

Office for  
Students



# Preparing for degree study

**Analysis of Access to Higher Education  
Diplomas and integrated foundation year  
courses**

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**Annex A** is available alongside this report.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/preparing-for-degree-study/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/preparing-for-degree-study/).

# Summary

1. For the past few years the number of students studying Access to Higher Education Diplomas ('Access courses') has been declining, while the number on integrated foundation years has been increasing. This means that in 2017-18, the number of entrants to Access courses was approximately equal to the number of entrants to integrated foundation year courses. The number of entrants to Access courses declined by 18 per cent between 2012-13 and 2017-18, from 36,880 to 30,410, while the number of integrated foundation year entrants almost tripled from 10,430 to 30,030.
2. This report shows that there are similarities between Access to Higher Education Diplomas and integrated foundation year courses, but also important differences. In particular, the wider geographical spread of Access courses means they may be suitable for a wider range of potential higher education students and enable progression to many different courses, whereas foundation years may be more likely to attract students with a higher level of commitment to taking degree-level study at a specific provider.
3. The key findings of this report are as follows:
  - a. Two-fifths of Access students held a qualification equivalent to A-levels before taking the course, compared with four-fifths of foundation year students.
  - b. Most Access course entrants were over 21, whereas the majority of those starting foundation years were 20 or younger.
  - c. Access courses were almost entirely taught at further education colleges, while integrated foundation years were predominantly taught at higher education institutions. This means that students usually had to travel further to take a foundation year than an Access course.
  - d. Subjects allied to medicine were the most common subject area for entrants to Access courses, whereas business and administrative studies were the most common for integrated foundation years.
  - e. The proportion of students who progressed to a degree programme in the four years following an Access course (62 per cent) was lower than the proportion who progressed after a foundation year (79 per cent). Students from both courses sometimes went on to a degree course after two or more years, rather than immediately.
  - f. The proportion of entrants who progressed to degree-level study has remained broadly stable over time for both types of course.
  - g. Students who started without A-level or equivalent qualifications had a lower rate of progression to degree-level study (55 per cent for Access courses, 61 per cent for foundation years), than those with A-levels (71 and 89 per cent respectively).
  - h. Those who progressed to full-time degree-level study after a foundation year were similarly likely to complete their degree within four years (69 per cent) to those on a degree after an Access course (68 per cent).

- i. Of those who qualified with a degree, a higher proportion of Access course students achieved first or upper second class degrees (70 per cent) than those who studied a foundation year (64 per cent).

**Correction**

The completion rates referred to in section h. above were understated in the original report due to the accidental exclusion of some of those who qualified later than expected. This was corrected in July 2020. The proportion of those completing after progressing to full-time degree study was reported as 63 per cent of foundation year students (now corrected to 69 per cent) and 53 per cent of Access course students (now corrected to 68 per cent). The proportion of foundation year students who achieved a first or upper second class degree was reported as 67 per cent (now corrected to 64 per cent) while the proportion of Access course students was unchanged at 70 per cent.

# Introduction

## Aim

4. Access to Higher Education Diplomas and integrated foundation year courses are designed to help students who wish to take a degree course, but require preparation to do so. The Office for Students (OfS) is interested in such courses because they may help widen access and participation in higher education for underrepresented groups.
5. This paper provides quantitative evidence to help understand the role of these courses in enabling students to undertake degree-level study. This covers the characteristics of students taking these courses, whether or not they subsequently study at degree level, the outcome of their degree, and recent trends. This complements other published analysis<sup>2</sup> by tracking a cohort of entrants over time rather than considering entry, progression and completion of higher education study in isolation.

## Background

6. While Access to Higher Education Diplomas ('Access courses') and integrated foundation years play a similar role in preparing students to take degree-level study, there are important differences:
  - a. An Access course is a standalone qualification equivalent to A-levels, which enables the holder to take a variety of courses at different higher education providers, at any point in the future. In contrast a foundation year is an extra year at the start of a degree course at a specific higher education provider, with the expectation that the student will continue to the full degree course after completing the year.
  - b. There are often differences in the required entry qualifications. Foundation year courses usually require students to hold A-level qualifications or equivalent, whereas Access courses are more likely to require GCSE-level qualifications.
  - c. There are also differences in the tuition fees and the loans available. Integrated foundation years are treated the same way as degree courses, with fees of up to £9,250 and student support available for tuition fees and living costs. For Access courses, the fees are lower and support is available for tuition fees but not necessarily for living costs. If eligible students complete a higher education course after achieving an Access to Higher Education Diploma, the loan for the Access course will be written off.

## Methodology

7. The population used in this analysis is made up of UK-domiciled entrants to further education colleges and higher education providers in England who are identified as studying an Access to

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/Key-Statistics-2017-18.aspx](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/Key-Statistics-2017-18.aspx).

Higher Education Diploma<sup>3</sup> or an integrated foundation year course.<sup>4</sup> It is based on data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, and from the Individualised Learner Record which covers further education colleges.

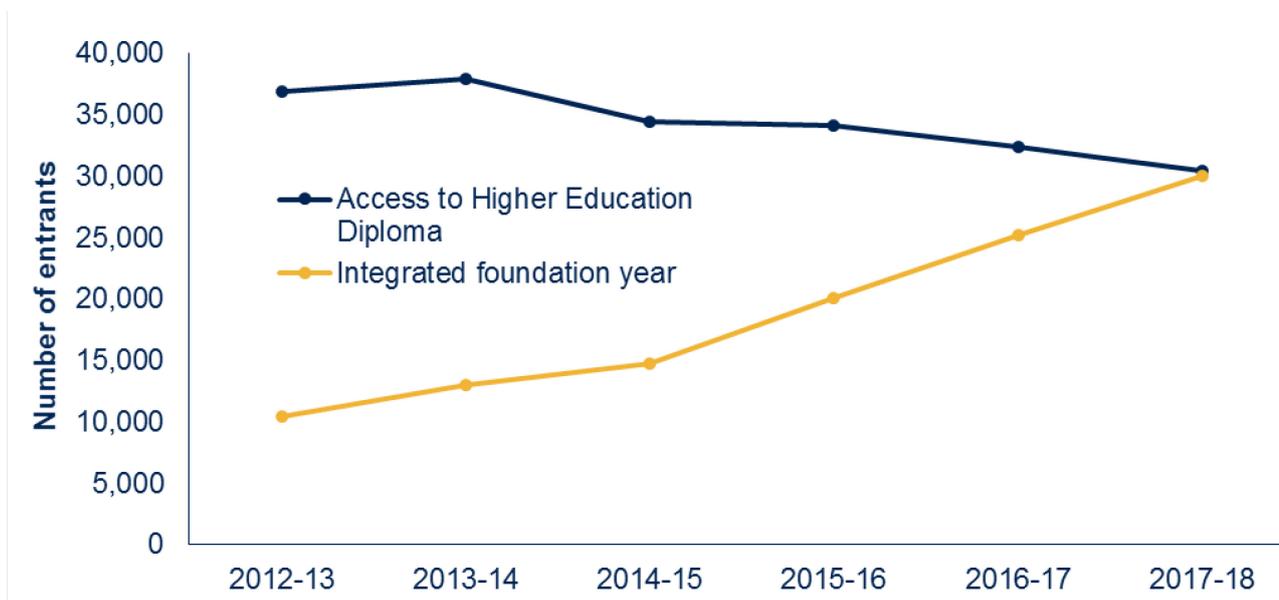
8. Students are tracked between data sources to see whether they progressed to degree-level study after finishing their Access course or foundation year. The tracking is carried out using personal identifiers such as names and dates of birth, to determine whether students were actively studying a degree course at any provider in subsequent years.<sup>5</sup>

## Results

### Overall numbers

9. For the past few years the number of entrants to Access to Higher Education Diplomas has been declining, while the number on integrated foundation years has been increasing. Figure 1 shows that the number of entrants to Access courses declined by 18 per cent between 2012-13 and 2017-18, with 6,500 fewer entrants, while the number of integrated foundation year entrants almost tripled, with an increase of 19,500. This means that in 2017-18, the number of entrants to Access courses was approximately equal to the number entering integrated foundation year courses.

**Figure 1: Numbers of UK entrants to Access and integrated foundation year courses in England between 2012-13 and 2017-18**



Note: The figures behind all the charts in this report are included in Annex A.

<sup>3</sup> This analysis is based on all Access to Higher Education Diplomas, including some that are not validated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

<sup>4</sup> Only students on undergraduate first degree level courses are included in this analysis. Those on other undergraduate courses are excluded.

<sup>5</sup> That is, whether they were part of the standard higher education registration population aiming for a first degree or postgraduate qualification (as defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency at [www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/students](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/students)). Study on an integrated foundation year course is not counted as progression until they continue to the main degree course.

## Student characteristics

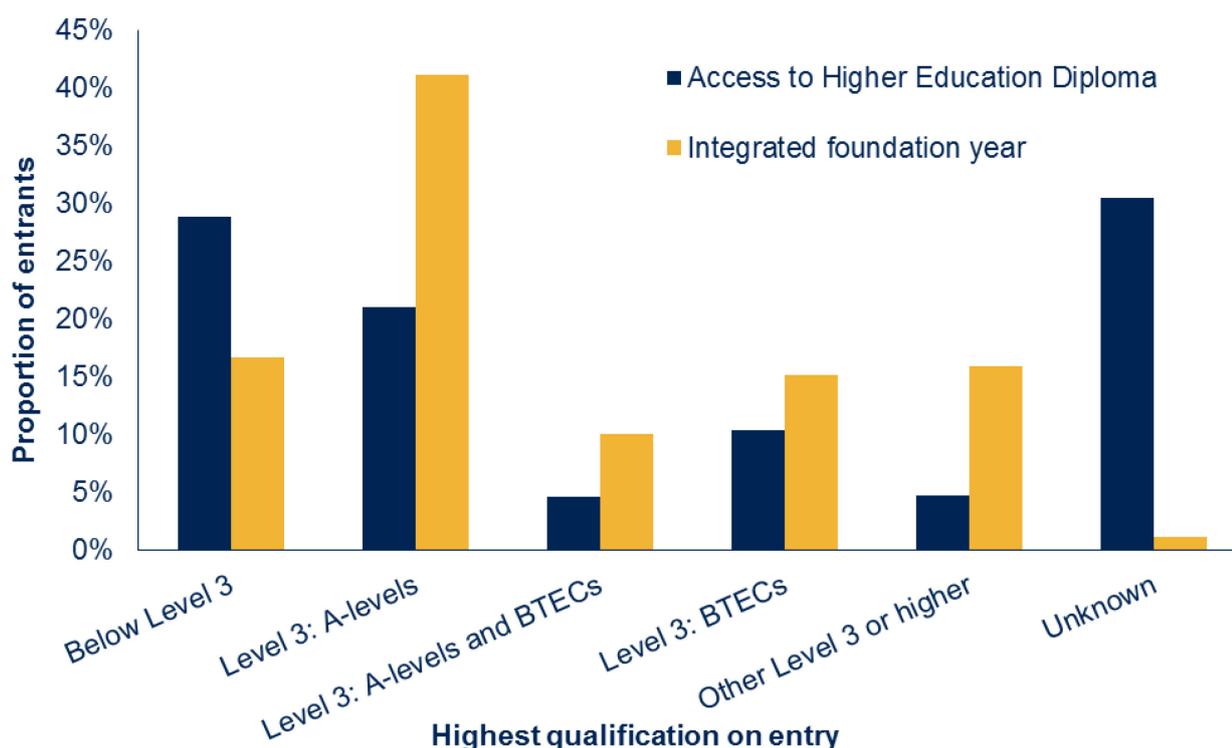
10. In this section, we compare the types of students on Access courses with those studying integrated foundation years, to establish whether or not they are serving the same students.

### Entry qualifications

11. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's description of the Access to Higher Education Diploma is that it is 'a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university'.<sup>6</sup> Integrated foundation year courses, on the other hand, are aimed at those who do not meet the entry qualifications for the course they intend to study. This section explores the qualifications students held when they began their courses, and in particular whether they held qualifications at a level equivalent to A-levels, known as 'Level 3'.

12. Figure 2 shows that most students on integrated foundation year courses held A-levels, whereas most of those on Access courses either had no qualifications, held qualifications below Level 3 or had unknown entry qualifications.<sup>7</sup> In total, 82 per cent of foundation year students were known to have qualifications at Level 3 or higher, compared with 41 per cent of Access students. Both of these figures are lower than the average proportion for students who started a degree course in 2017-18, 96 per cent of whom had a Level 3 qualification or higher.

**Figure 2: Proportion of 2017-18 entrants by entry qualification**



13. Another way to look at entry qualifications is to exclude those over 30, whose qualifications are less likely to be recorded in the available data. For Access students aged 30 or under, 50 per

<sup>6</sup> See [www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk).

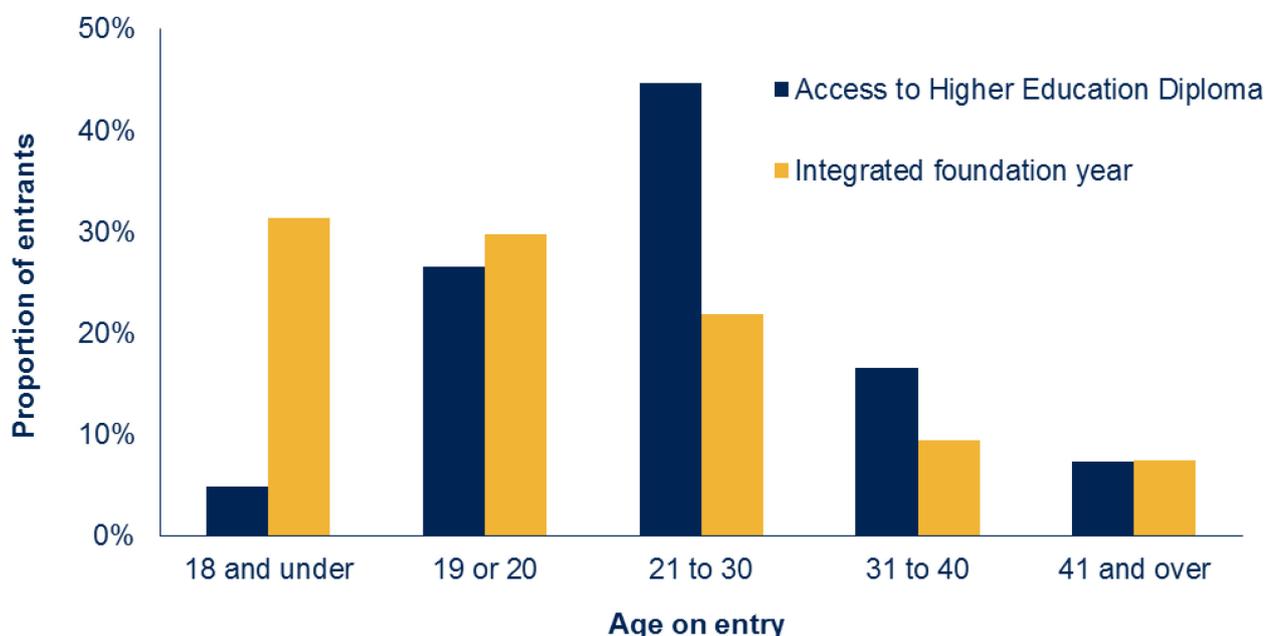
<sup>7</sup> Entry qualifications were not directly available for this analysis for those who studied at colleges, which includes nearly all Access students. Data on these students is derived by matching students to schools and college data showing Level 3 qualifications achieved since 2002, which means that older students are less likely to have their qualifications recorded.

cent had qualifications at Level 3 or higher, with 33 per cent below Level 3 and 17 per cent with unknown entry qualifications. In comparison, 90 per cent of foundation year students aged 30 or under were known to have qualifications at Level 3 or higher, and 9 per cent were known to have qualifications below Level 3.<sup>8</sup> This compares with 98 per cent of all UK entrants aged 30 and under who started a degree course in England during 2017-18.

## Age

14. Figure 3 shows the differences in course type by age. It shows that most of those on Access courses, 69 per cent, were mature students – defined as being aged 21 or over when they entered. This is a decrease compared with 2012-13, when 77 per cent were mature. On the other hand, 39 per cent of integrated foundation year entrants were 21 or over on entry, which is more similar to the overall age profile of degree entrants from the UK, of whom 30 per cent were mature.

**Figure 3: Proportion of entrants in 2017-18 by age on entry**



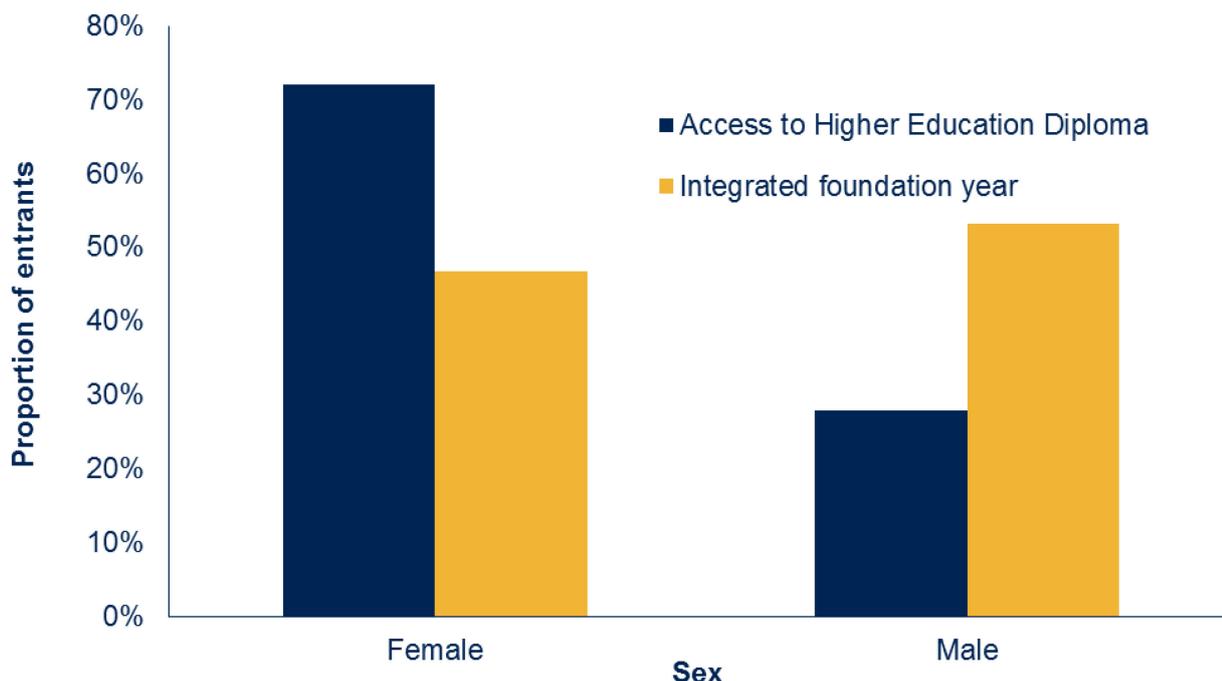
## Sex

15. Figure 4 shows that 72 per cent of entrants to Access courses were female, compared with 47 per cent of those who did an integrated foundation year and 56 per cent of UK entrants to degree courses generally. While this proportion has remained fairly constant for Access students, for foundation year students it increased from 37 per cent in 2012-13.

16. The high proportion of Access students who were female is related to the high proportion who studied nursing or other allied health courses.

<sup>8</sup> For the full table see Annex A, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/preparing-for-degree-study/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/preparing-for-degree-study/).

**Figure 4: Proportion of entrants in 2017-18 by sex**

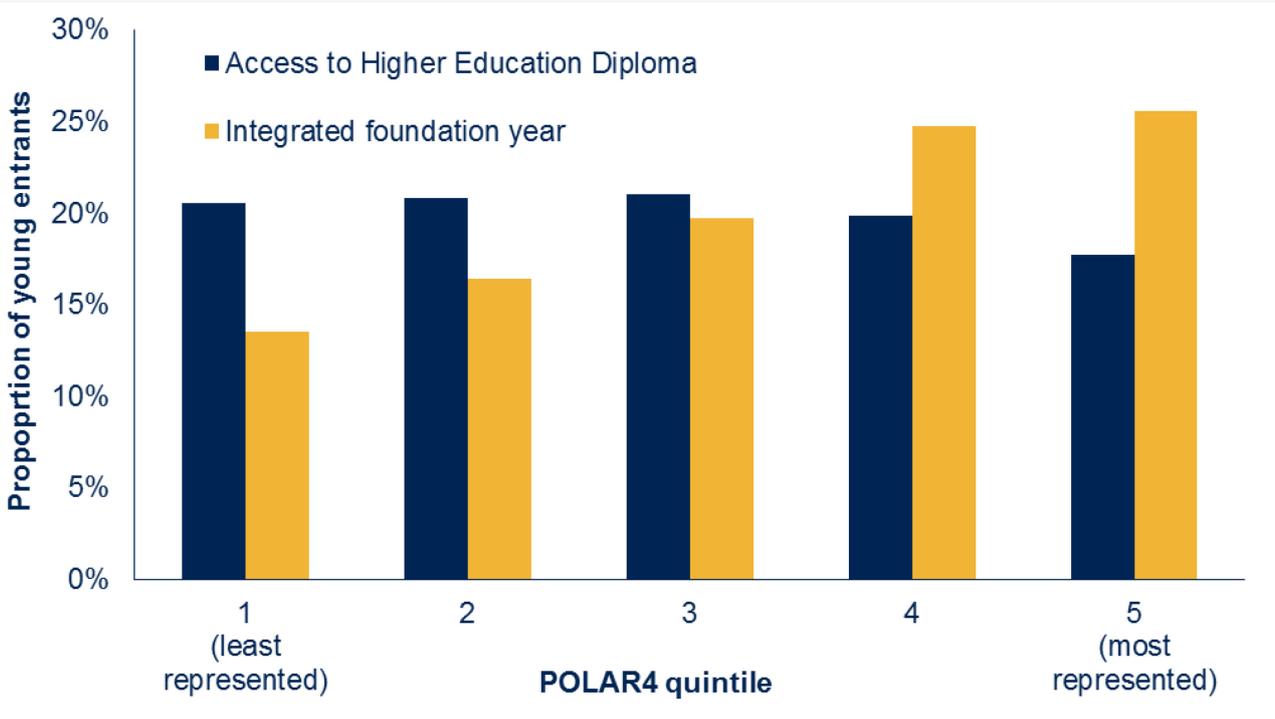


Note: The 10 students on integrated foundation years who reported their sex as indeterminate are not shown in this figure.

### **Disadvantage of local area**

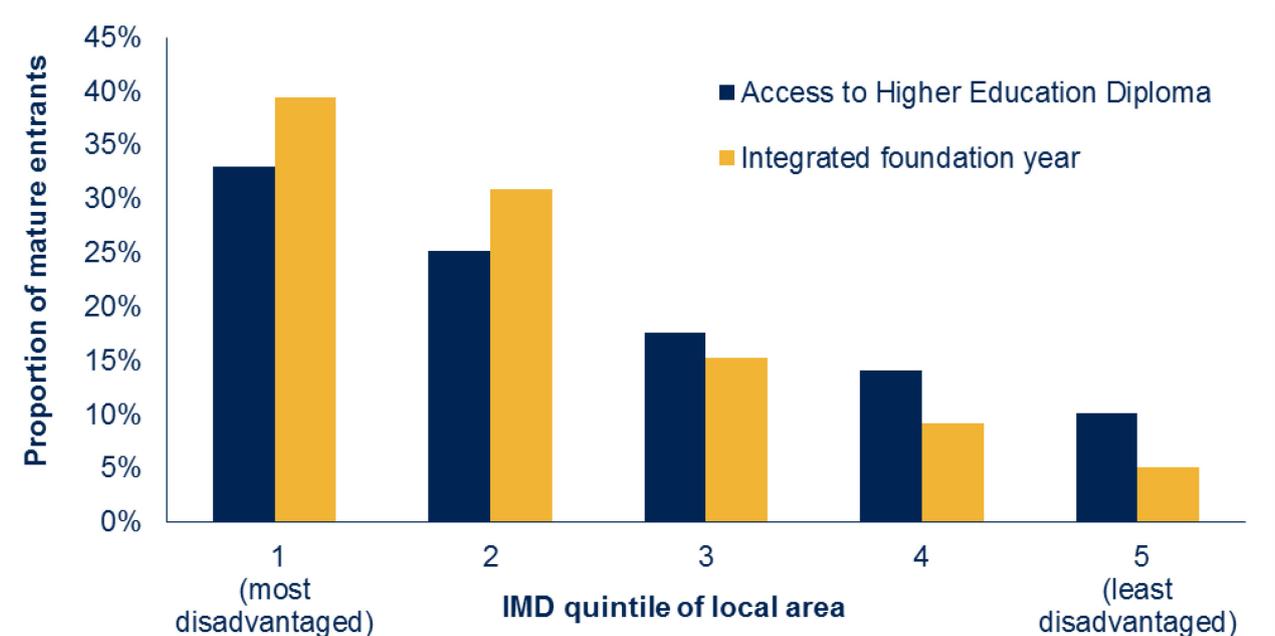
17. Another difference between students on Access courses and those on integrated foundation year courses is shown in the educational disadvantage of the students' neighbourhoods. An underrepresented area is one where only a small proportion of young people studied a higher education course. The Participation of Local Areas Measure (POLAR4) is a way of quantifying how disadvantaged an area is by measuring the proportion of young people from that area who enter higher education. Quintile 1 areas cover the 20 per cent of the population who live in the most underrepresented areas.
18. Figure 5 shows that students on Access courses are more evenly split between different areas than those on integrated foundation year courses, with 21 per cent rather than 14 per cent coming from POLAR4 quintile 1 areas. The proportion from quintile 1 areas has been increasing over time for both types of course. In comparison, of all young UK entrants to degree courses in 2017-18, 12 per cent came from quintile 1 areas.

**Figure 5: Proportion of young entrants in 2017-18 by POLAR4 quintile**



19. When considering mature students, the overall deprivation of an area is often a more appropriate indicator of disadvantage than the proportion of young people who attended higher education. For this reason, Figure 6 uses the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) for England to show the makeup of mature students on Access or foundation year courses by the local deprivation of their home before their course. This chart is limited to students from England as the definitions for IMD vary across the UK.

**Figure 6: Proportion of mature entrants in 2017-18 by IMD quintile of local area**

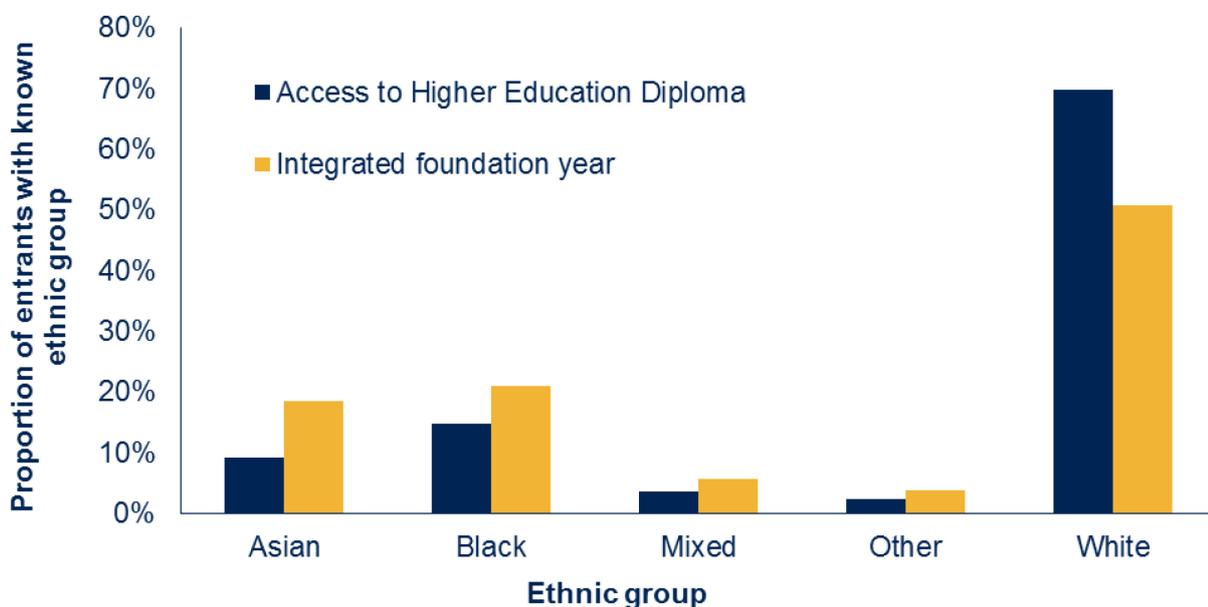


20. Overall, 28 per cent of mature degree entrants from England come from IMD quintile 1, so Figure 6 shows that students on both Access and foundation year courses are more likely to come from the most deprived areas, with 33 per cent and 39 per cent from quintile 1 respectively.

## Ethnic group

21. The proportions of different ethnic groups undertaking Access and foundation year courses can be seen in Figure 7. It shows that a higher proportion of Access students were white (70 per cent) than foundation year students (51 per cent). In comparison, across all UK degree entrants, 71 per cent of students were white.

**Figure 7: Proportion of entrants in 2017-18 by ethnicity**

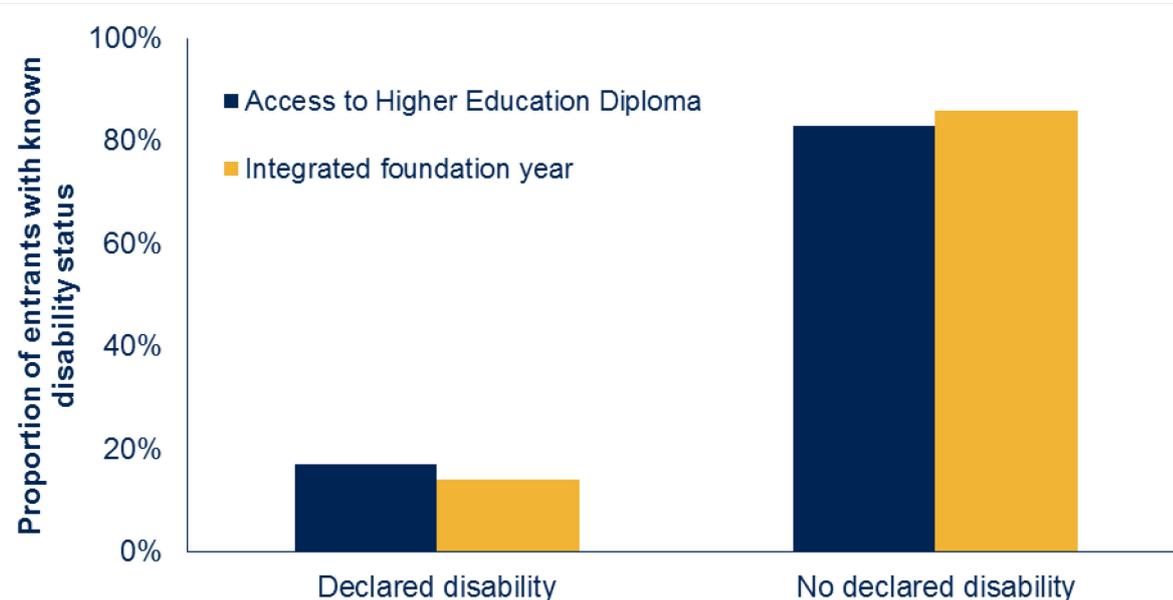


Note: The 2 per cent of UK students whose ethnicity was not collected or who chose not to disclose it are excluded from these percentages.

## Disability

22. Figure 8 shows that a larger proportion of Access students were disabled (17 per cent) than foundation year students (14 per cent). In comparison, 15 per cent of all degree entrants from the UK were disabled.

**Figure 8: Proportion of entrants in 2017-18 by disability**

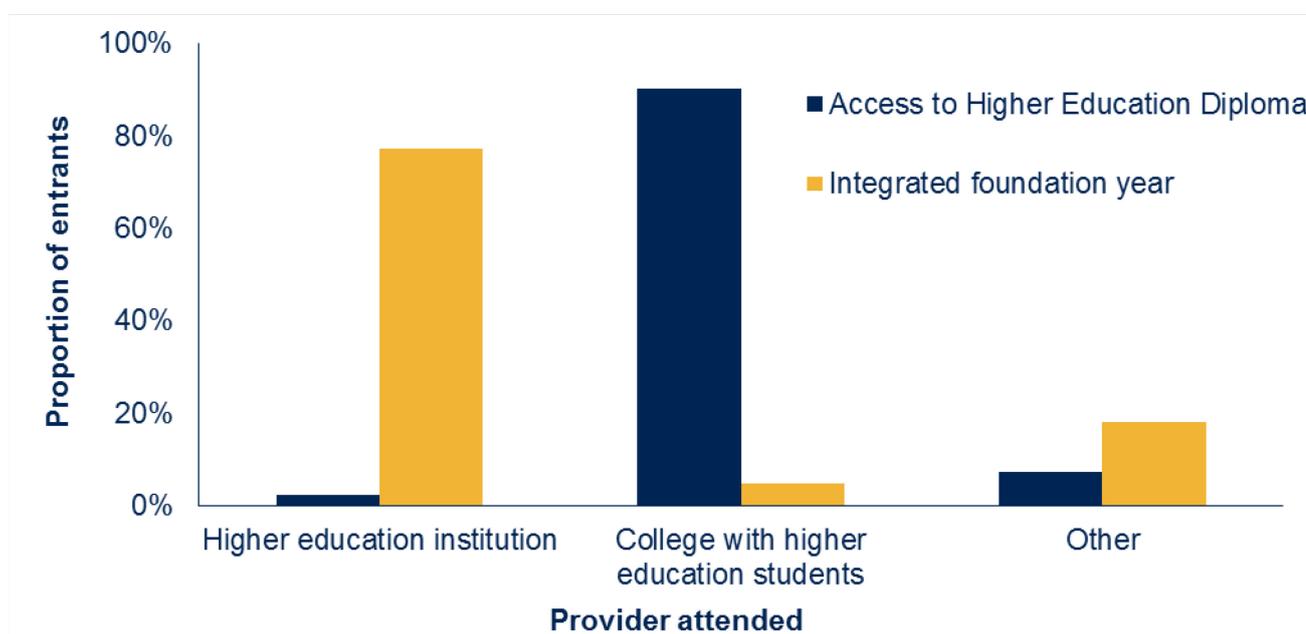


## Provider characteristics

### Type of teaching provider

23. Figure 9 shows that there were significant differences in the types of provider where students were studying. Nearly all Access course entrants (90 per cent) were taught at further education colleges whereas the majority of integrated foundation year students (77 per cent) were taught at a higher education institution.
24. A proportion of foundation year students (11 per cent) were taught at a college or private provider but were registered at a higher education institution. In part this reflects arrangements where a college teaches the foundation year and then the student takes the full degree course at the higher education institution.

**Figure 9: Proportion of entrants in 2017-18 by type of teaching provider**



Note: 'College with higher education students' refers to further education colleges that received some direct higher education funding in 2017-18. 'Other' includes other further education colleges and private providers.

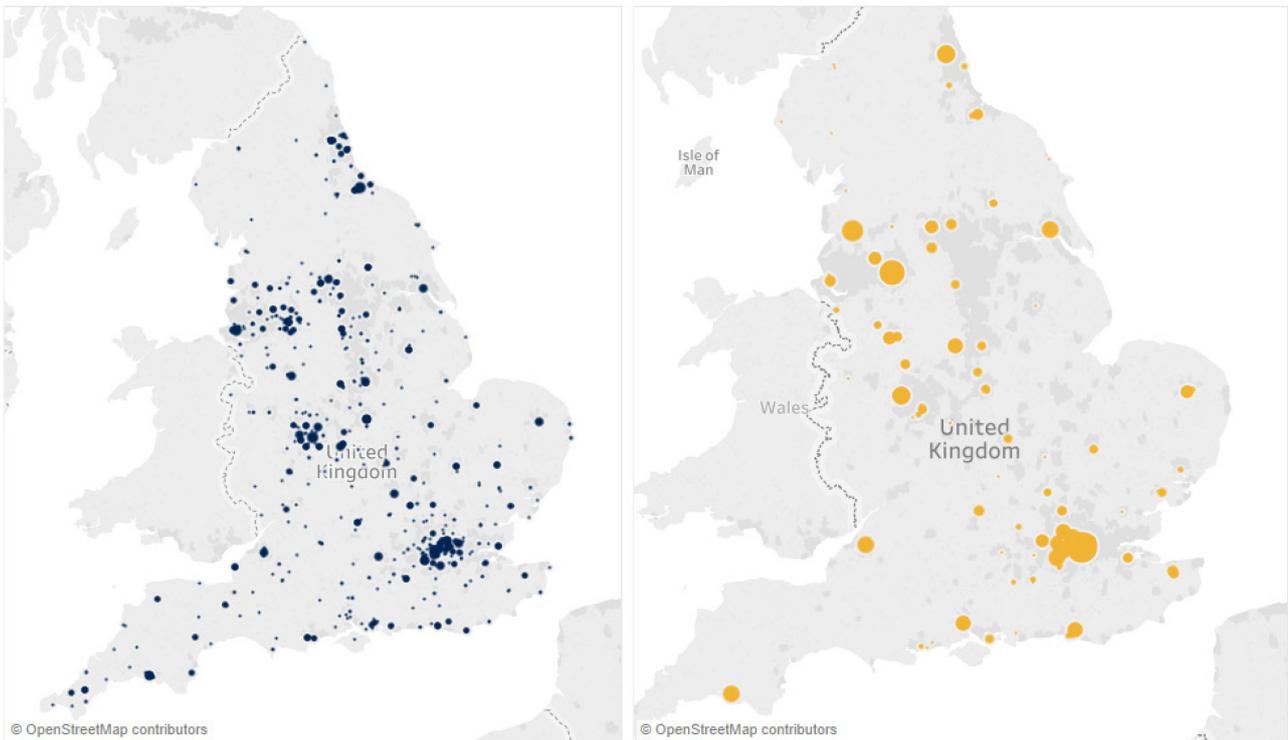
### Location of provision

25. Figure 10 shows the geographical spreads of where the two types of courses were taught. The size of each circle represents the number of entrants studying at that location between 2012-13 and 2017-18. It shows that Access courses were taught more widely throughout the country than integrated foundation years, and at a far larger number of providers. This could be due to either student demand or the types of institution that provide each type of course.

**Figure 10: Locations of teaching for Access courses and integrated foundation year courses, by number of entrants between 2012-13 and 2017-18**

Access to Higher Education Diploma

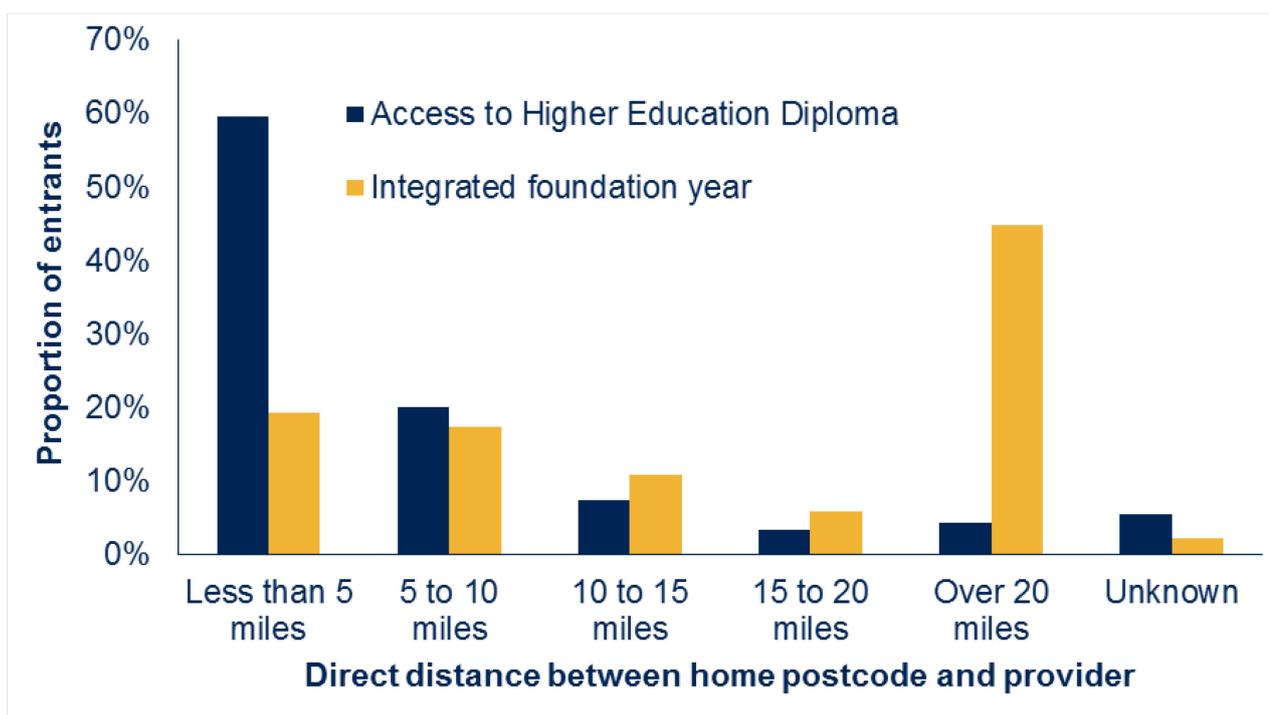
Integrated foundation year



Notes: Locations with fewer than five students are excluded to ensure data protection. Students on distance learning courses or at providers with no teaching location recorded are excluded.

26. The findings in Figure 10 are supported by those in Figure 11, showing the direct distance between students' addresses before they started their courses and where their courses were taught. It shows that 60 per cent of Access course students were taught within five miles of home, compared with 19 per cent of those on integrated foundation year courses. Conversely, 4 per cent of Access entrants and 45 per cent of foundation year entrants were at a provider more than 20 miles from where they lived before the course. These differences could be due to the distribution of provision or the mobility of the students.

**Figure 11: Proportion of entrants in 2017-18 by distance between provider and home address before the course**



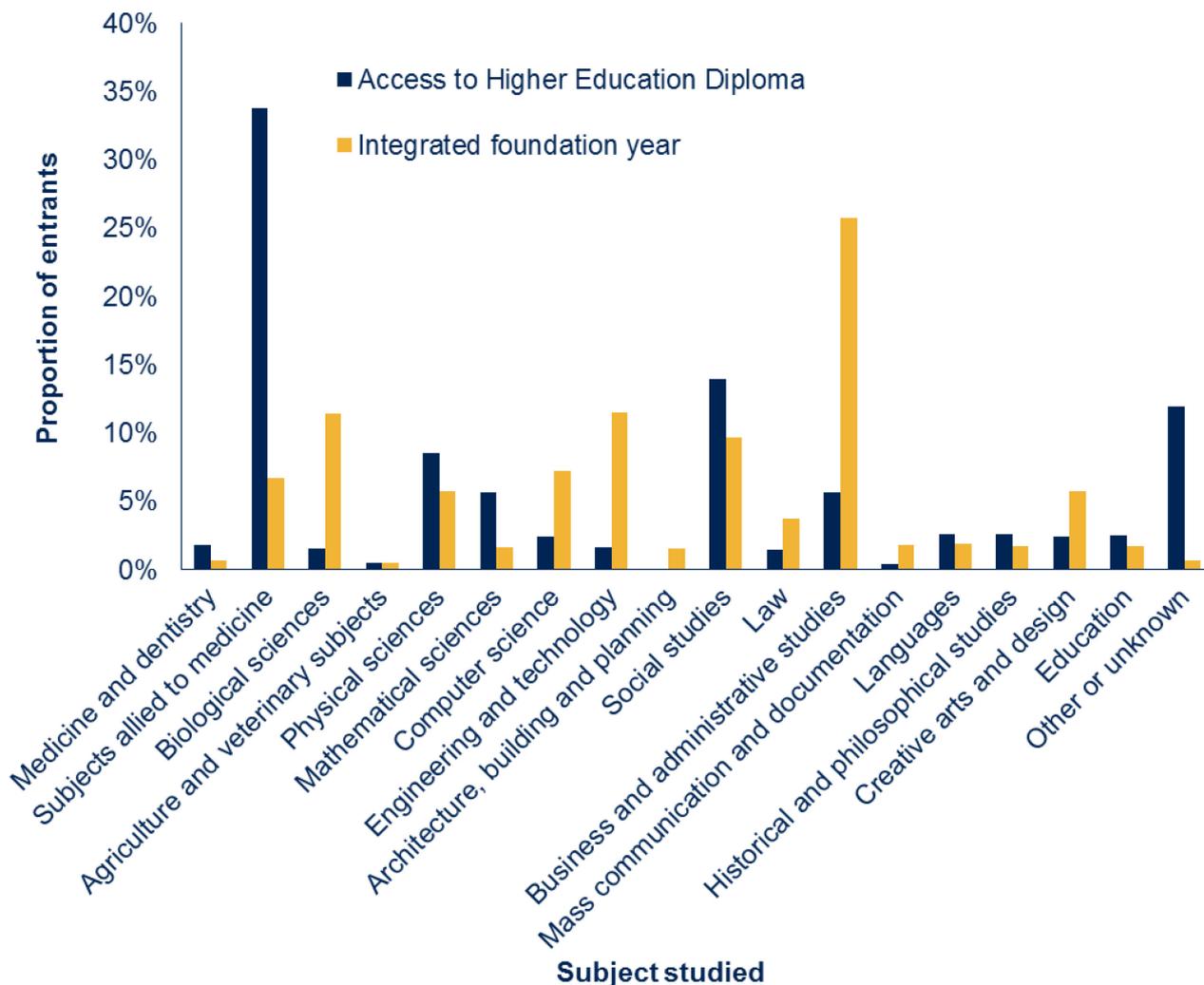
## Course characteristics

### Subject area

27. Figure 12 shows that subjects allied to medicine are by far the most common subject area<sup>9</sup> for entrants to Access courses, with 34 per cent of entrants studying them. Business and administrative studies were the most common subject for those on integrated foundation years, with 26 per cent of entrants. This is an increase from 17 per cent of entrants in 2012-13.

<sup>9</sup> Subject area based on JACS 3.0 principal subject areas (see [www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs/jacs3-principal](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs/jacs3-principal)). Because of small numbers veterinary science has been combined with agriculture and related subjects, collectively referred to as agriculture and veterinary subjects.

**Figure 12: Proportion of entrants in 2017-18 by subject**



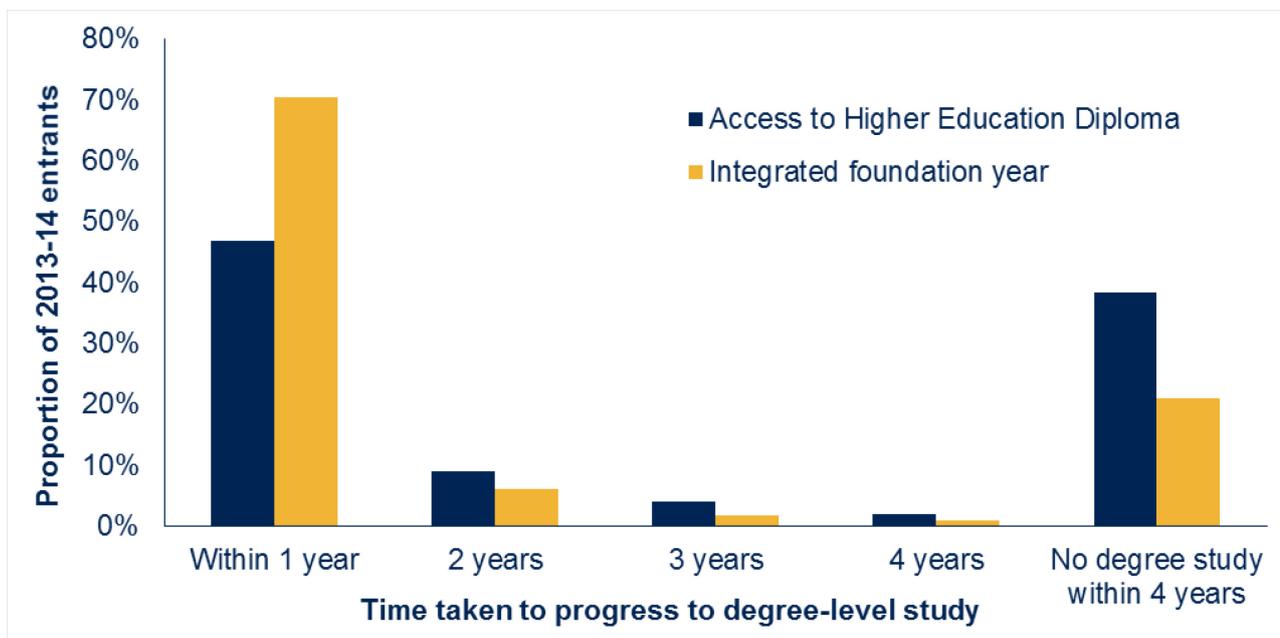
## Progression to degree-level study

### Progression within four years

28. Access and foundation year courses are designed to help students who wish to take a degree course but require further preparation, so it is important to consider whether students on these courses subsequently undertake degree-level study. For this section we consider 2013-14 entrants and determine whether they studied at degree level in a later year.

29. Figure 13 shows the amount of time taken to progress to degree-level study (or higher), at the same provider or a different one, for those who entered an Access or integrated foundation year course in 2013-14. It shows that 70 per cent of students continued from their foundation year straight into degree-level study, and a further 9 per cent progressed between two and four years after their foundation year, giving a total of 79 per cent with some degree-level study within four years. On the other hand, for students who took an Access course, 47 per cent entered degree-level study within a year and 15 per cent in two to four years, giving a total of 62 per cent who progressed within four years.

**Figure 13: Proportion of 2013-14 entrants progressing to degree-level study after an Access course or integrated foundation year**



30. Clearly this shows that students starting a degree course with an integrated foundation year are more likely to continue with their studies. This is not unexpected, as they have already secured degree-level study whereas students who undertake an Access course will still need to gain a place on a degree course.

31. One further reason for some Access course students not starting a degree is that they did not complete their Access course – a quarter of 2013-14 entrants left without completing it.

### Progression for different student groups

32. This section compares the progression of different student groups with the overall progression to degree study of students who took an Access course (62 per cent progressed within four years) or a foundation year (79 per cent).<sup>10</sup> Analysis shows that:

- a. Students who started their Access course or foundation year without Level 3 qualifications had a lower rate of progression (55 per cent for Access courses, 61 per cent for foundation years), and those with A-levels had a higher rate (71 and 89 per cent respectively).
- b. Among Access students, the progression rate was the same for young and mature students (62 per cent), whereas among foundation year students the rate was considerably higher for young students (83 per cent) than for mature students (71 per cent).
- c. Young students from the most underrepresented areas according to POLAR4 had a lower rate of progression than those from the most represented areas. Among Access students, 57 per cent progressed from quintile 1 and 66 per cent from quintile 5, while among foundation year students 86 per cent progressed from quintile 1 and 89 per cent from quintile 5.

<sup>10</sup> For the full tables see Annex A, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/preparing-for-degree-study/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/preparing-for-degree-study/).

- d. There was some variation by subject. Among Access students, progression was lowest for courses in creative arts (52 per cent) and agriculture and veterinary subjects (53 per cent), and highest for courses in education (67 per cent) and mass communications and documentation (69 per cent). Among foundation year students, continuation to the full degree course was lowest for courses in business (64 per cent) and education (75 per cent), and highest for those in medicine and dentistry (96 per cent) and agriculture and veterinary subjects (97 per cent).

### **Provider of degree course**

33. This section considers the university or college that provided the students' degree course.<sup>11</sup> Analysis shows that of those who transitioned to a degree course within four years:

- a. Nearly all Access students (97 per cent) went to a different provider for their degree course, whereas only 16 per cent of foundation year students changed provider.
- b. Most students from Access and foundation year courses went to a university with low or medium average tariff scores. Only 2 per cent of Access students and 1 per cent of foundation year students studied at a college.
- c. Foundation year students were slightly more likely than Access students to attend a university with a high average tariff – 16 per cent compared with 13 per cent.

### **Progression rates over time**

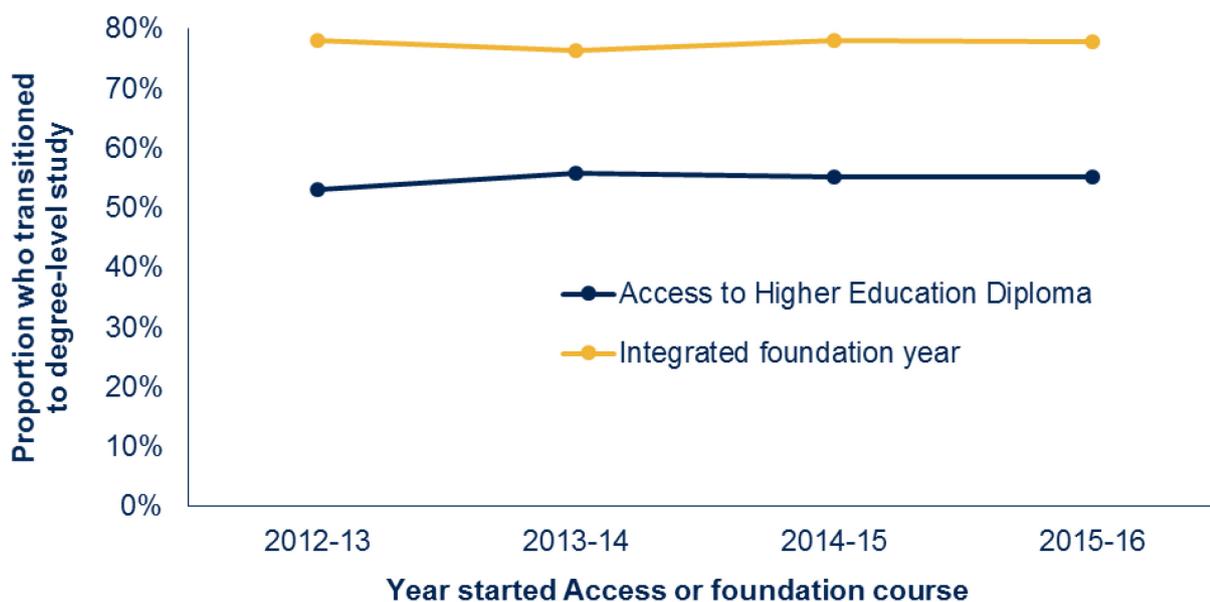
34. This section considers the trend in progression to degree-level study over time. So that we can consider more recent Access course and foundation year entrants, we consider progression over two years rather than four.

35. Figure 14 shows that the two-year progression rates for Access courses increased slightly, from 53 per cent for 2012-13 entrants to 55 per cent in 2015-16, whereas the rates for integrated foundation years have stayed broadly stable at around 78 per cent.

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<sup>11</sup> For the full tables see Annex A, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/preparing-for-degree-study/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/preparing-for-degree-study/).

**Figure 14: Proportion of 2012-13 to 2015-16 entrants who transitioned to degree-level study within two years**



## Degree outcomes

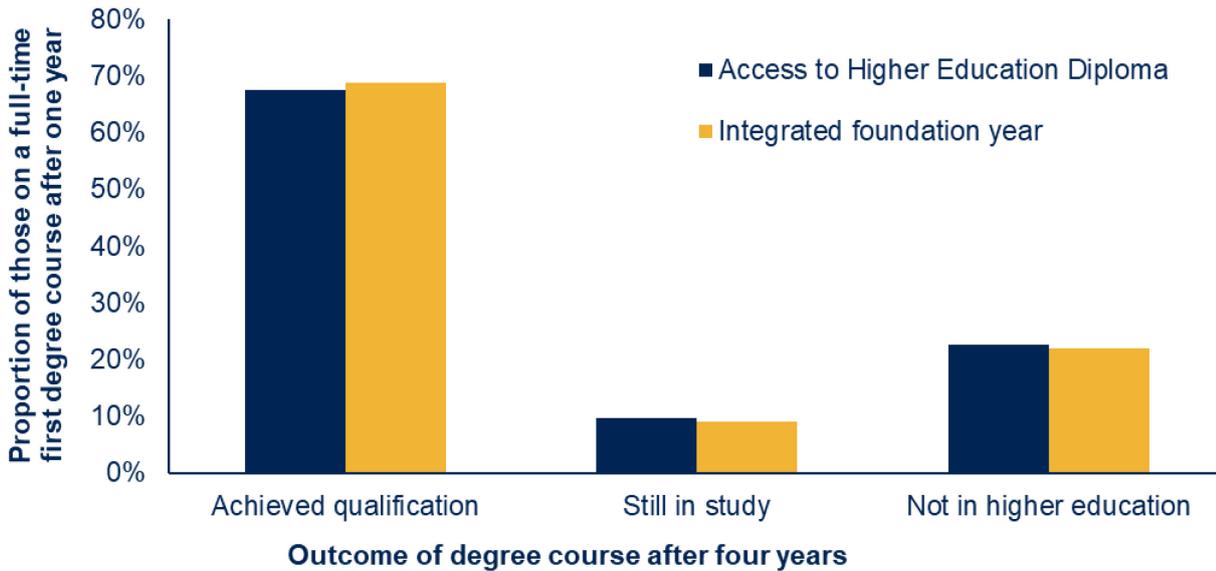
36. This section considers the degree outcomes of students who studied an Access course or undertook an integrated foundation year. It is important to remember that many factors influence the likelihood of a student's completing their course, including age and prior attainment.

## Degree completion

37. For simplicity this section is restricted to students who began their Access course or integrated foundation year in 2013-14 and then progressed to full-time degree-level study in 2014-15. This allows enough time for them to complete their course so we can observe the outcome. This restriction reduces the Access course population size from the 37,920 who began a course in 2013-14 to the 17,475 who progressed to a full-time first degree course in 2014-15. Similarly, the population of integrated foundation year students is restricted from 12,995 to 9,090.

38. Figure 15 shows that 68 per cent of Access course students who started a degree course qualified within four years, whereas 23 per cent left higher education without achieving a degree. In comparison, 69 per cent of those who started with a foundation year qualified within four years, and 22 per cent left higher education without achieving a degree.

**Figure 15: Outcome of degree course for students who progressed within a year**

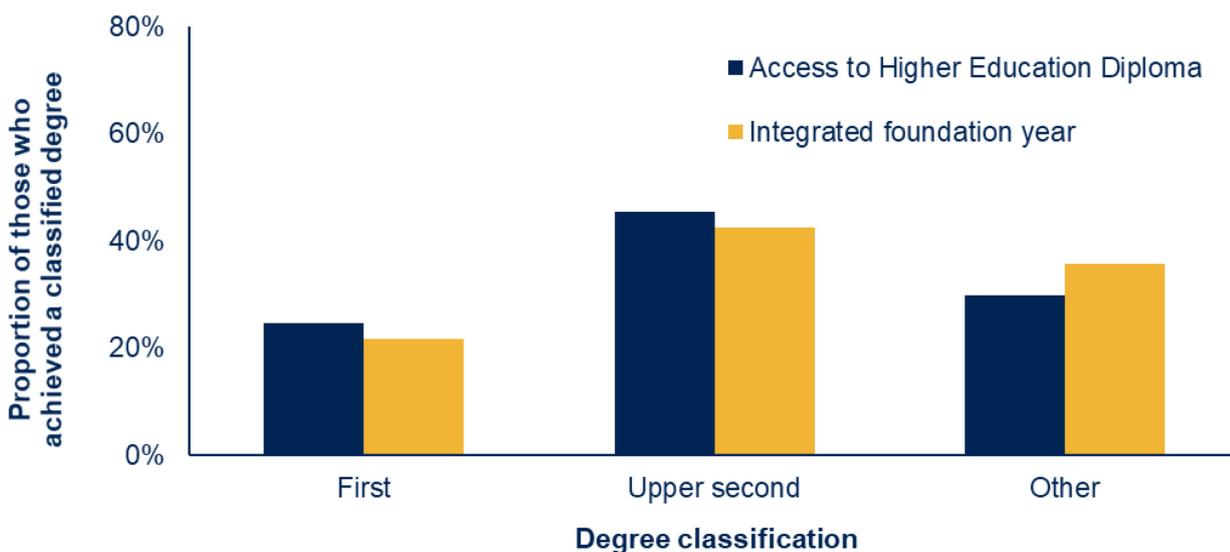


### Degree classification

39. Figure 16 shows the difference in the proportion of qualifiers who achieved a first or upper second degree classification. As in the previous figure, this is restricted to those who were on a full-time degree course a year later, but the small number who received a degree without a classification (usually due to the type of course) are also excluded.

40. Figure 16 shows that the proportion of qualifiers who achieved both first and upper second class degrees was higher among those who had taken an Access course than among those who took an integrated foundation year.

**Figure 16: Degree classification for students who achieved a classified degree after progressing within a year**



## Conclusion

41. This report has shown that while there are similarities between Access to Higher Education Diplomas and integrated foundation year courses, there are also important differences. In particular, the wider geographical spread of Access courses means they may be suitable for a wider range of potential higher education students and enable progression to many different courses, whereas foundation years may be more likely to attract students with a higher level of commitment to taking degree-level study at a specific provider.
42. However, there is also evidence that a significant proportion of those who take an Access course will not progress to degree-level study in the years afterwards, and a number of those who progress from both types of course will not achieve a degree.



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