



**The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education**

**Guidance for the admission of students to  
QAA-recognised Access to HE programmes**

**November 2007 (revised)**

## **Admissions to Access to Higher Education (HE) programmes**

### **Introduction**

Under the terms of its licence from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an access validating agency (AVA)<sup>1</sup> is required to assure the quality and fitness for purpose of the Access to HE courses to which it grants formal recognition through its processes of validation and monitoring. The criteria which specify an AVA's responsibilities in this regard require the AVA to consider and confirm 'arrangements and criteria for admission to the course, including pre-course guidance'.<sup>2</sup> This guidance is intended to support AVAs in identifying appropriate 'arrangements and criteria', and to provide a reference point for providers and others by clarifying national expectations in this area.

While AVAs may expect that providers' admissions procedures in relation to Access to HE courses will be broadly consistent with providers' general policies and procedures for admissions, they also have a responsibility to consider whether any additional arrangements are necessary in order to reflect the particular requirements of Access to HE courses and the specific target groups identified by the provider.

Providers are responsible for ensuring that their admissions procedures, criteria and practices conform to relevant legislation and regulation (including that relating to equality and diversity, data protection and freedom of information). This guidance does not take precedence over any legal requirements. Providers should also be aware of any funding implications of their admissions decisions and ensure that applicants are advised fully and appropriately<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> AVAs are responsible for the validation of Access to HE courses and the award of Access to HE Diplomas. They were previously known as 'authorised validating agencies'.

<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 3.5 of *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: Principles and criteria for the licensing of Authorised Validating Agencies* (October 2005). This document can be located at [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/recognition/recog\\_principles.asp](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/recognition/recog_principles.asp)

<sup>3</sup> Current legislation (the Learning and Skills Act 2000) makes a clear distinction between provision intended for those under the age of 19 and that intended for those over the age of 19. Section 96 of the 2000 Act provides that, for persons under 19, a course which leads to an external qualification can only receive funding from the Learning and Skills Council for England (LSC) (as an 'authorised body' under Section 100) if that external qualification is approved by the Secretary of State (as per Sections 98 and 99), QAA-recognised Access to HE qualifications are external qualifications not approved for the purposes of the Learning and Skills Act 2000. Therefore they are ineligible for LSC funding for learners under the age of 19. Section 96 of the 2000 Act also applies in Wales, where the approval of external qualifications (as per section 99) and the funding, is authorised by the Welsh Ministers.

## **Principles**

The arrangements and criteria for the admission of students to Access to HE courses should reflect the primary aim of this provision to provide an appropriate preparation and recognised qualification for progression to HE. In particular, Access to HE courses are targeted at those who have the ability to benefit from a course of HE but who have not previously had the opportunity to do so. To be successful in reaching their target groups, Access to HE courses are designed, through their curriculum, their delivery methods and their course structures to meet the needs of those who may have few, if any, prior qualifications, or those whose educational progress has been limited by their particular social or educational circumstances.

There is no single type of suitable Access to HE applicant, and the intention of the admissions process should be to respond positively to the diversity of background and experience of applicants and to offer opportunities to all those who meet the criteria. While courses may be targeted at particular groups, especially the disadvantaged and those currently under-represented in HE, there should, in most cases, be no group or type of applicant that is explicitly excluded from admission to a course. Where any exceptions are made to this general principle, the justification should be clear and made explicit at initial course recognition. There is no minimum or maximum age requirement for admission to an Access to HE course.

Admissions procedures and criteria are expected to ensure that applicants' needs and capacities are considered with reference to the characteristics of particular courses, and may therefore differ in their detail. This principle recognises that Access to HE courses are designed with reference to the needs of varying target groups and progression opportunities. If the target groups for the course are revised, the course itself, including its admission practices, should be reviewed in relation to continuing fitness for purpose.

## **The admissions process**

The admissions process should be designed to ensure that the needs and abilities of individual students match the aims and demands of particular courses. To this end:

- i procedures should be clear, fair and explicit
- ii procedures should be consistently and expeditiously applied
- iii procedures should be appropriate to the needs and characteristics of any specified target groups
- iv appropriate criteria for admission to the course should be established and made available to applicants (see Admissions criteria below)
- v procedures should provide for equality of opportunity for all applicants within the admissions criteria established for the course
- vi any entry requirements should be made clear to applicants

- vii clear information about the course should be provided to applicants, in order to ensure that they are able to make an informed decision about whether it meets their aims and needs
- viii information about alternative options should be available, and the prospective student's legitimate interests should be taken into account in any advice given
- ix information about the broad financial implications of undertaking the Access to HE course and of following a course of higher education should be provided, including information about where applicants may access advice in relation to their personal circumstances
- x the admissions process should include consideration of, and judgement about, individual applicants' capacity to complete and benefit from the Access to HE course
- xi the timing and nature of information about the outcome of the process should be made clear to applicants, and any applicant who is turned down should be informed of the reason for the decision
- xii providers should have policies and procedures in place for responding to applicants' complaints about the operation of their admissions process
- xiii all those involved in the admissions process should understand the process as a whole and their responsibilities within it, and should be competent to undertake their roles
- xiv the admissions process should accommodate the requirement of the QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland that 'Where an Access programme is intended to lead to further study for a professional qualification, students are made aware of, and given the opportunity to meet, the entry requirements of the national professional body concerned'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paragraph 3.6 of *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: Principles and criteria for the licensing of Authorised Validating Agencies*. This document can be found at [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/recognition/recog\\_principles.asp](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/recognition/recog_principles.asp)

## Admissions criteria

Admissions should be made according to transparent and justifiable criteria, and should include reference to:

- i the match between **the applicant's aims and goals** and the primary aim of the programme as a preparation for study in higher education
- ii **the applicant's ability to benefit** from the programme
- iii **the applicant's potential** to meet the demands of the programme and complete the programme requirements successfully. A range of evidence may be considered when assessing the potential of an applicant to succeed on a particular programme. Applicants for Access to HE programmes are likely to come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and specific criteria should recognise that applicants can demonstrate their potential to succeed in a variety of ways, and that opportunities to participate in certain activities can be limited by disability or by cultural or social background. In making specific requirements in relation to life or work experience, providers should be aware of a range of legitimate types of experience, and the inappropriateness of some demands for certain groups, particularly in respect of learners with disabilities.
- iv **the applicant's life experience.** Successful applicants will normally have substantial experience of life outside of formal education, gained since completing compulsory schooling. Where exceptions are made to this criterion, providers should be clear about the particular circumstances which justify such an exception being made. In certain circumstances, (in relation, for example, to admission to Access to HE programmes preparing students for an HE course leading to a professional qualification) it may be appropriate to require students to have particular kinds of work experience
- v **the applicant's educational experience.** Where an applicant has recently undertaken the whole, or part of, another Level 3 course, the application should be considered with particularly careful reference to points i – iii, above.