outcomes framework, Engagement represents an important component of the Model with Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) being a national programme of co-ordinated enhancement activity. The first STEP topic, which will run until 2028, is Supporting Diverse Learner Journeys, and a priority within this topic is Supporting Transitions and Navigating Pathways. STEP brings the Scottish tertiary sector together to share good practice and work collaboratively on its common priorities.

In England, HE providers wishing to charge above the basic tuition fee level must have an Access and Participation Plan (APP) approved by the Office for Students (OfS). APP guidance and requirements have changed significantly since the introduction of Access Plans by the Office for Fair Access in 2005, but the principle remains the essentially the same with each provider setting out their key objectives to improve the access or success of identified student groups; success being continuation (a retention measure), achievement and/or progression to graduate employment or further study. Approval of APPs is a role now undertaken directly by the OfS. A required element of APPs is providers' plans for evaluation

of their strategic interventions and progress towards meeting their institutionally agreed APP targets. To support evaluation, TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education) provides resources to assess the success of measures to widen participation. APPs are publicly accessible from the regulator's website.

Similar to England, in 2006, the Northern Irish government introduced new HE tuition fee arrangements including a requirement that providers wanting to charge undergraduate tuition fees above the standard level needed to have an Access Agreement in place outlining their provision of student support, including bursaries and outreach activities. In 2013 arrangements were revised to require institutions to provide Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPPs) - an amalgamation of previous Access Agreements and Widening Participation Strategic Assessments. WAPPs are approved annually by the Department for the Economy and published on providers' websites.

While each UK nation has developed its own access and participation frameworks, the Access to HE Diploma provides an additional, UK-wide mechanism, regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), for supporting adult learners without traditional qualifications. Delivered widely across England and Wales, and in small numbers in Northern Ireland, the Diploma enables progression into HE, particularly in areas facing skills shortages such as health and social care. Its focus on academic preparation and confidence-building makes it an effective pathway for transition while being well aligned with broader policy aims around lifelong learning, social mobility and economic participation.

4. Transition themes

belonging

Throughout the good practice findings and case studies a number of common themes emerge. One of these is '**belonging'**. Research has shown that students who feel a strong sense of belonging are more likely to persist in their studies, leading to improved retention rates.[9] The emergence of the effect of belonging on retention led many providers to re-think the provision of bursaries and other financial support as a key measure to support student retention and instead look at ways to build students' sense of belonging and community.

skills

There has also been research, such as by Lewis and Hodges,[10] which demonstrates that academic ability can affect an individual's sense of belonging and, conversely, those who doubt their abilities can feel less certainty about their sense of belonging. Doubt over academic ability and belonging uncertainty can both lead to poor academic outcomes, hence the importance of academic **skills development** for successful transitions.

A recent large scale research project undertaken jointly by Wonkhe and Pearson explores relationships between a sense of belonging, academic skills and students' confidence: [Building Belonging in Higher Education. Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach.](#)[11] The project included a survey of 5,233 students across HE providers in England, Scotland and Wales, followed by focus groups in which participants were deliberately and specifically chosen to over select from under-represented groups within HE. The report identifies that the greatest impact that a university can have on its students' sense of belonging is to improve the way it connects with those students.

From its large-scale survey, the researchers found a clear link between students' sense of belonging and confidence in their academic skills. Over a third of all students (38%) doubted their ability. While 32% of students who reported high levels of belonging also lacked confidence in their academic skills, 68% of students who reported a low level of belonging doubted their ability. This indicates a strong need for academic skills development and confidence boosting early within any course. The report recommends institutions to evaluate the reach, delivery and efficacy of pre-arrival and early induction activities and to consider ways to evaluate their impact on student confidence. While the report also recommends that systems should be put in place to identify beneficiaries of academic skills development as soon as possible, it also notes that academic skills development should be integrated throughout teaching and learning, delivered as standard to all students rather than requiring students to identify as deficient, thereby avoiding a 'deficit' model approach where only those who are considered to be lacking in skills or experience are referred to specialist teams for additional support.

The Wonkhe/Pearson report offers numerous examples of activities and actions that institutions can adopt to improve students belonging. Some activities are designed to improve academic skills, including assessment literacy, through regular and repeated in-class exercises that build students' confidence. Many of the suggested activities are easily transferable and/or adaptable to target or support various under-represented groups.

induction

information

Noting that all institutions provide **inductions**, not all providers evaluate the effectiveness of these activities. The authors recommend including a midpoint survey designed to identify where signposting or re-signposting of relevant support and other **information** would be beneficial. Additionally, it is recommended that students in all year groups would benefit from induction each year.

Through a survey of 2,190 HE applicants for the Unite Students Applicant Index, Unite Students in partnership with the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), found that the most disadvantaged UK HE applicants (based on economic status) are less likely to believe that they would feel welcome at university, or to feel as though they belong, compared to the most advantaged applicants. [12] 2025 research by Unite Students, "A different world": the impact of socioeconomic background on the student experience, based on focus groups with students at the University of Leeds and Manchester Metropolitan University, presents a number of recommendations for HE providers on actions that can provide opportunities to make a positive difference for new HE students.[13] The first set of these recommendations aims to foster a sense of belonging for new students. Further recommendations include opportunities for students to meet with peers from a wide range of backgrounds so they are able to see students who are, in some ways, similar to themselves and to provide diversity among the staff with which they will interact; communication of inclusive services and support to applicants and new students; as well as "normalisation of the ups and downs of settling in". Further recommendations include actions to provide "proactive and accessible knowledge and information" and to "support students to make social connections across the year."

peer mentoring

The Unite Students research report also discusses the importance of **peer mentoring** and support which is one of five key themes that emerge across a range of transition approaches. When one of more of these five themes, belonging, skills development, induction, information or peer mentoring, are foundations of the transition approaches described, the icons introduced in this Section will be used to provide easy reference to these themes throughout the good practice examples presented. It is appropriate to note that single approaches can cover multiple themes such as the appointment of peer mentors who are involed in induction and share information with the mentees.

A list of the transition resources identified throughout this report is additionally provided in the Appendix, categorised by the relevant theme(s).

5.   QAA resources

QAA has created a wide range of resources in relation to transitions based on projects and initiatives that sought to identify successful approaches. QAA's [Supporting successful student transitions](#) project from 2020-21 provides positive approaches and practical solutions to help support a range of transitions, with a focus on supporting students moving into HE for the first time or returning to university. These resources are available from the publicly accessible QAA website with further resources available only to staff within QAA Member institutions. Additionally, the Transitions support section of [QAA's Awarding Map](#) resource further signposts a collection of resources and good practice available to Member institutions. A selection of these successful approaches is discussed in this Section.

QAA's [Student guide to the hidden curriculum](#) is based on the notion that the existence of a 'hidden curriculum' means that some students are not equipped to navigate the unfamiliar territory of HE, which can have consequences for their wellbeing and sense of belonging.[14] The Guide anticipates the sort of questions students might have as they start to navigate university life and familiarise themselves with the different principles, structures and processes. Helpful definitions and explanations are provided including common terms encountered at university, a range of support services that may be available for students to seek out as and when may be needed and examples of terms used to describe teaching, learning and assessment.

Drawing on practice at the University of Sussex, [Using strengths to support student mindset](#) facilitates students to identify their strengths prior to entering HE. During induction, dedicated workshops are scheduled to support students with understanding, developing and utilising their strengths throughout their university experience.

QAA's [Independent learning plan](#) resources are designed to be used by providers to support students to create their own independent learning plans that will help them to manage their goals and expectations through their HE journeys. The resource encourages students to identify strengths and skills they have developed and further skill developments that will support them in achieving their goals.

[Building belonging in the post-pandemic landscape](#) describes the importance of embedding a sense of belonging among students as they make transitions into and through HE. The resource highlights specific aspects of Glasgow Caledonian University's (GCU) approaches to building belonging which includes a 'learner lifecycle approach to transitions' with pre-entry support together with provision of information about programmes and preparation for university. GCU also developed a Peer-Assisted Learning Support programme to connect new and existing students in order to help new students to settle into life at GCU and make new social connections.

Also on the theme of belonging, QAA offers a range of small tweaks or activities that can be used by an HE teacher to support community building among a student group. The activities include prompts for pre-lecture chats on any topic to help develop a cohort community as well as suggestions for regular ice breakers to help build confidence and ensure that all voices are heard in every session. Alternatively, chill and chat opportunities, outside of timetabled lesson time, enable students to meet informally with a tutor, to chat about a particular aspect of their learning or university experience. A range of activities and instruction sheets for use by staff with students to jointly build communities to support student transitions are available on the QAA website.

6. Practice from Scotland

During 2014 to 2017, QAA Scotland along with Scottish HE institutions delivered the [Student Transitions Enhancement Theme](#) – a focused enhancement initiative that explored the transitions of students into, through and out of HE. Alongside institutional work, the Student Transitions Enhancement Theme involved two large sector-wide projects. From this work several transition models were proposed that provide frameworks for understanding student transitions. Collectively, these models show that transitions are non-linear, emotionally complex and influenced by both internal and external factors.

Six overall recommendations came from the research:

1. *Early preparation*: Institutions should provide realistic **information** and support pre-entry to help students manage expectations.

2. *Skill development*: Embed **training** in self-efficacy, reflection and independent learning into curricula.

3. *Ongoing support*: Extend **induction** beyond the first weeks and tailor support to different transition stages.

4. *Peer and social integration*: Facilitate **peer mentoring** and social engagement to build **belonging**.

5. *Feedback and reflection*: Use formative assessment and reflective tools to support **academic growth**.

6. *Holistic models*: Adopt multi-phase models to guide institutional strategies and student support services.

While these recommendations do not fully articulate the five themes that have arisen from this project, each of the themes are clearly covered and provide assurance that these are themes that should be considered within transitions activity and support.

As part of a comprehensive evaluation of the 20 years of Scotland's Enhancement Themes, the success of the Student Transitions Theme was illustrated by the observation from the evaluators of the "extent to which the sector now actively considers the experiences of students at all stages of the HE journey…"[15] This is reflected in examples of Scottish approaches that were identified as good practice by quality assurance reviewers as part of an Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) during the period 2013 to 2021 or a Quality Enhancement and Standards Review (QESR) from 2022 to 2024.[16]

Robert Gordon University (RGU) offers tailored induction programmes that consider the needs of international, widening participation and other groups of students. Through an established partnership with North East Scotland College (NESCOL) and guaranteed university places, students commencing a qualification at NESCOL can understand the requirements for articulation to the University and RGU provides an enhanced induction programme for students who are articulating from link colleges.[17]

Through its partnerships with local colleges and associated articulation arrangements, **Dundee University** identified a disadvantage for some articulation students due to challenges in matching the curriculum. To address this, the University developed 'STEP UP' (Student Transition Enhancement Programme for University Progression) modules, delivered by the University's Academic Skills Centre, which were designed to help articulating students in business management and humanities and social sciences.[18]

Queen Margaret University (QMU) has a Transition and Induction working group to oversee its induction processes. There are several elements to the University's approach, including a programme of longitudinal induction to support students in making the transition to University and early induction and peer mentoring programmes for students from widening participation groups. Mature students are offered a three-day pre-entry course and peer mentoring called QMAdvance.[19] Additional face-to-face and online mentoring schemes, particularly aimed at widening participation students, are run by Student Services. QMU also has support arrangements for care leavers including an accommodation guarantee, provision of a named contact, proactive identification of support services including signposting of work opportunities within the University.'[17]

The University of Edinburgh and the **University Students' Association** provide a range of peer-assisted learning schemes (PALS) primarily targeting students at key transition points. Peer Assisted Study Sessions, Peer Mentoring and Peer Support provide a range of academic and community building networks for students of all year groups. This peer learning and support work has achieved national and international recognition including from the National Union of Students, the UK Council for International Student Affairs, sparqs* and Advance HE. During its 2021 ELIR, several students commented that PALS increased their engagement with their discipline area and that they had also engaged in the scheme as peer mentors in subsequent years. The ELIR team reported that these schemes effectively deploy students who have first-hand experience of transitions to the support of new entrants.[20]

The **University of the West of Scotland** (UWS) developed a roadmap following its engagement with the Student Transitions Enhancement Theme.[21] The UWS Roadmap was designed to support students through the first 12 weeks of study pointing out key aspects of university life along the student journey. UWS's reflective analysis, that was undertaken as part of its preparation for its 2019 ELIR, identified that the institution has seen improved retention and progression of students and achievement of relevant institutional key performance indicators as a result of this work.

---

* sparqs is [student partnerships in quality Scotland](#)

Abertay University has taken an innovative two-pronged approach to supporting student transitions. The first component is the Abertay Discovery Tool: a diagnostic test undertaken by all first-year students which comprises self-reflective questions to help students identify strengths and areas for development. The questions cover the topics of Studying at University, Academic Skills, Digital Skills, Careers & Employability and Wellbeing.[22] As well as students receiving a personalised feedback report, programme leaders receive an insight report which identifies cohort strengths and areas for development. The second component is a suite of micro-credentials including 'Being Successful at Abertay', 'Successful Writing at Abertay', 'Dundee and Me', 'Research and Enquiry Skills for the Digital Age' and 'Wellbeing Tools & Tricks'. These micro-credentials support transition to the University and the development of any weaknesses, that may have been identified through the Discovery Tool (which is embedded within 'Being Successful at Abertay'). Through this series of micro-credentials, each student can embark on a personalised journey to improve academic skills and support their social integration into the University. The micro-credentials are peer-supported by Student Module Assistants, who offer synchronous contact points for students to ask questions, gain support or be directed to academic staff. Students are also involved in the co-development and review of micro-credentials. The University's 2021 QESR report noted that students said that 'Being Successful at Abertay' had helped them to have a better understanding of what was expected academically, as well as to identify their personal ambitions for university study.[23]

7. Practice from England

A range of good practice from England has been covered within the resources and good practice from QAA presented in Section 5 above. Much of the England-based good practice identified through this project cites actions and activities that are aimed at developing relationships with transitioning students, developing their sense of belonging to the new institution and new student groups and developing academic skills and recognising their individual learning needs.

University Centre South Devon uses an integrated tutorial model with all students being allocated a personal tutor whom they meet once a week for a group tutorial with other students on the course.[11] These group tutorials follow a curriculum of study skills, personal development and employability. Students also have one-to-one tutorials for pastoral and academic support.

The **University of Plymouth** runs experience days for new students who disclose anxiety conditions.[11] The experience days are delivered as one day programmes for up to 15 students to familiarise themselves with the new environment, encourage confidence, aid transition and reduce anxiety triggers.

The **University of West London** provides a tailored peer mentoring programme that enables exploration of a sense of community through peer-to-peer interaction: Monitoring and enhancing retention among under-represented groups.[24] Within this case study, the aim of peer mentoring is to create a mutually beneficial relationship between an individual, who already has experience of studying at university, and a student who is new to university. They volunteer to share experiences and challenges to help them feel part of the community and develop skills over the academic year. Students are given the choice to be part of the standard peer mentoring programme, an international mentoring programme or a Black student mentoring programme.

An interesting approach from **University College Birmingham** is the adoption of a marketing lens to support a student-centred approach to induction (and everything else about the student experience) rather than a more traditional institution or course-centred approach.[25] The approach works on the basis that supporting good transitions into HE is fundamentally about 'very human, ideally 1-1 interactions, and listening to what students really want and need.'

Additionally, Ready to learn? A study of student knowledge and understanding as they entered higher education in 2021 examines the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic affected the readiness of students entering HE.[26] It is based on 10 years' worth of data exploring the academic transition of Biology students, which provides a comparison of the knowledge, skills and abilities of students who entered HE in 2020 and 2021, with those who entered in 2019.The key finding from the research was that there were no significant differences in knowledge and understanding of biological terms and concepts between students who did, and did not, have disrupted teaching.
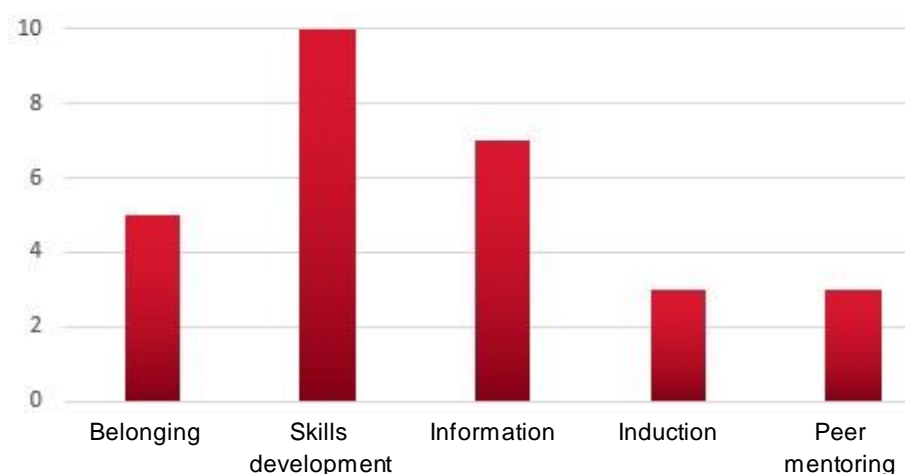
8.   Practice in Wales

The Welsh Government's first strategic statement on education and lifelong learning in 2001, set out a vision for expanding educational access and opportunities (National Assembly for Wales, 2001).[27] The Wales-wide Reaching Wider programme was established in 2002–03 by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) as a regionally focused, collaborative, long-term programme to widen access to HE and higher-level skills.[28] The programme continues todays and aims to increase access to HE, retention and success for learners from priority groups and communities in Wales by raising educational aspirations and skills, and creating innovative study opportunities and learning pathways into HE. Two case studies that showcase the work and role of Reaching Wider form part of the good practice evidence described below.

Access to HE Diplomas represent another important strand of activity in Wales' widening participation and transition landscape. In 2023-24, 1,486 learners were registered on an Agored Cymru AHE Diploma; Agored Cymru being the predominant QAA-regulated Access Validating Agency in Wales. The Diploma remains a highly valuable route into HE for adults without traditional qualifications. By equipping learners with the skills, confidence and knowledge needed for higher-level study, the Diploma plays a valuable role in widening access and supporting national ambitions for adult upskilling and lifelong learning.

To support this project, an open call for case studies of good practice was launched in April 2025. Notification went to all regulated HE providers in Wales via QAA's provider contacts and additionally to all colleges via CollegesWales. Providers were requested to submit good practice examples of support for learners to progress into and within HE; 14 case studies were agreed including one case study previously collated by QAA Cymru as part of its work on micro-credentials.

The case studies can be broadly categorised into one or more of the five key themes, as depicted in Figure 2. Five case studies involve the development of a community or sense of **belonging** for the group of learners who are looking to progress or are new to HE. The majority of case studies describe the development of **skills** in order for learners to be appropriately equipped to start an HE course. Half of the case studies demonstrate a range of approaches to raising aspirations to progress to HE including the provision of impartial **information** about HE study. Only three case studies specifically mention **induction** as part of their approach, but it is assumed that each provider represented delivers induction activities to all new students and three of the case studies focus on **peer mentoring** or have peer mentoring included within the initiatives.

Figure 2: Themes of submitted case studies

For each case study, the relevant key themes are indicated by the icons introduced in Section 4. Each case study can be read in full on the QAA Cymru website.

With just 18 HE providers in Wales (10 colleges and 8 universities), the sector is small enough to support **collaboration** and the majority of case studies feature strong collaboration with clear demonstration of **partnership working** between universities and colleges and universities and other settings such as schools.

Good practice case studies

Reaching Wider is a pan-Wales collaborative programme that works with universities, colleges and schools to improve social mobility by widening access to HE for under-represented groups. Funded by Medr, the programme targets learners from the lowest two Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) quintiles, as well as care-experienced individuals, carers, disabled learners, ethnic minority groups and Welsh-medium learners. Led regionally by Swansea University, University of South Wales and Bangor University, Reaching Wider delivers a wide range of engagement activities including campus visits, subject-specific workshops, mentoring and tailored information sessions. In 2023-24, the programme reached 17,570 participants, delivering over 95,000 hours of engagement, with 70% of learners meeting Reaching Wider eligibility criteria. By offering hands-on experiences, personalised guidance, and long-term support, the programme helps learners see HE as an achievable goal. Reaching Wider continues to empower the next generation by breaking down barriers and creating inclusive educational opportunities across Wales.

Reaching Wider's **national online bilingual mentoring programme**, launched in 2022 in partnership with Brightside, supports young people aged 14-19 from under-represented groups in exploring educational pathways. Delivered through a secure, safeguarded platform, the programme offers flexible, one-to-one online mentoring in both Welsh and English, aligning with the Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 strategy. Mentors, trained and DBS-checked students from Welsh colleges and universities, are matched with mentees based on shared interests. The programme includes three tailored projects: core mentoring for Years 11–13, STEM mentoring for Years 9–10 and a dedicated project for young carers aged 14–25. Since its pilot, the programme has expanded to eight projects, supporting over 1,000 mentees in 2023–24, with 54% from under-represented backgrounds. Impact data shows increased confidence and understanding of HE pathways among participants, with 90% of young carers actively exploring next steps into education or employment. The programme continues to grow, offering vital, accessible support across Wales.

The **Access to Higher Education (AHE) Diploma** is a Level 3 qualification, regulated by **QAA**, and designed to support adult learners transition into HE. Equivalent to the Welsh Baccalaureate, it offers a flexible, one-year full-time or two-year part-time route into HE, with 60 credits across academic and professional skills. **Agored Cymru**, Wales' leading QAA-approved Access Validating Agency, validates 15 Welsh colleges to offer AHE Diplomas in 16 subject areas, with a strong focus on health, social sciences, and biosciences. In 2023-24, 1,486 learners were registered with one of the 15 Agored Cymru-validated providers delivering AHE Diplomas. 81% of AHE learners typically identify as female and 49% from disadvantaged backgrounds. Learners benefit from small group teaching and tailored support, with outcomes comparable to A-levels. The Diploma is workforce-aligned, regionally responsive and well-recognised by UK HE providers. In 2023–24, 82% of Agored Cymru AHE learners progressing to HE remained in Wales, reinforcing its value to the local economy and communities. The Diploma is a proven, purpose-built route for adult HE progression.

University Ready is a collaborative initiative developed in response to the Welsh Government's call for enhanced support for learners transitioning into HE. Launched in 2021 and hosted on The Open University's OpenLearn platform, the project brings together **all Welsh universities** to provide free, bilingual resources covering topics such as the application process, student life, study skills, wellbeing, and financial guidance. A steering group and working group, comprising representatives from government, education bodies and all Welsh HE institutions, guide the project's development. Notable outputs include a bilingual podcast series, Let's Talk about Uni, and an interactive parent guide. The resources are designed to be neutral and accessible, offering practical, relatable advice without promoting specific institutions. With over 250,000 visitors since its launch, the project has successfully supported learners through sector-wide collaboration. A full evaluation in 2025 will inform future development and integration with other initiatives to further support HE access in Wales.

The **National Enrichment Programme Enhanced (NEPE),** developed by **The Open University in Wales**, is a collaborative initiative designed to support FE learners in progressing to HE or employment. Aligned with Welsh Government priorities, NEPE provides tailored academic and personal development resources via the OpenLearn platform. **Coleg Gwent's** implementation of NEPE exemplifies its impact, offering structured support across three key stages: pre-enrolment, early HE study and preparation for employment or further study. Learners accessed targeted resources to build academic skills, confidence and wellbeing. Two dedicated Progress Coaches provided personalised guidance and helped integrate NEPE into the curriculum. Since its launch in 2023, 403 HE learners at Coleg Gwent have benefited from the programme. The initiative has enhanced learner progression, employability and resilience, while also enriching teaching practices and contributing to institutional development. NEPE demonstrates the value of co-designed, inclusive approaches to supporting learner success across the post-16 education landscape.

Coleg Cambria's Academic Skills – Foundations to HE Study programme is a key initiative supporting adult learners on Access to Higher Education (AHE) Diplomas, particularly those from under-represented backgrounds. Delivered in partnership with Reaching Wider and led by the College's Library & Academic Skills team, the programme provides tailored academic and digital skills support from induction through to course completion. It includes sessions on academic writing, referencing, digital literacy and critical thinking, alongside wrap-around support services such as wellbeing, inclusion and careers guidance. The initiative fosters a strong sense of belonging and prepares learners for the transition to HE. Approximately 150 AHE learners benefit annually, with a significant proportion from priority groups including carers and care-experienced individuals. In 2023–24, 58% of participants received and accepted university offers. Now in its fourth year, the programme continues to grow, thanks to the dedication of staff and funding from Reaching Wider, ensuring equitable access to essential resources and support.

The **HE4ME** initiative, developed by the **University of South Wales** (USW) in partnership with Reaching Wider, aims to raise aspirations and support progression into HE among Level 3 college students. Launched in 2024-25, the programme delivers a series of four interactive workshops to Creative Arts students at **Coleg y Cymoedd's** Aberdare campus and other partner colleges. Led by USW staff and supported by student ambassadors, the sessions provide engaging, practical guidance on university life, application processes and student finance. The inclusion of personal stories from ambassadors helped demystify HE and made the experience more relatable. Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting increased clarity, confidence and motivation to pursue HE. The initiative has already led to a noticeable rise in university interest among participants. By offering tailored support and real-world insights, HE4ME empowers learners to make informed decisions about their academic futures and strengthens the transition from further to higher education.

Cardiff University's flagship **Pathways to a Degree** programme, delivered by the Division of Lifelong Learning (LEARN), provides flexible, part-time routes into HE for adult learners from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds. Designed in collaboration with academic schools, the 13 Pathways programmes each offer 60 credits of Level 4 study and are supported by tailored academic and pastoral guidance. The initiative targets learners from low-income areas, care-experienced individuals, carers, veterans, refugees, asylum seekers and those with disabilities or mental health conditions. In 2024-25, 63% of learners came from the most deprived areas, with strong representation from BAME and LGBTQ+ communities. Since 2012, 381 students have progressed to undergraduate study at Cardiff University, with high retention and degree completion rates. The programme plays a vital role in widening access and building inclusive learning communities within the University.

In 2024-25, **Wrexham University** and **Coleg Cambria** launched **Healthcare Heroes,** a collaborative, careers-focused initiative funded by the Reaching Wider North and Mid Wales Partnership. Designed to inspire and inform both school pupils (Years 10–11) and college students (Levels 2–3), the event aimed to raise awareness of healthcare-related HE pathways and careers. Hosted at Wrexham University, the event featured hands-on workshops, taster lectures, employer engagement booths and one-to-one careers advice, creating a dynamic and immersive learning environment. Approximately 295 learners participated, including over 160 school pupils and 130 college students. The initiative successfully fostered cross-sector collaboration, received strong positive feedback and demonstrated high demand, with plans to repeat the event biennially. Healthcare Heroes exemplifies good practice in widening participation and supporting learner transition, particularly in a sector facing growing skills demands. It also highlights the potential for scalable, multi-partner models to inspire future professionals and strengthen regional workforce development.

Cardiff University's Aspire programme is a key initiative supporting sanctuary seekers (refugees, asylum seekers and migrants) by addressing the unique barriers they face in accessing HE. As part of the University's commitment as a University of Sanctuary, Aspire offers tailored support including a bespoke open day, an immersive summer school and scholarships for English language and degree pathway programmes. These initiatives help participants navigate the UK HE system, build academic confidence and foster a sense of belonging. In 2023–24, Aspire welcomed 33 participants from 15 countries, with 92% reporting increased confidence in pursuing UK university study. Many progressed to further education, with some receiving full scholarships. The programme also provides Aspire Pathways and IELTS Scholarships, covering tuition, resources and exam fees. Aspire's holistic approach not only supports academic progression but also strengthens community and inclusion, making it a vital component of Cardiff University's civic mission and its broader efforts to widen participation in HE.

The collaboration between the **University of Wales Trinity Saint David** (UWTSD) and **Gower College Swansea** (GCS) has significantly enhanced progression into HE for Level 3 Engineering learners. Launched in 2020, the initiative replaced the previous BTEC Diploma with a more industry-relevant **Advanced Manufacturing Engineering** (AME) programme, including a Motorsport pathway co-designed with Pearson. A shared-delivery model allows GCS students to access UWTSD's SA1 Swansea Waterfront Campus weekly, combining practical workshops with theoretical learning and enabling peer interaction with HE students. This immersive experience demystifies university life and boosts learner confidence. Since its inception, HE progression from the AME programme has risen markedly, with projected enrolments increasing from under five in 2018-19 to 18 in 2025-26. Student feedback highlights the value of early exposure to HE environments, while promotional activities have further driven interest. The initiative has successfully addressed cultural and psychological barriers to HE, strengthened STEM pipelines and aligned learning with industry needs.

Cardiff University's [Student Mentor Scheme](#), established in 2012, plays a vital role in supporting first-year undergraduates through their transition into university life. Each new student is paired with a trained peer mentor from their academic school, who offers guidance, shares personal experiences, and signposts University support services. Mentors help develop social connections, provide practical advice on non-academic matters and support mentees in navigating their new environment. The scheme promotes a mentee-centred approach, encouraging engagement and building a sense of belonging. Regular mentor reports allow the University to monitor participation and offer additional support where needed. In 2024-25, 63% of students said their mentor helped them settle in and 31% of those considering withdrawal cited their mentor as a reason for staying. Since its inception, over 6,000 mentors have supported more than 50,000 students enhancing student retention, confidence and integration into university life.

Wrexham University has developed a **[digital transition support tool](#)** to better prepare students, particularly those first in their family to attend HE or returning after time in work, for university life. In 2023-24, the Student and Campus Life teams began using Target Connect to create a customised 'Student Life' portal, offering accessible, bilingual resources grouped thematically to reduce information overload and improve pre-arrival engagement. Topics include assessment, student finance, wellbeing and academic expectations, with interactive content designed to promote confidence and independence. The portal is available to applicants, enrolled students, staff and even parents or carers, ensuring broad access to key information. Early usage data shows strong engagement, particularly with pathways addressing challenges and university terminology. With live data integration from student records, the University can monitor trends and refine support. The full launch in summer 2025 aims to enhance transition experiences and empower students to feel prepared and supported from the outset.

Cardiff University's micro-credential **Community Learning Programme** is a flexible approach to supporting transitions. The University's Lifelong Learning Division, LEARN, works with a wide range of community partners including local councils, the Welsh Refugee Council and multiple community groups. Working closely with this community, the University has co-created a suite of 10-credit, Level 3 micro-credentials (or modules) to support deprived communities in quintiles 1 and 2 of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), thereby supporting students into work, college or university. Modules cover a range of subjects from Academic English for Adults (across five levels of proficiency) to introductory courses in interpreting, criminology, health & social care and childcare. The courses develop employability skills as well as preparing under-represented learners for further study at college or university.

9. Conclusion

There is considerable effective collaboration across Wales and Welsh tertiary providers to aid progression to and successful transition into HE study. Some of the activity reported here has targeted raising aspirations of specified under-represented groups through provision of clear and impartial information about HE. The development of learners' skills is also a key area of focus across many initiatives. While belonging only featured in 36% of the Welsh case studies, there was a clear commitment to raise individuals' confidence so they felt able to commence HE as well as carefully constructed skills development to support higher level study. This combination of confidence building and skills development should naturally result in an increased sense of belonging.

The Access to HE Diploma represents a valuable and scalable route into HE for adults without traditional qualifications. With nearly 1,500 learners studying through Agored Cymru-validated providers in 2023-24, it already plays a key role in supporting transitions through academic preparation, confidence-building and skills development. There is clear potential to expand this pathway further, including through more flexible, part-time provision, to meet the needs of learners for lifelong learning opportunities and to support national priorities around widening access, upskilling and economic participation.

One notable divergence from wider UK trends is in the availability of part-time study. Across the UK, the proportion of Access to HE students studying part-time has increased sharply from 12% in 2018-19 to 43% in 2023-24. However, only 5% of AHE Diploma learners in Wales study part-time. This suggests there may be structural, financial or other barriers to part-time delivery within the Welsh context, limiting flexibility for adult learners who need to balance study with work or caring responsibilities. In light of this, the expansion of flexible Access to HE provision could represent an opportunity to support ambitions for widening access, upskilling, and reducing economic inactivity.

Although Reaching Wider has been in existence for over 20 years, the majority of case studies describe recent activity for which it is too early to determine whether there is real evidence for improved retention as a result of the interventions. However, from review of a wide variety of good practice and successful case study examples it is appropriate to propose that each HE provider can implement a structured and strategic approach to transitions aligned to the key themes identified throughout this report.

Building a strong sense of **belonging** is a powerful approach to ensuring success in HE and providers should consider belonging in all of their transition approaches.

All HE courses should have embedded academic **skills development** for all students, reducing the 'deficit model'. Additional support should be available but provision of academic skills training repeatedly to all students will boost confidence and reduce the opportunity for students to stay 'below the radar' and miss out on the support. Additionally, the use of tools to support reflection and identification of personal goals can support academic growth.

Providers should ensure all learners have access to impartial and realistic **information** about HE to help them manage expectations. Particularly successful are approaches where information is provided by current HE students and by those who share characteristics of the potential applicants/new students, such as ethnicity, disability, care experienced/carers and sanctuary seekers.

Induction is essential for all new and returning students. This should include opportunities not just to develop connections with students on the same courses but with peers across the institution and information on how to engage with groups and services outside of the provider who may better reflect an individual's background, religion or social preferences. Induction should be stretched wider than the first weeks of term and be re-visited at key stages where students may need a reminder of structures or support or just need a boost of connecting with like-minded people.

The use of current students and **peer mentors** has been shown to be successful, particularly for the sharing of information around HE and providing realistic expectations to learners unsure of HE environments.

Providers should also consider a holistic view of transitions ensuring that professional services teams are working together to provide the right information, at the right time, delivered by the right people (course tutors, peer mentors, diversity of academic and professional services staff). Providers should regularly evaluate their transition activities and adapt as necessary based on staff and student feedback as well as using quantitative data such as retention and student outcomes.

10. References/notes

[1] Medr (2025) Sta/Medr/09/2025: Students in Higher Education, 2023/24; accessed 3 July 2025

[2] Welsh Government (2023) Students in higher education: September 2021 to August 2022; accessed 3 July 2025

[3] Welsh Government (2025) Unique learners enrolled at further education institutions by age group, mode of learning and level; accessed 3 July 2025

[4] Medr (2025) Strategic Plan 2025 - 2030; accessed 3 July 2025

[5] Welsh Government (2025) Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): 2024; accessed 3 July 2025

[6] Welsh Government (2025) Number and proportion of 16 to 24 year olds not in education employment or training (NEET) who are qualified above or below level 3 in Wales, three year average from 2022 to 2024; accessed 3 July 2025

[7] Scottish Government (2017) A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access; accessed 3 July 2025

[8] Based on Scottish indicators of multiple deprivation (SIMD)

[9] Morgan, J. (2024) Fostering belonging in higher education: Implications for student retention and wellbeing. Advance HE blog; accessed 3 July 2025

[10] Lewis, K.L. and Hodges, S. D. (2015) Expanding the concept of belonging in academic domains: Development and validation of the Ability Uncertainty Scale, Learning and Individual Differences, Vol 37, 197-202. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2014.12.002; accessed 3 July 2025

[11] Blake, S., Capper, G. and Jackson, A. (2022) Building Belonging in Higher Education. Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach, Wonkhe and Pearson; accessed 30 June 2025

[12] Unite Students (2024) Applicant Index 2024; accessed 3 July 2025

[13] Unite Students (2025) "A different world": the impact of socioeconomic background on the student experience; accessed 3 July 2025

[14] Birtill, P., Harris, R. and Pownall M. (2022) Student Guide to the Hidden Curriculum, QAA; accessed 3 July 2025

[15] Jones-Devitt, S. and Austin, A. (2024) An Evaluation of 20 Years of the Enhancement Themes 2003-23, QAA Scotland; accessed 3 July 2025

[16] Arrangements and reports for all quality reviews can be found on the QAA Scotland website: QAA Scotland

[17] QAA (2017) Thematic Report on Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) Reports 2013-16: Transitions Into University; accessed 3 July 2025

[18] QAA (2018) Enhancement-led Institutional Review of University of Dundee, Technical Report, November 2018; accessed 3 July 2025

[19] QAA (2018) Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Queen Margaret University, Technical Report, April 2018; accessed 3 July 2025

[20] QAA (2021) Enhancement-led Institutional Review of University of Edinburgh, Technical Report; accessed 3 July 2025

[21] QAA (2020) Enhancement-led Institutional Review of the University of the West of Scotland, Technical Report, November 2019; accessed 3 July 2025

[22] Hogan, J. and Millard, L. (2024) Building Academic and Social Success: Abertay Discovery Tool – a case study output from the Enhancement Themes collaborative cluster project: Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community (PARC); accessed 3 July 2025

[23] QAA (2024) Quality Enhancement and Standards Review: Abertay University, Review Report March 2024; accessed 3 July 2025

[24] Farrier-Williams, L. (2022) Monitoring and Enhancing Retention Among Underrepresented Groups, QAA; accessed 3 July 2025

[25] Wilby, A. (2021) How can we support all students to have a positive transition to HE study? QAA; accessed 3 July 2025

[26] Jones, H., Scott, J., Zini, V., Prendergast, J. and Green, J. (2022) Ready to learn? A study of student knowledge and understanding as they entered higher education in 2021. QAA; accessed 3 July 2025

[27] Nesom, S., Silva, L., Skeels, A., Taylor-Collins, E., Hill-Dixon, A. and Price, J. (2024) Widening participation in tertiary education. Evidence review and reflections for Wales, Wales Centre for Public Policy; accessed 3 July 2025

[28] HEFCW (2022) Reaching Wider Programme guidance; accessed 3 July 2025

Appendix – Directory of transition resources

Resource	Originating organisation
Belonging – a strong sense of community improves student retention and wellbeing	
Aspire programme	Cardiff University
Pathways to a Degree	Cardiff University
Student Mentor Scheme	Cardiff University
Academic Skills – Foundations to HE Study	Coleg Cambria
Building belonging in the post-pandemic landscape	Glasgow Caledonian University
Chill and chat	QAA
Ice breakers	QAA
Small tweaks	QAA
Unite Students Applicant Index	Unite Students/HEPI
"A different world": the impact of socioeconomic background on the student experience	Unite Students
Building Belonging in Higher Education. Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach	Wonkhe/Pearson
Monitoring and enhancing retention among under-represented groups	University of West London
Digital transition support tool	Wrexham University

Resource	Originating organisation
Skills development – early and integrated academic support builds confidence and capability	
Abertay undergraduate micro-credentials	Abertay University
Access to Higher Education Diploma	Agored Cymru/QAA
Aspire programme	Cardiff University
Micro-credential Community Learning Programme	Cardiff University
Pathways to a Degree	Cardiff University
Academic Skills – Foundations to HE Study	Coleg Cambria
Student Transition Enhancement Programme for University Progression (STEP UP) modules	Dundee University
National Enrichment Programme Enhanced	The Open University in Wales/Coleg Gwent
University Ready	The Open University
Student guide to the hidden curriculum	QAA
Independent learning plan	QAA
Integrated tutorials	University Centre South Devon
Peer-assisted learning schemes (PALS)	The University of Edinburgh and University Students' Association
HE4ME	University of South Wales/Coleg y Cymoedd
Advanced Manufacturing Engineering	University of Wales Trinity Saint David/Gower College Swansea
Building Belonging in Higher Eduvcation. Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach	Wonkhe/Pearson

Resource	Originating organisation
Information – clear, inclusive and impartial information enables informed decision-making and enables realistic expectations	
Abertay Discovery Tool	Abertay University
Student Mentor Scheme	Cardiff University
Academic Skills – Foundations to HE Study	Coleg Cambria
Building belonging in the post-pandemic landscape	Glasgow Caledonian University
Student Guide to the Hidden Curriculum	QAA Membership
Pre-entry course and peer mentoring	Queen Margaret University
National Enrichment Programme Enhanced	The Open University in Wales/Coleg Gwent
University Ready	The Open University
Experience days	University of Plymouth
HE4ME	University of South Wales/Coleg y Cymoedd
Advanced Manufacturing Engineering	University of Wales Trinity Saint David/Gower College Swansea
Digital transition support tool	Wrexham University
Healthcare Heroes	Wrexham University/Coleg Cambria

Resource	Originating organisation
Induction – structured and ongoing induction prepares students for their HE journey	
Aspire programme	Cardiff University
Pathways to a Degree	Cardiff University
Academic Skills – Foundations to HE Study	Coleg Cambria
Longitudinal induction	Queen Margaret University
Tailored induction programmes	Robert Gordon University
Student-centred approach to induction	University College Birmingham
Experience days for new students	University of Plymouth
Using Strengths To Support Student Mindset	University of Sussex
UWS Roadmap	University of the West of Scotland
Building Belonging in Higher Education. Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach	Wonkhe/Pearson

Resource	Originating organisation
Peer mentoring – support from fellow students enhances social and academic integration	
Student Mentor Scheme	Cardiff University
Pre-entry course and peer mentoring	Queen Margaret University
National online bilingual mentoring programme	Reaching Wider
Peer-assisted learning schemes (PALS)	The University of Edinburgh and University Students' Association
"A different world": the impact of socioeconomic background on the student experience	Unite Students
Monitoring and enhancing retention among under-represented groups	University of West London
Digital transition support tool	Wrexham University

All themes	
Awarding Map	QAA Membership
Supporting successful student transitions	QAA Membership