

Greater Manchester Open College Network

FEBRUARY 2003

Published by
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ISBN 1 85824 965 1

All the Agency's publications are available on our web site www.qaa.ac.uk

Printed copies are available from:
Linney Direct
Adamsway
Mansfield
Nottinghamshire NG18 4FN

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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 programmes. QAA exercises this responsibility through a national network of authorised validating agencies (AVAs), which are licensed by QAA to recognise individual Access to HE programmes, and to award Access to HE certificates 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.

2 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. The ARLC is responsible for overseeing the process of AVA review through which AVAs are periodically relicensed. 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's licence should be renewed, are provided within the Recognition Scheme documentation. These criteria are grouped under the seven principles that provide the main section headings of this report.

3 Following the review of an AVA, a member of the review team presents the team's report to the ARLC. The Committee then makes one of five 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 **withdrawal** of licence for operation as an AVA;
- v **temporary renewal** of licence with request for further information by specified date (decision suspended).

4 This is a report of a review of the AVA function of the Greater Manchester Open College Network (GMOCN) undertaken by QAA. The Agency is grateful to GMOCN and to those who participated in the review for the willing cooperation provided to the review team.

The review process

5 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 GMOCN representatives and the QAA Assistant Director to discuss the requirements for the *Analytical Account* (the *Account*) and the process of the review; the preparation and submission by GMOCN 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 GMOCN to finalise the programme and other arrangements for the review visit.

6 The review visit took place on 11 and 12 February 2003. The visit to GMOCN consisted principally of meetings with representatives of GMOCN, including members of the Board of Directors, Quality Committee and Access to HE Quality Sub-Committee; representatives of the Access to HE Standing Panel and Access Forum; moderators for Access to HE programmes; current Access students and former Access students now studying in higher education; and representatives from higher education.

7 The review team consisted of Mr David Burtenshaw, Development Consultant for the Hampshire Authorised Validating Agency and Ms Sue Georgious, Director, Open College Network for Central England. The review was coordinated for QAA by Ms Kath Dentith, Assistant Director (Access).

The AVA context

Background and major developments since the last AVA review

8 The Manchester Open College Federation was established in 1981 and became incorporated, as the Greater Manchester Open College Federation, in 1995. It adopted its current name, the Greater Manchester Open College Network (GMOCN) in 2000.

9 The last review of the AVA was conducted by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) in April 1996. That review resulted in the renewal of the AVA's licence, with five conditions to be met. The conditions focused on the need for more analysis of student profiles and performance; links to improve liaison between further and higher education institutions and the AVA; and requirements to review various projects and recently revised arrangements. Substantial developments have taken place since that time,

although the AVA's *Account* acknowledges that some of the issues raised by the HEQC report continue to hold challenges for the AVA. In particular, the AVA recognises the need to increase the involvement of HE staff in the work of the AVA and to develop the coordination and articulation of providers' quality assurance procedures with its own. The review team noted that the recommendation in relation to the use of data also continues to be an area where the AVA's work would benefit from attention. (See paragraphs 60-61, below.)

10 At the time of the HEQC review, the AVA was based in offices in Manchester Metropolitan University, and received substantial support from the University, including services provided to the AVA at minimal cost. In addition, the Chief Officer was seconded from Manchester City Council, reflecting the original relationship between Manchester Open College Federation and the Council, in which the former was heavily subsidised by the latter. Since 1996, the GMOCN has achieved complete financial self-sufficiency, and the increasing strength of its financial position enabled it to move into independent office premises in 2000-01, and has allowed it to more than double the number of staff it employs. (See also paragraphs 54-58, below.)

Members and provision

11 GMOCN has a current membership of five higher education institutions (HEIs) (Bolton Institute of Higher Education, Edge Hill College of Higher Education, The Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Manchester and University of Salford); 10 further education colleges (FECs); and two adult and community education services. In addition, there are five providing institutions which use the AVA's services but which are not currently in membership.

12 Access to HE learner registrations account for 9.2 per cent of GMOCN's total registrations, but account for a much larger proportion of the OCN's activity and income, Access learners being awarded 41 per cent of all credits awarded by the OCN. In 1996, there were 81 recognised Access to HE programmes, delivered by 25 providers: in the current academic year, 47 programmes are delivered by 18 providers (16 post-16/FECs, one HEI and one independent provider). In discussing this apparent decline in provision, the AVA's *Account* refers to the trend towards larger programmes with multiple pathways, and explains that 23 out of the 47 listed are of this nature. While it is difficult in these circumstances to assess trends, figures for the issue of Access to HE certificates indicate some increase in the last four years, from 794 in 1999, to 928 in 2002.

13 Data which is held by the AVA about students' progression to HE suggests that students progress primarily to courses in nursing and subjects allied to medicine (27.5 per cent), and to social sciences (26.6 per cent). Two HEIs, the University of Salford and The Manchester Metropolitan University, are the dominant destinations (62.6 per cent). Only 14.1 per cent progress to non-member HEIs and 6.7 per cent to HEIs outside the North West region.

AVA statistics 2001-02

(as provided by the AVA in its annual report to QAA for 2001-02)

14 Providers offering Access to HE programmes	19
Access programmes available	70
Access programmes running	51
Access learner registrations	2,590
Access to HE certificates awarded	928

Principle 1

The organisation has a structure which is based on a partnership of members, including institutions which provide Access to HE programmes and institutions of higher education.

15 At incorporation in 1995, GMOCN was formally constituted as a membership organisation. The provisions of the *Articles of Association* stated that those who subscribed to the *Memorandum of Association* 'shall be members of the federation' and allowed for 20 members to be registered (with a provision to allow an increase in membership by the Board). The 16 organisations registering as members at incorporation each paid a one-off fee of £3,000, providing the original capital for the organisation, and became designated as 'founder members'. These included HEIs, FECs and adult education services in the Greater Manchester area. Those providers who were not founder members were designated 'user members'. Founder members had a guaranteed place on the Board of Directors; user members had no representation within the governance structure of GMOCN.

16 During the period up to 2000, the founder members constituted the full membership of GMOCN, with each being represented on its Board. A reduction from 16 to 14 members occurred as a result of mergers and one FEC moving membership to a neighbouring AVA. All members were involved with Access to HE provision as either providers or receivers of Access students. As a result of the decline in the number of members and the growth in provision, both Access to

HE and other OCN-accredited provision, the Board undertook a review of the membership arrangements in June 2001. The *Account* notes that the original concept of 'user member' had fallen into disuse and that no other organisations had been invited to apply, or had applied for founder member status under the original terms.

17 In 2001, a number of non-member providing organisations were invited to join GMOCN and, as a result, one additional organisation applied and was confirmed as a founder member by the Board in 2001. In September 2001, the Board proposed changes in the categories of membership to include 'founder' and 'other' members and these were approved by the AGM in 2002 and an amendment was made to the *Articles of Association*. This amendment defines the new category of members as those 'who pay a subscription annually'. Since the introduction of these new arrangements, two new 'other' (also described as 'annual' members) have been approved. Thus, despite the efforts of the OCN to increase its membership, the original founder members remain its key stakeholders, and, of the 18 Access to HE providers currently working with the AVA, only 12 are members of GMOCN. Eleven of these are founder members, the other one listed as an 'annual' member. The remaining six providers involved in the delivery of Access to HE provision make use of the accreditation services provided by GMOCN, but are not in membership.

18 The review team noted the OCN's commitment to developing and strengthening its membership base, and considered that the recent review of membership issues by the Board had been timely and seriously intended. However, it had failed to make a significant impact on widening the AVA's membership, and the *Account* acknowledged that 'the concept of membership in itself has not been particularly attractive'. The team sought to understand why this should be so and noted that the lack of any financial incentive, such as reduced charges for members, was reported as a key reason for lack of take-up. The team therefore recommends that GMOCN should reconsider its strategy for increasing its membership base, with the aim of securing a wider representation from providers and, in particular, ensuring that the full range of Access to HE providers is adequately represented within, and able to contribute to, the AVA's decision-making structures.

Membership application

19 A recently introduced *Position Statement on Membership and Accountability* (dated December 2002) sets out the categories of membership; rights, responsibilities and benefits of membership; and procedures for the admittance, refusal, suspension or withdrawal of membership. Organisations submit an

application form confirming how the work of the organisation supports the mission of GMOCN and that the organisation will undertake the duties as set out in the position statement. This is referred to the Board for approval. The Chief Officer, on payment of the membership fee, confirms approval in writing.

20 The review team noted the introduction of the *Position Statement* as an important step in articulating clearly membership rights and responsibilities for prospective members. The document is, however, presented as a policy paper rather than the basis of a formal agreement between the AVA and the member. The team considered that the current process and documentation did not constitute a formal agreement signed by both parties committing the AVA and the member organisation to their respective responsibilities and liabilities. The team therefore recommends that, in addition to the current *Position Statement*, GMOCN develops a formal membership agreement signed by the head of the applying organisation and the Chair of the AVA, that clearly defines the separation of the responsibilities, liabilities and authority of each party.

21 The review team concluded that GMOCN currently meets the criteria expressed under Principle 1. The team considered that the recent review of membership arrangements had begun to address the issues identified by GMOCN as important in widening the membership base of the organisation, but that further work was needed to secure a wider membership base through which the interests of all Access providers could be fully represented.

Principle 2

The organisation has governance structures which allow it to discharge its AVA responsibilities securely.

Constitution

22 GMOCN is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status: its constitutional base is therefore provided by its *Memorandum and Articles of Association*. GMOCN is accountable to its members through the AGM, which receives the annual report and audited accounts, appoints auditors and elects the Board of Directors in accordance with the procedures detailed in the *Articles of Association*.

23 The minutes of the OCN's AGMs confirm two sets of amendments to the original *Memorandum and Articles*: in 2000, in respect of its change of name and a revision to its *Mission Statement* (see paragraph 46, below); and in 2002, to introduce the two categories of membership, 'founder' and 'other' members and detailing representation of each on the Board (see paragraph 17, above, and paragraph 25, below).

24 The *Memorandum and Articles* define the legal status of the organisation and its public responsibilities and liabilities, and the Objects of the organisation are clearly stated as 'the promotion, maintenance, improvement and advancement of education of the public within Greater Manchester and its surrounding areas'. In the view of the review team, the current *Memorandum and Articles* set out the requirements and regulations necessary for the organisation in relation to its legal identity and functions and in order to meet the requirements of the licensing criteria.

Governance structures

25 The *Articles of Association* set out the regulations relating to governance, the conduct of general meetings, and the appointment and conduct of the Board of Directors. The Articles permit the Board to exercise all the powers of the company, and the Board has powers to make rules and regulations for the conduct of the organisation's business, as it deems necessary or desirable. While the Board has the general responsibility to 'manage the affairs' of the company, the Articles do not specify particular responsibilities, and there are no separate terms of reference for the Board. Directors are elected by the AGM from the membership up to a maximum of 20 individuals, with a quorum of three. The 2002 amendments to the *Articles*, introducing the category of 'other' members, identify up to 15 places to be available to founder members and up to five places for other members. Currently, therefore, all members are entitled to places on the Board. If the AVA's membership were to increase beyond 20, elections would take place, but this has not been necessary to date. Directors serve on an annual basis and there is no stated limit to the number of years a director may sit on the Board as a result of annual re-election.

26 The team was informed that the overall responsibility for the AVA licence resided with the Board of GMOCN, and it is able to exercise this responsibility through the work of committees to which it delegates responsibility and from which it receives reports. For the purposes of clarity, clear terms of reference for the Board, outside those provided within the *Memorandum and Articles*, would assist in articulating this responsibility and ensuring that AVA responsibilities and activities cannot become marginalized.

27 In practice, the review team heard that Access to HE continues to be a significant strategic consideration within the organisation and this is supported in the current strategic plan for GMOCN (see paragraphs 46-47, below). The team was able to confirm through its meetings with directors that they considered their responsibilities for Access to HE matters and the AVA licence as central to their role. It is recommended that this be more formally articulated in the constitutional documentation providing the Board's terms of reference.

28 Under the terms of the Articles, the Board may delegate any of its powers to a sub-committee consisting wholly of directors. As permitted by this provision, the Board has established two committees with powers to undertake specified duties on its behalf: the Finance and General Purposes Committee and the Quality Committee. It has also established an Access to HE Quality Sub-Committee which reports to the Quality Committee.

29 One result of this requirement that Board committees be composed wholly of directors is that it is not possible for GMOCN to take advantage of the full extent of experience which exists across the AVA. The founder member organisations have played a significant role in the development of the organisation and their representatives remain at the heart of all GMOCN's governance and executive structures. In the absence of increased interest in membership (see paragraphs 17-18, above) the representatives of these founder member organisations, who through the *Articles* also sit on all other sub committees of GMOCN, have been the key decision-makers and steer the direction and policy of the AVA. As a result of preparation for the present review, the Board decided in December 2002 to 'add protection against undue influence to the self assessment criteria for committees'. The review team noted this as a welcome development, and would recommend that the Board also considers the influence of committee membership requirements in this regard.

Finance and General Purposes Committee

30 The Finance and General Purposes Committee has a membership of five directors and is responsible for overseeing the financial position, staffing arrangements and general resourcing of GMOCN. Its terms of reference require the Committee to report directly to the Board through a standing agenda item. The minutes of this committee demonstrate strong governance in relation to financial policy and careful scrutiny of budgets and cash flow. On the basis of the evidence available to it, the review team formed the judgement that this committee met its responsibilities as specified within its terms of reference, and in respect of the licensing criteria.

Quality Committee

31 The Quality Committee has detailed terms of reference which state that it is 'responsible to the Board for the licences held from the National Open College Network (NOCN) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)'. The Committee oversees quality matters relating to accreditation including development, moderation and certification. The Committee's terms of reference specify that it 'will have a minimum of 6 members and a maximum of 12

members in total, with at least two members being from an HE organisation and with a majority being Board members'. The review team noted that this specification was not consistent with the specification in the Company's *Articles* that sub-committees be wholly composed of directors. However, co-options from 'suitably experienced people' are also allowed. The Committee is currently made up of six Board members (one of whom is from HE) and three co-options (one of whom is also from HE).

32 In June 2001, the Board agreed to the formation of a new sub-committee, the Access to HE Quality Sub-Committee (AHEQSC). The *Account* explains that this change was intended to 'provide a clear quality assurance focus on the specific requirements of the two licensing bodies, QAA and NOCN, and, in particular, to clarify the locus of authority for decisions about Access to HE'. The terms of reference support this intention, stating that the AHEQSC 'is responsible to the Board via the Quality Committee for the licence held from the QAA'. The review team was informed that this reporting relationship provided an effective means of ensuring that there was a separate focus for AVA matters, while recognising that many quality issues were common across the whole of the organisation.

33 The membership specification for the AHEQSC is identical to that of the Quality Committee given above (paragraph 31), the only difference being that, whereas the Quality Committee is chaired by the Deputy Chair of the Board, the AHEQSC is chaired by 'an HE member of the Board'. In practice, the Quality Committee and AHEQSC - which meet on the same day - operate with a common membership, differentiated only by the Chair (although, at the time of the review, the Chair of the Quality Committee was also chairing the AHEQSC for a temporary period until the new Chair took up his position). The committee and its sub-committee each has a quorum of three.

34 Minutes provided for the review of both the Quality Committee and the AHEQSC demonstrated that attendance at meetings over the period since the inception of the AHEQSC had been poor. Of five meetings of the Quality Committee and four of the AHEQSC, only three meetings had exceeded the quorum. The self-assessment report for 2000-01 recorded this weak attendance, noting, in relation to the OCN's committee meetings in general, that three Board members did not attend any meetings during the year. The AVA's *Account* noted this as a concern, indicating that the timing of meetings of the Quality Committee were to be changed to address the problem. Board members also confirmed to the team that they intended to consider the matter further during 2003. The AVA may wish to consider whether the constitution of its committees, resulting in the

expectation that a relatively small number of people will serve on several different committees, contributes to its difficulties in this respect.

35 The AHEQSC's terms of reference give it substantial responsibilities in relation to Access, including responsibility for the final approval of programmes; receiving reports on 'the development of procedures...with a view to promoting continuous improvement'; approving Access to HE moderators' reports; receiving reports on the moderation process and providers' reports and making recommendations to the Board on 'action to be taken on issues that affect the quality of that provision'. Minutes suggested, however, that the main business conducted by the AHEQSC, to date, focused primarily on the requirements of external demands, such as consideration of the AVA's annual report to QAA and discussion of the draft *Account* for the present review. Members reported to the team that substantial reading of paperwork prior to meetings was required and committee workloads were heavy, although the minutes seen by the team did not reflect this volume of activity. The team heard that discussions had been held with officers, in which the Quality Committee had expressed the view that minutes were not sufficiently detailed. The review team would concur with this view, and was concerned that the basis and detail of decisions made by the Quality Committee and AHEQSC, and their minuted records, were not sufficiently substantive to provide adequate records of the Committees' work for the purposes of external audit or scrutiny.

36 The review team heard from members of the Quality Committee and AHEQSC that the separation of business between OCN and AVA activity was not always well defined. This appeared to be related to a lack of clarity in the operation of the reporting relationship of the AHEQSC through the Quality Committee to the Board, exacerbated by the fact that it was the same group of people serving on each body. While the Board had decided, in establishing the AHEQSC that it should be a sub-committee of the Quality Committee, rather than a separate committee, the Quality Committee's minutes provided no evidence of the Committee having formally received and considered the minutes of the AHEQSC, while the Board itself had received AHEQSC minutes on a number of occasions. At best, the arrangements mean that the two committees are considering the same business twice. More worryingly, it appeared that these arrangements, intended to clarify the locus of responsibility for Access had led, in practice, to some uncertainty about where responsibility actually lay and how it should be exercised in relation to a number of important AVA matters. In the judgement of the review team, there is a lack of clarity in reporting responsibilities

and requirements (particularly where responsibilities are delegated) and the current arrangement risks confusion in the roles of the committees.

37 The *Account* reports that 'the first year of operation of the new structure has proved positive'. Having considered all the evidence presented to it, the review team was not able to agree entirely with this view, and concluded that it would be beneficial for the AVA to review its committee structures. While there is some merit in having a separate sub-committee to consider Access matters, it was not clear to the team what was gained by the current arrangement that could not be achieved with greater clarity by having standing items relating to Access on the agenda of the Quality Committee. If the present structure is to be retained, however, the team considered that a clearer separation of membership - drawing on relevant expertise and interest elsewhere in the AVA - and sharper delineation of the respective Access responsibilities of the Quality Committee and AHEQSC, would assist in providing a clearer focus on AVA matters, and would clarify reporting arrangements to the Board.

Access to HE Standing Panel

38 The committee structure detailed in the *Account* identifies the Access to HE Standing Panel (AHESP) as a sub-group of the AHEQSC, although it has a rather wider membership. The AHESP is chaired by the Chair of the AHEQSC and has a core membership (including representatives from each of the six HEIs in the area served by GMOCN) which is supplemented by others to provide an appropriate range of individuals for the consideration of particular programmes submitted for AVA recognition. The AHESP was established in 2001 to enhance the status of Access panels; increase the involvement of HEIs; and provide greater consistency in decision-making. The *Account* states that the AHESP has responsibility for the detailed approval process of Access programmes and agreeing the completion criteria on behalf of the AHEQSC. Its terms of reference also include a responsibility to 'provide advice to the AHEQSC on matters relating to the development, approval, moderation and continuous improvement of Access to HE provision'. Evidence presented to the review team, both in meetings and through the AVA's documentation, indicated that the establishment of this group had been extremely beneficial to the AVA. Minutes of its meetings are detailed, and the group has already been responsible for implementing new processes for approval and curriculum review.

39 The review team considered that the potential of this group to ensure consistency, coherence, quality development and innovation of Access to HE provision was significant. In its meeting with the team, the members of the group demonstrated detailed

knowledge of Access and a commitment to its development. However, its focus as a standing panel for programme approval, whose meetings are arranged to meet this particular purpose, places some limits on its ability to meet its wider remit (see paragraph 38, above). The team concluded that this group was already playing a significant role in the quality assurance and development of Access to HE provision within the AVA, and its achievements are to be commended. In the light of this, the team suggests that, in any formal evaluation of current committee arrangements, the particular value of this group should be considered.

Access Forum

40 GMOCN also supports an Access Forum, which is 'open to all Access to HE providers with programmes validated by GMOCN, and to HE receiving institutions'. Forum members meet to discuss matters arising from the AVA and from their own institutions, with officer support being provided by the AVA. The Forum's role in relation to sharing good practice, co-operating on joint initiatives and promoting Access to HE is defined in its terms of reference. Although the Forum has no formal place within the AVA's constitutional framework, it receives minutes of other committees, and minutes of the AHEQSC indicate that it receives reports from the Access Forum. Its terms of reference also give it a role in informing the development of GMOCN policy and practice by 'making recommendations to GMOCN staff and to the Board and its sub-committees'. It is also asked to 'consider and respond to requirements from licensing and regulatory bodies, in particular the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the National Open College Network (NOCN)'.

41 In reviewing the governance and committee structures within the AVA, the review team acknowledged that a number of changes had taken place in order to attempt to provide a clearer locus for decision-making related to the AVA and noted that these changes had not yet been formally evaluated. However, where decisions relating to specific aspects of the AVA's work are concerned, the current structures have not yet demonstrated the clear identification and effective operation of mechanisms for the development of Access. The reporting arrangements for the AHEQSC through the Quality Committee and then to the Board produce artificial divisions in the decision-making process and, as the membership of all of these bodies is almost entirely common, members are, at each point, reporting to themselves. The team was assured by Quality Committee members that it was their intention to review all of the recent structural changes introduced since 2001. The Board members had not set a date for any review at the time of the visit, although the Chief Officer suggested that it might be sensible to review the outcomes in the autumn of 2003. GMOCN

might consider building reviews into its formal processes, so that major changes to committee structures, as have happened in the past two years, are automatically evaluated and considered within the governance structures of the AVA.

42 In conclusion, therefore, the review team confirms that the AVA meets most of the requirements of the criteria expressed under Principle 2, but a number of actions should be taken to build on the changes which have recently taken place, which will enable the AVA to meet the criteria in full. First, GMOCN should establish a process for the evaluation of the current structures and constitutional arrangements for decision-making in relation to Access and AVA matters to consider the extent to which they fully meet the original objectives; secondly, it should consider the place of the AHEQSC within these structures as a sub-committee of the Quality Committee and, finally, it should revisit the place and contribution of the AHESP within the governance structures, in particular its relationship to the AHEQSC, to utilise the role and work of this important group more fully. The team would also recommend that GMOCN puts in place measures to ensure that the minutes of meetings record more carefully the details of the decision-making process, including clearer references to background papers, to provide a proper record of the basis of decisions taken by committees.

Principle 3

The organisation is aware of, and in position to meet, its legal and public obligations.

43 As previously noted, the legal identity of GMOCN has been secured by its decision in 1995 to become a company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital. The company has charitable status. This ensures that it has an adequate basis to enter legal agreements and prescribes its public liabilities.

44 The *Memorandum and Articles of Association* ensure that all financial arrangements are properly regulated. As the OCN is a registered company and charity, its accounts are subject to externally audited accounting procedures to fulfil the requirements of Companies House and the Charity Commission. The organisation's financial position is sound, with substantial reserves held for contingencies and additional funds available for development (see also paragraphs 50-51).

45 The company is independent of any other organisation and the review team concluded that, in all these regards, GMOCN met the criteria as set out in Principle 3.

Principle 4

The organisation is able to manage effectively its AVA responsibilities and the structure which supports them.

Aims

46 The company's statement of its Objects (see paragraph 24, above) is supported by the Mission Statement: 'The GMOCN exists, as a member of the NOCN, to widen access to, and participation in, high quality flexible education and training for learners who have benefited least from formal provision. It will promote equality of opportunity through the provision of a credit based accreditation service that is responsive to the needs of the member and user organisations and the wider needs of the region'. While the Mission Statement, like the Objects, makes no specific reference to Access to HE or progression to higher education more generally, it provides broad aims which are congruent with the Aims of the *Recognition Scheme*. Specific support of Access to HE is articulated within the *GMOCN Strategic Plan 2001-2004* which states that, in order to achieve its mission, GMOCN will 'develop its role as an Authorised Validating Agency by raising the profile of Access to HE and its role in widening participation in HE by promoting a coherent approach to provision to meet an increasing number of HE progression routes'.

Strategic planning

47 GMOCN operates a three-year strategic planning cycle and a new strategic plan was approved by the Board in December 2001 and endorsed by the AGM in February 2002. The *Strategic Plan 2001-04* includes five strategic objectives for the period to 2004, including the objective 'To provide a coherent framework of provision designed to promote access to and widen participation in a wide range of HE provision'. This is supported by two 'indicative targets and success indicators' for 2004: 'coherent framework adopted by all Access to HE providers', and 'enhanced curriculum to provide access to a wider range of HE programmes, especially to non-traditional progression routes'. Extensive consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders including the Learning and Skills Council, member organisations, staff and Board members informed the development of the current plan. The preparation of the annual report to QAA, undertaken by the AHEQSC, provides an opportunity for a focused consideration of areas for development of Access, which, in turn, informs the development of the strategic plan.

48 Annual operational targets set against the strategic objectives are agreed following consultation with senior managers of member organisations.

Ten operational targets are identified for Access to HE for 2002-03 and the operational plan notes progress to date against each target. Lead responsibility for meeting the targets rests with the Chief Officer and Development Officer, and targets are reviewed annually by the Board and, where necessary, revisions are made.

49 The evidence presented to the review team indicated that a strong strategic planning cycle was in place and that there were regular and thorough reviews of progress in meeting operational and strategic targets within GMOCN. The AVA is commended for the thorough and systematic methods used to compile and monitor its strategic plan.

Financial management

50 At the time of the HEQC review in 1996, GMOCN had just become incorporated and one of its aims was to establish a sound financial basis for the new organisation. Since then, the organisation has carefully managed its finances through both governance and management structures. Financial planning includes projections for a three-year period and an annual cycle of budget-setting and monitoring is overseen by the Board. Day-to-day responsibilities for finance lie with a full-time Finance and Resources Manager, who services the Finance and General Purposes Committee. Standard accounting procedures are used and appropriately clear and detailed financial regulations are in place covering the processes for the recording, controlling and monitoring of financial decisions.

51 AVA activity is treated as a part of GMOCN's overall activity and is not currently budgeted separately, although it is estimated that it contributes approximately one third of the organisation's annual income. GMOCN has accumulated a substantial reserve, which is subject to a reserves policy. This includes established criteria for agreeing how reserves should be allocated, such as requirements that proposals should provide value for money, be within mission, and that an analysis of the benefits of any work should be undertaken. The review team noted that a sum had been identified for developmental activity within GMOCN though, at the time of the review, no decision had been taken on how this would be spent. There was some suggestion, however, that part of the development fund might be used to co-fund Partnerships for Progression work in which the AVA was involved.

52 The link between risk assessment, developmental spending and Access provision was raised in meetings with Board members. The review team noted that external consultants would be likely to undertake any formal risk assessment and currently the Board had some

awareness of potential risks to Access to HE but was confident that it was deeply rooted within the AVA and was therefore secure. The team would recommend that the AVA, in considering developmental spending of the reserve, undertake a risk assessment relating to Access to HE provision to inform its decisions strategically.

53 The review team concluded that GMOCN had a strategic approach to financial planning, sound mechanisms for accounting and the management of its finances, and a financial base which is currently healthy and secure.

Staffing and resources

54 GMOCN employs 13 staff and contracts two additional people to deliver internal moderator and tutor assessor training. The review team noted the commitment of the Board to monitoring the adequacy of staffing. Of the three development officers, one has specific responsibility for Access to HE, and this currently occupies approximately 50 per cent of her time. Other staff, including the Quality and Standards Officer, support Access provision. Administrative staff, managed by the Accreditation Team Leader, support the administration of the registration and certification service for Access provision. The review team noted that additional clerical support for the Development Officer with Access responsibilities had been discussed.

55 The volume of work associated with the post of the Development Officer with Access responsibilities is significant, covering 18 providers and substantial Access to HE provision. The review team noted that, inevitably, much of the work undertaken was process or system based as a result of the demands on the time of this one officer. While the Development Officer's work in developing quality assurance procedures and providing guidance to providers about meeting the AVA's quality assurance requirements is valuable, it provides a restricted model of 'development'. Responsibility for more broadly based development projects associated with the AVA's strategic targets is not so readily identified in the AVA's staffing structures, although the Chief Officer takes responsibility for the AVA's involvement with external projects with which the AVA is associated.

56 There are a number of areas for development already identified by the AVA in which focused attention from an Access perspective would be of value. These include the proposed developments for curriculum review within the AVA; liaison with HE, especially in relation to the AVA's involvement at sub-regional level in Partnerships for Progression initiatives; and developments in relation to the 19-20 year old agenda. The review team considers, in the light of the current reserve held by GMOCN and the significant contribution

of Access to income generation, it may be timely for GMOCN to consider investing in additional officer time for Access matters, in order to ensure that it is able to meet its targets in this area in full.

57 GMOCN staff are well supported and a regular staff review process operates. A staff development plan is prepared annually, following job review interviews. The Chief Officer leads teams and has a significant input into strategic development work related to Access. The Chief Officer works closely with both the Finance and Resources Manager and the Quality and Standards Officer in servicing committees and keeping staff updated on strategic and operational developments.

58 In 2000, GMOCN took a 10-year lease on modern offices in Chorlton, five miles from the centre of Manchester, which provide adequate and appropriate accommodation for the AVA's current needs.

Information and data

59 The organisation has well-developed guidance on the operational procedures for the accreditation and administration of Access to HE provision. An Annual Circular is distributed to senior managers, examinations officers and moderators responsible for Access to HE provision at the beginning of each academic year, detailing operational requirements and procedures. Substantial detail on procedure is provided through an *Administration Pack* and standard documents are regularly updated. The review team scrutinised a substantial amount of such material and concluded that operational management and supporting information for providers was comprehensive and useful. The team also noted that members and providers were very satisfied with the support and service received from staff at GMOCN.

60 GMOCN operates the Advanced Revelation (ARev) database to support the operational management of Access provision and provide the basis for statistical reports to QAA. Some additional material is supplied by providers in their annual reports to GMOCN. Following comments from QAA in 2000, work has been undertaken with the annual data return from providers to improve the quality of data, particularly that on learner achievements. However, the review team noted some continuing anomalies in data returns for 2001-02, particularly in relation to withdrawals, with the AVA's data return recording no learner withdrawals. The review team was informed that this matter was to be addressed in the next data submission to QAA, so that a more accurate picture of achievement and non-completion would be available. In view of the fact that GMOCN is not currently fully meeting the licensing criterion relating to the provision of data, it was agreed that, as a condition of licence, GMOCN should demonstrate its ability to provide this data in the future.

61 The review team also considered that GMOCN would benefit from a more systematic approach to the collection and analysis of data, which considers not only GMOCN's need for data from an operational point of view and to meet the needs of its licensing bodies, but to consider what statistical information it needs in order to assess whether the AVA is meeting its aims and targets, and the part played by individual providers in achieving these.

62 The AVA's annual report to QAA is circulated to HEIs and a general OCN learner leaflet is available which includes a reference to Access to HE. The recently introduced annual award ceremony has been a successful development for promoting the success of Access learners. However, the review team found little evidence of the AVA's promotion of Access provision or its Access work, and the AVA does not have a strong role in informing students and HEIs about the requirements and opportunities for progression. The team noted that information was provided through the GMOCN website but concluded that the AVA could be more proactive in this area of its work. Further, the team considered that greater use of data and statistical analysis to inform the development and analysis of Access by the AVA, providers and HEIs would add another dimension to decision-making for the future.

63 In conclusion, the review team considered that the licensing criteria expressed under Principle 4, with the exception of that concerning data requirements, had been met. The team would recommend that the AVA adopts a more systematic method for the evaluation and use of statistical data to review, develop and promote Access provision for the benefit of learners, providers and receiving HEIs in the region. The team would further recommend that the AVA review its staffing requirements and allocation for Access.

Principle 5

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 recognition.

Programme development

64 Development work with potential providers and in relation to new programmes is undertaken by the Development Officer who manages the programme development process, according to GMOCN's established procedures, working with and supporting providers at the different stages of the process, including the preparation of programme documentation.

65 In the autumn term, the Development Officer meets providers whose programmes are due for review or who wish to develop a new programme, and

timescales are established to bring submissions to approval panels. The process is supported by established administrative procedures which track the various stages of development, enabling the AVA to manage the panel process efficiently. This planned approach was introduced in autumn 2002 to overcome difficulties experienced with submissions reaching the AVA after deadlines, with consequent difficulties for assuring the robustness of the panel process.

66 The AVA's *Access to HE Submission Document*, which provides the pro forma to be completed for providers wishing to develop programmes and/or new units, is supported by published *Access to HE Submission Advice*. The guidelines within the *Submission Document* and the *Submission Advice* are clear and cover the range of appropriate detail about the programme which providers are required to give. GMCN also has a *Code of Practice for Access to HE*, first developed in 1995 and regularly reviewed since then. The *Code of Practice* recommends that 'the curriculum for an Access programme is devised in consultation with potential HE receiving institutions', and the submission is required to 'show evidence of liaison with HEIs'.

Programme recognition

67 The AHESP (see paragraphs 38-39, above) has a formal responsibility to 'conduct programme approval and review in accordance with the requirements of QAA'. Its terms of reference explain that it 'will form the core membership of the panels held to approve Access to HE programmes', the rest of a panel's members being invited for their contribution to the business of the particular panel, including subject specialists, moderators and those submitting the programme. The revised *Panel Pack* provided to the review team at the review makes clear that submitters 'participate in the discussion of programmes put before the panel but final decisions regarding approval rest with the regular appointed members of the AHESP'. This statement did not seem wholly consistent with the later statement in the *Panel Pack* that 'panel decisions are reached by consensus, and the views of all members of the panel are given equal consideration'.

68 The *Panel Pack* outlines the two-stage process of programme approval, which is being introduced during the current academic year. The first stage covers an appropriate and extensive range of areas relating to the programme and its delivery context, including the programme's aims, target groups, intended progression routes, programme structure, successful completion criteria, and information about the providing organisation's resources and standard policies and procedures. Part 2 focuses on the curriculum in terms of appropriate knowledge and skills, their level and assessment and support for independent learning. The AVA has introduced a system of Lead and Subject

Readers: Lead Readers are appointed from the AHESP and they lead questioning at panels on Part 1 of the submission; Subject Readers are Access to HE moderators who have responsibility for scrutinising the curriculum content of the proposed programme.

69 Members of AHESP emphasised that the introduction of the standard format had made requirements clearer, and this contributed to a more consistent approach which would lead to greater commonality and comparability. The earlier availability of a calendar of approval panel meetings has also contributed to improvements in the security and robustness of procedures by improving panel members' attendance. As previously noted, the AHESP has only been operational for one full academic year and the process described above is being implemented for the first time this year. The new processes will clearly need evaluation and review, as will the introduction of Centre Approval in relation to Access to HE provision. Nonetheless, the review team considered that the new systems and procedures were thorough and rigorous, and early indications suggest that the introduction of the AHESP has already brought considerable improvements to the programme approval process, not least because of the commitment of the AHESP itself to bring about such improvements, and its willingness to revise its procedures in the light of experience.

Programme approval

70 The *Panel Pack* explains the possible outcomes of an approval panel, stating that 'the panel can: approve the programme with immediate effect, with no changes; approve the programme with conditions; approve the programme with recommendations; refer the programme for further work'. While a later section in the *Panel Pack* explains that 'the programme cannot run until the final document is approved', it is not otherwise made clear that the panel's approval of the programme is subject to any further approval process, or what the process for this final approval might be.

71 The review team noted with concern that 29 per cent of the programmes reviewed in 2002 did not meet the conditions within the timescale. The *Account* noted that, in some instances, providers had apparently not understood what was required of them, and the AVA planned to introduce panel condition workshops to assist providers to meet conditions on time. The AVA has also recognised the need to spend more time on agreeing words and conditions in panel reports to ensure clarity of expectation. The team would recommend that written guidance is developed for inclusion in the *Panel Pack* when it is next reviewed, about what should constitute a condition, as distinct from a recommendation or textual amendment, in order to contribute to further clarity and consistency of approval decisions.

72 The review team noted that the Development Officer was responsible for post-panel procedures, for tracking and ensuring compliance with panel conditions. Rigorous administrative procedures are in place for ensuring the alteration of documentation to reflect changes brought about by providers' response to conditions and preparing the AVA's systems for the newly approved programme, after which 'providers are sent notification that they can register students on the programme'. It is, apparently, after this that the Development Officer reports to AHEQSC and AHESP. Although the AVA's *Account* states that 'final approval of programmes is confirmed by AHEQSC', it further explains that 'a report on how conditions were met is added to the agendas of the Access to HE Standing Panel and Quality Committee meetings during the Autumn term of the following academic year'. As most programmes start running at the beginning of the autumn term, programmes will be running before they have received 'final approval' by the Quality Committee. It appears, therefore, that responsibility for the approval of the programme which sanctions the registration of students on a programme, lies, in effect, with the officer. While the officer may take advice from the Chair of the AHESP, this is neither a requirement nor a consistent practice.

73 The review team was concerned to note that, in spite of much-improved processes to clarify the formal approval of Access programmes, this final step in the process appeared to depend on an officer decision. Where conditions are imposed, there is no system in place which requires the provider's response to conditions to be reported and confirmed as satisfactory by the appropriate body prior to permission being given for the programme to run.

74 While the minutes of the Access to HE Sub-Committee of September 2002 recorded that 'the panel approved the list of new Access to HE programmes recognised since the last meeting', it was unclear what the reference to 'the panel' signified in this context. The accompanying committee paper provided a simple list of programme names, with no information to identify conditions or confirmation that they had been met. The team considered that neither the minutes themselves, nor the accompanying committee paper, provided an adequate formal record of the approval of individual programmes.

75 The review team concluded that GMOCN's recently adopted process for programme recognition, including a consistent, experienced core to the panel membership, a clearly focused two-stage process and the allocation of responsibilities to Lead and Subject Readers provided a rigorous model for Access programme recognition which had every indication of being successfully applied. While it remains to be seen whether these

processes deliver the consistency of academic standards intended, early outcomes reported to the team suggest that improvements in this area are likely.

76 In order to meet the criteria set out under Principle 5 in full, however, the AVA is required to ensure that the responsibility for final programme approval, including the monitoring of any conditions that are set, lies with the AVA itself, not with one of its officers, and that programmes do not run until all conditions have been met; definitive documentation has been received; and final approval has been granted. The AVA should also ensure that the responsible committee receives sufficient information to carry out its responsibility for programme approval, to include information about any conditions that have been set and that its minutes record by name the final approval of each programme. The review team also recommends that, in its next revision of the *Panel Pack* for Access to HE, the AVA clarifies the approval procedure to ensure that all those involved in the panel process are clear where responsibility, including ultimate responsibility, for approval lies.

Principle 6

The organisation is able to safeguard the continuing quality of Access to HE programmes, and to secure the standards of achievement.

Moderation processes

77 GMOCN introduced a revised moderation model in 2001-02 which, after some teething problems, was refined in November 2002. The new process responds to QAA's requirement for curriculum expertise in moderation and the AVA's observation of the trend towards larger framework provision. The AVA has introduced 'lead' and 'subject' moderators for such provision, with 'programme' moderators being maintained on programmes where the moderator has 'a sufficient range of subject expertise to feel competent to moderate the entire range of subject modules being delivered within the programme'. The *Access to HE Moderation Guidelines* make it clear that the AVA's expectation is that such feelings of competence will relate to programmes in which 'modules are developed in mainly one subject area plus core skills', whereas lead and subject moderators are appointed to general Access programmes and multi-pathway frameworks where the spread of curriculum areas is broader.

78 The lead and subject moderators work as a small team of usually not more than three, although it is the lead moderator's responsibility to identify the need for additional subject moderators. The lead moderator (who also has subject moderation responsibilities) has a coordinating role. Subject moderators report to the lead moderator after each visit and before the final award

visit, and the lead moderator has responsibility for submitting the final report to GMOCN on the basis of the subject moderators' observations.

79 The Salford Scheme provides a further variant to the general GMOCN model. The scheme was originally designed by the University of Salford to provide a unified curriculum and common units with a number of 'associated colleges' working with a consortium of centres. The provision was accredited by GMOCN in 1997, although the University still plays a key coordinating and developmental role. In this case, pathways are moderated across the four consortium members. This model provides greater comparability of standards on pathways and GMOCN is currently evaluating its effectiveness.

80 The *Access to HE Moderation Guidelines* provide detailed guidance to moderators about their role and responsibilities, with timescales for each activity and a clear agenda for each of the three visits that are required by the AVA. Much emphasis, especially in the spring term, is placed on subject moderators reviewing content, delivery and assessment against the submission document, and scrutinising records and internal moderation procedures. All visits trigger reports to GMOCN.

81 Moderators leave action plans with the providers. To avoid the danger that there could be a plethora of action plans and action agendas at a variety of levels, and to reduce the demands on institutions and fit better into institutional quality cycles, moderators are moving to a system of joint action planning with providing institutions.

82 As the new system has only recently been introduced, GMOCN has not yet assessed its effectiveness, but moderators reported improved operation of the process this academic year, and the review team considered that the processes described provided a sound basis for effective moderation.

Moderator selection, appointment and training

83 The procedures for appointing moderators are clear, and procedures for termination of contracts are in place. The *Account* records that the recruitment of moderators is proving difficult, apparently because of the time commitments required of moderators in addition to their normal duties at their place of work. The current list of moderators includes five 'independent' moderators (ie not employed by any of the AVA's member organisations) but only three moderators come from HE members.

84 Appointments are made for three years, renewable on an annual basis. Many moderators have been employed by GMOCN for a number of years on this

basis, moderating a series of different programmes. The experience and practice of such moderators, across a range of the AVA's programmes, provides a contribution to consistency of judgements about the quality and standards of programmes, as well as ensuring some reasonable continuity of moderation for providers.

85 GMOCN offers initial and refresher training specific to Access to HE moderation. Mandatory training for moderators was introduced this year, with the explicit aim of introducing moderators to the revised moderation model.

Monitoring and responding to moderation

86 The AVA operates a detailed procedure for handling moderators' reports within the office: all moderators' reports are read by officers; any serious matters of concern identified by the moderator are followed up with the head of the providing institution; moderators' comments are 'graded' in relation to each section of the report; and results are entered on to a spreadsheet which provides a record of previous moderation and moderation results across the provider organisation and, by topic, across different institutions. A copy of the moderator's report is returned to the organisational contact, usually the head of the organisation, in September. These are then discussed with the centre when the Lead Development Officer visits the providing institution in the subsequent year. The reports and linked action plans provide a clear basis for continuous improvement.

87 The *Account* states that 'the outcomes of Access to HE moderation are an agenda item for the November Access to HE Sub-Committee of Quality Committee'. While the review team noted that the Quality Committee had received a general report on the moderation process and outcomes for 2000-01 in October 2001, there was no evidence in the minutes of AHEQSC available to the team of any consideration of the Access moderation process and outcomes. It was unclear how, in these circumstances, the AHEQSC was able to meet the responsibility specified in its terms of reference to 'approve reports from Access to HE moderators'.

The award of the Access to HE certificate

88 The procedures for certification are clearly defined, and responsibility for signing the Access to Higher Education Award Form lies with programme and lead moderators. Lead and programme moderators are also expected to countersign forms submitted for cases of mitigating circumstances.

89 GMOCN operates a credit-based system of award, with credits required for the award of the Access to HE certificate varying from 16 to 24. This variation was explained partially by programmes' different histories

and partly by the different requirements of some HE courses and providers. The Salford Scheme has a common basis for certification, and the AVA has harmonised the minimum number of credits and the role of Level 2 units in its award. The review team would concur with the view expressed by moderators that it was desirable for the AVA to continue its planned programme to harmonise the credits required across the AVA, in the interests of consistency of standards and equity for providers and students. The variable cost to colleges of registering and crediting students on programmes might also be seen as inequitable and this merits consideration within the AVA's deliberations on this matter.

The issue of Access to HE certificates

90 GMOCN has procedures for checking and recording certification, although certificates are unnumbered and there is therefore no record of the detail of certificate issue. The procedures for issuing certificates are, in most respects, clearly outlined and strictly managed. The review team was surprised, therefore, to note that sample Access certificates which were provided misnamed QAA as 'the Quality Assurance Agency for the Higher Education Quality Council' and used the wrong version of QAA's Access logo, printed in a colour which is not approved. GMOCN is required to address this as a matter of urgency and ensure all Access certificates awarded in the future bear the version of the logo which includes the words 'recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education' and delete any other reference to QAA.

91 The review team concluded that, while moderation and certification processes are essentially sound, the AVA would need to make the process of the issue of certificates more secure and revise the wording and logo on Access certificates issued by the AVA, as detailed above, in order for it to be able to demonstrate that it had a properly regulated process for Access certification, and thus meet the licensing criteria expressed under Principle 6.

Principle 7

The organisation is underpinned by structures and processes which enable it to review, evaluate and develop the Access to HE provision for which it has responsibility.

Monitoring the quality of Access programmes

92 GMOCN requires Access providers to submit annual reports as a requirement of continued approved status. Providers are requested to comment on a number of issues, such as recruitment and students'

experience, although they are not asked to comment on retention and progression. Action plans and action agendas are components of the report to the AVA. GMOCN uses the reports as a part of its own internal review processes and for its annual report to QAA, and AHEQSC receives reports on any matters raised.

93 The various reports from moderators and centres provide a range of useful material, enabling judgements to be made on the health of the programmes. However, there is little evidence that the totality of information about a centre is reviewed by the AVA. While officers monitor closely providers' responses to quality, the overall picture does not generally seem to be formally or systematically conveyed to the AHEQSC, in spite of the expectation in the AHEQSC's terms of reference that it will 'receive reports on ...providers' internal review of GMOCN Access to HE programmes and recommend to the Board action to be taken on issues that affect the quality of that provision.'

The revalidation of Access programmes

94 Programmes are periodically revised and providers are notified when a re-validation is due. Approval is normally for five years, but providers may voluntarily bring forward programmes for review.

95 The AHESP has instituted a five-year review of curriculum content, commencing in 2003, with Access to HE programmes as a key focus. Issues of coherence, subject knowledge and academic skills are being addressed in this review. It is recognised that curriculum review will affect the overall composition of programmes in centres, and a further declared purpose of the review is to achieve greater comparability and commonality across other aspects of programmes. While the proposed five-year review will result in a worthwhile continuous rolling programme of change, it will not necessarily prioritise a response to inconsistencies which have already been identified. It is therefore recommended that the AVA considers accelerating the schedule for curriculum reviews.

96 The Salford Scheme has been the subject of a recent rigorous review, using a slightly different procedure to the standard GMOCN re-validation procedure to allow co-validation by the consortium, the University and GMOCN. With common subject specifications and subject moderators working across a set of colleges, the Scheme has led to greater consistency of outcomes. The speed of subject review in the Scheme could be a model for planned curriculum reviews (see paragraph 95, above) for the rest of the AVA's Access provision

97 The review team concluded that the licensing criteria expressed under Principle 7 had been met. However, while procedures are in place which allow the AVA to review and develop provision, the team considered that further use could be made of the information it receives through these procedures to evaluate provision and its own role in promoting the development of that provision.

Conclusions

98 Greater Manchester Open College Network (GMOCN) is currently one of the largest AVAs, both in terms of numbers of QAA-recognised Access programmes and of registered learners. It has been involved with the provision of Access programmes in the Greater Manchester area for over twenty years and has accumulated considerable experience in this area. It has a core membership which has been loyal and active over that period and many of the Access programmes for which GMOCN has responsibility are very well established.

99 Drivers for recent change have included the AVA's detailed consideration of, and response to, the introduction of the AVA licensing criteria. Over the last two years, in particular, GMOCN has reconsidered some of its structures and procedures for Access, and has introduced considerable and significant changes in several key areas, including in its governance and committee structures. The matters identified by the AVA in these deliberations undoubtedly needed attention and the AVA has brought about some worthwhile change. However, this essentially incremental approach has tended to result in the modification of structures and processes, rather than a more wide-ranging reform, conceived of within a wider context, which is more likely to reveal any fundamental issues that need to be addressed. With regard to changes to its committee structures, for example, the changes that it is able to make are, to some extent, restricted by some of its traditional constitutional arrangements, and these may need to be reconsidered in order to bring about the change that is necessary for fully effective governance of the AVA.

100 A particular example of this was the introduction of a dedicated sub-committee with major responsibility for Access. Though welcome as an attempt to ensure that AVA matters are properly considered, the committee has not been functioning satisfactorily, and this, paradoxically, has contributed to some lack of clarity in relation to Access responsibilities. In reviewing these arrangements, the AVA will need to consider whether it is just adjustments in relation to this particular committee that are needed, or whether other, more fundamental changes need to be made to its governance structures and constitutional arrangements.

101 In taking these decisions, account will also need to be taken of the future function and constitutional position of the Access to HE Standing Panel, which clearly is working very successfully, making a significant contribution to the development of the AVA's work and where there is evidence of a healthy dynamism and drive to reform. The AVA could benefit from consideration about how to make best use of having a specialist panel for this area of activity and secure its benefits for the management and development of Access provision, without diluting its effects through the journey between the deliberations of the Panel itself and the major committees which hold formal responsibility in this area.

102 The AVA has, over time, developed and modified its quality assurance procedures, so that it now has comprehensive and well-documented procedures for most aspects of its Access work. Recent developments include changes to systems for Access programme approval and moderation. While the approval mechanisms are still very new, and it is, perhaps, too early to make a definitive judgement about their success, the work done by the Access to HE Standing Panel in this area is encouraging in its readiness to re-think approaches to the AVA's requirements and procedures. New moderation systems are also becoming established and moderators are optimistic that they will prove effective in improving quality. Although the system has moderator support, there is a need for formal evaluation of the newly introduced procedures to ensure that any further modifications necessary can be made, and new models can be treated with greater confidence.

103 The organisation's overall approach to strategic planning is systematic and thorough. There has been relatively little emphasis, however, on the particular needs of and opportunities for Access provision. Some investment in development of this area, along with greater analysis and use of the data it collects to evaluate the strengths of current provision could allow the AVA to build on its historical strengths and develop new ways of addressing the needs of its target groups.

Commendations

The AVA is commended for:

- i the thorough and systematic methods used to develop the Strategic Plan;
- ii the achievements of the Access to Higher Education Standing Panel.

The AVA licence

Review outcome

The review team recommends that the Greater Manchester Open College Network be awarded a **conditional** renewal of its AVA licence.

Conditions

The licence is renewed on condition that the AVA:

- i revises its constitutional arrangements for decision-making in relation to Access and AVA matters, with particular reference to the quality assurance of programme approval and strategic development of Access, ensuring clarity of responsibility and accountability. GMON should consider, in particular, the place of the AHEQSC within these structures as a sub-committee of the Quality Committee and revisit the place and contribution of the AHESP. Revised terms of reference for any committees and groups affected should be developed, as necessary, which specify lines and means of reporting (paragraphs 32-39 and 42);
- ii firmly locates responsibility for final programme approval, including the monitoring of any conditions that are set, within the AVA's governance structures, not with one of its officers. This should include the following actions:
 - providing the responsible committee with sufficient information to carry out its responsibility for programme approval, to include details of any conditions that have been set;
 - ensuring that Access programmes do not run until all conditions have been met;
 - recording the final approval of the programme when the conditions have been met (paragraphs 72-76);
- iii ensures the security of individual Access certificates through, for example, the issue of numbered certificates, and maintenance of a record of all certificates issued (paragraphs 90 and 91);
- iv ensures that data relating to learner withdrawals is provided to QAA, as required (paragraphs 60 and 63);

(Conditions to be met by 1 December 2003)
- v revises its standard Access certificates to include the correct version of the Access logo on the QAA-recognised Access certificate, and ensures that no further certificates are issued with the incorrect logo or inaccurate references to the name of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (paragraphs 90 and 91).

(Condition to be met by 30 June 2003)

Recommendations to the AVA

The review team recommends that the AVA:

- i reconsiders and develops its strategy for increasing the AVA's membership base, with the aim of securing a wider representation from providers and, in particular, ensuring that the full range of Access to HE providers are adequately represented within, and able to contribute to, the AVA's decision-making structures (paragraph 17 and 18);
- ii develops a formal membership agreement signed by the head of the applying organisation and the Chair of the AVA, that clearly defines the separation of the responsibilities, liabilities and authority of each party (paragraph 19 and 20);
- iii articulates more formally the Board's responsibilities in relation to the AVA licence, and includes this within the constitutional documentation providing the Board's terms of reference (paragraph 26);
- iv considers the influence of committee membership requirements with regard to protection of the AVA against undue influence (paragraph 29);
- v puts in place measures to ensure that the minutes of meetings record more carefully the details of the decision-making process, including clearer references to background papers in order to provide a proper record of the basis of decisions taken by committees (paragraphs 35 and 42);
- vi in considering developmental spending of reserve funds, undertakes a risk assessment relating to Access to HE provision to inform its decisions strategically (paragraph 52);
- vii reviews its staffing provision for Access, in order to ensure that it can meet its developmental targets as well as maintaining operational procedures (paragraphs 55 and 63);
- viii adopts a more systematic method for the evaluation and use of statistical data to review, develop and promote Access provision for the benefit of learners, providers and receiving HEIs in the region (paragraphs 62 and 63);
- ix develops guidance, for inclusion in the *Panel Pack for Access to HE* when it is next reviewed, about what should constitute a condition, as distinct from a recommendation or textual amendment, in relation to programme or unit approval (paragraph 71);
- x clarifies in its next revision of the *Panel Pack*, the detail of the approval procedure to ensure that all those involved in the panel process are clear where responsibility, including ultimate responsibility, for approval lies (paragraph 76);

- xi continues its planned programme to harmonise the credits required for the award of an Access certificate across the AVA (paragraph 89);
- xii considers accelerating the programme of curriculum reviews (paragraph 95).

Appendix

Aims and objectives of AVA review

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.

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.

