

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar [Llwybrau at addysg a hyfforddiant ôl-16](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) on the [Routes into post-16 education and training](#)

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Executive Summary – Written for the Welsh Parliament inquiry into ‘Routes into post-16 education and training’.

This submission presents research findings on regulating, delivering, and assessing Access to Higher Education (HE) courses in Wales, focusing on aligning the current framework with 21st-century educational and societal demands. Based on qualitative data gathered from Access practitioners, historical perspectives from key literature, and insights from recent research into tertiary education policy, it identifies critical challenges, including misalignment in regulatory mechanisms, evolving learner demographics, funding disparities, and inconsistencies in assessment standards and curricula offer across further education organisations.

This executive summary constitutes a component of various dissemination activities that are integral to the authors' ongoing doctoral research study: *‘Is the current regulatory framework, educational policy, and delivery of Access to Higher Education in Wales suitable for the demands of the 21st century?’ [E020801LR]*. The research critically evaluates the regulatory framework, educational policy, and delivery mechanisms of Access to Higher Education (AHE) programs in Wales. It aims to determine their suitability for meeting the educational demands of the 21st century, explicitly assessing whether these programs align with widening participation agendas and adequately prepare learners for undergraduate studies. The research explored key themes, including program regulation, design, funding, and stakeholder perspectives.

The study utilises a qualitative methodology within a multi-case study approach conducted in two phases:

- Phase 1: Participants (Access practitioners and coordinators) from further education organisations across Wales were interviewed using semi-structured interviews.
- Phase 2: The participants included strategic stakeholders, such as policymakers and educational leaders. After sharing initial themes from phase one of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Phase 1 was used to gather qualitative data from ten participants representing seven further education organisations across Wales. An initial semantic analysis of the interview transcripts identified key insights and emerging themes. These findings were instrumental in shaping the focus of Phase 2, ensuring a more targeted investigation of strategic stakeholder perspectives.

Introduction and Methodology

Since its inception in the mid-1960s, the Access to Higher Education Diploma has been a cornerstone of widening participation in higher education. Rooted in a commitment to social justice, these courses have provided transformative opportunities for learners traditionally marginalised by educational and social systems (James and Busher, 2018). By fostering inclusivity, Access courses align with the Welsh Government's objectives of social mobility and equity in education (Miles, 2022).

This report draws on primary data collected from semi-structured interviews, insights from key literature, and findings from the Access Insight Knowledge Transfer Project (2024). These recent studies explore the regulation and funding of Access and Foundation provision in Wales and the transition to 'Medr', the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER). The integration of these sources strengthens the research findings base and aligns this submission with contemporary policy developments.

Contextual Background

Access to HE courses emerged during the 1960s as part of a broader movement to democratise higher education and address systemic inequalities in access to learning opportunities (Parry, 1996). Initially tailored for mature learners, the courses have expanded to accommodate diverse demographics, including younger students transitioning directly from secondary education. This evolution underscores the enduring relevance of Access courses as tools for widening participation and promoting social mobility.

The establishment of CTER represents a transformative step in Welsh tertiary education policy, consolidating the regulation and funding of all post-16 education under a single framework. This approach aims to enhance the sector's coherence, equity, and collaboration (PolicyWISE, 2024). By prioritising life-long learning and civic missions, Medr's launch strategy aligns with the foundational objectives of Access provision.

4. Thematic Findings

So far, seven main themes have been identified in the subheadings below. Sub-themes are also presented within these.

4.1. Historical and Regulatory Context

The formalisation of Access courses in the 1980s and their subsequent regulation by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) established them as a recognised route into higher education alongside A Levels and vocational qualifications (James and Busher, 2018). Despite these advancements, misalignments between regulatory mechanisms in England and Wales create challenges for Welsh institutions.

Access courses were conceptualised as part of a widening participation agenda to address the exclusion of underrepresented groups from higher education (Parry, 1996). These courses have undergone significant transformations to meet changing societal and economic demands.

Research findings from phase one indicate that Access to Higher Education exists in a 'regulatory vacuum', a niche area of post-compulsory education somewhat outside Welsh educational policymakers' influence. Access is regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency, Funded by the Welsh Parliament, and is acknowledged by Qualifications Wales, yet is only funded for those learners aged 19+. Despite this, research findings from phase one indicate that learners aged 17+ are being enrolled on full-time Access courses across several further education organisations across Wales, with little clarity on how Access education is funded for those learners under 19.

From phase one, it is clear that the future regulation of Access to higher education diplomas in Wales is currently unknown. However, some participants suggested a move towards Access qualifications being regulated from within Wales while maintaining its national parity with A-levels may be beneficial. The regulatory transition of further and higher education to Medr in 2024 will integrate all post-16 education, creating a unified regulatory and funding body modelled partly on the Scottish system. This shift is expected to enhance coherence and address disparities in regulation and funding (PolicyWISE, 2024).

Phase 1 indicates that whether long-term regulation remains with the QAA or regulatory oversight transfers to Medr, the Access diploma must maintain its parity with A-levels, remain the third route into higher education, and continue to be recognised across the United Kingdom as meeting the admission requirements for study at undergraduate level.

4.2. Younger Learner Demographics

The increasing enrolment of younger learners, in some cases one academic year post-completion of secondary education, highlights a shift in Access course demographics. Some participants reported that learners enrol in Access courses after completing the AS year or year one of the level 3 health and social care qualifications. While this diversification aligns with the Welsh Government's widening participation agenda, it poses unique challenges:

- Educational Preparedness: Younger learners often lack the life experience and academic readiness required for intensive Access courses. One participant observed, *"Many younger students lack the maturity needed for self-directed study, central to Access courses"*.
- Institutional Adaptations: Providers must balance the needs of traditional mature learners with those of younger students. This tension underscores the need for tailored support systems and preparatory pathways. Participant 1 highlighted, *"Younger students, often just out of A-levels, struggle with the condensed and intensive nature of the Access curriculum"*.

4.3. Funding and Financial Barriers

The Access Insight Knowledge Transfer Project highlighted significant disparities in funding for Access learners compared to those pursuing traditional A Levels or Foundation Year programs. Access courses are funded if the learner is 19+. The Qualifications in Wales (2024) QiW database indicates that the Access qualification is not eligible for use on publicly funded learning programmes for learners under the age of 19.

However, it is unclear how further education providers are funded for learners 17 – 18 enrolled in an Access course when other suitable level 3 provisions are available. When participants were asked to explain how Access courses are funded, only two participants were able to indicate they were aware of funding mechanisms and that Access education is only funded for those learners aged 19+.

Key themes include:

Cost of Living and Debt Aversion: Many learners are deterred from pursuing Access courses due to financial pressures and aversion to debt. Participant 7 noted, *“Financial challenges often mean learners must juggle jobs and studies, making it hard to keep up with the course”*.

Differentiated Funding Models: Access learners struggle with meeting the financial demands of full-time study. Most work part-time or full-time, while some receive a combination of part-time work and state benefits such as Universal Credit. However, ‘foundation Year’ students (those who study a higher education level 4 certificate course and then transition to undergraduate study) can access student loans and maintenance grants. This bifurcation exacerbates inequities and undermines the accessibility of the Access provision (Access Insight, 2024, p.28).

4.4. The Role of Welsh Language and Culture

The integration of Welsh language and culture into Access courses remains inconsistent, with practitioners highlighting both barriers and opportunities for improvement. While the Welsh Government has prioritised bilingualism in broader education policy, the Access curriculum has yet to embrace this agenda fully. Phase one indicates there may be a future need for a ‘Welsh language and culture diploma pathway to support those who wish to study the Welsh language and culture at the undergraduate level.

Current Integration Efforts: Some Access providers have introduced informal Welsh language and culture components, such as optional Welsh language sessions or extracurricular activities, often driven by individual tutors’ passion for Welsh heritage. Participant 4 emphasised, *“Incorporating Welsh heritage into teaching materials helps learners connect better with their cultural identity”*.

Barriers to Implementation: Challenges include limited availability of Welsh-medium teaching staff, resource constraints, and a lack of formal integration within the curriculum framework. Practitioners suggested piloting Welsh-medium learning units in key subject areas to address these gaps.

4.5. Transferability and Midpoint Qualifications

Access qualifications have traditionally followed an “all-or-nothing” model, with learners required to complete the full diploma to achieve a recognised qualification. However, discussions with practitioners and stakeholders indicate a growing interest in creating more flexible progression pathways:

Credit Transfer: Participants noted the potential benefits of implementing credit transfer systems to allow learners to carry completed units across institutions. Participant 3 explained, *“A learner with 30 credits from one centre could seamlessly continue at another centre without starting over, promoting greater accessibility”*.

Midpoint Qualifications: Some practitioners advocated introducing interim qualifications, such as certificates, that recognise partial completion. This could serve as a safety net for learners unable to complete the full diploma. *“It’s all or nothing at the moment, and that’s a barrier. If we had midpoint awards, learners would leave with something to show for their efforts,”* noted Participant 7.

4.6. Access as a Pathway to Higher Education

Access courses provide an invaluable route into higher education, particularly for learners outside the traditional A-level pathway. Participant 2 remarked, *“Our Access students are often more prepared for university study than their A-level counterparts due to the rigorous and diverse nature of the curriculum”*. However, some participants indicated that Discrepancies in recognition persist, with some institutions undervaluing Access qualifications compared to A-levels.

4.7. Alignment with Parliamentary Inquiry Terms of Reference

The following table illustrates how the findings from this research align with the key areas of the parliamentary inquiry:

<i>Terms of Reference</i>	<i>Findings</i>
Effectiveness of regulatory mechanisms	Misalignment in regulatory oversight and limited consideration of Welsh-specific needs.
Equity and accessibility of education pathways	Increasing age-related disparities and lack of preparatory courses for learners underqualified or those without relevant experience.
Assessment and curriculum consistency	Variability in assessment methods and standards across FE centres. Limited ability to offer curricula which are reactive to learner needs at level 3 and in preparation for level 4 study.
Support for Welsh language and culture	Need for greater integration of Welsh language and cultural elements into Access curricula.
Funding for equitable access	Learners face significant barriers due to their eligibility for limited financial support (e.g., grants). There is also a lack of clarity on how Access provision for learners aged 17 and 18 is funded. Not all Further Education institutions

	provide an Access route for learners younger than 19 due to concerns over funding.
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5. Conclusion

Access to HE courses fosters inclusivity and social mobility within Wales' education system. By addressing regulatory disparities, supporting diverse learner demographics, and embracing the Welsh cultural context, these courses can continue to serve as a beacon of opportunity for non-traditional learners. The enduring relevance of Access courses in shaping a more equitable and inclusive higher education landscape and their ability to foster social mobility and potentially lift learners and their families from poverty should be protected.

6. References

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