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A Year in Review

25

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Introduction

2025 has been a year of innovation, collaboration, and impact for Open Awards. Guided by our mission to empower learning and progression, we have responded to an evolving educational landscape with agility and purpose. From launching our new Strategic Plan 2025–2028, which sets a bold vision for skills development and equality, to introducing micro-credentials that meet the demands of a rapidly changing workforce, we have continued to place learners and providers at the heart of everything we do.

This year saw significant milestones:

- Supporting Access to Higher Education learners through our bursary programme, enabling inclusive and practical learning experiences.
- Driving sector-wide dialogue via the Knowledge Exchange Hub, fostering collaboration and standardisation.
- Expanding our qualifications portfolio with new maritime routes, technical diplomas, and wellbeing qualifications, ensuring clear pathways into employment and lifelong learning.
- Certificating over 38,000 learners, including thousands progressing to higher education, and maintaining exceptional quality assurance standards across our network.

Alongside these achievements, we embraced opportunities to shape policy, champion Functional Skills in Apprenticeships, and explore the responsible use of technology and AI in education. Our commitment to innovation and excellence remains unwavering as we look ahead to 2026 and beyond.

Thank you to our providers, partners, trustees, and staff for your continued support and collaboration. Together, we are creating opportunities that transform lives.

Apprenticeship Reforms

February saw major changes to the Apprenticeship programme announced by the government including the proposal for much shorter Assessment Plans, new terminology and the option for over 19s not to have to take Functional Skills alongside their apprenticeships.

According to National Numeracy's 2025–2028 strategy, around 50% of working-age adults in the UK have numeracy skills equivalent to those of a primary school child so unsurprisingly many employers decided not to take up that option. We await achievement rates in February next year to see what difference it has made.

Our response to the government's update sparked debate in the industry with our CEO, Heather Akehurst '[Making the case for functional skills in apprenticeships](#)'.

“We know there are gaps in literacy and numeracy attainment that contribute to inequality across different groups. Education is the leveller in this, creating opportunities for personal and community advancement and affecting other areas of life such as positive health and actions.”

- Heather Akehurst OBE

Open Awards Bursary

Our Bursary this year went to support Southport College and their Access to Higher Education provision. In response to this year's theme of 'Doing Things Differently', Southport College proposed changing the delivery and assessment of their Access to HE healthcare Diplomas by redeveloping their old laboratory into one solely dedicated for use by Access to HE learners. Southport College used learner feedback and retention data to demonstrate how this new laboratory will improve achievement rates, remove barriers to progression and support kinaesthetic learners.



Access to HE learners showcasing the new lab at Southport College

“The Access team at Southport College are very grateful to receive this funding from Open Awards. The money will result in our Access students experiencing a more inclusive, practical and fun experience whilst studying their Access course. It will also allow units to be assessed in a more practical and interactive way.”

- Wesley Magee, Curriculum Leader for Health, Social Care and Access to HE at Southport College.

Knowledge Exchange Hub

Collaboration is important to us at Open Awards and we established our Knowledge Exchange Hub to do just that. A joint project between Open Awards, OCN London, Agored Cymru and ECITB, The Knowledge Hub was designed to facilitate meaningful and proactive communication within the industry. Meeting quarterly, The Knowledge Hub provides industry professionals with the opportunity to:

- Share knowledge, best practise and predictions
- Forecast the future needs of assessment
- Maintain standardisation across the industry

“Assessment is changing and Awarding Organisations need to change to meet the differing demands and opportunities available that benefit learners and apprentices. The Knowledge Hub enables us to do this in a supportive environment with robust challenges but a clear focus on improving assessment mechanisms and standards.”

- Heather Akehurst OBE

We were delighted that this work was nominated for 'Quality Improvement Collaboration of the Year' at the [Quality Professionals Awards](#)!

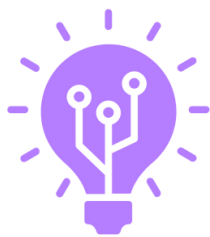
Strategic Plan 2025–2028

In June, we launched our new Strategic Plan which sets out our vision for the next three years, with education and skills at the forefront of growth on an individual, organisational, and national level.

Guided by our history and passion, our new Strategic Plan outlines our response to the challenges of the Skills and Post-16 Education Act by deepening the integration of employability, personal and skills development, equality, sustainability and internationalisation within learner and apprentice-led approaches.

“Through this strategy and our values, we will ensure our high-quality provision meets the needs and aspirations of our community, helping to catalyse growth.”

- Heather Akehurst OBE



Our commitment to the sector is to innovate as we continue to deliver against an evolving landscape.



We will ensure curriculum reform will prepare learners and apprentices for employment and life opportunities.



We will continue to be at the forefront of reimagining the learner experience through our online offer and careful, but considered use of AI.

[Read our new Strategic Plan 2025–2028](#)

Trustees

Trustees play an important part in strategic leadership and this year saw the launch of our new Strategic Plan looking ahead to 2028 with a clear focus on provider support, responsible use of Artificial Intelligence and some new offerings in response to demand. Sadly we had to say farewell to our esteemed Chair, Nicky Mailey and our Access to Higher Education guru, Dr Andrew Stott. We were delighted to welcome Clare Webster of St Helens College, Dr Anthony Rayworth of Rayworth Academy, previously, International Decorative Art and Design Association, Dr Fern Chantele-Carter of RSL Awards and Ben Cowling-Monks of CM Marine to our Board.



Left to right: Clare Webster, Dr Anthony Rayworth, Dr Fern-Chantele Carter, and Benjamin Cowling-Monks.

“On behalf of the Board of Trustees, I would like to thank Open Awards providers and partners who choose to work with us to deliver qualifications and assessment services for the benefit of learners and apprentices.

Our new Strategic Plan, alongside our Mission, Vision and Values, will act as a guiding framework for decision-making and resource allocation. During the life of this plan, Open Awards will have provided qualifications for over 45 years and we look forward to continuing to do so.



- Dr. Ir, Harm van Zalinge, Chair of the Board of Trustees

Welsh 14-16 Qualifications

Work continued on the Welsh Reformed Qualifications agenda, and we enjoyed working alongside the regulator and other Awarding Bodies to begin to develop several exciting, new qualifications for teaching in schools from September 2027. We were delighted to formally receive our accreditation from Qualifications in Wales to continue this work.

Image: Irene Oliver (Product Development Manager), Jen Kehlenbeck (Marketing Manager) and Teri Greaves (Business Development Manager) at the National Education Show in Llandudno.



Summer Awarding

Summer was busy ensuring learners and apprentices achieved in good time. We certificated over 38,000 learners including 2,472 Access to Higher Education learners ensuring through their hard work, they can progress onto their next adventures in life.

38

Different Access to HE qualification titles awarded

394

Access to HE learners achieved a full Distinction profile

34,932

Individual Access to HE unit results processed

109,080

Credits worth of achievement uploaded to UCAS

New Qualifications

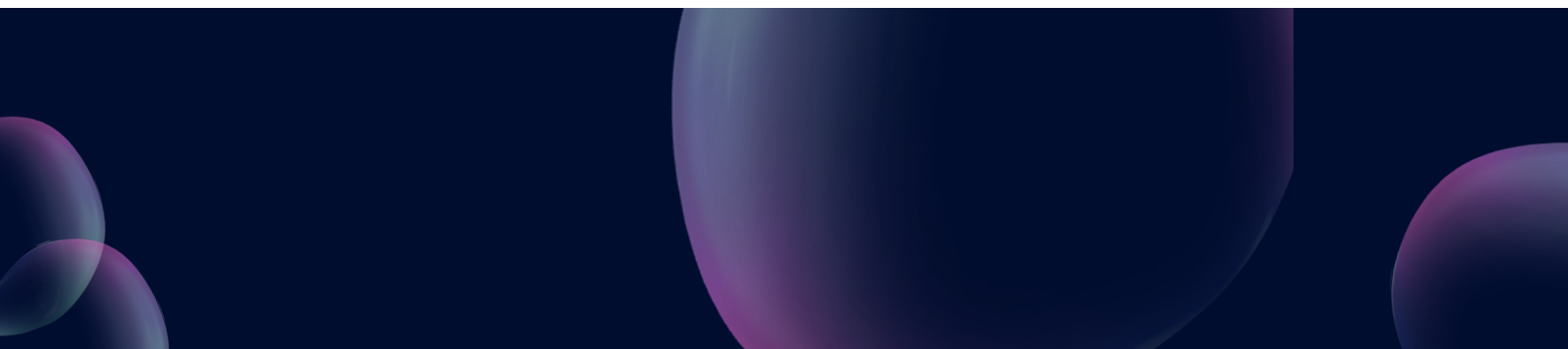
This year marked a significant expansion of our regulated qualifications portfolio, reflecting our commitment to meeting sector needs and supporting learners into meaningful progression and employment.

Working in partnership with the **Maritime Skills Alliance (MSA)**, we approved a suite of new maritime qualifications at Levels 2 and 3. These span key occupational routes including Workboats, Deck Rating, Able Seafarer (Deck), and Officer of the Watch (less than 500 GT, near coastal). Collectively, these qualifications develop essential maritime knowledge and practical skills, covering health and safety, vessel operations, navigation, seamanship, stability, meteorology and emergency procedures, supporting clear pathways into maritime careers.

In response to the Government's post-16 Level 3 qualification reforms, we also approved two new Technical Occupational Entry Diplomas: **Youth Support Work**, and **Early Years Educator**. Both align directly to current apprenticeship standards and provide learners with a high-quality, employer-endorsed route into designated occupations. Approved by the Department for Education, these qualifications will be available for delivery from August 2026 and are supported through a range of funding streams, including 16 to 19 funding, Level 3 Legal Entitlement, Advanced Learner Loans and Free Courses for Jobs.

We further strengthened our wellbeing and sustainability offer through the development of Level 1 and Level 2 Awards in **Nature Connection and Wellbeing**, created in collaboration with The Therapy Adventure. These qualifications support learners to understand the link between nature, mental health and environmental responsibility, with Level 2 exploring mindfulness, urban nature and conservation action in greater depth.

In addition, we developed bespoke private qualifications in Equine Physiotherapy and Outdoor and Adventure Therapy, supporting specialist provider innovation across diverse sectors.



Micro-credentials

We were delighted, to officially launch our micro-credentials, a modern and flexible way to recognise skills, achievements and much more.

Highly focused, our micro-credentials are short, targeted learning programmes (typically under 10 hours) designed to recognise the specific skills and competencies needed today. They allow learners and providers to:

- Rapidly respond to evolving industry demands
- Meet local learning needs
- Fulfil an organisation's requirements
- Prioritise professional learning

Our micro-credentials are validated by our new digital badges. Easy to share, our digital badges make training programmes mean more by celebrating learners' achievements and demonstrating the value of their learning.



Education Insights

October saw our well received Education Insights Conference, bringing together educators, researchers and specialists to share their expertise and best practise. The day was made possible by our wonderful sponsors (MRD Technologies and Coelrind), our guest of honour - the Lord Mayor of Liverpool, Councillor Barbara Murray - and the fantastic on-the-day support from our Liverpool City Council interns Heather, Ben and Ivette. Through a mixture of bite-sized talks and panel discussions, we covered a range of trending topics, concerns and developments in the sector, including Health and Wellbeing, SEND, AI and Tech, and changes to the Ofsted inspection framework.



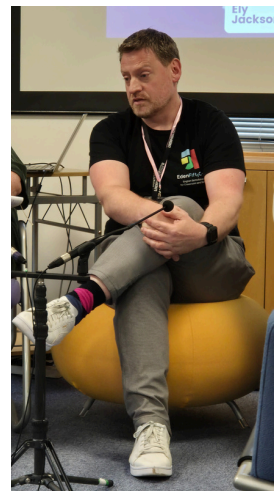
Education Insights

Thank you to everyone who spoke, attended and/or supported the event. Together we had some meaningful and actionable discussions.

If you missed the event and want to hear our expert's advice, the talks from Education Insights are now available for free via our eLearning shop. You can watch the recordings in your own time to:

- Upskill quickly
- Explore key topics
- Increase your knowledge

You'll also receive a digital badge to celebrate your achievement. Watch [Education Insights here](#).



“It was really good to hear different organisations’ feedback as well as in-depth knowledge of the sector from informed individuals.”

- Attendee feedback

Functional Skills

Functional Skills continues to grow – and we continue to be one of the very few Awarding Organisations to offer Entry Level to Level 2 in English and Mathematics, as well as online and paper-based assessments. Our first full academic year of offering Level 1 and Level 2 paper-based on demand assessments has seen a greater uptake of that offer.



The support staff were very quick to respond to any questions I had.

The online exam interface was easy to follow.

Open Awards invigilators are very friendly.



- A selection of learner feedback

Apprenticeship Updates

We are starting to see the practical implications of the changes to the Apprenticeship programme announced in February, with publication of some pilot assessment plans and associated funding guidance during October. We also await the outcome of an Ofqual consultation activity that took place over July/ August that will provide more clarity on scope for some apprenticeship assessment to be undertaken by Providers during the planned period (formerly known as the 'on-programme' stage). We are delivering a series of webinars over the Autumn term to keep our Providers and their employers updated with the confirmed changes, as well as the reassurance we 'get' the changes and will continue to offer a high-quality assessment offer.

Quality Assurance

The quality team has been busy helping providers to improve delivery, assessment, and internal quality assurance practices. In the 2024-25 academic year, they completed 145 provider compliance reviews and 234 external sampling activities. Nearly 95% of all Open Awards learners were registered at providers that are low risk. We continue to work closely with all providers to minimise risks and maximise impact.



(L-R): Richard Spencer (Director of Quality and Data) and Carla Hodgkinson (Quality and Standards Advisor) visiting Open Awards provider Pass Functional Skills.

Provider Standardisation

In October 2025, we welcomed 78 delegates from 45 providers to Open Awards offices for a series of standardisation sessions. These sessions covered subjects as diverse as forest school education, science and peer mentoring and were extremely well received. This was this first in-person standardisation session held in recent years and something we will be scheduling for future years alongside our online training offering.

Cyber Secure

Open Awards was pleased to again be awarded the Cyber Essentials Plus - Certificate of Assurance. This certification provides the highest level of assurance that our IT defences and cyber security controls have been assessed as satisfactory against commodity-based cyber attacks.



Charity Work

Throughout the year, the Open Awards team have come together to raise money for causes close to our hearts. We've held cake sales, walking challenges and organised food bank donations.

Our pancake day sale was a highlight. Not only did this event raise over £300 for Mind, but it also raised our spirits. A massive 'thank you' must go to our intern, Ben Guy-Wilkinson, who played a major role in initiating and organising many of our events.



Employees of the Year

We end the year, as ever, with our amazing Employee of the Year Awards that pay tribute to colleagues who embody our Values and are voted for by providers, learners and their peers. Congratulations go this year to: **Carla Hodgkinson** - Award for Excellence; **Irene Oliver** - Award for Aspiration; **Teresa Wilson** - Award for Respect; and **Jennie Rossiter** - Award for Innovation. A particular mention goes to **Michael Perry** who was awarded the Josh Byrne Kindness Award in memory of a well-loved colleague.



Winners of the 2025 Open Awards Employee Awards (L-R): Carla Hodgkinson, Irene Oliver, Teresa Wilson, and Jennie Rossiter.

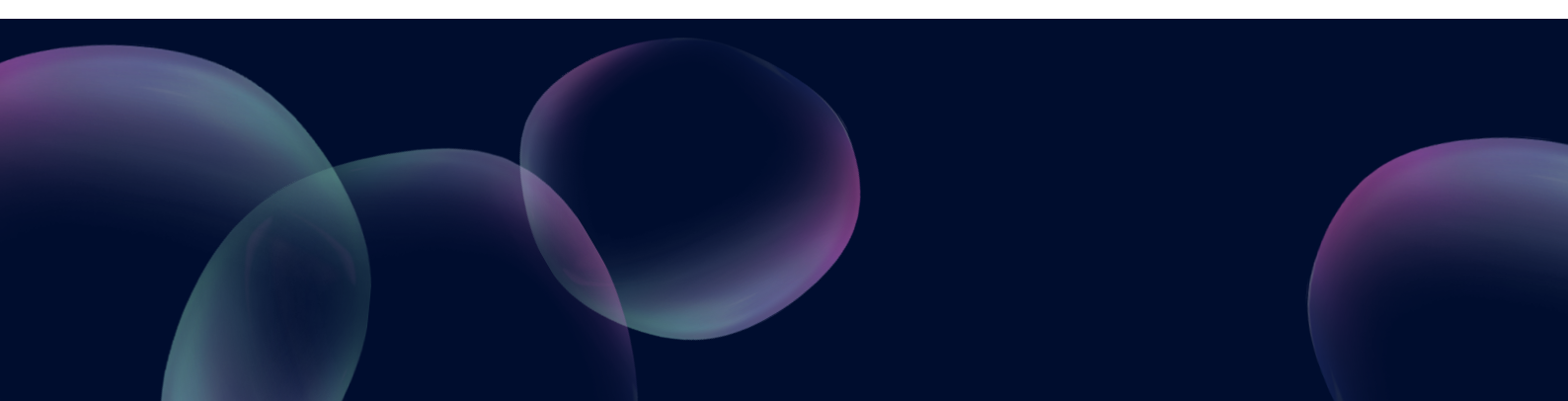
Looking Ahead to 2026



Next year, we are celebrating two big birthdays. May 2026 marks 45 years since the inception of the Open College Network North West Region and 21 years since we became Open Awards.

Throughout next year, we'll be sharing stories from our providers and learners to celebrate their achievements, successes and outcomes.

Want to join in the celebrations? Share your stories with enquiries@openawards.org.uk or via the QR code below:





Changing lives through learning

