Access
to Higher Education

Access to Higher Education

Open College Network
West Midlands Region

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Contents

Foreword

1   The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is responsible for the recognition of Access to Higher Education (HE) courses. QAA exercises this responsibility through a national network of Access validating agencies (AVAs), which are licensed by QAA to recognise individual Access to HE courses, and to award Access to HE qualifications to students. The AVAs are responsible for implementing quality assurance arrangements in relation to the quality of Access to HE provision and the standards of student achievement. QAA has developed a scheme for the licensing and review of AVAs, the principles and processes of which are described in the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (the Recognition Scheme). The Recognition Scheme is regulated and administered by the Access Recognition and Licensing Committee (ARLC), a committee of QAA's Board of Directors.

2   The ARLC is responsible for overseeing the processes of AVA licensing and periodic review and relicensing. The criteria applied by the ARLC and by review teams operating on the Committee's behalf, in reaching judgements about whether and under what terms an AVA licence should be confirmed or renewed, are provided within the Recognition Scheme documentation. These criteria are grouped under the four principles that provide the main section headings of this report.

3   Following an AVA review, a member of the team presents the team's report to the ARLC. The Committee then makes one of four decisions:

- **unconditional confirmation** of renewal of licence for a specified period

- **conditional confirmation** of licence with conditions to be met by a specified date

- **provisional confirmation** of licence with conditions to be met and a further review visit by a specified date

- **withdrawal** of licence for operation as an AVA.

4   This is a report on the review for the Open College Network West Midlands Region (OCNWMR). QAA is grateful to OCNWMR and to those who participated in the review for the willing cooperation provided to the team.

The review process

5   The review was conducted in accordance with the process detailed in the Recognition Scheme. The preparation for the event included an initial meeting between OCNWMR representatives and QAA's Assistant Director to discuss the requirements for the Overview Document (the Overview) and the process of the event; the preparation and submission by OCNWMR of its Overview, together with a selection of supporting documentation; a meeting of the review team to discuss the Overview and supporting documentation and to establish the main themes and confirm the programme for the review; and negotiations between QAA and OCNWMR to finalise other arrangements for the review.

6   The review visit took place from 3 to 5 March 2009. The visit to OCNWMR consisted principally of meetings with representatives of OCNWMR, including AVA officers; members of the Board of Trustees, the Access to HE Committee; moderators for Access to HE programmes; and Access to HE coordinators.

7   The review team consisted of Dr Mark Atlay, Penny Blackie, and Keith Fletcher. The review was coordinated for QAA by Matthew Cott, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

The AVA context

8   OCNWMR was formed in August 2005 by the merger of three existing Open College Network and AVAs: Open College Network Central England, Open College Network North West Midlands and Open College Network West Midlands. OCNWMR applied for an AVA licence in October 2006 and the provisional licence was confirmed in July 2007.

9   OCNWMR operates throughout the West Midlands and includes the urban areas of Birmingham, Coventry, Solihull, the Black Country, Telford and Wrekin, and Stoke on Trent, and rural communities in Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Herefordshire.

Major developments since the granting of the licence

10   Since its establishment, OCNWMR has undergone a major restructuring which resulted in the closure of offices in Coventry and Stoke on Trent and the relocation of staff to new offices in Wolverhampton which the OCN now owns. Alongside this, a new regional staffing structure, including staff with a specific responsibility for Access to HE, has been implemented with harmonised terms and conditions.

11   The major areas of work for OCNWMR since the granting of the provisional licence have been the consolidation of regional quality assurance arrangements, the exploration of possible development activity with regional lifelong learning networks, the development of the website, and activities to raise the profile of the AVA and promote Access to HE provision, and the development of a regional pool of approved units.

Members and provision

12   In 2007-08, there were 40 OCNWMR approved providers offering 140 Access to HE programmes. The further education sector is the biggest provider of Access to HE courses accounting for over 80 per cent of the AVA's centres. Recently, Access to HE student numbers in the region have declined, falling by 14 per cent in 2006-07 and a further 11 per cent in 2007-08. This decline was seen largely as a result of economic growth in the region leading to high employment rates and a reduction in the number of centres. In addition, increased course fees, a reduction in part-time and evening provision and reduced recruitment to health-related courses, were seen by the AVA as key factors in this decline.

13   Learners are predominantly female (78.6 per cent in 2007-08) and the percentage of black and minority ethnic students has remained constant over recent years at around 30 per cent. The proportion of learners in the younger age ranges has increased with marginal recent increases in the percentage of students aged under 20 (in 2007-08, up 1.2 per cent to 10.5 per cent) and a significant expansion in the percentage of students in the 20-29 age group (in 2007-08, up 5.3 per cent to 54.5 per cent). The proportion of learners retained on programmes is 77 per cent, with 80 per cent of those who complete also achieving an Access to HE Certificate or the new Access to HE Diploma.

AVA statistics

14   The AVA reported the following statistics in its annual report for 2007-08.

Providers offering Access to HE awards	40
Access to HE awards available	140
Access to HE awards running	121
Access to HE learner registrations	4,212
Access to HE certificates awarded	1,856

Principle 1

The organisation has governance structures which enable it to meet its legal and public obligations, to render it appropriately accountable, and to allow it to discharge its AVA responsibilities securely

15   OCNWMR is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. The charity's objects, set out in the Memorandum and Articles of Association (Memorandum and Articles), are the advancement of the education of the public in or around the West Midlands region and elsewhere. Those objects specifically related to the AVA are:

● '…by operating as an Authorised Validating Agency by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education or the appropriate agency acting on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills or its successor

- by operating with full commitment to the distinctive mission of Access to Higher Education by widening participation and recognising the achievements of young people and adults through high quality, responsive and flexible accreditation

- by approving Access to Higher Education courses and awarding Quality Assurance Agency-recognised Access to Higher Education certificates to students'.

16   The review team considered the objects to be appropriate but noted that the AVA had not as yet updated some of its documentation to 'Access Validating Agency' (see paragraph 15). OCNWMR adopted the National Open College Network's statements on mission, vision and values for the region. The Mission states: 'The Open College Network supports learning and widens opportunity by recognising achievement through credit-based courses and qualifications'.

Constitution and legal identity

17   OCNWMR took legal advice on the most appropriate legal identity to fulfil its public obligations. The Memorandum and Articles and accompanying set of private 'Rules', agreed in July 2006, include the detail of governance of the company and explain the OCN's legal and constitutional arrangements.

18   The specific conditions set by QAA on the licence application in 2007 required a review of the Memorandum and Articles and the Rules. These changes, including specific mention of the AVA context in the objects, were made and approved at an Extraordinary General Meeting of the members in March 2007. QAA accepted these changes, but recommended that further changes should be made to the Rules including the role of the Board, the removal of historical information relating to the original merger and the voting convention for removal of Board members. These changes were approved at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the members in March 2008. Further amendments to the Rules were to be discussed at the AGM in April 2009 and the review team considers it would be useful to review the detail in which

the responsibilities for the Access for Higher Education Committee are specified (see paragraph 29).

Governance structure

19   The governance structure of the OCN consists of the legal members and a Board of Trustees, the latter being the principal strategy forming and decision-making body.

20   Membership of the charity is open to organisations who meet the membership criteria and whose application is approved by the Board of Trustees. Any organisation which is an approved provider of OCN accreditation and any higher education institution (HEI) in the West Midlands region is entitled to be a member. All approved providers and HEIs are required to complete a membership application. Members are expected to attend and have voting rights at AGMs where they can appoint and remove the Board Trustees in rotation and approve or otherwise the annual report and accounts.

21   Applications for membership are received on a regular basis and are presented to each Board meeting for approval as a standing agenda item, although there have been no applications from new organisations wishing to run Access to HE programmes since the merger. The AVA has appropriate systems in place should there be new applications for membership. Not all of the member institutions of the previous three OCNs have applied for membership of OCNWMR and the AVA is continuing to make efforts to increase the number of members.

22   The membership acts as the guarantors for the charity but their liability is limited. The OCN has insurance cover to limit its own liability and that of its Board members, executive officers and its membership and also has employer and public liability insurances.

23   At the time of the licence application, the Board consisted of two members from each of the originating OCNs. However, since December 2006 the Board has been expanded and there are currently 10 members. OCNWMR

seeks to ensure that the membership of the Board and committees reflects the broad geographical area of the region, the different types of stakeholders and has the skills and expertise to help the organisation make effective decisions. The core membership of the Board and committees has remained relatively stable with some resignations due to a change of employment or retirement and some new recruits. The profile of the present Board of Trustees includes senior staff from regional colleges and HEIs as well as other related organisations. The review team considers that the AVA has successfully retained and recruited individuals whose range of experience and expertise has proved helpful and supportive of the decision-making process. OCNWMR aims to recruit more members up to its agreed maximum of 12 places with room for three co-opted members. The team commends the AVA for the composition, commitment, skills and enthusiasm of its Board of Trustees.

24   The AVA has revised its meeting dates to ensure that the annual report can be formally approved by the Board prior to its submission to QAA.

Financial arrangements

25   OCNWMR is required to produce annual reports and audited accounts to both Companies House and the Charity Commission. An accountancy company has been appointed as financial adviser and auditor. Two reports have been submitted to date. Financial regulations were agreed and are reviewed annually. All finance functions are performed by staff of the OCN except that of payroll which is provided by a contract with OCN East Midlands Region.

Committee structure

26   Ultimate authority for the governance of the AVA rests with the Board of Trustees as are all material decisions on expenditure, contracts and policy matters. However, the Board can delegate certain matters to the following three committees: Finance and Resources, Quality, and Access to HE (AHEC). The Rules contain a

Delegation Protocol and descriptions of each committee's remit. All three committees report and can make recommendations directly to the Board through their minutes which are a standing item on the Board's agenda. Each committee has at least three trustees as members, enabling the Board to monitor the actions and decisions of the subcommittees.

27   Responsibility for Access to HE provision rests with AHEC. Part of the remit for the Quality Committee and AHEC is to liaise to ensure a standardised approach to quality assurance and improvement across the range of provision and, therefore, each receives the minutes of the other as a standing agenda item. The review team read a range of Board and subcommittees' minutes of meetings and noted some inaccuracies in the confirmed minutes. The team recommends that the AVA ensures that Board and subcommittee chairs, responsible for confirming the accuracy and quality of committee minutes, can be assured that the agreed minutes will be produced and retained to a professional standard.

28   AHEC may consist of up to 12 members and must include three trustees, of whom one is the Chair. Three members must have an HE background. Other members must have relevant Access to HE experience. The three trustees on this committee are all employed by, or have relatively recently retired from, HEIs and have long experience of Access to HE provision and AVAs. The Committee meets at least three times each year. The AVA is conscious of the need to engage regional HEIs in its work and is actively seeking to widen HEI representation.

29   Although AHEC is responsible for all quality assurance matters related to Access to HE provision, its remit does not make this explicit. The remit for AHEC gives its responsibilities as monitoring, reviewing and reporting on all quality assurance matters relating to, and all the accreditation processes of, QAA-recognised Access to HE provision. AHEC is also responsible for ensuring that the AVA meets all the requirements for the AVA licence. The Committee carries out these

functions but also approves programmes, amendments to programmes, appointment of moderators and the operation of panels for the approval of programmes. Some of these tasks were listed in an appendix to the Overview which set out standing agenda items, but there was some confusion among some AHEC members who met the review team about the precise nature of their responsibilities. The team considered that this confusion may be partly due to the rapid pace of change and the fact that some areas of responsibilities are still being embedded. AHEC receives the initial draft of the annual report to QAA and makes a recommendation to the Board of Trustees for the report's approval. However, it is the Board that approves the report as being appropriate for submission to QAA.

30   The review team concluded that the AVA needs to revise elements of its documentation (see paragraphs 18, 29) in order to meet all the licensing requirements for governance matters. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA further reviews and revises its documentation to ensure that AHEC's delegated responsibilities for all Access to HE quality assurance processes are clearly specified.

Principle 2

The organisation is able to manage its AVA responsibilities effectively, and to maintain an appropriate structure to support them

Strategic and business planning

31   The initial vehicle for strategic planning and review was the 2006-07 Business Plan which included a number of Access to HE related operational targets and performance measures. This was approved by the Board of Trustees in September 2006. A Strategic Plan was subsequently developed and approved in 2007 and has provided an effective framework for the AVA activity to date. Although all of the strategic aims have a bearing on the development of AVA work, Aim 2 ensures a clear focus on this aspect of OCNWMR's responsibilities:

'To strengthen and develop the role of the Access Validating Agency to promote QAA recognised Access to Higher Education provision across the region.'

32   The detail of AVA activity is articulated in an annual Business Plan, initially developed by the AVA's Senior Management Team (SMT) but shared with all staff before being presented to the Board for approval. Both Access to HE providers and higher education institution (HEI) receivers are represented on the Board, along with other organisations with an interest in Access to HE and their views, therefore, are fully taken into account. The Business Plan includes specific operational objectives, deadlines and performance indicators in relation to each strategic aim. While most of these relate to both OCN and AVA activity, each plan sets specific objectives for Access to HE provision. Comprehensive risk assessments are completed by the AVA's SMT within the business planning process.

33   Subsequent monitoring of the achievement of the Operational Plan is undertaken by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the SMT, comprising the Director of Access and Quality, the Director of Business Development and the Director of Operations at regular SMT meetings. Progress is also monitored within Access Team meetings, consisting of staff directly involved with AVA activity. The achievement and progress towards the Operational Plan is subsequently reported to the Board via an Implementation Plan updated to reflect the progress made between Board meetings. The AVA believes, and the review team concurs, that these arrangements have proved effective in ensuring that targets are met, although the AVA is sufficiently flexible to respond where changed circumstances requires these to be reassessed or reprioritised (for example, see paragraph 34).

Promotion and marketing

34   Since the initial licence application, the AVA has maintained objectives in relation to continued support for Access Tutor Forums, GCSE-equivalence meetings and Access to HE

forums. These activities are valued by the members who met the review team. The AVA remains committed to any targets that had to be deferred and they have been incorporated into the 2008-09 Business Plan; the planned Access to HE conference will be held in June 2009. The team considered that the AVA's decision to de-prioritise these areas was a sensible and measured response to the need to consolidate the fundamental basis of the organisation. This, in turn, will enable the AVA to pursue its promotional and developmental role more effectively in the future.

35   The AVA has continued to engage actively with lifelong learning networks (LLNs) within the region. The CEO attends stakeholder meetings of one of the regional LLNs. The AVA is currently exploring initiatives in relation to progression agreements between Access providers and HEIs, as well as exploring the potential for LLN involvement in the development of regional Access to HE Diplomas. This development reflects the AVA's awareness of the pivotal role it can play in mediating between the requirements of HEI receivers and Access to HE providers. The intention to develop a pilot regional Access to HE Diploma in Health was signalled in the business plan and this subject area aligns with local LLN curriculum development priorities.

Management and operations

36   The CEO is responsible for the day-to-day business. The restructuring of the staff and the relocation to a single office in Wolverhampton in 2008 presented an opportunity to look at the requirements for the AVA provision, and the decision was taken to amalgamate the curriculum and quality assurance under one member of the senior management team, the Director of Access and Quality. This post holder and the Director of Business Development attend AHEC meetings.

37   The process of merger, restructuring the staff and relocating to new premises required skilful and open management. The staff the review team met, along with the Board and other committee members, believed that these

changes were carried out smoothly and have made the AVA more focused, the provision more coherent. AVA staff members reported that they were more than satisfied with their new working environment. The AVA is commended for the management of change in an approach that was consultative, sensitive and equitable and which has established the new AVA for the benefit of Access to HE provision in the West Midlands region.

38   OCNWMR has implemented the National OCN self-assessment requirements in one full cycle of activity since gaining its AVA licence. Based on this, it is the AVA's intention to augment its self-assessment arrangements in order to ensure comprehensive coverage of QAA requirements. The AVA envisages that the emerging self-assessment model will make better use of the routine monitoring and reporting on a range of quantitative service standards, together with qualitative feedback on the effectiveness of the AVA's operations from key stakeholders. The AVA intends to fully incorporate these existing sources of evidence into its self-assessment arrangements. The review team considers that this staged approach will result in enhanced self-assessment.

Financial management

39   OCNWMR operates a rigorous and systematic approach to its financial affairs. The ultimate locus of responsibility for the management of the AVA's finances is the Board of Trustees, which delegates some of its authority to the Finance and Resources Committee (FRC). The budget, including AVA income and expenditure, is reviewed by the CEO and Director of Operations on a monthly basis and reported to FRC and the Board at regular intervals. Not all meetings of FRC are quorate. The AVA is taking action to improve the quoracy by seeking to expand the committee (currently six members) and by writing to current members to stress the importance of their role. From its meetings with Board members and scrutiny of minutes, the review team was assured that no decisions are taken at meetings that are inquorate.

The budget is developed in line with the Business Plan and takes into account the resourcing needs set out in the Operational Plan. This is updated on an annual basis and a thorough analysis of best and worst case scenarios takes place. Financial Regulations are in place, as is a Financial Reserves Policy.

40   Some difficulties with the performance of the OCN's finance team, in the period immediately following the merger, resulted in the appointment of a full-time finance manager and part-time finance officer in a revised staffing structure. With the exception of the payroll, which is contracted to another OCN (see paragraph 25), all financial functions are managed internally. This marks a significant shift from the pre-merger position, where all financial functions were performed by host universities. OCNWMR has adopted a standard accountancy package and staff receive dedicated training in the use and applications of this package.

41   During 2006, because of the staged timing of the merger of the three OCNs, the Board decided to change its financial year to run from 1 October until 30 September each year. This means that, while the AVA is able to provide final management accounts with the AVA annual report to QAA, audited accounts are provided subsequently, after they have been approved. The AVA believes that the auditor's reports and presentations have proved particularly useful in helping to shape financial policy.

Staffing and accommodation

42   Following the creation of OCNWMR in 2005, the Board reconsidered its initial commitment to retain the three existing offices if it remained financially viable to do so. Accordingly, the AVA continued to be based at Coventry, Wolverhampton and an office based in Stoke on Trent. It became increasingly apparent that this arrangement was resulting in a number of dysfunctions and inefficiencies which, in the long-term, had the potential to adversely affect the service offered by the AVA.

43   Following consultation a new staffing structure was implemented from 1 September 2008. There has been a rationalisation in the number of staff employed. However, the AVA considered that the new structure will enable it to meet its obligations more effectively, and is more sustainable in the long-term. The review team considered that the staffing changes related to Access to HE, which now has a dedicated team to carry out all its operations, adds considerably to the operation of the AVA. Board and AHEC members and moderators who met the team all commented on the added coherence and efficiency created by this staffing decision.

44   The revised staffing arrangements define more clearly AVA line management responsibilities and will facilitate a clearer focus on AVA provision. The AVA is commended for the establishment of a dedicated team of Access to HE staff who are experienced, responsive and well supported by the AVA's SMT, and who are highly valued by the Board, providers, moderators and other stakeholders.

45   The AVA has acquired spacious premises located centrally within the region. There is appropriate, networked office accommodation for all the AVA's staff. The new premises offer enhanced storage facilities together with dedicated committee, meeting and training rooms.

Operational procedures

46   The merger of the three OCN/AVAs highlighted the varied procedures in operation within the different offices. A common set of procedures relating to all key processes of AVA operational activity was subsequently developed, taking the best practice from each of the three original AVAs. All documentation relating to procedures, processes and systems is available on the shared drive of the OCNWMR's computer network ensuring all staff have access and enabling version control. Key policies are in place, along with an operational manual.

Management information

47   All data in relation to learner registration and achievement, together with the key specifications of all units of achievement used within the AVA's accredited Access to HE provision, is recorded and held on the Opus database. This enables the AVA to record and track credit and Diploma achievement and the award and/or transfer of credit. Work on a regional version of Opus was initiated before the relocation and has now been completed. The AVA is conscious that its existing system does not fully meet some of the existing and planned developments in the Recognition Scheme. For example, there is no facility within Opus to check that the specific rules of combination associated with a particular Diploma have been met, necessitating time-consuming manual checks. Because of technical difficulties, the AVA has not been able to distribute its certificates in a timely fashion. The grading proposals will also necessitate developments in relation to the recording of grades achieved on the system and unit achievement transcripts.

48   The AVA considered its options in this area and has purchased an alternative system, AVAD, in order that it can continue to meet its obligations in this regard. At the time of the review visit, staff development had been planned to introduce the new system to the AVA staff. The AVA believes that this change will enable them to produce timely award certificates from the summer of 2009. Opus provides a back up until such time as the new database's effectiveness has been proved.

Communication with stakeholders

49   OCNWMR has a number of mechanisms for communicating with the key stakeholders and ensuring that all parties are aware of new AVA procedures and regulatory requirements. Providers and moderators who met the review team confirmed the regularity and value of email and other communications.

50   A specific area of the OCN's website is dedicated to Access to HE provision and is updated regularly throughout the year. This contains information relevant to stakeholders (including learners, providers and moderators) and is easy to navigate. Current guidance documents, forms and policies are all available from the website's download section. News items are regularly posted on the site and there is a facility to email newsletters to all providers and stakeholders. Information about training and/or information sessions is also posted on the website.

51   The regular Access to HE forums, held termly in each of the three subregions, provide an opportunity for face-to-face communication with Access to HE coordinators and to explore and discuss issues. The annual moderator review meeting fulfils a parallel function in relation to the AVA's team of external moderators. The forums have been a useful mechanism in developing common practice across the region, and this year will incorporate regional standardisation activity.

Principle 3

The organisation is able to assure the quality and fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes at the point at which they are granted formal approval, and to have effective means to develop, evaluate and review the Access to HE provision for which it has responsibility

Programme development

52   Support for the development of programmes for submission for validation is provided by the AVA's Access Development Adviser - a new full-time post from September 2008 - using a set of guidance documents that outline in detail all stages of the development and validation process, including the possible outcomes of validation.

53   The guidance includes the National OCN Guidelines for writing units. This document is not always entirely relevant to all Access to HE

provision, for example, it includes reference to mapping units to national occupational standards. In the context of the development of a separate unit approval process within the emerging Regional Access Framework (see paragraph 56), the AVA may wish to keep its unit writing guidance under review.

54   The Access Development Adviser builds a supportive relationship with providers and ensures that documentation is ready for the validation panel. The review team heard from coordinators that the support for programme development was excellent, involving detailed advice on curriculum, course design and assessment, and sharing examples of good practice.

55   The AVA requires providers to consult with representatives from HE during the development of new programmes and the review team concluded, from its scrutiny of audit trails and discussions with coordinators, that this happens in practice.

Regional Access Framework

56   The AVA is in the process of developing a Regional Access Framework (RAF) consisting of a pool of approved units which are available for adoption and incorporation into programmes by providers at the time of their quinquennial review. The AVA sees several advantages of the RAF: uniformity of standards; reduced demands on providers at the time of revalidation; and forming the basis for new regional Access to HE Diplomas. The review team found that providers are generally in favour of this development. Although the AVA encourages the use of RAF units, and programmes undergoing review in 2008 were almost exclusively constructed from RAF units, providers retain the option of developing their own locally devised units.

57   The first batch of over 300 units was submitted to unit approval panels, consisting of subject experts and representatives from local higher education institutions (HEIs), in April and May 2008. Unit panel reports were considered by AHEC in June 2008. The Committee commented that, although they felt that the

process of unit approval was sufficiently robust, they had 'reservations that it was adequately captured within the relevant panel reports' and asked for revised reports to be submitted. The Committee re-examined these reports and confirmed validation at its meeting in September 2008.

58   AHEC approved proposals in September 2008 to establish curriculum development groups (CDGs) from 2008-09 onwards to approve new units and admit them into the RAF, approve new non-RAF units, and monitor the use of approved units. Committee members who met the review team were not entirely aware of the details of how such groups would operate, nor had they considered how they could ensure that CDGs would meet AVA licensing requirements around programme and unit approval.

59   CDGs consist of an AVA officer and subject experts drawn from both HE and from Access to HE practitioners. They also have authority to establish working groups taken from their membership to write new units should there be an identified need. AVA staff confirmed that they were aware of the need to make sure that the members of any such working groups did not participate in the subsequent unit approval panel, although there were as yet no specific guidelines for the operation of these groups. The review team formed the view that it was essential that guidelines be drawn up to cover the operation of CDGs and the RAF (see also paragraph 61). It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA publishes Regional Access Framework guidance which includes, but is not limited to: a) the composition, purpose and function of curriculum development groups, differentiating clearly between processes for unit development and unit approval; and b) the roles and responsibilities of unit approval panel chairs and members, with reference to the AVA licensing criteria for programme and unit approval.

Programme validation and recognition

60   Formed from the merger of three mature AVAs with established provision, there has been relatively little new provision validated by the AVA in the past two years and the current focus is on the revalidation of existing programmes rather than the validation of new ones. The Access Development Adviser decides when a programme is ready to be submitted to the validation panel and the date and arrangements for the panel are agreed in advance with the provider.

61   As part of the standard information pack, panel members receive a letter which informs them that 'all units within the submission are derived from OCNWMR's Regional Access Framework, Unit Specifications and will not, therefore, be considered at the panel'. However, two completed programme panel validation reports included in the audit trails indicated that the panels looked at the RAF units and made recommendations to the AVA for changes. Given an obvious need to develop further the mechanisms for the regular review of RAF units, the review team concluded that the AVA would benefit from feedback from a number of the groups that operate within and for the AVA, and recommends that the AVA establishes a process by which validation and revalidation panels, moderators and tutors can provide feedback on units to inform the work of curriculum development groups involved in developing and enhancing units in the RAF.

62   Criteria for validation, the role of panel members, and the function and possible outcomes of the panel are made explicit within the AVA's guidance documentation. This guidance does not, however, distinguish between the role of the presenting team and the rest of the panel membership in the decision-making process. It is a licensing requirement that 'members of the validation panel have no real or apparent conflicts of interest in respect of the outcome of the validation event, and those responsible for developing the programme are not involved in the validation process'. The review team concluded that the AVA's guidance needs to

be revised. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA revises its guidance for validation panel members and chairs to include a clearer statement on the roles and responsibilities of panel members, in particular that the 'presenting team' is not involved in making the validation decision.

63   The AVA has experienced continuing difficulties with finding sufficient panel members. Although this has not had an adverse effect so far, and all panels have been appropriately constituted, the AVA has been exploring ways of addressing these difficulties, including paying part-time tutors and retired subject experts to attend. The AVA requires HE representation at validation panels and the review team concluded from the evidence available that this occurs in practice.

64   The AVA's submission document is mapped against the licensing requirements for consideration by validation panels. The AVA's requirements in relation to the ethos and conduct of panels are set out in the panel guidelines. On the basis of evidence available from audit trails and discussions with tutors, AVA officers and AHEC members, the review team concluded that validation panels are comprehensive and thorough in their examination of the programme submissions and rigorous in their methods and operation.

65   The panel's deliberations and decisions are set out in a panel report produced by the Access Development Adviser which includes the panel outcome; any recommendations and conditions (with deadlines); the period of recognition; a summary of rules of combination and successful completion requirements for the award of the Access to HE Diploma.

66   It is the task of the Access Development Adviser to check that any conditions have been met before final approval is confirmed. Evidence from audit trails and discussions with AVA officers indicated that this happened in practice, although the review team found that there was some confusion over who grants final approval. The AVA's guidance to both submitting tutors and to panels is that panels

can approve programmes. Discussions with members of AHEC and reference to AHEC minutes and papers, and the Overview Document, indicated that the AVA's policy is that panels make recommendations for approval and AHEC grants final approval. In meeting licensing conditions i and iii, the AVA should make explicit where authority for granting final approval lies.

Programme amendments

67   Guidance on the process to be followed by course teams wanting to make changes to validated programmes is available in the Tutors' Handbook and on the AVA's website. The Director of Access and Quality makes the decision on whether the proposed change is major (requiring a validation panel and AHEC final approval) or minor. The process for dealing with proposals for changes is managed by the Access Development Adviser and involves moderators as appropriate. Although the review team found that the process works well enough in practice, the AVA may wish to consider using more detailed criteria for distinguishing between what counts as a major or a minor change.

Periodic review and annual monitoring

68   Periodic review panels operate in the same way as programme validation panels except that providers subject to periodic review are required in addition to submit a critical review of the operation of the programme since the previous validation. Evidence from the audit trails showed these to be invariably thorough and full of intelligent and appropriate analysis which informed providers' future plans.

69   The AVA experienced some difficulty in 2007-08 in preparing documents for revalidation panels, resulting in retrospective approval being granted for a number of programmes. The review team formed the view that the AVA has taken appropriate action to ensure this situation does not recur: all revalidations must now be completed by the end of May; progress is checked by AHEC at each of its meetings; and the Access

Development Adviser is in post to monitor and manage the process and ensure that deadlines are met.

70   The AVA requires providers to undertake an annual self-assessment and to report the outcome to the AVA. It provides detailed guidance on the content and structure of the report, including reference to quality and comparability of programmes and consistency of student outcomes. Reviews have to include annual statistics and a quality improvement plan. Discussions with AVA officers confirmed that the AVA considers these reviews to be important and takes firm action if they are not forthcoming. Coordinators confirmed that the AVA's guidance and support was thorough and valued. Providers' annual reviews were present in all audit trails, were comprehensive and contained much valuable and relevant information. The AVA is commended for the quality and consistency of providers' annual reviews and periodic review self-evaluations, reflecting the rigour of the AVA's requirements and the comprehensive support and advice it provides.

Development, enhancement and promotion

71   The AVA holds nine annual forums across the region and at different times of the year which Access to HE tutors find very useful. AHEC considers reports from these forums. The AVA also holds Access to HE fairs in the autumn term at a number of HEIs, and an annual Access to HE conference. The AVA considers such events to be more widely strategically important and believes that it will encourage a wider range of HEIs to become more closely involved while at the same time promoting Access to HE and the AVA to other stakeholders.

72   At national level, through senior officer and Board members, the AVA has contributed to a number of QAA initiatives and has been represented at national conferences, grading events and database training.

73   The review team concluded that the AVA has effective means to develop, evaluate and review the Access to HE provision for which it

has responsibility. Further work is needed in relation to the developing RAF and the operation of revalidation panels to enable it to assure the quality and fitness for purpose of Access to HE provision at the point at which it is granted formal approval.

Principle 4

The organisation is able to secure the standards of achievement of students awarded the Access to HE Diploma

The moderation process

74   OCNWMR's moderation model is designed to ensure that the quality of Access to HE provision is maintained; that there is consistency in the award of both credits and the Access to HE Diploma; and that OCNWMR meets its responsibilities as an AVA. OCNWMR operates a single model of external moderation which involves the appointment of two categories of external moderator to each provider. Details of the moderation process are clearly set out in the Access to HE Quality Assurance Handbook.

75   A centre moderator is appointed to each provider whose role is to monitor the overall quality and fitness for purpose of all the Access to HE provision within that centre, and ensure that issues identified through external moderation and student review processes are addressed promptly and appropriately. Centre moderators attend the centre's final moderation meeting where they confirm the eligibility of learners recommended for the Access to HE Diploma.

76   A team of curriculum area moderators (CAMs), who are subject specialists, are appointed to each programme at a centre. CAMs cover a cluster of providers and are responsible for ensuring the accuracy and consistency of assessment judgements and confirming the award of credit through sampling assessed work and monitoring relevant internal moderation records. Where providers support a diverse range of subject options, this can lead to relatively large

moderator teams. In its Overview Document and in discussions with the review team, the AVA acknowledged the problems that liaising with a large number of CAMs can cause, but stated that it was waiting for the current system to become fully embedded before considering the need for any revision. The review team considered this to be an appropriate response at this time.

77   For both centre and curriculum area moderators, the moderation process involves both interim and final moderation. Interim moderation takes place between December and February so that any issues are identified in time to be addressed during the year. The main focus of final moderation, which takes place in June or July, is confirmation of both the award of credit and QAA-recognised Access to HE Diploma. Centre moderators visit in order to be involved in the final moderation boards but CAMs undertake final moderation via postal sampling.

78   In addition to the external moderation, all centres are required to have internal moderation processes in place. OCNWMR does not prescribe the nature of these arrangements but provides a set of benchmark statements for this process. CAMs check that the benchmarks are being met in practice and report on this through their final reports. The review team formed the view that this benchmarking process had led to the significant enhancement of the internal moderation process. The AVA is commended for the criteria developed for assessing the effectiveness of providers' internal moderation processes and its use and reporting through the external moderation process.

79   From its review of the documentation and its discussions, the review team was able to confirm that OCNWMR has established a system of regular external programme monitoring and assessment ('moderation') through which the quality, comparability and fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes, and the consistency and sufficiency of standards of student achievement, are assured.

Moderators' appointment and development

80   The appointment of all new moderators conforms to a standard regional process. Applicants are initially sent a pack consisting of an application form, job description and person specification. Completed applications are forwarded to the Access Development Adviser who makes an initial judgment about the applicant's suitability based on an assessment of the application against the job description. The appointment of moderators is subject to formal confirmation by AHEC through a standing agenda item.

81   The contractual arrangements between the AVA and its moderators are contained in four related documents: the Access to HE Quality Assurance Handbook, a Moderation contract, an offer of work and a moderator fees circular. Moderators who met the review team commented positively on the usefulness of this documentation and on the induction and support they receive from AVA staff.

82   In order to ease the transition from the three pre-existing sets of moderation arrangements, existing moderators automatically transferred to the new AVA once it was established, and in the first year of operation little change in the allocation of moderators to centres was undertaken to ensure consistency at a time of change. In the second year, moderators were reallocated to ensure that the four-year limit on moderators being appointed to the same centre was met. This caused a slight delay in the allocation of moderators. Although the AVA had gone to some lengths to ensure that it met its licence requirements in respect of the length of attachment of moderators to centres, this was not reflected in the information it conveyed to centres or moderators through the Access to HE Tutor Handbook and the Access to HE Quality Handbook. Given that moderators have some degree of flexibility in the number of centres they are prepared to cover each year, the review team considered that the AVA should further strengthen its procedures by ensuring that AHEC receives details of the length of

moderator contracts with individual centres and courses. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA enables AHEC to monitor moderators' periods of office, to ensure that the period does not extend beyond four years for any one Access to HE course at any one provider. The team also recommends that the AVA communicates its expectations in respect of period of association to both centres and moderators through revisions to its handbooks or other means.

83   The moderation pool contains a number of experienced moderators who are now retired from teaching. The AVA was aware of the risks involved in an overreliance on moderators whose involvement in delivering the curriculum may no longer be current. Action has been taken to recruit a reserve pool of new moderators, while at the same time developing a currency policy to place a time limit on the appointment of moderators no longer involved in teaching or a relevant and related activity.

84   The AVA holds an annual meeting with moderators which involves a standardisation meeting in the morning and a moderators' meeting in the afternoon. The standardisation process is led by experienced CAMs, designated for this purpose as 'curriculum area lead moderators', who coordinate standardisation activity within each of the curriculum areas, and subsequently report on the outcome. Attendance at the November 2008 meeting meant that some curriculum areas were not subject to standardisation. The review team heard differing views from officers and AHEC on the importance of ensuring that all curriculum areas were standardised each year and the manner in which this might be undertaken. The team formed the view that greater clarity was required. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA develops a clear specification of the annual standardisation process, including the curriculum areas to be covered and the participation of moderators.

85   OCNWMR has in place a number of mechanisms for communicating with moderators including the website (which contains a specific section for moderator

downloads), a dedicated email address, and an electronic newsletter. Information that is more specifically linked, for example, to changes to the AVA's requirements or communications from QAA, are forwarded directly by email or circular letter, as appropriate. Although the website was not fully operational at the time of the review visit, moderators confirmed that they were kept well-informed and particularly commended AVA officers for the prompt nature of their responses to queries.

86   While there is close monitoring of moderators' engagement with centres and their report writing, OCNWMR currently has no formal mechanisms of gathering feedback from centres on the effectiveness of moderators in undertaking their duties. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA develops a mechanism for gathering and using feedback from Access to HE providers on the performance of moderators.

87   From its discussions with moderators, centres and AVA officers, and from a review of the documentation, the review team was able to confirm that OCNWMR had in place procedures that ensure that those who act on the AVA's behalf to monitor the quality of Access to HE programmes and the standards of student achievement are competent to do so.

Moderator reports

88   Moderators complete reports via standardised report forms and according to a strict timetable set by the AVA. The reports cover a variety of topics including actions taken in response to issues from the previous year, areas of good practice and those for improvement, assessment practice, internal moderation and promotional materials. The AVA operates a standard moderation report follow-up process, the first stage of which is to allocate reports to one of three categories depending on the level of concern raised about the provision. The consistent interpretation of these categories is supported by formal criteria. An annual report is prepared for AHEC each year who also receive any category 3 reports (defined as serious quality assurance issues likely

to affect the integrity of the award of credit).

89   Once all the reports for a particular course have been received and categorised, the AVA circulates them, together with standard covering letters. In the case of category 2 and 3 reports, the letter identifies the issues that the centre needs to address and requests the centre to detail what action they intend to take in relation to the issues raised. Where issues are raised at final moderation, the centre response is incorporated into a quality improvement plan which forms part of the centre's annual review report. Moderation reports, together with the covering letter, are subsequently circulated to the course coordinator and centre moderator. The centre copies its response to the issues raised in the moderation reports to the centre moderator, as well as the AVA, who monitors the agreed actions during the next moderation cycle.

90   Through the papers and minutes of meetings and its discussions with committee members and staff, the review team was able to review the use OCNWMR made of the outcomes of the moderation process to improve and enhance approved Access to HE programmes through the annual reporting on moderation and its consideration by AHEC. The team considered that the detailed moderator report forms used by centre and curriculum area moderators, and the manner in which they were used by the AVA, significantly enhanced quality assurance and enhancement processes. The AVA is commended for the use made of moderators' detailed interim report forms to support and enhance the moderation process. In continuing to develop its procedures, the team recommends that the AVA considers the benefit of sharing providers' annual quality improvement plans with moderators.

Confirmation of awards

91   Formal responsibility for the award of Access to HE certificates is delegated from the Board to AHEC, which itself delegates this authority to officers because of the timing of the process. The arrangements for awarding certificates require CAMs to complete a 'Results

Confirmation Form' as a result of their postal moderation. This, together with the results for all students and the Recommendation for the Award of Credit, form the basis for the final moderation board attended by the centre moderator. During 2007-08 the Tutor Handbook had contained detailed guidance on the operation of this final board. This guidance had been omitted from the 2008-09 edition but the review team heard of steps that would be taken to ensure all tutors and moderators were aware of their responsibilities. In discussions, some coordinators suggested that students might be present at award boards, but the team also heard that this event was usually a two-stage process with the first part involving a meeting between students, or their representatives, the course team and the moderator, while the second was given over to a consideration of students' results at which students would not be present. The team considered that the AVA has specified procedures and clear criteria for the award of an Access to HE Diploma to students but that current guidance on the final moderation board could be further strengthened. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA reinstates its guidance for final moderation meetings to include appropriate membership, the seniority and independence of the Chair, confidentiality, and the standard and distribution of minutes including the process by which minutes of meetings will be monitored by the AVA.

Format and issuing of certificates and diplomas

92   Once confirmed results are received in the office, AVA staff check that all the programme requirements have been met and final awards are then approved according to clearly documented procedures. OCNWMR's Access to HE Diplomas and transcripts have a standard format. The format of Diplomas meets the requirements of the licensing criteria. The specimen credit summary and detailed transcript seen by the review team, however, departed from recent guidance issued by QAA which specified that a clear distinction should be made between the award of credits which contributed

to the award of the Diploma, and the award of credits that represented any other achievement. The AVA will therefore need to revise its credit transcripts to meet QAA's new requirements.

93   In its Overview, the AVA acknowledged that there had been delays in the issuing of Diplomas at the end of 2007-08, which had meant that centres had not received these until late September. Course coordinators commented to the review team on the difficulties this had caused. As noted earlier in this report (see paragraph 48) the team heard of steps being taken by the AVA to purchase, install and get operational a new database system to help with the issuing of certificates and, in particular, the checking of students' records against the approved rules of combination for each programme. Although the timescale was tight, AVA staff were convinced that the new system would be operational in time for the summer, and the team heard of contingency plans in case unforeseen difficulties arose. The team concluded that the AVA has in place a regulated process for the issuing of Access to HE Diplomas and credit transcripts to students.

94   In its Overview Document, OCNWMR stated that the new arrangements for moderation had achieved the AVA's intention of providing more informed scrutiny of curriculum issues, more rigorous sampling across the curriculum and more detailed feedback to both centres and the AVA. From its review of the documentation and its discussions with staff, Access to HE coordinators and moderators, the review team was able to confirm that the moderation process was operating as specified by the AVA. The team formed the view that the AVA had established and operates a system for ensuring the consistency and sufficiency of academic standards is maintained, and that there is a regulated and secure process for the issuing of the Access to HE Diploma and related transcripts.

Audit trails

95   The review team conducted audit trails on six of OCNWMR's providers. The purpose of these trails was to enable the team to look at the effectiveness and consistency of the AVA's processes at centre level, and to identify matters that needed further investigation through the extended review process.

96   The AVA has 40 providers offering Access to HE programmes, of which 121 ran in 2007-08. The review team considered a wide sample of Access to HE programmes from further education colleges of different sizes, the majority of which also provide HE opportunities, and a college with land-based provision.

97   The programmes represented a wide curriculum spread including nursing and health, science, computing, education and humanities, combined studies, and land-based studies, and were of varying sizes (from nine to over 200 students). Programme documentation was clear and well ordered and included details of course structure, units and modules, and rules of combination.

98   The review team was presented with a comprehensive set of evidence from at least the past two years (reports and reviews) or across a substantial part of the life of the programmes (programme and validation documentation). These included correspondence with centres pre-panel, revalidation panel reports, final programme documents, letters confirming validation, moderators' reports, records of programme changes and confirmation letters to providers, annual programme reviews/self-assessment reports from providers (which included annual statistics for the past three years), and rules of combination pro forma. Only one file included a current student handbook, although two others included those from previous years, considered at the time of the last revalidation. Although all documents were not present in every file, the team concluded that the files contained enough information for the purpose of the audit trails.

99   Information in the files was generally thorough, accurate and consistent. It was apparent that the AVA collects and stores an appropriate and adequate level of programme and student information and data.

100   There was evidence to show that revalidation processes are the same as those for full validation. Evidence in two of the files showed that the AVA provides relevant and timely support for programme development during periodic review. Revalidation panel reports were present in five files and showed that panels considered every section of the programme submission document. Specific details were given of their deliberations, and panel composition was adequate and appropriate and included an HE representative. From the evidence examined, the review team concluded that the revalidation process was comprehensive and allowed panels to come to an informed and reasoned decision.

101   Letters informing providers formally of the panel's outcome were present in four files. These confirmed that the validation of the programme depends on the receipt of the revised programme submission document and evidence that any conditions have been met. There was evidence of retrospective approval in at least two of the files where the date of the revalidation panel and the date of final confirmation of approval were subsequent to the programme start date. The situation is one that the AVA recognises and for which it has put mechanisms in place to ensure that it does not recur (see paragraph 69).

102   The Access Development Adviser examines the amended submission when it is received from centres and also checks that any conditions have been met. These are each recorded on the panel report. There was evidence of this process in the programme files that the review team examined.

103   There was evidence that programme amendments had been agreed by the AVA and that these had been approved by AHEC. There was not enough evidence in the files to indicate whether the AVA had a clear policy for

establishing whether a proposed change counted as minor or major and requiring a validation panel.

104 All files contained moderators' reports. Since 2007, there have been significant changes to the AVA's moderation process and a number of the reports were products of the previous scheme. However, all reports contained in-depth and relevant responses from the moderators on programme delivery; staffing; management and assessment; internal moderation; resources; responses to previous moderation reports; student support and student handbook; examples of good practice; and issues and recommended actions.

105 All files contained the AVA's request for annual statistics and the statistics themselves. These were attached to the providers' annual reviews and analysed as part of the review process. Annual programme reviews were present in all files. Attached to each was a quality improvement plan containing the planned actions in response to issues identified in the moderator's report and through the self-assessment process. The reviews met the AVA's requirements and contained information on recruitment, retention, achievement and progression; equal opportunities/widening participation; management of the programme; internal moderation; and curriculum issues. The reviews were thorough, detailed, and contained much intelligent analysis.

106 None of the audit trail files contained examples of current publicity material for Access to HE programmes except as part of the documentation supporting submission for revalidation (one file only) that was examined and approved by the panel in 2008.

107 On the basis of the audit trail evidence considered, the review team concluded that OCNWMR's quality assurance processes are successful in assuring standards across the range of provision and are valued by providers. In the context of change, evidence in the audit trails implied that the procedures of the predecessor AVAs, adopted and developed by OCNWMR, were rigorous and robust.

Conclusions

108 The Open College Network West Midlands Region is a new AVA recently formed from the merger of three well-established AVAs and was granted a provisional AVA licence in 2007. The period since its establishment has been one of significant change with the development and implementation of a new set of procedures and practices, drawn from perceived best practice from across the predecessor AVAs, covering all aspects of the AVA's provision. In addition, the reorganisation of staffing and the consolidation of its centre of operation at one site added a further level of change.

109 The process of change has been carefully and considerately managed: initially through a transition board and subsequently by the Board of Trustees and AVA officers. Course coordinators and moderators spoke of the improved level of service that the new AVA provided and of the greater clarity and rigour in procedures. The result is a stronger, well-resourced AVA with a clear regional footprint, good links with its stakeholders, a dedicated team of officers with a responsibility for Access to HE, and a commitment to the development of Access to HE provision in the region.

110 The Board delegates its responsibility for Access to HE matters to the Access to HE Committee (AHEC). AHEC has a broad remit for quality assurance and would benefit from a clearer set of terms of reference so that it can be precise about the nature of the Board's expectations in discharging its responsibilities for Access to HE provision and the maintenance of the AVA licence.

111 In its initial year of operation, the AVA had not sought to radically change its procedures, particularly in the area of moderation, so that it could be assured that standards were maintained in a period of change. Subsequently, both in its moderation process and in other activities such as the development of the Regional Access Framework (RAF), it was beginning to develop its own practices and procedures. Further work, particularly in respect of the emerging RAF, remains to be undertaken

to ensure that the AVA's policies and procedures are fully effective, owned and understood by its Access to HE providers. However, the self-evaluative nature of the Overview Document, and its discussions with the review team demonstrated that there can be confidence in the AVA's ability to manage these developments.

112 Moderators are the key element in the AVA's procedures for assuring the monitoring of quality and standards and robust procedures are in place for their selection, training, support and reporting. The AVA has taken effective action to help centres improve their internal moderation processes to assist moderators in their work. Further action is required to clarify the standardisation process and the expectations of final award boards and it would benefit the AVA to establish a more direct link between moderation and the valuable annual reviews it receives from providers.

113 Secure and robust systems are in place for the issuing of the Access to HE Diploma although difficulties in checking each student's record against programme expectations have led to severe delays in the issuing of final awards. The AVA is taking action to address this issue including the purchasing and implementation of a new Access to HE database.

Commendations

114 The AVA is commended for the:

i   composition, commitment, skills and enthusiasm of its Board of Trustees (paragraph 23)

ii   management of change in an approach that was consultative, sensitive and equitable which has established the new AVA for the benefit of Access to HE provision in the West Midlands region (paragraph 37)

iii establishment of a dedicated team of Access to HE staff who are experienced, responsive, and well supported by the AVA's senior management team, and who are highly valued by the Board, providers, moderators and other stakeholders (paragraphs 44, 54)

iv   quality and consistency of providers' annual reviews and periodic review self-evaluations, reflecting the rigour of the AVA's requirements and the comprehensive support and advice it provides (paragraphs 68, 70)

v   criteria developed by the AVA for assessing the effectiveness of providers' internal moderation processes and its use and reporting through the external moderation process (paragraph 78)

vi   use made of moderators' detailed interim report forms to support and enhance the moderation process (paragraph 90).

The AVA licence

Review outcome

115 The review team recommends that the Open College Network West Midlands Region's AVA licence is confirmed, with conditions i, ii and v to be met by 30 September 2009 and the remaining conditions by 1 December 2009.

Conditions

116 The licence is awarded on condition that the AVA:

i   further reviews and revises its documentation to ensure that the Access to HE Committee's delegated responsibilities for all Access to HE quality assurance processes are clearly specified (paragraphs 16, 18, 29, 30)

ii   publishes Regional Access Framework guidance which includes, but is not limited to:

a) the composition, purpose and function of curriculum development groups, differentiating clearly between processes for unit development and unit approval

b) the roles and responsibilities of unit approval panel chairs and members, with reference to the AVA licensing criteria for programme and unit approval (paragraph 59)

iii   revises its guidance for validation panel members and chairs to include a clearer statement on the roles and responsibilities of panel members, in particular that the 'presenting team' is not involved in making the validation decision (paragraph 62)

iv   enables the Access to HE Committee to monitor moderators' periods of office, to ensure that the period does not extend beyond four years for any one Access to HE course at any one provider (paragraph 82)

v   develops a clear specification of the annual standardisation process, including the curriculum areas to be covered and the participation of moderators (paragraph 84)

vi   develops a mechanism for gathering and using feedback from Access to HE providers on the performance of moderators (paragraph 86)

vii   reinstates its guidance for final moderation meetings to include appropriate membership, the seniority and independence of the Chair, confidentiality, and the standard and distribution of minutes including the process by which minutes of meetings will be monitored by the AVA (paragraph 91).

Recommendations to the AVA

117 The review team recommends that the AVA:

i   ensures that Board and subcommittee chairs, responsible for confirming the accuracy and quality of committee minutes, can be assured that the agreed minutes will be produced and retained to a professional standard (paragraph 27)

ii   establishes a process by which validation and revalidation panels, moderators and tutors can provide feedback on units to inform the work of curriculum development groups involved in developing and enhancing units in the Regional Access Framework (paragraph 61)

iii   revises the tutor and moderator handbooks so that all parties are aware that moderators can only be associated with courses or providers for a maximum of four years (paragraph 82)

iv   considers the benefit of sharing providers' annual quality improvement plans with moderators (paragraph 90).

Appendix

Aims and objectives of AVA review

1   The aims of the system of Access validating agency (AVA) review are:

i   to provide the basis for an informed judgement by the Access Recognition and Licensing Committee about the fitness of the AVA to continue as a licensed agency

ii   to promote public confidence in Access to HE as a properly regulated and respected route into higher education by assuring:

- the quality and adequacy of AVAs' systems and procedures

- the quality, comparability and range of AVAs' operations

- the adequacy and comparability of AVAs' standards for approval, moderation and monitoring of programmes

- consistency across AVAs in the operation of criteria for the granting of the Access to HE award

iii   to stimulate reflective and self-critical perspectives within AVAs, as an instrument to promote quality enhancement

iv   to provide an opportunity to identify and disseminate good practice of AVA operations

v   to provide a mechanism for ensuring necessary, and encouraging desirable, improvements and developments in AVAs.

2   The objectives of each AVA review are:

i   to examine, assess and report on:

- the development of, and changes in, the AVA since its last review or initial licence, and its plans and targets for the future

- the organisation's continuing viability and robustness and the ways in which the AVA demonstrates sound governance

- the efficiency and effectiveness of the AVA's operational and quality assurance systems

- the range and scope of the AVA's activities, and the appropriateness and value of these activities

- the ways in which the AVA approves and monitors programmes and the ways in which these processes take account of the need for consistency and comparability

- the ways in which the AVA satisfies itself of the adequacy and comparability of standards achieved by students gaining the Access to HE Diploma

- the evidence available to indicate the AVA's success in achieving its aims and targets

ii   to identify and report on:

- strengths and good practice in procedures and operations

- areas which would benefit from further development

- areas requiring attention.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel   01452 557000
Fax   01452 557070
Email   comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web   www.qaa.ac.uk