

QAA submission to the Education Select Committee inquiry on further education and skills

What is the Access to HE Diploma?

The Access to HE Diploma provides a route into higher education for adult learners without traditional qualifications. Most UK universities recognise the Diploma as an alternative to more traditional Level 3 qualifications such as A Levels and BTECs. It caters to learners from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, offering flexibility for learners returning to education who often juggle family and work commitments alongside of their studies.

Who can study an Access to HE Diploma?

Access to HE courses are specifically targeted at those who have the ability to benefit from higher education but who have not previously had the opportunity to do so. Through the design of their curriculum, delivery methods and course structures The diploma provides appropriate preparation and recognised qualification for progression to higher education.

This approach means that the student body consists of many demographics that are currently underrepresented in higher education (see below graphic). In addition, despite the national decline in part-time students, over half of all learners studying the Access to HE Diploma do so part-time.

Students registered to study on an Access to HE Diploma in 2022-23



Source: DfE/AVAs Other Level 3 qualifications: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/>

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¹ AVAs refer to the Access Validating Agencies that operate as the awarding bodies of the Diploma.

What are the benefits of the Access to HE Diploma?

Benefits for the student:

1. Over 90% of Access to HE Diploma graduates are employed or in further study 6 months after graduating.²
2. Students who complete their Diploma and go on to complete a degree or other eligible higher education qualification are not required to repay the Advanced Learner Loan available to support their diploma studies, minimising their debt burden.
3. The Diploma, unlike a foundation year, is a standalone qualification which is portable and therefore may be used to meet the entry criteria of many HEIs.

Benefits beyond the student:

1. 77% stayed in their local area to study in higher education, increasing the skills pipeline in local areas.³
2. Many of the subjects available contribute directly to the development of a highly skilled workforce in priority areas. Almost 60% of Access students study a subject within health, public services and care.

Access to HE Diploma graduates

Gemma was inspired to become a nurse after seeing how NHS staff cared for her son before he passed away. However, as she had left school before sitting her GCSEs she wasn't sure how to make her dream become a reality.

"For anybody that thinks that they can't, they can. If I can do it, anybody can! My English was terrible. I would write the way I speak because that's all I ever had to do. I had so much to learn. My first new assignments compared to those at the end were terrible." -

[Gemma Lee, Access to HE Diploma \(Nursing and Midwifery\) Graduate](#)

"Every day, I see how the power of education can transform lives - people of all ages and backgrounds who've had different life experiences. And I'm one of them - someone who left school with virtually no qualifications to becoming Vice-Chancellor of a university." - [Nick Petford, Vice Chancellor, University of Northampton](#) (studied the diploma in 1984)

² Data provided by Jisc.

³ Data provided by UCAS.

“The Access to HE Diploma gave me confidence in my academic ability. Now aged 24, and the UK’s youngest standing MP, I haven’t looked back.” - [Nadia Whittome, MP for Nottingham East since 2019](#)

QAA’s role in relation to the Access to HE Diploma

QAA has regulated the Access to HE Diploma since 1997. Any course bearing the Access to HE Diploma title must be recognised by QAA to operate. Since QAA began regulating the qualification, there have been over 1 million student registrations.

Our role involves developing the Diploma Specification and Grading Scheme, regulating the Diploma’s awarding bodies, maintaining the public database of all recognised Access to HE Diplomas, publishing data about the Diploma and its students, and maintaining strong links across the sector to build the profile of the Diploma.

