

UCAS response to QAA's consultation: Changes to the Access to Higher Education Diploma Specification

Introduction to UCAS

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for post-secondary education. This service spans undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories to access UK higher education (HE). In addition, we are a student-centric organisation with one of the UK's largest student audiences – ucas.com receives 30 million unique visits per year and more than 1.5m people engage with UCAS each year, exploring HE, apprenticeships, and early careers.

Lifelong learning is a key priority for governments across the UK. It is also a strategic priority for UCAS. During the 2022 cycle, UCAS has supported 116,270 UK students aged 21 and over in exploring their next steps, 24% (27,450) of which held an Access to HE Diploma qualification which is the dominant entry pathway for those aged 21+. Mindful of the importance of this qualification in enabling progression to HE, UCAS is responding to this consultation. Key points as follows:

- **Credits must underpin progression pathways:** Retaining a credit-based Access to HE Diploma futureproofs a critical progression route for mature students ahead of a likely growth in micro-credentials.
- **Flexibility in both delivery and funding models is key:** In the context of the introduction of the lifelong loan entitlement (LLE), it will be important to develop a mechanism for Access to HE Diploma students to both study and be funded on a 'bitesize' basis.
- **Evolving the Access to HE Diploma could broaden options for students at Level 4+:** The proposed introduction of subject descriptors with the intention of facilitating progression to a broader range of HE subjects is welcome.
- **More support for care-experience students:** UCAS proposes that QAA works with expert organisations to develop guidance for Access to HE course providers and AVAs that covers the information and advice care-experienced students can access in HE, from pre-application through to graduation.

Unit size and configuration

UCAS agrees with the principle of retaining a credit-based qualification to futureproof the Access to HE Diploma ahead of a likely growth in micro-credentials. Within UCAS' [response](#) to the Department for Education's Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) consultation, we call for sector-wide agreement, underpinned by government, on what a credit is, with a standard process for digital management and verification. As such, the clarity outlined in the consultation, with defined minimum and maximum numbers of 6 and/or 9 credit units is welcome.

In a similar vein, we believe it is important that Level 3 provision does not become a barrier for entry to lifelong learning provision at Levels 4-6 as enabled through the LLE. As such, we wholly support the availability of credit-based Level 3 qualifications such as the Access to HE Diploma. For such a system to flourish, the delivery and funding models will both need to evolve, developing a mechanism for Access to HE Diploma students to both study and be funded on a 'bitesize' basis. Creating a flexible delivery and funding model at Level 3 will support the creation of a flexible skills system at Levels 4 and above.

Diploma titles and content

UCAS research, [Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#) explored how qualification choice at Levels 2 and/or 3 can inadvertently prevent students from studying a subject at HE level. This ground-breaking report, based on a survey of 27,000 students, mapped their education choices through their journey from school into HE.

There is evidence that some students miss out on their preferred choice of degree subject because of the qualification and subject decisions they make in school. One in five students report they were unable to study a degree subject that interested them because they did not have the relevant subjects for entry. Some degree courses, such as medicine and dentistry, maths, economics, or languages, require applicants to have taken a specific set of fixed pre-requisite qualifications. Other subjects, such as business or law, are much more fluid and accept applicants with a diverse range of qualifications.

Whilst this research focused on the progression of school leavers, we also see similar limitations among mature students holding Access to HE Diplomas – currently, progression is concentrated in a small number of HE subjects, namely nursing and other allied health subjects. As such, the proposed introduction of subject descriptors with the intention of facilitating progression to a broader range of HE subjects is welcome.

As per UCAS' recent [report](#), we also recommend the provision of greater support for care-experienced students – such applicants are more than twice as likely to study the qualification compared to non-care-experienced applicants. Therefore, UCAS proposes that QAA works with expert organisations to develop guidance for Access to HE course providers and AVAs that covers the information and advice care-experienced students can access in HE, from pre-application through to graduation.