

## Access to HE courses: retention, selection and demand

1 Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) provided reports in December 2009 on work they had undertaken at QAA's request to investigate reasons for varying withdrawal rates and to explore the impact of the use of retention benchmarks on Access to HE. This report outlines the outcomes of this work and goes on to review the range and impact of retention and selection strategies adopted by colleges. It also includes a consideration of any change in demand for Access to HE courses in 2009-10 and how providers responded to that demand.

2 This work was requested by QAA because of the suggestion reported in the *Access to HE data trends survey* ([www.accesstohe.ac.uk/feStaff/default.asp](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/feStaff/default.asp)) that the use of retention benchmarks had contributed to a decline in the number of providers delivering Access to HE courses and the downward trend in student numbers. That survey indicated that, because some colleges had closed courses which failed to meet retention benchmarks, the opportunities available for potential Access to HE students had become more limited. It was reported that there had been a particular impact on the availability of part-time provision, where retention was generally weaker. It had also been reported that there had been an impact on selection, with the drive to improve retention leading to less willingness to recruit applicants who were perceived to be at greater risk of withdrawing, and this had led to fewer students being recruited. There was some concern that this development was not consistent with one of the principal purposes of Access to HE in providing a route into HE for those with few, if any, prior formal qualifications.

3 AVAs reported on this further work in a special appendix to their 2009 annual self-evaluation reports. The guidance to AVAs gave a specific set of requirements ([www.accesstohe.ac.uk/avas/statisticsSubmission/AVADDataSub0809.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/avas/statisticsSubmission/AVADDataSub0809.pdf)), including:

- analysis of provider data on withdrawals, as gathered for the AVAs' standard data collection exercise
- the source and use of retention benchmarks
- providers' analyses of withdrawal or retention
- strategies for improving retention, including selection, and their impact
- demand for Access to HE for 2009-10 entry, and colleges' response to demand.

4 This study was not about particular reasons for withdrawal at the level of the individual student, but about why there were different rates between providers; how different providers responded to withdrawal and the strategies they adopted to improve retention; what part was played by retention benchmarks; whether earlier identified declines in student numbers had continued; and what action could be taken by AVAs in working with providers to improve retention.

## Summary of findings

### General

5 Fourteen of the 15 AVAs responded to the specific guidance for 2009 special appendix. Most of the AVAs had conducted detailed surveys with providers, some converting QAA's questions into a more detailed questionnaire (and a few taking the opportunity to seek additional information while doing so). Some AVAs deal with only small numbers of providers and the level of response from providers was only partial. The detail in which the analysis of responses was reported and the type and level of analysis by AVAs also varied. The summary below is therefore descriptive of the overall picture provided by AVAs' reports, and conclusions can only be indicative.

### Withdrawal/retention rates

6 All AVAs identified a wide range of withdrawal rates. While the average figure recorded by QAA for student withdrawals as a whole has been fairly constant for the last five years (at a figure between 16 per cent and 19 per cent), the variation between and within AVAs is very much greater, and AVAs also reported that data from some providers showed significant variation between years. While several AVAs were able to report at least one provider with no withdrawals in 2008-09, most AVAs also reported a small number of instances where the withdrawal rate was over 30 per cent.

7 AVAs tended to describe providers with withdrawal rates at the extreme ends of the spectrum as being untypical, and noted that the numbers were generally too small to be statistically significant. These were therefore largely discounted and regarded as uninformative in commentaries. In several cases, a very small student cohort meant that an apparently high withdrawal rate could be misleading. Those that attempted to explain particularly high withdrawal did not always agree in their analyses. For example, one AVA concluded that provider type was not significant, two pointed to higher withdrawal in HE institutions and another suggested that sixth-form colleges were more likely to have high withdrawal rates. One concluded that there was no correlation with areas of disadvantage, while another noted that of the 12 providers with the highest withdrawal rates, nine were located in areas of greatest deprivation. There were several observations suggesting that exceptionally high withdrawal rates related to exceptional provider circumstances, such as the long-term sickness of a key member of staff or reliance on an exceptionally large number of part-time staff. In a number of instances where attempts were made to explain exceptionally low withdrawal rates, a link was made with prescriptive entry requirements, such as prior achievement of GCSEs, although one concluded that there was 'no direct linkage between the "open access" approach and retention'.

8 Most AVAs were not able to identify any commonality between providers at different points within their withdrawal range, in terms of any particular relationship between withdrawal rates and any other known characteristic of the provider, the provision or the nature of the student cohort. However, it should be borne in mind that there are relatively few factors within the data sets with which withdrawal rates could be correlated, and the total number of providers that most AVAs deal with are too small to demonstrate a statistically significant correlation. Some suggested that age might be a significant factor, and this was reflected in practitioners' responses to AVAs: one commented that 'Assertions that the largest increase in withdrawals is to be found amongst the youngest student cohort (19-25) and especially amongst males, emerges as a pattern amongst providers'. Two AVAs which specifically explored this found that the view was not supported by the data. However, a wider statistical sample would be needed to confirm, or otherwise, providers' sense that younger students were more likely to withdraw. There were also indications that subject was

significant, and benchmarks in different Subject Sector Areas support this view. Again, this is not something that could be demonstrated on the basis of current data at AVA level, but is an area that may, nevertheless, be worth fuller exploration.

9 The reports provided to QAA did not identify any clear explanation for the differences in withdrawal or retention rates reported to AVAs by their providers. It is clear, however, that instances of very high withdrawal rates which may be considered 'exceptional' by an individual AVA, are less exceptional when seen in the context of the national picture.

## **Use of benchmarks**

10 AVAs reported that all, or nearly all, of their providers made use of retention benchmarks, and a number also referred to the more recent Learning and Skills Council (LSC) focus on success and achievement. The LSC's (and DCELLS') national benchmark data for retention, achievement and success were commonly alluded to, and some respondents also made specific mention of the calculation of benchmarks using standard Pro-Achieve software. There was also reference to several other data sources being used to create benchmarks, including QAA or AVA data. Most benchmarks reported varied between 70 per cent and 90 per cent, but benchmarks for 2008-09 as low as 43 per cent and as high as 96 per cent were cited.

11 A number of AVAs reported that providers had referred simply to 'national benchmarks', although it was not clear (and it was not clear whether the respondent knew) what these referred to, and responses suggested some uncertainty or confusion about where benchmarks came from, what they represented or why they varied between courses. It may be that respondents to the AVAs' survey were not sufficiently involved in college management to be aware of detail beyond the particular benchmark that had been applied to their course. Perhaps as a result, a significant number of the responses to AVAs seemed to regard benchmarks as unrealistic and inflexible performance targets imposed upon courses, derived from mysterious sources, with unreasonable penalties if they were not met. (One AVA reported, however, that 'Providers are very clear about how and why benchmarks are used. Course teams and managers use benchmarks effectively to inform quality improvement activities and in curriculum planning'.)

12 The role of benchmarks within providers' standard quality self-assessment procedures was often recognised, and reference was made to their significance for Ofsted inspection. However, there was less sense of the use of benchmarks for quality improvement, and the consequences of not meeting benchmarks tended to be defined in terms of decisions about budget allocations, course viability and provision planning.

13 As AVAs would have received information only from those providers who were still delivering Access to HE, whether any of the providers who withdrew from delivering Access to HE between 2007-08 and 2008-09 or before did so because benchmarks had not been met cannot be answered here with certainty, so the impact of retention benchmarks on recruitment cannot be demonstrated clearly. However, there were some individual examples reported of certain pathways or routes (including part-time routes) being closed because of weak retention.

## **Strategies to improve retention**

14 AVAs reported that most providers had undertaken an analysis of withdrawal and/or retention in the last three years, several providers noting that, as analysis of withdrawals was a standard part of their college self-assessment reports, this was now done annually.

15 AVAs' reports of providers' work in this area confirm that the most common reasons for withdrawal from Access to HE courses are the well-established factors which were outlined in the guidance notes for the special appendix, most emphasising the external pressures that are more likely to impact on mature students and students from more disadvantaged groups.

16 This is not to say that providers are resigned or regard withdrawal as inevitable: many providers have been active in attempting both to address factors that were within their control and in supporting students facing difficulties that were outside the providers' control. The approaches most frequently identified are outlined below.

**a Recruitment and selection** (see also paragraphs 18-26)

Most AVAs made reference to the introduction of 'more rigorous' interviewing; initial assessment of various kinds; diagnostic testing; and, in some places, specific entry requirements (for example, GCSE or level 2 literacy). Diagnostic testing was sometimes used to screen out applicants deemed not to be ready for Access to HE; in other places the emphasis appeared to be more on identifying particular learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, and ensuring that the necessary learning support would be available to the student. Reference was also made to late applications being discouraged because of evidence that late starters were more likely to withdraw.

**b Initial information advice and guidance**

This included improving the provision of information about overall time commitments on the course; workload expectations and deadlines; financial advice; information about HE; and careers advice. With a slightly different emphasis, one respondent emphasised a more explicitly customer-focused strategy which involved changes in college planning to make the detailed timetable available as early as possible, so that students were able to make plans for childcare or changes to work shifts well in advance of the start of the course.

**c Structured induction and taster courses**

A variety of approaches to improved induction and taster programmes was mentioned. Some providers also structured the Access to HE course itself in a way that gave a particular focus in the first few weeks. In some places, for example, there was a focus on level 2 study at the start of the course, and students were encouraged to try a range of options to ensure that they made more informed subject choices, or the first few weeks were described as being 'probationary' in some way.

**d Pre-Access provision**

The existence of a pre-Access course was frequently mentioned as an effective way of ensuring students were ready for the demands of the Access to HE course. It was also seen as an important 'fall-back' position for students who struggled with the demands of Access to HE and needed to be transferred to a lower level course.

**e Attendance monitoring and follow up**

There were many references to the development of more systematic methods for monitoring attendance; identifying and sharing information about 'at risk' students; use of 'traffic light' monitoring tools; contacting absent students by telephone (and use of texting services); and, in some instances, following through to more formal procedures with intervention by nominated staff which could have disciplinary consequences for students.

**f Progress monitoring and systems for student support**

Structures and processes for providing academic and/or pastoral support were frequently mentioned. More tutorial support was mentioned by some, as was a greater focus on systematised progress monitoring in tutorials with, for example, individualised target setting,

as well as enhanced links being made between tutorials and various learning support mechanisms to which students could be referred.

#### **g Changing the pattern of delivery**

Flexibility of delivery was seen as important, particularly the use of part-time parallel courses to allow full-time students to transfer to a part-time mode of study if they experienced unforeseen difficulties part way through a full-time course. However, difficulties in maintaining part-time provision where withdrawal rates were higher (as discussed in QAA's report on the *Access to HE data trends survey* ([www.accesstohe.ac.uk/feStaff/default.asp](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/feStaff/default.asp)), were underlined here. So, while some providers reported increasing part-time provision to increase responsiveness to Access to HE students' changing external work and domestic commitments, others mentioned that they had closed part-time courses in order to address high withdrawal rates on these courses.

#### **h Improving group cohesion and peer support**

In one instance, a retention survey had asked students who had been retained if they had thought of leaving and, if so, why they had not. From this approach the provider had discovered the importance of peer support and had, in consequence, developed strategies to develop and build group cohesion. Elsewhere, there were mentions of mentoring or buddying schemes, sometimes making use of former Access to HE students currently studying in local HE institutions: one example of an e-mentoring scheme with former students was given.

#### **i Incentive or rewards schemes**

While this was not widespread, there were some examples of schemes designed to incentivise good attendance, with prizes or rewards being given (sometimes also associated with achievement rewards).

17 Most AVAs reported that providers generally felt that there had been improvements in retention and many indicated that, following the adoption of a particular strategy, they had seen an improved retention rate. Providers and AVAs both recognised, however, the difficulty in demonstrating a clear causal link between any particular action and any actual improvement in retention. It was noted that the numbers involved at provider level, the period over which any change was measured, and the number of other variables involved made it difficult to demonstrate a link and to be certain that any recent improvement would be sustained.

### **Selection strategies**

18 Selection was often seen as an important part of broader course retention strategies. This area was considered separately for these purposes, however, because more selective recruitment had been indicated as a contributory factor in the fall in number of student registrations, in responses to the Access to HE data trends survey.

19 The information provided in AVAs' reports suggests that almost all Access to HE courses have developed more rigorous selection processes and/or criteria. Very few appear to operate an 'open-access' approach to recruitment, although a small number of provider comments suggest this remains a central principle of their Access to HE provision (for example, 'We do not believe in a selection strategy as it flies in the face of the core object of the course'.)

20 There has been an increased focus on identifying applicants' readiness to cope with the demands of the Access to HE course, and a range of means of identifying 'readiness' at the point of selection were noted. The most common were:

- interviews (criteria that applied to selection were not always clear: references were made to identifying 'commitment', but some also mentioned a new emphasis on 'clear goals in relation to HE', 'greater scrutiny of learner aims' or 'emphasis on long-term goals')
- written tasks or tests to assess literacy and, less commonly, numeracy skills (with new systems for referral to pre-Access courses or other courses, if readiness for Access to HE was not demonstrated)
- diagnostic testing
- prior achievement of level 2 qualifications, especially GCSEs, as a condition or expectation of entry.

21 While the broad categories of selection practices mentioned above are not especially novel, some individual initiatives had only recently been introduced, and providers often commented to AVAs that it was 'too early' to assess their impact. It was the final category of required prior achievements that, while still applied in a minority of cases, was most frequently cited as a new requirement, supporting the suggestion that Access to HE courses may have become more selective in some places.

22 The impact on subsequent retention is not clearly demonstrated, although some responses identified an improvement in retention since more selective pre-entry requirements had been introduced. Nonetheless, providers generally emphasised positive outcomes of more selective approaches to recruitment, including: higher achievement or success rates; 'more appropriate level of course being offered'; 'process enables us to get students on the correct level of course for them'; 'student body has adapted better to the demands of the one year course'; 'students of higher ability than previously'.

23 Providers identified very few difficulties resulting from the adoption of these strategies. One mentioned an increased demand on colleges to provide learning support and lower level courses; one mentioned that unsuccessful applicants were sometimes dissatisfied with the outcome; and one AVA reported a negative effect on achievement. (However, while this particular AVA did see the achievement rate go down, this was not generally the case.)

24 While providers reported a largely positive consequence of more selective recruitment procedures, it is not clear whether students are being selected to screen out those who would be unable to complete the course successfully or, slightly differently, whether a 'low risk' approach to selection on the basis of academic ability and/or potential also leads to the unnecessary exclusion of some applicants.

25 On the question of whether more selective recruitment is directly related to an actual reduction in numbers of student registrations (a view that had been strongly expressed in provider responses to the data trends survey) there was little evidence or comment. A connection between more rigorous selection and a decrease in numbers recruited was mentioned by only one AVA.

26 The national data for 2008-09 records a small overall increase in registrations, reversing a five-year downward trend, with nine out of the 15 AVAs reporting a rise in their regions. It is not possible to know from the results of this study whether the more selective recruitment practices reported are therefore having no effect on total numbers of students, or whether the rise in student numbers in 2008-09 would have been higher than the small increase reported had it not been for the more selective recruitment practices recently introduced.

## **Demand 2009-10**

27 All AVAs reported that there has been strong demand for Access to HE courses in 2009-10. AVAs indicated that between 70 per cent and 100 per cent of the providers they worked with had experienced a notable increase in demand. The size of the increase could not be quantified, as unsatisfied demand is not always measured (and applications may not, in any case, be a true reflection of demand). However, increases in demand were, in a number of places, described as 'substantial', 'major', 'dramatic' or 'massive' (including several cases where demand had increased by 100 per cent or more; an engineering pathway which had 70 applicants for 16 places; and another which had 100 enquiries for a course which normally has 18 students).

28 The extent to which providers were able to respond to the increased demand varied. One AVA reported that, although 85 per cent of providers reported an increase in demand, only 35 per cent had been able to respond to that increased demand. Two others suggested that about 50 per cent of providers experiencing an increase in demand had been able to respond to it. Some providers had been unable to exceed capped numbers, but the more common position was that providers had accommodated additional demand.

29 The most common way in which additional demand had been accommodated was through increasing group sizes. In other places, additional groups had been added, sometimes allowing for an increased range of options to be made available. Some colleges allocated additional part-time teaching hours or employed more staff to cope with the increase; others increased workloads of existing staff by, for example, reducing the length of teaching sessions and adding an additional teaching session in the day. Additional classes were sometimes made available by adding part-time or evening provision, and one example was given of an increase in the amount of blended learning included in a course.

30 Where the additional demand had not been accommodated, many had operated waiting lists, first to provide 'reserves' for the main 2009-10 intake, and secondly to provide a possible pool for recruitment in 2010-11. In a small number of instances, there were also references to a second intake later in the year having been planned for those on the waiting list. Other strategies for dealing with additional demand without increasing recruitment were to refer applicants to other provision within the college or to refer students to other Access to HE courses at other colleges.

31 There was only one reported case where a decision had been taken not to increase the number of students, in spite of increased demand, because of concerns about the availability of HE places for students progressing from the course.

32 The extent to which the reported increase in demand has translated to increased recruitment is not yet known: some of the increase experienced by current providers may have resulted from courses being closed at neighbouring providers. However, AVAs are anticipating that they will be reporting another increase in student numbers to QAA in December 2010.

## **Follow-up plans**

33 The extent of the follow-up action planned by AVAs varied. Most AVAs planned to make their reports available to providers and, for some, the next step would be presentation of the report to a committee. It was not always clear whether such steps were intended as a starting point for further action or not.

34 Some identified areas in which they intended to undertake more detailed research and analysis, and a small number of AVAs indicated that they might benefit from a fuller understanding of colleges' use of benchmarks. Three also included a stated intention to take forward discussions about retention with moderators, but only one AVA indicated that it planned to undertake any further investigation into the small number of cases where high withdrawal rates might be regarded as a cause for concern.

35 However, many indicated plans to provide opportunities for sharing good practice. The most commonly mentioned mechanism for doing this was through a practitioners' forum or other staff development event, and one stated its intention to develop a good practice guide. Three set out more developed plans, with a series of actions aimed not only at sharing good practice but improving their own understanding of different withdrawal rates, raising practitioner awareness and providing additional support.



**QAA**

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