

Access to Higher Education Courses

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Key Features

Access courses offer a point of transition for individuals who wish to return to study, progress into higher education, change or enter into new careers. The Access to Higher Education Diploma provides an entry route into higher education for learners lacking the 'traditional' educational qualifications required. Courses combine academic subject knowledge and a preparatory focus on independent learning and techniques for university study. Courses are one year in duration and since 2006, 60 credits are required to achieve the Diploma qualification (45 of which are graded at Level 3).

Operation date: 1978 – Present.

Target population: Adults with few or without the necessary Level 3 educational qualifications needed to access higher education.

Purpose: To widen access and participation into higher education among mature and/or disadvantaged adults, and those wishing to upskill or transition into different occupations. Mature students (aged 21+) are more likely to come from 'non-traditional' or underrepresented backgrounds, which includes those disadvantaged on account of class, disability status and/or ethnicity (Access HE, 2022).

Introduction

While there are a number of generalist access courses available to adults, this paper focuses specifically on Access to Higher Education (AHE) courses which offer a progression route into higher education. In 1978, the then Labour Government expanded the provision of access courses for those 'excluded, delayed or otherwise deterred by a need to qualify for (university) entry in more conventional ways' (Parry, 1996, p.11). In 2019-20, 40,550 students were registered to study an AHE diploma in the UK (Access HE, 2022). More than 40 years later, AHE courses continue to offer a diversity of adults a 'second chance' pathway to obtain educational qualifications and progress into higher education (Evans and McCulloch, 1989).

AHE courses are delivered by further education (FE) and some higher education (HE) providers and consist of a one year, Level 3 course of study which leads to either a certificate or diploma qualification, depending on the number of credits achieved. AHE courses have traditionally combined two main aspects of study: a curriculum concerned with preparation for higher education level study, and subject based knowledge (Parry, 1996). There are full-time, part-time or distance learning options in course subject areas which include; subjects allied to health and medicine, social sciences, arts and humanities, business, computing, law and sports science. There are currently 1,200 recognised courses available, which vary depending on what individual institutions are able to offer (Access to HE, n.d.).

The term 'Access to Higher Education' is restricted and can only be used to describe a course validated and approved by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA); the regulatory body for higher education. The recognition of AHE courses prior to this was led by a number of HE sector bodies which were: from 1989 the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), followed by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) in 1992, and now since 1997, the QAA and representatives from higher education manage the regulation of AHE courses through licensed Access Validating Agencies who work with providers (Farmer, 2017). As part of this, the QAA introduced a credit bearing and grading (Pass, Merit, Distinction) system in 2008-09 to ensure standardisation across the qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and instil confidence in its quality amongst HE providers when considering entry applications (Broadhead and Davies, 2019).

As AHE courses are primarily aimed at mature students, standard guidance around entry requirements for HE admissions staff are broader in scope. Staff are encouraged to think more about the capability of an applicant, factoring in life experience outside of compulsory schooling, individual needs, potential to benefit from the course and goals related to higher learning (QAA, 2021). Research by MillionPlus and the National Union of Students (MillionPlus, 2012) reports that mature students are more likely to be Black, Asian or minority ethnic, have known disabilities, come from a disadvantaged class background and/or have non-traditional qualifications compared with younger students. AHE courses are further known to consistently attract a larger proportion of females (around 70-75 per cent) (Access HE, 2022; O'Doherty et al., 2008) many of whom are described as single mothers (Reay et al., 2002).

Some research with AHE learners has reported on the variety of motivations for undertaking the qualification. Students believed it represented an investment in their future, many of whom have families and dependents, while offering a clear pathway to return to formal education (Busher and James, 2020; Reay et al., 2002). Many mature students also reflected on poor prior schooling experiences which resulted in them not achieving formal qualifications within the expected timeline, but who nevertheless described a passion for learning (Busher and James, 2020; Fowle, 2008).

Policy Context

In England and Wales, access courses had already been in operation in the 1970s, however, August 1978 is cited as being the point that led to their rapid expansion (Evans and McCulloch, 1989) when the Department for Education and Science (DES) circulated a letter inviting eight local education authorities (LEAs) to take part in a pilot scheme to establish new access courses for adults (DES, 1978). This initiative was argued to differ from previous ‘access’ courses by its use of FE colleges to deliver locally-devised, flexible learning options for local residents, developed in an ad-hoc fashion in relation to place-based needs (Lieven, 1989). However, the invited LEAs were not provided with additional funding or expertise to support the delivery of the scheme (Evans and McCulloch, 1989). Despite this, provision soon expanded across England and by 1986, only nine years since the first eight LEAs were invited, access courses were on offer in 40 Local Authorities, attracting around 7,000 students in FE colleges (Lieven, 1989).

Although courses were targeted to a range of adult learners, Evans and McCulloch (1989, p.22) note they were ‘aimed primarily, but not exclusively, at members of the ethnic minority communities’ to extend access to higher learning. Establishing an alternative route into HE, in this context largely for people from Black and Asian backgrounds, was grounded in the assumption that extending educational opportunity could alleviate some of the disaffection and social unrest prevalent in cities across England (e.g. London, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol), in relation to racism and structural disadvantage (Lieven, 1989). Moreover, it could facilitate entry into occupations such as teaching, nursing, youth and social work – occupations which would benefit from greater workforce diversity to alleviate institutional racism, however, struggling in recruitment because of the need for formally recognised higher level qualifications.

Increasingly by the late 1980s, mature students were seen as a key group in facilitating the expansion and reform of the higher education system more broadly. In the then Conservative government’s White Paper in April 1987 ‘Higher Education: Meeting the challenge’ (DES, 1987), the aim was to recruit a greater number of non-traditional students (Reay et al., 2002). The White Paper designated Access to Higher Education as the ‘third route into higher education’ for mature learners without ‘traditional sixth form nor vocational qualifications’ (DES, 1987, p.10). However, Kearney and Diamond (1990, p.134) described the White Paper as an ‘appropriation of access provision into the status quo in HE terms’ in which access courses then became wholly synonymous as ‘pre-degree’ courses, as opposed to facilitating access to lifelong learning. Lieven (1989) argues this call for expansion was partly driven by a liberal ideology around equality of opportunity, but also by necessity. Between 1984 and 1996, there was a 33 per cent fall in the population of 19-year-olds, meaning less potential young entrants into higher education. Moreover, continued industrial decline and the resultant need to change occupations had impacted the ‘traditional’ intake and purpose of FE colleges. This context presented the HE sector with both an opportunity to draw in different types of students and continue to expand by attracting mature learners.

Policy Evaluation

To date, there have been few rigorously evaluated studies of the success of the AHE route or mature learners in general (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), 2021). However, broader discussion around ‘access’ can reveal a divergence in how its wider purpose is perceived. For instance, is access embedded in a tradition of radical adult education, is it about serving a more functional role in relation to occupational change, or is it about serving the needs of the higher education market? Kearney and Diamond (1990) reflected on their experience of working in South Manchester FE College in the 1980s, commenting on the way ‘access’ was increasingly being drawn away from an initial community development model (focused on lifelong and continuous learning), towards a higher education model. While the higher education model is argued to promote individualism and market expansion over community development, it is worth noting that a significant proportion of AHE students still opt to study courses with community value, such as education, health and social care. For example, data for the period 2019/20 shows that 35 per cent of students entering HE with an AHE Diploma studied Nursing, compared to 6 per cent of those who entered with other Level 3 qualifications to study Nursing (Access HE, 2022).

AHE courses do play an important role in enabling universities to widen participation and meet their access targets – targets which are monitored by the Office for Students (OfS) and determine levels of funding awarded to HE institutions. However, since the end of the polytechnic era in 1992 (see [Parry, 2022](#)), students enter into an increasingly stratified HE market (Brine and Waller, 2004), and AHE students represent a significant intake of entrants into post-1992 higher education institutions. Research has shown that more selective universities in the UK afford their graduates better employment/salary options, however access into such institutions is not fair amongst those from disadvantaged class backgrounds, particularly for ethnic minority students (Boliver, 2013; Budd, 2017) – a significant number of whom gain entry via the AHE route. As such, Brine and Waller (2004, p.110) argue that ‘widening participation has meant in practice (A)ccess to new universities’ for the majority of AHE students. There is a tension therefore between widening participation and access in its truest form and the selective, stratified nature of the wider HE market.

The financial commitment of undertaking an AHE course is important to consider when evaluating whether the Access route is widening participation amongst the most disadvantaged. The costs incurred from course fees and study related costs, in addition to living costs, while being able to successfully complete the course and progress into HE, can be challenging for many Access students. Access students are more likely to experience financial constraints, have dependents and/or be in low-paid employment (Bushier et al., 2012). Advanced Learner Loans are now available to students in England aged 19+ without an existing Level 3 qualification to cover tuition fees, which are paid directly to the education provider. Learners completing an AHE course who then go on to complete a degree, have the balance of this loan written off. However, learners who do not progress into higher education and complete their course, are expected to repay the loan. Burns and Slack (2015) argue more research is needed to determine whether the loan system supports retention. In 2018/19 data from the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) reported that non-continuation rates amongst younger students (aged under 21) who gained entry via the Access route, was higher across all subject areas (11.3%), compared to A-Level entrants (between 1.3-4.3%). However, for mature learners entering via the Access route, the non-continuation rate was roughly similar to that of A-Level entrants (10%) – which serves as a reminder of the difficulties mature learners face regardless of qualification type.

Research has shown that mature students are more likely to drop out of their course than younger students and face barriers in relation to developing a sense of belonging in HE institutions (TASO, 2021). Although motivation is generally considered high for AHE students and courses aim to prepare students for successful transitions into HE (Bushier et al., 2015), there is no guarantee students would progress into HE after completing their AHE Diploma. Data from 2019/20 would suggest that more than 10,000 students registered for a Diploma in the previous year did not progress into HE (Access HE, 2022). While some may have chosen to go into employment, the data reported is not clear. There are wider concerns that those from the most disadvantaged class backgrounds, for whom HE participation is riskier, would struggle to take on the debt burden if they are unable to progress into HE (Archer et al., 2002). Reay et al., (2002) note that disadvantage in relation to ethnicity, class, gender and marital status intersect and can make the transition process difficult, particularly for working-class, single mothers. Reay et al. (2002) note that seven out of 23 of the mothers studying for an AHE diploma in their research, had failed to progress into HE.

Lessons Learnt

AHE courses continue to play an important role in extending opportunity and widening participation amongst underrepresented and disadvantaged learners. It provides a working example of how adult education could be used as a tool to counter structural disadvantage and offer a ‘second chance’ to counter poor early learning experiences, as well as support transitions into alternative occupations (Lieven, 1989; Reay et al., 2002). Data from the Graduate Outcomes Survey 2019/20 shows that 80.1 per cent of graduates with an AHE Diploma completing the survey were in employment, compared to 73.6 per cent of graduates with other qualifications (Access to HE, 2022). However, HE institutions must continue to support mature learners throughout the whole student lifecycle, not just through access, as drop-out rates are known to be higher compared to younger learners (TASO, 2021). The success of the AHE pathway therefore depends on the support HE institutions are able to offer non-traditional learners to ensure retention and progression. This includes tailored inductions, financial support and ensuring courses are flexibly designed and accessible to AHE students, who may have additional responsibilities to employers or families to consider.

Research has highlighted the good practice of FE colleges in their ability to structure and deliver learning which recognises the social context and circumstances of their AHE learners, through appropriate timetabling, flexible and modular approaches to learning (Storan, 2000). Furthermore, research capturing the perspectives of Access tutors found that their experience of teaching AHE students was more positive than A-Level students, as the teaching and assessment approaches required for A-Level were felt to be ‘inappropriate for helping many students develop their skills and identities as successful learners’ more broadly (Busher et al., 2015, p.130). Although, some criticism has been made of the credit based grading system of the Diploma, particularly as this may be reminiscent of school classroom pedagogies which potential Access students may have typically had poor prior experiences of (Broadhead and Davies, 2019; Fowle, 2018).

For many Access students, financial support is particularly important. Support from existing employers to study is necessary if students are to successfully meet the credit-based requirements of the AHE course. Students often have caring responsibilities, families and rely on their employment income or savings to sustain a living. Keep and James (2012) argue financial incentives to employers to allow employees to combine work and study is necessary, but woefully limited. Further, some AHE students have reported Job Centres informing them they would lose their Jobseeker’s Allowance if a job became available for them to take that they would be unavailable to take, despite their AHE course requiring full-time attendance (Busher and James, 2020). Supporting student retention through the capability to both study and sustain a living are key issues to consider if we are to develop a skilled workforce and ensure the principle of ‘access’ is upheld.

As AHE courses are well-established across FE providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, this is also a timely reminder of the value and role FE institutions have in bridging access to higher level learning for adults hoping to upskill or reskill into graduate-entry careers with greater income potential, as the majority of AHE provision is still within the FE sector (Broadhead and Davies, 2019). This contribution towards lifelong learning and adult education is increasingly important to consider as the labour market continues to change, while higher level skills shortages remain persistent across the UK. Moreover, data from the 2019/20 period showed that 79 per cent of AHE students stayed in their local area to pursue higher education study and are less likely to relocate upon graduation (Access HE, 2022). This suggests that the AHE route could support local economies if providers are able to work in partnership with local employers and residents to identify skills needs.

Overall, the AHE route has, and continues to be, a relatively successful initiative if we consider its longevity, despite numerous changes in government administration. It is a well-established route into higher education – although this does not mitigate the reality that despite attempts to standardise and regulate the quality of courses, some HE institutions continue to be highly selective in their entry, based on prior academic attainment and qualification type (Boliver et al., 2021). And while an increasing number of learners from lower-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds have progressed into higher education in recent years, the gap in access compared to more affluent students remains stark: with students from the most affluent areas more than twice as likely to enter HE than those from areas of high deprivation (Education Policy Institute, 2020). As such, AHE courses play a considerable role in widening participation, lifelong learning and adult education in the UK and worthy of further research and evaluation.

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