Access
to Higher Education

Institutional Review Directorate: Access to Higher Education

West and North Yorkshire
Open College Network

Contents

Foreword

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is responsible to the Department for Education and Skills for the recognition of Access to Higher Education courses. QAA exercises this responsibility through a national network of authorised validating agencies (AVAs), which are responsible for the processes of individual course recognition and the award of Access to HE certificates to students on QAA's behalf. QAA has developed a scheme for the licensing and review of the 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 is regulated and administered by the Access Recognition and Licensing Committee (ARLC), a committee of the QAA Board of Directors.

2 This is a report of a review of the AVA function of the West and North Yorkshire Open College Network (WNYOCN) undertaken by QAA. The Agency is grateful to WNYOCN and to those who participated in the review for the willing cooperation provided to the review team.

Aims and objectives

3 The aims of the system of AVA review are:

i to provide the basis for an informed judgement by the ARLC 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.

4 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 certificate;
- 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.

Outcomes

5 Following the review of an AVA, the reviewers' report is presented to the ARLC by a member of the review team. The Committee then makes one of six decisions:

i **unconditional renewal** of licence for a specified period;

ii **conditional renewal** of licence with conditions to be met by specified date;

iii **provisional renewal** of licence with conditions to be met and further review visit by specified date;

iv **suspension** of licence until specified conditions are met;

v **withdrawal** of licence for operation as an AVA;

vi **temporary renewal** of licence with request for further information by specified date (decision suspended).

The review process

6   The review was conducted in accordance with the process detailed in the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.* The preparation for the review included an initial meeting between WNYOCN representatives and the QAA Assistant Director with responsibility for Access to HE matters to discuss the requirements for the *Analytical Account* (the *Account*) and the process of the review; the preparation and submission by WNYOCN of its *Account*, together with a selection of supporting documentation; a meeting of the review team to discuss the *Account* and supporting documentation and to establish a draft programme for the review visit; and negotiations between QAA and WNYOCN to finalise the programme and other arrangements for the review visit.

7   The review visit took place on 20 and 21 November 2001. The visit to WNYOCN consisted principally of meetings with representatives of WNYOCN, including AVA officers; members of the Board of Directors, Quality Committee, Access to HE Committee and Finance and General Purposes Committee; moderators for Access to HE programmes; Access to HE tutors and programme managers from providing institutions; higher education admissions officers; and former Access students now studying in HE.

8   The review team consisted of Dr Pete Johnston, formerly of the University of Essex, and Mr Anthony McClaran, Deputy Chief Executive, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. The review was coordinated for QAA by Ms Kath Dentith, Assistant Director (Access), Institutional Review Directorate.

AVA statistics 1999-2000*

9   Providers offering Access to HE programmes   15

Access programmes available   18

Access programmes running   32

Access learner registrations   651

Access to HE certificates awarded   315

as provided in the WNYOCN annual report to QAA, 1999-2000

The AVA context

Background and major developments since the last AVA review

10   The origins of the AVA lie in the West and North Yorkshire Access Validation Consortium (WNYAVC), which was licensed as an AVA in 1990. WNYAVC established an Open College Project in 1993, and the success of this project led to the formation that year of the West and North Yorkshire Access Network (WNYAN), bringing together the activities of the AVA and the Open College Network. WNYAN became a full member of the National Open College Network (NOCN) in November 1994.

11   The last review of the AVA was conducted by the Higher Education Quality Council in July 1996, and there has been a substantial growth in the organisation's overall business since then, with learner registrations having grown from 10,000 to 28,000. In recent years, WNYOCN has achieved significant milestones in its development: in May 1999 it was incorporated, with the business transferred to the new company in August that year; in 1999-2000 it was awarded a licence without conditions from NOCN; and it became a registered charity in October 2001.

12   Since the merger of the Open College Project and WNYAVC, the AVA has been committed to the principle of operating one coherent set of quality systems within an integrated AVA and OCN structure, seeing this as representing parity of esteem and equity across the different levels of activity and also providing what the *Account* describes as 'a way of offering more dynamic opportunities for cross-sectoral staff development'. As a result, however, of its own internal review procedures, it has identified the need for some significant changes to current procedures and structures to meet the new licensing criteria for AVAs and has acted accordingly (see paragraph 30, below).

13   The 1996 HEQC review report confirmed confidence in the quality assurance processes of the AVA, and the conditions and recommendations from that review have been largely addressed by specific AVA action or overtaken by national developments. One particular issue, however, survives from that review. The review report records the AVA's difficulties in gathering and analysing data on its Access to HE learners, which the AVA attributed to the transition to WNYAN and the process of unitisation. This process was incomplete at the time of that review, but was completed in 1998. The *Account* for the current review identifies 'data collection and the use made of quantitative data to monitor trends and aid evaluation' as a major area for improvement, again referring to difficulties of combining data from the old pre-unitised programmes and unitised programmes.

Location and premises

14   WNYAVC initially operated from an office in Huddersfield Technical College, and later, following the merger of its operations with those of the Open College Project, from Crofton High School in Wakefield. The need for a more central location led to a move in 1994 to premises provided by Leeds Metropolitan University (LMU) (see paragraph 32, below). The organisation is now located in two terraced houses on the LMU's

Beckett Park Campus which provide an administrative and development/academic base, as well as a dedicated meeting room. The AVA anticipates that, having expanded its premises in spring 2000 when additional staff were appointed, the current accommodation will be adequate for the foreseeable future.

Mission, aims, objectives in relation to Access to HE provision

15   WNYOCN has a general mission statement and, in October 2001, it introduced a separate Access to HE mission statement which is a particularised version of the general statement, including additional and specific references to the organisation's role as a licensed AVA. These statements are represented in the set of objects of the company.

16   WNYOCN's planning is conducted through a three-year Business Plan and an annual Strategic Plan. There is also a separate Access to HE Action Plan. The OCN holds an annual Strategic Planning Day, attended by both WNYOCN staff and members of the Board of Directors. During this day, the achievements of the previous year are identified and broad strategic aims for the coming year are set. The review team noted that, as a particular outcome of WNYOCN's May 2001 Strategic Planning Day, WNYOCN had identified a need for further work to link the Strategic Plan with the Business Plan. The team also considered that the coherence and effectiveness of the AVA's forward planning would benefit from further attention being given to the linkage between these formal plans.

17   The Strategic Plan and Access to HE Action Plan are both structured around the same six broad strategic aims: Learner Achievements and Standards; Quality; Curriculum; Governance and Management; Equal Opportunities and Social Inclusion; and Finance. Further linkage is made in relation to the 'tasks' and 'indicators' listed under the corresponding aims in these two plans; the Access to HE Action Plan details Access-specific aspects of relevant general 'tasks' and/or Access specific 'indicators' of relevant general 'tasks'. With this degree of articulation between these two plans and, furthermore, the direct reporting line from the Access to HE Committee, which recommends the Access to HE Action Plan to the Board of Directors, the organisation has the capacity to ensure that the AVA role is strongly represented in its strategic policy development.

Membership

18   The membership list provided with the AVA's *Account* specifies three HEIs: Bradford University, Huddersfield University and Leeds Metropolitan University, and 13 members are listed under the heading 'FE', including almost all the FE colleges in the region. Seven members appear under the heading 'LEAs and Council Departments and TECs', including five of the six local authorities in the region. Since the last review, the organisation has seen significant and steady growth in the number of voluntary and community sector members, and there are now 34 under the heading 'Voluntary Sector Organisations', all of which are full members, and an additional 51 members are listed as 'Associate Voluntary Organisations'. Finally, two members are listed under the heading 'Private Training Organisations and Private Sector Employers'.

19   The *Account* notes that 'The pattern of membership is becoming increasingly complex' and this is reflected in recent debate by the AVA's committees about the membership of project organisations and some small voluntary organisations. In particular, while recognising the value of membership both to the OCN and to the member itself, there has been a proper concern about the difficulties that may be faced by such organisations in meeting the OCN's quality standards. While WNYOCN has agreed action to address this particular concern, the review team would recommend that consideration is also given to related issues of the categories for membership. In particular, the AVA may wish to consider the relationship between categories of membership for constitutional purposes, as stipulated in its Articles, and those needed for fee-charging purposes, reflected in the slightly different categories provided in the *Quality Assurance Handbook* and those in the organisation's membership and charging policy document: *A Simple Guide to Membership and Charging.*

20   The organisation has sound procedures for the formal approval of new members by the Board of Trustees, with the Finance and General Purposes Committee also permitted to act, if necessary, in order to ensure an appropriately speedy response to an application for membership. The Board of Directors also has the authority to refuse or withdraw membership from individual organisations.

21   Guidance on joining the organisation, with specification of rights and responsibilities, together with information on all charges, is clearly expressed in the *Simple Guide to Membership and Charging*, which is published annually by WNYOCN. Members are entitled to receive a range of services from WNYOCN and in return accept a number of responsibilities, including the appointment of a coordinator to liaise with the OCN, a commitment to meet the costs of hosting accreditation and validation panels within their own organisation, and provision of staff to serve on accreditation and validation panels and as potential external moderators. Some difficulties have been encountered in achieving in practice the levels of staff commitment to which members sign up in principle in a number of areas such as attendance at meetings and

staff development events; those who spoke to the review team asserted that this was largely because of the intense teaching workload experienced by staff, and the increased use of part-time staff, in further education institutions.

Providers and approved Access to HE programmes

22   WNYOCN currently validates 16 Access to HE programmes, delivered by a total of 14 organisations. The *Account* records the loss during the period under review of four Access to HE providers to other AVAs, together with a summary of the AVA's analysis of the reasons for the loss. This analysis states that reasons cited by the relevant providers 'included the validation process was perceived as too demanding (two), feedback from the external moderation process was regarded as too critical (one) and costs were significantly higher than competitors (mentioned by two).'

23   Currently recognised Access programmes cover a diverse range of provision, in terms both of size and progression routes. The *Account* records the AVA's analysis of trends in the organisation and delivery of Access provision since the last review, with two of the most significant changes being the increased use of the part-time registration mode and the inclusion of level two units within the multi-modular frameworks to support progression and appropriate preparation.

Trends and targets

24   The *Account* records that 'learners on Access Programmes' for 2000-01 totalled 491, whereas the corresponding figures for 1999-2000 and 1998-99 were 651 and 790 respectively. The total numbers of learners achieving Access to HE Certificates are recorded as 260, 315 and 480 for the same three years respectively. This downward trend applies across almost all the age bands in which the data is recorded. The only exceptions are in the 46-55 age band where the 1999-2000 registration figure is a slight increase on that for 1998-1999 and similarly in the 'under 19' age band. The existence of this latter age band reflects the organisation's past policy of registering students under 21 on recognised Access to HE programmes. With the existence of substantial numbers of students recorded in the 'under 19' and '19-25' age bands (see paragraph 58, below), no deductions can be made as to the proportion of those learners who were eligible to obtain an Access to HE certificate who actually achieved such a certificate.

25   WNYOCN's accreditation guidelines include target group(s) as an explicit matter to be addressed in the programme submission document, and moderators are required to report on how the programme fulfils its objectives in relation to the target group. With reference to the particular issue of targeting under-represented

ethnic minorities, the *Account* records the AVA's view that 'analysis of data indicates relatively low take-up of provision by minority ethnic learners' and that the AVA is addressing this 'in a range of ways through widening participation projects and through close attention to suitability of curriculum and marketing strategies at the programme development stage'.

Financial matters

26   With the incorporation of the OCN in August 1999, all the activities, assets and liabilities of West and North Yorkshire Open College Network (a cost centre of Leeds Metropolitan University) were transferred from LMU to the registered company, West and North Yorkshire Open College Network. The income and expenditure account for the period ended 31 July 2000, the first year of trading of the company, showed an income of £493,938, giving a surplus of £12,429. The financial aspects of its activity as an AVA are completely integrated within the OCN's overall business plan. The income generated from AVA activity in 2000-01 was given to be approximately £27,500, representing 5.5 per cent of total turnover.

27   Historically, the organisation has derived its income from membership charges, programme recognition charges and learner registration charges, with the vast bulk of income deriving from the learner registration charges. The organisation has, however, recently taken a strategic decision to diversify its sources of income and, as a result, has actively pursued opportunities for partnership funding and income through its staff development activities. This is explicit in its current Business Plan, which predicts significant contributions from such sources for 2000-01 and 2001-02.

28   The budget includes a specific contingency component and the organisation operates a reserves policy to secure sufficient resources for continued operation. The organisation employs a full-time Finance Manager who is a member of the management team. Business performance is monitored by the Board of Trustees through its Finance and General Purposes Committee, which receives regular financial reports to its meetings.

29   As a registered company and as a registered charity, WNYOCN's finances are subject to external scrutiny through delivery of its audited annual accounts to the Registrar of Companies and to the Charity Commission.

Current and planned AVA developments

30   As noted above (paragraph 12), WNYOCN has recently made a number of revisions to the organisation's structure and staffing responsibilities, with the aim of enhancing the work of the AVA and to address the impending introduction by QAA of the new Principles

and Criteria for the Licensing of AVAs. These revisions include the appointment of a Lead Moderator for Access to HE, the establishment of a new Access to HE committee, a review of the Access Development Worker's role to enable full concentration on improving the performance of the AVA, and an additional 0.5 FTE Administrator (Quality and Access to HE) post to support quality development and the AVA.

31   In terms of the developing agenda concerning widening participation in HE, WNYOCN in its AVA role sees the current challenge as being that of promoting and locating the AVA programmes within a wider range of access activity and also of ensuring that the AVA is recognised as an important source of expertise and knowledge that can inform, enhance and support that activity. In pursuance of these wider objectives, WNYOCN is represented on the steering group of two current HEFCE Widening Participation Projects and has close links with a third.

Governance and committee structures

Legal status and constitutional position

32   WNYOCN is a fully incorporated limited company. Its constitution is given in the Memorandum and Articles of Association, which state that one of the ways in which WNYOCN will achieve its objects is 'by operating as an approved validated [sic] agency by the Quality Assurance Agency'. In furtherance of this object, the Memorandum also states that WNYOCN will 'maintain the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and National Open College Network approval as an accreditation agency.' The AVA's relationship with Leeds Metropolitan University, its host institution, is governed by legal agreements covering the provision of accommodation, and ICT and payroll services. WNYOCN is currently considering the provision of some personnel services by an external provider.

33   The legal status of WNYOCN is, therefore, clearly defined and is the foundation of the AVA's independence, a status reinforced by the legal agreements which regulate its relationships with its host institution.

Committee structures

34   WNYOCN's Articles of Association set out the constitution, powers and responsibilities of the Council of Members and the Board of Directors; members of the latter constitute the Charity's trustees. There are three committees which are appointed by, and report to, the Board: the Finance and General Purposes Committee, the Quality Assurance Committee and, most recently, the Access to HE Committee. The members of the Board are elected by the Council of

Members at its Annual General Meeting (AGM). Both the Board and Quality Assurance Committee have responsibilities across the full range of WNYOCN's activities; the Access to HE Committee, as its names implies, is exclusively concerned with Access provision and WNYOCN's role as an AVA.

Council of Members

35   The Articles of Association presented to the review team specified that WNYOCN should hold at least two general meetings of its Council of Members each year. Subsequent to the review, WNYOCN has informed QAA that the Articles have been formally amended, and that the OCN is now constitutionally bound to hold only one Council of Members meeting annually. Each member organisation of the OCN is entitled to send one representative to the Council's meetings and all members, other than small voluntary organisations which are associate members, have voting rights. Business at the first AGM, held on 1 December 2000, included receiving WNYOCN's Annual Report, elections for the appointment of the Trustees (Board of Directors) and receipt of the annual accounts. Although WNYOCN has over 60 organisations in full membership and a large number of associate non-voting members, attendance at the first AGM amounted to 15 members.

Board of Directors

36   The composition of the Board of Directors is set out in the Articles of Association and is designed to ensure cross-sectoral membership. Four members come from the further education colleges, two from higher education institutions, one from the voluntary sector and one from the local authorities. A further three trustees are appointed to reflect the full range of the OCN's membership, with the opportunity for the Board to co-opt two more trustees when this is felt to be necessary. Procedures for the appointment, retirement and rotation of trustees are provided in the Articles of Association. The Board elects from among its own members a chair and vice-chair, both of whom serve for a period of two years. Its quorum is a third of its members or three members, whichever is the greater. The Chief Executive, the Operations Manager and the Finance Manager attend meetings of the Board but have no voting rights.

37   The Board of Directors meets four times a year. It manages the business of the charity and may exercise all its powers. The Board receives reports and recommendations from its three sub-committees (the Quality Assurance Committee, the Access to HE Committee and the Finance and General Purposes Committee) and during the past year has been considering revisions to the terms of reference for each.

38   In addition to the duties and powers found in the Articles of Association, a paper on the roles and responsibilities of the Directors and Board of Trustees, intended to set out these matters in more detail, is currently in preparation.

39   The constitutional position of the Board of Directors is firmly established. While it is still clearly evolving in the light of its responsibilities for what is now an incorporated company and charity, the review team found evidence in its minutes and in discussion with its members of an active and reflective self-assessment underpinning the process of constitutional and organisational change which have characterised WNYOCN's development in recent years.

Quality Assurance Committee

40   The Quality Assurance Committee is a sub-committee of the Board of Directors. According to its terms of reference, the Committee's objectives are to monitor and review the quality assurance systems with specific reference to recognition, validation and moderation; and to support the development and benchmarking of good practice. While there has been a Quality Assurance Committee within WNYOCN for many years, the composition and role of the current committee arises from a thorough review of quality assurance within WNYOCN which took place in 2000. A well attended 'quality meeting' on 3 March 2000 effectively dissolved the old Committee and agreed the remit and membership for a new one, based on the need to develop a more transparent system of self-assessment as the basis for quality. The new committee met for the first time on 5 April 2000. The role and responsibilities of the Quality Assurance Committee, together with information on the organisation of WNYOCN and the operation of its processes for programme development, recognition and moderation, are set out in the OCN's admirably clear *Quality Assurance Handbook.*

41   The new Quality Assurance Committee is cross-sectoral in membership and consists of at least one representative from HE, FE, an LEA and the voluntary sector. The Quality Manager, a full-time member of WNYOCN's staff, is in attendance at all meetings. The Chief Executive and the Accreditation Officer are also usually in attendance; in fact, the terms of reference state that 'the Committee must include the Chief Executive or Quality Manager as an ex officio member' although the minutes do not reflect this constitutional position, listing the officers instead as 'in attendance'.

42   In fulfilling its objectives, the Committee is broadly charged with reviewing all self-assessment activity undertaken by the Network, and it samples documentation provided in all self-assessment activities. Members are nominated to serve on

recognition panels and the Committee monitors the appointment of external moderators. It considers the reports of the Quality Manager which summarise issues from the moderators' reports and cover other aspects of quality on which the Committee's views are sought. Through the Quality Manager, members of the Committee contribute to the strategic planning process and, in some cases, as members also of the Board of Directors, have attended the annual strategic planning day.

43   The Committee's terms of reference include an 'ethos' which underlines its aim of acting in a supportive way in relation to the OCN's staff and members but also states that it will act promptly to ensure that the Committee acts as a court of appeal in any cases of disputes about the appointment of external moderators and is able to recommend the withdrawal of accreditation if it has serious concerns which providers have failed to address. The decision actually to withdraw accreditation can only be taken by the Board of Directors. Members of the Committee also play a role in WNYOCN's appeals process, which is clearly defined in the *Quality Assurance Handbook.*

44   As a relatively recent creation, the Committee is still working out the most effective way of fulfilling its duties. This is reflected in the fact that the terms of reference, although substantially complete, are still undergoing amendment. The Committee is also in the process of determining the most effective way of sampling the papers and reports of panels and other events in order to conduct its monitoring role effectively without being inundated with too much paper. The Committee is also adjusting to the existence of the newly created Access to HE Committee. Committee members acknowledged some concerns about the incomplete flow of data on Access provision within WNYOCN and believed that its improvement would provide an important support to its monitoring activities.

Access to HE Committee

45   The Access to HE Committee is the newest part of WNYOCN's constitutional structure and it held its first meeting in January 2001. It was set up in order to address concerns within WNYOCN about the profile of the AVA and thus can be seen as part of the package of measures identified above (paragraph 30). The Committee's objectives, as set out in its terms of reference, are to focus on Access to HE provision within the region in order to raise standards, particularly with reference to progression; support WNYOCN to develop and benchmark good practice in Access provision; promote the use of Access to HE and related initiatives as an effective means of widening participation; and to support the organisation in preparation for the QAA review.

46   The Committee is appointed by the Board of Directors and has cross-sectoral membership. The Quality Manager and the Development Worker for Access to HE are in attendance at its meetings, which are held at least three times a year. Currently, the Chair of the Access to HE Committee also chairs the Quality Assurance Committee. Although this is not a constitutional requirement, and the AVA regards it as a transitional arrangement, it is proving particularly helpful during this period when these new committees are working their way towards the most effective arrangements for discharging their responsibilities.

47   In fulfilling its objectives, the Committee receives the annual report to QAA produced by the Development Worker (Access to HE). The Account states that the report is 'approved by the Board', although this procedure did not appear to be in place for the 1999-2000 report. Since September 2001, the Committee has also had responsibility for the formal approval of recommendations of validation panels for Access to HE courses. In future, the Committee will provide members to chair validation panels for Access and also ensure that one of its members attends the annual Access Moderator Forum. In its relationship with the Lead Moderator for Access, the Committee both provides advice and receives his reports. This process may in turn lead to recommendations to the Board. The Committee also receives a summary of issues raised by external moderators prepared by the Accreditation Officer. As part of the AVA's new arrangements, the Lead Moderator will also provide an annual report on moderation across WNYOCN's Access provision, providing an overview of the issues raised by moderators during the academic year. The relationship between the Accreditation Officer's report and that of the Lead Moderator is one to which the AVA is currently giving some attention in order to ensure clear and distinct remits and productive co-operation.

48   The Committee is clearly at an early stage of its development and, like the Quality Assurance Committee, its terms of reference are still being fine-tuned. It is unambiguously the quality assurance committee for Access to HE within WNYOCN's structure, but the relationship between its activities and those of the Quality Assurance Committee, which has overall responsibility for quality matters within the OCN as a whole, remain to some extent undefined. Although the AVA's structure chart indicates that the Access Committee reports both upwards to the Board and sideways (reciprocally) to the Quality Assurance Committee, the latter relationship is not enshrined in the terms of reference. The fact that the two Committees currently share the same chair means that in practical terms this may not pose an immediate difficulty, but WNYOCN acknowledges that the issue will need to be addressed if the potential danger of the emergence of divergent quality assurance systems is to be avoided, in line with WNYOCN's philosophy that there should be an integrated approach to quality across its entire provision. In the opinion of the review team, WNYOCN will need to develop and clarify the role of the Quality Assurance and Access to HE Committees in relation to its quality assurance and development policies for Access to HE, with particular reference to the suitability of the committees' terms of reference and the effectiveness of their operation. These developments should be considered in a Board-level review which assesses the committees' work and makes recommendations for further action, as necessary. The creation of the Access to HE Committee with its specific remit has, indeed, the potential to ensure a concentrated focus on the quality of Access, and this assessment of its effectiveness in fulfilling this role should, in itself, be a valuable exercise.

The Finance and General Purposes Committee

49   The Finance and General Purposes Committee is a sub-committee of the Board of Directors and has responsibility for financial, staffing, accommodation and management information systems, strategies and policies; consideration of the OCN's business plans and annual operating and capital budgets; the development of the OCN's human resources policies; and the monitoring and evaluation of budgets and the policies within its remit. The Committee considers and recommends to the Board applications for membership of the OCN.

50   The Committee's constitution provides for up to six members, at least three of whom must be trustees. It is currently chaired by the Chair of the Board and includes the Chief Executive as an ex-officio member. It meets three times annually and has provision for ad hoc meetings to take place when necessary. There is provision for the co-option of up to two additional non-voting members in order to provide the Committee with particular expertise in those areas for which it is responsible.

51   In recent years, the development of WNYOCN into an independent limited company with charitable status has inevitably placed heavy demands upon the Finance and General Purposes Committee. The Committee's detailed terms of reference, its clear lines of report and the delineation of those areas in which it works in conjunction with the Chief Executive, have all contributed to the effective way in which the process of transition to the OCN's current legal and constitutional status has been conducted.

Organisational structures

Management, administration and staffing

52   WNYOCN, as a fully incorporated limited company, is responsible for employing its staff of 11 full-time and four part-time staff. The team is led by the Chief Executive and consists of the Quality Manager, Operations Manager, Finance Manager, Staff Development Tutor, Accreditation Officer, four development workers (one of whom is specifically dedicated to Access to HE) and five administrators, one of whom is recently appointed and has exclusively Access to HE responsibilities. The policies and procedures for staff are outlined in a Staff Handbook and the Operations Manual.

53   The staff met by the review team had clear and up-to-date job descriptions outlining their areas of responsibility and specific duties. In addition to their participation in the annual Strategic Planning Day (see paragraph 16, above), each member of staff is also involved in reviewing progress towards the OCN's strategic aims at the halfway point during the operational year. They each work to individual action plans negotiated with line managers and related to the OCN's strategic plan.

54   Since the administration of the AVA is fully integrated with that of the OCN, all staff may, in principle, have some dealings with Access matters. However, it is particularly worth noting that the Development Worker with responsibility for Access to HE (0.6 FTE) has the specific task of providing strategic advice in support of Access to HE provision and is responsible for ensuring that the QAA's criteria for licensing are met. This Development Worker reports to the Quality Manager and, as a deliberate strategy, the AVA has tried to promote a strong link between the work of these two officers. The Quality Manager in turn reports to the Chief Executive and has line management responsibility for all the OCN's development workers, moderators, staff development tutors and the Accreditation Officer.

Quality assurance responsibilities

55   Under the Chief Executive, responsibility for quality assurance lies with the Quality Manager who, by virtue of her line management of the development workers and the Accreditation Officer, together with her attendance at meetings of the Quality Assurance and Access to HE committees, is well placed to ensure the effective articulation of quality processes throughout the AVA's structures. The post embodies a strong link between quality procedures and staff development activity, for which the Quality Manager is also responsible. The Accreditation Officer, who is responsible for the development and monitoring of the quality systems for recognition, validation and

moderation within the QAA and NOCN frameworks, has a particular responsibility for reviewing and processing all external moderator reports in order to identify quality assurance issues. These are then referred to the Quality Manager in order both to inform the work of the Quality Assurance Committee and to feed into the staff development programme. This programme is extensive and offers a commendable range of staff development activities; for 2001-02, for example, a large number of sessions are being offered on assessment, internal and external moderation, quality support for member organisations, and days for examination officers.

56   WNYOCN operates an integrated quality assurance system based upon the format for self-assessment found in the Common Inspection Framework. The *Account* acknowledges that this new approach is still under development; given also the relative newness of other key components of the AVA's quality assurance system, such as the Access to HE Committee and use of a lead moderator for Access, the review team would recommend that an evaluation of the remits of staff with quality assurance responsibilities is included in the overall review of quality assurance structures referred to above (see paragraph 48).

57   WNYOCN's staff are not only responsible for quality assurance procedures relating to provision; they participate in well-established reflective processes, designed to ensure the quality of the management and administration offered by the OCN. The emphasis on self-assessment is a notable feature of the AVA's operations, which appears to serve it well in providing a mechanism for responsiveness to changing circumstances.

Data management collection and analysis

58   Many of the AVA's quality assurance processes are supported by the Advanced Revelation (A-Rev) database system, on which details of all programmes, including any conditions imposed by recognition panels, are recorded. Some serious problems have been experienced in operating this database, and the Council of Members noted in July 1999 that 'The current A-Rev database is now reaching its capacity for optimum operation'. The situation is exacerbated by occasional failures on the part of providers to send in data. This has contributed to difficulties in the provision of data, both within the AVA itself and in reports to QAA. The statistics proforma submitted to QAA in December 2000, for example, provided only one year's data rather than three. Although data for the missing years was subsequently provided later that month, when the AVA's revised Annual Report was submitted in April 2001, the statistical proforma again included data only for 1999-2000, albeit with some small amendments. The

system is apparently able to impose an automatic block on registering learners aged under 21 for Access to HE provision, which makes the appearance of a category of 'under 19' and '19-25' learners in some of the AVA's statistical tables somewhat surprising.

59   Although the *Account* states that the AVA 'has effective systems for collecting, recording and holding data about access to HE programmes', the review team was informed that there is still some concern about the AVA's data, and the unreliability or incompleteness of statistical information ran as a thread through discussions with the AVA's main committees. The team noted, in particular, that the absence of reliable statistics made more difficult the task of addressing the strategic issues facing the AVA, such as the declining numbers of students on Access courses or the acknowledged under-representation of ethnic minorities (see paragraphs 24 and 25, above).

60   The team was assured that plans were in hand for the significant improvement of the AVA's ICT infrastructure and that current systems would be replaced by 2002-03, as a result of the implementation of the final phase of NOCN's national ICT strategy. This is welcome, but earlier action may be required in order to ensure that the AVA has data collection systems which are adequate for supplying reliable data to meet QAA's requirements and which can be used to inform and underpin strategic approaches to the areas of concerns which the AVA itself has identified. The AVA has already recognised in its *Account* that 'it needs to collect more data, improve the consistency of the data collected and allocate more resources to scrutinise the data in relation to benchmarking and trend analysis'. The team concluded that, for the effective implementation and monitoring of the effectiveness of its work, such action is essential.

Communications with providers

61   Alongside communication through the formal committee and organisational structures already described, the AVA communicates through a range of publications for providers and the day-to-day contacts which its officers have with its staff in providing institutions. Publications include the *Quality Assurance Handbook*, to which reference has already been made, *Guidelines for Writing a Submission for Accreditation,* an *External Moderation Handbook*, the aforementioned *Simple Guide to Membership and Charging* and a brochure for the staff development programme. All publications seen by the review team were attractively designed, well written and thoughtfully structured. It was clear from discussions during the visit that they were familiar to providers and well used by them. In their clarity and for the transparency which they bring to the AVA's procedures and structures they are worthy of

commendation. The team also found substantial evidence of the regularity and quality of communication from the AVA's officers to staff in providing institutions. Advice and support for each of the stages of development, assessment and moderation of Access provision is available and highly valued.

The development, validation and evaluation of Access programmes

Development and validation of new provision

62   The development of new Access programmes is usually initiated by providers but, through the Development Worker (Access to HE), the AVA provides advice and support from the earliest stage. The support is often proactive; the review team heard that the Development Worker facilitates liaison between institutions for purposes of programme development and is able to provide advice on good practice. This advice is supported by the detailed description of the AVA's procedures found in the *Quality Assurance Handbook* and *Guidelines for Writing a Submission for Accreditation*. WNYOCN uses a standard submission document, revised on an annual basis, which provides guidance on the requirements for a programme submission. Requirements include programme information; details of funding; aims and purposes; target groups; a description of arrangements for quality assurance and moderation; an indication of the resources that will be available for the programme and structures for achievement, progression, recruitment, admissions and the guidance and support of learners. Every programme submission must also include a statement of the organisation's equal opportunities and health and safety policies. The document has been revised in recent years in response to the requirements of NOCN and QAA and also as a result of regional consultations between AVAs in the north of England. For the last two years, the submission document has been provided on disk. In constructing a new Access programme, member institutions are able to draw on a large bank of approved units; the unitisation of WNYOCN's provision across the board has made this possible.

63   Once the programme is in advanced draft form, the Development Worker (Access to HE) will set up an internal pre-panel approval process which involves the whole development team and is co-ordinated by the Quality Manager. If at this stage the draft is approved, then the proposal will go forward for the consideration of a validation panel. The panel is composed according to written guidelines designed to ensure cross-sectoral membership and Access to HE panels must have at least two HE representatives in membership. The panel is also required to include at least two members who are external to the submitting institution but, as in at

least one example seen by the review team, may include a large number of representatives from the provider. Other than in exceptional circumstances, the presence of the proposed external moderator is required. In future, the Chair will be a member of the Access to HE Committee, as part of the role which it is intended that the Committee should now exercise in the AVA's approval processes. The Development Worker is present to advise the Chair on procedural matters and generally to assist in the panel's deliberation. The *Quality Assurance Handbook* contains written guidance for panel chairs which explicitly states that the Chair is the formal representative, or 'ambassador', of WNYOCN.

64   Either the Development Worker or the Accreditation Officer will be charged with writing the panel report. This will be read by the Chair before being sent to the submitting tutor, which WNYOCN commits itself to doing within two weeks of the panel. The report will include an indication of any amendments required by the panel and will either recommend recognition for five years or one year, with any conditions or recommendations which the panel may wish to make. Alternatively, the programme might be referred back for further development. The panel recommendations for Access to HE courses are then sent on to the Access to HE Committee which now has, as has already been noted, final responsibility for granting approval.

65   A recently introduced feature of the AVA's validation process have been unit approval panels which take place prior to the main validation panel itself. Unit approval panels include consultative members from HE and members with appropriate subject expertise. The consideration of similar units from different providers at the same unit approval event enables the AVA to consider equivalence across programmes and has therefore, it believes, provided an important element of standardisation across diverse provision. Feedback from the unit approval panels is then passed on to the full validation panels.

66   Revalidations of provision essentially follow the same process and there is a recognition on the part of the AVA that the planning cycle and support needs for revalidation can often be almost as demanding as for completely new provision. The *Quality Assurance Handbook* also contains advice on the procedures to be followed in making changes to a recognised programme. The guidelines help providers to distinguish those changes which are relatively minor and can be approved by the external moderator from those which require the consideration of a 'mini-panel' convened by the AVA or which are substantial enough to require a full panel for revalidation.

67   The review team was satisfied that the AVA's

procedures provided a comprehensive and robust framework for the development and validation of QAA-recognised Access programmes.

Monitoring, evaluation and review of programmes and procedures

68   WNYOCN's procedures for evaluation and review are based strongly on the reports provided by external moderators. The Quality Manager has overall responsibility within the AVA's structures for ensuring that issues raised through moderators' reports which relate to the quality of provision are raised, as appropriate, with providers and with the AVA's committees. Appropriate arrangements are in place to ensure that such matters are also brought to the attention of the AVA's committees (see paragraph 47).

69   Less formal parts of the evaluative process include tutor forums organised by the AVA which, in addition to providing briefings on current issues and the sharing of good practice, also enable Access moderators collectively to feed back any concerns which they may have to the Quality Manager.

70   During the process of integrating the processes and procedures of the AVA and OCN activities within WNYOCN, the requirement for Access course providers to submit annual reports on each course was dropped. The AVA has recently reconsidered this decision and is reintroducing a requirement for a formal annual report from each course, which will be submitted to the Access to HE Committee. It is hoped that the reappearance of these reports will not only reinforce the ability of the AVA to evaluate and monitor its recognised provision but also to address some of the statistical difficulties to which reference has already been made.

71   WNYOCN has structured methods for monitoring and evaluating the recognition process itself. An evaluation report for each panel, produced by the AVA staff involved in the panel on the basis of written feedback from panel members, is read by the Access to HE Development Worker and the Chair of the panel, and any resulting issues are reported to the Quality Manager for action. The Quality Manager coordinates an annual review of the AVA's panel processes which is submitted to the Access to HE Committee. The panel evaluations also feed into an internal review process conducted twice a year, which in turn results in recommendations for the improvement of the recognition process. The AVA offers direct support to member organisations in the form of training events on the accreditation process and best practice in writing a submission document. These are commendable processes, ensuring that the fruits of continual and inclusive self-assessment and review are then made available to staff in providing institutions through AVA-based training.

Assessment, moderation and award of certificates

Guidance on assessment

72   At the beginning of the period under review, the unitisation of programmes necessitated a focus on assessment practice. Recognising that this was a new area for most tutors, WNYOCN responded by establishing a staff development programme for tutors. The OCN has recognised a continuing need for support in this area and, since 1999, support for assessment in practice has featured as a coherent programme within an annual staff development calendar. The OCN also publishes a useful booklet, *Quality Standards in Assessment*, which gives clear guidance on the portfolio-based approach to assessment, and evidence and which contains a section specific to Access to HE provision.

73   When submitting a programme for accreditation, a provider is required to include a detailed description of the assessment strategy together with precise information about evidence collection and the recording of achievement. Where the programme is an Access to HE programme, the *Account* records that submitting tutors 'are encouraged by the Access development worker to include recognition of the diversity of assessment methods and evidence which may be appropriate for many non-traditional learners'. This is formally represented in the section of the *Quality Assurance Handbook* specifically relating to the development and recognition of Access programmes.

Standardisation

74   Over the past three years, the AVA has organised standardisation events to review assessment practice. These focus on curriculum by looking at specific units and allow for the review of assessment practice and further confirm the standardisation of the award of level and of credit. In particular, an Access to HE Study Skills event was held in March 2001, at which it was agreed that there was consistency in the application of level across the samples considered. The report of the meeting records that 'internal moderation is a key part of the quality assurance process and is vital in ensuring standardisation in assessment practice'. As a particular outcome of the meeting, those present agreed to develop common study skills units. This development was taken forward by the Access Development Worker in further meetings with tutors and the units presented to Unit Approval Panels in July 2001. However, in its *Account* the AVA comments that these units 'were not all adopted by the practitioners, which demonstrates the tension between WNYOCN's promotion of standardisation in the interest of efficiency and quality, and the provider's desire to keep their individuality in the curriculum'.

75   In its *Account*, the AVA states that 'it has made considerable efforts to engage Access practitioners and moderators in standardisation events and will be introducing an element of compulsion to ensure that participation in these activities is prioritised in the future'. (This comment follows several references to the organisation's recognition of the difficulties faced by part-time FE tutors in attending AVA events, standardisation events in particular). The *Account* also notes, in relation to regional standardisation, that all colleges will be 'required to attend and provide samples' and that 'Any organisation not sending a representative or a sample will be referred to the Access to HE Committee.' The review team was informed that the reference to 'compulsion' should not be seen as implying that sanctions were to be applied but rather that the AVA would monitor attendance very closely. In this respect the team noted that the Access to HE Action Plan for 2001-02 included the indicator '80% attendance of organisations at Access to HE standardisation'. While the team considered the AVA's approach to engaging Access practitioners and moderators in standardisation events to be a positive and realistic response to a difficult situation, it would nonetheless advise the AVA to explore what its formal response might be to situations in which its 'requirements' are not met.

Selection, appointment and training of moderators

76   External moderators are recruited, trained and appointed by WNYOCN. These processes are managed by the Quality Manager and monitored by the Quality Assurance Committee, with appointments being confirmed by the Committee. The criteria for appointment for all WNYOCN moderators are appropriate, including relevant subject specialisation or experience in a particular curriculum area and externality to the providing organisation. In addition, external moderators for Access to HE programmes are always members of staff from local HEIs. The appointment of all external moderators is confirmed in writing with an explicit contract. The contract is for three years and is confirmed annually in writing at the start of each academic year. One-day induction training is a requirement of contract and the review team heard from moderators that this policy is strictly applied. Additionally, the AVA now requires all moderators newly appointed since September 2001 to attend accredited training, except where they can claim APEL.

77   External moderators are given clear and appropriate guidance on the conduct of moderation and the responsibilities of the role in the *External Moderation Handbook* (which includes specific sections on Access to HE courses). These responsibilities include supporting programme development; addressing any specific concerns of the panel; sampling assessed

evidence to verify learner achievement; ensuring consistency in application of level and assessment practice; and the provision of clear written feedback through reports on their visits. In this last respect, moderators are required to visit the programme at least once near the start of the programme run with a Visit report form completed and to attend the final moderation meeting and produce an Annual Review report, to standard headings, to be submitted to WNYOCN.

78   These procedures for Access to HE programmes follow the standard pattern required for all WNYOCN's provision, but Access moderators are asked in particular to comment on progression opportunities as well as resources, guidance, internal quality assurance and internal moderation and assessment practice. This detailed guidance is provided in the *External Moderation Handbook*, which the review team considered especially clear and comprehensive.

79   Where appropriate or necessary, several moderators are appointed to a programme to provide sufficient expertise. In particular, the AVA has appointed a Core Moderator for the multipathway programme at Calderdale College. The review team noted that the outline of the role included provision of an overview of the quality of the whole programme (by sampling courses or learners), reading of all Moderator Annual Review reports on the particular pathways, and the submission of an annual report to WNYOCN.

80   The organisation provides various relevant events open to Access moderators, in particular through its staff development calendar. However, the *Account* expresses the AVA's concerns about the low take-up of training by Access moderators and by the relatively low attendance rates at seminars and other events. In response, the AVA has established an Access Moderators' Forum and has also appointed a Lead Moderator with the aim of promoting good practice in moderation and assessment for the Access to HE provision in the region. This appointment, created for 2000-01 includes responsibilities in the areas of facilitating the Moderators' Forum; maintaining contact with all moderators in an advisory capacity (with establishment of an electronic network to support this); recording all issues raised by Moderators and report to WNYOCN; and promotion of good practice through meetings with programme co-ordinators. Furthermore, the appointee has responsibilities regarding the promotion of the OCN's Access provision with HE Admission Tutors in the region and also regarding the tracking of learners and obtaining statistics on achievement and retention, with each of these conducted in liaison with the Access Development Worker.

81   The review team found the arrangements for selection, appointment and training of external moderators to be clearly expressed and understood, and consistently applied. It considered the AVA's response to difficulties in engaging Access moderators in its events to be appropriate, but noted the AVA's recognition that, at the time of the review, it was too soon to evidence the impact of the Lead Moderator appointment in this respect.

Internal moderation

82   The (QCA) requirement that all assessment decisions on accredited programmes are internally moderated was implemented in September 2000. This is reflected in the current *Guidelines for Writing a Submission for Accreditation,* which require a description of the internal moderation system in full, specifying the model used and showing how it meets the OCN's standards. Summary guidance specific to Access programmes is given in the *Quality Assurance Handbook.* Particular reference is made to the fact that Access programmes often involve large teams of tutors working across several disciplines and issues to be addressed include the structure of internal team meetings, staff development and consistency of standards across the whole programme. The external moderator is required to have an overview of the internal moderation system, advise on its implementation and report to the institution and to WNYOCN as part of the Annual Review report.

83   The *Account* states that the AVA provides internal moderation training days and that its Quality Manager offers colleges in-house team training to provide advice on setting up an internal moderation system with the further comment that 'This has been widely taken up but not in relation to Access to HE programmes. The AVA intends to promote this offer more effectively to Access Co-ordinators in the future.' Recalling the comment from the record of the Study Skills event about the significance of internal moderation in ensuring standardisation in assessment practice (see paragraph 74, above) and noting, for example, specific suggestions in a 2000-01 moderator report as to how internal quality standardisation can be further developed, the review team recommends that the AVA attach high priority to such promotion.

Receipt of and response to moderation reports

84   As noted previously (paragraph 77), moderators are required to provide WNYOCN with a Visit report and an Annual Review report. An important element of the Visit report is comment on how matters raised in previous moderator reports have been addressed. The Annual Review report is copied to the principal of the college with a copy to the course co-ordinator asking that it be circulated to the staff team. All reports are

logged by the Accreditation Officer under the guidance of the Quality Manager and the AVA maintains an issues file for each institution. Reports are sent with a covering letter highlighting any issues and indicating the necessary response. Any serious matters of concern are passed to the Quality Manager who follows them up personally with the organisation and records the outcome.

85   On the basis of evidence gathered during the review process, the review team concluded that external moderators have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities and that the moderation system for Access provision is effective and robust.

Procedures for the award of the Access to HE certificate

86   All assessment portfolios must be internally moderated prior to the final moderation meeting. The external moderator is required to review the completed assessment evidence for a sample of learners either at the final meeting or by reading submitted portfolios in advance. When the level and credit is confirmed by the sampling process, and the relevant moderation forms recording the achievement of learners have been signed by the internal moderator to confirm internal moderation, the external moderator signs these forms. WNYOCN will not certificate any learner whose moderation form has not been signed by an internal and external moderator. As regards the award of a QAA-recognised Access to HE Certificate, the *External Moderation Handbook* specifically states that the external moderator is responsible for ensuring that the moderation forms are accurate and that learners have been awarded the certificate only where they meet the given requirements. Moderation forms are checked in the WNYOCN office for accuracy, in particular against credit achievement requirements for the Access certificate. This process is supported appropriately by the database on which all learner registrations are held. The review team concluded that these systems were thorough and rigorous.

Learner experience, standards and progression

87   The review team heard from former Access students that, generally, they had been well prepared for entry to higher education. Higher education admissions tutors supported this, identifying particular strengths of Access students in relation to study skills. These views accorded with the findings of a survey, conducted by the Development Worker (Access to HE) in 1998 of the views of former WNYOCN Access students. The AVA intends to conduct a further survey in the current academic year (2001-02).

88   Students reported that they had been given opportunities during their Access programmes for their views to be considered either informally (principally through tutorials) or formally through a variety of means including feedback sheets, minutes from weekly group meetings chaired by students, and through interaction with moderators. Moderators are asked to report on feedback from learners in their reports. All providers are required to use learner evaluations and reviews to inform annual action-planning, and students cited instances of appropriate action which had been taken in response to comments that they had made. The review team considered that, with the addition of the recent re-introduction of the requirement that each provider should submit an Annual Course Report, these mechanisms were appropriate.

89   WNYOCN gathers information on Access to HE destinations by collating data obtained via Access programme providers. Students on Access programmes are asked to complete destination sheets detailing offers made and accepted for entry to HE or concerning other destinations. Although the AVA expressed appropriate caution relating to the inherent problem of reliability of such data, the given data does suggest a high degree of success in providing students on Access programmes the opportunity to participate in higher education. For 1998-99, of a total of 792 learner registrations (including under 21 year olds and part-time students not intending to complete their programme that year), 697 returns were received, and of those 440 specified the HE destination. For 1999-2000, the corresponding figures were 637, 420 and 289 respectively.

90   The review team heard references to a problem commonly faced by AVAs, namely difficulties with ease of access to, and reliability of, progression data about Access students in HE. It heard further references to the key importance of such data and of plans to renew attempts to obtain such data from local HEIs. The team recommends that such attempts should receive high priority.

Conclusions

91   West and North Yorkshire Open College Network (WNYOCN) provides an effective and efficient AVA service to its members, with due attention given to the quality assurance responsibilities of its AVA licence. Many aspects of the AVA's quality assurance procedures are well-developed and mature, such as, for example, processes for programme development and recognition; others reflect continuing attention given to changing circumstances which may call for revisions to processes such as, for example, some aspects of moderation. Procedures are generally well managed and implemented by the AVA's staff: there is evidence of effective support provided both by the organisation as a whole through its procedures and documentation,

and on the part of individual staff in their relationships with members. The published documentation is clear and comprehensive, including specific references to Access where appropriate, and the high quality and range of WNYOCN's publications provide a notable strength for the AVA in its communications with its members and users of its services.

92   Rather unexpectedly, in this context of efficient and thorough operational management, there is a major weakness in the collection and use of data, and, although the AVA is aware of this, it has not yet resolved the difficulties satisfactorily. While the AVA has taken measures to address some of the frailties in the collection of statistical data, the effectiveness of these measures has yet to be demonstrated, and the collation and analysis of data show some significant flaws. This has resulted in difficulties with use of data for strategic purposes, and WNYOCN's evaluation, planning and development in relation to Access are inevitably limited by this weakness. In addition, the AVA has, to date, been unable to provide reliable statistics to QAA in the categories required.

93   In the process of the development of the OCN, there was a concentration on the integration of AVA quality assurance structures and procedures with those applied to the OCN's non-Access work. More recently, there has been a reflection on what needs to be put in place to address the particular needs of QAA-recognised Access to HE programmes, and appropriate modifications and developments have been introduced, or are planned for introduction in the near future. The current period, in which some committee structures and quality assurance procedures are in a process of change, can be seen, therefore, as a result of the OCN's own self-assessment processes, together with an awareness of QAA's requirements. Some structures and mechanisms are very new and not yet fully embedded, such as, for example, the work of the Access to HE Committee and Access Lead Moderator, and it is therefore difficult to determine their effectiveness. Nonetheless, the introduction of these recent changes appears to be well-considered and, with the OCN's strong emphasis on self-evaluation, the structures are in place to review and revise them as necessary to ensure the continuing effectiveness of the AVA.

Commendations

94   The review team commends WNYOCN for:

i   the extensive range of activities made available to providers through its staff development programme;

ii   the high quality and comprehensiveness of its publications and the transparency which they bring to the AVA's procedures and structures;

iii   the thoroughness of its procedures for the evaluation of the programme recognition process, and the use made of evaluation for the enhancement of this process.

Recommendation to the ARLC

95   The review team recommends that WNYOCN be granted a conditional renewal of its AVA licence.

Conditions

96   Subject to the approval of the ARLC, WNYOCN's licence is renewed on condition that the AVA:

i   develops and clarifies the roles of the Quality and Access to HE Committees in relation to the AVA's quality assurance and development policies for Access to HE, with particular reference to the suitability of the committees' terms of reference and the effectiveness of their operation. These developments should be considered in a Board-level review which assesses the committees' work and makes recommendations for further action, as necessary, and which should be documented in a formal report to QAA;

(1 December 2002)

ii   ensures that it has the means to supply adequate and reliable data about Access to HE which will meet QAA's requirements, and which can be used to inform and underpin strategic approaches to areas of concern identified by the AVA, such as declining numbers or the under-representation of ethnic minorities.

(1 September 2002)

Recommendations

97   The review team recommends that WNYOCN:

i   includes an evaluation of the remits of staff with quality assurance responsibilities relating to Access to HE in the overall review of quality assurance structures referred to in Condition i, above;

ii   considers its categories for membership to ensure consistency and clarity in the AVA's documentation and practice;

iii   attaches high priority to its plans to:

●   develop the links between its strategic plan and its business plan;

●   consider how internal quality standardisation can be further developed;

●   renew attempts to obtain progression data from local HEIs.