

The QAA Access to HE Diploma

A report by OCN North East Region on provider practice in selection and retention and demand for Access in 2009/10

Background

As part of the 2009 Self Evaluation Report for QAA, AVAs were requested to investigate and report on the range of practice in student selection, retention and demand for Access to HE Courses. This was requested by QAA because of a concern at the time that the use of retention benchmarks had contributed to a decline in the number of providers delivering Access to HE courses and in student recruitment. It was suggested that opportunities available for potential Access to HE students had become more limited; this had had a particular impact on the availability of part-time provision, where retention was generally poorer. It had also been reported that there had been an impact on selection; with the need to improve retention leading to a more cautious approach to recruitment and fewer students being recruited who might be deemed to present a higher risk of withdrawing. A key concern was that this contradicted the principal purposes of Access to HE in providing a route into HE for those with few, if any, prior formal qualifications.

OCN North East Region Survey method

The Annual Quality Review Report template, usually used to collect provider self-assessment details, was adapted to enable the AVA to collect the additional information required by QAA. This was sent to all fourteen providers in the region who completed the report in preparation for the Annual Quality Review Meetings held with the Access to HE Manager in October. The information was collected during the meeting and detailed discussions were held regarding their responses.

Data collection method

The data used for the research was provided by LSC Data Services for each provider and exported into an appropriate format, as required by QAA. It was then analysed and presented in the table below.

Data interrogation and analysis

The table below identifies learner withdrawal rates from Access to HE Diplomas for each provider (actual and percentage), plus the range of withdrawal rates across all providers, highlighting those providers who are within the modal range and those who fall outside at either end.

College	Completed /Transferred	Withdrawn	Grand Total	% Withdrawn	% Retained	Band Withdrawn	Band Retained	Withdrawal Band
A	24	13	37	35%	65%	31-40	60-69	Well above
B	220	40	260	15%	85%	11-20	80-89	Modal band
C	62	6	68	9%	91%	1-10	90-99	Below
D	65	17	82	21%	79%	21-30	70-79	Above
E	70	30	100	30%	70%	21-30	70-79	Well above
F	15	2	17	12%	88%	11-20	80-89	Modal band
G	95	21	116	18%	82%	11-20	80-89	Modal band
H	198	80	278	29%	71%	21-30	70-79	Above
I	55	26	81	32%	68%	31-40	60-69	Well above
J	224	23	247	9%	91%	1-10	90-99	Below
K	19	1	20	5%	95%	1-10	90-99	Below
L	43	12	55	22%	78%	21-30	70-79	Above
M	104	22	126	17%	83%	11-20	80-89	Modal band
N	73	16	89	18%	82%	11-20	80-89	Modal band
Grand Total	1267	309	1576	20%	80%	11-20	80-89	Modal band

- The overall AVA figure for withdrawal (20%) is comparable with the national figure of 19% quoted in QAA Key Statistics 2009 and the modal range is in line with national data.
- There is no obvious link between colleges with higher withdrawal rates. Colleges report a range of reasons for learner withdrawal which are listed below. One reason suggested by colleges H and L was an increased number of younger learners who found the course too demanding or moved onto another course/employment.
- The lowest rates (5% and 9%) correlate with colleges who have reported improved retention and who had introduced more stringent recruitment procedures at the start of 2008-09, suggesting that those strategies have worked particularly well. College C reported using peer support as a key tool in addressing withdrawal, a factor also considered by other colleges as being important in limiting the number of learners who leave the course.
- All colleges identify retention as a high priority and have employed increasingly rigorous strategies to ensure the right learners are enrolled on the right course; these are discussed in more detail, see e) below.
- This data would enable the AVA to set a 'benchmark guide' for achievement/retention in the region for use by providers, Moderators and the AVA.

Retention rates

a) There is significant variation across providers in relation to course benchmarks for Access to HE, the highest figure quoted was 90% and the lowest 64%. Five colleges reported that they have no benchmark for Access courses.

b) Where a benchmark is used, and the rationale for using it is known, the following reasons were given; LSC 19+ long course benchmark, college-wide benchmark, school or division benchmark and level 3 course benchmark across the college.

c) There is consistency in terms of the way in which providers view the use of benchmarks, even if a benchmark is not identified as being used. Benchmarks are used to compare retention rates year on year to help to identify improvements or areas for concern. They are also used to measure the 'success' of the course and to inform planning for the following year. It was apparent from discussions that some colleges do use benchmarks to gauge whether Access provision will continue to be offered. Course Leaders at colleges where benchmarks had been set expressed some frustration at being compared with other courses in the college, as they felt that this sometimes gave an unfair picture of the success of Access. Most explained that it can cause undue pressure to keep learners on the course, even if the learner themselves lacked the motivation or ability to cope. They also explained that many learners who leave Access to HE courses do so because they are mature and have other pressures in their life, which are beyond the scope of college staff to support, but that this damages the reputation of Access, leading to some Senior Managers believing that the course is not as successful as it could be. It was interesting to note however that, despite Course Leaders' concerns, most of the courses where benchmarks had been set had met or exceeded the benchmark anyway.

d) Analyses of retention rates is a standard feature of college self assessment reports and so all colleges could give examples of how this is done each year and suggest outcomes. The methods used to analyse the results ranged from formal studies, with clear outcomes and strategies to address any issues, to a simple analyses of data with no clear action as a result. Regardless of the method of analyses the outcomes again show some consistency across region; the main reasons for withdrawal being personal circumstances, health problems (especially mental health), financial issues, childcare issues and difficulties with meeting the academic demands of the course. The quality of the course and learner support were not identified as reasons in any of the studies discussed. The learners' ability to cope with the demands of the course was particularly identified as a reason for withdrawal in the early stages.

e) In all colleges, strategies had been employed to improve retention; it was identified as a high priority. A wide range of strategies have been used or are planned for 2009-10, including the following;

- Pre-Access courses which prepare learners for the demands of the Access to HE Diploma; these are used as an option for learners who initially apply for the Access course and are deemed not to be ready.
- Enhanced pastoral care and study support for learners, either through personal tutor systems or group tutorial support.
- Learning support programmes which aim to improve specific skills where learners show a lower level of ability than is required to achieve on the Access Course. These are delivered in parallel to the Access course, for example Basic Skills or ESOL.
- Changing the pattern of delivery, for example starting courses later in the day to help learners with childcare responsibilities or putting on evening classes for those who work part-time.

- 'At Risk Registers' which are used to monitor learners who are identified as being at risk of withdrawing.
- More rigorous recruitment process to ensure the right learners are on the right course.
- One college ask a specific question in their end of course evaluation form which helps to inform their strategy on improving retention; *if you have ever thought about leaving the course, why were you going to leave and what stopped you leaving*. The college reported that the main reason for the latter part of the question was peer support; their friends on the course persuaded and supported them to stay. For this reason group cohesion was a particular focus for the early stages of the course and in group tutorial sessions. The Pre-Access course was also felt to contribute significantly to this element.
- There was little specific evidence that these measures contributed to improved achievement rates because any increase could also have been due to improved teaching, assessment, resources etc.

Selection strategies

- f) All colleges operate a selection strategy in which improving retention is one of the objectives. All colleges interview learners and undertake screening through a range of initial assessment processes. Most also have information sessions for Access learners before enrolment to explain the key aspects of the course. All Course Leaders explained that they try to emphasise how demanding the Access Course is and the commitment that learners need to make if they are going to achieve and be ready to go on to university. Most ask ex-learners to come to these events to talk about their experience of the course, which reinforces the messages the Course Leaders give.

In all but one college, the Course Leader undertakes the interviews where they try to establish the learners' level of attitude, motivation and commitment to the course and plans for going onto university. In one college the interviews are held centrally by learner services and information about enrolments is passed onto the Course Leaders. It is felt by those Course Leaders that this allows too many learners to be enrolled who are not suitable for the course and they are then put in the position of trying to signpost them to other courses, which causes disappointment for the learners. The Course Leaders involved explained that they would like to review this approach and move to interviewing learners personally.

Some colleges ask for prerequisites, for example GCSEs in Maths and English and a minimum level in English language skills for international learners, but most colleges said that these are not always applied strictly if learners demonstrate the personal and academic qualities required to achieve. Often learners will be accepted and then provided with additional support to bring their skills up to the required level, as described above.

- g) Where these strategies have already been implemented there is anecdotal evidence in most cases that they do help to improve retention and in one college there is very clear statistical evidence that Pre-Access and other methods have worked over a 3 year period. These methods will be tested over the coming year (2009-10) with the increase in enrolments across the region and it will be important that their effectiveness is analysed by colleges and the AVA. Retention results should also be compared with achievement figures for that and previous years to see if any conclusions can be drawn about the retention strategies in place.

- h) All colleges reported that demand for Access to HE places had increased significantly for 2009-10. In all but two colleges enrolments have increased as a result. The number of extra learners recruited ranges from one extra class to a 175% increase in one college. Only one college did not cap numbers at all and they have rented class rooms in other venues and increased staffing to accommodate the increase in learners. One college has decreased the number of learners compared with the previous year and this needs to be investigated further by the AVA. One college capped numbers at the same level as the previous year because it was not felt to be possible to increase resources and so an increase in numbers would threaten the quality of the course.

All the colleges who have increased their numbers have made modifications to the course to accommodate the extra learners. Some have introduced other modes of delivery, like evening classes, longer days or a higher degree of blended learning, with more use of online methods. Only two colleges reported an increase in staffing.

Conclusions and consideration of follow-up actions for the AVA

j) What has the AVA learned from completing the investigation?

- Provider retention is a different measure to that indicated by AVA registrations and course completion; some course leaders use different measures compared with the LSC and AVA.
- Some colleges enrol learners on other courses prior to the Access to HE Diploma which can help to maximize retention results
- Retention drives success rates, both of which are highly important KPIs for evidence of provider performance
- The learners who are retained tend to achieve
- Key features of retention strategies are;
 - Pre-Access or equivalent
 - Sign posting to other courses as appropriate
 - Interviews and screening of all learners who apply
 - Risk management – careful monitoring of any learner likely to withdraw
 - High levels of pastoral care and tutorial support
- Teaching and learning standards do not necessarily link directly with retention rates. High standards of teaching and assessment do not always correlate with high retention rates and visa versa.

j) What further information might be needed by the AVA to complete its understanding of withdrawal and retention?

- Encourage providers to undertake more detailed analyses of the methods they employ to improve retention.
- Undertake further investigation into the way in which data is collected from colleges to ensure statistics give a completely accurate picture of provision in the region and can better analyse the trends.
- Convene provider forums to further explore the reasons behind the statistics, to inform future planned activity.

k) What can the AVA do to follow up its conclusions?

- Implement action plan in relation to the collection of data on retention and achievement
- The report and conclusions will be published on the AVA website in the provider area
- The Access to HE Forum will provide an opportunity for a workshop discussion about retention and the sharing of good practice
- Research specific strategies, like Pre-Access provision, to analyse various methods used and recognise any benefits
- Prepare a good practice guide for providers using real examples to explain what has worked and why
- Encourage learners to help other learners
- Lobby the relevant bodies with regard to funding for childcare, travel expenses etc both regionally and nationally
- Consider issues of retention when designing new curriculum and assessment planning
- Develop closer relationship with provider MIS Managers to ensure data is from the appropriate source and can be reconciled with AVA data.
- Research pathways which are motivational, proven to lead to HEI places and/or employment
- Publicise success and achievement through Press, Awards and Events
- Allow flexible timeframes and modes of delivery
- Develop informal benchmarks or regional statistics which might help Course Leaders to compare their retention and success rates with other Access courses in the region.

**Jennie Lawson, Access to HE Manager
November 2009**