CAVA reveals 2024-25 Award winners, celebrating exceptional learners and the first Inspirational Tutor Award

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CAVA has announced the winners and runners-up of the 2024-25 CAVA Awards, recognising exceptional learners and educators across Access to Higher Education. These annual awards celebrate academic excellence, resilience, and inspirational teaching across CAVA's network of Access to HE Diplomas.

Winners of the student categories Outstanding Academic Achievement and Outstanding Commitment to Study, will be nominated for the national Keith Fletcher Memorial Prize, a prestigious award honouring the legacy of Keith Fletcher, a champion of widening participation across the South West.

CAVA received an extraordinary number of powerful nominations this year. "The stories shared with us were inspiring, moving, and a testament to the life-changing impact of Access to HE" CEO, Emily Ross said. "Choosing a winner and runner-up was exceptionally difficult."

Outstanding Academic Achievement

Winner: David Langley (Nottingham College)

After 20 years away from education, David Langley returned through the Access to HE (Science) Diploma with the goal of progressing to university. His tutor, Pietro Albano, described him as an "outstanding and proactive student" who not only excelled academically but also supported and encouraged his peers. David immersed himself in independent research and steadily grew in confidence, ultimately deciding to pursue a degree in Chemistry.

David explained that returning to education had a transformative effect on his mental health, after suffering for many years. He described studying as "more like a cure" that reshaped his confidence and sense of identity. He summed up his learning journey in three words: challenging, affirming, transformative. He is now thriving on a Chemistry degree, with long-term plans to continue progress on his learning journey.

Runner up: Alice Bailey (College of West Anglia)

Alice Bailey discovered her passion for veterinary care after work experience at a local practice. This led her to the Access to HE (Veterinary Science) Diploma, where she excelled academically, achieving distinctions across all graded units. Her tutor, Deejay Latchuman, described her as a highly capable student with a strength for research and analysis. Despite some personal challenges, Alice managed to power through while maintaining a high level of achievement.

Alice expressed deep gratitude to her tutors for their outstanding support and welfare guidance. She has now progressed to university to study Veterinary Science and is considering future career pathways in both small animal practice and farm work-particularly after discovering an interest in working with cows during hands-on university farm sessions.

Outstanding Commitment to Study

Winner: Amy Bartlett (Nottingham Trent University, Brackenhurst)

Amy Bartlett has shown extraordinary resilience throughout her education after being diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia at age 12 and experiencing multiple relapses and two stem cell transplants. Despite ongoing medical appointments and the physical challenges of treatment, Amy thrived on the Access to HE (Land-Based Studies) Diploma. The course helped regain her confidence and overcome her anxiety of returning to an educational environment, and engaging with people her own age again.

Amy actively participated in all practical activities from working with horses and reptiles to driving tractors, and achieved distinctions in all graded modules. She shared: "I feel a great sense of achievement that,

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despite my reduced energy levels and mobility challenges, I still got involved with everything." Her tutor, Bethany Drury, described her as quietly strong, committed, and an inspiration to her peers.

Runner-Up: Zoe Stephenson (City College Plymouth)

Zoe Stephenson began the Access to HE (Social Sciences) Diploma at 18 after leaving A-levels due to her needs not being supported. Despite challenges posed by her disability and periods of ill health, her positivity and determination were a constant presence throughout her course. She embraced every lesson with enthusiasm and warmth. She found a particular passion for Law, thriving in discussions and performing exceptionally during a mock court exercise in which she acted as prosecutor.

Her tutor, Rebeca Elias-Jones, praised her resilience, positivity, and high academic achievement. Zoe said the award recognition "strengthened my confidence and reminded me of what I am capable of achieving" as she prepares for the next stage of her education.

Inspirational Tutor Award

Winner: Gemma Hutchings (City College Plymouth)

The Inspirational Tutor Award, introduced for 2024–25, attracted over 60 nominations from students. Winner Gemma Hutchings, Access to HE Programme Manager, was described by learners as "life-changing" in her support. From the very beginning, she took the time to understand each learner's goals, their university ambitions, long-term career hopes, and the personal challenges they carried with them. Students said this care shaped everything she did: her feedback, her guidance, and the way she consistently aligned their targets to help them reach those aspirations.

Beyond academic support, she created a vibrant, engaging learning environment. Students recalled creative lessons, guest speakers, walks, VR experiences, and her infectious enthusiasm that made the subject come alive. Many learners said they would not have completed the course without her belief in them.

Runner up: Judi Fisher (Grantham College)

Runner up Judi Fisher, who teaches English and Study Skills, was praised for her calm, supportive presence. She offers a welcoming and reassuring environment, helping students feel confident that they had made the right choice in returning to education. Students highlighted the way she went above and beyond her formal responsibilities, checking in with the entire cohort each week, offering personalised advice, signposting relevant support, and taking the time to listen when life became complicated.

Judi expressed that there is "no such thing as a dull day" with Access students, appreciating the variety of their life experiences and different approaches to learning. Students highlighted her empathy, consistent guidance, and transformative academic support - which many believe made their progression to university possible.

Across all categories, this year's CAVA Awards highlight the profound impact of Access to HE - empowering learners to overcome obstacles, rebuild confidence, and take transformative steps toward their futures. They also spotlight the educators whose commitment and belief create the conditions for success.

To celebrate this year's winners, CAVA has created a video featuring students and nominators sharing their reflections on being selected as winners and runners up in the awards.

For enquiries, please contact:
Emma Smith, Communications and Events Officer
e.smith@cava.ac.uk

Cambridge Access Validating Agency (CAVA) is a non-profit membership organisation that designs, validates, quality assures, and awards Access to Higher Education (HE) Diplomas. We work with over 30 Further Education Institutions and collaborate with a wide network of universities across the UK to support high-quality pathways into higher education.

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