



Access to Higher Education Diploma: supporting adult learner transition in Wales

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Access to HE Diploma

The Access to HE (AHE) Diploma is a Level 3 post-16 qualification (equivalent to the Welsh Baccalaureate) primarily focused on providing adult learners who wish to enter higher education (HE) with the necessary qualifications in the subject area they wish to follow.



If studied full-time, the AHE can be completed in one year. On completion of an Access to HE Diploma, students may go on to study at a higher level with an HE provider, which could be a degree or other higher-level qualification at Level 4 or above.

Access to HE Diplomas are widely recognised by HE providers throughout the UK and, since September 2017, have been included in the UCAS points tariff. They lead to a standalone qualification and their portability attracts learners who wish to explore options for progression rather than committing to a particular HE provider through a foundation year.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) assumed custodianship of the Access to Higher Education Diploma in 1997. QAA exercises its responsibility for regulating the Diploma through its Recognition Scheme.¹ Within this regulatory framework, QAA authorises organisations to develop, validate, approve and award Access to HE Diplomas. An organisation that has been authorised by QAA for these purposes is known as an Access Validating Agency (AVA).

Of the nine AVAs operating across the UK, Agored Cymru is most active in Wales, with 15 providers currently approved to deliver the Access to HE Diploma. 36,183 students registered to study AHE in the UK in 2023-24,² of which 1,486 studied with an Agored Cymru validated provider.

It should be noted that learners in Wales may choose to travel to study outside of Wales, or study remotely via one of the 35 online AHE learning providers – in such scenarios they may be registered with an AVA other than Agored Cymru.

¹ Access to HE is also regulated by Qualification Wales, with whom QAA has a Memorandum of Understanding.

² Numbers are derived from AVA, DfE and UCAS reports. For further details and for additional UK context, visit: <https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/regulating-access/statistics>

Agored Cymru AHE providers 2023-24

- Bridgend College
- Cardiff and Vale College
- Coleg Cambria
- Coleg Ceredigion
- Coleg Gwent
- Coleg Llandrillo
- Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor
- Coleg Menai
- Coleg Powys
- Coleg Sir Gâr
- Coleg Y Cymoedd
- Gower College Swansea
- NPTC Group of Colleges
- Pembrokeshire College
- The College Merthyr Tydfil

Access to Higher Education learners

The Diploma is widely recognised for its role in widening participation and attracting adults (aged 19+) who have not had the opportunity to achieve a Level 3 qualification in their chosen subject area. In Wales, eight in ten (81%) learners identify as female and four in ten (38%) have declared a learning need or disability. Almost half of Access to HE learners in Wales (49%) come from a recognised area of disadvantage, reflecting the socio-economic status of parts of the nation and speaking to the life-changing opportunity that the Diploma creates for individuals, their families and the wider community.



The AHE Diploma

Each AHE Diploma comprises 60 credits which typically require 600 hours of tutor-led and independent study over a period of one year full-time or two years part-time.³

During their course, learners can expect to study approximately 15 units, each varying in size from 3 to 9 credits. 15 credits are ungraded and are used as opportunities to develop academic and professional skills. 45 credits are graded on a Pass, Merit, Distinction basis across three grading standards:

- ✓ Knowledge and understanding
- ✓ Subject-specific skills
- ✓ Transferable skills.

AVAs and providers work together to determine learning outcomes, course content and assessment methods, guided by the national Diploma Specification and informed by local needs.

For Access to HE (Medicine) there is a Subject Descriptor⁴ which was developed by QAA in collaboration with the Medical Schools Council and the General Medical Council. The purpose of the Subject Descriptor is to define the minimum content for this specific title.

³ A growing proportion of AHE learners are studying part-time; in Wales approximately one in ten learners study part-time.

⁴ QAA has also developed a Subject Descriptor for Access to HE (Nursing) and Access to HE (Health Professions). Only compliant Diplomas may use these reserved titles.

The Subject Descriptor provides information regarding the expected and recommended areas of study to support progression into Medicine at HE level, but also allows a degree of flexibility in Diploma design. The Subject Descriptor should also provide HE admissions staff with confidence that a student who has achieved Access to HE (Medicine) has covered the specified content.

- Applied Computing
- Art and Design
- Business and Financial Services
- Counselling and Psychology*
- Biosciences
- Engineering and Physical Science
- Health Care
- Health Science
- Humanities
- Humanities and Social Sciences
- Medicine
- Nursing and Health Professions*
- Policing
- Science
- Social Care
- Social Sciences

Agored Cymru recently added two new (*) AHE Diplomas to its portfolio bringing the total to 16 Diplomas in a wide range of subject areas.

"Our 16 Diplomas cover a wide range of subject areas that support progression into HE across the UK. Our providers are also encouraged to propose the development of new Diplomas where the need exists. Our flexible approach to delivery and assessment (including blended and online) and our proactive support allow providers to fully focus on their learners."

Agored Cymru

Supporting adults in Wales progress to HE and succeed

There is no such thing as a 'typical' Access to HE learner. They come from all walks of life and face different challenges. AHE students studying at an Agored Cymru provider can expect to learn in small, welcoming groups and have regular contact with teaching and support staff who are able to offer highly focussed and contextually sensitive academic and pastoral support. In 2023-24 41% of Agored Cymru awards were equivalent to an ABB profile, comparable with both UK-wide Access to HE and A level results.⁵



"I didn't continue my second year of A-levels due to a serious illness — completing the Access course seemed like a good option for still being able to go to university. If you have the time to do the course and you want to get to university, then this course is perfect."

Kamal Shah's health did not allow him to complete his A levels, which led him to believe that university wasn't an option. However, as a result of his Access to HE (Bioscience) course he was offered a place to study Biology at the University of Bath

⁵ All 60 credits at Distinction grade; or between 30 and 44 credits at Distinction with all remaining credits at Merit. These grade profiles are considered equivalent to ABB at A level and are expected to be within +/- 10 points of 29.6 – the proportion of A level students historically achieving an ABB profile.

The Access to HE Diploma offers a complementary route for adults seeking to progress into HE, particularly those seeking to retrain or upskill in key sectors. Of the 50 Diploma courses offered by Agored Cymru in 2023-24, 18 related directly to health, public service and care and a further 13 related to social sciences. All 12 of its science and maths Diplomas were in Bioscience or Health Science. Four in every five Agored Cymru learners (82% in 2022/23) who progressed to HE chose to stay in their local area for their studies, supporting the Welsh economy in doing so.

The Access to HE model is:

- ✓ purpose built for adults, with a track record of progression into HE
- ✓ delivered by colleges, community-based and regionally responsive
- ✓ workforce aligned, particularly in public service sectors facing shortages
- ✓ well recognised by HE providers across the UK.

The Diplomas offered by Agored Cymru form the mainstay of AHE provision in Wales, and as such have potential to enhance learner choice and regional provision by building on the strengths of Wales' colleges as trusted Access to HE Diploma providers.

“ Access to HE is a qualification for those who aspire, who are seeking opportunity, who are motivated and engaged and need an interface with the education system that can address their specific needs. The Access to HE Diploma works to get people into HE and help them succeed it supports all students no matter where they are from or what they want to do. It is a mature, effective and resilient qualification that delivers results for learners and society and that is why the QAA is committed to its future. ”

Rob Stroud,
Executive Director of Quality
Assurance and Enhancement,
QAA

Some of the Agored Cymru AHE alumni



Just five years after a life-changing accident left her in a coma with serious burns, Catrin Pugh was awarded Access to HE (Bioscience) and secured a place to study physiotherapy at King's College London.

Catrin is now a physiotherapist with The Katie Piper Foundation and a motivational speaker.

Kelly Osborne was working in healthcare during Covid and decided to retrain. She was recognised as Learner of the Year for Outstanding Academic Achievement by both Agored Cymru and the national Keith Fletcher Awards in 2023 before progressing to Bangor University to study midwifery. She said: *"I absolutely loved the Access course and it gave me such a renewed passion for learning, it was definitely one of the best things I had done in a while! The class was full of interesting people of all ages with lots of different life experiences and it was a really lovely supportive atmosphere to learn in."*



Emma Hughes, Agored Cymru Learner of the Year 2022, progressed to a learning disability nursing degree at the University of South Wales and was awarded Nursing Times Student of the Year Award in 2025. The academic rigour of her AHE course meant she arrived at university ready to hit the ground running, particularly in modules like anatomy and physiology.

"[The AHE staff] didn't just warn us there'd be a step up – they prepared us for it. I'd sit in [university] lectures thinking, 'I know this, I've done this already.' That confidence made all the difference."

This case study has been produced and shared as part of the Medr-funded QAA Cymru project: Enabling learner progression into and within higher education.

Find out more about the project on the QAA Cymru [website](#).

