Access to Higher Education Regulation

Annual regulatory report of the Access to HE Diploma: 2025-26



November 2026

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Executive Summary

1. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has been responsible for the regulatory oversight of the Access to Higher Education Diploma (AHED) since 1997, and in that time more than a million learners have enrolled on Access to HE Diploma courses.

2. The Access to HE Diploma plays a critical role in widening participation, lifelong learning and skills development across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. As governments, employers and higher education providers respond to growing demand for higher-level skills, workforce shortages and changing patterns of learning, the Diploma continues to provide a trusted route into higher education for adults who may not have followed traditional educational pathways. Through a network of nine licensed Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) and more than 250 providers delivering the qualification, almost 35,000 learners each year access opportunities to progress into higher education and transform their future prospects.

3. This year demonstrates the continuing strength and value of the qualification. Learner numbers remained substantial, progression outcomes remained strong, and the Diploma continued to support national and regional skills priorities in areas such as health, education, social care, science and engineering. During the year, QAA implemented the revised Access to HE Recognition Scheme, strengthening regulatory oversight while working with AVAs and providers to maintain confidence in standards, support high-quality delivery, and ensure that the qualification remains responsive to learner and sector needs.

   Our work has been guided by three regulatory principles:

   Integrity
   maintaining the credibility, standards and reputation of the Access to HE Diploma.

   Opportunity
   supporting learners to progress to and succeed in higher education.

   Relevance
   ensuring that the qualification continues to meet the needs of learners, higher education providers, employers and society.

4. Looking ahead, the Access to HE sector faces both challenges and opportunities. Participation across adult learning remains vulnerable to economic pressures, demographic change and evolving funding arrangements, while new delivery models, online learning and emerging technologies create both opportunities for innovation and regulatory challenges. At the same time, developments including the Lifelong Learning Entitlement in England, growing demand for higher-level skills, and increased recognition of flexible learning pathways provide significant opportunities to strengthen the reach and impact of the Diploma. QAA will continue to work with AVAs, providers and governments to protect standards, support learners and ensure that Access to HE remains a credible, relevant and sustainable route into higher education.

Access to HE in 2024-25 at a glance

A trusted route into higher education

A nationally recognised Level 3 qualification for adults, regulated by QAA since 1997, with more than one million learners enrolled.

34,790
learners registered on Access to HE courses (new and continuing)

17,080
Access to HE Diplomas awarded

93%
of learners who complete their course awarded a Diploma

National reach

9
licensed Access Validating Agencies (AVAs)

256
approved providers delivering courses

1,191
courses available
↑4% on 2023-2024

3
nations: England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Strong preparation for higher education

14.8% achieved an all Distinction profile
Source: AVAs

18,285 learners with an Access to HE Diploma accepted in the 2024 entry cycle
Source: UCAS

Widening participation (AVAs data)

22.5% come from disadvantaged areas

31.4% of learners from Asian, Black or Mixed ethnic backgrounds

52.6% aged under 24, alongside adults returning to learning

2025-26 Highlights of our regulatory principles in action

Integrity

- Revised Recognition Scheme implemented, completing the first full licensing cycle
- All nine AVAs reassessed against 23 regulatory Conditions
- Registered trademarks protect learners and national standards

Opportunity

- Continued Advanced Learner Loan funding confirmed in England, written off when learners complete eligible HE courses
- Learner success celebrated at the Keith Fletcher Awards, Palace of Westminster

Relevance

- Supporting skills priorities in health, education, social care science and engineering
- Recognised in draft Lifelong Learning Entitlement legislation as a route into HE

Sources: data reported by the nine licensed AVAs for 2024-25; UCAS 2025 cycle. Regulatory highlights relate to 2025-26.

Introduction: Access to HE in 2025-26

What is Access to HE and why does it matter?

5. The Access to Higher Education (Access to HE) Diploma is a nationally recognised Level 3 qualification that provides an alternative route into higher education for adults seeking to progress to university, develop new skills, or pursue new career opportunities. It supports learners from a wide range of educational and personal backgrounds and plays an important role in widening participation, social mobility and lifelong learning.

6. QAA is the regulator of the Access to HE Diploma, a function embedded within its charitable objects. In this role, QAA licenses and oversees Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), provides advice to governments on the recognition of the Diploma, and protects the integrity and reputation of the qualification through the Access to HE Recognition Scheme. The scheme sets out the regulatory requirements that AVAs must meet in order to develop, validate and award Access to HE Diplomas. QAA also holds the Access to HE trademarks which protect the integrity and national recognition of the qualification. QAA governs the Scheme through its Access Regulation and Licensing Committee (ARLC), a sub-Committee of the Board. As a condition of their Licence Agreement, all AVAs contribute to the costs of operating the Recognition Scheme through an annual fee. This fee comprises a variable charge based on the number of Access to HE learners registered with the AVA in the previous year and supports QAA's costs of maintaining, regulating and developing the Scheme (see Appendix A).

7. QAA's regulatory principles are threefold: maintaining the integrity of the Diploma, supporting learners to progress to and succeed in higher education, and ensuring that the Diploma remains relevant and continues to grow in a changing policy landscape. These principles shape our decisions, our expectations, and our relationship with the organisations we regulate.

8. Through a network of nine licensed AVAs and more than 250 providers, the Diploma is delivered to around 35,000 learners each year across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

9. As governments, employers and education providers respond to changing economic priorities, workforce shortages and growing demand for higher-level skills, the need for flexible routes into higher education has never been greater. At the same time, significant challenges remain in widening participation, supporting social mobility and ensuring that opportunities are available to learners from all backgrounds, not just those who follow traditional educational pathways.



10. Against this backdrop, the Access to HE Diploma continues to play a vital role within the UK's education landscape. It provides a trusted route into higher education for adults returning to learning, individuals seeking a career change, and those who may not have previously had the opportunity to progress through conventional qualifications. As the lifelong learning agenda evolves and learner needs become increasingly diverse, Access to HE remains uniquely placed to support progression, reskilling and workforce development while helping to address inequalities in participation and achievement.

11. The qualification also has an important role to play across the devolved nations, where differing policy priorities, funding arrangements and demographic challenges create opportunities for innovation and growth. By combining academic rigour with flexibility and a strong commitment to widening participation, Access to HE continues to support learners, strengthen communities and contribute to the skills and talent needed for the future.

12. The impact of the Diploma can be seen not only in progression to higher education, but also in the role it plays in enabling learners to develop confidence, realise their potential and pursue careers in sectors of strategic importance, including health, education, social care, science and engineering.



Celebrating learner success

13. In 2025-26, learner achievements continued to demonstrate the transformative impact of Access to HE and the opportunities it creates for individuals, families and communities.

14. In May 2026, QAA supported the annual Keith Fletcher Awards at the Palace of Westminster, celebrating the achievements of Access to HE learners from across the country. The awards recognise learners who have overcome significant personal and educational barriers to progress successfully through the Diploma.

15. Throughout the year, individual learner stories continued to demonstrate the transformative impact of the Access to HE Diploma. One such example was Ellie Nancarrow, who graduated with a First-Class Honours degree in Veterinary Nursing from University Centre Reaseheath after beginning her journey on an Access to HE course. Having previously struggled in education and leaving college without the qualifications she needed, Ellie used the Access to HE Diploma as a route back into learning, discovering new confidence and academic potential. Reflecting on her progression, she said: 'I'd never thought I was smart enough to study Veterinary Nursing. So, I was ecstatic when I was accepted onto the degree course.' Ellie went on to progress successfully into higher education, complete professional placements, secure employment before graduation and qualify as a registered veterinary nurse. Her story is one of many examples of the life-changing opportunities that Access to HE creates for learners seeking to achieve their ambitions.[1]

1 Available at https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/real-stories and https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/news-events.

Part 1: Integrity - maintaining confidence in the Diploma

Implementing the revised Recognition Scheme

16. A major milestone during 2025-26 was the implementation of the revised QAA Access to HE Recognition Scheme and the completion of the first full cycle of AVA licensing under the revised framework. Approved by the QAA Board in March 2025, the revised Scheme introduced clearer and more proportionate regulatory Conditions, strengthened governance and data expectations, enhanced risk-based monitoring, and modernised licensing arrangements.

17. As part of this work, all nine licensed AVAs were reassessed in 2025-26 against 23 new regulatory Conditions covering governance, financial sustainability, provider oversight, qualification development, assessment and awarding (see Appendix B). This provided renewed assurance that organisations responsible for validating and awarding Access to HE Diplomas have the systems, resources and controls necessary to protect standards and safeguard learners. Eight AVAs were awarded the standard five-year licence, while one AVA received a three-year licence with enhanced monitoring in recognition of identified risks requiring closer oversight.

18. The relicensing process was subject to extensive scrutiny by the Access Regulation and Licensing Committee (ARLC)[2], which assessed whether licensing recommendations were robust, proportionate and evidence-based before making recommendations to the QAA Board for approval.

19. Beyond individual licensing decisions, ARLC used evidence from across the entire relicensing cycle to identify emerging risks, common themes and examples of effective practice across the Access to HE sector.

2 Further information on ARLC is available in Appendix A on Governance and Accountability

> The introduction of the new Recognition Scheme, together with the successful renewal of licences for all Access Validating Agencies, marks an important milestone for Access to HE regulation. By creating a more principles-based and risk-informed framework, the Scheme enables the Access Regulation and Licensing Committee to focus more effectively on strategic oversight, emerging risks and the long-term development of the Access to HE Diploma, while maintaining confidence in quality, standards and outcomes. In doing so, it strengthens our ability to ensure the Diploma continues to provide a high-quality and trusted alternative route into higher education, supporting qualified adults from underrepresented backgrounds to access opportunities and fulfil their academic potential."
>
> **Professor Rachid Hourizi, Director of the Institute of Coding, QAA Board Member and Chair of the QAA Access Regulation and Licensing Committee**

AVA licensing and oversight

20. The revised Recognition Scheme introduced time-limited licences, creating a more transparent and risk-based model of regulation. Five-year licences are now the default where there is confidence in compliance and financial resilience, while shorter licence periods can be used where additional scrutiny is required. Importantly, licence length does not limit QAA's ability to intervene through enhanced monitoring, licence Conditions, suspension or withdrawal where risks emerge.

21. The relicensing process also generated important system-wide learning. Assessment findings showed that most areas of the regulatory framework are well understood and consistently applied across AVAs. Areas relating to monitoring, data submission and qualification awarding showed particularly high levels of compliance. Where issues did emerge, they were concentrated within governance, organisational management and specific operational processes, rather than concerns about academic standards or learner outcomes.

22. One particularly valuable outcome was the identification of common sector-wide issues relating to trademarks, complaints procedures and course transfer arrangements. In response, QAA shared new guidance to AVAs on Provider Transparency and Student Information[3], helping AVAs strengthen oversight of marketing and learner-facing information. Several AVAs have subsequently undertaken comprehensive reviews of their arrangements, reducing potential risks to learners and improving consistency across the sector.

3 The guidance is published on the Access to HE SharePoint site for AVAs – and is available on request.

Monitoring, compliance and enforcement

23. Under the Recognition Scheme AVAs must report to QAA notifiable incidents. A total of 33 incidents across six AVAs were reported in 2025-26. Academic misconduct and administrative processes relating to registration and certification were the main areas where incidents were reported. Reports relating to late registrations were made by two AVAs. Only one AVA reported certification errors which were attributed to administrative errors by providers in submitting results. The instances of misconduct reported related primarily to learner plagiarism and cases where providers had not correctly applied QAA's regulations governing resubmissions, as set out in Section C of the Access to HE Grading Scheme. These regulations permit resubmission where learning outcomes have not been achieved but do not permit learners to resubmit work solely for the purpose of improving grades.

24. Incidents relating to incorrect use of QAA's trademarks or misleading public information were identified across four AVAs.

25. QAA received four complaints under the Access to HE Diploma Concerns Scheme. Only one complaint related to QAA-recognised Access to HE Diplomas but was not in scope for consideration under the scheme at the time of submission. Two of the other complaints related to non-Access to HE provision at Access to HE providers. One complaint related to university study.

26. No investigations were initiated in the 2025-26 academic year. However, additional monitoring identified in an investigation report approved in 2024 continued until April 2026 when it was confirmed the case was closed. Officers will undertake enhanced monitoring for one AVA following the 2025-26 licensing reassessment activity.

Trademarks, transparency and learner protection

27. Protecting the integrity of the Access to HE Diploma remains a core element of QAA's regulatory role. QAA owns the registered trademarks 'Access to Higher Education' and 'Access to HE', alongside the Diploma Specification and associated branding. These protected terms may only be used in relation to qualifications developed, validated and awarded through QAA-licensed AVAs. Trademark protection is therefore not simply a matter of brand management; it is a key mechanism for safeguarding learners, maintaining national standards and preserving confidence in the Diploma among higher education providers. By preventing unregulated courses from being marketed as 'Access to HE', the trademark helps ensure that learners can have confidence that qualifications carrying the Access to HE title are nationally recognised and subject to QAA's regulatory oversight.

28. During the year, QAA continued its work to address misuse of the Access to HE trademark and to ensure that references to the Diploma remain accurate and consistent. However, the introduction of the revised Recognition Scheme has broadened the regulatory focus beyond trademark protection alone. The Scheme places increased emphasis on transparency, consumer protection and the quality of information provided to prospective and current learners, recognising that clear and accurate information is essential to informed decision-making and successful participation.

29. As part of implementation, QAA issued guidance to AVAs on provider transparency and learner information. The guidance reinforces the principle that learners should receive clear, accurate, timely and non-misleading information throughout their learner journey, from initial enquiry through to completion. It establishes expectations for risk-based oversight of provider marketing and communications, including websites, prospectuses, advertising, social media and other learner-facing materials. Early implementation activity identified a number of instances where provider information required improvement, prompting AVAs to review arrangements across their provider networks and strengthen oversight of learner-facing communications.

Looking ahead

30. During 2026-27, a risk-based thematic review of online and distance-learning Access to HE provision will examine how effectively providers and AVAs support learners throughout their learner journey. This reflects the significant growth in online and distance-learning Access to HE provision, the increasing use of digital learning platforms and AI-enabled services, and the need to ensure that regulatory arrangements remain effective in protecting learners and maintaining the integrity of the Diploma as delivery models evolve. The review will explore the quality and transparency of pre-enrolment information, learner support and communication, awareness of rights and routes for raising concerns, arrangements for identifying and supporting learners at risk of disengagement, and the effectiveness of learner protection measures. It will also examine the opportunities and risks associated with online delivery, identify examples of effective practice, and consider whether any changes to guidance, monitoring arrangements or regulatory approaches are required. Findings will inform future regulatory activity, guidance and enhancement work across the Access to HE sector.

Ensuring financial sustainability

31. Financial resilience is an important component of learner protection. Provider or validating agency failure would disrupt study, progression and qualification achievement. The enhanced assessment introduced through relicensing therefore forms part of QAA's wider approach to identifying emerging risks and safeguarding learner interests.

32. Relicensing incorporated a more systematic assessment of financial resilience. QAA analysed audited accounts, reserves, liquidity, solvency and financial forecasts alongside operational performance and governance arrangements. The focus was not on achieving fixed financial thresholds, but on providing reasonable assurance that learners would be able to complete their courses and receive their qualifications.

33. The assessment found that the vast majority of AVAs demonstrate adequate to strong financial resilience, supported by healthy reserves, robust governance arrangements and sound strategic planning. Where risks were identified, these have been managed through proportionate regulatory responses. This approach strengthens learner protection while ensuring regulation remains proportionate and risk-based.

Upholding regulatory best practice

34. Regulation of Access to HE is an important public function that helps maintain confidence in the Diploma, protect learners and support positive outcomes across the sector. The purpose of the Recognition Scheme is to provide a framework that is proportionate, evidence-based and focused on delivering public benefit.

35. QAA's approach is informed by recognised principles of regulatory best practice, including the OECD Best Practice Principles for Licensing and Permitting, and the UK Regulators' Code.[4] These frameworks emphasise that regulation should be transparent, risk-based and outcomes-focused, with regulatory effort targeted where it is most needed. They also highlight the importance of constructive engagement, clear guidance and the use of evidence to inform decision-making.

36. In practice, this means creating a regulatory environment in which AVAs are supported to understand and meet regulatory requirements, while maintaining robust oversight of quality, standards and learner protection. QAA seeks to combine assurance, guidance and engagement with proportionate intervention where risks emerge. Our aim is not merely to identify non-compliance, but to support compliance, anticipate risks and reduce the likelihood of regulatory failure.

37. Effective regulation must continue to evolve in response to changes in the wider educational landscape. Developments such as digital delivery, artificial intelligence, new approaches to learner support, changing policy priorities and emerging delivery models present both opportunities and challenges for the Access to HE Diploma. Maintaining a responsive and future-focused regulatory framework is therefore an essential component of good regulation.

38. During 2026-27, QAA will review the extent to which the Recognition Scheme continues to reflect recognised principles of regulatory best practice. This review will consider how effectively the Scheme:
    - aligns regulatory activity with intended outcomes;
    - adopts a proportionate and risk-based approach;
    - supports AVAs to comply and improve;
    - maintains clear, accessible and consistent guidance;
    - engages stakeholders effectively;
    - promotes transparency, fairness and accountability; and
    - remains responsive to future developments.

4 OECD (2025) Best Practice Principles for Licensing and Permitting: How to Manage Risks While Supporting Growth. Paris: OECD Publishing, available at https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/11/best-practice-principles-for-licensing-and-permitting_aee48c02.html. Office for Product Safety and Standards (2014) Regulators' Code. London: UK Government, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulators-code

39. This work will help ensure that the Recognition Scheme continues to support learners, providers and AVAs effectively, while maintaining confidence in the integrity, quality and long-term sustainability of the Access to HE Diploma.

Conclusion

40. Taken together, implementation of the Recognition Scheme, the completion of AVA relicensing, strengthened approaches to learner protection, enhanced oversight of financial resilience and continued commitment to regulatory best practice have reinforced confidence in the Access to HE Diploma. These activities provide assurance that standards remain robust, regulation remains proportionate, and learners continue to be protected across the system.



Part 2: Opportunity - supporting learner success and progression

41. Through nine licensed Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) and more than 250 providers, Access to HE Diplomas are delivered to around 35,000 learners each year across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Together, providers offer almost 1,200 Diploma courses, supporting progression into higher education across a wide range of subjects and professional fields.

42. A full set of data and statistics are being published alongside this report and a summary is provided in Appendix C.

43. Unless otherwise stated, the statistical data presented in this report relate to the 2024-25 academic year. This reflects the timing of data collection and reporting across the Access to HE system. Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) submit annual learner and qualification data to QAA following the completion of the academic year, meaning that comprehensive data for 2025-26 will not be available until after the annual AVA data return in December 2026.

44. Similarly, progression and outcomes data obtained from external sources, including UCAS and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), are reported on an academic-year basis and therefore reflect the most recently available validated dataset, which at the time of publication, is the 2023-24 cycle (HESA) and 2024-25 academic year (UCAS). HESA 2024-25 data will be received in Autumn 2026 and data will be used to update statistics online.

45. Throughout this report, references to learner registrations, achievement, progression and demographic characteristics should therefore be understood as relating to the latest available complete dataset rather than the reporting period covered by the wider annual regulatory report.

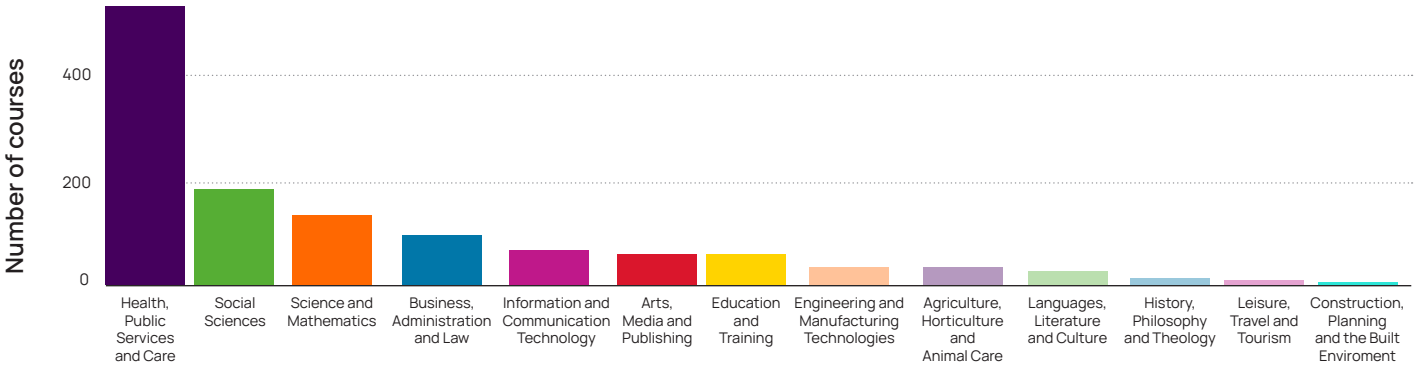
Participation and provision

46. National AVA monitoring data for 2024-25 shows a continuing downward trend in Access to HE registrations, with learner numbers falling from over 36,000 in 2019-20 to 34,790 in 2024-25, a decline of 4.2% over five years. While the reduction mirrors wider demographic and participation challenges within adult learning and further education, the provider landscape has remained stable. In 2024-25, 256 approved providers delivered Access to HE courses, with no net change in provider numbers year on year.

47. The number of Access to HE courses increased to 1,191 in 2024-25, representing growth of 4% compared with the previous year. This suggests that despite fluctuations in learner demand, providers continue to invest in maintaining and developing progression opportunities across subject areas and regions, supporting learner choice and responsiveness to local and national skills needs.

48. Access to HE continues to make an important contribution to national and regional skills priorities. Health-related programmes remain by far the largest area of provision, alongside significant numbers of courses in social sciences, science, education, business and engineering. These subject areas support progression into higher education courses and professional careers that are important to public services, economic growth and workforce development.

Chart 1: Number of courses offered (2024-25) by Sector Subject Area



Tier 1 Subject name	Number of courses offered
Health, Public Services and Care	524
Social Sciences	180
Science and Mathematics	134
Business, Administration and Law	97
Information and Communication Technology	62
Arts, Media and Publishing	55
Education and Training	53
Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	29
Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	28
Languages, Literature and Culture	23
History, Philosophy and Theology	11
Leisure, Travel and Tourism	9
Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	2

Learner outcomes and progression

49. Achievement rates remain strong across the sector and grading outcomes continue to be consistent following the transition from seven grading descriptors to three grading standards. In 2024-25, 17,080 Diplomas were awarded, 93% of learners completing their course achieved the Diploma, and 14.8% achieved an all-Distinction profile. In addition, 42.8% of learners achieved Profile 1 (ABB A-level equivalent or above), demonstrating the continued effectiveness of the Diploma as preparation for higher education study.

50. Progression to higher education remains a particular strength of the Diploma. While learner journeys are increasingly diverse and may include breaks in study or deferred progression, UCAS data shows 18,285 learners with an Access to HE background were accepted into higher education in the 2024 cycle. AVA data also indicates strong progression aspirations among current cohorts, with 78.8% of Diploma achievers intending to progress to higher education as the next step in their journey.

Understanding today's learners

51. Registration data highlights several important changes in the learner population.

52. The age profile of learners continues to evolve, with those aged under 25 accounting for an increasing proportion (52.6%) of registrations while participation among older learners has gradually declined. This suggests that Access to HE is serving an increasingly diverse learner population, combining its traditional role as a route back into education for mature learners with growing importance as a progression route for younger adults.

53. The proportion of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds has increased steadily over recent years, rising from 4.1% in 2019-20 to 22.5% in 2024-25. The national measure currently used to assess disadvantage draws on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, a well-established area-based measure. Because it reflects the characteristics of where learners live rather than their individual circumstances, it is likely to capture only part of the full range of challenges experienced by Access to HE learners, including caring responsibilities, health conditions, disrupted educational experiences and financial hardship, which are not identifiable from postcode data alone.

54. Registration patterns also demonstrate increasing diversity within the learner population. Registrations from Asian, Black and Mixed-ethnicity learners have continued to increase, while female learners remain the majority cohort across the sector. Disability data suggests participation remains stable, although a significant proportion of learners continue to have unknown disability status recorded, highlighting the need for improved understanding and data quality.

55. Despite modest declines in overall registration numbers, the available evidence suggests that the Access to HE Diploma continues to deliver strong outcomes for learners. The combination of stable provider numbers, increased course availability, strong achievement rates and sustained progression to higher education indicates continued confidence in the qualification among learners, providers and higher education institutions.



Strengthening our understanding of learner journeys

56. During 2025-26, QAA began work on a Data and Evidence Roadmap to support implementation of the Recognition Scheme and strengthen understanding of learner participation, progression and success.

57. The roadmap is being designed to provide a proportionate and evidence-informed approach to evaluating the effectiveness of the Access to HE system. Rather than creating significant additional reporting requirements, it seeks to make better use of existing data, intelligence and stakeholder insight to support decision-making and continuous improvement.

58. A particular focus of the roadmap will be understanding learner journeys more effectively. This includes identifying patterns in participation, progression and withdrawal, exploring variations across learner groups and regions, and developing a clearer evidence base on the contribution of Access to HE to widening participation, social mobility and workforce development.

59. As implementation of the Recognition Scheme continues, the roadmap will support more sophisticated analysis of learner outcomes, progression pathways and emerging trends. This will help QAA, AVAs and providers better understand where learners succeed, where barriers remain, and how the Access to HE Diploma can continue to support opportunity for future generations of learners.

Part 3: Relevance - ensuring Access to HE remains fit for the future

Understanding a changing Access to HE sector

60. During 2025-26, implementation of the Recognition Scheme provided QAA with the most comprehensive picture of the Access to HE sector in recent years, drawing together performance, provider, learner and market data from across all licensed Access Validating Agencies (AVAs).

61. The evidence demonstrates that Access to HE remains a diverse but stable system. While learner registrations have declined modestly in recent years, AVA-level data shows significant variation in growth, delivery models and organisational strategy. Some organisations have expanded rapidly, while others have consolidated provision or experienced declining enrolments. Taken together, this evidence suggests a sector that is adapting to changing patterns of demand rather than experiencing systemic decline. Nonetheless, declining overall registrations indicate that adaptation has been uneven, and raise an important question about whether the sector is evolving quickly enough to meet changing learner preferences and expectations. The challenge for the coming years will be to ensure that innovation and new delivery models are supporting both sustainable growth and continued confidence in the qualification.

62. Learner outcomes remain strong. Progression to higher education continues to be a particular strength of the Access to HE Diploma, while achievement rates remain stable across the sector. Although retention rates vary between providers and AVAs, this variation often reflects differences in learner populations, modes of delivery and recruitment patterns rather than concerns about quality or standards.

63. The evidence also highlights a changing learner population. Increasing numbers of younger learners are accessing the Diploma alongside traditional adult returners, while providers are responding to growing complexity of learner need and widening participation challenges. The ability of the qualification to maintain positive outcomes while serving a changing learner population demonstrates its continued adaptability and relevance.

Emerging risks and challenges

64. While the sector remains resilient, a number of strategic risks continue to require careful monitoring.

Demand, participation and sustainability

65. Recruitment across the adult learning sector continues to be influenced by economic conditions, demographic change and evolving funding arrangements. Continued declines in participation could reduce learner opportunities in some areas, contribute to regional inequalities in access to provision and place pressure on the sustainability of some providers and AVAs.

66. The Recognition Scheme requires AVAs to maintain effective strategic oversight of their Access to HE provision, monitor recruitment and learner outcomes, and identify and mitigate risks to quality, standards and organisational sustainability. QAA supplements this through sector-wide monitoring of participation trends, annual data returns and engagement with AVAs to identify emerging risks and opportunities.

Digital delivery and learner protection

67. The rapid growth of online and distance learning Access to HE provision continues to create opportunities to widen participation and improve flexibility. However, it also introduces new challenges relating to learner engagement, learner support, assessment practice and the quality of information provided to prospective learners. The increasing use of digital marketing, third-party recruitment arrangements and AI-enabled communications reinforces the importance of effective oversight and transparency.

68. During 2026-27, QAA will undertake a risk-based thematic review of online and distance-learning provision and continue to strengthen expectations relating to transparency, learner protection, provider oversight and risk management through the Recognition Scheme.

Maintaining confidence in standards

69. Confidence in the Access to HE Diploma depends on the consistent application of academic standards across the sector. As delivery models evolve, QAA will continue to monitor grading outcomes, moderation arrangements, assessment practice and qualification development to ensure that standards remain robust, comparable and trusted.

70. QAA maintains oversight of standards through the Recognition Scheme's requirements for quality assurance, moderation and monitoring, supported by analysis of grading outcomes and sector performance data. During 2026-27, this will be complemented by a review of the Access to HE Grading Scheme and a thematic review of online and distance-learning provision to ensure that standards remain robust, comparable and trusted across evolving delivery models.

Balancing innovation and regulation

71. A continuing challenge for the Recognition Scheme is maintaining an appropriate balance between regulatory assurance and innovation. The framework must provide sufficient oversight to protect learners and standards while remaining proportionate, avoiding unnecessary burden and enabling AVAs and providers to respond to changing learner expectations, technologies and approaches to teaching and learning.

72. QAA will continue to review the revised Recognition Scheme and engages regularly with AVAs and stakeholders to ensure that regulatory requirements remain proportionate, evidence-based and responsive to innovation and emerging risks.

A changing policy environment

73. The policy landscape for post-16 education continues to evolve through skills reforms, lifelong learning initiatives, funding changes and increasing local decision-making. These developments create opportunities for growth but also require continued engagement to ensure that Access to HE remains aligned with government priorities and continues to provide a credible and recognised route into higher education.



Read Andy Byrne's story

Opportunities for growth and development

74. Alongside these challenges, significant opportunities exist for the continued development of Access to HE.

75. Strategic statements submitted by AVAs demonstrate a sector that remains strongly committed to widening participation, social mobility and lifelong learning. Across the UK, the AVAs intend to maintain or expand provision, particularly in areas linked to workforce shortages and economic priorities, including health and social care, digital technologies, STEM disciplines, life sciences, construction and green industries.

76. Digital innovation is also emerging as an important area of development. AVAs are increasingly investing in online learning resources, hybrid delivery models and technology-enhanced learning. At the same time, they are exploring how artificial intelligence may support curriculum development, assessment and quality assurance while recognising the need to protect academic integrity.

77. Many AVAs are strengthening partnerships with higher education providers and exploring more flexible progression pathways, including modular learning, micro-credentials and innovative delivery models designed to meet the needs of adult learners balancing study with work and family commitments.

78. Emerging developments such as the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, growing demand for higher-level skills, increasing emphasis on place-based economic growth and recognition of flexible learning pathways create significant opportunities to strengthen the visibility and impact of Access to HE in the years ahead.

79. Taken together, the evidence presents a picture of a confident and adaptable sector that remains committed to its core purpose while responding proactively to changing learner needs, workforce demands and policy priorities. As the revised licensing framework becomes embedded, further opportunities exist to strengthen learner voice, learner protection, equality outcomes and the wider public-interest contribution of Access to HE.

Part 4: Regulatory leadership and influence

QAA's role in promoting understanding of Access to HE

80. As the regulator of the Access to HE Diploma, QAA has an important role in supporting awareness and understanding of the qualification. However, that role is distinct from marketing individual courses or generating recruitment for providers. QAA does not promote individual Access to HE Diplomas, AVAs, colleges or universities. Nor is it responsible for creating learner demand or recruitment activity. These responsibilities sit with AVAs, providers and their partners.

81. Instead, QAA's role is to build public understanding of the Access to HE Diploma as a nationally recognised and regulated qualification that provides a proven route into higher education for adult learners. Through its regulatory and convening functions, QAA works to ensure that learners, advisers, employers, higher education providers, regulators and policymakers have clear, consistent and accurate information about what the qualification is, how it operates and the opportunities it creates.

82. QAA provides system leadership by coordinating national resources and messaging about Access to HE and by supporting stakeholder engagement across the sector. QAA seeks to strengthen understanding of the Access to HE system as a whole and to reinforce confidence in the standards, quality and protections that underpin the qualification.

Working with other regulators

83. QAA works closely with governments, regulators, inspectorates and sector bodies across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to support effective regulation, policy development and learner protection. During 2025-26, QAA continued to draw on intelligence and evidence from across the education system to inform regulatory decision-making and ensure that Access to HE remains aligned with wider developments in qualifications, skills and higher education.

84. During the year, QAA worked closely with Ofqual on areas of shared policy interest and regulatory oversight, progressed a revised Memorandum of Understanding with Qualifications Wales, and increased engagement with Estyn. These partnerships support information sharing, horizon scanning and coordinated approaches to issues affecting learners and progression pathways.

85. QAA also continued to contribute evidence and expertise to policy discussions across the UK. This included engagement with Medr, the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland, and the All-Party Parliamentary Group inquiry into adult education. Through this work, QAA highlighted the contribution of Access to HE to widening participation, lifelong learning, social mobility and workforce development.[5]

86. In Wales, QAA contributed to consultations on the future of tertiary education[6] and provided evidence to the Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into routes into post-16 education and training.[7] QAA also undertook research commissioned by Medr, publishing Transitions into and within Higher Education: An Exploration of Approaches and Good Practice, which highlighted the role of Access to HE in supporting progression and widening participation.[8]

87. In Northern Ireland, QAA responded to the Department for the Economy consultation on widening participation in higher education, drawing on evidence from Access to HE provision across the UK and identifying opportunities to strengthen adult progression routes and participation.[9]

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5 See https://www.aoc.co.uk/news-campaigns-parliament/work-in-parliament/appg/appg-inquiry-on-adult-education. The inquiry was launched by the APPG on Further Education and Lifelong Learning in March 2026, with evidence sessions running through spring and summer 2026 and recommendations due to be presented to government in autumn 2026. As of the time of writing, the inquiry is still in progress and no final report has been published.

6 See https://www.gov.wales/future-tertiary-education-wales-five-challenges. The call for evidence closed in March 2026 and the Welsh Government published a Summary of Responses and supporting technical annexes in August 2026.

7 QAA submission available at https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s157634/RET%2011%20Quality%20Assurance%20Agency%20for%20Higher%20Education%20QAA.pdf

8 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2025) Transitions into and within Higher Education: An Exploration of Approaches and Good Practice. Available at: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/about-us/readiness-to-learn-report-dec-25.pdf.

9 See https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/consultations/review-approach-widening-participation-higher-education. The consultation ran from **22 January** to **16 April 2026**. The Department stated that responses would be evaluated and a summary report published. However, the Department has subsequently confirmed that it is progressing a refreshed widening participation approach and moving towards a new **Access, Participation and Outcomes Plan (APOP)** framework, reflecting a stronger focus on access, progression, success and outcomes.

Influencing funding and policy reform

88. During the year, QAA continued to engage closely with the Department for Education in England on the future funding and policy position of the Access to HE Diploma. Given the qualification's long-standing contribution to adult progression and widening participation, QAA made the case for continued public investment in Access to HE as a distinctive and valuable route into higher education.

89. In England, the Government subsequently confirmed the continuation of financial support for Access to HE learners. Learners aged 19 and above will remain eligible for Advanced Learner Loans, including existing arrangements under which loan balances are written off when learners progress to and complete eligible higher education courses. The Department also confirmed that funding-by-exception arrangements for eligible 18 to 24-year-old learners will continue for Access to HE Diplomas linked to the first tranche of V Level subjects from 2027-28.

90. There were also positive developments relating to the Lifelong Learning Entitlement. Draft secondary legislation published during the year explicitly recognised the Access to HE Diploma as an illustrative route into higher education and confirmed continuation of loan cancellation arrangements. Together, these developments reinforce the ongoing importance of Access to HE within the evolving lifelong learning and skills landscape.[10]

91. QAA will continue to engage with governments and monitor the impact of wider reforms, including funding changes and English devolution arrangements, to understand their implications for learner participation, provider sustainability and future growth.

International Access to HE Diploma

92. In April 2026, QAA announced its decision not to proceed with the proposed International Access to Higher Education Diploma pilot following an extensive programme of development work, stakeholder engagement and public consultation.

93. The proposed qualification sought to extend the benefits of the Access to HE Diploma beyond the UK, providing adult learners overseas with a recognised route into higher education and supporting international progression opportunities. However, following a detailed assessment of feasibility and risk, QAA concluded that the potential benefits were outweighed by concerns relating to market demand, progression opportunities, regulatory complexity and the operational requirements associated with international delivery.

94. Although the pilot will not proceed, the work undertaken has strengthened understanding of international markets, qualification design and stakeholder priorities. The evidence gathered through the project will continue to inform future policy and strategic discussions.[11]

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10 Draft legislation is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-lle-overview/lifelong-learning-entitlement-overview#secondary-legislation

11 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2026) International Access to Higher Education Diploma: Decision to discontinue the proposed pilot, available at: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/access-to-he/decision_to_discontinue.pdf, and QAA (2026) International Access to Higher Education Diploma: Licensing arrangements for Access Validating Agencies operating internationally: Summary of consultation responses available at https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/access-to-he/consultation_analysis.pdf.

Part 5: Priorities for Access to HE in 2026-27

95. As implementation of the Recognition Scheme continues, QAA's focus remains on maintaining confidence in the Access to HE Diploma, supporting learner success and progression, and ensuring that the qualification continues to respond effectively to changing learner, sector and policy needs. During 2026-27, our priorities will continue to be guided by our three principles.

Integrity

96. Maintaining confidence in the Diploma remains central to QAA's regulatory mission. During 2026-27, we will continue to embed the Recognition Scheme, publish remaining supporting guidance and strengthen risk-based monitoring arrangements. We will review the implementation of the revised Grading Scheme, consider the effectiveness and coverage of Subject Descriptors and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements, and undertake a thematic review of online and distance-learning provision.

97. Alongside this work, we will continue to monitor compliance in the public and learner interest, with particular attention to learner protection, provider transparency, marketing practices and appropriate use of the Access to HE trademarks. We will also continue to strengthen our use of regulatory intelligence and evidence to ensure that oversight remains proportionate, effective and responsive to emerging risk.

Opportunity

98. Improving understanding of learner participation, progression and success will be a major focus during the coming year. Through publication of the Data and Evidence Roadmap, QAA will strengthen analysis of learner journeys, participation patterns, withdrawals, progression outcomes and regional variation. Particular attention will be given to identifying and understanding 'cold spots' in participation, whether by geography, subject area or learner demographic.

99. We will strengthen learner insight and explore new approaches to learner voice, alumni engagement and learner ambassador activity. We will also consider how Access to HE can better support learners facing additional barriers to participation and progression, including veterans and those with justice-experience.

100. Alongside this, QAA will work with higher education providers, admissions professionals, mission groups and careers services to raise awareness of Access to HE and strengthen progression opportunities. We will continue to explore new progression pathways, including opportunities arising from the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, apprenticeships and developments in Northern Ireland.

Relevance

101. Ensuring that Access to HE remains responsive to future needs will require continued engagement with governments, regulators, higher education providers and wider stakeholders. During 2026-27, QAA will strengthen the visibility of Access to HE within national discussions on skills reform, lifelong learning, devolution, widening participation and workforce development. This will include continued engagement with government departments, regulators, admissions and careers professionals, and sector bodies to ensure that Access to HE is recognised as an important route supporting adult learning, participation and progression.

102. We will explore options for facilitating engagement with Strategic Authorities in England, to ensure that Access to HE pathways continue to reflect economic priorities and workforce needs. We will also strengthen relationships with governments and stakeholders across Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure that Access to HE remains aligned with emerging tertiary education priorities and developments.

103. QAA's leadership role extends beyond regulation alone. Through publication of system-level analyses and learner insights, we will continue to strengthen the evidence base underpinning future development of the Diploma. Increasingly, this work will support a deeper understanding of participation patterns, learner outcomes, emerging risks and opportunities for improvement. It will also help address misconceptions about Access to HE and provide insight into issues such as inclusive course design, digital delivery, adult learning and the responsible use of artificial intelligence.

104. A key development during 2026-27 will be the launch of the Access and Adult Learning Networking Community for QAA members. Bringing together colleagues from Access to HE delivery and receiver institutions, the community will provide a forum for sharing practice, exploring the opportunities and challenges facing adult learners, and strengthening understanding of progression into and through higher education. Through collaborative initiatives such as this, together with ongoing engagement with sector partners and stakeholders, QAA will continue to support the relevance, visibility and long-term sustainability of Access to HE within an evolving educational and skills landscape.

Looking ahead

105. Alongside these priorities, QAA will continue to strengthen its evidence base, communications and sector engagement activity.

106. This programme of work will help ensure that the Access to HE Diploma remains a trusted, high-quality route into higher education while strengthening its contribution to widening participation, social mobility, workforce development and lifelong learning across the UK.

Appendix A: Governance and Budget

Access Regulation and Licensing Committee (ARLC)

The Access Regulation and Licensing Committee (ARLC) is the Board committee responsible for overseeing QAA's Recognition Scheme for Access to HE, including AVA licensing, regulatory oversight, monitoring activity and the continued development of the Access to HE Diploma. Acting on delegated authority from the Board, the Committee provides strategic oversight of regulatory performance, considers emerging risks and opportunities across the Access to HE system, and advises on the effectiveness, relevance and sustainability of the Recognition Scheme.

While the Committee would normally be expected to meet three or four times each year, ARLC met on five occasions during 2025-26 in recognition of the significant strategic demands placed upon it. In addition to its ongoing oversight responsibilities, the Committee played a central role in scrutinising and advising the Board on the implementation of the revised AVA licensing arrangements, including consideration of licensing recommendations for all nine recognised AVAs. It also considered the future viability of the proposed International Access to HE Diploma pilot. The additional meetings reflected the scale of regulatory reform underway and the importance of ensuring robust governance and scrutiny during the transition to the revised Recognition Scheme.

During 2026-27, the Committee will also review and refresh its Terms of Reference to better reflect the current QAA Scheme of Delegation and ensure it remains focused on strategic oversight rather than operational activity. Proposed changes include clarifying the Committee's purpose and measures of success, strengthening the emphasis on enhancement alongside regulatory assurance, and considering how learner insight and learner voice can be more effectively incorporated into the Committee's work. The review will also take account of the wider governance review being undertaken by QAA and ensure that ARLC continues to provide effective strategic advice and assurance to the Board.

Financial overview

The Access to HE Recognition Scheme operates on a cost-recovery basis and is funded principally through fees paid by licensed AVAs. Each AVA is required, as a condition of its licence, to contribute to the costs of maintaining, operating and developing the Recognition Scheme. Annual fees are calculated using a transparent formula based on the number of new Access to HE learners registered with each AVA, with a common per-learner rate applied across the sector. This approach ensures that the costs of regulation are shared proportionately according to the scale of each AVA's activity.

The annual fee supports QAA's core regulatory functions, including licensing, monitoring, quality assurance, regulatory policy development, guidance and sector-wide oversight. In addition, where enhanced monitoring, investigations or other exceptional regulatory activity are required in relation to a specific AVA, additional charges may be applied to recover the costs of that activity rather than distributing them across the wider sector. This ensures that routine regulatory costs are shared collectively, while exceptional costs are borne by the organisation giving rise to the additional regulatory activity.

Appendix B: The Access to HE Recognition Scheme Conditions

The **Access to HE Recognition Scheme** provides the regulatory framework through which QAA licenses and oversees Access Validating Agencies (AVAs). To obtain and maintain a licence, AVAs must comply with a set of requirements designed to protect the integrity, quality and national recognition of the Access to HE Diploma.

The Recognition Scheme comprises two core elements:

- **Standard Terms for the Licensing of AVAs:** the contractual terms that organisations must agree to in order to become, and remain, licensed AVAs.
- **Access to HE Conditions:** the regulatory requirements that AVAs must demonstrate they can meet, and continue to comply with, in order to retain their licence.

The Conditions are supported by a range of **Regulatory Documents**, which provide more detailed requirements and guidance. These include:

- **Licensing Arrangements:** setting out how licences are awarded, renewed, surrendered or withdrawn.
- **Monitoring Arrangements:** explaining how QAA monitors compliance with the Recognition Scheme and responds where concerns arise.
- **Qualification Requirements:** including the Access to HE Diploma Specification, Access to HE Grading Scheme and Subject Descriptors, which establish requirements for the design, delivery, assessment and award of Access to HE Diplomas.

Together, these arrangements provide a consistent and proportionate framework for regulating AVAs, safeguarding academic standards, protecting learners and maintaining confidence in the Access to HE Diploma across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Documentation relating to the Scheme is available on the QAA website: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources/access-to-he-licensing-criteria

The Recognition Scheme Conditions are structured across six Parts (A–F), each containing a different number of individual sub-Conditions.

Part 1: The AVA

Section A – Management, governance and strategy

- **A1:** Governance arrangements
- **A2:** Accountability
  - **A2.1:** Responsible Officer
  - **A2.2:** Strategic Statement
  - **A2.3:** Annual Statement of Compliance
- **A3:** Finance and resources
  - **A3.1:** Ensuring the ability to develop and award qualifications
  - **A3.2:** Ensuring financial viability
- **A4:** Identification and management of risk
- **A5:** Complaints and appeals
- **A6:** Compliance with regulatory requirements
  - **A6.1:** Regulatory Documents
  - **A6.2:** Access to HE trademarks
- **A7:** Student registration

Section B – Monitoring and information provision

- **B1:** Notification to QAA of certain events
- **B2:** Notice to provide information to QAA
- **B3:** QAA monitoring of AVAs
- **B4:** Information and data submission requirements
- **B5:** AVA monitoring of records

Part 2: Providers approved to deliver the Access to HE courses

Section C – Provider and course recognition

- **C1:** Provider approval
  - **C1.1:** Process for approval
  - **C1.2:** Requirement for an agreement between the AVA and Provider
  - **C1.3:** Confirmation of Provider approval
- **C2:** Ongoing monitoring of Providers

Part 3: Validation, approval and delivery of the Diploma

Section D – Development of Diplomas

- **D1:** Content and structure of Diplomas
  - **D1.1:** Compliance with the Recognition Scheme
  - **D1.2:** Accessibility of Access to HE Diplomas
  - **D1.3:** Modifications to units and Diplomas
- **D2:** Approval and ongoing validation of Diplomas and Access to HE courses
  - **D2.1:** Initial approval and validation of Diplomas and Access to HE courses
  - **D2.2:** Revalidation of a Diploma
  - **D2.3:** Quality assurance
- **D3:** Provider and Diploma withdrawal
  - **D3.1:** Withdrawal of an Access to HE Diploma
  - **D3.2:** Provider withdrawal
- **D4:** Diploma and Access to HE course transfers

Section E – Setting, delivering and moderating assessments

- **E1:** Operationalising standardisation and moderation
- **E2:** Assessment design
- **E3:** Academic misconduct (including generative artificial intelligence)
- **E4:** Moderation
  - **E4.1:** Internal moderation
  - **E4.2:** External moderation
  - **E4.3:** Recruitment, selection and appointment of external moderators
  - **E4.4:** Induction and training of external moderators
  - **E4.5:** Moderator reports

Section F – Awarding the qualification

- **F1:** Qualification recognition
  - **F1.1:** Procedures for the award of Access to HE Diplomas
  - **F1.2:** Certification
  - **F1.3:** Transcript of achievement

Appendix C: Statistical tables

AVA data for the 2024-25 academic year

Learner characteristics	Number of registrations (rounded)	Percentage of ALL registrations
Female	25,525	73.4%
24 and under	18,310	52.6%
25 and over	16,480	47.4%
From area of disadvantage	7,845	22.5%
Disadvantage unknown	7,635	21.9%
Asian	3,490	10.0%
Black	5,160	14.8%
Mixed	2,280	6.6%
Other	1,265	3.6%
White	19,115	54.9%
Disabilities and/or Learning Difficulties	3,925	11.3%
No Disability or Learning Difficulty	19,281	55.4%
Not disclosed	75	0.2%
No information provided on disabilities	11,510	33.1%
Destination HE	10,335	60.5%
Destination unknown	2,005	11.7%
All learners	**34,790**	

Completion and achievement	2024-2025
Learners registered to complete in one year between 1 August and 31 July	17,500
Learners registered to complete in more than one year	17,285
New learners registered	24,915
All learners registered	**34,790**
% of learners registered to complete in one year between 1 August and 31 July	50.3%
% of learners registered to complete in more than one year	49.7%
Access to HE Diplomas awarded	**17,080**
All learners completing the Diploma	18,370
Full-time* learners completed in one year	13,830
Full-time* learners completing and certificated	13,325
Diplomas awarded as a % of all learners completing the Diploma	93.0%
Diplomas awarded as a % of full-time learners*	97.6%
Full-time learners* certificated as a percentage of full time learners* starting in the academic year (achievement rate)	76.1%
Full-time learners* who completed their Diploma as a percentage of full time learners* starting a Diploma in the academic year (retention rate)	79.0%
Full-time learners[13] certificated as a percentage of full-time learners[13] who completed in the academic year (pass rate)	96.4%
Number of learners who withdrew within the academic year	5,410
Withdrawn learners as a percentage of all learners registered	15.6%

* Learners registered to start and complete their Diploma within the reporting academic year (full-time learners)

Grade combinations Description	% ALL Diplomas awarded
All Distinctions (no Passes or Merits)	14.8%
All Merits (no Passes or Distinctions)	0.3%
All Passes (no Merits or Distinctions)	0.9%
Some Merits and some Distinctions (no Passes)	42.6%
Some Passes and some Distinctions (no Merits)	0.9%
Some Passes and some Merits (no Distinctions)	7.9%
Some Passes, some Merits and some Distinctions	32.5%

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